

Be Ye Lamps unto Yourselves: Interview with Jacob Needleman

Samuel Bendeck Sotillos

Professor Jacob Needleman (b. 1934) is no stranger to the readers of the journal *Studies in Comparative Religion*, and he will therefore be familiar to the readers of *Sacred Web*; many will recall that he has provided one of the most influential anthologies, what many consider to be a landmark in the field of the Traditionalist or Perennialist studies, through the book that he edited, titled *The Sword of Gnosis: Metaphysics, Cosmology, Tradition, Symbolism* (1974).¹ Professor Needleman describes his first encounter with the integral metaphysics of the perennial philosophy which may resonate with contemporary seekers:

One of the most interesting intellectual developments of the 1960's was the publication in England of a periodical called *Studies in Comparative Religion*. When it first came across my desk, it had seemed to me merely another gray scholarly journal—an impression that was only strengthened by its stated purpose of presenting essays concerning “traditional studies.” Like many Americans, I was put off by the very word “tradition.” But I pressed on because I had heard that this journal contained some of the most serious thinking of the twentieth century.... On close reading, I felt an extraordinary intellectual force radiating through their intricate prose. These men were out for the kill. For them, the study of spiritual traditions was a sword with which to destroy the illusions of contemporary man.²

Jacob Needleman is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at San Francisco State University and is the author of numerous books covering a wide array of topics. At the core of all of his works, it

¹ By way of an example, Patrick Laude has indicated, “*The Sword of Gnosis*, edited by Jacob Needleman in 1974, was instrumental in introducing the perennialist perspective to the English speaking world.”

² Jacob Needleman, “Foreword” to *The Sword of Gnosis: Metaphysics, Cosmology, Tradition, Symbolism*, ed. Jacob Needleman (London: Arkana, 1986), p. 9.

could be said that he addresses the ultimate questions which relate to the inner dimension of all religions, what is known as esotericism.

Professor Needleman also had the opportunity to meet and know many of the representatives of the traditionalist school such as Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998), Titus Burckhardt (1908-1984), Marco Pallis (1895-1989), Martin Lings (1909-2005), Joseph Epes Brown (1920-2000), Whitall N. Perry (1920-2005), Huston Smith (b. 1919) and Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933).

An interesting feature of Professor Needleman's work is his sustained interest in modern psychology and its relationship to the Sacred. He has sought the proper place of modern science by confronting the reductionistic outlook of scientism and advocating in favor of the sacred science underlying the spiritual domain.³ He has participated in numerous panel presentations and conferences relating to this theme⁴ and has also published, edited and translated books on this topic.⁵ He has also known personally many of the pioneers and influential individuals within humanistic and transpersonal psychology. While Professor Needleman has conducted many interviews, this one uniquely covers the theme of sacred psychology as it relates to the perennial philosophy.

The interview was conducted on November 4, 2011, at Professor Needleman's home in Oakland, California.

³ "Psychology, properly so-called, must therefore always be a sacred science." [Jacob Needleman, "Magic and Sacred Psychology" in *A Sense of the Cosmos: The Encounter of Modern Science and Ancient Truth* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1976), p. 138]

⁴ See "Psychology, Science, and Spiritual Paths: Contemporary Issues," *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (1978), pp. 93-111; Dick Anthony, Bruce Ecker and Ken Wilber, "When Is Religion Transformative? A Conversation with Jacob Needleman" in *Spiritual Choices: The Problem of Recognizing Authentic Paths to Inner Transformation*, eds. Dick Anthony, Bruce Ecker and Ken Wilber (New York: Paragon House, 1987), pp. 327-348.

⁵ Ludwig Binswanger, *Being-in-the-World: Selected Papers of Ludwig Binswanger*, trans. Jacob Needleman (New York: Basic Books, 1963); Jacob Needleman and Dennis Lewis (eds.), *On the Way to Self Knowledge* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976); Jacob Needleman, "Psychotherapy and the Sacred" in *A Sense of the Cosmos: The Encounter of Modern Science and Ancient Truth* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1976), pp. 107-134; Jacob Needleman, "Magic and Sacred Psychology" in *A Sense of the Cosmos: The Encounter of Modern Science and Ancient Truth* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1976), pp. 138-139; Jacob Needleman, "A Brief Note on Jungianism" in *A Sense of the Cosmos: The Encounter of Modern Science and Ancient Truth* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1976), pp. 130-134; Jacob Needleman, "Psychiatry and the Sacred" in *Consciousness and Tradition* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), pp. 72-87; Jacob Needleman, "A New Psychology and a New Humanity" in *What is God?* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2009), pp. 54-64.

Samuel Bendeck Sotillos: Perhaps we could begin this discussion by contextualizing how contemporary psychology, within **both** modernism and by extension postmodernism, exemplifies a fundamental deviation from the pre-modern or traditional world which is essentially metaphysical and spiritual, and in which human existence is understood to be pervaded with the sense of the sacred. Could you please speak to the modern deviation, with which you are familiar and about which you have presented staunch criticisms in numerous works?⁶

Jacob Needleman: I think the origins of what we call modernity, and specifically modern science, are rooted in an honorable part of the mind—the wish to know, to understand for oneself, free of rigid dogmatic compulsion—an impulse of a mind wishing to be free, to see for oneself, to verify. But at the same time this idea of verification has been itself rigidly, and in its way, dogmatically narrowed in the modern world by what we may call “reductionism.” Actually, traditionally, verification is a sacred thing, as, for example in Buddhism where the Buddha advises: don’t simply believe anything that you are told, but see for yourselves, “be lamps unto yourselves.” This implies that within oneself is the source of truth, and eventually, the source of guidance under the eye of that which takes the place of God in Buddhism [*Dharmakāya* or the Supreme Being], something which often first manifests itself as a kind of investigative attitude toward one’s own mind.

The investigative attitude can become very close to a spiritual attitude, the pure love of knowledge and understanding. With that attitude great minds like Galileo [1564-1642] and Newton [1662-1727] and others brought forth tremendous discoveries within the physical world. But soon enough the impulse is appropriated by more pragmatic desires, needs and impulses having to do with what we might call the “body” for lack of a better word, “desire nature”⁷ in the traditional sense—some of the desires being very reasonable (safety, health), but then also getting very quickly linked in with more egoistic impulses: power, money, wealth, fame,.

Then you could say that a deviation began, not so much of the traditions but of the near-spiritual element that was originally in the minds and hearts of many of the originators of modern science.

⁶ Professor Needleman speaks to this “deviation” in a discussion which was originally produced as a video interview: see Jacob Needleman, “Spirituality and the Intellect” in *Thinking Allowed: Conversations on the Leading Edge of Knowledge with Jeffrey Mishlove* (Tulsa, OK: Council Oak Books, 1992), pp. 75-83.

⁷ This is what Theravāda Buddhism calls *tanhā*, “craving”; in the Vajrayāna or Tibetan Buddhism it is personified as the six classes of *samsaric* beings of the Kalachakra or Wheel of Existence.

But I think the most important thing by far is to investigate these deviations as they exist within oneself. Of course, we can look at what we call “deviations” solely externally, historically, philosophically or from the point of view of the ideas that we respect and value very much, but we can’t really understand deviations until we see them in ourselves, how our own minds and hearts deviate within ourselves. In myself I am constantly deviating; I have to *see* that, see that without any kind of hasty attempt to fix it. But if I don’t see them that way, internally, I become a “righteous” judge, I become very self-satisfied, I tell myself I alone have the truth.

So, the *Kali-Yuga* is not just *out there*, it’s *in here*, in oneself. And if I actually see the *Kali-Yuga* in myself then that’s where it gets deeply interesting, because when I really am able to see—not just with the mind which explains and tries to always correct what it sees, tries to justify it and make the ego comfortable—if I really see my own inner world under the light of objective conscience, then I begin to understand what’s going on in the world I live in, and I can begin perhaps to act in a way that Frithjof Schuon speaks of in “No Activity Without Truth.”⁸ The Truth we need is not just doctrinal, it is internal. So while I agree with the whole drift of your question, I would internalize it.

SBS: You have presented very stark, if not very radical, criticisms of modernity, and you have continuously spoken about the imminent crisis that is in our midst.⁹ Would you say that this entropic turn is a decisive reflection of the modern worldview itself?

JN: Let me respond with a personal example. A year or two ago I was walking in downtown San Francisco and I passed a store right in the center of town, a big modern store, big showcase windows, and inside the windows were toys. It was a very large toy store, mainly dolls and teddy

⁸ Frithjof Schuon, “No Activity without Truth” in *The Sword of Gnosis: Metaphysics, Cosmology, Tradition, Symbolism*, ed. Jacob Needleman (London: Arkana, 1986), pp. 27-39; For a new and revised translation of this highly esteemed essay, see, Frithjof Schuon, “No Activity Without Truth” in *The Betrayal of Tradition: Essays on the Spiritual Crisis of Modernity* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2005), pp. 3-14.

⁹ “There is little question that now the patient, modern man, knows he is sick.... Modern man knows he is at the end of his tether. He may not know the reasons why he has come to this pass and he may have only the palest idea of what he has lost. He may think, wrongly, that it is only his physical existence that is threatened or he may identify the destruction of the human spirit with elements in his society that are merely distant effects of man’s fundamental metaphysical failure. Granted all this, he still knows he is facing the end of the road.” [Jacob Needleman, “Preface to the Second Edition” in *The Sword of Gnosis: Metaphysics, Cosmology, Tradition, Symbolism*, ed. Jacob Needleman (London: Arkana, 1986), p. 4]

bears, basketballs, horses, rockers, tiny children's toys. As I walked on by, I noticed that in these toys there was a piece of glass, a kind of opaque window. But half a block down the street I stopped cold in my tracks and I thought to myself, "What on earth did I just see?" I turned around and went back to the store and I went inside the store. What I saw shook me. All these toys for toddlers, babies, infants—they were *television sets*, they had taken real television sets and made toys out of them, for the child to play with, you could get any program you wanted on it, like any other television set. I felt as if I had gone into a brothel, it was such a shock. The point is that we have no idea what influences human beings need in order to live like human beings. It's a question of influences. Television, yes there are some good things about it, I too watch it, but the overall influence of it has on the whole been toxic, and for children especially. But that would take us to a very important field of inquiry, the whole question of the new technologies of communication and media and their huge influence on the inner and outer life of our culture.

There has been a forgetting; a great massive forgetting, we have forgotten who we are. Humanity has forgotten what it is and what it's meant for. I think we need to help bring that question into peoples' lives. It's very essential. Without it we are in very great danger at this point.

SBS: How would you relate this question to the context of modern psychology? A central obstacle for modern psychology in its four "forces"—behaviorism,¹⁰ psychoanalysis, humanistic and transpersonal psychology—is that it is a derivative of the 17th or 18th century Enlightenment, marked by scientism, which tends to reject or downplay all pre-modern and traditional psychologies of the perennial philosophy.¹¹ What are your reflections on this predicament that modern psychology has neglected to come to terms with?

¹⁰ "Thus, in principle, behaviorism is the true science of fallen or automatic man. The error of behaviorism is that it believes this is all man can ever be." [Jacob Needleman, "Magic and Sacred Psychology" in *A Sense of the Cosmos: The Encounter of Modern Science and Ancient Truth* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1976), p. 139]

¹¹ "Modern psychology did indeed bring one thing that was new, namely the underestimation of human possibility." [Jacob Needleman, "Introduction" to *The New Religions* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1970), p. 18]; "When seen from this point of view, it seems to me that none of the more recent attempts [i.e. humanistic and transpersonal orientations] to broaden psychology have hit the mark." [Jacob Needleman, "Psychotherapy and the Sacred" in *A Sense of the Cosmos: The Encounter of Modern Science and Ancient Truth* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1976), p. 118]

JN: There are many nuances here that we mustn't gloss over—certain exceptions, especially now that this movement has been around for a long time. What is called “transpersonal psychology” has been around long enough to have many of its practitioners themselves engaged in genuine spiritual practices. Many therapists now recognize a clear distinction between psychotherapy and spiritual practice. They make a distinction between on the one hand, helping an individual get on his feet, strengthening the ego just enough so that it can function in the world, so it is not in continual despair—and on the other hand, an actual spiritual path. From this point on they may, as it were, say to an individual: “As a psychiatrist, as a therapist, I can't do anything with what your questions are now. The suffering that you now are experiencing is not pathology; it is suffering that is intrinsic to the human condition.” I think the good psychiatrists and therapists understand that there is a line between neurotic problems and really transpersonal, or spiritual, issues.

Maybe the world needs such therapists much more now. Maybe intimate spiritual or philosophical friendships are much more rare now; maybe you can't have that kind of healing openness between people that might have been more common in traditional societies, in traditional families. There's a loneliness, a spiritual and psycho-physical loneliness in our world. Where is one able to converse openly about the great questions of meaning and human purpose to someone? The work of really listening to another person is disappearing from our society. Listening, real listening is a very sacred thing, it's the beginning of love, and do you see many people listening to each other out there? Mostly, you see nothing but shouting. Even at our best, we rarely listen, we are constantly listening mostly to our own thoughts. We hear maybe one third of what is said, if that, and the rest of it we unknowingly fill in with our own thoughts. So the work of listening—which is a part of the training of a good therapist—the *attention* of a good listener is the most healing force. It has nothing to do with whether they are behaviorists or psychoanalysts or whatever “ism” they follow. If the therapists actually work at *listening* they are going to help the person. It is this that Freud brought, the healing force of the disciplined, open-hearted work of listening. To my mind, this is what is most valuable about what Freud initiated in our culture—quite apart from any of his theories about the structure of the human psyche, which certainly may be open to question.

This brings us to another question—and this is of utmost importance: what is this thing, this capacity of the human psyche, of the human soul, called *attention*? You find this question, under varying names, occupying an absolutely central place in all of the great spiritual traditions, from “the attention of the heart” of the early Desert Fathers to the “mindfulness” practised at many

levels in Buddhism, in the Kabbalistic practices. In English translation it is sometimes spoken of simply as “mind.” But it is not the element, the often automatic reasoning capacity we call “mind.” It is pure attention: it is a force, a holy force, at a certain level it’s the *spirit*. When it is very, very concentrated, it’s the dove that comes down between and among people at certain points of their inner work.

You know, in the field of human relationships, there are very interesting illustrations, medieval illustrations where you have two people speaking to each other—they may be monks or they may be ordinary people—and there is a dove, a symbol of the Holy Spirit, coming down between them, that I understand to be the reconciling force in their conversation, their exchange with each other.¹² And that reconciling force is what is missing today, almost everywhere. If I had to put my finger on one thing that could actually be of attainable help in our modern world, it would be to make people aware that listening, real listening, is a capacity that, if we actually worked to access it, to practice it, would begin to change our lives.

Modern psychology as such, as a body of ideas including all the four “forces,” essentially does not know what the real possibility of man is, does not know the real structure of the soul, and often when it gets hold of spiritual, metaphysical ideas, it simply feeds them into its reductionist machine. Now the situation is becoming worse than ever because it’s too often merely a matter of drug therapy. As opposed to that, I have a psychiatrist friend who works with young teenagers who are in trouble, at-risk youth. He guides them with exercises in mindfulness, it’s all he teaches them, no drugs, nothing else, and they really thrive. It’s revolutionary if one can apply such a spiritual method with awareness of the danger of distortion.

SBS: Perhaps you could say something about what you envision a good therapist to be?

JN: In the context of what we have been speaking of, a good therapist, in my opinion, tries to help the patient or the client exercise his or her own capacity of seeing oneself, of seeing one’s trauma, one’s anguish, one’s assumptions, the unrealistic fears that one has perhaps from one’s childhood, and such *seeing* becomes the healing force. Freud always felt that too—no matter

¹² Perhaps this is an illustration of Matthew 18:20, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” See Jacob Needleman, “The White Dove” in *Why Can’t We Be Good?* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2007), pp. 58-81.

how many people now attack Freud, in fact he saw something, he manifested something, a quality of seeing and helping a person to see. And seeing one's weaknesses actually has an effect. If it's really deep seeing, from deeper in oneself, it can help a person become free.

But we must make a clear distinction. This is where the theory, where the ideas can come in, the notion of psychological seeing. (We are talking about modern psychology in general, not the schools mixing it with Buddhism or something else.) The emphasis in that case is on *what is seen*, and not on *the capacity of seeing* itself—seeing your neurosis, childhood traumas, all that kind of thing. But the energy itself of seeing, the *seer* itself, is not attended to. The seer, not what is seen, is the embryo of the soul so to speak—the soul's first level, if one may speak about it this way. We are speaking of seeing as another word for the power of conscious attention. The deepening of this seeing as such, this force is, I think, where spiritual work begins and psychotherapy ends. So the seeing becomes a spiritual path, at least as far as I understand it from the Gurdjieff teaching. The seeing becomes the thing that eventually is most important. Krishnamurti [1895-1986], whom I respect very much, speaks of something that sounds paradoxical. He says “you must see the seer,” or he also speaks of “seeing without a seer.” It's similar to something in Zen, though they might not use this language. Rightly practiced, meditation leads to an ever deepening level of *the capacity of seeing*—to the point where a capacity of seeing may be reached that is far more important than what is seen. And it then becomes of utmost necessity to allow this spiritual energy of seeing to descend, without losing itself, back into the world of one's own everyday life of action and the life of suffering humanity. Here we touch on the mystery of the vow of the Bodhisattva and the work of love of every great spiritual guide throughout human history.

What we're saying is that the development of the seer, the evolution (in a good sense of the term) of the seer in one's own life, can be totally transformative. That's where the soul actually fulfills itself. The question of what is seeing becomes very central in the esoteric Christian tradition, the deserts of North Africa and Asia Minor; it's ultimately God seeing me, I am *being seen* by this Higher Force which is God—loved, yes—seen, yes—embraced. So, to surrender to this higher energy, this higher attention from the Above that is Within, this higher consciousness, is the beginning of spiritual fulfillment.

To repeat: The preponderant emphasis on *what* is seen represents the essential action of modern psychotherapy. That is the limit of therapy or modern psychology.¹³ Next begins spiritual development which is the cultivation of the seer, and becoming more concerned with that, and not so much *repairing*, or changing oneself, because you realize after a while that the real “fixing,” the real transformational repair of myself comes from this higher level of seeing, not from those kinds of modifications which I may justifiably need in order to get through the day in ordinary life. So there are three elements: *what* I see, *the seer* and then the opening to the Higher Attention from God, the Above that is Within, the Great Self. I wonder if humanistic psychology and transpersonal psychology can recognize or accept the importance of that distinction. This distinction has certainly helped me to understand the place of humanistic and transpersonal psychology without trying to be too judgmental.

SBS: You appear to have a positive appraisal of Sigmund Freud [1856-1939] which distinctly differs from the Traditionalist or Perennialist position that views him as being unequivocally hostile to both religion and spirituality, even to the extent that he pathologizes them. Could you please clarify your position on this matter, as you have in the past also made some less favorable remarks about Freud?¹⁴

JB: I have already alluded to what I believe is of great value in Freud’s work—namely, his discovery, for the modern secular world, of the healing power of listening, attention, itself. As for his conceptual theories about the structure of the psyche and his promotion of science as the only form of genuine knowledge (i.e. his scientism) all of that is, of course, very much open to question and even harmful. After all, he probably did not have access to the esoteric psychological teachings of the traditions—although there is some evidence that he was influenced to some degree by Kabbalistic writings.

¹³ “Whether in the systems of Freud [psychoanalysis or “second force”], Jung [analytic psychology also known as a transpersonal psychology or “fourth force”], encounter groups [humanistic or “third force”], or behavior therapy [“first force” in modern psychology]. All of these, sometimes under the name of *seeing*, are really encouraging an effort to be different, rather than to look, instantly, at what is.” [Jacob Needleman, “A Note on Krishnamurti” in *The New Religions* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1970), p. 148]

¹⁴ “Just as scientism has removed value from the outer world of nature, so Freud removed the organ of valuation from the inner world of man.” [Jacob Needleman, “Socrates and the Myth of Responsibility” in *The Heart of Philosophy* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2003), p. 31]

SBS: Some representatives of modern psychology, within its humanistic and transpersonal orientations, might argue that the “new” approaches within modern science like quantum theory are somehow directing us to the underlying Truth of the spiritual traditions. This position overlooks the fact that this so-called new paradigm, while it is more inclusive of the metaphysical nature of reality, it is also a byproduct of the same scientism of the Enlightenment which axiomatically divorced itself from the Sacred.¹⁵ What are your thoughts on this precarious situation?

JN: (Laughter) Every question like this requires a couple of days. Two things to start with. Chemistry, physics, genetics, biology, geology, those sciences are all in such flux, there is so much new data arising out of all the new observational technologies in all fields of science, that they’re just loaded with data, information that can’t yet be easily interpreted. They’re trying to incorporate it in the old paradigm and often they’re having to bend over backwards to get to it—and it’s all more and more fragmented. Fascinating fragments of truth, of observations, of information, of data are coming out that no one dreamt of. But what’s really out there in the life of reality nobody has any real idea of anymore.

So there needs to be some understanding of what science is bringing, it needs a real new paradigm, it probably needs to be rooted in the ancient truths, but maybe it can no longer be rooted in the ancient language. Maybe the ancient truths need another language now, because it’s very difficult to look at the mythic and the symbolic language that has been used in the past and to try to force into it what’s being found in this vast and unbelievably interesting and wild world of new data, new information, new techniques. It’s a world that could be considered to be going down very rapidly, or else it represents a new possibility. You could call it *Kali-Yuga*, but you can almost hear—I might be a little romantic now—but you can almost hear the earth praying for something to come and bring all of this material together so that it can be useful, rather than fragmented and leading to all kinds of egoism, to war, to the degeneration of education, destruction of children, of childhood, of marriage, of sexuality, and all the rest of it. So can you actually accept the cosmological systems of the discoveries of modern science, which are vast, and at the same time look at the cosmology of the traditions, of Islamic cosmology, of Kabbalah? There have been some very interesting attempts, but I do not think that they can fit into each other quite like that, and you are quite right, it’s unprecedented, the great ideas are everywhere

¹⁵ “[B]ecause the instrumental nature of religious forms was forgotten, the science of psychology suddenly appeared as something *new*.” [Jacob Needleman, “Introduction” to *The New Religions* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1970), p. 18]

now in addition to the toxic ideas; they occupy the same shelf in the paperback section in the bookstore. So the ideas are there now of course, but most modern people cannot read the traditionalists very well—who's the person who told you, "Who the hell is going to read this stuff?"¹⁶

SBS: Marty Glass.

JN: That was an interesting interview.

You ask who would be the new authority? I met Frithjof Schuon several times and he said, talking about Gurdjieff,¹⁷ "There can be no new revelation." But does that mean that God has given up? I think there's still Somebody up there, so the new revelation might have a completely different way of coming in, adapting to this culture. If there is to be a new revelation, and there could be more than one of course, Sufism itself could turn into that which touches the modern people if it adjusts marginal aspects of itself to the subjectivity of our time. Buddhism itself tells us that the Buddha descends into hell, he brings the dharma to those in hell, where he has to speak truth in the form of a lie. The *Kalama Sutta* says, "You **don't** tell the children that the houses are on fire, you tell the children that there are toys in the streets and they jump, and now that they are here you can start telling them something else."

¹⁶ See Samuel Bendeck Sotillos, "Excerpts from an Interview with Marty Glass: Tears, Laughter, Compassion and Wisdom in the *Kali-Yuga*," *Sacred Web: A Journal of Tradition and Modernity*, Vol. 26 (Winter 2010), pp. 170-191.

¹⁷ While the case of George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff (1877-1949) and the Traditionalist or Perennialist School is not the theme of this interview, since the subject has been broached it is fair to acknowledge that Schuon had strong reservations about Gurdjieff and his Fourth Way teaching. It has also been made public, largely through the publication of Whitall N. Perry's *Gurdjieff in the Light of Tradition* (published in book form in 1978, but first appearing in several issues of *Studies in Comparative Religion* during 1974-1975), that Madame de Salzmann (1889-1990), a leading, if not **the** foremost disciple of Gurdjieff for almost thirty years, sought out René Guénon in Cairo, Egypt, after Gurdjieff's death. What took place and what was discussed is largely unknown, and while Perry provides one account, the students of Gurdjieff give another. It is safe to say that Perry's book on Gurdjieff is considered by Gurdjieffians to be biased if not polemic. Professor Needleman explained to the interviewer that Madame de Salzmann, whom he knew very well, confirmed to him that she did make the journey to meet with Guénon to discuss Gurdjieff and his teaching. Madame de Salzmann also stated that at the end of the meeting with Guénon, he proclaimed, "Now I see." When this interviewer asked Professor Needleman to elaborate on the meaning of this statement, as it could be interpreted in two very different ways, he expressed that it was a positive response in regards to the authenticity of Gurdjieff's teaching.

Maybe you can't tell the whole thing, people won't understand it, but how to touch them in a way that doesn't compromise the real truth, that doesn't really poison it, touch them in a way that really awakens and supports the part in a human being that could really try to start searching for truth. And for Western people that part may well be this isolated intellect that is the cause of so much damage. But there may be hope if you can show people some kind of great *knowledge* that exists, that they could verify—which brings us back to the original question of verification. Maybe that could be a way for modern people, particularly Americans who have a love of knowledge, a love of knowing. Yes it gets mixed up with the ego, but maybe in there there's some spark, a sense of wonder and astonishment that that could lead them to move step by step, if there was a teaching, a master who could help guide the way.

Now that would lead to the general question of, "How do you recognize a master, a teacher, a guru?" I hear that from students all the time. There are so many "gurus," and some of them are really good, they're interesting, and some are charlatans and some of them are self-deceived or frauds. How do you recognize the authentic spiritual teachers?—because there are fake Sufis, there are fake Christians, there are fake Gurdjieffians—there are fake everything! And they all say "I'm the one." You can't recognize a teacher by their "robes"; they all have robes. You can't recognize them even by their writings, some of them write very well. So you can't be external only. What are the marks of the Buddha? Broad shoulders? That's all symbolic. So the question becomes *what in myself* could recognize a teacher? And the real question is really two questions: "How seriously do I wish to know, how seriously do I feel the need for truth, spiritual truth?" and "How do I examine this teacher impartially?" A professor of mine once said to me, "We have to be open-minded, but not so open-minded that our brains fall out." So we have to be critical as well as open-minded, open-minded without being gullible, critical without being cynical. That's up to us.

Now, are there people that can help us? I think there are, I think good academicians, thoughtful psychologists exist who can help us to be aware of when we're being sentimental and being seduced and when we're being cynical. There can be cynicism also when you say, "There are no new revelations," that can be a kind of cynicism. I do not say that it is cynicism in the hands of someone like Frithjof Schuon, but it can be if it falls into the wrong hands. Maybe there is someone arising among us that has the gift, and maybe it's not going to be called Tradition, maybe it will be called something else.

SBS: Due to the lack of discernment within both third and fourth “forces” in modern psychology,¹⁸ could you speak to the importance of attaching oneself to a traditional spiritual form as it relates to the perennial philosophy and its expositors?

JN: Such a framework is very hostile to something happening here, in this culture, the culture is hostile to it, the academic culture, the humanist culture, the fundamentalist culture—it’s hard to see how something is any time soon going to enter into that culture that could really be sacred, that could really lead people to the Sacred. But there may be an exoteric framework forming within the modern culture that doesn’t call itself religion, it may call itself “community of seekers” or something like that, which may contain, in sacred privacy, an esoteric spiritual path.

I would like to conclude by considering a question that is often raised by some Christian theologians confronting the fact of the inner spiritual effort that esoteric and contemplative practices frequently speak of. It sometimes seems to Christians that effort in the realm of faith denies the purity, the *givenness*, of God’s grace—I’ve heard things like that said rather often. Now, when I ask “What is grace?” the mind stops. You can verbally define it, but—it’s really beyond definition. Yet one can speak of it in connection with other things, first of all on the level of ideas. No great idea exists alone, it’s part of a whole teaching, and the idea of grace—which on one level *is* a great idea—is “the unearned gift from above,” that’s what it means verbally. You can say a lot of things about human psychology from the Christian tradition, and from that worldview that talks about the nature of God and human effort and suffering and where grace fits in as part of it.

But at the experiential level, in the experiential practice of spiritual tradition, from many people’s experience, *grace* is not arbitrary. There has to be—perhaps not as a fixed rule but in general—there has to be some preparation for it. A famous saying, rightly or wrongly attributed to St. Augustine, is “God provides the wind, but man must raise the sails.” What we do to be receptive, to receive *grace*, is an essential part of a spiritual teaching. St. Paul says that *grace* came, Christ Jesus came, to cure us because of man’s disobedience to the Law. But it was the Law (the Torah) that showed us we cannot obey the law that was given by God. In that sense, the effort to become experientially aware of sin made it possible for us to open to the energy of grace.

¹⁸ See footnote 13, *supra*.

So grace and effort are a dance; if you take one too far it just becomes fantasy. “Everything is happening, grace, I’ll just wait, I’ll sit around and do whatever I want to do and grace will come to me.” It becomes twisted like that, it becomes predestination, shallow Calvinism, and things like that. On the other hand, if there’s too much emphasis on effort, then it becomes muscular, doing, ego, “I’m going to charge into heaven, put my boots on.” So there’s a very interesting interplay. There must be a third principle that can harmonize them.

A personal story: When I was writing my book on Christianity,¹⁹ I met with Anthony Bloom [1914-2003], who was at that time the Russian Orthodox Archbishop in London. I spoke to him of an experience I had when I was in Athens on my way to Mount Athos. It was when I was sitting inside a large Orthodox church. As you probably know, in the center of the ceiling is a huge head of Christ, Christ *Pantocrator*, ruler of the universe. I was in quite a receptive state, and when I looked up I saw this immense face of Christ looking straight down at me. It touched me very deeply. I felt at that moment that my life and all of life was a gift, an immense gift we’ve been offered by God, Christ. I said to Anthony Bloom, “I saw this face of Jesus looking down on me, as though offering me a huge gift. I felt utterly unworthy in front of this gift. How can I be worthy of such a gift, the scale of it?”

He gave me a wonderful reply. “What is the proper response to a gift?” he said. I had no answer.

After a long silence, he said simply, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world, “The proper response to a gift is to accept it”

And after another long silence, he said, “In all our work, we are working to become able to accept the gift.” That couldn’t more beautiful, could it?

So grace is there, the gift is being offered, constantly being offered from inside and above myself, it’s crying out for me, it wants to come into my life, God wants to do that and He can’t; so, the little *big* thing that I have to do—it’s very little but without it He cannot come in—is to work to receive. So in that case there’s effort, there’s struggle, there’s searching, there’s praying, and all the inner work that goes on in order to allow the gift to be received, to enter and permeate my body and my life.

¹⁹ Jacob Needleman, *Lost Christianity* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980).

So, you see, a word like grace can be taken in a superficial way, as even “revelation” can. The state we’re in when we hear such ideas determines whether they have a beneficent action upon us, or (whether they are) just another idea taken by (mere) thought and ordinary emotion.

SBS: There are several core facets which obstruct modern psychology, if not the whole of modernism and postmodernism, both in its theoretical underpinning and in its practice. This reductionism could be isolated although not limited to the following: *scientism*,²⁰ *evolutionism*, *psychologism*,²¹ *syncretism* and *New Age thought*.²² While you have spoken to some of these obstacles, would you agree that these are limiting the very efficacy of modern psychology in all its “forces”?

JN: So much to talk about here, but the bottom line is the aim of a spiritual path is not ideas, ideas alone are not going to do it.²³ They will help only up to a point in preparing the mind and the feelings. But surely the ultimate aim of spiritual work is what could be called “the creation of people,” people who are actually able to live what the spiritual teachings are speaking of. It’s real people, fully human beings that are needed. I can have all the doctrinal teachings of, say, Sufism or Buddhism, in my mind and not be able to live it. But if, *with help*, we start living it, an influence can come through us and might even help some of us modern people who in a way are suffering from a psycho-spiritual affliction that neither we nor many psychotherapists know we really have.

It’s all about what Gurdjieff, and possibly Guénon as well, called *being*, the being of a fully human man or woman. That’s what matters. If you meet a person of developed being, of real

²⁰ See Jacob Needleman, “Questions of the Heart: Inner Empiricism as a Way to a Science of Consciousness,” *Noetic Sciences Review* (Summer 1993), pp. 4-9.

²¹ “The metaphysics of scientism encourages man to stop his search for inwardness at the level of psychic contents.” [Jacob Needleman, “A Brief Note on Jungianism” in *A Sense of the Cosmos: The Encounter of Modern Science and Ancient Truth* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1976), p. 131]

²² “[T]he new, exoteric religion of ‘esotericism’...to drag in these esoteric terms and make them into mass religion.... [T]he New Age thinkers are overoptimistic and naïve” [Dick Anthony, Bruce Ecker and Ken Wilber, “When Is Religion Transformative? A Conversation with Jacob Needleman” in *Spiritual Choices: The Problem of Recognizing Authentic Paths to Inner Transformation*, eds. Dick Anthony, Bruce Ecker and Ken Wilber (New York: Paragon House, 1987), p. 339]

²³ Jacob Needleman, “The First Step” in *Why Can't We Be Good?* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2007), pp. 3-23.

presence, you feel something in their presence, it makes you quiet; in their presence, even if only for a moment, you become *yourself*, closer to the Self you are meant to be.²⁴ That's what we need: real people. "Mankind," says Gurdjieff "is asleep." We need people who are awakening. Of course, ideas are important, they are necessary. Spiritually profound explanation is urgently needed. What the writings of Frithjof Schuon bring is so powerful, so beautiful. But, ultimately, and above all, it's *people*—that's what's needed. If I meet a truly conscious human being, I cannot help but sense their *being*, which includes a mysterious level of objective love and understanding calling out from within them to us, far beyond insistence on ideas and allegiance to form and doctrine.²⁵

²⁴ See Jacob Needleman, "Hope," *Material for Thought*, No. 14 (1995), pp. 7-11.

²⁵ Here we might recall Professor Needleman's informative words captured a quarter of a century ago, alluding to the kind of men and women needed to evade the crisis of the modern and postmodern world, and we would still agree that it is those individuals who tirelessly seek principial knowledge or esoteric truth via the world's spiritual traditions: "And which people are needed?—surely, this is the question that surpasses everything in importance. What qualities of the human person can actually bring real force and justified hope to the seeker of today?" [Jacob Needleman, "Preface to the Second Edition" in *The Sword of Gnosis: Metaphysics, Cosmology, Tradition, Symbolism*, ed. Jacob Needleman (London: Arkana, 1986), p. 8]