

## Original Research Article

### Criticism of Traditionalists' Ideas on Wisdom and Concealed Secrets of Islamic Art

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#### Abstract

Traditionalism is a contemporary esoteric current that lays its foundations on hidden signs and the process of discovering and revealing them. Though, unlike other encoding processes, this one has no sound and clear regulations, rules, or acquirable techniques or skills. Believing in monotheistic theologies, traditionalists understand the world as a created reality that conceals a system of divine signs, and as for the holy Quran, it is called “a closed book” which is divinely inspired hence has to be difficult to disclose the depths of its meaning to the superficial reader; rather, it has to be meditated upon and, as the mystics of yore used to say, has to be understood as if man were listening to God’s own words, addressed to him at this very moment. Traditionalists firmly believe in the sacredness and transcendence of artworks created by Muslim artists or craftsmen and attribute this unique holiness to the concept of unity in multiplicity and multiplicity in unity. Some of the leading and eminent figures of traditionalism like Rene Guenon, Frithjof Schuon, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and Titus Burckhardt sustain that everything is divinely created and that an ontological metaphysical essence exists in every created being. Though from traditionalists’ point of view “tradition” indicates the spiritual wisdom conceived as having formed the ancient core of all the great religions and spiritual paths, a thorough look at their works and findings contradicts their ideas and opinions. This study attempts to have a comparative though thorough look at thoughts and ideas of some of the leading traditionalists regarding Islamic tradition, on which their core structure is claimed to be established, and presents a brief explanation of their paradoxical claims.

**Keywords:** *Tradition, wisdom, Islamic art, Guenon, Burckhardt, Schuon, Nasr.*

Traditionalism or what is occasionally called Guénonian Traditionalism is an esoteric current or school whose foundation is attributed to French author and perennial philosopher René Guénon (1886–1951) that later changed his name to Abd al-Wahid Yahya. The school was founded in 1920 in Paris and since then has had a huge impact on different fields of study. Sometimes the term “Perennialist” is used by traditionalists to describe themselves. One of the main features of traditionalists is

their insistence on esoteric initiation which is one basis on which traditionalism may be named and categorized as esoteric. Some traditionalists nowadays are loyal to Guénon’s original conceptions and practice, and they may be said to form the Traditionalist school, sometimes now called Integral Traditionalism; others have modified and developed his ideas to the extent that purist Guénonians do not recognize them as fellow Traditionalists. Guenon and his followers believe in the absolute truth and inner unity of the world and for them, tradition encompasses the spiritual

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wisdom that is conceived as having formed the ancient core of all the great religions and spiritual paths. Based on their anti-modernism ideas lowering and simplifying tradition to worldly issues which are far away from spirituality, loftiness and transcendence is a huge mistake that leads to banality and even calamity of humankind. Based on the definition, traditionalism is a type of transcendent science based on the reinterpretation of “*Philosophia Perennis*” that can be conceived, gained, and comprehended only by special thinkers who are aware of the meaning of signs and not by ordinary people. As a matter of fact, the core of this science is rooted in a firm set of philosophical truths which are totally unbound and untouched by time and place. This notion is based on the rules of divinity that describe and the present universe as sign packed combination of divine elements that shall never be manifested. Hence, every entity, creature, or object has a share of this divine and ontological truth deep inside. According to traditionalists, such unchangeable eternal feature cannot be confined inside any historical or cultural framework and therefore is of a divine and immortal nature. Taking humankind into consideration, traditionalists firmly accentuates spiritual wisdom and claim that the only path through which humans can move forward and reach the destined transcendent goal is resorting to tradition. Based on what has been mentioned above, the question that immediately comes to any readers’ minds is that if all religions and religious schools consist of one universal truth, which themselves root in internal wisdom based on a divine source, and why no specific method, approach or even path have been introduced or illuminated for their followers? Even assuming that such paths have been mentioned through concealed signs, how can it be accepted that only a few people, with no connection to the transcendent world and holy realm, could decipher the codes and reveal the messages of signs?

Since this article is a case study based on an analytical approach, the author intends to examine the thoughts and ideas of some of the leading figures of traditionalism like Guenon, Burckhardt, Schuon, and Nasr who are widely regarded as the commentators and interpreters of Islamic Art, a term that coined and spread by them as well and

thoroughly analyze the claimed process of decoding the holy signs concealed in the works of art created by Muslim artists and craftsmen. To start, a brief explanation of traditionalists’ main ideas will be presented and then notions of wisdom, science, technique, and sign will be analyzed.

### **Theoretical foundations**

It needs to be mentioned that the author’s stress is on some hugely paradoxical and contradictory points in traditionalists’ claim that comprehension of the signs in Islamic art is not acquirable and thus can only be achieved through intuitive channels connecting to the transcendent and holy source. From traditionalists’ point of view, the unique feature that distinguishes Muslim artists is their spiritual state of mind while creating their artworks (Burckhardt, 1967, 11). A claim that no logical proof or historical evidence supports.

A very significant point to make about traditionalism is that it has a complex doctrine, and a cyclical conception of time borrowed directly from Hinduism. In the distant first age of the current cycle, spiritual wisdom was widespread and generally accessible; in the current and final age, identified as the “Kali Yuga” or “Dark Age”, spiritual wisdom has almost vanished. The result is what is called modernity, with all its problems. Inevitably, things will degenerate further. During the first age, spiritual wisdom was unified, and there was no distinction between the esoteric and exoteric. In other words, according to Guenon’s ideology during the age of modernism, tradition which consists of a horizontal and a vertical dimension has been ignored by societies and such ignorance has confined human beings in a hollow of darkness. Hence the result will be a daunting atmosphere in which no good will ever occur and even if any good happens, that would be of no causal nature and just a mere accident. Traditionalists even blame humankind’s wickedness and misery on separating from the tradition which ends in the apocalypse and formation of dystopia (Guenon, 1945, 72).

Another overwhelming consensus that exists among traditionalists is the presence of four elements to form a

perfect tradition. These elements are a revelation from the transcendent world, an unending blessing that compasses esoteric and exoteric features, implementation of divine teachings, and an all-out manifestation of such tradition in all aspects of life and art. One could wonder with the assumption of the existence of such a perfect tradition that includes all various religions in the course of history and depicts their laws and basics, why there is no name, trace of even indication of it in all holy books? To be more precise, not only is there no indication or introduction, but it is quite clear that every religion or sect has its own tradition that not only approves its predecessors but it frequently rejects them. A very thought-provoking fact in a comparative study of religions and schools like Taoism, Sufism, Buddhism, and Hinduism, which all have received assiduous attention by traditionalists, is that there is not even one single or even similar understanding of God. Whereas in the holy Quran to which traditionalists like Burckhardt, Schuon, and Nasr refer, the distinction between divine tradition and human tradition is conspicuous. As a matter of fact, it has been clearly stated that “God’s tradition never changes”<sup>1</sup>. It is quite obvious that the definition that traditionalists offer is in direct and complete contradiction to what is mentioned in Quran and Islamic teachings in turn. In fact, from traditionalists’ point of view, tradition is much loftier, higher, and more widespread than religion that includes all aspects of human life. Whereas Quranic verses have clearly stated the distinction and differences between religion and tradition.

### **Traditionalists and wisdom**

Another element on which enormous stress has been laid by traditionalists is wisdom and in particular Islamic wisdom. Wisdom is described as “right” which leads humans. Imam Ali (PUHB) defined wisdom as the treasure of ration; prophets are introduced as the springs of wisdom and in Quran, wisdom is called light. The way traditionalists face the notion of wisdom is quite interesting. In a forward to Burckhardt’s book “Art of Islam” Nasr mentioned that the writings of Titus Burckhardt have the great virtue of having brought to light for the first time in the modern

West and other fundamental principles of Islamic art and of having achieved at last for Islamic art what Ananda Coomaraswamy did for the art of India (Burckhardt, 1967, 7). Describing the abstract essence of Islamic art and wisdom, Nasr claims that the nature of this abstraction is in complete contradiction to the abstraction used in Western art and they stand at opposite poles. The result of the one form of abstraction is the glass skyscrapers that scar most modern cities, and the fruit of the other is the Shah Mosque and the Taj Mahal.

The one seeks to evade the ugliness of naturalistic and condensed forms of nineteenth-century European art by appeal to a mathematical abstraction of purely human and rationalistic order. The other sees in the archetypes residing in the spiritual empyrean the concrete realities of which the so-called realities of this world are nothing but shadows and abstractions. (Here the trace of Plato’s “World of Ideas” can be easily noticed). It, therefore, seeks to overcome this shadow by returning to the direct reflections of the truly concrete world in this world of illusion and abstraction which the forgetful nature of man takes for concrete reality. The process of so-called “abstraction” in Islamic art is, therefore, not at all purely human and rationalistic as in modern abstract art, but the fruit of intellection in its original sense, or vision of the spiritual world, and an ennobling of matter by recourse to the principles which descend from the higher levels of cosmic and ultimately Metacosmic Reality (*ibid.*). As it can be seen when Nasr talks about the spiritual manifestation of holy level canceled in Islamic works of art, he refers to higher levels of cosmic and metacosmic reality. To know this notion, one should be aware of the description of such reality and its cosmic components that even in the next phase advances to metacosmic. However, even in the first place this theory lacks logical explanation and makes the process of understanding more complicated which might be Nasr’s main goal to go back to the original claim that could be understood by only a small number of people with specialized knowledge or interest. As maintained by Nasr, the creation of Islamic artworks is purely based on metaphysical and revelation-related connections along

which no rational thinking has interfered. Just consider Shah Mosque; based on what proofs can it be accepted that such an architectural masterpiece has been created with no rational thinking? What parts of this landmark indicate the holiness of its creator? This type of justification makes it quite simple for Nasr to accuse any opposition of lack of spiritual power and pure connection to the realm of sacredness and transcendence. Though Nasr tries his best to establish his religious multiplicity based on cultural differences, he fails to do that when dealing with a single cultural context because such differences will result in the ignorance of humans' spirituality and religion. Burckhardt who is known as one of the most masterly expositors of Sufism in the west has mentioned that Islamic art derives from the wedding of wisdom and craftsmanship. He strictly speaks about a unique rhythm in Islamic works of art that belongs not to space but to time, of which it is not the quantitative measure but the qualitative one. He claims that for a Muslim artist or craftsman who has to decorate a surface, geometrical interlacement doubtless represents the most intellectually satisfying form, for it is an extremely direct expression of the idea of the Divine Unity underlying the inexhaustible variety of the world. He talks about the interrelated notions of "unity in plurality", and at the same time "plurality in unity". In other words, Burckhardt and other leading figures of traditionalism believe in the divine unity underlying things, namely that it is generally constituted from a revelation and can only be gained, comprehended, and transferred by those with a pure heart and loyal to the perfect tradition. He goes even further and interprets the limitations of Muslim artists in drawing, painting, or sculpture as their purposeful goal to avoid sheer imitation and representation of phantom-like objects. (Plato's mimesis is quite clear). He claims that sacred art does not depict the role of objects and any lack of technical mastery like perspective or lighting is not only a shortcoming or lack of knowledge but quite on the contrary proves their perfected spiritual levels and revelation-based genius. Though he insists that this process is carried out through signs, he never mentioned how or under what circumstances a Muslim artist could acquire such sacred

science (*ibid.*).

As claimed by traditionalists, the science a Muslim artist employs to create an artwork boasts a wisdom-centered core that connects scientific data to cosmic foundations. Strictly speaking Islamic art flies with two wings of use and beauty toward a divine perfection. Again no indication of the nature of the above-mentioned science or how to gain it has been mentioned. Traditionalists believe that the structure of Islamic art is neither established on a spiritual foundation nor derived from the prophet's words and pieces of advice however it is quite holy and divine. This deep contradiction brings a question to every reader's mind. If this art has no spiritual root or basic what exactly gives it such an unworldly and sacred characteristic? Such paradoxical sayings get even more conspicuous when Burckhardt talks about Islamic calligraphy and arabesque. He explains that Islamic calligraphy is the most prominent type of Islamic art because it is a direct manifestation of verses of the Quran.

So is the reader supposed to believe in absolute formalism? Does writing and to be precise copying some texts from holy books end in the creation of a sign-packed holy work of art? Explaining arabesque, Burckhardt starts mixing different aspects and includes geometry into the world of signs. He states that arabesque is a geometrical plant-like shape created out of utmost genius by Muslim artists to express the divine unity which is widespread throughout the universe, though through the language of signs. Even an ordinary reader who knows about Islam knows that based on Islamic teachings, Muslims are prohibited to draw facial expressions and that is why they resort to plant-like shapes instead. Even a closer look at arabesque shows that the type of plant used as a reference where quite available and common in that special era so no signs or hidden message has been encoded by the artists. Another point that should be made is Burckhardt's stress on geometry. On one hand, traditionalists like Burckhardt believe in the uniqueness and unworldliness of Muslim's science while creating art and on the other hand, they put stress on the vital role of geometry which reminds the readers of the famous quote by Plato that is said to be engraved at the

door of his Academy: “Let no one ignorant of geometry enter”.

### Decoding the “Closed Book”

Traditionalists believe that materialistic ideology and cognition prevents human being from comprehending the achievements of the experimental sciences which leads to the degradation of science into technique and consequently makes human incapable of understanding. Burckhardt emphasizes that the structure of his theories is based on divine science. Frithjof Schuon who is another leading figure in traditionalism refers to Quran as a “Closed Book”. According to what he describes, a book which has been divinely inspired and will not disclose the depths of its meaning to the superficial reader; rather, it has to be meditated upon and understood as if a man were listening to God’s own words, addressed to him at this very moment (Schuon, 1961, 8). Schuon completely talks about a direct and unworldly tangible state of mind and even body that requires the reader to deeply contemplate, ponder and finally meditate to reach the entelechy of being God’s addressee. Such prerequisite he mentions might be an introduction of what he later called and held as primordial meetings. Here he categorizes and separates readers of the Quran, which is totally against Islamic teachings which are said to be understandable for all readers.

Schuon also talks about superficial readers and excludes them from the group of others under the pretext that they are not able to meditate while reading the verses. Assuming that disclosure of the deep messages of the Quran can be concluded by mediation and entering into a trance level, then how can essential concepts like faith and divine nature be known and gained? Did Schuon and Burckhardt have access to the divine source of revelation by meditating on the essence of the Quran? Like the prophet, have they been connected and inspired by the holy source? If so, what steps or to say it more precisely, what meditational steps did they take to reach the level of deep understanding as if they were in a direct talk with God? Does taking a formal approach to study the artworks in Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Taoism, and Buddhism end up unearthing the

transcendent truth? How about the hidden symbols and signs? Describing Quran, Schuon states that the divine threats and promises contained in the Quran are symbols for the equilibrium that exists in the entire universe, as all great religions have taught; this is a kind of “Golden Rule” which is at work throughout the created cosmos (*ibid.*, 23). First comparing Abrahamic religions to non-Abrahamic ones is quite wrong in the first place due to their different basics. Second if how can a rational reader be convinced that this Golden Rule that makes the balance across the universe has no exact definition and is only conceived through signs? Schuon continues that Islamic tradition encompasses detailed and vast aspects of life including physical, ethical, social, and spiritual. He further goes into more details and give some examples of physical recommendations or do’s and don’ts like the rules of propriety that result from the nature of things: for example, avoidance of speaking during meals and while eating in general, or rudimental standards of hygiene like to wash your mouth after eating or drinking, not to eat garlic in case you want to take part in a gathering, to observe all the rules of cleanliness, and to take off shoes before entering in the house. He also talks about some elementary Islamic gestures which every Muslim is aware of like ways of greeting, thanking, and so on (*ibid.*, 51). Now how can one accept that a religion that has expressed all aspects of life for its followers in such details and with such clarity, has all of a sudden change its method of teaching to signs and symbols when it comes to art? Having in mind that art is a part of people’s daily life too brings this question up that if there had to be a set of rules or policies for Muslims through which they start creating artworks, they must have been mentioned extrinsically just like other rules of life. Another distinguishing though common feature among traditionalists is their burning enthusiasm to analyze the form of Islamic artworks and discovering the element of unity deep inside each work of art. They believe that every piece of artwork created by a Muslim artist which can be an architectural landmark, a miniature, or a colorful arabesque, has a divine unity inside because its creator has been inspired by this holy unity. How can it be proven that

the unity used in building Kaaba is the same as the one used in Shah Mosque? How can the degree or extent of this unity be measured? How about Qasr Al-Mshatta? What elements of this landmark indicate its kings' or caliphs' connection to divine unity? Is there any special form? What about those landmarks with no known creator? As it can be seen, the contradiction is too obvious that one can simply question such claims.

## Conclusion

Undoubtedly, by examining the ideological foundation and also formation of traditionalism, the presence and influence of schools such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Sufism, and Taoism, which are all non-heavenly and non-Abrahamic schools, is quite traceable. In addition to the influence of the teachings of these religions, another obvious fact is the impact of African, Indian, and indigenous tribes that are by no means monotheistic in nature. The existence of this common point among the traditionalists on the one hand, and their entry into Islam, its traditions and teachings, and the attempt to interpret and explain the spiritual and wise themes, escalates the ambiguity in the mind of the audience to find out traditionalists' burning interest toward Islam and Islamic art. Has the intense contradiction between the mentioned schools and Islam attracted these philosophers to the concepts of Islam? If so, why do many traditionalists still emphasize the formal and semantic homogeneity between the icons and symbols of art of the Islamic era which is referred to as Islamic art by them? Interestingly, although traditionalists place a great emphasis on the mysteries of the sacred arts, especially

Islamic art, they do not provide a clear set of regulations, methods, or available resources for learning the mysteries and teaching them to other enthusiasts. Instead, they keep claiming to reveal the spiritual truths concealed in this art based solely on their comparative and intuitive perceptions. Although traditionalists lay great stress on the fact that the structure of Islamic art is based on the principles of rational intuition and wisdom, in many interpretations of the most prominent figures of this school, the presence of strong emotions, personal perceptions, and prejudices are observable which all are in deep contradiction with the notion and nature of wisdom. To conclude, it is essential to note that, unfortunately, the prominent role and weirdly unexplainable influence of traditionalist philosophers on the terms "Islamic art" and "wisdom of Islamic art" has been so deep that it is unlikely to find a book, scientific article or a research study in this field with no reference to the works of Guenon, Burckhardt, Schwann, and Nasr. This is while one will face a great deal of irrational and unscientific contradictions and issues reading the books of the above-mentioned figures that cannot be justified not only in terms of wisdom but also in terms of common sense.

## Endnote

1. Ahzab, 62

## Reference list

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