

HINDU ART IN THE TRADITIONAL DOCTRINE OF SACRED ART*

Geleneksel Kutsal Sanat Doktrini Açısından Hindu Sanatı

Assist. Prof. Dr. Muharrem HAFİZ**

ABSTRACT

Every sacred art for the traditionalist school (including the names as Renè Guènon, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, Frithjof Schuon, Titus Burckhardt and Seyyed Hossein Nasr) is founded on a deep metaphysical background. According to the traditional doctrine of sacred art, this world is only an image/copy of a spiritual pattern, and the very existence of this world is derived from its celestial archetypes. Sacred art is the visible and audible form of the Invisible as it helps man to find his own center and kernel of which the nature is to love God. In this presentation, the metaphysical aspects of the doctrine of sacred art in general will be examined and then the angelic origin of art formulated explicitly by the Hindu tradition with regard to the traditionalist school.

Keywords: Hinduism, Hindu art, Tradition, Traditionalist school, Sacred art

ÖZET

Gelenekselci Okul (Renè Guènon, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, Frithjof Schuon, Titus Burckhardt ve Seyyed Hossein Nasr ile temsil edilen) için her kutsal sanat derin bir metafizik arka plana sahiptir. Okulun kutsal sanat doktrinine göre, içinde yaşadığımız dünya, manevi bir düzenin salt bir görüntüsü/kopyasıdır ve bu dünyanın mevcudiyeti ilahi arketiplerden neşet etmektedir. O halde kutsal sanat Görünmez-Olan'ın, görünür ve duyulur şeklidir. İnsana fitratı gereği merkezini ve Tanrı'yı seven özünü bulmasında yardım eder. Bu sunumda ilk olarak ana hatlarıyla kutsal sanat doktrini, daha sonra ise Gelenekselci okul bağlamında ve Hindu geleneğinin açıkça formüle ettiği şekliyle sanatın semavi kökleri irdelenecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Hinduizm, Hindu sanatı, Gelenek, Gelenekselci okul, Kutsal sanat

* This work, which is supported by Istanbul University Coordination Unit for Scientific Researches (Project no: UDP-38816), is the revised article version of a paper presented in the symposium held in New Delhi/India. (The 7th International Conference of the Asian Philosophical Association to be held jointly at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, India between 14th and 16th January 2014)

** Istanbul University Theology Faculty History of Philosophy Department, (muharremhafiz@hotmail.com)

I. Tradition and the Traditionalist School

The term 'Traditionalist School' is used to denote a school of thought based upon the idea that all of the world's great religions share the same origin and metaphysical principles. These perennial principles are commonly called 'philosophia perennis' or 'sophia perennis' and expounded in the writings and teachings of Renè Guènon, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, Frithjof Schuon, Titus Burckhardt and Seyyed Hossein Nasr. The term *tradition* is not here to connote 'conservation' or 'custom' which are both human acquisitions, but a primordial Wisdom and Truth or immutable supra-formal essence that involves Creation. "Tradition" is then seen by the traditionalists as the transmission of the highest principles and truth throughout time. According to Nasr, "tradition means truth or revealed principles and in fact, a whole cosmic sector through various figures envisaged as messengers, prophets, *avatars*, the Logos or other transmitting agencies, along with all the ramifications and applications of these principles in different realms including law and social structure, art, symbolism, the sciences, and embracing of course Supreme Knowledge along with the means for its attainment" (Nasr, 1989: 64). If the term (tradition) is conceived as the transmission of the divine and sacred principles and archetypes, it is the *sophia perennis* of the Western tradition, *sanatana dharma* of Hindus and *al-hikmetu'l-khâlîde* of Muslims.

Frithjof Schuon also states that no intellectuality is possible outside the language of Tradition. In other words, "an intellection outside Tradition will have neither authority nor efficacy" (1995: 48). Also in Burckhardt's view it is Tradition that transmits sacred models and the working rules and thereby guarantees the spiritual validity of the forms. According to the traditionalist school, Tradition has within itself a secret force which is communicated to an entire civilization and determines even those arts and crafts of which the immediate objects include nothing particularly sacred. This power creates the style of a traditional civilization (Burckhardt, 1967: 8). On the other hand, Tradition which combines the human and divine/sacred realm could be described best in this legend: "The words of a street singer heard by the author in Morocco are worth quoting here. The singer was asked why little Arab guitar had only two strings. He gave this answer: 'To add a third string to this instrument would be to take the first step towards heresy. When God created the soul of Adam it did not want to enter into his body, and circled like a bird round about its cage. Then God commanded the angels to play on the two strings that are called the male and the female, and the soul entered it and remained within it. For this reason two strings are also enough to deliver the soul from the body'" (Burckhardt, 1967: 9). For Burckhardt, this legend summarizes the traditional doctrine of sacred art.

The concept of 'Tradition' expresses then the universal and divine principles and unchangeable Truth which binds man to the Holy. In this case Tradition

implies the truths of supra-formal character centered in the nature of reality. It comes from the Source in which everything originates and to which everything returns, and this Source is same in all the aspects of religions and traditions. However when we say that Tradition is issued from the same Source or the Ultimate Reality, we must also take into consideration the fact that man lives in the world of forms. In other words, if the Ultimate Reality is considered to be the Supreme Subject or Immanent Self, then the world of forms or multiplicity must be understood as an objectivization; or if that Reality is taken as the Supreme Object or Transcendent One this phenomenal world must be understood as subjectivization. In either case the principle of manifestation requires the acceptance of the distinction between Essence and form, inward and outward, or noumenon and phenomenon. We can describe this relationship in a Vedantic manner by saying that “*Âtmâ* made Itself *Mâyâ* so that *Mâyâ* could realize *Âtmâ*; the Real became illusory thus the illusory could become real” (Schuon, 1986: 5). In the universe there is the known and the knower; in *Âtmâ*, the two poles are united in One, that is to say; the one is inseparably within the other, whereas in *Mâyâ* this unity is split into subject and object.

II. Sacred Art and Its Metaphysical Basis

The ultimate origin of sacred is not the individual psyche of the artist. It is the “metaphysical and spiritual world” that transcends the individual artist, and that is where the great difference between traditional and modern art comes from. On the other hand, from the traditional point of view every beauty is associated with the Sacred, with a capital S that means God but not everyone is aware of the levels of the reflection of Beauty. In this regard, the Sacred is the projection of the celestial Center on the cosmic periphery, or of the “Motionless Mover” into the flux of things. The sense of the Sacred is the awareness of That which cannot not be in the world of that which may or may not be, and whose immense remoteness and miraculous proximity we experience at one and the same time (Schuon, 1982: 103). Here we are, in the traditional perspective, far from the scholastic and rational arguments, yet this is also an argument, but one that addresses not conceptual intelligence but aesthetic intuition.

The Sacred is on the other hand the projection, objectification and expression of the Unchangeable into the changeable. As a result, the sense of the sacred consists of not only perceiving this projection and objectification, but also discovering the trace of Unchangeable in things. The sense of the sacred is also the consciousness of the presence of God.¹ This carries us to the mystery of the two aspects of *Mâyâ*, the one that imprisons and the one that delivers. We always experience two aspects of Truth in all our experimentations: phenomena-

¹ It is the consciousness of the divine presence which well-known *hadith* of Prophet Muhammed (A.S.) on *ihsân* refers: “Perfect piety (*ihsân*=right action) is that you adore God as if you were seeing Him, and if you do not see Him, He nonetheless sees you”.

noumena, sensible world-thinkable world, senses-reason etc. Therefore man cannot be a metaphysician in the full sense without possessing the sense of the sacred. What lies behind this idea is the principle of *Unity in multiplicity* (which is also stated in Islam as the principle *Tawhid*).

We can say here that one cannot enter the sanctuary of Truth except in a holy manner. This relationship allows an understanding of how art can be an instrument of contemplation, because the purpose of art is not a priori to induce aesthetic emotions, but to transmit the spiritual message and the expression of truth directly. The artist is on the other hand the person who expresses the Divine principles and truth in this world. The creative externalization from the Center to the periphery is also valid in art. In other words, art is oscillation between the empirical world and Heaven.

According to the members of the traditional school the origin of sacred art is considered by all traditions to be the Sacred itself. In other words, sacred art comes from the Sacred itself; it does not have a human origin. The members of the perennialist school who have the claim of using the same eternal truth and principles in history are opposed to the profane philosophy. In this regard, rational philosophy or rational mode of knowledge is for the school in no way extends beyond the realm of metaphysics and reaches any transcendent truth per se. On the other hand metaphysics has a transcendent character which transcends and makes itself independent of human thought. Philosophy depends on individual *ratio* whereas metaphysics depends on *Intellect*. Reason proceeds discursively, through language, and like a bridge, merges two banks, knower and known, without removing the river in between. However the Intellect identifies the knower with what he knows, transforms it to the other. Therefore we must always remember the fact that when we talk about the school and its doctrine of sacred art, perennial philosophy is not profane or rational philosophy.

In this holistic conception, Beauty is the splendor (*Gloria* in theological aesthetics) of Truth. In a word, for traditional man a certain and individual beauty that can be thought of as a "means" is part of his existence. Beauty, being essentially deployment, is an "exteriorization" of God, where unfathomable mystery of the Self cannot be grasped. Being and Existence, in Hindu terms *Ishvara* and *Samsara*, are both *Maya*, but Being is still God, whereas Existence is already world. As stated above *Âtmâ* made Itself *Mâyâ* in order that *Mâyâ* could realize *Âtmâ*. The greatest of all miracles is theophany, or in other words, there is only one miracle in reality from which all others derive, that is the contact between the finite and the Infinite. The Divine and Sacred Image is a sacramental crystallization of this miraculous meeting and for the members of this school nothing brings closer to this truth than *sacred art* (Schuon, 1984: 236).

The archetype of Beauty or its Divine/Sacred model is overflowing of the existential potentialities in pure Being. In other words, Beauty stems from the

Divine Love. This Love is the will that emanates and realizes itself in “another”; thus it is that God created the world and man out of love. Through the experience of beauty man can see totality, although it is not for the human soul to realize this metaphysical totality but to protect its holiness. For this reason the purpose of art is to enable man to participate in the order that manifests the Divine Unity directly.

The ultimate objective of sacred art is not the evocation of feelings or the exchange of impressions. But it is a symbol and Traditions emerge from the Infinite like flowers; they can no more be fabricated than the sacred art which is their witness and proof. No art in itself is a human creation; but sacred art has this particularity, that its essential content is a revelation. Therefore sacred art is the visible and audible form of Revelation (Schuon, 2007: 33). And the form of this art must be an expression of its Divine content and in no way should it contradict with Revelation or Tradition.

According to members of the traditionalist school, in no traditional doctrine does the idea of Divine Art play so fundamental a part as in the Hindu doctrine and art (Burckhardt, 1967: 12).

III. Hindu Art and Its Spirituality

In Hindu doctrine the origin of the images existed in Heaven (*Kailasa*) and created by the artist is divine. The works of art (*silpani*) are empirical reflections of the Absolute Self (*Atman*).² On the other hand *Mâyâ* in Hindu tradition is not only a mysterious Divine Power which causes the world to exist outside the Divine Self or Reality, she is also in her positive aspect of Divine Art which produce all form. *Mâyâ* in principle is not other than the possibility contained in the Infinite of limiting Itself without It infinity being thereby limited. Therefore God manifests Himself in the world, yet equally He does not manifest but expresses Himself and at the same time keeps silent by persisting on His ineffable being.

According to Ananda Coomaraswamy, who stresses mostly on the importance of Hindu art among the other members of the traditionalist school, the systematic discussions of aesthetic problems have been mostly held on India (1956: 5). The real and fundamental element of this art represents a pure mental activity (*citta-sanna*). For Coomaraswamy, this activity is only possible with highly specialized technique of vision. The essential principle of Hindu art is that the true knowledge of an object is not obtained by mere empirical observation (*pratyaksa*), but when the knower and known, the seer and seen, meet in an act transcending distinction (*anayor advaita*). Coomaraswamy supports this thought with a passage from *Bṛhadaranyaka Upaniṣad*, I, 4-10: “Whoever worships a

2 In Indian literature there are numerous lists of the eighteen or more professional arts (*silpa*) and the sixty-four avocational arts (*kalâ*). They all equally emanates from the divine origin without distinction of rank (Coomaraswamy, 1956: 9).

divinity as other than the self, thinking 'He is one and I another', he knows nothing." According to Meister Eckhart, states Coomaraswamy, a skilled painter shows his art, but it is not himself that is revealed to us. He also quotes the words of Dante in this regard "who paints a figure, if he cannot be it, cannot draw it" (Coomaraswamy, 1956: 7).

In Hindu tradition, a work of art (*silpa*) is then only accomplished by the artist who comprehends this unity of human and divine realms, for the works of art are in fact the reflections of the Absolute "I" (*Ātmā*).³ This state of intellect metaphysically corresponds to the formal theory of aesthetic experience in Asian and especially in Hindu tradition. In other words, it should be realized that from the Indian metaphysical viewpoint the subject and the object or subjective and objective are not irreconcilable categories, since Truth (*satya*) subsists where intelligence and sensible (or in philosophical terms noumena and phenomena) unite.⁴ According to the traditionalist school, is not entitled to be called "sacred" unless its formal language metaphysically reflects the spiritual character of a particular religion. In other words, no art can be rationally enjoyed without the recognition of the metaphysical principles to which they are related. The ultimate theme of sacred is then concerned with one and undivided principle by which the artists reveal his or her inner life (*Atma*) that is metaphysically contacted with God (*Brahman*). It can be said from the traditionalist school's perspective that it is the essence of art to bring back the order the multiplicity of Nature and the artist and to prepare all the creatures for their return to God.

How is it possible to unite these two realms of experience that seem impossible to reconcile? What allows us to perceive these two fields as one? In the theory of Hindu art, the most important term is *Rasa* which means "flavor". Aesthetic experience emerges in this sense as the tasting of flavor (*rasâsvâdana*) or simply tasting (*svâda*). The word "*rasa*" is here absolutely used with reference to the interior act of tasting flavor. The usage of this word in this sense needs

3 Ananda Coomaraswamy states that there are many passages of the Rg. Vega corresponding to the sacred origin of the art-works.

4 At this point we should remember the Hindu term or principle which is mostly emphasized as essential to art "*Pramâna*". As the source of the truth, for the members of traditional school, the Indian theories of knowledge admit not an empirical perception but an inwardly known model. However such knowledge should not contradict experience. As not to contrary to experience this concept which we can translate as "measure" means what is "true" here and now in the light of experience and under changed conditions. *Pramâna* can be easily understood when compared to Western "conscience" as an inward criterion which gives form to conduct. However while Occidental "conscience" is only related to the field of ethics, Oriental conscience "*Pramâna*" contains all the intellectual, ethical and aesthetical forms. According to this kind of approach, "Beauty is the splendor of Truth" and all these areas are not independent from each other. In this regard Oriental conscience (*Pramâna*) supplies a total and monistic structure which includes all activities of intellectual, moral and aesthetic. When we adapt this totality to all art, we can regard that they tend towards a perfection in which pictorial or formal elements are not merely reconciled but at the same time completely identified. This monistic approach could be justified in Hindu terminology "*nirmâna-kâraka*", as in the Islamic assertion that "the only true artist (*musavvir*) is God (*Allah*)" (Coomaraswamy, 1956: 21).

to be distinguished from the related beauties and the superficial enjoyment of the work. The nature of aesthetic experience (*rasâsvâdana*) is discussed by Visvanatha in the *Sahitya Darpana* as: "It is pure, indivisible, self-manifested, compounded equally of joy and consciousness, free of admixture with any other perception, the very twin brother of mystic experience (*Brahmasvadana sahodarah*), and the very life of it is super-sensuous (*lokottara*) wonder" (transmitted by Coomaraswamy, 1957: 35). According to Coomaraswamy, *rasah* is experienced with regard to the aesthetic experience only by those having innate knowledge of absolute values in exaltation of pure consciousness. The pure aesthetic experience is also twin brother of the experience (*âsvadyâte*) of *Brahma* (*Brahmasvadana sahodarah*) whereof the life is super-worldly lighting flash as an intrinsic aspect in indivisibility (1956: 48). In Hindu art, pure aesthetic experience belongs to whom the knowledge of ideal beauty which is known intuitively in an intellectual ecstasy at the highest level of consciousness. This level of pure aesthetic experience is indeed that of the pure angelic status proper to Motionless Heaven (*Brahmaloka*). The immediate experience of *Brahma* in the work of art as "sudden flash of lightening" is beyond our individually grasp and conception. Therefore, for Coomaraswamy, religion and art are thus the names for the one and same experience, an intuition of reality and identity. This is not exclusively Hindu view, but it has been stated by other traditions as well (1957: 36).

Such an understanding of metaphysical unity is mostly reflected from the traditional viewpoint in the sanctuary (*sacratum*). Spiritually speaking a sanctuary is always at the center of the world (*axis mundi*) and whoever resides in it is protected from the indefiniteness of space and time, for the sanctuary is "here" and "now" that God is present to man (Burckhardt, 1967: 17). From this viewpoint the temple unites the intelligible and sensible by revealing the symbolism of 'circle' and 'square'. The center of the world prefigured in the temple is symbolized in the rectangular form of the temple and this square or rectangular form essentially opposes to the circular form of a heavenly world. The square represents the positive and fixed aspects of this world, whereas the circle represents the divine, sacred and heavenly principles. That is why the sacred architecture of any given tradition, can be seen as a development of the fundamental theme of the transformation of the circle into the square. The circle is related to unchangeable heavenly world and the movement of which it reproduces, whereas the square to the changeable earth. This symbolic relationship between the circle and the square predominates in the sacred architecture of India. In other words, in the genesis of Hindu temple can be seen as the metaphysical and spiritual unity of intelligible and sensible world together, namely that of noumena and phenomena (Schuon, 2007: 82; Burckhardt, 1967: 18).

The fundamental plan of the Hindu temple is thus a symbol of the divine and sacred presence in the world. According to Burckhardt, the Hindu spirit is always inclined to transpose terrestrial and cosmic realities in to the non-separative and static plenitude of the Divine Essence (1967: 19). The “crystallization” of all cosmic realities in a geometrical symbol is metaphysically prefigured in the Hindu tradition by the construction of the temple. This holds true for the other traditions as well. At this point we will mention briefly the Hindu cosmogony as the essential part of its art.

The cubical shape of the Vedic altar represents the “body” of *Prajâpati* which is the total cosmic being. The *devas* sacrificed this primordial being at the beginning of the world and his organs, which constitute the multiple parts of the cosmos that are to be “symbolically” reassembled.⁵ *Prajâpati* is the “Principle” in its manifested aspect which includes the totality of the world. In his essence he is not other than *Purusha* whom the *devas* sacrificed at the beginning of the creation.⁶ At this point it must be remembered that multiplicity is not in the nature of God, but it is in the nature of creation and the world. This Hindu spiritual viewpoint also reflects the Hindu art as well. Therefore every sacrifice reproduces the *pre-temporal* sacrifice of the *devas*; and the unity of the total being is symbolically and spiritually reflected by art-works and rituals. The person who guides the rite (officiate) or the artist who expresses the work of art identifies himself with the altar which was built in the likeness of the universe. The plan of the Hindu temple which reflects the expression of the divine norm is thus a symbol of the Divine Self (*Purusha*) in the world.

According to Hindu tradition a common idea in the science of construction (*vastushastra*: architecture) is that the temple is symbolically a representation of the cosmos. On the other hand just as the cosmic diagrams (*mandalas*) were painted as two-dimensional representations of the cosmos, the temple was regarded as a three-dimensional *mandala* representing the universe. In both, the *mandala* and the temple, the deity occupies the center (Blurton, 1992: 47). Eliade argues for that we will encounter the same symbolism of center for the construction of a house in India. In this context, he states that when a Hindu affirms that his house is in the “Center of the World”, he embraces this belief as a “living truth” and a “spiritual reality”. It is no longer submitted to a test of scientific reduction in order to demystify it, by observing that if all Indian houses were

5 According to Burckhardt, the myth of immolation of *Prajâpati* by the *devas* is analogous to the Sufic (Islamic mystical) doctrine according to which God manifested the multiple universe by the virtue of His Beautiful Names (*Esmâu'l-Husnâ*). According to the terminology of the monotheistic religions the *devas* also corresponds to the angels, insofar as they represent divine aspects. (1967: 39 quoted as footnote, 5 and 7).

6 The etymological origin of the sacred in connection with its extension which means “sacrifice” can give us some important inspirations about the nature of it. In Latin “to make *sacer*” is *sacer facere* (sacrifice in English). That is to say the believer transfers the guilt, the sin and the curse from his own shoulders to the sacrifice, since that is obvious way to come near or enter the *sacer*. (Soltes, 2005: 4). The fact that the sacrifice (*kurbân*) means “coming near/close” in Islamic terminology should be kept in mind.

proclaimed to be in “the Center of the World”, there must exist an infinity of such centers, which is obviously absurd. On the contrary, in the face of such beliefs, it can be concluded that the sacred space in which the “Center of the World” is inscribed has nothing to do with the profane space of geometry; “it has another structure and responds to another experience” (Eliade, 1985: 105). Therefore to build a temple, a house or a city is equivalent to reiterating the “construction of the Universe”. That is to say, the repetition of the cosmogony and the symbolism of the Center are not exclusive to sacred architecture.

The dance of *Shiva* also plays an important role in Hindu art. Amongst the greatest of the names of *Shiva* is *Natarâja*, Lord of Dancers. Whereas architecture represents the substantive and the fixed aspect of the Divine Essence, dance reflects the moving and dynamic aspect of this essence. The root idea behind all of *Shiva's* dances is one and the same, “the manifestation of primal rhythmic energy” (Coomaraswamy, 1957: 56). In other words, the central motif of the dance is the cosmic activity. The dance of *Shiva* expresses the production, conservation, and the destruction of the cosmos, considered as the activity of God. *Shiva* representing the Divinity (Holiness) as transformer of the cosmos was moved by *Shakti* that dances on the motionless body of *Shiva*. Images of dancing *Shiva* then exhibit the attributes of a God, since God is beyond all forms.

If we consider Indian religious philosophy and its sacred art we will be faced with the Absolute Reality that neither dies nor is born. In the Upanishads, we know that the Ultimate Reality is referred as unlimited by any empirical form and not to be described by any predicate, because He is unknowable in consideration of His Absolute Self. In fact we experience, in Schuon’s terms, His immense remoteness and miraculous proximity at one and the same time and as all philosophies or religious traditions, all art including Hindu art also tries to grasp the contracting and conflicting fields in unity. The ineffable and unknown nature of God as emphasized in the Upanishads, in the words of *Saiva* hymnist, *Manikka Vaçagar*, “He is not comprehensible by words, not visible to eye or other senses” is also declared with Koranic or Old-Testament statement as “I am that I am” ($A=A$). In a famous prayer Shankaracharya, who established the doctrine of *advaita* -the unity of *Atman* and *Brahman* in Hindu tradition- apologizes for visualizing One who is not limited by any form and for visiting Him in sacred shrines, who is omnipresent (Coomaraswamy, 1956: 160).

Conclusion

According to the traditional school, intellectual intuition in the traditional civilizations lies at the root of everything, an idea which is foreign to the Western or modern consciousness. Here we are talking about the sphere of universal principles and pure metaphysics alone. After the epistemic breakdown in West, individualism raised and began to impose the negation of any principle higher than individualism and the reduction of civilization to purely human elements.

Individualism amounts also to the same thing as what was called 'humanism' and 'profane'. However in the traditional man's eyes, there is no real distinction between the sacred and the profane or this world and the other. In all Asian societies and traditions, including Hindu people and their art, all manifestations are in fact the reflections of the Divine Principle without any difference. Therefore as all the traditional and sacred arts, the Hindu art differs essentially from the individual and the modern non-intellectual considerations of art as well. When we think about the crisis of the modern world today, the world in which the relationship between the sacred and the profane is broken in a diseased way, especially through the Asian thought including Hindu tradition we can understand once again the importance of the integrative and connective power of sacred art between the separate domains of Heaven and Earth/man and God appeared in the eyes of modern man. If we consider the divine and sacred origin of art we can think that we have the right to expect that only that Origin will save us from all human's faults and breakings, in Heideggerian words, "Only a god can save us now" (*Nur noch ein Gott uns retten*).

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