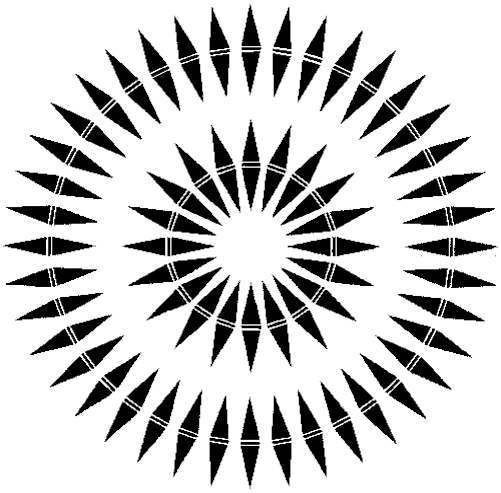
The Perennial Philosophy

An Introduction to the Perennialist School of Comparative Religious Thought



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"Our talk had reached a point where the greatest possible delights of our bodily senses, radiant as they might be with the brightest of corporeal light, could not be compared with the joys of eternal life, could not, indeed, even deserve a mention. Then we raised ourselves higher and, step by step, passed over all material things, even the heaven itself, from which the sun and moon and stars shine down upon the earth.

"And still we went upward, meditating and speaking and looking with wonder at Thy works, and we came to our own souls, and we went beyond our souls to reach that region of never-failing plenty where Life is the Wisdom by whom all these things are made, both what is past and what is yet to come—that Wisdom which herself is not made, but is as she has been and will be forever."

Saint Augustine, *The Confessions*, IX.10

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I

Introduction

1

Is There a Perennial Philosophy?

Huston Smith

Huston Smith (b. 1919) is Thomas J. Watson Professor of Religion, Emeritus, Syracuse University, and Adjunct Professor Emeritus at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. His book *The Religions of Man*, reissued as *The World's Religions*, has been the best-selling introduction to the subject for the last fifty years.

Steven Katz's assertion that there is no perennial philosophy[1] has attracted considerable attention, and its categorical character raises in a pointed way two important questions. Formally, what is the perennial philosophy?—how is it to be defined?[2] And factually, does it exist? Do we find it everywhere, as the word "perennial" claims that we should?

Katz rules out the possibility of a ubiquitous philosophy because experience is socially conditioned and societies differ. "The single epistemological assumption that has exercised my thinking," he tells us, is that "*there are NO pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences.* Neither mystical experience nor more ordinary forms of experience give any indication, or any grounds for believing, that they are unmediated…. *All* experience is processed through, organized by, and makes itself available to us in extremely complex epistemological ways" (1978:26).

This bears on the perennial philosophy in two ways. First, it rules out the possibility of cross-cultural *experiences,* because "experience is contextual" (1978:56-57). And it renders cross-cultural *typologies* suspect, for these too are culture bound. Categories that purport to service multiple cultures slur differences that are important. Their generality insures that they are either vacuous or misleading in presuming more cross-cultural similarity than in fact pertains.

As these are the objections to the perennial philosophy that Katz argues, I shall devote most of my space to them, but not without first pointing out that they focus on secondary issues.

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[1] "There is no *philosophia perennis,* Huxley and many others notwithstanding" (1978:24). Let us note right off that others, including others who do not accept the perennialist position, see things differently. Thus Owen Thomas has recently written that "the perennial philosophy … has been the dominant form of Western philosophy from Plato to Hegel" (63). Not Western philosophy only. "The 'perennial' philosophy [enlisted] most reputable philosophers of both Europe and Asia up to about A.D. 1450" (Conze, 25).

[2] Because "perennial" refers only to time, "primordial" (which includes space) is the better designator, but I shall stay with Katz's more prevalent nomenclature.

Katz's criticisms are the ones that perennialists most often hear, but the real issue lies elsewhere.

The Central, Neglected Claim of the Perennial Philosophy

The claim of the perennial philosophy is not that mystical experiences are cross-culturally identical. Its claims do not appeal to experience at all, save in the trivial sense that everything that enters our awareness can be said to be an experience of some sort. Nowhere in the thirty-odd books of Frithjof Schuon—one of the two perennial philosophers Katz mentions by name (1978:67)—do we find him undertaking a phenomenology of mystical states along the lines of Zaehner, Stace, and James. That he shuns this approach completely shows that the perennial philosophy he argues for does not turn on assessments of mystical phenomena at all; logically it doesn't even presuppose their existence. The other perennialist Katz names, Aldous Huxley, is less emphatic about this; he was, after all, an amateur rather than an exact philosopher. Yet no more than Schuon does he ground perennialism in experience. "The core of the Perennial Philosophy," he tells us, is "doctrines."[3]

The doctrines derive from metaphysical intuitions, and it is to these that the perennial philosophy appeals. To discern the truth of a metaphysical axiom one need not have an "experience." The ontological discernments of pure intellection, which must be distinguished from rational argumentation—*ratio* is not *intellectus*—have nothing to do with mystical rapture or access to states of "pure consciousness." The legitimacy of a metaphysical truth, evident to the intellect, does not depend on *samadhi* or gifts of "infused grace." Nowhere does the *Brahma* Sutra, e.g., appeal to mystical experience to support its metaphysical claims and arguments. The drift is the opposite. Ontological discernments are enlisted to elucidate or validate the yogas and the experiences they deliver.

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[3] Introduction to Prabhavananda & Isherwood's translation of *The Bhagavad-Gita,* p. 13. The doctrines Huxley refers to are there listed as four. First: the phenomenal world is the manifestation of a Divine Ground. Second: human beings are capable of attaining immediate knowledge of that ground. Third: in addition to their phenomenal egos, human beings possess an eternal Self, which is of the same or like nature with the divine Ground. Fourth: this identification is life's chief end or purpose.

Like mystical theophanies, metaphysical intuitions are ultimately ineffable. No more than the former can they be adequately rationalized; strictly speaking, they can only be symbolized—not to objectify Brahman but to dispel ignorance is the *Shastras*'s object, Vedantins tell us. The reasons for the ineffability in the two cases, however, are different. Infused or mystical graces, including the *samadhis* and *nirvakalpa* especially, bring into more or less direct view features of higher ontological orders. This does not happen in metaphysical discernment. There it is not *other* ontological realms, but principles that pervade them all that come to view. In both cases, analogy is the only final recourse for reporting, but the comprehension/experience distinction remains intact. To understand that 2 + 2 = 4 does not require access to higher realms of either consciousness or being.

Katz steers clear of metaphysics; his argument is phenomenological throughout. It seems safe to assume, though, that he would expect his "principle of no unmediated experience" to cover metaphysical discernments as fully as it does mystical states. As the latter coverage is the one he spells out, I proceed with it while re-emphasizing the point of this opening section. Only to the extent that Katz's arguments about mysticism can be read as applying *pari passu* to metaphysical intuitions do they bear on the perennial philosophy at all.

Is there a Universal Mystical Experience?

By his reading of it, Katz's unqualified premise—"there is NO unmediated experience"—suffices by itself to rule out the possibility that mystical experiences could be cross-culturally identical, but he adds induction to deduction by marshalling differences that turn up in mystical reports. His premise remains important, though, for he leans on it to argue that the differences are not confined to descriptions. The experiences that generate the descriptions are themselves different. Mystics in different traditions, and to some extent in different pockets of the same tradition, "see" different things.

This is overwhelmingly the case, of course. The question is whether, amidst these manifold differences, which no one disputes, there is one form of mystical experience that *is* cross-culturally identical—or better, indistinguishable, for it is impossible to determine whether even physical stimuli, such as the color red, are experienced identically. I am referring, of course, to what Stace calls the introspective type of mystical experience, which

cannot be culturally pegged because no culturally-identifiable particulars turn up within it. It isn't culturally tinted because, as the pure white light of the void, it has no tint.

We can approach this question by way of developmental psychology's classification of the kinds of knowing that successively emerge as human beings learn to abstract. There is a charming story of a Tibetan refugee in Switzerland who, having been persuaded to turn over his hundred frank note to a bank on the assurance that he could have it back on demand, returned the next day to prove that his informants had lied. The bank did not return his note, which for test purposes he had marked; it gave him a different note. To the bank, a hundred frank note was a hundred frank note. Not so to the Tibetan, who had been reared in a barter economy wherein every item of exchange was unique.

To the perennialist this tells the whole story of the present controversy, but it cannot be assumed that others will agree, so its moral must be spelled out. To his ontological hierarchy of being, the perennialist aligns a noetic hierarchy that extends beyond Piaget's while resembling it. In infancy knowing hovers close to the physical senses, but in childhood it takes off into images. Adults go on from there to order their images with abstract concepts. Mystics in their introvertive moments invoke a fourth kind of knowing that rises above sensations, images, and concepts, all three. If those ingredients continue to operate, they do so subliminally—tacitly, as Polanyi would say. They are not in view.

Katz may not believe that this fourth mode of knowing occurs,[4] but nothing in his argument proves that it cannot. His formal point about experience being mediated no more rules it out than the diversely mediated experience of delegates to the World Health Organization prevents them from getting past Irish potatoes and Peking duck to talk about carbohydrates, nutrition, and (quite simply) food. As for his empirical contention—that mystical accounts never report a culture-free experience—it is impossible of course to prove such a universal negative, but what is to the point is that Katz's handling of the data does not give him the edge over Stace who, sifting the same material (85-111), reaches the opposite conclusion; I mention Stace because he is the opponent Katz cites most often. Admittedly things get subtle

[4] It seems clear that he doesn't. "There is no substantive evidence to suggest that there is any pure consciousness *per se*.... The contention that we can achieve a state of pure consciousness is … erroneous" (1978:57-58). For a reasoned argument to the contrary, see Merrell-Wolff.

here. For example, the longest account that Katz quotes to support his conclusion that mystics never rise above the particulars of their respective religious conditionings reads to my eyes as if it supports the opposite conclusion. I refer to Ruysbroeck's report (which Katz quotes on 1978:61) that at the apex of the mystical experience "the three Persons give place to … the bare Essence of the Godhead … the Essential Unity … without distinction," which condition is "so onefold that no distinction can enter into it."

If there were such a thing as the introvertive mystical experience, Katz says in his final argument against it, it could not affect our understanding because the paradoxical and ineffable properties that are regularly ascribed to it "cancels [it] out of our language" and preclude "making any … intelligible claim for any mystical proposition" (1978:56).[5] Paradox and ineffability need to be uncoupled here. Far from saying nothing, a genuine paradox, such as matter being both wave and particle, can precipitate a noetic crisis, generating things not just to think about but to worry about. As for ineffable, far from its saying nothing, it too (in mystical context) makes a major claim: the claim that, poised on the rim of the human opportunity, the human mind can under exceptional conditions—the condition of infused grace it is sometimes called—see things too momentous to be fitted into language which on the whole serves quotidian ends. The claim may not be true, but only a crude positivism can deny that it is a *claim*.

Are Typologies Trustworthy?

Katz's second charge is directed against cross-cultural typologies, which he says are "reductive and inflexible, forcing multifarious and extremely variegated forms of mystical experience into improper interpretative categories which lose sight of the fundamentally important differences between the data studied" (1978:25). That typologies can and often do propose improper categories is again not in dispute; the question is whether there can also be useful ones. Katz himself seems in the end to concede that there can be, for he closes his essay with a plea for "further fundamental epistemological research into the conditions of mystical experience … in order to lay bare the [presumably generic] skeleton of such experience" (66). If this is indeed the

[5] By contrast, the protagonist in John Updike's novel *Roger's Version* attributes his passion for theology precisely to the way it "caresses and probes every crevice of the unknowable."

concession I take it to be, Katz's objection to the perennial philosophy on this second count cannot be that it *spins* a typology, but rather that the one it spins is "too reductive and inflexible." As he doesn't deliver on these charges,[6] the only way to respond is to present the perennial typology and let the reader assess it for himself. Does it make mincemeat of the religious corpus, cross-culturally examined, or does it (as the perennialist believes) cut where the joints are?

I shall summarize the perennialist typology, but before doing so I want to continue for a second stretch with Katz. Having responded to his criticisms of the perennial philosophy as he understands it, I wish (in the upcoming middle third of this essay) to show what there is about his project that causes it to misfire even when directed toward mystically defined perennialism.

Contra Katz

Katz tell us that his "entire paper is a 'plea for the recognition of differences'" (1978:25), but one difference he doesn't mention, and it proves to be the one that is crucial for the perennial philosophy. I refer to the difference between occasions on which (and contexts in which) differences are important, and other occasions and contexts in which similarities call for attention. Everything obviously both resembles and differs from every other thing: resembles it in that both exist; differs or there would not be two things but one. This being the case, when should we accent one pole, when the other? Claims for similarities or differences spin their wheels until they get down to *ways* and *degrees* in which things differ or are alike, and those variables shift with the problem we are working on. Does the fact that an Ethiopian's hunger is mediated by his African context cause it to differ from mine to the point where it throws international famine relief into question? If not, where are Katz's contexts and mediations relevant, and where are they not? Where, balancing his "plea for differences," is the place of Piaget's "decentration," the process of gradually becoming able to take a more and more universal standpoint, giving up a particular egocentric or sociocentric way of understanding and acting and moving towards the "universal communications community"? Overlooking this question, Katz by-passes most of the interesting and important issues in his topic. The neglect is

[6] Katz doesn't discuss the perennial philosophy's typology at all, so one must infer his criticisms of it from the general tenor of his argument.

particularly unfortunate in religion, where commissions to break through provincial contexts and conditionings—what Max Weber called "the fetters of the sib"—are half the story.

This distinction—to repeat, the distinction between occasions where differences need attention and ones where the flip side of the story becomes important—is so obvious that one wonders why Katz doesn't mention it. The Judaism from which he speaks may provide part of the answer, for it is especially important that that tradition retain its identity and distinctiveness. Insofar as this is an intended or unintended motive, the perennialist supports Katz completely in it.

Less acceptable to the perennialist is another influence I think I see at work. When I listen to Katz I don't hear him speaking for himself only, or even (if this pertains; I'm not sure) for Judaism. I hear him speaking for an important thrust in contemporary philosophy; indeed, the leading thrust, if Richard Rorty is right in reporting that twentieth century philosophy "is ending by returning to something reminiscent of Hegel's sense of humanity as an essentially historical being, one whose activities in all spheres are to be judged not by its relation to non-human reality but by comparison and contrast with its earlier achievement and with Utopian futures" (748). "In all spheres" makes clear that by this view not even religion is to be judged by its relation to non-human reality—perhaps God for a starter? *Nothing* outside of socio-historical contexts may be legitimated or (are we to assume?) even meaningfully pondered.

Katz acknowledges in his closing paragraph that his thinking, too, is contextual. He doesn't identify its controlling context, but it seems clear that it is the socio-historical, or cultural-linguistic, holism just noted. As the adequacy of his critique of the perennial philosophy turns in the end on the adequacy of that holism, I devote the next short section to it. The way I caption that section is flippant, but I am willing to risk indignity for the sake of emphasis. In four short words, two of them abbreviated, it says exactly what I want the section to say. Katz is to be judged by the philosophical company he keeps, which company is limited.

Katz and Co., Ltd.

By mid-twentieth century phenomenologists had persuaded philosophers that the gestalt psychologists were right: the mind doesn't just add up the data that comes its way; it patterns that data, altering thereby the way the data appears. Introduced into the philosophy of science, this produced the realization that "all facts are theory-laden" (Hanson). Thomas Kuhn picked up

that insight and ran with it; his *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* has been the most cited book on college campuses for the last twenty-five years and turned "paradigm" into a household word. Already, though, Heidegger and Wittgenstein had deepened theoretical holism into practical holism.[7] Because thinking invariably proceeds in social contexts and against a backdrop of social practices, meaning derives from—roots down into and draws its life from—those backgrounds and contexts. This means that in considering an idea we must take into account not just the conceptual gestalt of which it is a part; we must also consider the social "forms of life" (Wittgenstein) whose "micro-practices" (Foucault) give noetic gestalts their final meaning. "In a real sense, the medium *is* ... the content of truth" (Knitter: 19). Wittgenstein insisted that "agreement in judgments means agreement in what people do and say, not what they believe" (Dreyfus: 235).

Katz's company is those who think that way.[8] Now for the way their thinking is limited. The social holism they belabor is insightful as a half-truth, but forced into the role of the whole truth it collapses under the weight of its own self-reference. Pushed to logical extreme, cultural conditioning becomes, first, cultural subjectivism, and finally cultural solipsism. It renders unintelligible the ways and degree to which we can and do communicate, understand, and yes, even experience cross-culturally. Underestimating these ways and degrees, it faces two unresolvable problems. First, it cannot adequately answer the problem of relativism. It can escape "cheap relativism" by appealing to underlying agreements or pragmatic outcomes, but relativism remains relativism, and to its expensive versions holism has no answer. Second, holism is unconvincing when it argues that meaning and truth are *generated* by society, never—not even in the case of arithmetic—apprehended by it.[9] Elsewhere I have argued these limitations of untempered holism. Here I can only assert them.

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[7] On the difference between theoretical and practical holism, see Dreyfus.

[8] The way is not limited to philosophers; as the quotation from Knitter signals, it has moved solidly into religious studies. All of the contributors to the two volumes that Katz has edited on mysticism lean towards what George Undbeck calls the "cultural-linguistic" approach which is challenging the "experiential-expressive" approach to religious experience, and notables are buying into the view—Hans Kung for one, who acknowledges that Katz's views "fully confirm" his own on this issue (173). Whereas experiential-expressivism sees religions as expressions or objectifications of inner, preconceptual experiences of God, self, and world, the cultural-linguistic approach insists that experience is shaped by its social context from the start. "Inner experiences are not prior to their linguistic 'exteriorization', rather, the symbol system is the pre-condition of the experiences—a sort of cultural public *a priori* for the very possibility of 'private' experience" (Wood, 236). That last sentence could have been written by Steven Katz.

[9] According to Kripke, Wittgenstein so argued,

The Perennial Philosophy Defined[10]

Let us be clear: the perennial philosophy is a philosophy, not a sociology or anthropology that would jump out of the empirical bushes if only we squinted hard enough. The perennialist arrives at the ubiquity of his outlook more deductively than inductively.[11] Having encountered a view of things he believes to be true, he concludes that it must be true universally, for truth has ubiquity built into its meaning. Not simple-mindedly. That "it is raining" is true in Berkeley doesn't make it true everywhere. But it does make it true everywhere that it is at this moment raining in Berkeley.[12]

Philosophy is not concerned with particulars such as what's happening in Berkeley; in the end it is concerned with the whole of things. The topic is too vast for individual minds. They need help, which help the perennialist finds in the world's enduring religious or wisdom traditions.[13] In theistic terminology these traditions stem from divine revelation, but if that way of speaking closes rather than opens doors, one can think of them as wisdom reservoirs. They are tanks, or in any case deposits. Distillations of the cumulative wisdom of the human race.

Some will protest their being lumped together this way. Is it immaterial that Hinduism and Buddhism teach reincarnation whereas Christianity rejected it; that Christianity and Islam affirm the soul whereas Buddhism negates it; that Christianity exalts the Trinity while Judaism and Islam repudiate it; that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam propound creation whereas Taoism and Neoplatonism prefer emanation? It's not immaterial at all, the perennialist replies; on the contrary, it is providential. Here, though, the relevant point is that, important as these

[10] Naturally I assume full responsibility for the definition here offered. My intent is to present the position I find in the writings of Rene Guenon, A. K. Coomaraswamy, Titus Burckhardt, Frithjof Schuon, Martin Lings, S. H. Nasr, and their like. My *Forgotten Truth* and two books by Nasr, one that he authored, the other he edited, present overviews of the position.

[11] In a later, 1985, essay, Katz seems to sense this but discounts the approach. The "hermeneutical procedure" of the perennialists, he says, is confessional, "as much by way of testimony as by way of analytic or historical scholarship…. [It] substitutes *a priori* and non-disconfirmable intuitions for reasoned, defendable theories or generalizations" (76f). When this is contrasted with the hermeneutic Katz recommends, namely "restricting oneself to an independent and coolly distanced reading of the material," one wonders if part of Katz's objection to the perennial philosophy isn't disciplinary—an objection to philosophy itself. The final arbiter of truth, he seems to be saying, is the objective findings of the socio-historical sciences, or the sciences of man as they are coming to be called.

[12] Etienne Gilson's *Medieval Universalism* remains a classic defense of this point.

[13] Where else? Certainly not science, with which modernity displaced revelation; science registers only a fraction of the real. Shall it be, then, the autonomous reason of the Enlightenment? What defenders does it still have among frontline philosophers?

differences are in respects that are about to be indicated, they are not ultimate. Red is not green, but the difference pales before the fact that both are light. No two waves are identical, but their differences are inconsequential when measured against the water that informs them all.

We are back with the point that arose earlier: people differ according to whether they incline towards similarities or differences. Perennialists are persons who are exceptionally sensitive to the commonalities that similarities disclose; they are drawn toward unity as moth to flame. Sensitized by its pull, they find tokens of unity profligate; they see similarities everywhere. It comes as something of a jolt, therefore, to find that others see their eye for resemblances as an optical defect—a far-sightedness that cannot read fine print.

As the world houses both correspondences *and* diversities, which come through most strongly must depend on the viewer. Enter the division between esoteric and exoteric personality types that invariably crops up in perennialist writings. The words "water" and "eau" differ in both sound and appearance, which is to say outwardly and exoterically. All the while, their meaning (hidden and therefore esoteric to the senses) is the same. At the elementary level of this example, everyone is an esoteric. What distinguishes the esoteric as a type is his aptitude, honed no doubt by desire, to press the distinction between form and content all the way. For him *all* particulars—things possessing distinguishing identities—are ultimately symbols. They are coverings or containers for inner essences which, being without final demarcations, prove in the end to be single.

With unity thus stressed, the theological story reads like this: there is one God. It is inconceivable that He not disclose His saving nature to His children, for He is benevolent: hence revelation. From His benevolence it follows, too, that His revelations must be impartial, which is to say equal; the deity cannot play favorites. Here for the first time, perhaps, empiricism enters the picture. Having moved this far largely deductively, the perennialist now opens his eyes to see if evidence supports the hypothesis that has come to view—does the theory check out? The great historical religions have survived for millenia, which is what we would expect if they are divinely powered. Stated negatively, God would not have permitted them to endure for such stretches had they been founded on error. Nor, conversely, would He have permitted multitudes to have been thrown into life's sea in oceans of desolation—ages and regions where there was no lifeline.

As for the manifest diversity in the traditions, neither equality nor the universality of truth requires that traditions be identical. We have already noted that the same thing can be said in different languages, but different things, too, can be said without violating parity or truth. It is as if the differences in revelations "flesh out" God's nature by seeing it from different angles. They supplement our view without compromising the fact that each angle is, in its own right, adequate, containing (in traditional locution) "truth sufficient unto salvation."

If we try to lift out the underlying truth that *makes* the several revelations internally sufficient, we must speak more abstractly, shifting from theology to metaphysics. There is an Absolute, which is likewise Infinite. This Infinite both includes and transcends everything else, which everything is (in categorical contrast) finite and relative. The way the Absolute transcends the relative is to integrate the relative into itself so completely that even the Absolute/relative distinction gets annulled: form is emptiness, emptiness form. (This separates perennialism from the monism it is sometimes (mis)taken for; it is, rather, *a-dvaita* or non-dual.) How the opposition is resolved we cannot, of course, imagine or even consistently conceive, which is one reason the Absolute is ineffable. Too vast for our logic not just in extent but in kind, it intersects with language to about the extent that a ball touches a tabletop. At the same time we are so (unwittingly) party to the Absolute that it constitutes the only finally authentic part of our being.

If all this sounds like playing with words, the charge takes us back to the distinction in spiritual personality types the perennialist finds inevitable. One man's mush is another man's meaning. Because not many can draw spiritual nourishment from—which is to say find *existential* truth in—abstractions on the order of the preceding paragraph's, more concrete formulations are required, which is where the historical religions come in. Not only for exoterics; esoterics, too, stand in need of them.[14] This is an aspect of the perennial philosophy that is often overlooked by critics who see it as sitting loose to religions in the plural, patronizing if not by-passing their concreteness and particularity. Katz's two volumes perform a needed service in helping to correct the notion that "mysticism … is an autonomous realm of experience which only uneasily fits in with more traditional and widespread religious beliefs, practices, and communities" (1982: Introduction). What is unfortunate is that in countering that error the

[14] "Exoterism is the necessary basis of esoterism" (Frithjof Schuon, in Nasr 1986:121).

volumes muddy the waters by tarring the perennial philosophy, even its mature proponents, with the mistake. The charge that the transcendent unity of religions perceived by the perennialist fits "only uneasily" with the historical traditions is like charging that Chomsky's universal, deep-lying linguistic structures ill-accord with actual languages. The perennialist finds the unity of religions *in* the religions in the way he finds beauty in paintings and song. A more esoteric thinker than Shankara cannot be imagined, but only theoretically can we separate his metaphysical discernments from the hymns to Shiva that he composed and that powered his *jnana*. On this point the perennialist agrees with the practical holist, Katz emphatically included. Holism presses its case too far when it claims that truth is *generated* by practices, but it is right in insisting that practice is essential to truth's effective assimilation.

So the unitary truth to which the perennial philosophy points does not depend on the world's religions, but from our side we are not likely to come upon it, much less keep it in place, save through them. Does that single truth constitute the essence of the enduring religions? Esoterics and exoterics will answer that question differently. Exoterics will be quick to point out that the perennial philosophy is the minority position everywhere, even in mystical India, to say nothing of the form-loving West. Esoterics admit this statistical point, but insist that profundity is not determined by headcount. Workmen can understand nature in ways that are fully adequate for practical purposes without knowing the Einsteinian (or even Newtonian) laws by which it works.

The standard consequential charges against the perennial philosophy are that it devalues matter, history, the human self (in both its individual and communal poles), and God's personal aspect. The esoteric disclaims these charges; after all, the dictum that "samsara is nirvana" pays the phenomenal world no small compliment. The esoteric sees nothing in his philosophy to prevent appreciation of the realities in question as much as his exoteric brothers and sisters, while at the same time recognizing that there are things that exceed those qualified and provisional realities. One does not need to be ignorant of things better than chocolate to enjoy chocolate as much as a four-year-old.

The Perennial Typology

I began by pointing out that in aiming his critique of the perennial philosophy at mystical identities, Katz sets out on the wrong foot. What is perennial (which is to say "no matter where

or when") for that philosophy is, first, God (or the Godhead/Absolute if one prefers), and second, the generic human capacity to ascertain truths about Him/Her/It.

Of these truths, or discernments as I early spoke of them, the most important is God's ultimacy as compared with the world's lack thereof. The Real and the (comparatively) unreal, the Absolute and the relative, Infinite and finite, Noumena and phenomena, appearance and Reality—everywhere we find this distinction emphatically drawn.

As all traditions consider the capitalized terms in the pairs to be ultimately ineffable, this seems to rule out the possibility of cross-cultural differences in characterizing them. To name names; is it possible, in the face of their unanimous countermand to all culturally-mediated, conceptual, reified representations, to saddle the Kabbalah's *'en-sof,* Eckhart's Godhead, Nirguna Brahman, Nirvana, and the Tao that cannot be spoken, with predicates that distinguish them from their counterparts?

Strictly speaking, this negative, apophatic, *neti-neti* aspect of the Absolute—metaphysically counterpart of the unmediated mystical experience that Katz goes after—is the only point where perennialists see the traditions converging indistinguishably. Thereafter revelation fractionates like light through a prism, and what the perennial typology spreads before us is correspondences. Whether one is more impressed by the similarities that underlie these correspondences (which at eventual levels of abstraction phase into archetypal identities) or by the different ways the archetypes are clothed in the various traditions, depends again on the esoteric/exoteric difference that was earlier introduced.

In any case, the correspondences factor out into a hierarchical ontology such as Arthur Lovejoy tells us "the greater number of subtler speculative minds and great religious teachers … through the Middle Ages and down to the late eighteenth century were to accept without question" (26, 59). Everywhere thoughtful people have sensed the presence of another, more fundamental world underlying our familiar, quotidian one. And each of these halves-of-being, immanent and transcendent, subdivides in turn, producing an embracing typology of four ontological levels. The phenomenal world divides into its visible and invisible sides, the former constituting nature and the latter the spirit world of folk religion. As for the noumenal world, it has regions the mind can grapple with theologically—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Allah of the Ninety-nine Names, *Saguna Brahman,* the Buddha's *Sambhoga-kaya,* and the Tao that can be spoken—and abysmal depths, alluded to above, that baffle the mind's approach.

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Introduction, *Splendor of the True: A Frithjof Schuon Reader*

James S. Cutsinger

Few religious writers of recent times have had as polarizing an effect on those acquainted with their work as Frithjof Schuon.

A first group of readers have competed to see who can praise him in the grandest terms. One of them tells us that Schuon's books offer "completely new perspectives in every aspect of religious thought",[15] while another asserts that "*à propos* religion, equally in depth and breadth", he was "the paragon of our time".[16] Yet a third prolific and highly respected scholar has elevated his own superlatives to the level of the superhuman, comparing Schuon to "the cosmic Intellect itself".[17] It is important to note that these are not the words of marginal thinkers or cultish sycophants. On the contrary they represent the considered judgment of several of the academy's most prestigious and influential names. Schuon—who was at once a philosopher, an authority on the world's religions, a spiritual guide, and a gifted poet and painter—seemed to many of his most learned readers not just a man but a providential phenomenon, a many-sided genius with a God-given spiritual role for our age.

At the same time, however, his work has been severely criticized—when not simply ignored—by a second and admittedly much larger group, and this includes academics who might have otherwise been expected to benefit most from his insights: philosophers of religion, authorities on mysticism and spirituality, and comparative religionists. In fact scholarly dismissals began many years ago when a prominent reviewer of one of this author's first books complained that "Schuon glories in his contempt for human reason" and that his writings are little more than "a disconnected series of private thoughts";[18] another critic has charged Schuon

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[15] Jacob Needleman, *The Sword of Gnosis: Metaphysics, Cosmology, Tradition, Symbolism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 14-15.

[16] Huston Smith, commenting on Schuon's book *Logic and Transcendence* (London: Perennial Books, 1975).

[17] "Schuon seems like the cosmic Intellect itself … surveying the whole of the reality surrounding man and elucidating all the concerns of human existence in the light of sacred knowledge" (Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred: The 1981 Gifford Lectures* [Albany, New York: State University of New York, 1989], 107).

[18] R. C. Zaehner in a review of Schuon's *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* in *The Journal of Theological Studies*, Vol. 6 (1955), 341.

with a "subtle arrogance which is hardly becoming in those who desire religious unity",[19] while a third objects that "the very manner in which Schuon's thesis is developed suggests that the theoretical is the basis for what is…. The course of philosophy (and theology, too) over the past two centuries is precisely one of questioning such an approach."[20] For a number of reasons that I shall be exploring below, the opinions of those in this second group have tended to carry the day. As a result Schuon's books are seldom read in college or university classrooms, and his name therefore remains comparatively unknown among students of religion and philosophy as well as among those in the wider public whose choice of reading is influenced by what the pundits say.[21]

My aim in compiling this anthology has been to redress this imbalance by offering its readers a glimpse of the full scope of Schuon's philosophy in order that they might be able to judge for themselves what to make of this provocative, and obviously controversial, writer. It should be understood from the outset that I am by no means an indifferent observer. Having studied and written about Schuon for the past quarter century, I have long been convinced that he is an author whose work deserves a much larger audience and much fairer hearing, and this book has been quite deliberately designed to persuade others to think the same. Colleagues in the field who are accustomed to maintaining neutrality may fault me for adopting the role of an advocate, and if so they are kindly invited to bring their preferred methodology to the table and to be as critical as they wish. For my part I cannot but agree with Schuon that "knowledge saves only on condition that it engages all that we are",[22] and since—as I see it—the only good reason for seeking knowledge in the domain of religion is that it might in fact save us, I have chosen to remain as fully engaged with the Schuonian message as possible.

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[19] Richard Bush, "Frithjof Schuon's *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*: Con", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (1976), 717.

[20] Shunji Nishi in a review of Schuon's *Transcendent Unity of Religions* and *Logic and Transcendence* in *The Anglican Theological Review*, Vol. 60 (1978), 120.

[21] Or if not unknown at least unnamed. "One rarely encounters academic specialists in the spiritual dimensions of religious studies who have not in fact read several of the works of Schuon, but this wide-ranging influence is rarely mentioned in public because of the peculiar processes of academic 'canonization'" (James W. Morris, "Ibn ʿArabī in the 'Far West': Visible and Invisible Influences", *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ʿArabī Society*, No. 29 [2001], 106). Noting the "profound effect of the abundant writings of Frithjof Schuon" on "several generations of philosophers and theologians seeking to develop a comprehensive, non-reductive 'philosophy of religions'", Morris attributes scholarly unwillingness to acknowledge this influence to the "vagaries of academic opinion and respectability" (105-106).

[22] *Prayer Fashions Man: Frithjof Schuon on the Spiritual Life*, ed. James S. Cutsinger (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2005), 24.

My task as editor has not been an easy one. The complete corpus of Schuon's writings is extensive and imposing: over two dozen books, some four thousand poems, and nearly two thousand letters, as well as approximately twelve hundred short spiritual texts, which were privately circulated among his friends and close associates.[23] My goal here is simply to present a small cross-section of the evidence that has led Schuon's defenders to draw what must otherwise seem excessively flattering conclusions concerning his stature and significance, while at the same time challenging his critics—and the religious studies community as a whole—to give his work a much fuller and more sustained examination than it has so far received.

But words of both praise and blame aside, who exactly was Frithjof Schuon,[24] and why, if his perspective has seemed to some so immensely important, has he been so disparaged when not neglected by others?

Perennialist

A first response is to say that Schuon was the leading spokesman for a contemporary school of comparative religious thought known as perennialism,[25] the distinctive teaching of which is that the world's great religious traditions are all expressions or crystallizations of a single, saving Truth.

Born in Basle, Switzerland in 1907, Schuon writes that even as a young boy

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[23] Compiled in his later years as "The Book of Keys" (*Le Livre des clefs*), these texts were initially composed as *mudhākarat* or "sermons" for Schuon's Sufi disciples (see below for a discussion of his role as a *shaykh*). With the exception of a first volume in German—*Leitgedanken zur Urbesinnung* [Guiding Thoughts for Primordial Meditation] (Zürich: Orell Füssli Verlag, 1935); revised edition: *Urbesinnung: Das Denken des Eigentlichen* [Primordial Meditation: Contemplating the Real] (Freiburg im Breisgau: Aurum Verlag, 1989)—the author's books were compiled from articles originally written in French and published in such journals as *Le Voile d'Isis*, *Études traditionnelles*, and *Connaissance des religions*. Schuon wrote poetry in Arabic, English, and German; a sampling of his English poems can be found in *Road to the Heart* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1995), and the German poems appear in a number of collections, including *Songs for a Spiritual Traveler: Selected Poems* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2002) and *Adastra & Stella Maris: Poems by Frithjof Schuon* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2003). For further information, see the Bibliography of Works by Frithjof Schuon, pp. ___.

[24] A much more complete picture of Schuon than this brief introduction intends to supply can be found in Jean-Baptiste Aymard and Patrick Laude, *Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teachings* (Albany, New York: State University of New York, 2004) and Michael Fitzgerald, *Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2010).

[25] The label "traditionalism" is also sometimes used; see for example Kenneth Oldmeadow, *Traditionalism: Religion in the Light of the Perennial Philosophy* (Colombo, Sri Lanka: Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies, 2000). The term "traditionalism" underscores the importance of fidelity to the revealed doctrines and rites of the major religions, while "perennialism" points to the metaphysical unanimity of these religions.

> I saw with my eyes and my heart the beauty, grandeur, and spirituality of other civilizations … and I could never believe that one religion alone in the whole world was the true one and that all other religions were false…. How could God, wishing to save every human soul, have given the saving truth to only one people and thus condemned so many others, who are no worse than these, to remain forever in deadly darkness?[26]

Comparing this Truth to a perennial flower, a perennialist teaches that there is one divine Source of all wisdom—itself timeless and universal—which has repeatedly blossomed forth at different moments of history. The major religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, are different blooms on that wisdom—or, to change the metaphor, different paths leading to the same summit or different dialects of a common language.

Schuon's early signature work, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, first published in 1948, was a key to defining the perennialist standpoint, a standpoint often associated with two other especially noteworthy spokesmen, René Guénon and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy.[27] As the word "transcendent" implies, the unity or unanimity of the world's wisdom traditions is not to be found in the "human atmosphere" but in the "divine stratosphere"—to borrow one of Schuon's more memorable metaphors—and for the perennialist this means that a careful distinction must be drawn between two levels of religious meaning and interpretation. Outwardly or exoterically the doctrines of the major traditions are clearly different, even contradictory, a fact not surprisingly stressed by scholars whose approach to religion is strictly historical and empirical. The Hindu tradition, for example, includes many Gods, Judaism insists there is only one God, and Buddhism declares the question of God to be moot. Or again, Christians believe that God is a Trinity and that the divine Son of God was incarnate as Jesus Christ, beliefs explicitly rejected by Islam.

According to Schuon, however, such outwardly divergent teachings, providentially adapted to the spiritual, psychological, and cultural needs of different peoples at different periods of history, can be inwardly or esoterically reconciled by those who are sensitive to the

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[26] Letter to Benjamin Black Elk (7 October 1947); see the Appendix, p. __ (Selection 2).

[27] The French metaphysician René Guénon (1886-1951), with whom Schuon corresponded and collaborated for nearly twenty years, may be regarded as the founder of the perennialist school; Guénon articulated the first principles of this perspective in such books as *An Introduction to the Study of Hindu Doctrines* (1921), which Schuon first read in 1924 at age seventeen, and *Man and His Becoming: According to the Vedānta* (1925). Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), for many years curator of Indian art at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, was the author of numerous books and articles on metaphysics, art, religion, and traditional civilizations; see especially his *Selected Papers* on *Metaphysics* and *Traditional Art and Symbolism*, ed. Roger Lipsey (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

metaphysical and symbolic meanings of revealed doctrines and rites and who are prepared to follow the golden thread of the dogmatic letter to the deepest—or highest—level of Spirit. From the perennialist point of view, this is why one finds such a remarkable "stratospheric" consensus among the greatest mystics and sages, such as Shankara in Hinduism, Ibn Arabi in Islam, and Meister Eckhart in Christianity.[28]

Schuon's perennialism embraces three distinct dimensions, which are reflected in his use of three Latin phrases: *Sophia Perennis* ("perennial wisdom"), *Philosophia Perennis* ("perennial philosophy"), and *Religio Perennis* ("perennial religion"). When speaking of the *Sophia Perennis*,[29] what he has in mind above all is metaphysical Truth as such—eternal, immutable, and supra-formal Wisdom—which he would occasionally sum up by citing the advaitic teaching of Shankara: "God is real; the world is unreal; the soul is not different from God." *Philosophia Perennis* on the other hand refers in the Schuonian lexicon to the conceptual approximations and elaborations of this Wisdom that are to be found in the West among such figures as Plato, Plotinus, the Church Fathers, and the medieval Scholastics,[30] although Schuon also uses this phrase to refer more generally to "the connecting link between different religious languages".[31] Finally, *Religio Perennis* is an expression he employs in order to accentuate the "quintessence of all spirituality", the "underlying universality in every great spiritual patrimony", or simply the "underlying religion" (*la religion sous-jacente* in his original French).[32] Reduced to its perennial essentials, every genuine religion is based doctrinally on a salvific descent of the Real into the illusory and, at the operative level of practice, on a metaphysical discernment between the Real and illusory and a contemplative concentration on the Real.

The perennialist perspective is sometimes classified as a kind of pluralism, but in fact it is fundamentally different, and this difference places Schuon worlds apart from many

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[28] See Reza Shah-Kazemi, *Paths to Transcendence: According to Shankara, Ibn Arabi, and Meister Eckhart* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2006).

[29] For example, in "Axioms of the *Sophia Perennis*", *The Transfiguration of Man* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1995).

[30] *Stations of Wisdom* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1995), 33; see also Schuon's article "The Perennial Philosophy" in *The Unanimous Tradition: Essays on the Essential Unity of All Religions*, ed. Ranjit Fernando (Colombo, Sri Lanka: Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies, 1991). The phrase *philosophia perennis* appears to have been used for the first time by Agostino Steucho (1496-1549), a Vatican librarian, and it was given currency in the early eighteenth century by the philosopher Leibniz.

[31] See below Ch. 1, "The Sense of the Absolute in Religions", p. __.

[32] See below "*Religio Perennis*", p. __, where the author presents this "quintessence" or "underlying universality" in light of the Patristic maxim: "God became man that man might become God". See also the Appendix, p. __ (Selection 32).

contemporary comparativists and philosophers of religion. Most pluralists, working inductively from the data presented by ethnographers and historians of religion, envision the diversity of religious traditions as the *natural* effect of a corresponding variety among human beings and cultures: Different people at different times and in different places have endeavored to reach out to the divine Reality—a Reality, many pluralists would insist, which can never be known as it is in itself[33]—and the religions, which are the results of their collective efforts, are therefore as varied as they are.

Schuon teaches by contrast that the great traditions are this Reality's own self-disclosures, each a *supernatural* effect resulting from direct revelation. The differences between them, together with certain fundamental divergences between the types of people to whom the revelations were given, correspond in the first instance to distinct archetypes in the divine Mind and distinct intentions in the divine Will, with each religion reflecting—as Schuon puts it—one of the "confessional Faces" of God.[34] In other words religions are not human creations, and they should not be understood to comprise merely partial or complementary truths, which then need combining with those of other traditions in order to achieve a more complete—but still always imperfect—picture of the Real. On the contrary each tradition is integrally true in that it provides its adherents with everything they need for reaching the highest or most complete human state, a state in which they may come to know and participate in the Supreme Reality itself.

Three consequences follow from Schuon's position, each of which is bound to be problematic for pluralists of a more typically historicist, empiricist, and "democratic" mindset. First, a merely abstract respect for the great wisdom traditions or a purely theoretical acknowledgment of their "transcendent unity" is not enough. Those intent upon penetrating, and not merely appreciating, the religions must be concretely engaged in the practice of one of them,

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[33] Pluralist thinking is often undergirded by the Kantian assumption that knowledge is inevitably mediated by conceptual categories, which means that we can never experience Reality *an sich*, as it is in itself. I shall return to the question of cognitive limits below.

[34] "There is not only a personal God—who is so to speak the 'human Face', or the 'humanized Face', of the supra-personal Divinity—but there is also, beneath this first hypostatic degree and resulting from it, what we may term the 'confessional Face' of God: It is the Face God turns toward a particular religion, the Gaze He casts upon it, *without which it would not even exist*" (see Chapter 4, "The Mystery of the Hypostatic Face", p. __ [my italics]). I say "in the first instance" because Schuon was not so blind as to think that the religions as we actually find them in history are immune to a variety of adaptive, and sometimes distorting, forces. "In every religious cycle four periods are to be distinguished: first the 'apostolic' period, then the period of full development, after which comes the period of decadence, and last the final period of corruption" (Schuon, *Christianity/Islam: Perspectives on Esoteric Ecumenism*, ed. James S. Cutsinger [Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2008], 10). Despite the divine origin of the orthodox traditions, there remains what he calls a "human margin"; see the chapter by that title in his book *In the Face of the Absolute* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1989).

a practice prescribed in that religion's sacred scriptures and followed by its own saintly authorities. "A spirituality deprived of these bases," Schuon warned, "can only end up as a psychological game without any relation to the unfolding of our higher states."[35] The syllogism is perennialist through and through: Whoever knows one religion knows implicitly all the others as well, for each of the orthodox faiths of the world is the manifestation of a single, underlying Essence. But the only way truly to know a given religious tradition—deeply and experientially and in such a way as to understand its very reason for being—is by believing in it and doing what it requires. Therefore only those who are fully living the life required by their own religion, opening themselves to its doctrinal vision and submitting themselves to its moral and sacramental precepts, are qualified to speak with authority about any religion.[36]

Second, the validity or spiritual legitimacy of a religion is not to be measured by something as subjective as the personal testimony of any given believer, however learned or faithful, but rather by objective criteria. "In order for a religion to be considered intrinsically orthodox," Schuon writes,

> it must be founded upon a doctrine which, taken as a whole, is adequate to the Absolute … and it must promote and bring to fulfillment a spirituality proportioned to this doctrine, which means that it must include both the idea and the fact of sanctity. The religion must therefore be of divine and not philosophical origin, and as a result it must convey a sacramental or theurgic presence, manifest above all in miracles and—though this may be surprising to some—in sacred art.[37]

As for a given branch or spiritual community within a larger tradition, it too must be evaluated on the basis of objective factors, above all the scriptures and other revealed sources of the religion in question as these are interpreted by that tradition's "apostolic" and "patristic" authorities.[38] Readers who are accustomed to stressing the importance of tolerance and open-mindedness will doubtless wince, but Schuon did not hesitate to bring these criteria to bear in

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[35] See below Ch. 19, "The Nature and Function of the Spiritual Master", p. __. Schuon clearly parts company with a growing number of people who prefer to call themselves "spiritual" outside the context of a traditional religion.

[36] One is reminded of the saying of Evagrios the Solitary: "The theologian is one who prays, and the one who prays is truly a theologian."

[37] Schuon, *Forme et substance dans les religions* [Form and Substance in Religions] (Paris: Dervy-Livres, 1975), 19. I should point out that when Schuon speaks here of doctrinal "adequacy" he is not referring to a teaching that is merely "acceptable"; he is alluding instead to the Scholastic definition of truth as the "adequation of reality and mind" (*adaequatio rei et intellectus*).

[38] Certain pluralists on the other hand prefer to "demythologize" the scriptures and dismantle traditional doctrines on the pretext that they can no longer by understood, let alone believed and practiced, by modern people; see for example John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic Age* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox, 1993).

denouncing what he regarded as pseudo-religions and "intrinsic heresies", and he was prepared to name names.[39]

Finally, a third result of his perennialism—and this may take the reader by surprise—is that Schuon was deeply skeptical of interfaith dialogue, at least in its most common forms. I do not mean to suggest that he was some sort of religious "isolationist"; on the contrary his personal friendships with believers and spiritual authorities in many different traditions were varied and extensive and included Hindu *guru*s and pundits, Pure Land Buddhist priests and Zen masters, Christian monks and abbots, and Native American chiefs and shamans.[40] But he knew very well that contemporary ecumenical discussions are too often dominated by interlocutors who fail to take seriously their own tradition's theology and who therefore end up reducing whole religions to an ethical least common denominator in the interest of promoting peace and harmony. Laudable as such a goal might seem, for Schuon this deliberate blurring of dogmatic differences involved—at least potentially—a kind of "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit", for if differences between the religions are indeed willed by God and if they manifest the various facets or "faces" of the Supreme Reality, these differences must be salvifically necessary.[41] And this being so, one is obliged to respect the integrity of each orthodox tradition as an irreplaceable repository of the sacred, honoring the formal structure of its distinctive dogmas, rites, and symbols so as to ensure that these unique "dialects" not be confused or collapsed into a kind of "religious Esperanto".[42]

"If all men were metaphysicians and contemplatives," Schuon notes,

> a single Revelation might be enough; but since this is not how things are, the Absolute must reveal itself in different ways, and the metaphysical viewpoints from which these Revelations are derived—according to different logical needs and different spiritual temperaments—cannot but contradict one another on the plane of forms…. The great evil

[39] For example, the Transcendental Meditation movement of Mahesh Yogi (see the Appendix, Selection 12). In Schuon's terminology an "intrinsic heresy" is incompatible with metaphysical Truth as such; an "extrinsic heresy" on the other hand is a valid dogmatic perspective, which only appears to be false from the point of view of another such perspective. See the important chapter "Orthodoxy and Intellectuality" in Schuon's *Stations of Wisdom*.

[40] Schuon took a special interest in the religious traditions of the Plains Indians, twice visiting the American West, in 1959 and 1963. He also enjoyed longstanding friendships with Benjamin Black Elk, son of the Oglala Sioux elder Black Elk, and Thomas Yellowtail, a Crow Sun Dance chief.

[41] Schuon occasionally cited the Koran in this regard: "For each We have appointed a divine law and a traced-out way. Had God willed He could have made you one community. But that He may try you by that which He hath given you (He hath made you as ye are). So vie one with another in good works. Unto God ye will all return, and He will then inform you of that wherein ye differ" (*Sūrah* "The Table Spread" [5]:48).

[42] The phrase is Coomaraswamy's; see "Sri Ramakrishna and Religious Tolerance", *Coomaraswamy, 2: Selected Papers: Metaphysics*, ed. Roger Lipsey, 40. In a recent book, *God is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World—and Why Their Differences Matter* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010), Stephen Prothero alleges that perennialist writers treat all the religions as if they were the same, but this is a complete misrepresentation of Schuon's position, whom Prothero never bothers to cite or even mention.

> is not that men of different religions do not understand one other, but that too many men—due to the influence of the modern spirit—are no longer believers.

Given this situation, his advice was that people should "return to faith, whatever their religion may be, provided that it is intrinsically orthodox and in spite of dogmatic ostracisms".[43] Better in other words to worship God in a religiously exclusivistic but orthodox environment than to run the risk of diminishing or disparaging, however unintentionally, one of Heaven's gifts.

Shaykh

This advice is a key to one of the most important and distinctive aspects of Schuon's teaching. A perennialist, he was just as much a traditionalist, who maintained throughout his long career—as we have already noted—that a sacramental affiliation with a specific religion is the *sine qua non* not only for personal spiritual growth but for understanding religion in general. Now it is one thing for a religious writer to pray and to encourage others to do the same,[44] but what we have in this case is someone who takes the further step of insisting that only those who *do* pray can speak on the subject of religion with true authority.

Schuon did not exempt himself from this rule, a fact which brings us to a second answer to the question of who he was, why he has provoked such divergent responses among his readers, and why so many remain unaware of his work. Since his death in 1998, it has become a matter of public record that his own spiritual practice was undertaken within the framework of Islam, specifically within the mystical tradition of Sufism. Some of his closest associates have published biographical reminiscences in recent years,[45] and we now know that this perennial

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[43] Letter of 29 May 1964. For the complete letter, see *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom: A New Translation with Selected Letters*, ed. James S. Cutsinger (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2006), 133-34. Schuon's observation here as to "how things are" will perhaps be taken as an example of the "subtle arrogance" mentioned by one critic above. If so, surely the only response can be that Schuon was right, whether we like the way he puts things or not. The majority of religious believers need a formal, and relatively simple, expression of Truth in which they can put their entire trust without being troubled by metaphysical subtleties.

[44] "Even if our writings had on average no other result than the restitution for some of the saving barque that is prayer, we would owe it to God to consider ourselves profoundly satisfied" (Schuon, *The Play of Masks* [Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1992], vii).

[45] For example, Martin Lings, *A Return to the Spirit: Questions and Answers* (Louisville, Kentucky: Fons Vitae, 2005), 1-19.

philosopher served for over sixty years as the *shaykh*, or spiritual master, of a traditional Sufi brotherhood in the *Shādhilīyyah-Darqāwīyyah* lineage.[46]

Growing up in Western Europe in the early years of the twentieth century, Schuon was raised first as a Protestant and later received confirmation as a Roman Catholic. Nowhere in these Christian contexts, however—as he explains in several letters as well as in his unpublished memoirs[47]—did he encounter spiritual teaching and guidance of the same kind and caliber as he had discovered, during his early teens, in the scriptures and sacred art of the East.[48] "Being *a priori* a metaphysician," he recalls,

> I had since my youth a particular interest in *Advaita Vedānta*, but also in the method of realization of which *Advaita* approves. Since I could not find this method—in its strict and esoteric form—in Europe, and since it was impossible for me to turn to a Hindu *guru* because of the rules of the castes, I had to look elsewhere; and since Islam *de facto* contains this method in Sufism, I finally decided to look for a Sufi master; the outer form did not matter to me.[49]

This search took him eventually, in 1932, to Mostaganem, Algeria, where he met and was soon initiated by one of the most celebrated of twentieth century Sufi masters, the *shaykh* Ahmad al-Alawi.[50] This aspect of Schuon's personal background, together with his own subsequent role as a *shaykh* in his own right—the Shaykh Isa Nur al-Din Ahmad al-Shadhili al-Darqawi al-Alawi al-Maryami—was kept in the strictest confidence until his death, and those who had the privilege of approaching him for spiritual direction, including perhaps as many as a thousand disciples throughout the world, were asked to do their part in protecting his privacy.[51]

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[46] This is an unbroken line of initiatic transmission tracing its origin to the thirteenth century master Abu al-Hasan al-Shadhili (1196-1258) and including among its subsequent branches an order founded in the early nineteenth century by Mawlay al-Arabi al-Darqawi (1760-1823).

[47] *Erinnerungen und Betrachtungen* (Lausanne: privately circulated, 1974); English translation: "Memories and Meditations" (Bloomington, Indiana: privately circulated, 1982).

[48] "In my childhood I was first a Protestant and later a Catholic; to the simple and sincere piety of my first teacher, who lived wholly on the Bible, I owe much. In Catholicism I loved the liturgical manifestation of the holy, the beauty of the divine service in the Gothic-style churches, the cult of Mary and the Rosary. But I could not stop with this, for at an early age I had read the *Bhagavad Gītā* and profoundly experienced the sacred art of the Far East" (Letter of 21 December 1980; see below, footnote 76).

[49] Letter of January 1996.

[50] See Martin Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century: Shaikh Ahmad al-Alawi: His Spiritual Heritage and Legacy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1973). "To meet such a one," Schuon later wrote, "is like coming face to face in mid-twentieth century with a medieval Saint or a Semitic Patriarch, and this was the impression made on me by the Shaikh Al-Hajj Ahmad Bin-Aliwah, one of the greatest Masters of Sufism, who died a few months ago at Mostaganem" ("*Rāhimahu ʾLlah*", *Cahiers du Sud*, August-September, 1935).

[51] In addition to his Sufi disciples, Schuon also gave counsel to a number of seekers from other religions, including Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, and Christians; regarding this unusual role, see below Ch. 19, "The Nature and Function of the Spiritual Master", p. __.

There were at least two reasons for the veil of anonymity surrounding Schuon's person and for the relative secrecy of his Sufi brotherhood. First, like any other such authority—whether Hindu *guru*, Buddhist *roshi*, or Christian *geronda*—he was obliged by his office to take into careful consideration the moral and other qualifications of those who sought to become his disciples. "In former times," he writes,

> when an aspirant presented himself at the door of a *zāwiyah* [a Sufi center for prayer] he was at first left to knock in vain; one was wary of opening the door to him right away, and it sometimes happened that he was left to wait many days…. One wanted to be sure of his sincerity, humility, capacities, and good character. I do not say that things were always like this or that we must do things this way; I simply indicate a traditional point of view, which is as obvious as it is indispensable. Needing no one, we are not interested in strangers who simply wish to make our acquaintance.[52]

Although Schuon devoted considerable time and attention to those who were in earnest about their spiritual lives and who exhibited the persistence necessary to seek him out, he had no interest at all in proselytizing or attracting newcomers. His personal guidance was destined for a relatively small number of people, and he took very seriously his responsibilities for protecting their privacy and providing them with a congenial environment for their spiritual work—"a little garden of the Holy Virgin", as he liked to call it, hidden from the public gaze.[53]

But a second, and for our purposes more important, reason for his circumspection was an abiding concern that the message he sought to convey in his books—a perennial, hence universal, message precisely—not be confused or identified with a single religion. He knew that those who were aware of his European background might falsely conclude from his Sufi affiliation and function that he had renounced the religion of his youth and "converted" to Islam, whereas in fact his initiatic link with the Muslim tradition in no way conflicted with his remaining throughout his long life an adamant defender of traditional Christianity against its own modernist critics nor with his having a special affinity for the Christian East and the Hesychast

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[52] Letter of 8 June 1984.

[53] "One must live in a little garden of the Holy Virgin, without unhealthy curiosity and without ever losing sight of the essential content and goal of life" ("Message to a Disciple", undated document). It is useful to note in this regard that Schuon's branch of the *Shādhilīyyah* Sufi line came to be known as the *Tarīqah Maryamīyyah*, having been blessed, he informed his disciples, with the celestial patronage of the Virgin Mary. "The coming of Sayyidatna Maryam [as the Virgin is called in Islam] did not depend on my own will but upon the will of Heaven; it was a totally unexpected and unimaginable gift" (Letter of September 1981). For further insight into the distinctively Marian aspects of his teaching, see my article "Colorless Light and Pure Air: The Virgin in the Thought of Frithjof Schuon", *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies*, 6:2 (Winter 2000); reprinted in *Maria: A Journal of Marian Studies*, 3:1 (August 2002) and in *Ye Shall Know the Truth: Christianity and the Perennial Philosophy*, ed. Mateus Soares de Azevedo (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2005)

method of prayer.[54] He therefore felt it was necessary to avoid not only "the curiosity of Westerners", who might well have flocked to his door in hopes of finding something strange and exotic, but even more the misunderstandings of "Muslim Easterners, for whom a *shaykh* embodies not only what is most lofty and mysterious in Islam but also what is narrow and sentimental—when in reality I wished to represent above all the *Religio Perennis*".[55] Moreover Schuon was perfectly aware of the political implications of being a Muslim in the West, to say nothing of a *shaykh*, and he was quick to recognize—even in a "pre-9/11" context—the importance of distancing himself and his philosophy from the misleading associations such terms and categories could easily lead to:

> If we present ourselves in the Western world as "Muslims", people will think quite logically that we are converts, apostates, and traitors, given that Islam rejects Christianity…. Muslims on the other hand will welcome us as "brothers" and will congratulate us on having rejected the false religion that is Christianity, whereas in reality we are Vedantists who have sought an initiation and a spiritual method. What this means is that we shall appear in a false light in regard to both the East and the West. It is therefore important to keep silent to the extent we can.[56]

These facts go some further way in helping answer the question of why Schuon's name is not better known among scholars of religion nor cited as often as one might have expected in the pertinent bibliographies. Even though he was a much-published author, his role as a *shaykh* led him to maintain a deliberate public anonymity, far from the halls of academia and the lecture and conference circuits where he might otherwise have gained a wider hearing.

Silence, circumspection, and relative anonymity notwithstanding, it was only natural for an author who was so deeply immersed in an intense contemplative practice and in the day-to-

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[54] Schuon's brother was a Trappist monk, and his numerous other Christian contacts included the Russian Orthodox archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov (1896-1993), who was a noted disciple of Saint Silouan of the Holy Mountain of Athos, and the widely influential Roman Catholic writer Thomas Merton (1915-68), who near the end of his life was in regular correspondence with several of Schuon's disciples about the possibility of meeting with "the Shaykh" and seeking his spiritual guidance; see *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Harcourt, 1993), 476-77.

[55] Letter of 21 August 1971. "Our starting point is *Advaita Vedānta* and not the voluntarist, individualist, and moralist anthropology with which Sufism is unquestionably identified" (Letter of 29 April 1989).

[56] Letter of January 1992. Schuon adds, "In the Muslim world religion is becoming more and more politicized, which makes our position all the more precarious in the Western world—although we would have nothing to fear if people knew what we are in reality, not 'believers' of this or that faith but esoterists, who are by definition universalists, open to every orthodox credo." It should be emphasized that Schuon had nothing but the highest respect for the revealed forms of Islam and for traditional Islamic law as such: "Admittedly, one has the right to criticize those who, by an excessive and possibly absurd legalistic zeal, refuse to benefit from the simplifications that the Law itself offers, but one does not have the right to scorn in the least a given prescription of the Law or to take advantage of simplifications with a feeling of superiority or triumph. The Law is sacred" ("The Book of Keys", No. 887, "On the Subject of the Notion of Exoterism").

day life of a spiritual community to bring at least something of that side of himself to his written expositions, and this was certainly true in Schuon's case. From first to last—from *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* in 1948 to *The Transfiguration of Man* in 1995—his books testify to a continuing interest in the scriptures, doctrines, symbols, rites, and sacred arts of the Muslim tradition. *Understanding Islam*—first published in 1961 and translated into Arabic, Persian, and Urdu, as well as many European languages—remains his most often reprinted and most widely read title, though mention should also be made of *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence* and *Christianity/Islam: Perspectives on Esoteric Ecumenism*.[57] These books continue to attract a small but highly receptive audience in the Islamic world. At the same time it is no surprise that a significant number of his Muslim readers, including at least a few other Sufi authorities, have found much to object to in Schuon's work. His uncompromising defense of a pure or integral esoterism "uncolored" by the viewpoint of any specific religion or formal spiritual framework,[58] his perennialist insistence on the validity and salvific efficacy of all the world's major traditions, and his trenchant criticisms of what he called the "moralizing metaphysics" of "average Sufism"[59] made him an unusual *shaykh*, to say the least, and it has sometimes been difficult for those of other Sufi lineages, let alone the exoteric Muslim majority, to understand and accept his full perspective, however impressed they might otherwise be with particular aspects of his teaching.

Certain of his critics have suggested that Schuon gradually drifted away from an initially firm footing in traditional *Tasawwuf*, but this claim appears to be belied by the facts. In this respect as in others he seems on the contrary to have undergone virtually no intellectual or

[57] *Understanding Islam*, ed. Patrick Laude (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2011), foreword by Annemarie Schimmel; *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence*, ed. James S. Cutsinger (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2006), foreword by Seyyed Hossein Nasr; *Christianity/Islam: Perspectives on Esoteric Ecumenism*, ed. James S. Cutsinger (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2008); two anthologies of Schuon's writings on Islam should also be noted: *Dimensions of Islam*, trans. P. N. Townsend (London: Allen and Unwin, 1969) and *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, trans. J. Peter Hobson (London: World of Islam Festival, 1976).

[58] "The word 'esoterism' designates not only the total truth insofar as it is 'colored' by entering a system of partial truth but also the total truth as such, which is colorless" (see below Chapter 2, "Two Esoterisms", p. __). Schuon described his perspective as that of "Islamic esoterism", where "the esoterism comes first and Islam afterward", and not that of "esoteric Islam", where "Islam comes first and esoterism afterward" ("The Book of Keys", No. 1008, "Islamic Esoterism and Esoteric Islam").

[59] "The Quintessential Esoterism of Islam", *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence*, 102. Critical though he could be of confessional or "contingent" expressions of Islamic spirituality, it is important to underscore the fact that Schuon was adamant in his defense of a "quintessential Sufism" consisting of three key elements: discernment between the Real and illusory—between *al-Haqq*, the True, and *al-hijāb*, the veil—as expressed by the *Shahādah*; permanent concentration on the Real by means of *Dhikru 'Llāh*, the Remembrance or Invocation of God; and conformity to the Real through *Ihsān*, beauty of soul or virtue.

spiritual development. Having as a young man made the decision to enter Islam, he continued to practice within that framework for the rest of his life, and yet he remained simultaneously a "pure esoterist" from start to finish. In a letter written when he was just twenty-five—several months before meeting Shaykh al-Alawi—he said to a friend,

> If there were any essential difference between a path that passes through Benares and one that passes through Mecca, how could you think that I would wish to come to God "through Mecca" and thereby betray Christ and the *Vedānta*? Is the Nirvana of Mecca different from the Nirvana of Benares simply because it is called *fanā'* and not *nirvāna*? Either we are esoterists and metaphysicians who transcend forms … and do not distinguish between *Allāh* and *Brahman*, or else we are exoterists, "theologians", or at best mystics, who consequently live in forms like fish in water and who do make a distinction between Mecca and Benares.[60]

Precisely the same metaphysical accentuation remains evident nearly fifty years later in another letter, written to one of his disciples when Schuon was seventy-four:

> Our *Tarīqah* is not a *Tarīqah* like the others…. Our point of departure is the quest after esoterism and not after a particular religion—after the total Truth, not a sentimental mythology. To renounce and forget the religion of our [Christian] forefathers simply to immerse ourselves in another religion … could never be our perspective.[61]

Here we begin to see yet another reason, or set of reasons, why Schuon's writings may have failed to gain a wider readership and why they will doubtless never be popular even among those who in other ways are prepared to appreciate many of the key elements in his philosophy, including his defense of revelation and tradition, his movingly poetic descriptions and explanations of religious symbols and art, his penetrating criticisms of the modern world, and his insistence on the practice of virtue and prayer. Attractive though Schuon's work might be for the serious person of faith, whether Muslim or otherwise, his message refuses to be domesticated in the interest of any sectarian aim and cannot be limited by any formal enclosure—even the "mystical enclosure" of traditional Sufism.[62]

Gnostic

The difficulties certain of the faithful may have in appreciating Schuon's teaching are nothing, however, compared to the problems modern scholars must face in coming to terms with his

[60] Letter of 15 May 1932.
[61] Letter of 18 May 1981.
[62] Schuon discusses the uniqueness of his perspective, and the differences between his teaching and that of other Sufis, at several points in the Appendix below, notably in selections 6, 19, and 29.

work. For if he has seemed insufficiently partisan from the point of view of some fellow Sufis, he is undoubtedly much too partisan for the taste of most contemporary religionists, who are trained to be wary of mixing personal commitment with scholarly discourse.[63] His frequent references to God and not merely to what people *say* about "God", his confident asseverations as to the esoteric significance of sundry doctrines and symbols, and his continual talk about "pure" metaphysics and Truth—with a capital "T" after all!—are bound to leave many of the professoriate feeling nonplussed if not irritated, or else embarrassed to have been caught reading such an author. What will one's colleagues think?

Asked in a 1991 interview why his books had not received more attention in university circles, Schuon quickly cut to the chase with a reply that was at once abrupt and revealing: "The reason is that I am not a relativist. Today all the scholars are relativists, and I am an absolutist. I believe in Truth, and the official scholars do not believe in Truth."[64] Anyone who has had a religion course in a secular university setting—or for that matter in any number of "church-related" institutions of higher learning—is well aware of what Schuon is talking about, and they know he is largely right, not perhaps about any given scholar as an individual person of faith but about virtually all the scholars *qua* scholars. For with few exceptions most academic religionists decided long ago to adopt the public posture of agnostics, obediently doing their part to uphold the opinion that opinions—more or less well informed by historical and other empirical data—are all we can hope for when it comes to God and other ultimate issues.

Into such a climate of assumptions and professional protocols the words of this "absolutist" inevitably descend like a thunderbolt, shattering preconceptions, flouting conventions, and often offending the sensibilities of those who might otherwise have been sympathetic to his ecumenical outlook. Even readers who admit to finding themselves powerfully attracted by Schuon often report having experienced a certain shock upon first contact with his work. For here one is confronted by an approach to religion and spirituality that

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[63] Jan G. Platvoet gives voice to what is for many academics the default methodology: "Scholars of religion … can only take an agnostic position in respect of the truth or falsehood of the beliefs of the faithful. They must, therefore, confine themselves to investigating what is empirical about these beliefs and rituals, i.e. to those elements and aspects of them that belong squarely to our own world and are parts of its empirical, cultural, and historical realities" ("Rattray's Request: Spirit Possession among the Bono of West Africa", *Indigenous Religions: A Companion*, ed. Graham Harvey [London and New York: Cassell, 2000), 81). Mircea Eliade's complaint that scholars today often "take refuge in a materialism or behaviorism impervious to every spiritual shock" (*The Quest* [Chicago: University of Chicago, 1969], 62) still rings true.

[64] "Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy" (biographical video featuring interviews with Schuon in 1991 and 1992; Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2012).

eschews, indeed strongly denounces, the pervasive "contextualism" of today's university, refusing to justify itself by any of the usual standards of academic research while at the same time conveying a clear and unmistakable note of authority and total certainty.[65]

But where does this authority come from? And what are the foundations, if any, for Schuon's certainty?

In order to begin addressing these questions, one must dig deeper than we have thus far—deeper certainly than a discussion of perennialism as a school of thought and deeper too than an acknowledgment of this author's connection with Sufism. Something of the depth in question was suggested many years ago in a review of Schuon's third book, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* (1953). Noting that this volume possessed "the intrinsic authority of a contemplative intelligence", the reviewer went on to suggest that its author "speaks of grace as one in whom it is operative and as it were in virtue of that operation".[66] If this observation is to be regarded as anything more than hyperbole—and similar comments on the part of other learned readers oblige us, if we are honest, at least to consider that option—a radical shift in assumptions is clearly going to have to take place. We must entertain the possibility, if only as an experiment in thought, that Schuon was someone who actually *knew* what he was talking about, someone who had apprehended the Truth—with that capital "T" once again—in a way that cannot be accounted for in terms of sheerly natural causes or purely human phenomena.

I realize how inflated such language will sound to many readers. It is therefore of the greatest importance that in approaching Schuon's work from this angle we be exceedingly cautious, for the last thing I want to do is to give the impression that his faithful defenders are nothing more than mere fideists, whose positive response to his books is based on a prior conviction concerning his spiritual station. By all accounts Schuon was indeed an exceptional

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[65] "We grew up at a time when one could still say—without blushing on account of its naiveté—that two and two make four, when words still had a meaning and said what they meant to say, when one could conform to the laws of elementary logic or of common sense without having to pass through psychology or biology or so-called sociology and so forth, in short when there were still points of reference in the intellectual arsenal of men. By this we wish to point out that our way of thinking and our dialectic are deliberately out of date; and we know in advance, for it is only too evident, that the reader to whom we address ourselves will thank us for it" (Schuon, *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism* [Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1986], 2). As one scholar has noted, "If the premise of the Perennial Philosophy is conceded, then much of the apparatus of modern scholarship … stands condemned" (Carl Ernst, "Traditionalism, the Perennial Philosophy, and Islamic Studies", *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin*, Vol. 28, No. 2 [December 1994], 181). For Schuon's further thoughts on authority, certainty, and infallibility, see Ch. 7, "Tracing the Notion of Philosophy", pp. __.

[66] Bernard Kelly, "Notes on the Light of the Eastern Religions: With Special Reference to the Writings of Ananda Coomaraswamy, René Guénon, and Frithjof Schuon", *Dominican Studies*, Vol. 7 [1954]), 265.

human being, and his "presence" was such that many who knew him were inclined to describe him in quite extraordinary terms; such testimonials in fact abound, and not only on the part of injudicious disciples.[67] But it would be a mistake to suppose that the validity of his philosophy somehow rested on his charisma or other personal qualities. In fact one of the characteristic and most frequently noted features of his books is how rigorously impersonal they are; autobiographical allusions are extremely rare, and one finds no references at all to his own spiritual attainments, whatever those may have been. This is no accident, for though Schuon certainly wished for his readers to put their trust in God, he was not in the business of soliciting their trust in himself or in promulgating his insights as it were *ex cathedra*. On the contrary his explicit and oft-stated aim was to teach his readers "how to think"[68] in order that they might come to know God for themselves. As a *shaykh* Schuon was unquestionably a master to those in his charge, but as an author he was always careful to maintain the stance of a logician and diagnostician.

Of course, even after the bugbear of authoritarianism has been put to rest, there will remain for many an even greater obstacle: namely, the claim that it is possible for anyone—Schuon or otherwise—truly to know things of a spiritual or supernatural order. The question of whether he himself might have been a "gnostic" or *jnānin* pales to insignificance before the more radical question of whether there really is such a thing as genuine *gnosis* in the first place—whether "spiritual knowledge" or a "science of the Real" is anything more than an idle dream and hence unworthy of the attention of the serious reader.[69] When Schuon tells us that "human intelligence coincides in its essence with certainty of the Absolute",[70] that "the real and the

[67] To give but one instance, we may quote the distinguished author of the foreword to this anthology: "With the possible exception of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Frithjof Schuon is the only person I have known who invariably made me feel, on leaving him, that I had been in the presence of a different order of human being" (Huston Smith, *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2 [Winter 1998], 31).

[68] "I have the impression of living in a world where almost no one knows how to think anymore; this does not encourage me to share my thoughts. One of the reasons I write articles is that I hope to influence not only the intelligence but also the soul or sensibility of readers and to teach them how to think" (Letter of 9 September 1970).

[69] Schuon often uses the term *gnosis* as a synonym for metaphysical knowledge, as in his book *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*; see below: pp. __. "We say *gnosis* and not 'Gnosticism'," he clarifies, "for the latter is most often a heterodox mythological dogmatism, whereas intrinsic *gnosis* is not other than what the Hindus mean by *jnāna* and *Advaita Vedānta*. To claim that all *gnosis* is false because of Gnosticism amounts to saying, by analogy, that all prophets are false because there are false prophets" (Schuon, *Roots of the Human Condition* [Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 2002), 10-11). Christian readers of Schuon sometimes balk at this word, but Saint Irenaeus of Lyon, the greatest of the early cataloguers of heresy, made a point of denouncing all "*gnosis* falsely so called" (1 Tim. 6:20), which obviously implies the existence of a *gnosis* "rightly so called".

[70] *Logic and Transcendence*, ed. James S. Cutsinger (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2009), 49.

knowable coincide",[71] that "all that exists is inscribed *a priori* in the theomorphic substance of our intelligence",[72] or that "real knowledge has no history"[73] since it is dependent instead on the sudden and supersensible "grasping of a truth already latent within us",[74] the testy response of many scholars will no doubt be to say: Did this latter-day Platonist know nothing about the philosophy of the last two or three hundred years? Was he really so naive as to be unaware of what any undergraduate knows, that human knowledge is strictly dependent on sensory experience and irrevocably conditioned by cultural categories? Had he never heard of Kant, to say nothing of the numerous postmodern reminders that we are all in epistemological bondage—however subtle and unconscious—to our gender, race, social class, period, and climate of opinion?[75]

As a matter of fact Schuon was well aware of such Kantian and post-Kantian "critiques", and much of his work was devoted to exposing the radical inconsistency involved in every such claim to *know* the limits of knowledge. "In times past it was the object that was sometimes doubted," he writes:

> But in our day no one fears the contradiction of doubting the knowing subject in its intrinsic and irreplaceable aspect; intelligence as such is called into question, even "examined", without wondering "who" examines it … and without taking account of the fact that philosophic doubt is included in this same devaluation, that it falls with the fall of intelligence, and that at the same stroke all science and philosophy collapse.[76]

It is not my aim in this short introduction to attempt to justify Schuon's position; whatever else one might say about him, this is clearly an author who is prepared to speak in his own defense, and these opening words of mine are no more than a prelude to letting him do just that in the pages which follow. But perhaps I could venture just a hint as to what this defense will consist in by underscoring the phrase "knowing subject" in the passage above. For Schuon learning "how

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[71] *In the Face of the Absolute*, 37.
[72] See Ch. 6, "Consequences Flowing from the Mystery of Subjectivity", p. __.
[73] *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, ed. James S. Cutsinger (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2007), 10.
[74] Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom*, 15.
[75] Schuon anticipates these criticisms: "There are few things that … 'a man of our times' endures less readily than the risk of appearing naive; everything else can be sacrificed as long as the feeling of not being duped by anything is safeguarded…. Those who reproach our ancestors with having been stupidly credulous forget first of all that one can also be stupidly incredulous and second that the self-styled destroyers of illusion live on illusions that exemplify a credulity second to none; for a simple credulity can be replaced by a complicated one, adorned with the arabesques of a reflexive doubt forming part of the style, but it is still credulity. Complication does not make error less false or stupidity less stupid" (See Ch. 3, "Naiveté", p. __).
[76] Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, ed. Deborah Casey (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2006), 111. See also "The Contradiction of Relativism" in Schuon's *Logic and Transcendence*.

to think" means above all learning how to come to grips with the "who" of the subject or self—not just *ab extra* but in its "intrinsic and irreplaceable aspect"; and what this in turn involves is the sudden realization—however demanding and protracted the preparation may prove—that in knowing that which is we must be That which knows. This is what it means to be a gnostic, no more but at the same time no less.

Gnosis thus understood is the prerogative of a faculty which Schuon calls the Intellect and which he describes, following the medieval Christian mystic Meister Eckhart, as "uncreated" and "uncreatable".[77] Largely dormant in most of us and yet present in all, it is a power of immediate or intuitive discernment, unobstructed by the boundaries of physical objects and unaffected by the limitations of historical circumstance. In contrast with the reason or discursive intelligence, the Intellect enables us to *see* what is so, not as a conclusion conceptually derived from a premise, but with the immediacy of perception—or "combustion" perhaps, to recall Plato's "leaping spark".[78] It is a direct apprehension of being as object by virtue of being as subject, an apprehension that "comes into being" when the mind attends to itself and to what makes it attend, and when in this way it enters into an "other" that is essentially inward, there to know God. But not just any God or God in any mode: To see God truly is to see that there is within Him something other than God that "is" God nonetheless, which is our seeing—and which our thinking, even in its most skeptical forms, has involved all along, though we "knew Him not" (John 1:10).

Schuon's ultimate goal was not to promulgate truths in the propositional plural; it was to bring about a direct engagement with Truth in the ineffable singular. To read him otherwise, as if his main interest were in advancing some hermeneutical theory which the rest of us are simply obliged to accept or as if his insights were tied to certain formulations of language whose incompleteness or fragility the suspicious postmodernist may eventually hope to expose, is to misinterpret the evident authority of his work and to misconstrue virtually every sentence he wrote. "Every doctrine," Schuon readily admits—and this clearly includes even that of the

[77] Eckhart: "There is something in the soul [*anima*] which is uncreated and uncreatable; if the whole soul were such, it would be uncreated and uncreatable, and this is the Intellect [*Intellectus*]" (as quoted in the papal Bull *In agro dominico* [1329]). According to Schuon the Intellect amounts to a microcosmic revelation, even as Revelation is a macrocosmic intellection.

[78] *Epistle VII*, 341d. As Schuon writes, "When the heat produced by rubbing two pieces of wood together—or by a lens capturing a ray of sunshine—reaches the precise degree that is its culminating point, a flame suddenly bursts forth; in just the same way intellection, as soon as the mental operation is capable of supplying an adequate support, instantly grafts itself onto this support" (see Ch. 17, "Modes of Spiritual Realization", p. __).

gnostic—"is only error when confronted with the divine Reality in itself, but a provisional, indispensable, salutary 'error', containing and communicating the virtuality of Truth."[79]

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I have tried to be as frank as I can about the difficulties as well as the benefits presented by Schuon's perspective. My goal of course is to persuade not dissuade—to pique curiosity and not merely raise hackles—and I shall be disappointed if these opening hints as to this author's significance, subtlety, and scope have failed to attract at least a few adventurous readers. In bringing this introduction to a close I would like to extend a special invitation to three groups of such readers in particular—groups which clearly overlap in a variety of important ways.

First are proponents of interfaith dialogue. It seems to me obvious that anyone interested in promoting understanding between religious believers will find Schuon invaluable. This should prove especially true for those interlocutors who have grown dissatisfied with the reductionist tenor of the current conversation—its tendency to force the religions into a Procrustean bed of scientistic assumptions and liberal social platitudes—and who are therefore open to the prospect of an ecumenism that is at once deeply esoteric and yet fully traditionalist. In pondering the insights of Schuon the *perennialist*, they will gradually begin to discern a transcendent unity among the world's religions while at the same time respecting and safeguarding the revealed integrity of their immanent or exoteric forms.

Second are my fellow academics. Anyone who studies religion stands to learn from this author, but the scholars whom I most have in mind—and their numbers increase every day—are those who have found themselves wondering whether there might be an intellectually respectable way of bridging the divide between their personal religious commitments, which they have been trained to keep private, and their public work as historians, philosophers, social scientists, and critical interpreters of texts. Such an audience cannot but profit from its encounter with Schuon

[79] *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 173. This is an important key to understanding the nature of the author's mode of argument, and it provides one response to the critic mentioned above who complained of Schuon's "contempt for human reason" (see footnote 4). As Schuon notes elsewhere, "Logic is nothing other than the science of mental coordination, of rational conclusion; it is therefore unable to reach the universal and transcendent by its own means; a supra-logical—but not 'illogical'—dialectic based on symbolism and analogy, and thus descriptive rather than ratiocinative, may be more difficult for some people to assimilate, but it conforms more closely to transcendent realities" (*Les Stations de la sagesse* [Stations of Wisdom] [Paris: Buchet et Chastel, 1958], 23).

the *shaykh*, a man who realized that spiritual methods are considerably more rigorous than their scientific counterparts and whose religious affiliation and contemplative discipline made him a more, and not less, scrupulously objective thinker.

Third and finally are spiritual "seekers". Here I include anyone who has ever been told that intelligent people no longer talk about Truth but who has nonetheless been unable to shake the conviction that there must be something More, something *knowably* More. As a university professor for over thirty years, I have repeatedly witnessed the disheartening effects of academic skepticism, and I confess to having a special affection and sympathy for this disillusioned multitude. If they will give the admittedly demanding work of Schuon the *gnostic* the attention it requires and deserves, I promise them that he will provide in abundance precisely the resources they need for constructively doubting the fashionable doubts of our day and calling the bluff on de-mythologizers and debunkers of every size and stripe.[80]

Needless to say, I would be delighted if the doubters and debunkers themselves would take this book in hand and submit themselves to some Schuonian dialectic. What I can promise *them* is that their minds will be stretched in ways they had never imagined.

[80] Particularly egregious examples in recent years include Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004); Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Viking, 2006); Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006); and Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007).

3

Axioms of the *Sophia Perennis*

Frithjof Schuon

There are truths which are axioms because they are self-evident, and which therefore can be proven *ab extra*; there are others which are axiomatic because they are present in the very substance of the intelligence, so that, *ipso facto*, their evidence can only be attested to *ab intra*; and this raises the question of knowing what is meant by a proof. We would say that verification *ab intra* is quasi-existential: certain conditions must have been realized to be able to perceive that which is to be proven, if this word has a meaning here. However, the fact that metaphysical axioms are verified "from within" could not mean that they cannot be "illustrated" *ab extra* and by the use of reason; for reasonings can perfectly well offer keys to direct intellection, or else there would be no books or any doctrines; as for receptivity with regard to rationally graspable arguments, everything depends on our fundamental tendencies, that is, on the question of knowing, not what we think, but what we are.

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We say that there is an absolute, transcendent Reality, unperceivable by the senses, beyond space and time, but knowable by the pure Intellect, by which It makes Itself present; a Reality which, without ever undergoing the least change, since It is unconditional, gives rise—by virtue of Its very Infinitude—to a dimension of contingency or relativity in order to be able to realize the mystery of Its radiation. For "it is in the nature of the Good to wish to communicate Itself": this means that God wishes to be known not only in Himself, but also "from without" and starting from an "other than He"; this is the very substance of the Divine All-Possibility.

This is what we say, or recall, *a priori*. We say it, not only because we believe it, but because we know it, and we know it because we are it. We are it in our transpersonal Intellect, which

intrinsically is the vehicle of the immanent Presence of the Absolute Real, and without which we would not be men.

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Thus human intelligence—by the fact that it is capable of essentiality and totality—contains in its substance of the fundamental data of the *Sophia Perennis*: absolute Reality, which by definition is the Sovereign Good; then its Infinitude—All-Possibility—which is its intrinsic consequence and which causes that projection which is Relativity or Contingency. The Relative on the one hand is prefigured in the Absolute-Infinite and on the other hand manifests the latter at various degrees; now the cosmogonical projection, since it necessarily moves away from the Principle, just as necessarily gives rise, within Manifestation which it creates, to the enigma that is imperfection, privation, absurdity, evil; but evil, being quite paradoxically the image of a nothingness inexistent in itself, cannot prevail against the Good, which is the very essence of Being; *vincit omnia Veritas*.

At a doubtless more elementary but nevertheless essential level, our spirit contains the following axioms: there is a God, all-powerful and *a priori* fundamentally benevolent;[81] He is our Benefactor and will be our Judge; our soul is immortal; it has the twofold vocation of prayer and virtue; it is made for Salvation and Beatitude. This is our innate theology, whether we like it or not;[82] and "blessed are they who have not seen and yet have believed."

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The fact that the Principle and Manifestation are incommensurable could not mean that they are totally foreign to each other; quite the contrary, Manifestation is necessarily prefigured in the principial order, which for its part is just as necessarily reflected in the manifested

[81] "God alone is good," according to the Gospels. According to the Koran, "My Mercy precedeth (*sabaqat*) my Wrath"; the meaning of the verb is principial, not only temporal; "Mercy" (*Rahmah*) is intrinsic, and "Wrath" (*Ghadab*) extrinsic.

[82] This is why there is no people without religion, which "illustrates" in its manner our thesis of the immanence of spiritual notions.

order; the world contains modes of the divine Presence, just as the divine Intellect contains the prototypes of the phenomena of the world; in other words, God is present in the world through sacred things, and the world is present in God through the Platonic Ideas.

On the one hand Manifestation is positive since it expresses the Principle, but on the other hand it has a negative character in that it inevitably moves away from the Principle and thereby opposes It. Despite this ambiguity, it is positive in itself, precisely because its reason for being is to bring about the radiation of the Divine Sun, which allows us to say that it is more truly a good which comprises some evils than an evil which comprises some good. This preponderance of the positive aspect is explained by the very nature of Being, which by definition is the *Agathon*, the supreme Good, and *ipso facto* the archetype and source of all possible good. Quite evidently, privation is the accident, whereas value is the substance; the Universe could not possibly begin with a privation; if Being did not coincide with the Good, there would be no good whatsoever in the world. We insist on all these data—at the risk of being repetitive—because of their at once subtle and fundamental character.

According to Plato and Saint Augustine, the cause of the world is the tendency of the Good to communicate Itself; negatively speaking, this cause is a result of the Infinitude of the Supreme Principle, which necessarily implies the "possibility of the impossible," namely the possibility of the Absolute not to be the Absolute. But since this possibility is absurd, it can be realized only in an illusory dimension, that of Relativity, of *Maya*; whence the ambiguous possibility of the world, precisely.

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Philosophically speaking, there are two great problems, that of Being, of Reality, and that of Consciousness or of Knowledge; these are problems because of the prejudice that treats the roots of Existence as if sensible objects were in question. For the Gnostic—the born metaphysician—there are no problems; he perceives Being—or conceives of It—through phenomena, and perceiving Being, he knows *ipso facto* that he "is" what he "knows."[83]

[83] "*Brahma* is Truth (*Satyam*), the world is appearance (*mithya*); the soul is not different from *Brahma*."

The sufficient reason for human intelligence—without which man would not exist—is that which it alone is capable of attaining to. We are made in order to be the mirror of the absolutely Real, that is to say in order to know the Absolute starting from Relativity; and this is so in virtue of the illumination of the divine Possibility, which could not exclude this indirect way of Consciousness of the Self. Now to know total Reality is to know it totally; it follows that man must know with all his being: he must will what he knows and love what he knows and wills, given that the supreme Object of his knowledge is the Absolute, precisely. The certainty of the knowledge of the Absolute is absolute, for it coincides with That which is.

II

Hinduism

4

The Vedānta and Western Tradition[84]

Ananda K. Coomaraswamy

Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) was a multi-talented researcher, scientist, linguist, expert on culture and art, philosopher, museum curator, and author. He was the first well-known author of the modern era to expound the importance of traditional arts, culture, and thought as more than simply relics of a bygone past. He is often credited with reintroducing the concept of the Perennial Philosophy to a West dazed by the endless multiplicity of the modern world.

> These are really the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands; they are not original with me.
>
> Walt Whitman

I

There have been teachers, such as Orpheus, Hermes, Buddha, Lao-tzu, and Christ, the historicity of whose human existence is doubtful, and to whom there may be accorded the higher dignity of a mythical reality. Shankara, like Plotinus, Augustine, or Eckhart, was certainly a man among men, though we know comparatively little about his life. He was of south Indian Brahman birth, flourished in the first half of the ninth century A.D., and founded a monastic order, which still survives. He became a *samnyasin***,** or "truly poor man," at the age of eight, as the disciple of a certain Govinda and of Govinda's own teacher Gaudapada, the author of a treatise on the Upanishads in which their essential doctrine of the non-duality of the divine Being was set forth. Shankara journeyed to Benares and wrote the famous commentary on the *Brahma Sutra* there in his twelfth year; the commentaries on the Upanishads and *Bhagavad Gita* were written later. Most of the great sage's life was spent wandering about India, teaching and taking part in controversies. He is understood to have died between the ages of thirty and forty. Such wanderings and disputations as his have always been characteristically Indian institutions; in his days, as now, Sanskrit was the lingua

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[84] [Originally an address given before the Radcliffe College chapter of the Phi Beta Kappa Society, the text in its present form was published in *The American Scholar,* VIII (1939).—ED.]

franca of learned men, just as for centuries Latin was the lingua franca of Western countries, and free public debate was so generally recognized that halls erected for the accommodation of peripatetic teachers and disputants were at almost every court. The traditional metaphysics with which the name of Shankara is connected is known either as the Vedānta, a term which occurs in the Upanishads and means the "Vedas' ends," both as "latter part" and as "ultimate significance"; or as Atmavidya, the doctrine of the knowledge of the true "self" or "spiritual essence"; or as Advaita, "Nonduality," a term which, while it denies duality, makes no affirmations about the nature of unity and must not be taken to imply anything like our monisms or pantheisms. A gnosis (*jnana*) is taught in this metaphysics.

Shankara was not in any sense the founder, discoverer, or promulgator of a new religion or philosophy; his great work as an expositor consisted in a demonstration of the unity and consistency of Vedic doctrine and in an explanation of its apparent contradictions by a correlation of different formulations with the points of view implied in them. In particular, and exactly as in European Scholasticism, he distinguished between the two complementary approaches to God, which are those of the affirmative and negative theology. In the way of affirmation, or relative knowledge, qualities are predicated in the Supreme Identity by way of excellence, while in the way of negation all qualities are abstracted. The famous "No, no" of the Upanishads, which forms the basis of Shankara's method, as it did of the Buddha's, depends upon a recognition of the truth—expressed by Dante among many others—that there are things which are beyond the reach of discursive thought and which cannot be understood except by denying things of them.

Shankara's style is one of great originality and power as well as subtlety. I shall cite from his commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita* a passage that has the further advantage of introducing us at once to the central problem of the Vedānta—that of the discrimination of what is really, and not merely according to our way of thinking, "myself." "How is it," Shankara says, "that there are professors who like ordinary men maintain that 'I am so-and-so' and 'This is mine'? Listen: it is because their so-called learning consists in thinking of the body as their 'self.'" In the Commentary on the *Brahma Sutra* he enunciates in only four Sanskrit words what has remained in Indian metaphysics from first to last the consistent doctrine of the immanent Spirit within you as the only knower, agent, and transmigrant.

The metaphysical literature underlying Shankara's expositions consists essentially of the Four Vedas together with the Brahmanas and their Upanishads, all regarded as revealed, eternal, datable (as to their recension, in any case) before 500 B.C., together with the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Brahma Sutra* (datable before the beginning of the Christian era). Of these books, the Vedas are liturgical, the Brahmanas are explanatory of the ritual, and the Upanishads are devoted to the Brahma-doctrine or *Theologia Mystica,* which is taken for granted in the liturgy and ritual. The *Brahma Sutra* is a greatly condensed compendium of Upanishad doctrine, and the *Bhagavad Gita* is an exposition adapted to the understanding of those whose primary business has to do with the active rather than the contemplative life.

For many reasons, which I shall try to explain, it will be far more difficult to expound the Vedānta than it would be to expound the personal views of a modern "thinker," or even such a thinker as Plato or Aristotle. Neither the modern English vernacular nor modern philosophical or psychological jargon provides us with an adequate vocabulary, nor does modern education provide us with the ideological background which would be essential for easy communication. I shall have to make use of a purely symbolic, abstract, and technical language, as if I were speaking in terms of higher mathematics; you may recall that Emile Male speaks of Christian symbolism as a "calculus." There is this advantage: the matter to be communicated and the symbols to be employed are no more peculiarly Indian than peculiarly Greek or Islamic, Egyptian or Christian.

Metaphysics, in general, resorts to visual symbols (crosses and circles, for example) and above all to the symbolism of light and of the sun—than which, as Dante says, "no object of sense in the whole world is more worthy to be made a type of God." But I shall also have to use such technical terms as essence and substance, potentiality and act, spiration and despiration, exemplary likeness, aeviternity, form, and accident. Metempsychosis must be distinguished from transmigration and both from "reincarnation." We shall have to distinguish soul from spirit. Before we can know when, if ever, it is proper to render a given Sanskrit word by our word "soul" (*anima, psyche*), we must have known in what manifold senses the word "soul" has been employed in the European tradition; what kind of souls can be "saved"; what kind of soul Christ requires us to "hate" if we would be his disciples; what kind of soul Eckhart refers to when he says that the soul must "put itself to death." We must know what Philo means by the "soul of the soul"; and we must ask how we can

think of animals as "soulless," notwithstanding that the word "animal" means quite literally "ensouled." We must distinguish essence from existence. And I may have to coin such a word as "nowever" to express the full and original meanings of such words as "suddenly," "immediately," and "presently."

The sacred literature of India is available to most of us only in translations made by scholars trained in linguistics rather than in metaphysics; and it has been expounded and explained—or as I should rather say, explained away—mainly by scholars provided with the assumptions of the naturalist and anthropologist, scholars whose intellectual capacities have been so much inhibited by their own powers of observation that they can no longer distinguish the reality from the appearance, the Supernal Sun of metaphysics from the physical sun of their own experience. Apart from these, Indian literature has either been studied and explained by Christian propagandists whose main concern has been to demonstrate the falsity and absurdity of the doctrines involved, or by theosophists by whom the doctrines have been caricatured with the best intentions and perhaps even worse results.

The educated man of today is, moreover, completely out of touch with those European modes of thought and those intellectual aspects of the Christian doctrine which are nearest those of the Vedic traditions. A knowledge of modern Christianity will be of little use because the fundamental sentimentality of our times has diminished what was once an intellectual doctrine to a mere morality that can hardly be distinguished from a pragmatic humanism. A European can hardly be said to be adequately prepared for the study of the Vedānta unless he has acquired some knowledge and understanding of at least Plato, Philo, Hermes, Plotinus, the Gospels (especially John), Dionysius, and finally Eckhart who, with the possible exception of Dante, can be regarded from an Indian point of view as the greatest of all Europeans.

The Vedānta is not a "philosophy" in the current sense of the word, but only as the word is used in the phrase *Philosophia Perennis*, and only if we have in mind the Hermetic "philosophy" or that "Wisdom" by whom Boethius was consoled. Modern philosophies are closed systems, employing the method of dialectics, and taking for granted that opposites are mutually exclusive. In modern philosophy things are either so or not so; in eternal philosophy this depends upon our point of view. Metaphysics is not a system, but a consistent doctrine; it is not merely concerned with conditioned and quantitative experience,

but with universal possibility. It therefore considers possibilities that may be neither possibilities of manifestation nor in any sense formal, as well as ensembles of possibility that can be realized in a given world. The ultimate reality of metaphysics is a Supreme Identity in which the opposition of all contraries, even of being and not-being, is resolved; its "worlds" and "gods" are levels of reference and symbolic entities which are neither places nor individuals but states of being realizable within you.

Philosophers have personal theories about the nature of the world; our "philosophical discipline" is primarily a study of the history of these opinions and of their historical connections. We encourage the budding philosopher to have opinions of his own on the chance that they may represent an improvement on previous theories. We do not envisage, as does the *Philosophia Perennis*, the possibility of knowing the Truth once and for all; still less do we set before us as our goal to become this truth.

The metaphysical "philosophy" is called "perennial" because of its eternity, universality, and immutability; it is Augustine's "Wisdom un-create, the same now as it ever was and ever will be"; the religion which, as he also says, only came to be called "Christianity" after the coming of Christ. What was revealed in the beginning contains implicitly the whole truth; and so long as the tradition is transmitted without deviation, so long, in other words, as the chain of teachers and disciples remains unbroken, neither inconsistency nor error is possible. On the other hand, an understanding of the doctrine must be perpetually renewed; it is not a matter of words. That the doctrine has no history by no means excludes the possibility, or even the necessity, for a perpetual explicitation of its formulae, an adaptation of the rites originally practiced, and an application of its principles to the arts and sciences. The more humanity declines from its first self-sufficiency, the more the necessity for such an application arises. Of these explicitations and adaptations a history is possible. Thus a distinction is drawn between what was "heard" at the outset and what has been "remembered."

A deviation or heresy is only possible when the essential teaching has been in some respect misunderstood or perverted. To say, for example, that "I am a pantheist" is merely to confess that "I am not a metaphysician," just as to say that "two and two make five" would be to confess "I am not a mathematician." Within the tradition itself there cannot be any contradictory or mutually exclusive theories or dogmas. For example, what are called the "six systems of Indian philosophy" (a phrase in which only the words "six" and "Indian" are

justified) are not mutually contradictory and exclusive theories. The so-called "systems" are no more or less orthodox than mathematics, chemistry, and botany which, though separate disciplines more or less scientific amongst themselves, are not anything but branches of one "science." India, indeed, makes use of the term "branches" to denote what the Indologist misunderstands to be "sects." It is precisely because there are no "sects" within the fold of Brahmanical orthodoxy that an intolerance in the European sense has been virtually unknown in Indian history—and for the same reason, it is just as easy for me to think in terms of the Hermetic philosophy as in terms of Vedānta. There must be "branches" because nothing can be known except in the mode of the knower; however strongly we may realize that all roads lead to one Sun, it is equally evident that each man must choose that road which starts from the point at which he finds himself at the moment of setting out. For the same reasons, Hinduism has never been a missionary faith. It may be true that the metaphysical tradition has been better and more fully preserved in India than in Europe. If so, it only means that the Christian can learn from the Vedānta how to understand his own "way" better.

The philosopher expects to prove his points. For the metaphysician it suffices to show that a supposedly false doctrine involves a contradiction of first principles. For example, a philosopher who argues for an immortality of the soul endeavors to discover proofs of the survival of personality; for the metaphysician it suffices to remember that "the first beginning must be the same as the last end"—from which it follows that a soul, understood to have been created in time, cannot but end in time. The metaphysician can no more be convinced by any so-called "proof of the survival of personality" than a physicist could be convinced of the possibility of a perpetual motion machine by any so-called proof. Furthermore, metaphysics deals for the most part with matters which cannot be publicly proved, but can only be demonstrated, i.e., made intelligible by analogy, and which even when verified in personal experience can only be stated in terms of symbol and myth. At the same time, faith is made relatively easy by the infallible logic of the texts themselves—which is their beauty and their attractive power. Let us remember the Christian definition of faith: "assent to a credible proposition." One must believe in order to understand, and understand in order to believe. These are not successive, however, but simultaneous acts of the mind. In other words, there can be no knowledge of anything to which the will refuses its consent, or love of anything that has not been known.

Metaphysics differs still further from philosophy in having a purely practical purpose. It is no more a pursuit of truth for truth's sake than are the related arts a pursuit of art for art's sake, or related conduct the pursuit of morality for the sake of morality. There is indeed a quest, but the seeker already knows, so far as this can be stated in words, what it is that he is in search of; the quest is achieved only when he himself has become the object of his search. Neither verbal knowledge nor a merely formal assent nor impeccable conduct is of any more than indispensable dispositive value—means to an end.

Taken in their materiality, as "literature," the texts and symbols are inevitably misunderstood by those who are not themselves in quest. Without exception, the metaphysical terms and symbols are the technical terms of the chase. They are never literary ornaments, and as Malinowski has so well said in another connection, "Technical language, in matters of practical pursuit, acquires its meaning only through personal participation in this type of pursuit." That is why, the Indian feels, the Vedantic texts have been only verbally and grammatically and never really understood by European scholars, whose methods of study are avowedly objective and noncommittal. The Vedānta can be known only to the extent that it has been lived. The Indian, therefore, cannot trust a teacher whose doctrine is not directly reflected in his very being. Here is something very far removed from the modern European concept of scholarship.

We must add, for the sake of those who entertain romantic notions of the "mysterious East," that the Vedānta has nothing to do with magic or with the exercise of occult powers. It is true that the efficacy of magical procedure and the actuality of occult powers are taken for granted in India. But the magic is regarded as an applied science of the basest kind; and while occult powers, such as that of operation "at a distance," are incidentally acquired in the course of contemplative practice, the use of them—unless under the most exceptional circumstances—is regarded as a dangerous deviation from the path.

Nor is the Vedānta a kind of psychology or Yoga a sort of therapeutics except quite accidentally. Physical and moral health are prerequisites to spiritual progress. A psychological analysis is employed only to break down our fond belief in the unity and immateriality of the "soul," and with a view to a better distinguishing of the spirit from what is not the spirit but only a temporary psycho-physical manifestation of one of the most limited of its modalities. Whoever, like Jung, insists upon translating the essentials of

Indian or Chinese metaphysics into a psychology is merely distorting the meaning of the texts. Modern psychology has, from an Indian point of view, about the same values that attach to spiritualism and magic and other "superstitions." Finally, I must point out that the metaphysics, the Vedānta, is not a form of mysticism, except in the sense that with Dionysius we can speak of a *Theologia Mystica*. What is ordinarily meant by "mysticism" involves a passive receptivity—"we must be able to let things happen in the psyche" is Jung's way of putting it (and in this statement he proclaims himself a "mystic"). But metaphysics repudiates the psyche altogether. The words of Christ, that "No man can be my disciple who hateth not his own soul," have been voiced again and again by every Indian guru; and so far from involving passivity, contemplative practice involves an activity that is commonly compared to the blazing of a fire at a temperature so high as to show neither flickering nor smoke. The pilgrim is called a "toiler," and the characteristic refrain of the pilgrim song is "keep on going, keep on going." The "Way" of the Vedantist is above all an activity.

II

The Vedānta takes for granted an omniscience independent of any source of knowledge external to itself, and a beatitude independent of any external source of pleasure. In saying "That art thou," the Vedānta affirms that man is possessed of, and is himself, "that one thing which when it is known, all things are known" and "for the sake of which alone all things are dear." It affirms that man is unaware of this hidden treasure within himself because he has inherited an ignorance that inheres in the very nature of the psycho-physical vehicle which he mistakenly identifies with himself. The purpose of all teaching is to dissipate this ignorance; when the darkness has been pierced nothing remains but the Gnosis of the Light. The technique of education is, therefore, always formally destructive and iconoclastic; it is not the conveyance of information but the education of a latent knowledge.

The "great dictum" of the Upanishads is, "That art thou." "That" is here, of course, Atman or Spirit, Sanctus Spiritus, Greek *pneuma,* Arabic *ruh,* Hebrew *ruah,* Egyptian *Amon,* Chinese *ch'i;* Atman is spiritual essence, impartite whether transcendent or immanent; and however many and various the directions to which it may extend or from which it may withdraw, it is unmoved mover in both intransitive and transitive senses. It lends itself to all

modalities of being but never itself becomes anyone or anything. That than which all else is a vexation—That art thou. "That," in other words, is the Brahman, or God in the general sense of Logos or Being, considered as the universal source of all Being—expanding, manifesting, and productive, font of all things, all of which are "in" him as the finite in the infinite, though not a "part" of him, since the infinite has no parts.

For the most part, I shall use the word Atman hereafter. While this Atman, as that which blows and enlightens, is primarily "Spirit," because it is this divine Eros that is the quickening essence in all things and thus their real being, the word Atman is also used reflexively to mean "self"— either "oneself" in whatever sense, however gross, the notion may be entertained, or with reference to the spiritual self or person (which is the only knowing subject and essence of all things, and must be distinguished from the affected and contingent "I" that is a compound of the body and of all that we mean by "soul" when we speak of a "psychology"). Two very different "selves" are thus involved, and it has been the custom of translators, accordingly, to render Atman as "self," printed either with a small or with a capital s according to the context. The same distinction is drawn, for example, by St. Bernard between what is my "property" (*proprium*) and what is my very being (*esse*). An alternative Indian formulation distinguishes the "knower of the field"—viz. the Spirit as the only knowing subject in all things and the same in all—from the "field," or body-and-soul as defined above (taken together with the pastures of the senses and embracing therefore all things that can be considered objectively). The Atman or Brahman itself cannot be thus considered: "How couldst thou know the knower of knowing?"—or in other words, how can the first cause of all things be one of them?

The Atman is impartite, but it is apparently divided and identified into variety by the differing forms of its vehicles, mouse or man, just as space within a jar is apparently signate and distinguishable from space without it. In this sense it can be said that "he is one as he is in himself but many as he is in his children," and that "participating himself, he fills these worlds." But this is only in the sense that light fills space while it remains itself without discontinuity; the distinction of things from one another thus depending not on differences in the light but on differences in reflecting power. When the jar is shattered, when the vessel of life is unmade, we realize that what was apparently delimited had no boundaries and that "life" was a meaning not to be confused with "living." To say that the Atman is thus at

once participated and impartible, “undivided amongst divided things,” without local position and at the same time everywhere, is another way of stating what we are more familiar with as the doctrine of Total Presence.

At the same time, every one of these apparent definitions of the Spirit represents the actuality in time of one of its indefinitely numerous possibilities of formal manifestation. The existence of the apparition begins at birth and ends at death; it can never be repeated. Nothing of Shankara survives but a bequest. Therefore though we can speak of him as still a living power in the world, the man has become a memory. On the other hand, for the gnostic Spirit, the Knower of the field, the Knower of all births, there can never at any time cease to be an immediate knowledge of each and every one of its modalities, a knowledge without before or after (relative to the appearance or disappearance of Shankara from the field of our experience). It follows that where knowledge and being, nature and essence are one and the same, Shankara’s being has no beginning and can never cease. In other words, there is a sense in which we can properly speak of “my spirit” and “my person” as well as of “the Spirit” and “the Person,” notwithstanding that Spirit and Person are a perfectly simple substance without composition. I shall return to the meaning of “immortality” later, but for the present I want to use what has just been said to explain what was meant by a nonsectarian distinction of points of view. For, whereas the Western student of “philosophy” thinks of Samkhya and Vedanta as two incompatible “systems,” because the former is concerned with the liberation of a plurality of Persons and the latter with the liberty of an inconnumerable Person, no such antinomy is apparent to the Hindu. This can be explained by pointing out that in the Christian texts, “Ye are all one in Christ Jesus” and “Whoever is joined unto the Lord is one spirit,” the plurals “ye” and “whoever” represent the Samkhya and the singular “one” the Vedanta point of view.

The validity of our consciousness of being, apart from any question of being So-and-so by name or by registrable characters, is accordingly taken for granted. This must not be confused with the argument, “Cogito ergo sum.” That “I” feel or “I” think is no proof that “I” am; for we can say with the Vedantist and Buddhist that this is merely a conceit, that “feelings are felt” and “thoughts are thought,” and that all this is a part of the “field” of which the spirit is the surveyor, just as we look at a picture which is in one sense a part of us though we are not in any sense a part of it. The question is posed accordingly: “Who art thou?” “What is

that self to which we should resort?" We recognize that "self" can have more than one meaning when we speak of an "internal conflict"; when we say that "the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak"; or when we say, with the *Bhagavad Gita,* that "the Spirit is at war with whatever is not the Spirit."

Am "I" the spirit or the flesh? (We must always remember that in metaphysics the "flesh" includes all the aesthetic and recognitive faculties of the "soul.") We may be asked to consider our reflection in a mirror, and may understand that there we see "ourself"; if we are somewhat less naive, we may be asked to consider the image of the psyche as reflected in the mirror of the mind and may understand that this is what "I" am; or if still better advised, we may come to understand that we are none of these things—that they exist because we are, rather than that we exist inasmuch as they are. The Vedānta affirms that "I" in my essence am as little, or only as much, affected by all these things as an author-playwright is affected by the sight of what is suffered or enjoyed by those who move on the stage—the stage, in this case, of "life" (in other words, the "field" or "pasture" as distinguished from its aquiline surveyor, the Universal Man). The whole problem of man's last end, liberation, beatitude, or deification is accordingly one of finding "oneself" no longer in "this man" but in the Universal Man, the *forma humanitatis,* who is independent of all orders of time and has neither beginning nor end.

Conceive that the "field" is the round or circus of the world, that the throne of the Spectator, the Universal Man, is central and elevated, and that his aquiline glance at all times embraces the whole of the field (equally before and after the enactment of any particular event) in such a manner that from his point of view all events are always going on. We are to transfer our consciousness of being, from our position in the field where the games are going on, to the pavilion in which the Spectator, on whom the whole performance depends, is seated at ease.

Conceive that the right lines of vision by which the Spectator is linked to each separated performer, and along which each performer might look upward (inward) to the Spectator if only his powers of vision sufficed, are lines of force, or the strings by which the puppet-master moves the puppets for himself (who is the whole audience). Each of the performing puppets is convinced of its own independent existence and of itself as one amongst others, which it sees

in its own immediate environment and which it distinguishes by name, appearance, and behavior. The Spectator does not, and cannot, see the performers as they see themselves, imperfectly, but he knows the being of each one of them as it really is—that is to say, not merely as effective in a given local position, but simultaneously at every point along the line of visual force by which the puppet is connected with himself, and primarily at that point at which all lines converge and where the being of all things coincides with being in itself. There the being of the puppet subsists as an eternal reason in the eternal intellect—otherwise called the Supernal Sun, the Light of lights, Spirit and Truth.

Suppose now that the Spectator goes to sleep: when he closes his eyes the universe disappears, to reappear only when he opens them again. The opening of eyes ("Let there be light") is called in religion the act of creation, but in metaphysics it is called manifestation, utterance, or spiration (to shine, to utter, and to blow being one and the same thing *in divinis*); the closing of eyes is called in religion the "end of the world," but in metaphysics it is called concealment, silence, or despiration. For us, then, there is an alternation or evolution and involution. But for the central Spectator there is no succession of events. He is always awake and always asleep; unlike the sailor who sometimes sits and thinks and sometimes does not think, our Spectator sits and thinks, and does not think, nowever.

A picture has been drawn of the cosmos and its overseeing "Eye." I have only omitted to say that the field is divided by concentric fences which may conveniently, although not necessarily, be thought of as twenty-one in number. The Spectator is thus at the twenty-first remove from the outermost fence by which our present environment is defined. Each player's or groundling's performance is confined to the possibilities that are represented by the space between two fences. There he is born and there he dies. Let us consider this born being, So-and-so, as he is in himself and as he believes himself to be—"an animal, reasoning and mortal; that I know, and that I confess myself to be," as Boethius expresses it. So-and-so does not conceive that he can move to and fro in time as he will, but knows that he is getting older every day, whether he likes it or not. On the other hand, he does conceive that in some other respects he can do what he likes, so far as this is not prevented by his environment—for example, by a stone wall, or a policeman, or contemporary *mores*. He does not realize that this environment of which he is a part, and from which he cannot except himself, is a causally determined environment; that it does what it does because of what has been done.

He does not realize that he is what he is and does what he does because others before him have been what they were and have done what they did, and all this without any conceivable beginning. He is quite literally a creature of circumstances, an automaton, whose behavior could have been foreseen and wholly explained by an adequate knowledge of past causes, now represented by the nature of things—his own nature included. This is the well-known doctrine of *karma*, a doctrine of inherent fatality, which is stated as follows by the *Bhagavad Gita,* xviii.20, "Bound by the working (*karma*) of a nature that is born in thee and is thine own, even that which thou desirest not to do thou doest willy-nilly." So-and-so is nothing but one link in a causal chain of which we cannot imagine a beginning or an end. There is nothing here that the most pronounced determinist can disagree with. The metaphysician—who is not, like the determinist, a "nothing-morist" (*nastika*)—merely points out at this stage that only the working of life, the manner of its perpetuation, can thus be causally explained; that the existence of a chain of causes presumes the logically prior possibility of this existence—in other words, presumes a first cause which cannot be thought of as one amongst other mediate causes, whether in place or time.

To return to our automaton, let us consider what takes place at its death. The composite being is unmade into the cosmos; there is nothing whatever that can survive as a consciousness of being So-and-so. The elements of the psycho-physical entity are broken up and handed on to others as a bequest. This is, indeed, a process that has been going on throughout our So-and-so's life, and one that can be most clearly followed in propagation, repeatedly described in the Indian tradition as the "rebirth of the father in and as the son." So-and-so lives in his direct and indirect descendants. This is the so-called Indian doctrine of "reincarnation"; it is the same as the Greek doctrine of metasomatosis and metempsychosis; it is the Christian doctrine of our preexistence in Adam "according to bodily substance and seminal virtue"; and it is the modern doctrine of the "recurrence of ancestral characters." Only the fact of such a transmission of psycho-physical characters can make intelligible what is called in religion our inheritance of original sin, in metaphysics our inheritance of ignorance, and by the philosopher our congenital capacity for knowing in terms of subject and object. It is only when we are convinced that nothing happens by chance that the idea of a Providence becomes intelligible.

Need I say that this is not a doctrine of reincarnation? Need I say that no doctrine of reincarnation, according to which the very being and person of a man who has once lived on

earth and is now deceased will be reborn of another terrestrial mother, has ever been taught in India, even in Buddhism—or for that matter in the Neoplatonic or any other orthodox tradition? As definitely in the Brahmanas as in the Old Testament, it is stated that those who have once departed from this world have departed forever, and are not to be seen again amongst the living. From the Indian as from the Platonic point of view, all change is a dying. We die and are reborn daily and hourly, and death "when the time comes" is only a special case. I do not say that a belief in reincarnation has never been entertained in India. I do say that such a belief can only have resulted from a popular misinterpretation of the symbolic language of the texts; that the belief of modern scholars and theosophists is the result of an equally naive and uninformed interpretation of texts. If you ask how such a mistake could have arisen I shall ask you to consider the following statements of Saints Augustine and Thomas Aquinas: that we were in Adam "according to bodily substance and seminal virtue"; "the human body preexisted in the previous works in their causal virtues"; "God does not govern the world directly, but also by means of mediate causes, and were this not so, the world would have been deprived of the perfection of causality"; "As a mother is pregnant with the unborn offspring, so the world itself is pregnant with the causes of unborn things"; "Fate lies in the created causes themselves." If these had been texts extracted from the Upanishads or Buddhism, would you not have seen in them not merely what is really there, the doctrine of *karma*, but also a doctrine of "reincarnation"?

By "reincarnation" we mean a rebirth here of the very being and person of the deceased. We affirm that this is an impossibility, for good and sufficient metaphysical reasons. The main consideration is this: that inasmuch as the cosmos embraces an indefinite range of possibilities, all of which must be realized in an equally indefinite duration, the present universe will have run its course when all its potentialities have been reduced to act—just as each human life has run its course when all its possibilities have been exhausted. The end of an aeviternity will have been reached without any room for any repetition of events or any recurrence of past conditions. Temporal succession implies a succession of different things. History repeats itself in types, but cannot repeat itself in any particular. We can speak of a "migration" of "genes" and call this a rebirth of types, but this reincarnation of So-and-so's character must be distinguished from the "transmigration" of So-and-so's veritable person.

Such are the life and death of the reasoning and mortal animal So-and-so. But when Boethius confesses that he is just this animal, Wisdom replies that this man, So-and-so, has forgotten who he is. It is at this point that we part company with the "nothing-morist," or "materialist" and "sentimentalist" (I bracket these two words because "matter" is what is "sensed"). Bear in mind the Christian definition of man as "body, soul and spirit." The Vedānta asserts that the only veritable being of the man is spiritual, and that this being of his is not "in" So-and-so or in any "part" of him but is only reflected in him. It asserts, in other words, that this being is not in the plane of or in any way limited by So-and-so's field, but extends from this field to its center, regardless of the fences that it penetrates. What takes place at death, then, over and above the unmaking of So-and-so, is a withdrawal of the spirit from the phenomenal vehicle of which it had been the "life." We speak, accordingly, with strictest accuracy when we refer to death as a "giving up of the ghost" or say that So-and-so "expires." I need, I feel sure, remind you only in parenthesis that this "ghost" is not a spirit in the Spiritualist's sense, not a "surviving personality," but a purely intellectual principle such as ideas are made of; "ghost" is "spirit" in the sense that the Holy Ghost is Sanctus Spiritus. So then, at death, the dust returns to dust and the spirit to its source.

It follows that the death of So-and-so involves two possibilities, which are approximately those implied by the familiar expressions "saved" or "lost." Either So-and-so's consciousness of being has been self-centered and must perish with himself, or it has been centered in the spirit and departs with it. It is the spirit, as the Vedantic texts express it, that "remains over" when body and soul are unmade. We begin to see now what is meant by the great commandment, "Know thyself." Supposing that our consciousness of being has been centered in the spirit, we can say that the more completely we have already "become what we are," or "awakened," before the dissolution of the body, the nearer to the center of the field will be our next appearance or "rebirth." Our consciousness of being goes nowhere at death where it is not already.

Later on we shall consider the case of one whose consciousness of being has already awakened beyond the last of our twenty-one fences or levels of reference and for whom there remains only a twenty-second passage. For the present let us consider only the first step. If we have taken this step before we die—if we have been to some degree living "in the spirit" and not merely as reasoning animals—we shall, when the body and soul are unmade

into the cosmos, have crossed over the first of the fences or circumferences that lie between ourselves and the central Spectator of all things, the Supernal Sun, Spirit, and Truth. We shall have come into being in a new environment where, for example, there may still be a duration but not in our present sense a passage of time. We shall not have taken with us any of the psycho-physical apparatus in which a sensitive memory could inhere. Only the "intellectual virtues" survive. This is not the survival of a "personality" (that was a property bequeathed when we departed); it is the continued being of the very person of So-and-so, no longer encumbered by the grossest of So-and-so's former definitions. We shall have crossed over without interruption of consciousness of being.

In this way, by a succession of deaths and rebirths, all of the fences may be crossed. The pathway that we follow will be that of the spiritual ray or radius that links us with the central Sun. It is the only bridge that spans the river of life dividing the hither from the farther shore. The word "bridge" is used advisedly, for this is the "causeway sharper than a razor's edge," the Cinvat bridge of the Avesta, the "brig of dread," familiar to the folklorist, which none but a solar hero can pass; it is a far-flung bridge of light and consubstantial with its source. The Veda expresses it "Himself the Bridge"—a description corresponding to the Christian "I am the Way." You will have divined already that the passage of this bridge constitutes, by stages that are defined by its points of intersection with our twenty-one circumferences, what is properly called a transmigration or progressive regeneration. Every step of this way has been marked by a death to a former "self" and a consequent and immediate "rebirth" as "another man." I must interpolate here that this exposition has inevitably been oversimplified. Two directions of motion, one circumferential and determinate, the other centripetal and free, have been distinguished; but I have not made it clear that their resultant can be properly indicated only by a spiral.

But the time has come to break down the spatial and temporal materialism of our picture of the cosmos and of man's pilgrimage from its circumference to its center and heart. All of the states of being, all of the So-and-sos that we have thought of as coming into being on superimposed levels of reference, are within you, awaiting recognition: all of the deaths and rebirths involved are supernatural—that is, not "against Nature" but extrinsic to the particular possibilities of the given state of being from which the transmigration is thought of as taking place. Nor is any time element involved. Rather, since temporal vicissitudes play no part in

the life of the spirit, the journey can be made in part or in its entirety, whether before the event of natural death, at death, or thereafter. The Spectator's pavilion is the Kingdom of Heaven that is within you, viz. in the "heart" (in all Oriental and ancient traditions not only the seat of the will but of the pure intellect, the place where the marriage of Heaven and Earth is consummated); it is there only that the Spectator can himself be seen by the contemplative—whose glance is inverted, and who thus retraces the path of the Ray that links the eye without to the Eye within, the breath of life with the Gale of the Spirit.

We can now, perhaps, better understand all that is meant by the poignant words of the Vedic requiem, "The Sun receive thine eye, the Gale thy spirit," and can recognize their equivalent in "Into thy hands I commend my spirit," or in Eckhart's "Eye wherewith I see God, that is the same eye wherewith God sees in me; my eye and God's eye, that is one eye and one vision and one knowing and one love," or St. Paul's "shall be one spirit." The traditional texts are emphatic. We find, for example, in the Upanishads the statement that whoever worships, thinking of the deity as other than himself, is little better than an animal. This attitude is reflected in the proverbial saying, "To worship God you must have become God"—which is also the meaning of the words, to "worship in spirit and in truth." We are brought back to the great saying, "That art thou," and have now a better idea, though a far from perfect understanding (because the last step remains to be taken), of what "That" may be. We can now see how traditional doctrines (distinguishing the outer from the inner, the worldly from the other-worldly man, the automaton from the immortal spirit), while they admit and even insist upon the fact that So-and-so is nothing but a link in an endless causal chain, can nevertheless affirm that the chains can be broken and death defeated without respect to time: that this may happen, therefore, as well here and now as at the moment of departure or after death.

We have not even yet, however, reached what is from the point of view of metaphysics defined as man's last end. In speaking of an end of the road, we have so far thought only of a crossing of all the twenty-one barriers and of a final vision of the Supernal Sun, the Truth itself; of reaching the Spectator's very pavilion; of being in heaven face to face with the manifested Eye. This is, in fact, the conception of man's last end as envisaged by religion. It is an aeviternal beatitude reached at the "Top of the Tree," at the "Summit of contingent being"; it is a salvation from all the temporal vicissitudes of the field that has been left behind

us. But it is a heaven in which each one of the saved is still one amongst others, and other than the Sun of Men and Light of lights himself (these are Vedic as well as Christian expressions); a heaven that, like the Greek Elysium, is apart from time but not without duration; a resting place but not a final home (as it was not our ultimate source, which was in the nonbeing of the Godhead). It remains for us to pass through the Sun and reach the Empyrean "home" of the Father. "No man cometh to the Father save *through* me." We have passed through the opened doorways of initiation and contemplation; we have moved, through a process of a progressive self-naughting, from the outermost to the innermost court of our being, and can see no way by which to continue—although we know that behind this image of the Truth, by which we have been enlightened, there is a somewhat that is not in any likeness, and although we know that behind this face of God that shines upon the world there is another and more awful side of him that is not man-regarding but altogether self-intent—an aspect that neither knows nor loves anything whatever external to itself. It is our own conception of Truth and Goodness that prevents our seeing Him who is neither good nor true in any sense of ours. The only way on lies directly *through* all that we had thought we had begun to understand: if we are to find our way in, the image of "ourselves" that we still entertain—in however exalted a manner—and that of the Truth and Goodness that we have "imagined" *per excellentiam*, must be shattered by one and the same blow. "It is more necessary that the soul lose God than that she lose creatures . . . the soul honors God most in being quit of God . . . it remains for her to be somewhat that he is not . . . to die to all the activity denoted by the divine nature if she is to enter the divine nature where God is altogether idle . . . she forfeits her very self, and going her own way, seeks God no more" (Eckhart). In other words, we must be one with the Spectator, both when his eyes are open and when they are shut. If we are not, what will become of us when he sleeps? All that we have learned through the affirmative theology must be complemented and fulfilled by an Unknowing, the *Docta Ignorantia* of Christian theologians, Eckhart's *Agnosia.* It is for this reason that such men as Shankara and Dionysius have so strongly insisted upon the *via remotionis*, and not because a positive concept of Truth or Goodness was any less dear to them than it could be to us. Shankara's personal practice, indeed, is said to have been devotional—even while he prayed for pardon because he had worshipped God by name, who

has no name. For such as these there was literally nothing dear that they were not ready to leave.

Let us enunciate the Christian doctrine first in order the better to understand the Indian. The words of Christ are these: "I am the door; by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall pass in and out." It is not enough to have reached the door; we must be admitted. But there is a price of admission. "He that would save his soul, let him lose it." Of man's two selves, the two Atmans of our Indian texts, the self that was known by name as So-and-so must have put itself to death if the other is to be freed of all encumbrances—is to be "free as the Godhead in its nonexistence."

In the Vedantic texts it is likewise the Sun of men and Light of lights that is called the doorway of the worlds and the keeper of the gate. Whoever has come thus far is put to the test. He is told in the first place that he may enter according to the balance of good or evil he may have done. If he understands he will answer, "Thou canst not ask me that; thou knowest that whatever I may have done was not of 'my' doing, but of thine." This is the Truth; and it is beyond the power of the Guardian of the Gate, who is himself the Truth, to deny himself. Or he may be asked the question, "Who art thou?" If he answers by his own or by a family name he is literally dragged away by the factors of time; but if he answers, "I am the Light, thyself, and come to thee as such," the Keeper responds with the words of welcome, "Who thou art, that am I; and who I am, thou art; come in." It should be clear, indeed, that there can be no return to God of anyone who still is anyone, for as our texts express it, "He has not come from anywhere or become anyone."

In the same way, Eckhart, basing his words on the logos, "If any man hate not father and mother, . . . yea and his own soul also, he cannot be my disciple," says that "so long as thou knowest who thy father and thy mother have been in time, thou art not dead with the real death"; and in the same way, Rumi, Eckhart's peer in Islam, attributes to the Keeper of the Gate the words, "Whoever enters saying 'I am so and so,' I smite in the face." We cannot, in fact, offer any better definition of the Vedic scriptures than St. Paul's "The word of God is quick and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, extending even unto the sundering of soul from spirit": "Quid est ergo, quod debet homo inquirere in hac vita? Hoc est ut sciat ipsum." "Si ignoras te, egredere!"

The last and most difficult problem arises when we ask: what is the state of the being that has thus been freed from itself and has returned to its source? It is more than obvious that a psychological explanation is out of the question. It is, in fact, just at this point that we can best confess with our texts, "He who is most sure that he understands, most assuredly misunderstands." What can be said of the Brahman—that "He is, by that alone can He be apprehended"—can as well be said of whoever has become the Brahman. It cannot be said *what* this is, because it is not any "what." A being who is "freed in this life" (Rumi's "dead man walking") is "in the world, but not of it."

We can, nevertheless, approach the problem through a consideration of the terms in which the Perfected are spoken of. They are called either Rays of the Sun, or Blasts of the Spirit, or Movers-at-Will. It is also said that they are fitted for embodiment in the manifested worlds: that is to say, fitted to participate in the life of the Spirit, whether it moves or remains at rest. It is a Spirit which bloweth as it will. All of these expressions correspond to Christ's "shall pass in and out, and shall find pasture." Or we can compare it with the pawn in a game of chess. When the pawn has crossed over from the hither to the farther side it is transformed. It becomes a minister and is called a mover-at-will, even in the vernacular. Dead to its former self, it is no longer confined to particular motions or positions, but can go in and out, at will, from the place where its transformation was effected. And this freedom to move at will is another aspect of the state of the Perfected, but a thing beyond the conception of those who are still mere pawns. It may be observed, too, that the ertswhile pawn, ever in danger of an inevitable death on its journey across the board, is at liberty after its transformation either to sacrifice itself or to escape from danger. In strictly Indian terms, its former motion was a crossing, its regenerate motion a descent.

The question of "annihilation," so solemnly discussed by Western scholars, does not arise. The word has no meaning in metaphysics, which knows only of the nonduality of permutation and sameness, multiplicity and unity. Whatever has been an eternal reason or idea or name of an individual manifestation can never cease to be such; the content of eternity cannot be changed. Therefore, as the *Bhagavad Gita* expresses it, "Never have I not been, and never hast thou not been."

The relation, in identity, of the "That" and the "thou" in the logos "That art thou" is stated in the Vedānta either by such designations as "Ray of the Sun" (implying filiation), or

in the formula *bhedābheda* (of which the literal meaning is "distinction without difference"). The relation is expressed by the simile of lovers, so closely embraced that there is no longer any consciousness of "a within or a without," and by the corresponding Vaisnava equation, "each is both." It can be seen also in Plato's conception of the unification of the inner and the outer man; in the Christian doctrine of membership in the mystical body of Christ; in St. Paul's "whoever is joined unto the Lord is one spirit"; and in Eckhart's admirable formula "fused but not confused."

I have endeavored to make it clear that Shankara's so-called "philosophy" is not an "enquiry" but an "explicitation"; that ultimate Truth is not, for the Vedantist, or for any traditionalist, a something that remains to be discovered but a something that remains to be understood by Everyman, who must do the work for himself. I have accordingly tried to explain just what it was that Shankara understood in such texts as *Atharva Veda* x.8.44: "Without any want, contemplative, immortal, self-originated, sufficed with a quintessence, lacking in naught whatever: he who knoweth that constant, ageless, and ever-youthful Spirit, knoweth indeed him-Self, and feareth not to die."

5

The *Vedānta*

Frithjof Schuon

1

The *Vedānta* stands out among explicit doctrines as one of the most direct formulations possible of what constitutes the very essence of our spiritual reality; this directness is offset by its requirement of renunciation or, more precisely, total detachment (*vairagya*).

The Vedantic perspective finds its equivalents in the great religions that regulate humanity, for truth is one; the formulations, however, may be dependent on dogmatic perspectives that restrict their immediate intelligibility or that make it difficult to express them in a straightforward way. In fact, whereas Hindusim is composed of what might be called autonomous fractions, the monotheistic religions are organisms in which the parts are formally bound up with the whole.

Hinduism, while it is organically linked with the *Upanishad*s, is nonetheless not reducible to Shivaite and Shankarian Vedantism, although this must be regarded as the essence of the *Vedānta* and thus of Hindu tradition.

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Shankarian *Vedānta*, which is what we are thinking of especially here—and which is divine and immemorial in its origin and in no sense the creation of Shankara, who was only its great and providential spokesman—is concerned above all with the mental virtues, those which converge upon perfect and permanent concentration, whereas moral systems, whether Hindu or monotheistic, extend the same principles to the domain of action, which is nearly suppressed in the case of the wandering monk (*sannyāsin*). In the case of the Muslim, for example, calmness of mind (*shama*) thus becomes contentment (*ridhā*) or confidence in God (*tawakkul*), which in fact produces calmness of mind. *Vedānta* retains the alchemical essence of the virtues.[85]

[85] This is what Ibn al-Arif also does when he seems to reject the religious virtues one by one; in reality he detaches them from both the self-interested ego and the anthropomorphic aspect of the Divinity in order to keep only their

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According to *Vedānta* the contemplative must become absolutely "Himself"; according to other perspectives, such as those of the Semitic religions, man must become absolutely "Other" than himself—or "myself"—which amounts to exactly the same thing from the point of view of pure truth.

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In Sufism the term *Huwa,* "He", in no way signifies that the divine Aseity is conceived in an objectified mode, but only that it is beyond the subject-object distinction, which is designated by the terms *anā-anta*, "I-thou".

The "divine Subject", in "descending" to the plane of cosmic objectification, illuminates it by virtue of the mystery of "Spirit", *al-Rūh*; and it "sustains" as well as "absorbs" this plane by virtue of the mystery of "Light", *al-Nūr*.[86]

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The demiurgic tendency is conceived in *Vedānta* as an objectification and in Sufism as an individuation, hence in fact as a subjectification: God in this case is not pure "Subject" as in the Hindu perspective but pure "Object", "He" (*Huwa*), That which no subjective vision limits; this divergence is present only in the form, for it goes without saying that the Vedantic "Subject" is anything but an individual determination and that the Sufi "Object" is anything but the effect of "ignorance"; the "Self" (*Ātmā*) is "He", for it is "purely objective" inasmuch as it excludes all individuation, and the "He" (*Huwa*) is "Self", hence "purely subjective", in the sense that it

essences. Let us note that Hinduism also knows contentment (*santosha*) and confidence in God (*prapatti*), but the *sannyāsin* goes beyond them.

[86] On this subject see the chapter *Al-Nūr* in our book *L 'Œil du CŒur*.

excludes all objectification.

The Sufi formula *Lā anā wa lā Anta: Huwa* ("Neither I nor Thou: He") is thus equivalent to the Upanishadic formula *Tat tvam asi* ("That art thou").

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Where the Vedantist speaks of the "unicity of the Subject"—or more precisely of its "non-duality", *advaita*—a Sufi speaks of the "unicity of Existence", that is, of "Reality", *wahdat al-Wujūd*; the difference in Hindu terms is that the Vedantist emphasizes the aspect *Chit* ("Consciousness") and the Sufi the aspect *Sat* ("Being").[87]

What surpasses individuality and all separateness in man is not only pure "Consciousness" but also pure "Existence". Asceticism purifies the existential side of man and thus indirectly the intellectual side.

If a man confined himself to "being", he would be holy; this is what Quietism believed it had understood.

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Ātmā is pure Light and Bliss, pure "Consciousness", pure "Subject".[88] There is nothing unrelated to this Reality; even the "object" least in conformity with it is still it, but "objectified" by *Māyā*, the power of illusion resulting from the infinity of the Self.

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[87] At least in the school of *Wujūdiyah* (from *Wujūd*, "Existence", *Wujūd mutlaq* being "absolute Existence", God), though not in the school *of Shuhūdiyah* (from *shuhūd*, "unmediated vision", the word *Shāhid* meaning "Witness", exactly like the Sanskrit word *Sākshī*); the perspective of *Shuhūdiyah* is very similar to that of *Vedānta*. The two perspectives necessarily have a Koranic foundation, but the first is doubtless more in conformity with the most apparent meaning of the Book; the second has been falsely accused of immanentism because of its thesis concerning the "Sole Witness" and the indefinitely diversified "mirrors".

[88] Far from being merely psychological, the notion of the "subject" is primarily logical and principial and therefore cannot be restricted to any particular domain; the obvious subjectivity of the faculties of sensation already proves that the pair "subject-object" does not belong solely to the realm of psychology. All the more is it true that metaphysical notions such as the "Witness" (*Sākshin*) in the *Vedānta* or the "Knower" in Sufism (*Al-Aqil*, with its complement *Al-Ma'qūl*, the "Known"), or again the "divine Subjectivity" *(Anniyah*, with its complement *Huwiyah*, the "divine Objectivity"), have nothing whatsoever to do with psychology.

This is the very definition of universal objectification. But it is necessary to distinguish further between two fundamental modes within it—one "subjective" and the other "objective"—of which the first is the following: between the object as such and the pure and infinite Subject there stands in a certain way the objectified Subject, that is, the cognitive act, which by means of analysis and synthesis brings the bare object back to the Subject: this function—objectifying in relation to the Subject, which then projects itself as it were onto the objective plane, or subjectifying in relation to the object, which is integrated within the subjective and thus returned to the divine Subject—is the knowing and discerning spirit, the manifested intelligence, the relative consciousness: relative and therefore liable in its turn to become an object of knowledge.

The other fundamental mode of objectification may be described as follows: in order to realize the Subject, which is *Sat* (Being), *Chit* (Knowledge or Consciousness), and *Ānanda* (Bliss), it is necessary to know that objects are superimposed upon the Subject and to concentrate one's mind on the Subject alone. Between the objective world, which is then identified with "ignorance" (*avidyā*), and the Subject, the Self (*Ātmā*), there is interposed an objectification of the Subject; this objectification is direct and central: it is revelation, truth, grace, hence also the *Avatāra,* the *guru,* the doctrine, the method, the *mantra.*

Thus the sacred formula, the *mantra,* symbolizes and incarnates the Subject by objectifying it; and by "covering", or rather putting itself "in place of", the objective world—this dark cavern of ignorance—the *mantra* leads the spirit lost in the labyrinth of objectification back to the pure Subject.

This is why the *mantra* and its practice, *japa*, are referred to as "recollection" in the most diverse traditions: with the aid of the symbol, the divine Name, the distracted and separated spirit "remembers" that it is pure "Consciousness", pure "Subject", pure "Self".

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That the Real and unreal are "not different" does not in any way imply either the unreality of the Self or the reality of the world; in the first place the Real is not "non-different" with respect to the unreal, but the unreal is "non-different" with respect to the Real—not insofar as it is unreality

but insofar as it is a "lesser Reality", which is nonetheless "extrinsically unreal" in relation to absolute Reality.

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Māyā—the illusion or "divine art"[89] which expresses *Ātmā* according to indefinitely varied modes and of which *avidyā,* the ignorance concealing *Ātmā*, is the purely negative aspect—proceeds mysteriously from *Māyā* itself in the sense that *Māyā* is a necessary consequence of the infinity of *Ātmā*; Shankaracharya expresses this by saying that *Māyā* is without beginning.

Ātmā is beyond the opposition subject-object; one may call it the "pure Subject", however, when one begins with a consideration of "objects", which are so many "superimpositions" in relation to *Ātmā*.

Māyā is the objectifying or manifesting tendency. The principal degrees of objectification or manifestation are the "feet" (*pāda*s) of *Ātmā* or, from the viewpoint of the microcosmic sequence, its "envelopes" (*kosha*s). Each degree of objectification is equivalent to a more or less indirect image of *Ātmā* and reflects it inversely; at the same time each degree brings about an inversion in relation to the one which is above it and by which it is contained, and this is because the relationship Subject-objectification or Principle-manifestation is repeated from one *pāda* or *kosha* to another; thus animic or subtle objectification is principial in relation to corporeal or gross objectification, and likewise non-formal objectification is principial in relation to formal objectification, which itself contains both the animic and corporeal planes. But the universal and fundamental inversion between the Subject and objectification is never done away with as a result of the inversions contained within the objectification itself, for these are never produced under the same relationship nor under any relationship capable of nullifying the first inversion: inversion within an inversion is therefore never an inversion of the inversion, that is, a re-establishment of the "normal" relationship. In other words the subordinate inversion—which, within the great inversion represented by the cosmos in relation to the Self, appears as if it ought to overcome it since it inverts it symbolically—is in its turn inverted in relation to the divine Norm: thus an opaque body does not become transparent when painted white to compensate for

[89] Ananda K. Coomaraswamy suggested the word "art" as a translation of *Mâyâ* to show its positive function.

its opacity even though the color white represents light or transparency, hence the negation of opacity; and the fact that a body is black adds nothing to its opacity.[90] Therefore, even though formal manifestation, both subtle and gross, is inverse in relation to non-formal manifestation, this inversion does not do away with the inversion realized by non-formal manifestation in relation to that non-manifestation—or non-objectification—which is the Self, the Subject.

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It is very easy to label as "vague" and "contradictory" something one cannot understand because of a failure of "intellectual vision". In general, rationalist thinkers refuse to accept a truth that presents contradictory aspects and is situated, seemingly beyond grasping, between two extrinsic and negative statements. But there are some realities that can be expressed in no other way. The ray that proceeds from a light is itself light inasmuch as it illuminates, but it is not the light from which it proceeded; therefore it is neither this light nor something other than this light; in fact it is nothing but light, though growing ever weaker in proportion to its distance from its source. A faint glow is light for the darkness it illuminates but darkness for the light whence it emanates. Similarly *Māyā* is at once light and darkness: as "divine art" it is light[91] inasmuch as it reveals the secrets of *Ātmā*; it is darkness inasmuch as it hides *Ātmā*. As darkness it is "ignorance", *avidyā*.[92]

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[90] When Sufism teaches that the trees of Paradise have their roots above, it would be wrong to try to grasp this idea by means of the imagination, for the relation in question, once it is translated into terrestrial forms, is expressed precisely by the terrestrial position of trees; in other words, if one were to behold the trees of Paradise, a spirit endowed with the appropriate faculty of vision would accept them as "normal", exactly in the same way as the mind accepts the trees on this earth. In this regard it is instructive to note that the retina of the eye receives only inverted images; it is the mind that reestablishes the normal and objective relationship.

[91] "*Māyā*, precisely because she is the divine 'art' inherent in the Principle, is also identified with 'Wisdom', *Sophia*, understood in exactly the same sense as is given it in the Judeo-Christian tradition; and as such she is the mother of the *Avatāra*" (René Guénon, "*Māyā*", in *Etudes Traditionnelles,* July-August 1947). This is what Islamic esoterism designates by the terms "Science" (*Ilm*) and "Light" (*Nūr*).

[92] In Islamic terminology "association" (*shirk*) corresponds to this "ignorance", that is, the fact of associating a "superimposition" with Unity.

In spiritual realization the cosmic tendency of objectification is captured by the symbol: in the natural course of its drawing away from *Ātmā*, the soul meets the objectification—no longer indirect but direct—of the pure "Subject"; the indirect objectification is the world with its endless diversity, and the direct objectification is the symbol, which replaces the pure "Subject" on the objectified plane. *Ātmā* is in the center of man as "Subject", pure and infinite, and around man as the indefinitely differentiated objectification of this "Subject". The *yogin* or *mukta,* the "delivered one", perceives *Ātmā* in everything, but the man who is undelivered must superimpose on the world the synthetic and direct image of *Ātmā* in order to eliminate the superimposition represented by the world itself in relation to *Ātmā*. A symbol is anything that serves as a direct support for spiritual realization, for example a *mantra* or a divine Name, or in a secondary way a written, pictorial, or sculptural symbol such as a sacred image (*pratīka*).

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The revelation of Sinai, the Messianic redemption, and the descent of the Koran are so many examples of the "subjectivizing objectification" effected by the symbol, in which *Ātmā* is "incarnated" in *Māyā* and *Māyā* "expresses" *Ātmā*.

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To say, as do the Vedantists, that *Māyā* is an attribute of *Īshvara* and that *Māyā* expresses *Īshvara* while at the same time veiling Him signifies clearly that the world is derived from the infinity of *Ātmā*; one could also say that the world is a consequence of the absolute necessity of Being.

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If *Māyā* is presented as a postulate, this must not be understood in a philosophical or

psychological sense as if it were a question of a "hypothesis", for this postulate is necessary and therefore corresponds to an objective reality. Insofar as *Māyā* is a purely negative factor of objectification, it cannot be known positively; it therefore imprints itself on the intelligence as an "unextended" and "ungraspable" element.

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Māyā in a certain sense is the possibility for Being of not being. All-Possibility must by definition and on pain of contradiction include its own impossibility.

It is in order not to be that Being incarnates in the multitude of souls; it is in order not to be that the ocean squanders itself in a myriad of flecks of foam.

If the soul obtains deliverance, this is because Being is.

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Nothing is outside absolute Reality; the world is therefore a kind of inward dimension of *Brahma*. But *Brahma* is without relativity; and yet the world is a necessary aspect of the absolute necessity of *Brahma*; expressed another way, relativity is an aspect of the Absolute.

Relativity, *Māyā*, is the *Shakti* of the Absolute, *Brahma*.

If the relative did not exist, the Absolute would not be the Absolute.

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The essence of the world, which is diversity, is *Brahma*; it might be objected that *Brahma* cannot be the essence of a diversity since it is non-duality. Certainly *Brahma* is not the essence of the world, for in relation to the Absolute the world does not exist; but one can say that the world, to the extent it does exist, has *Brahma* for its essence, for otherwise it would have no reality whatsoever. Diversity itself is simply the inverse reflection of the infinity—or all-possibility—of

Brahma.

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Natural things are the indirect objectifications of the Self; the supernatural is its direct and lightning-like objectification.

The cosmos is the total objectification, "made in the image of God", which includes all other cosmic objectifications.

The cosmic objectification of the Self presupposes the divine objectification, Being: *Īshvara* or *Apara-Brahma*. Sufism expresses it by this formula: "I was a hidden treasure, and I wished to be known."

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"Union" (*yoga*): the Subject (*Ātmā*) becomes object (the *Veda*, the *Dharma*) that the object (the objectified subject, man) might become the (absolute) Subject.

"Deification": God became man that man might become God. "Man" pre-exists in God—this is the "Son"—and "God" pre-exists in man: this is the Intellect. The point of contact between God and man is objectively Christ and subjectively the purified heart, intelligence-love.

"Unification" (*tawhīd*): the One (*illā ʾLlāh*) became "nothingness" (*lā ilāha*) that "nothingness" might become the One; the One became separate and multiple (the Koran) that the separate and multiple (the soul) might become the One. The "multiple" pre-exists in the One—this is the uncreated Koran, the eternal Word—and the "One" pre-exists in the multiple: this is the heart-intellect and, in the macrocosm, the universal Spirit.

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The conceptions of Ramanuja are contained in those of Shankara and transcended by them. When Shankara sees a direct and tangible manifestation of the unreality of sensory objects in

their localization and duration, he does not say that they do not exist insofar as they are objects, as Ramanuja seems to have believed, but he says that insofar as they are existing objects they are unreal. Ramanuja maintains truths against Shankaracharya that Shankaracharya never denied on their own level.

Ramanuja has a tendency to "concretize" everything in relation to the created world, a tendency that corresponds very well with both the Vishnuite point of view and the Western outlook, which shares the same perspective.

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The antagonism between Shankara and Nagarjuna is of the same order as that between Ramanuja and Shankara, with this difference, however: when Shankara rejects the Nagarjunian doctrine, it is because its form corresponds—independently of its real content and spiritual potential—to a more restricted perspective than that of *Vedānta*. When on the other hand Ramanuja rejects the Shankarian doctrine, it is for the opposite reason: the perspective of Shankara surpasses that of Ramanuja not merely by its form but in its very foundation.

In order truly to understand Nagarjuna or the *Mahāyāna* in general, it is necessary to take account of two facts before everything else: first that Buddhism presents itself essentially as a spiritual method and therefore subordinates everything to the methodic point of view and second that this method is essentially one of negation; from this it follows that metaphysical reality is considered in relation to method, that is, as "state" and not as "principle", and that it is conceived in negative terms: *Nirvāna*, "Extinction", or *Shūnyā*, "Emptiness". In Buddhist wisdom "affirmation" has the same meaning and function as ignorance in Hindu wisdom; to describe *Nirvāna* or *Shūnyā* in positive terms would amount—in Vedantic language—to wishing to know the pure Subject, "divine Consciousness", *Ātmā*, on the plane of objectification itself, hence on the plane of ignorance.

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When Westerners refer to something as "positive" they almost always think of manifestation, the created, whence their preference for the Ramanujian perspective and their mistake in attributing "abstractions" to Shankara—or Plato.

God is "abstraction" for the world because the world is "abstraction" in relation to God;[93] now it is God who is real, not the world.

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People all too readily believe that the content of a statement is false to the extent it can be attacked dialectically; now every statement whose content is not a fact that can be tested physically or rationally, hence every transcendent truth, can be contradicted by arguments drawn from experience. Shankara never said that the inevitably human formulation of a truth—concerning absolute "Consciousness", for example—could not be attacked; he said that such formulations were intrinsically true, something reason alone could not verify. When Advaitists assert that "Consciousness" has a particular nature and that the example of deep sleep shows it, this does not at all mean that they themselves need this example or can be discomfited by a demonstration of the fissures it necessarily contains; obviously one makes use of an example not because of an opposing aspect but for the sake of analogy; opposing aspects do exist, but they need not be taken into account. If we say that any light is like the sun compared to an opaque body, the fact that this light has neither the form nor the dimensions nor the matter of the sun is absolutely without significance in this connection; if an example differed in no way from the thing to be demonstrated, it would not be an example but the thing itself.

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Intellectual intuition conveys a *priori* the reality of the Absolute.

[93] It should be noted here that the word "God" does not and cannot admit of any restriction, and this is for the simple reason that God is "all that is purely principial", hence also—and *a fortiori*—"Beyond-Being"; one may not know this or may deny it, but it cannot be denied that God is "That which is supreme", hence That which nothing can surpass.

Reasoning thought infers the Absolute by starting from the relative; thus it does not proceed by intellectual intuition, though it does not inevitably exclude it.[94]

Arguments have an absolute value for philosophy; for intellectual intuition their value is symbolical and provisional.

Shankara did not "construct a system";[95] he did not "seek a solution" for a given "problem";

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[94] "In our philosophy God is essentially and before all else the first Cause and prime Mover. Our reason for admitting His existence, our motive in recognizing in Him certain attributes, is that the existence and attributes in question are inferred, whether in a mediate or an immediate manner, from the existence of our starting point, the Cosmos. *Ducitur tamen ex sensibilibus intellectus noster in divinam cognitionem ut cognoscat de Deo quia est, et alia hujus modi quae oportet attribui primo Principio* (Saint Thomas, 1 *Contra Gent*., 3.1). For the Vedantist the question presents itself in a completely different way. For him the point of departure is the Absolute, the Supreme *Brahma*. He first determines what the Absolute is, the infinite Being, the *ens a se et per se*; when he has established its attributes, he then tries to explain the world in relation to Him—or to That—who is without restrictive qualifications, without dependence, and who is therefore the Unconditioned. This difference in starting points leads to important consequences. We Scholastics never feel tempted to deny the existence of the sensible world. It is the very basis of our doctrine. To suppress it would be tantamount to cutting the ground from beneath our feet. We will give up anything rather than give up the world of experience, for to renounce this would be to give up everything. It is possible that certain fragments of the real do not fit very well into our philosophical monument; so be it: we shall carve and adapt them, or better still we shall admit our insufficiencies. But to abandon the reality of the world—this we cannot do, for it is the cornerstone, and if we remove it the whole edifice will come crashing down. Our theodicy may therefore collide with apparent antinomies; but one thing at least is certain: a creator is required in order to make our world intelligible, and so a creator we shall have, even if it is difficult to reconcile the creation with the infinite immutability of an absolute that is a subsisting perfection and plenitude. The attitude of the Vedantist is and must be quite different. He begins with the Supreme and its attributes. Now the Supreme—whether one calls it God in Himself or *Para-Brahma,* which for the moment is of no importance—is Being itself, and more than that it is infinite. It is Intelligence in the pure state, saturation of Bliss, Being that is immense, necessary, and sufficient. It is in everything, and nothing else is outside it. This is the thesis, the starting point, of the doctrine; and the rest, if it is explainable, must be explained in relation to this primary truth. We say: let all else perish, but the reality of the Cosmos must remain! The Vedantist says: let the rest perish, but the Supreme must remain what it is: the absolute of Being, implying eternity, independence, and aseity!" (G. Dandoy, *L 'Ontologie du Vedānta*). No better definition could be given of the differences between pure metaphysics, which proceeds directly from the Intellect, and philosophy, which proceeds from reason; it is fair to add, however, that the passage quoted does not entirely do justice to Scholasticism and that the distinction is too systematic; nonetheless it has the merit of contrasting the viewpoints with perfect clarity. According to the same author, "The theory of the self in *Advaita* is established almost entirely on the basis of a gratuitous hypothesis, which is that the self is purely actual. Only one thing truly pertains to the self, namely, that the self always manifests *in actu*—that is, according to *Advaita*, as pure consciousness or intellectual light. Now this hypothesis does not rest on any proof." If there is a gratuitous hypothesis, it is certainly the assertion that there are hypotheses in metaphysics; moreover, nothing in metaphysics rests upon "proofs"; examples figure in it only as illustrations and play a part only in a clearly defined respect; it is useless to set out to attack their inevitable flaws, which are of no interest to the metaphysician and which in no way weaken his thesis. Furthermore Vedantists have never affirmed, as the author we have quoted seems to believe, that consciousness cannot in any way "turn back on itself", for otherwise it would be impossible to have the least notion of it; what they have stated is that it cannot in itself become its own object, which is something quite different. *Advaita* does not "suppose" that the Self is *actus purus*, and it does not "conclude" that all potentiality is but illusion; since it is not a philosophy, it is founded upon neither suppositions nor conclusions, nor any other mental crutches.

[95] We mean by this an assemblage of concordant reasonings hierarchically arranged. It is true that one can always describe an orthodox doctrine as a "system" when comparing it to some system in nature, such as the solar system; in fact a doctrine is naturally an assemblage of ideas arranged harmoniously around a central idea, from which they are derived according to various "dimensions".

he did not suffer from what he himself calls the disease of doubt.

Shankara is like a colorless glass through which the rays of light are allowed to pass intact whereas Ramanuja is comparable to a colored glass, which in transmitting light imparts to it a certain tint; this means that Ramanuja's doctrine is also inspired and not invented. Sages are instruments for the crystallization of pure Light; they are anything but inventors of systems. It is intellection that determines everything, the mode of expression being dictated by the requirements of the respective traditional form. With philosophers in the ordinary sense of the word, the initiative comes from the human side—from mental restlessness, doubt, the absence of a contemplative quality; their attitude is not "prophetic" but "Promethean".

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God cannot change; hence He cannot be the cause of a change as such. He is the cause of all things, and He is therefore the cause of what appears to us as change; but He is its cause not insofar as it is a change but insofar as this apparent change—which for us is real—affirms an aspect of the Immutable. Or again, to consider simply change as such: God is its cause only insofar as the change, or all change, expresses the divine infinity or all-possibility in the language of diversity.

The world cannot have God for its cause insofar as it is subject to change; from the standpoint of its negative character, the world is not. On the other hand, insofar as it expresses infinity—not insofar as it negates immutability—change must have God for its cause, and in this respect the world exists even though in the final analysis it is reducible to this cause itself. To the extent it is ontologically positive the effect is not really distinct from its cause.

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It has sometimes been argued that the delivered sage, the *vidwān*, having attained the state from which there is no return into the "karmic" chain of "samsaric" existences, has passed beyond our knowledge and can therefore no longer speak or teach. Now Advaitists have never denied the

double nature of the *vidwān*. If Christianity were not the religion of the West and if the twofold nature of Christ were not a dogma, no doubt the same philosophers who look for contradictions in the *Vedānta* would declare the two natures of Christ to be "incompatible" and would describe this dogma as a "failure"; they would do the same with regard to the Trinity.

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It is contradictory to maintain—in order to deny the reality of the absolute Subject—that the intellective light is real only in relation to its projection on an external object and that it therefore has a merely relative and extrinsic reality. A contrast can reveal the nature of something or bring out its value, but it cannot create this nature; it cannot reveal a nature that does not exist. God is Light in Himself, not because he illuminates our darkness; on the contrary He illuminates the darkness because He is Light in itself; He is not Love because He loves but He loves because He is Love.

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Between the soul and *Brahma* there is at once continuity and discontinuity, depending on how the relationship is viewed: continuity from the point of view of essential nature, which is "consciousness", and discontinuity from the point of view of "actual" nature, which is pure "Consciousness" on the divine side and objectified consciousness on the human side—objectified in its very cosmic root and consequently darkened, limited, and divided by *avidyā*, ignorance. It follows that the individual substance, even when empirically emptied of its "objective" contents, is by no means thereby rid of the fundamental vice of objectification, which can be eliminated only by Knowledge.

A given being as such—to the extent, in other words, that it is a mode of objectification—necessarily regards the one and only "Consciousness", from which in reality it is not distinct, as "external"; parallel to their state of "identity" and on another plane, the *avatāra*s worshiped God

as “outside” themselves.

The great defect of the soul—the “original sin”—is not the accidental objectification that causes a being to be distracted by one or another given thing but rather the fundamental objectification that makes this possible; now the fundamental objectification is collective and hereditary and belongs to the species, not to the will of the individual.

Pseudo-Vedantist “subjectivism”—which in reality is solipsism—is unable to explain the objective homogeneity of the cosmic environment.

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When objectified *as jivātmā* or *ahankāra*, *Ātmā* is the subject of mental objectification; it is thus a subject already objectified, secondary and relative.

When the individual empties his mind of every object, he approaches *Ātmā* in a certain symbolical way; but the objectification represented by the individual as such is not thereby abolished—far from it. Spiritual realization is neither solipsism nor autosuggestion.

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Christ could say: “Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is God.” This signifies that everything necessarily participates in the essential attributes of relativity.

Shankaracharya used such expressions as this: “I prostrate myself before *Govinda*, whose nature is supreme Bliss.” And Ramakrishna said: “In the Absolute I am not and you are not and God—to the extent He is personal—is not, for the Absolute is beyond all speech and thought. But as long as there still exists something outside myself, I must worship *Brahma* within the limits of my mind as something outside me.”

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Direct analogy and inverse analogy: as for the first, a tree reflected in water will never be anything but a tree; as for the second, the reflected tree will always be upside down.

Between God and the world, the Principle and manifestation, the Uncreated and the created, there is always—though in different respects—both direct analogy and inverse analogy. Thus the ego is not only a reflection but also a negation of the Self; therefore God can be called the "divine I" by analogy with what is positive, conscious, and immortal in the human "I", but He can also be called "He" in opposition to the negative, ignorant, and unreal aspects of the human "I". The word "Self" expresses the analogy as opposition.

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To say that Reality can never be attained by one who maintains the "objective illusion" is to forget that "union" does not at all depend on some particular terminology but on the fusion of two distinct elements, whether one calls them "subject" and "object" or something else; it amounts in any case to replacing the objective illusion, which is normal since it is general, with a subjective illusion, which is an abnormal and therefore far more dangerous error. In order to be united to something it is by no means necessary to begin by pretending that one is not separate from it in any way or in any respect—in short, that one does not exist; one must not replace intellection with a facile and blind conviction.

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It is useless to seek to realize that "I am *Brahma*" before understanding that "I am not *Brahma*"; it is useless to seek to realize that "*Brahma* is my true Self" before understanding that "*Brahma* is outside me"; it is useless to seek to realize that "*Brahma* is pure Consciousness" before understanding that "*Brahma* is the almighty Creator".[96]

[96] "No man cometh unto the Father, but by me." The following *hadīth* has the same meaning: "He who desires to meet God must first meet His Prophet."

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It is not possible to understand that the statement "I am not *Brahma*" is false before having understood that it is true. Likewise it is not possible to understand that the statement "*Brahma* is outside me" is not precise before having understood that it is; and likewise again it is not possible to understand that the statement "*Brahma* is the almighty Creator" contains an error before having understood that it expresses a truth.

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If it were necessary to have realized the Self in order to be able to speak of it, how could a person who had not realized it know that it is necessary to have realized it in order to be able to speak of it? If some sage could alone know that it is the Self because he had realized it, how could his disciples know he had realized it and alone knew what the Self is?

Under these conditions there would remain only absolute ignorance face to face with absolute knowledge: there would be no possible contact with the Self, no spiritual realization, no difference between the intelligent man and the fool or between truth and error. To attribute to knowledge a purely subjective and empirical background that is at the same time absolute amounts to the very negation of the Intellect and thus of intellection; it is also a negation of inspiration and revelation—in other words a denial first of intelligence, then of its illumination by the Self, and finally of the Prophetic and Law-giving manifestation of the Self in a given world. It is thus the destruction of tradition, for the unicity and permanence of the *Veda* would remain inexplicable in these conditions; every "realized being" would write a new *Veda* and found a new religion; the *Sanātana Dharma* would be devoid of meaning.

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Intellection, inspiration, revelation: these three realities are essential for man and the human

collectivity; they are distinct from one another, but none can be reduced purely and simply to a question of "realization". The "realized" man can have inspirations that are distinct from his state of knowledge as far as their production is concerned,[97] but he cannot add one syllable to the *Veda*; and in any case inspirations may depend on a spiritual function, for instance that of a pontiff,[98] just as they may also result from a mystical degree; as for revelation, it is very clear that the most perfect spiritual realization cannot bring it about, although conversely such a realization is its *conditio sine qua non*.

Intellection for its part is an essential condition of the realization in question, for it alone can give the human initiative its sufficient reason and efficacy. This fundamental role of pure intelligence is an aspect of "becoming what one is".

In a certain sense revelation is the intellection of the collectivity, or rather it takes its place; it is the only way of knowing for the collectivity as such, and this is why the *avatāra* through whom the revelation is brought about must—in his normative perfection—incarnate the humanity he at once represents and illumines.

This is why the prayer of a saint is always a prayer of all and for all.

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To believe with certain "neo-yogists" that "evolution" will produce a superman "who will differ from man as much as man differs from the animal or the animal from the vegetable" is not to know what man is: it is one more example of a pseudo-wisdom that deems itself vastly superior to the "separatist" religions but in fact shows itself more ignorant than the most elementary catechism. For the most elementary catechism does know what man is: it knows that by his qualities, and as an autonomous world, he stands opposed to the other kingdoms of nature taken together; that in one particular respect—that of spiritual possibilities and not of animal nature—the difference between a monkey and a man is "infinitely" greater than that between a fly and a monkey. For man alone is able to leave the world; man alone is able to return to God; and this is

[97] There are numerous examples of this: thus Sri Ramana Maharshi said that his stanzas (*Ulladu Narpadu* or *Sad-Vidya*) came to him as if "from outside", and he even described how they became fixed in his mind without the collaboration of his will.

[98] This is directly connected with "grace of state", "authority", "infallibility", and the "aid of the Holy Spirit".

the reason he cannot be surpassed by a new earthly being in any way. Man is central among the beings of the earth; this is an absolute position; there cannot be a center more central than the center if definitions have any meaning.

This neo-yogism, like other similar movements, pretends that it can add an essential value to the wisdom of our ancestors; it believes the religions are partial truths that it is called upon to paste together after centuries or millennia of waiting and then to crown with its own naive little system.

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It is far better to believe the earth is a disk supported by a tortoise and flanked by four elephants than to believe—in the name of "evolution"—in the coming of some "superhuman" monster.

A literal interpretation of cosmological symbols is harmless if not positively useful whereas a scientific error such as evolutionism is neither literally nor symbolically true; the repercussions of its falsity are incalculable.

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The intellectual poverty of neo-yogist movements provides an incontestable proof that there is no spirituality without orthodoxy. It is certainly not by chance that all these movements are in league as it were against the intelligence; intelligence is replaced by a form thinking that is feeble and vague instead of logical, "dynamic" instead of contemplative. All these movements are characterized by an affectation of detachment with regard to pure doctrine, the incorruptibility of which they hate; for in their eyes this purity is "dogmatism"; they fail to understand that Truth does not deny forms from the outside but transcends them from within.

Orthodoxy includes and guarantees infinitely precious values, which man could not possibly draw from himself.

III

Orthodoxy and Tradition

6

Revelation, Authority, Infallibility

Whitall N. Perry

Whitall N. Perry (1920-2005) was an independent scholar of the world's religions and for many years a close associate of Frithjof Schuon. *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, from which this selection is taken, is widely regarded as his masterwork.

No prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation.

II Peter i. 20

Revelation brings the individual, who is generically fallible, into contact with the supra-individual domain, by definition infallible.

In India, it is the *Matsya-avatāra*[99] who at the beginning of the present cycle or *Mahāyuga* reveals ('un-veils') the *Veda,* "by which is to be understood Science preeminently, following the etymological signification of this word (derived from the root *vid,* 'to know'), or sacred Knowledge in its integrality: and here is a particularly clear allusion to primordial Revelation, or the 'non-human' origin of Tradition. It is said that the *Veda* lasts perpetually, being in itself anterior to all the worlds: but it is somehow hidden or enveloped during the cosmic cataclysms which separate the different cycles, and must accordingly be manifested anew.[100] The affirmation of the perpetuity of the *Veda* is moreover in direct relationship with the cosmological theory of the primordiality of sound among the sensible qualities (as the quality proper to ether, *ākāsha,* which is the first of the elements); and this theory is not really different from that which other traditions express in speaking of creation by the word: the primordial sound is the Divine Word by which, according to the first chapter of the Hebraic *Genesis,* all things have been made. This is why it is said that the *Rishis* or sages of the first times 'heard' the *Veda:* Revelation, being

[99] The first of the manifestations of Vishnu, in the form of a fish.

[100] Also in Buddhism, the imperishable doctrine is conceived of as being preserved intact "underseas", between cycles of manifestation, by dragon deities.

a work of the Word like creation itself, is really an 'audition' for the person who receives it" (Guénon: 'Quelques aspects du symbolisme du poisson'. *Etudes Trad.,* Feb., 1936).

The comprehensive nature of this 'audition' is emphasized by Guénon in another passage, alluding to the 'Night of Power' (*laylatu 'l-qadr*) wherein the *Qur'an* is revealed: "This 'night', following the commentary of Mohyiddin ibn Arabi, is identified with the body itself of the Prophet. What is particularly noteworthy here is that 'revelation' is received, not in the mind, but in the body of the being who is 'delegated' to express Principle: *Et Verbum caro factum est*, says the Gospel likewise (*caro* and not *mens*), and here is another expression which is the exact equivalent, in the form proper to the Christian tradition, of what *laylatu 'l-qadr* represents in the Islamic tradition" ('Les deux nuits'. *Etudes Trad.,* 1939, p. 161).

From a more strictly microcosmic perspective, Revelation can be considered as 'a direct communication with the higher states…. The possibility of this 'Revelation' is based on the existence of faculties which are transcendent to the individual. Whatever name is given them, whether one speaks for example of 'intellectual intuition' or 'inspiration', it is always the same thing in the end. The first of these two terms brings to mind in a sense the 'angelic' states, which in point of fact are identical with the supra-individual states of being, whereas the second recalls more particularly that action of the Holy Spirit to which Dante expressly alludes *(De Monarchia,* III. 16). One could also say that what is 'inspiration' interiorly, for the person who receives it directly, becomes 'Revelation' exteriorly, for the human collectivity to whom it is transmitted through his mediation, in the measure that such a transmission is possible, namely, in the measure that it can be expressed" (Guénon: *Autorite spirituelle et Pouvoir temporel,* pp. 100-101).

It is essential to understand the meaning of intellect if one is to grasp the doctrine of Revelation. "The intellect is a receptive faculty and not a productive power: it does not 'create'; it receives and transmits. It is a mirror which reflects reality in an adequate and therefore efficacious manner. With most men in the 'dark age', the intellect is atrophied to the point of being reduced to a simple virtuality" (Schuon: 'Orthodoxie et intellectualite', *Etudes Trad.,* 1954, p. 211).

"What is Revelation for 'a humanity' will analogously be intellection for an individual, and *vice versa*. If every man possessed intellect, not merely in a fragmentary or virtual state, but as a fully developed faculty, there would be no Revelation, since total intellection would be

something natural; but as this has not been the case since the end of the Golden Age, Revelation not only is necessary but even normative as regards particular intellection, or rather, as regards its formal expression. There is no intellectuality possible outside of a revealed language, an oral or scriptural tradition, even though intellection can happen as an isolated miracle wherever the intellective faculty exists; but an extra-traditional intellection will have neither authority nor efficacity…. Revelation for the intellect functions as a principle of actualization, expression and verification" (Schuon: 'De la foi', *Etudes Trad.,* 1953. pp. 348-349).

The Mediator as *Pontifex*, identified with the World Axis and thus effectuating contact with the higher states through his function of *bridge* or *way*, is the vehicle par excellence of Revelation.[101] "The King is now in reality a 'Highness'; his actions are no longer determined by the likes and dislikes of his sensitive part (*necessitas coactionis*) but inwardly instigated, and being thus strictly speaking 'inspired', participate in the 'infallibility' of whatever proceeds *ex cathedra*, 'from the tripod of truth': the burden of responsibility transferred to other shoulders no longer adds to the sum of his mortality and we can say: 'O King, live for ever'. When we speak of a King as 'His Serene Highness' we are speaking precisely of the truly royal quality of self-possession by which a King, if he be really a King, is indeed 'exalted'.

"Thus from the standpoint of Indian sociological theory and that of all traditional politics, an individual tyranny, whether that of a despot, that of an emancipated artist, or that of the self-expressive man or self-sufficient woman, effects in the long run only what is ineffectual (*akrtāni*, 'misdeeds'): all self-importance leads to the disintegration and finally the death of the body politic, collective or individual. The essence of traditional politics amounts to this, that 'Self-government' (*svarāj*) depends upon self-control (*ātmasamyama*), Rule on ruliness" (Coomaraswamy: *Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power in the Indian Theory of Government,* p. 85).

"But where is the notion of a real hierarchy still to be found in the modern world? Nothing and nobody is any longer in the right place; men no longer recognize any effective authority in the spiritual order or any legitimate power in the temporal: the 'profane' presume to discuss what is sacred, and to contest its character and even its existence; the inferior judges the superior, ignorance sets bounds to wisdom, error prevails over truth, the human

[101] Cf. Guénon: *La Grande Triade,* ch. XVII.

supersedes the divine, earth overtops heaven, the individual sets the measure for all things and claims to dictate to the universe laws drawn entirely from his own relative and fallible reason" (Guénon: *The Crisis of the Modern World,* p. 99; tr. Arthur Osborne).

Infallibility relates to doctrine: "If doctrine is infallible, this is because it is an expression of the truth, which in itself is absolutely independent of the individuals who receive it and who comprehend it. The guarantee of doctrine resides fundamentally in its 'non-human' character: and one can say moreover that every truth, to whatever order it pertains, if taken from the traditional point of view, participates in this character, for it is truth only because it adheres to higher principles and is derived as a more or less immediate consequence from them, or from application to a determined domain. The truth is never made by man, as the modern 'relativists' and 'subjectivists' would have it, but is on the contrary imposed upon him, though not 'from without' in the manner of a 'physical' constraint, but in reality 'from within', since man is obviously obliged to 'recognize' it as truth only if he first of all 'knows' it, that is to say, if it has penetrated him and if he has really assimilated it" (Guénon: *Apercus sur I'lnitiation*, p. 291).

Infallibility relates to *gnosis*: "It follows from this that every man will be infallible when he expresses a truth which he really knows, namely, with which he is identified: but not inasmuch as he is a human individual will he be infallible, but inasmuch as, by reason of this identification, he represents so to speak this truth itself. Strictly, one should say in such a case, not that he expresses the truth, but rather that the truth is expressed through him" (id., p. 292).

Infallibility relates to ritual efficacy: "This efficacy is essentially inherent in the rites themselves, insofar as they are the means of action of a spiritual influence. The rite therefore acts independently of the quality as such of the individual who performs it, and without his even having to be effectively conscious of this efficacy" (id., p. 293).

"It should also be precisely stated that doctrinal infallibility, such as it has been defined, is necessarily limited, just as the function to which it attaches, and this in several ways: first of all, it can only be applied at the interior of the traditional form to which this function relates, and it is non-existent in respect to all that pertains to any other traditional form: in other words, no one can pretend to judge a tradition in the name of another tradition….[102] Secondly, if a function pertains to a certain determined order, it will entail infallibility only in what concerns this

[102] This would in part explain why certain contemporary Hindus, whose doctrinal grasp of their own tradition is beyond dispute, make the most lamentable errors—even absurdities—when dealing with certain aspects of Western civilization. It need hardly be added that the fault is reciprocal!

order.... Beyond the legitimate limits which suit each case, there is no longer infallibility, since there is then nothing to which it can be validly applied" (id., pp. 296-297).

Avataric Revelation is distinguished by its cosmic proportions, being global, comprehensive, and unique, as can be seen in the complete originality of each traditional form from another.

The inspirations of the saints and sages within each form carry different dimensions and developments always homogeneous to and in terms of that form, without ever violating the doctrinal and ritual cohesion proper to that form.

All the rest is fragmentary, imperfect, or erroneous. No false prophet has ever produced anything universal and unique, but only a borrowing from, distortion, or inversion of some form already in existence.[103]

It might be said that Revelation in its entirety enables us to view the world, the cosmos, mankind, and creatures with Divine Vision, as it were, giving us patterns of knowledge and action which supersede all human opinion and conjecture whatsoever.[104]

Revelation

And who shall know thy thought except thou give wisdom, and send thy Holy Spirit from above?

Wisdom, ix. 17

And it has not been (vouchsafed) to any mortal that *Allāh* should speak to him except by revelation or from behind a veil, or that He sendeth a messenger to reveal what He will by His leave. Lo! He is Exalted, Wise.

Qur'an. XLII. 51

I revealed my wisdom first to Brahma in the form of the Vedas. Brahma declared that wisdom unto his son Manu, from whom the seven patriarchs and sages—Bhrigu and the others—received

[103] Cf. St Augustine. *De Civ. Dei,* XVIII. xviii: "Nor can the devils create anything (whatever appearances of theirs produce these doubts) but only cast a changed shape over that which God has made, altering it only in show."
[104] It may be well to repeat here that canonical scripture always prevails in hierarchical importance over other texts in this book, even though the passages have been collated in regard to unity and sequence of idea, rather than preponderance of authority.

it. From them it passed on to their sons and disciples, who, being of various temperaments and natures, understood it variously. Thus arose the several interpretations of the Vedas.

Srimad Bhagavatam, XL viii

Since it is usual with all men of sound understandings to call on divinity when entering on any philosophic discussion, it is certainly much more appropriate to do this in the consideration of that philosophy which justly receives its denomination from the divine Pythagoras. For as it derives its origin from the Gods, it cannot be apprehended without their inspiring aid.

Iamblichus

We know that the revelation of these (Buddhist) mysteries was clearly not the work of man.

The Travels of Fa-hsien

All scripture is given by inspiration of God.[105]

II. Timothy, III. 16

'Where did you learn this from?' asked Nanpo Tsek'uei.

'I learned it from the Son of Ink,' replied Nu Yu, 'and the Son of Ink learned it from the Grandson of Learning, the Grandson of Learning from Understanding, and Understanding from Insight, Insight learned it from Practice, Practice from Song, and Song from Silence, Silence from the Void, and the Void learned it from the Seeming Beginning.'

Chuang-tse (ch. vi)

Divine truth hath its humiliation and exinanition, as well as its exaltation. Divine truth becomes many times in Scripture incarnate, debasing itself to assume our rude conceptions, that so it might converse more freely with us, and infuse its own divinity into us. God having been pleased herein to manifest himself not more jealous of his own glory, than he is (as I may say) zealous of our good. *Nos non habemus aures, sicut Deus habet linguam.* If he should speak in the

[105]St Augustine tells us (*Civ. Dei,* XVIII. xlii) that Eleazar the high priest at Ptolemy's bidding sent six scribes from every tribe to translate the Old Testament from Hebrew into Greek. "Their translation do we now usually call the Septuagint. The report of their divine concord therein is admirable: for Ptolemy having (to try their faith) made each one translate by himself, there was not one word of difference between them, either in sense or order, but all was one, as if only one had done it all, because indeed there was but one spirit in them all."

language of eternity, who could understand him, or interpret his meaning? or if he should have declared his truth to us only in a way of the purest abstraction that human souls are capable of, how should then the more rude and illiterate sort of men have been able to apprehend it? Truth is content, when it comes into the world, to wear our mantles, to learn our language, to conform itself as it were to our dress and fashions.

John Smith the Platonist

By the Star when it setteth.
Your comrade erreth not, nor is deceived;
Nor doth he speak of (his own) desire.
It is naught save an inspiration that is inspired.
Which one of mighty powers hath taught him.

Qur'an, LIII. 1-5

Even so there came no messenger unto those before them but they said: A wizard or a madman!

Have they handed down (the saying) as a legacy one unto another? Nay, but they are froward folk.

Qur'an, LI. 52, 53

No State can be happy which is not designed by artists who imitate the heavenly pattern.

Plato (*Republic,* 500 E)

Love without Knowledge
Is darkness to the wise soul.
Knowledge without Revelation
Is as the pain of Hell.
Revelation without death.
Cannot be endured.

Mechthild of Magdeburg

The Revelation of the Scripture is from *Allāh*, the Mighty, the Knower,
The Forgiver of sin, the Accepter of repentance, the Stern in punishment, the Bountiful.

There is no God save Him. Unto Him is the journeying.

None argue concerning the revelations of Allah save those who disbelieve, so let not their turn of fortune in the land deceive thee.

Qur'an, XL.2-4

Authority

No pronouncement of a prophet is ever his own; he is an interpreter prompted by Another in all his utterances, when knowing not what he does, he is filled with inspiration, as the reason withdraws and surrenders the citadel of the soul to a new visitor and tenant, the Divine Spirit which plays upon the vocal organism and raises sounds from it, which clearly express its prophetic message.

Philo

Let us set before our minds the scriptural rule that in speaking about God we should declare the Truth, not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the power which the Spirit stirred up in the Sacred Writers, whereby, in a manner surpassing speech and knowledge, we embrace those truths which, in like manner, surpass them, in that Union which exceeds our faculty, and exercise of discursive, and of intuitive reason. We must not then dare to speak, or indeed to form any conception, of the hidden super-essential Godhead, except those things that are revealed to us from the Holy Scriptures.

Dionysius

Or say they: He hath invented it? Nay, but they will not believe!
Then let them produce speech the like thereof, if they are truthful.
Or were they created out of naught? Or are they the creators?
Or did they create the heavens and the earth? Nay, but they are sure of nothing!
Or do they own the treasures of thy Lord? Or have they been given charge (thereof)?
Or have they any stairway (unto heaven) by means of which they overhear (decrees)? Then let their listener produce some warrant manifest!

Quran, LII.33-38

I must dare to speak the truth, when truth is my theme.

Plato (*Phaedrus,* 247 D)

Not on my authority, but on that of truth, it is wise for you to accept the fact that all things are one.

Heraclitus

The truth I tell is writ on many a page of the writers of the Holy Spirit.

Dante (*Paradiso,* xxix. 40)

To those desiring to learn the great and hidden good it is authority which opens the door. And whoever enters by it and, leaving doubt behind, follows the precepts for a truly good life, and has been made receptive to teaching by them, will at length learn how pre-eminently possessed of reason those things are which he pursued before he saw their reason, and what that reason itself is, which, now that he is made steadfast and equal to his task in the cradle of authority, he now follows and comprehends, and he learns what that intelligence is in which are all things, or rather what He is who is all things, and what beyond and above all things is their prime cause.

St Augustine

With the ancient is wisdom.

Job XII. 12

We have not kept to ourselves any of the Hierarchic Utterances which have been handed down to us but have imparted them without adulteration both to yourselves and to other holy men, and will continue so to do as long as we have the power to speak and you to hear. So will we do no despite unto the tradition, unless strength fail us for the perception or the utterance of these Truths. But be these matters as God wills that we should do or speak.

Dionysius

Ramdas' authority is derived from the fact that his experiences at different stages of his Sadhana bear a close resemblance with those of all saints and sages of the world who had the vision of God.

Swami Ramdas

Brahman should be regarded as the Self on the evidence of the scriptures, just as religious duties are known from the same source.

Sri Sankaracharya

O that thou hadst hearkened to my commandments! then had thy peace been as a river, and thy righteousness as the waves of the sea.

Isaiah, XLVIII. 18

We are like dwarfs seated on the shoulders of giants. We see more things than the Ancients, and things farther away, but this is not due to the sharpness of our vision or the height of our build. It is because they carry us and raise us from their gigantic height.

Bernard de Chartres

I, Honen, in my original being, am really Seishi, the great Bodhisattva, who has appeared here in this Temple for the salvation of sentient beings. I am every day with all who follow me, and I shall protect them and assuredly bring them to the Land of Perfect Bliss. If I should fail to make this vow effective, I would never accept of perfect enlightenment myself.

Honen

A true king must get a commission from Heaven before he becomes king.

Tung Chung-shu

The human race when best disposed depends upon a unity in wills. But this unity cannot be unless there is one will dominating and ruling all the rest to oneness; inasmuch as the wills of mortals, because of the seductive delights of youth, have need of a directive

principle,[106] as the philosopher teaches in the last *Ad Nicomachum*. Nor can that one will exist unless there be a single prince of all, whose will may be the mistress and ruler of all others. Now if all the above deductions are sound, which they are, it is necessary for the best disposition of the human race that there should be a monarch in the world, and therefore for the well-being of the world that there should be a monarchy.

Dante (*De Monarchia,* i. xv)

Imperial authority was devised for the perfecting of human life.

Dante *(II Convito,* iv. ix. 1)

If any one doubts the *reality* of our Art, he should read the books of those ancient Sages whose good faith no one ever yet called in question, and whose right to speak on this subject cannot be challenged. If you will not believe *them*, I am not so foolish as to enter into a controversy with one who denies first principles.

Michael Sendivogius

But if they are averse, We have not sent thee as a warder over them. Thine is only to convey (the message).

Qur'an, XLII. 48

And if any man hear my words, and believe not, I judge him not: for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world. He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day.

St John, xii. 47-48

Infallibility

The relation of the Rituals to the rectification of the state is the relation of a balance to weight, of inked string to crookedness and straightness, of compasses and T-squares to roundness and

[106] One sees how it is the tendency today, in the absence of any principle, for the 'students' (those at an age which is naturally rebellious, when passion and illusion most easily dominate the mind) of various countries to assume 'responsibility' for their governments, by way of anarchy and violence.

squareness. The reason is that provided the balance is truly suspended it is impossible for it to be deceived over the weight: provided the inked string is truly applied it is impossible for it to be deceived over the crookedness and straightness (of a line).

Li Chi, Ching Chi eh

Infallibility in the spiritual order and sovereignty in the temporal order are two perfectly synonymous terms.

Joseph de Maistre

The Scriptures, direct experience, authority, and inference—these are the four proofs of knowledge.

Srimad Bhagavatam, XI, xii

Now I am certain that this is not an invention of my own, who am well aware that I know nothing, and therefore I can only infer that I have been filled through the ears, like a pitcher, from the waters of another.

Plato (*Phaedrus*, *235* C)

Let no man who is present at this festival find fault with my art by reason of my personal defects: but be it known that the spirit which God breathes into men of my sort is unfailing.

Hermes

The Order in itself can neither be spoiled nor corrupted by the fault of the subordinates or the superiors. One wishing to enter an Order should not consider the bad people that are within: he should support himself on the arm of the Order which is strong and cannot weaken, and remain faithful to it until death.

St Catherine of Siena

Indeed it is hard to find anyone in this world who gives heed to the Law itself, irrespective of the character of the man who expounds it.

Honen

Say: I say not unto you that I possess the treasures of *Allāh*, nor that I have knowledge of the Unseen; and I say not unto you: Lo! I am an angel. I follow only that which is inspired in me. Say: Are the blind man and the seer equal? Will ye not then take thought?

Qur'an, vi. 50

He (the Delphian Oracle) is a god, and cannot lie; that would be against his nature.

Plato (*Apology, 2*1 B)

Blessed and praised be the name of our Lord Jesus Christ who has provided for us an image of the truth, himself namely, wherein is no possibility of error!

Eckhart

For we walk by faith not by sight: and faith will totter if the authority of the divine scriptures be shaken.

St Augustine

Or believe ye in part of the Scripture and disbelieve ye in part thereof?

Qur'an, II. 85

I believe in one God, sole and eternal, who moveth all the heaven, himself unmoved, with love and with desire.

And for such belief I have not only proofs physic and metaphysic, but it is given me likewise by the truth which hence doth proceed through Moses, through the Prophets and through the Psalms, through the Gospel and through you who wrote when the glowing Spirit had made you fosterers.

Dante (*Paradiso, xxiv.* 130-138)

No one need doubt the truth or certainty of this Art. It is as true and certain, and as surely ordained by God in nature, as it is that the sun shines at noontide, and the moon shews her soft splendour at night.

The Golden Tract

Lo! those who disbelieve in the Reminder when it cometh unto them (are guilty), for lo! it is an unassailable Scripture.

Falsehood cannot come at it from before it or from behind it. A Revelation from the Wise, the Owner of Praise.

Qur'an, XLI. 41, 42

Let go the things in which you are in doubt for the things in which there is no doubt.

Muhammad

The Hierarchy of Powers

These selves depend on that Self as retainers on their chieftain.

Kaushitaki Upanishad, iv. 20

The power of the sovereign proceeds from that of Principle.

Chuang-tse (ch. xii)

There is a divinity moving you, like that contained in the stone which Euripides calls a magnet, but which is commonly known as the stone of Heraclea. This stone not only attracts iron rings, but also imparts to them a similar power of attracting other rings; and sometimes you may see a number of pieces of iron and rings suspended from one another so as to form quite a long chain: and all of them derive their power of suspension from the original stone. In like manner the Muse first of all inspires men herself: and from these inspired persons a chain of other persons is suspended who take that inspiration.

Plato (*Ion,* 533 D)

So, when the intellect becomes thy captain and master, the dominant sense become subject to thee.

Rumi

Reason in a good man sits in the throne, and governs all the powers of his soul in a sweet harmony and agreement with itself: whereas wicked men live only ζωήν δοξαστικήν, being led up and down by the foolish fires of their own sensual apprehensions. In wicked men there is a

democracy of wild lusts and passions, which violently hurry the soul up and down with restless motions. All sin and wickedness is στάσις καί ὕβρις τής ψυχής, a sedition stirred up in the soul by the sensitive powers against reason. It was one of the great evils that Solomon saw under the sun. 'Servants on horseback, and princes going as servants upon the ground' (Eccles. X.7). We may find the moral of it in all wicked men, whose souls are only as servants to wait upon their senses. In all such men the whole course of nature is turned upside down, and the cardinal points of motion in this little world are changed to contrary positions: but the motions of a good man are methodical, regular, and concentrical to reason.

John Smith the Platonist

It is fitting that the workman should use the tool, and not the tool the workman: that the rider should guide and spur the horse, and not the horse the rider: and that the sovereign should direct and govern the people, and not the people the sovereign. If in such things as these the natural order is maintained, the result is harmony and beauty: but if the relations are reversed, the result is confusion, ugliness and distortion.

Hermes

There is no rectifying of those above by those below. Rectification must be from above downwards.

Mo Ti

The triumph of mediocre men brings down the elite.

'Ali

When the people rule over the sovereign, the times are upside down, and it cannot be but that both sovereign and people go to ruin: and even so, if the body rules over the soul, both must needs go to ruin.

Hermes

Once there were the heavens and the earth, there was the distinction between upper and lower, and when the first enlightened king made a permanent state, there was social organization (with

their class distinctions). Two nobles cannot serve each other, neither can two commoners set each other to work. This is the mathematics of Heaven.

Hsun Ch'ing

He hath exalted some of you above others in rank.

Qur'an, vi. 165

When the upper and lower ranks in society have a family feeling for each other, this means human-heartedness.

Li Chi, Ching Chieh

The late Jagadguru has repeatedly prayed to God to vouchsafe to the people of the land the recollection of the sacred truths…. His anxiety is that faith in the Shastras should be restored once again in the land so that the people may abandon the new ways of life, conduct, and dress which they have adopted quite in violation of the rules of their respective castes and families.

It is well known that people everywhere are now suffering. It can be confidently asserted that this suffering dates from their giving up the courses of conduct observed by their ancestors. When the practice of Dharma began to decline, suffering began.

Sri Chandrasekhara Bharati Swamigal

Those who preside over the practice of religion should be looked up to and venerated as the soul of the body…. The place of the head in the body of the commonwealth is filled by the prince, who is subject only to God and to those who exercise His office and represent Him on earth, even as in the human body the head is quickened and governed by the soul. The place of the heart is filled by the senate, from which proceeds the initiation of good works and ill. The duties of eyes, ears, and tongue are claimed by the judges and the governors of provinces. Officials and soldiers correspond to the hands. Those who always attend upon the prince are likened to the sides. Financial officers and keepers … may be compared with the stomach and intestines…. The husbandmen correspond to the feet, which always cleave to the soil, and need the more especially the care and foresight of the head, since while they walk upon the earth doing service with their bodies, they meet the more often with stones of stumbling, and therefore deserve aid and

protection all the more justly since it is they who raise, sustain, and move forward the weight of the entire body….

Then and then only will the health of the commonwealth be sound and flourishing, when the higher members shield the lower, and the lower respond faithfully and fully in like measure to the just demands of their superiors, so that each and all are as it were members one of another by a sort of reciprocity, and each regards his own interest as best served by that which he knows to be most advantageous for the others.[107]

John of Salisbury

I affirm that the temporal power does not receive its being from the spiritual, nor its virtue, which is its authority: nor even its efficiency absolutely. But it does receive therefrom the power of operating with greater virtue, through the light of grace which the blessing of the supreme pontiff infuses into it, in heaven and on earth.

Dante (*De Monarchia,* III, iv. 145)

Duke Ai: 'May I ask what is the art of government?'

Confucius: The art of government simply consists in making things right, or putting things in their right places.'

Confucius

[107] All this corresponds perfectly in mediaeval Christian terms with the principles on which the Hindu caste system is based.

7

An Open Letter on Tradition*

James S. Cutsinger

A traditionalist asked to write about tradition is faced with a daunting task. Not only must he find fresh words for a familiar topic in order to say something new about something old. Any writer on any important subject must do the same if he wishes to capture attention and sustain concentration. But the traditionalist must go further. If he intends to be true to his principles, he must insist in this case that the old actually *is* the new—that the antiquity and continuity of tradition are the best of all possible means for authentic transformation.

Reminding my fellow traditionalists of what is meant by this paradox is one part of my aim in what follows. But in order not to be accused of preaching only to the converted, as I often am by liberal academics, my hope is to dig somewhat deeper than the familiar political, moral, and even theological expositions of conservative theorists. Little will be said explicitly about religious doctrine as such, and nothing at all about social theory or culture. I leave it to others to cover these bases. The approach here will be strictly metaphysical. I use this word knowing, of course, that it may be misunderstood. Some will see it and suppose I intend to engage in remote and rarified speculation, when in fact I shall be raising some very down-to-earth, practical questions: What exactly is the point of tradition? What is to be gained from tradition in contemporary life?

Before going any further I should explain that I have a very specific audience in mind. I mentioned my liberal professional colleagues. This article is something of an open letter to them. It represents yet another attempt on my part to break through all the hackneyed responses to the dinosaur in their midst. A traditionalist publication may seem an odd forum in which to continue that conversation, and yet the method has three advantages. By speaking indirectly to those who take a very different position from our own, it may help to keep my fellow authors and me from merely talking shop with each other. It may also prove a useful aid to conservatives and traditionalists in their own real life conversations with liberal academics. And who knows? I

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might actually get through to a few of my modernist and postmodernist colleagues and help them to begin seeing old things anew.

Contributors to this discussion will no doubt construe my key term, “tradition”, in somewhat different ways. My own definition requires that this word be paired with “revelation”. The former, we might say, is horizontal, while the latter is vertical. Where revelation is the projection of God into space, tradition is the extension of revelation through time. A stone is dropped into a quiet pool of water. Its descent toward the pool and its contact with the surface provide an image of what I mean by revelation. The centrifugal movement of concentric waves radiating from the point of impact is an image of tradition. The distinction of space from time is too simplistic, of course. In entering space, God also enters time. And in their extension through time, the modes by which tradition carries the force of revelation—words, gestures, symbols, saints, shrines—take up a certain space. But however one pictures it, revelation and tradition are to be seen as two parts of a single movement from God to man.

This way of looking at the matter is consistent with the etymological meaning of “tradition”. Tradition is the action or result of handing down or transmitting. It is important to clarify, however, that not everything handed down is traditional in the sense at stake here. The passing along of a thing received also accounts for mere custom and habit. This is the concern, or at least one concern, of the liberal critic: that the conservative is simply nostalgic for the way things were done in the past, irrespective of their truth or adequacy. Some traditionalists might reply to this criticism by pointing out that the antiquity of a given usage almost certainly implies a correspondingly deep human need. But this is not my response here. I prefer instead to admit that a greater precision is called for than is afforded by etymology, and that our liberal colleagues are right in demanding it. The Thessalonians were exhorted to stand fast in holding to the tradition they received from Saint Paul (2 Thess. 2:5), but the Colossians were warned against subscribing to the mere traditions of men (Col. 2:8). It appears that not every giving and receiving is good for us. The fact of a transmission itself, let alone its duration or the number of its successive receptions, is not the point. Any given human custom may be older than any given divine tradition. The only essential is a contact with revelation and thus with God.

But wait just a minute. My university colleagues are impatient to speak. It will be objected that I am begging the question. For all I have done is to deflect attention from one idea to another. The difference between true tradition and false, I am claiming, is the difference

between what *is* and what is *not* revelation. But where does that get us? How are we supposed to know a revelation when we see one, even supposing such a thing and its Source really exist? Does it come labeled as such? Anyone can claim a revealed authority. This in fact is precisely what the history of human thought is all about. It is a history of competing and mutually exclusive claims to Truth, a history of men seeking to dignify their passions and their struggles for power by calling them divine. "We too," the liberal admits of himself and his confrères, "are subject to such passions and struggles, but at least we know we are, and this knowledge affords us a critical distance on the past. It permits—in fact requires—us to recognize the ideological roots of tradition. All tradition is in fact the tradition of men, Saint Paul's included, men whose opinions were shaped, not only by their individual psychological needs, but by the social structures and other relativities of their time. Some of their claims to divine inspiration may well have been sincere, so we may forgive them in part for their presumption. But we are certainly *not* obliged to perpetuate their opinions, or to force our own thinking and acting into the molds they bequeathed. And in many cases, we must reject their views outright, apostles or not, as inappropriate for contemporary egalitarian life. Those alone cling to past forms who have an interest in maintaining the power and privileges which the forms were designed to promote and protect. In short, only white males and those of their victims who have internalized their oppression are traditionalists."

I covered a lot of ground in that paragraph and may have skipped a step or two. But this, in broad strokes, is what I am constantly hearing from the majority of the academics I work with. What is the traditionalist to say in response to such charges? Surely the first thing is to agree that traditional forms can be abused and too often have been. Religion in particular has in many cases been the means for perpetuating the very attachment to self-interest and enlargement of ego that it purports to oppose. One must admit that asseverations as to divine inspiration and spiritual insight have sometimes been used for purely political purposes. But these historical facts, however odious, are irrelevant to the existence of that insight itself and hence to the true significance of revealed tradition. The fact that my claim to have seen something may be used to shore up my privileges and bolster my power is no proof against the existence of eyesight, even my own, nor does it follow that we should all deliberately blind ourselves to prevent such exploitation. The critics are correct to a point, but this merely shows that men are fallen, not that there is no revelation. Whether we call their criticism a case of throwing out the baby with the

bathwater or not seeing the forest for the trees, the sad fact remains that too many so-called intellectuals no longer seem to be using their intellects. So distracted are they by the accidents of the many data they study, and so intent on putting forward certain partisan theses, that they no longer seem capable of thinking metaphysically with respect to essentials. For if they were, they would be obliged to concede that even *if* all tradition were the tradition of men—if, in the whole of our human past, authentic revelation had never once broken through the barriers of pride, greed, indifference, and hatred—it had nevertheless finally done so in their case. This is a very important point. Let me circle round and come at it this way.

We are often told that traditionalists are romantics. They idealize and idolize the past. They speak in terms of broad generalities and neglect the complexity and concrete messiness of real life. The picture they paint of their ancestors is a fiction of their own imagining. They should wake up and come to grips with the fact that human beings are just human beings. Socrates, for example, was merely another academic—not in his disciple's but in our sense of the term. He claimed, among other things, that the soul is divine and inwardly free from the bonds of becoming, and he may have even believed it. But like any scholar, he was basically in the business of solving various mental puzzles and problems. Even when he said he was doing something other and higher—even when he maintained that it is possible for a man to discern the eternal forms with a disciplined intellect—this was simply another stratagem to circumvent certain conceptual difficulties, which were themselves rooted in the existential need he shared with all of us to cope with "real" life. The same must be said of all the other so-called sages, saints, and prophets, whose teachings are keys to tradition. None were any better than we are. In fact, if you think about it, they must have been worse. Insofar as they were sincere in their claims, they were naïve and unself-critical, and therefore intellectually our inferiors. Insofar as they were not sincere, they were demagogues and petty tyrants, and therefore morally deficient and worthy of censure.

I am going a little too far with this, I realize! I have not actually heard a liberal categorically state that all earlier thinkers were beneath him. But consistency demands that he suppose they were—if not all the time or in all particulars, then to the extent at least that they took revelation seriously, which means on that one point that was for them most important. For all tradition, remember, is the tradition of men. And all men, according to my postmodernist colleagues, are inevitably conditioned by their situation in history, whatever the claims to the

contrary. What we can know is necessarily colored and restricted: inwardly by our psychological make-up, and outwardly by the environment we occupy. Absolutes are therefore out of reach, and those who purport to transmit a teaching of unconditional value—who suppose themselves links in some "true" tradition—are either simpletons or frauds. My fellow contributors are almost certainly in the latter category. For unlike the ancient thinkers they laud, they have plenty of eager colleagues who are eager to diminish their foolishness by reciting any number of skeptical mantras about what it means to be caught in the web of relativity. We traditionalists are therefore without excuse. I am perhaps especially blameworthy. It would be rather different if I spoke only about the concept or the problem of God, or if I stopped short with the observation that such-and-such a historical figure had *alleged* that revelation is a divine descent into space and that tradition is its radiation through time. But no. Not content with historical or phenomenological description, I have gone and played the metaphysician and talked as though certain things can be said that just can't be. A single movement of God to man? What extraordinary pretension!

The reader will observe that I have thus far carefully avoided making use of the various technical terms that might have otherwise facilitated these descriptions of my critics' position. If, nonetheless, he has discerned the empiricism, nominalism, pragmatism, and evolutionism implicit in their commentary, so much the better. But I have found through long experience that it does no good to employ such words if one really wants to get somewhere in arguing about these issues. Names for schools of thought or philosophical positions are simply too unwieldy, too fuzzy around the edges. No one is going to accept a label which he is convinced is the name for an error, and if he is not yet convinced, the label itself will not help. The metaphysician must therefore go beneath all the party loyalties, all the likes and dislikes, all the historical associations and influences and eponyms, in order to get directly at the error, and thereby the corresponding truth, itself. By briefly recounting some of the arguments I hear against the traditionalist point of view, my aim is to encourage if possible a more precise assessment of the essential problems we face than a mere listing of –isms allows for. And I hope by this means to help in exposing the fundamental illogic at the root of the liberals' position.

Take a quick look back at the last page or so. The illogic or the contradiction I refer to may not be immediately obvious. I have left it embedded, for the most part, in the ambiguities and half-truths in which it usually comes packaged. There is one sentence, however, where it was allowed to emerge into the clear light of day. According to the critics, I reported, "all men are

inevitably conditioned by their situation in history." This report is hardly surprising. We have all been force-fed this maxim hundreds of times. But I suspect its very repetition may have dulled us to its full enormity. *All men are inevitably conditioned by their situation in history*. When all the competing slogans are put to one side, it is this more than any other that seems to typify the contemporary academic mentality, whatever the peripheral nuances. And it is this that accounts for the liberal scholar's sometimes patronizing, sometimes hostile attitude toward those who put stock in revealed tradition. Quite apart from all the rhetoric about abuse and injustice, and leaving aside all the lamentations about our need for pluralistic perspectives, the bottom line has to do with a complete misunderstanding as to the nature of man himself and about what can and cannot be known. And here, of course, is where the contradiction comes in. Who is there to know what the rest of us can't?

An image may be helpful. What we are dealing with basically are crabs in a barrel. The experienced chef is confident that he has nothing to fear in leaving the barrel uncovered as he goes about preparing to cook the creatures. For as soon as one of them gets close to the rim, the others are sure to pull him back. And so it seems with the liberal critics. Let anyone try to get past the rim of history and contingency—let anyone even take seriously the possibility that some have succeeded—and they are sure to cry foul. Certain members of the cognitive police would pull us down sooner. The world is a construction of language! All theory is ideology! Others would allow us to crawl a bit higher. All ideas follow from impressions of sense! Concepts without percepts are empty! But, either way, what these particular crabs do not seem to realize is that in their efforts to bring everybody else back down into the domain of the relative, they are themselves obliged to create leverage by reaching over the edge.

In order meaningfully to claim that men are inevitably conditioned by their situation in history, the critics must for a split second at least have escaped their own law of gravity. Either they have ceased to be men altogether, or as men they have ceased to be subject to the conditions in question. If the first were true, if these apparent men were gods, then their dictum could be salvaged. Presumably, however, they will admit they are not. If, on the other hand, the second and only other possibility obtains, then the rule collapses, the possibility of revelation is vindicated, and Socrates and company are free once again to teach the Truth. This is what I had in mind earlier when I accused the naysayers of tradition of not using their intellects and not thinking consistently. Even if they suppose all tradition to be the tradition of men, they are

compelled to make an exception in favor of their own assertions. Even if there were no revelation before, and therefore no contact with something higher than the rim of the barrel, there must be so now in their case. And this, of course, is the illogic I speak of. For if no one can know anything more than the relative, no one would be left to say that "no one can know anything more than the relative".

There is, admittedly, nothing new in these observations. I myself have been over much the same ground countless times, as I am sure other traditionalists have. And like me, they will doubtless have heard the many excuses for the unthinking at work here, some more and some less sophisticated. We are told about tricks of language, performative contradictions, the subtleties of self-reference, and incompleteness theorems, while distinctions within distinctions are drawn between various degrees of relativism, as if a man could be "somewhat" dead or a woman "rather" pregnant. I used to try arguing against these dodges, but I have come to believe that the real problem is not a lack of proof or clarity, but a lack of attention. The only other, even less charitable, hypothesis is sheer perversity. It seems there are minds, otherwise fairly supple and clever, which are unable to sustain a thought long enough to ponder its implications. I do not know why, but there are many highly credentialed and seemingly intelligent people who simply cannot look at their looking so as to see what conclusions must be drawn from their seeing. Try as one might by the grip of sound logic to pin their gaze and to keep their heads from twisting and turning, they are still going to blink.

But the point of this essay is not to engage in more wrestling. I return to this illogic only because I think it is crucial to the whole question of tradition in contemporary life. In fact, diagnosing this malady can help us understand what is decisive about tradition in any period, past or present. For the role of tradition is today no different from what it ever was. In season and out, the extension or radiation of revelation through time always serves the same essential function, which is to recall men from their attachment to time itself. In the midst of all the many changes both within us and out, the point of tradition is to provide human beings with openings onto the eternal—moments in which all movement is taken into itself, places where all of space becomes centered, and where we are brought face to face with what truly abides beneath the shifting surface of contingency. A ritual gesture, the implacable face in an icon, the poise of a spiritual master, a place of pilgrimage, the chanted words of a sacred text, a flower. These are all modes of tradition. These are the echoes and reflections of God.

Conceived in this way, tradition is there to remind us of who we are. Created in the image of God, man is meant to be pontifex. Made of both the real and the unreal, he is fashioned as a bridge between the infinite and the finite, the absolute and the relative. He himself is a projection of God into space, a kind of living, breathing revelation, from whose touch there should flow forth to all creatures the reverberations of their origin. But man constantly falls away from this high calling. Taking his definition from the creatures beneath him, he spends his whole life resisting the fact that he is made for eternity. He gives way to what changes and is drawn further and further into its sphere. What fails to abide also fails to demand, and man is soft. He finds it so much easier to flow with the shifting currents around him than to resist and be broken. So much the better, of course, if he can manage to convince himself that everything flows, that everything is relative, that all is woven from the threads of contingency. For then he has no cause to feel deficient or inadequate. His torpor excused as if it were a consequence of the very nature of things, he feels free to turn the tables on those who would speak of the gods, charging them with fantasy.

Of course, men have always cherished their excuses. I certainly do. There is nothing novel in our desire to avoid the discipline that must accompany all contact with God. The absolute by its very nature requires all that I am. It is satisfied with nothing less than the complete and continual conformity of my entire being. And in this sense human beings really are just human beings. No one likes to have his ego killed. Sanctity has never been easy, and those who think otherwise are romantics indeed, not traditionalists. What is new about the liberal mentality is not its weakness but its smug complacency. The position which contemporary academic liberals espouse is unprecedented, not because men never made excuses before, but because they never dreamed of elevating individual laziness to the level of a universal fatality. What is unique in our day is the fact that man's failures have become an occasion for applause and are taken, absurdly, as signs of maturity and strength. Ignorance has given way to agnosticism, sin to sickness, and "virtue itself of vice must pardon beg". And this is why any serious acceptance of tradition is bound to provoke the reactions it does, whether quiet amusement or smoldering indignation, or at best a feigned interest in the psychology or phenomenology of old-fashioned ways of thinking. Whatever else they may tolerate, those for whom everything changes and change is everything simply cannot abide the thought that there

was something in the beginning, which is now, and which ever shall be, unto the ages of ages. It cramps their style.

Let us remind ourselves, however, that age in itself is not the issue. Tradition, as I have been using the word, occupies an altogether different dimension from the chronologically old. This is why I was at pains early on to insist that we focus only on a specific set of transmissions, those beginning in God. My metaphysical definition of tradition as such, as distinct from a doctrinal exposition of any given tradition, was meant to underscore the fact that antiquity alone is irrelevant, and to encourage us to prescind from all the many interminable historical arguments about local apostolic successions.

Needless to say, what I am calling tradition as such cannot but be old, nor would it be possible to discover an era without its expression. But this is simply owing to the nature of the God who reveals Himself, who cannot but be infinite, and whose infinitude means both originality and perpetuity on the plane of becoming. To put the point otherwise, there has never been a time without God, nor a place into which He has failed to descend. His "eternal power and Godhead" have always been "manifest in the things that are made" (Rom. 1:20), and the particular traditions are but so many palimpsests of a script written into the substance of creation itself. It is not surprising, therefore, if we find signs of tradition wherever and whenever we look. But the universality and antiquity are accidental from the metaphysical point of view. They are the results of tradition, not its causes. This is what accounts for my opening paradox, and it is this that makes the traditionalist's task so difficult, so easily confused at first glance with exclusivist dogmatism or reactionary fundamentalism. He must defend what is old, not as old but as true, as the temporal expression of something which is always springing fresh from eternity, "without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life, but made like unto the Son of God" (Heb. 7:3).

As I approach my conclusion, I should probably back off just a bit. Satirical appearances to the contrary, I do not mean to suggest that we traditionalists are alone in our quest for the Truth, though I do believe we are *conscious* as to what we are doing in a way that the liberal is not, and one hopes conscientious as well. Had they eyes to see, the liberals would realize that our innate nobility as men obliges all of us to think metaphysically, for no one can escape his nature, not even by denying he has one. There is no avoiding the fact that we are made for the absolute, or else we are nothing, and that to be a man in the fullest sense of the word is to know it. Even in

their duckings and dodgings, the modernists and the postmodernists must attempt to speak truly. They must say what they suppose to be so, not only here and now, but as such. And they cannot therefore avoid being metaphysicians, whether they like it or not, and be they good ones or bad. The illogic of their supposals stands as indirect proof that this is so. It is precisely when their position implodes that they attest, quite in spite of themselves, to the underlying point of tradition, which is to transmit what we need in order to become what we are. They confess with us all that in abdicating his vocation as a projection of God, man has rendered himself dependent on revealed symbols of the Truth now buried in his heart.

Naturally, most of my university colleagues will still resist my talking this way. They will object that this letter has ignored their demands for criteria, their protests that revelation is far from self-evident. They will complain that my approach remains too abstract, too pretentious, too out of touch with the times. They will say, in short, that I am still preaching to the converted and not taking them seriously. And perhaps they are right. But throughout this additional rhetorical flurry, they will not have changed either. They will still be necessarily speaking as men—fallen men who, like me, continue to long for the Truth that makes free, whom tradition in contemporary life may yet make whole.

8

Religio Perennis

Frithjof Schuon

One of the keys to understanding our true nature and ultimate destiny is the fact that the things of this world are never proportionate to the actual range of our intelligence. Our intelligence is made for the Absolute, or else it is nothing; among all the forms of intelligence in this world the human spirit alone is capable of objectivity, and this implies—or proves—that the Absolute alone confers on our intelligence the power to accomplish to the full what it can accomplish and to be wholly what it is.[108] If it were necessary or useful to prove the Absolute, the objective and transpersonal character of the human Intellect would be a sufficient testimony, for this Intellect is the indisputable sign of a purely spiritual first Cause, a Unity infinitely central but containing all things, an Essence at once immanent and transcendent. It has been said more than once that total Truth is inscribed in an eternal script in the very substance of our spirit; the different Revelations do nothing other than "crystallize" and "actualize"—in varying degrees as the case may be—a nucleus of certainties which not only abides forever in the divine Omniscience but also sleeps by refraction in the "naturally supernatural" kernel of the individual, as well as in that of each ethnic or historical collectivity and of the human species as a whole.

Much the same thing can be said in the case of the will, which is no more than a prolongation or complement of the intelligence. The objects it commonly sets out to achieve or those that life imposes on it do not measure up to the fullness of its range; only the "divine dimension" can satisfy the thirst for plenitude in our willing or love. What makes our will human and therefore free is the fact that it is proportioned to God; in God alone is it liberated from all constraint, hence from everything that limits its nature.

The essential function of human intelligence is discernment between the Real and the illusory or between the Permanent and the impermanent, and the essential function of the will is attachment to the Permanent or the Real. This discernment and this attachment are the quintessence of all spirituality; carried to their highest level or reduced to their purest substance, they constitute the underlying universality in every great spiritual patrimony of humanity, or

[108] "Heaven and earth cannot contain Me (*Allāh*), but the heart of My faithful servant containeth Me" (*hadīth qudsī*). Similarly Dante: "I perceive that our intellect is never satisfied if the True does not enlighten it, outside which no truth is possible" (*Paradiso* 4:124-26).

what may be called the *religio perennis*;[109] this is the religion to which the sages adhere, one which is always and necessarily founded upon formal elements of divine institution.[110]

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Metaphysical discernment is a "separation" between *Ātmā* and *Māyā*; contemplative concentration, or unifying consciousness, is a "union" of *Māyā* with *Ātmā*. "Doctrine" refers to discernment, which separates,[111] and "method" refers to concentration, which unifies; "faith" is connected to the first element and "love of God" to the second.

To paraphrase the well-known saying of Saint Irenaeus, the *religio perennis* is fundamentally this: The Real entered into the illusory so that the illusory might be able to return into the Real. From the point of view of *gnosis*, this mystery—together with the metaphysical discernment and contemplative concentration that are its complement—is the only important thing in an absolute sense; for the gnostic—in the etymological and rightful sense of this word—there is finally no other "religion". It is what Ibn Arabi called the "religion of Love", placing the accent on the element "realization".

The twofold definition of the *religio perennis*—discernment between the Real and the illusory and a unifying and permanent concentration on the Real—contains the criteria of intrinsic orthodoxy for every religion and all spirituality; in order to be orthodox a religion must possess a mythological or doctrinal symbolism establishing the essential distinction in question, and it must provide a path that guarantees both the perfection of concentration and its continuity; in other words a religion is orthodox if it provides a sufficient, if not always exhaustive, idea of the Absolute and the relative—and thus of their reciprocal relationships—and a spiritual activity that is contemplative in its nature and effectual with regard to our ultimate destiny. For it is an

[109] These words recall the *philosophia perennis* of Steuchus Eugubinus (sixteenth century) and the neo-scholastics; but the word *philosophia* suggests rightly or wrongly a mental elaboration rather than wisdom and therefore does not convey exactly the sense we intend. *Religio* is what "binds" man to Heaven and engages his whole being; as for the word *traditio*, it is related to a more outward and sometimes fragmentary reality, besides suggesting a retrospective outlook; a new-born religion "binds" men to Heaven from the moment of its first revelation, but it does not become a "tradition"—or have "traditions"—until two or three generations later.

[110] This is true even in the case of the pre-Islamic Arab sages, who lived spiritually on the heritage of Abraham and Ishmael.

[111] This is what the Arabic word *furqān* signifies, namely "qualitative differentiation", from *faraqa*, to separate, discern, bifurcate; it is well known that *Furqān* is one of the names of the Koran.

acknowledged fact that heterodoxies always tend to adulterate either the idea of the divine Principle or the manner of our attachment to it; they offer a worldly, profane, or—if one prefers—"humanist" counterfeit of religion or else a mysticism containing nothing but the ego and its illusions.

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It may seem disproportionate to treat a subject as complex as that of spiritual perspectives in simple and as it were schematic terms, but since the very nature of things allows us to take into consideration an aspect of simplicity, the truth would be no better served by following the twists and turns of a complexity not called for in this case. Analysis is one function of the intelligence, and synthesis is another; the common association of intelligence with difficulty and of facility with presumption obviously has no relation to the true nature of the Intellect. It is the same with intellectual vision as it is with optical vision: Some things must be examined in detail if they are to be understood, while other things are better seen from a certain distance and convey their real nature all the more clearly in appearing simple. Truth can expand and be divided indefinitely, but it is also contained in a "geometrical point"; grasping this fact is everything, no matter what symbol—or symbolism—brings about intellection.

Truth is one, and it would be vain to want to look for it in a single place, for the Intellect contains in its substance everything that is true, and therefore truth cannot but be manifested wherever the Intellect is deployed in the atmosphere of a Revelation. Space can be represented by a circle as well as by a cross, a spiral, a star, or a square, and just as it is impossible for there to be only one figure representing the nature of space or extension, so it is impossible for there to be only one doctrine reflecting the Absolute or describing the relationship between it and contingency; in other words believing that there can be only one true doctrine is like denying the plurality of geometrical figures used to indicate the characteristics of space or—to choose a very different example—the plurality of individual consciousnesses and visual points of view. In each Revelation, God says "I" while placing Himself extrinsically at a point of view other than that of earlier Revelations, whence the appearance of contradiction on the plane of formal crystallization.

The objection might be raised that the various geometrical figures are not strictly equivalent in their capacity to represent spatial extension and thus that this very comparison could be used as an argument against the equivalence of traditional perspectives; to this we reply that the traditions are not meant to be absolute adequations—or not at least *a priori*—but rather paths of salvation and means of deliverance. And in any case, though we readily acknowledge that a circle—not to mention a point—is a more direct adequation of form and space than is a cross or any other differentiated figure since it reflects more perfectly the true nature of extension, we must nonetheless take into account the fact that a cross, a square, or a spiral expresses explicitly a spatial reality which a circle or point expresses only implicitly; the differentiated figures are thus irreplaceable—otherwise they would not exist—and they are in no sense various kinds of imperfect circles; the cross is infinitely nearer the perfection of a point or a circle than is an oval or trapezoid, for example. Similar considerations apply to traditional doctrines when one examines their differences of form and their merits as adequations.

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Let us return to the *religio perennis*, considered either as metaphysical discernment and unifying concentration or as the descent of the divine Principle, which becomes manifestation in order that manifestation may return to the Principle.

In Christianity—according to Saint Irenaeus and others—God "became man" that man might "become God"; in Hindu terms one would say that *Ātmā* became *Māyā* in order that *Māyā* might become *Ātmā*. In Christianity contemplative and unifying concentration is to dwell in the manifested Real—the "Word made flesh"—so that this Real might dwell in us, who are illusory, according to what Christ said in a vision granted to Saint Catherine of Siena: "I am He who is; thou art she who is not." The soul dwells in the Real—in the kingdom of God that is "within us"—by means of permanent prayer of the heart, as is taught by the parable of the unjust judge and the injunction of Saint Paul.

In Islam the same fundamental—because universal—theme is crystallized according to a very different perspective. Discernment between the Real and the non-real is affirmed by the Testimony of Unity (the *Shahādah*); the correlative concentration on the Symbol or permanent

consciousness of the Real is effected by this same Testimony or by the divine Name which synthesizes it and which is thus the quintessential crystallization of the Koranic Revelation. This Testimony or Name is also the quintessence of the Abrahamic Revelation—through the lineage of Ishmael—and it goes back to the primordial Revelation of the Semitic branch. The Real "descended" (*nazzala*, *unzila*); it entered into the non-real or illusory, the "perishable" (*fānin*),[112] in becoming the Koran—or the *Shahādah* that summarizes it, or the *Ism* (the "Name") that is its sonorous and visible essence, or the *Dhikr* (the "Remembrance") that is its operative synthesis—in order that the illusory might return by means of this divine barque to the Real, to the "Face (*Wajh*) of the Lord that alone abides" (*wa yabqā Wajhu Rabbika*),[113] whatever metaphysical import may be attributed to the ideas of "illusion" and "Reality". In this reciprocity lies all the mystery of the "Night of Destiny" (*Laylat al-Qadr*), which is a "descent", and of the "Night of Ascension" (*Laylat al-Miʿrāj*), which is the complementary phase; contemplative realization—or "unification" (*tawhīd*)—partakes of the ascension of the Prophet through the degrees of Paradise. "Verily"—says the Koran—"prayer guards against the major (*fahshā*) and minor (*munkar*) sins, but the remembrance (*dhikr*) of God is greater."[114]

Nearer to the Christian perspective in one way but much more remote in another is the Buddhist perspective, which on the one hand is based on a "Word made flesh" but on the other hand knows nothing of the anthropomorphic notion of a creator God. In Buddhism the two terms of the alternative—or of discernment—are *Nirvāna*, the Real, and *Samsāra*, the illusory; and the path is the permanent consciousness of *Nirvāna* as *Shūnya*, the "Void", or else it is concentration on the saving manifestation of *Nirvāna*, the Buddha, who is *Shūnyamūrti*, "Manifestation of the Void". In the Buddha—notably in the form of Amitabha—*Nirvāna* became *Samsāra* in order that *Samsāra* might become *Nirvāna*; and if *Nirvāna* is the Real and *Samsāra* is illusion, the Buddha is the Real in the illusory, and the *Bodhisattva* is the illusory in the Real,[115] which suggests the symbolism of the *Yin-Yang*. The passage from the illusory to the Real is described in the *Prajnāpāramitā-hridaya-sūtra* in these terms: "Gone, gone—gone for the other shore, attained the other shore, O Enlightenment, be blessed!"

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[112] The word *fanāʾ*, sometimes translated as "extinction" by analogy with the Sanskrit *nirvāna*, has the same root and literally means "perishable nature".
[113] *Sūrah* "The Merciful" [55]:27.
[114] *Sūrah* "The Spider" [29]:45.
[115] See "Le mystère du Bodhisattva" (*Études traditionnelles*, May-June, July-August, September-October, 1962).

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It is in the nature of things that every spiritual outlook must place a conception of man in contrast with a corresponding conception of God; hence arise three ideas or definitions: first, of man as such; second, of God as He reveals Himself to man thus defined; and third, of man as determined and transformed by God as a result of the outlook in question.

From the point of view of human subjectivity, man is the container and God the contained; from the divine point of view—if one may express it this way—the relationship is reversed, for all things are contained in God and nothing is able to contain Him. To say that man is made in the image of God means at the same time that God assumes something of that image *a posteriori* in connection with man. God is pure Spirit, and man is consequently intelligence or consciousness; conversely, if man is defined as intelligence, God will be "Truth". In other words God, desiring to affirm Himself under the aspect of "Truth", addresses Himself to man insofar as man is endowed with intelligence, just as He addresses Himself to man in distress to affirm His Mercy or to man endowed with free will to affirm Himself as the saving Law.

The "proofs" of God and religion are in man himself: "Knowing his own nature, he also knows Heaven," says Mencius, in agreement with other similar and well-known maxims. We must extract from the givens of our own nature the key-certainty that opens up the way to certainty of the Divine and Revelation; to speak of "man" is to speak implicitly of "God"; to speak of the "relative" is to speak of the "Absolute". Human nature in general and human intelligence in particular cannot be understood apart from the religious phenomenon, for it is this which characterizes them in the most direct and most complete way possible. Grasping the transcendent—not the "psychological"—nature of the human being, we thereby grasp the nature of revelation, religion, tradition; we understand their possibility, their necessity, their truth. And in understanding religion, not only in a particular form or in a literal way but in its non-formal essence, we also understand the religions—that is, the meaning of their plurality and diversity; this is the plane of *gnosis*, of the *religio perennis*, where the extrinsic antinomies of dogma are explained and resolved.

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On the outward and therefore contingent plane, which nonetheless clearly has its importance in the human order, there is a concordance between the *religio perennis* and virgin nature on the one hand and between this *religio* and primordial nudity on the other—the nudity of creation, birth, resurrection, or of the high priest in the Holy of Holies, a hermit in the desert,[116] a Hindu *sādhu* or *sannyāsin*, an American Indian in silent prayer on a mountain.[117] Nature inviolate is at once a vestige of the earthly Paradise and a prefiguration of the heavenly Paradise; sanctuaries and garments differ, but virgin nature and the human body remain faithful to the initial unity. Sacred art, which seems to move away from this unity, in fact simply serves to restore to natural phenomena their divine messages—messages to which men have become insensitive; in art the perspective of love tends toward overflowing and profusion whereas the perspective of *gnosis* tends toward nature, simplicity, silence; such is the contrast between Gothic richness and Zen sobriety.[118] But this must not lead us to lose sight of the fact that outward frameworks or modes are always contingent and that all combinations and compensations are possible, especially since in spirituality every possibility can be reflected in every other according to the appropriate modalities.

A civilization is integral and healthy to the extent that it is founded on the "invisible" or "underlying" religion, the *religio perennis*, that is, to the extent that its expressions or forms are transparent to the Non-Formal and tend toward the Origin, thus conveying not only the recollection of a Lost Paradise but also—and with all the more reason—the presentiment of a timeless Beatitude. For the Origin is at once within us and before us; time is but the movement of a spiral around a motionless Center.

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[116] Such as Mary of Egypt, in whose case the non-formal and wholly inward character of a love effected by God so fully partook of the qualities of *gnosis* that one could call it a "*gnosis* of love" in the sense of *parabhakti*.

[117] The simplicity and color of clothing, white in particular, sometimes replace the symbolism of nudity within the framework of vestimentary art; on every plane the laying bare inspired by the naked Truth counterbalances a worldly "culturism". In other connections, however, a sacred robe symbolizes the victory of the Spirit over the flesh, and its hieratic richness—which we are far from criticizing—expresses the inexhaustible profusion of Mystery and Glory.

[118] It is quite apparent, however, that the most sumptuous sacred art is infinitely nearer to *gnosis* than the ignorant and affected "sobriety" of those of our contemporaries who profess to be "making a clean sweep". Only a simplicity that is qualitative, noble, and conformable to the essence of things reflects and transmits the perfume of non-formal wisdom.

IV

Metaphysics and Epistemology

9

Oriental Metaphysics

René Guénon

René Guénon (1886-1951) was a French metaphysician, author, and editor who was largely responsible for laying the metaphysical groundwork for the Traditionalist or Perennialist school in the early years of the twentieth century. He remains widely influential today for his writings on the intellectual and spiritual bankruptcy of the modern world, on symbolism, on spiritual esoterism and initiation, and on the universal truths that manifest themselves in various forms in the world's religious traditions.

For the subject of this essay I have taken Oriental metaphysics. Perhaps it would have been better to have said simply metaphysics unqualified, for in truth, pure metaphysics being essentially above and beyond all form and all contingency is neither Eastern nor Western but universal. The exterior forms with which it is covered only serve the necessities of exposition, to express whatever is expressible. These forms may be Eastern or Western; but under the appearance of diversity there is always a basis of unity, at least, wherever true metaphysics exists, for the simple reason that truth is one.

If this be so, what need is there to deal specifically with Oriental metaphysics? The reason is that in the present intellectual state of the Western world metaphysics is a thing forgotten, generally ignored, and almost entirely lost, while in the East it still remains the object of effective knowledge. Thus it is to the East that one must look if one wishes to discover the true meaning of metaphysics; or even if one's wish is to recover some of the metaphysical traditions formerly existing in a West which was in many respects much closer to the East than it is today, it is above all with the help of Oriental doctrines and by comparison with them that one may succeed, since these are the only doctrines in the domain of metaphysics which can still be studied directly. As for these, however, it is quite clear that they must be studied as the Orientals themselves study them and one must certainly not indulge in more or less hypothetical interpretations which may sometimes be quite imaginary; it is too often forgotten that Eastern civilizations still exist and still have qualified representatives from whom it is possible to enquire in order to discover the exact truth about the subject in question.

I have said "Eastern metaphysics" and not merely Hindu metaphysics, for doctrines of this order, with all they imply, are not to be found only in India, as some people believe who, moreover, barely grasp their true nature. The case of India is by no means exceptional in this

respect; it is precisely that of all civilizations which possess what might be termed a traditional basis. On the contrary, what are exceptional and abnormal are civilizations without such a basis, and to tell the truth, the only one known to us is that of the modern West. To take only the principal Eastern civilizations: the equivalent of Hindu metaphysics is found in China (in Taoism) and is also to be found elsewhere in certain esoteric schools of Islam; it should be understood, however, that this Islamic esotericism has nothing in common with the overt philosophy of the Arabs, which is for the most part Greek-inspired. The only difference is that except in India these doctrines are reserved for a relatively restricted and closed elite. This was also the case in the West in the Middle Ages, in an esotericism comparable in many respects to that of Islam and as purely metaphysical as the Islamic one; of this the moderns, for the most part, do not even suspect the existence. In India it is not possible to speak of esotericism in the true sense of the word, because there is no doctrinal dualism of exoteric and esoteric; it can only be a matter of natural esotericism, in the sense that each goes more or less deeply into the doctrine and more or less far according to the measure of his abilities, since there are, for certain individualities, limitations which are inherent in their own nature, and which it is impossible to overcome.

Naturally, forms differ from one civilization to another; but though more accustomed myself to the Hindu forms, I have no scruple in employing others when necessary, if they can contribute to the understanding of certain points; there are no objections to this since they are only different expressions of the same thing. Once again, truth is one, and it is the same for all those who, by whatever way, have attained to its understanding.

This said, it should be made clear in what sense the word “metaphysics” is used, all the more so since I have frequently had occasion to state that everyone does not understand it in the same way. I think the best course to take with words that can give rise to ambiguity is to reduce them, as far as possible, to their primary and etymological meaning. Now, according to its composition, this word “metaphysics” means literally “beyond physics,” taking the word “physics” in the accepted meaning it always had for the ancients, that is as the “science of nature” in its widest sense. Physics is the study of all which appertains to the domain of nature; metaphysics, on the other hand, is the study of what lies beyond nature. How then can some claim that metaphysical knowledge is natural knowledge, either in respect of its object, or with regard to the faculties by which it is obtained? There we have a complete misconception, a

contradiction in terms; and, what is more amazing, this confusion affects even those who should preserve some idea of the true metaphysics and know how to distinguish it clearly from the pseudo-metaphysics of modern philosophers.

But, one might say, if this word "metaphysics" gives rise to such confusion, would it not be better to abandon it and substitute something more suitable? Plainly, this would not be advisable, since, by its formation, this word meets the exact requirements; also it is hardly possible, since Western languages have no other word equally adapted to this usage. Simply to use the word "knowledge," as is done in India, because this is indeed knowledge *par excellence* and that which alone can be dignified by that name, is out of the question, for it would only make things more confusing for Occidentals who habitually associate knowledge with nothing beyond the scientific and rational. Also is it necessary to concern ourselves with the abuse to which a word is put? If we rejected all such, what would be left? Is it not sufficient to take precautions to avoid misunderstandings and misrepresentations? We are not any more enamored of the word "metaphysics" than of any other, but since a better term cannot be suggested to replace it we will continue to use it as before.

Unfortunately one comes across people who claim to "judge" that which they do not know, and who, because they apply the name "metaphysics" to a purely human and rational knowledge (which for us is only science or philosophy), imagine that Oriental metaphysics is no more and no other than that; from which they arrive logically at the conclusion that this metaphysics cannot in reality lead to any particular results. They fail to see that it is an effective guide just because it is something quite other than they suppose. What they envisage has really nothing to do with metaphysics since it is only knowledge of a natural order, an outward and profane scholarship; it is not of this that we wish to speak. Can one then make "metaphysical" synonymous with "supernatural"? We are prepared to accept such an analogy, since if one does not go beyond nature, that is to say the manifest world in its entirety (and not only the world of the senses, which is only an infinitesimal part of it), one is still in the realm of the physical. Metaphysics is, as we have already said, that which lies beyond and above nature; hence it can properly be described as "supernatural."

But an objection will undoubtedly be raised here: Is it possible to go beyond nature? We do not hesitate to answer plainly: Not only is it possible, but it is a fact. Again it might be said, is this not merely an assertion; what proofs thereof can be adduced? It is truly strange that proof is

demanded concerning the possibility of a kind of knowledge instead of searching for it and verifying it for one's self by undertaking the work necessary for its acquisition. For those who possess this knowledge, what interest can there be in all this discussion? Substituting a "theory of knowledge" for knowledge itself is perhaps the greatest admission of impotence in modern philosophy.

Moreover, all certitude contains something incommunicable. Nobody can truly attain to any knowledge other than by a strictly personal effort; all that one can do for another is to offer him the opportunity and indicate the means by which to attain the same knowledge. That is why it would be vain to attempt to impose any belief in the purely intellectual realm; the best argument in the world could not in this respect replace direct and effective knowledge.

Now, is it possible to define metaphysics as we understand it? No, for to define is always to limit, and that with which we are concerned is, in itself, truly and absolutely unlimited and cannot be confined to any formula or any system. Metaphysics might be partly described, for example, by saying that it is the knowledge of universal principles, but that is not a definition in the proper sense, and only conveys a rough idea. Something can be added by saying that the scope of these principles is far greater than was thought by some Occidentals who, although really studying metaphysics, did so in a partial and incomplete way. Thus when Aristotle envisages metaphysics as a knowledge of being *qua* being, he identifies it with ontology, that is to say he takes the part for the whole. For Oriental metaphysics, pure being is neither the first nor the most universal principle, for it is already a determination. It is thus necessary to go beyond being, and it is this which is of the greatest significance. That is why in all true metaphysical conceptions it is necessary to take into account the inexpressible: just as everything that can be expressed is literally nothing in comparison with that which surpasses expression, so the finite, whatever its magnitude, is nothing when faced with the Infinite. One can hint at much more than can be expressed, and this is the part played by exterior forms. All forms, whether it is a matter of words or symbols, only act as a support, a fulcrum for rising to possibilities of conception which far outstrip them; we will return to this later.

We speak of metaphysical conceptions for lack of any other term whereby to make ourselves understood, but it is not to be concluded from this that there is here something comparable to scientific or philosophic conceptions; it is not a question of any "abstractions," but of attaining an intuitive and immediate supra-rational knowledge. This pure intellectual intuition,

without which there is no true metaphysics, has, moreover, no connection with the intuition spoken of by certain contemporary philosophers, which is, on the contrary, infra-rational. There is an intellectual intuition and a sensible intuition; one lies beyond reason, but the other is situated on its hither side; the latter can only know the world of changing and becoming, that is to say nature, or rather, an inferior part of nature. The domain of intuition, on the contrary, is the province of eternal and immutable principles; it is the realm of metaphysics.

To comprehend universal principles directly the transcendent intellect must itself be of the universal order; it is no longer an individual faculty, and to consider it as such would be contradictory, as it is not within the power of the individual to go beyond his own limits and leave the conditions which limit him *qua* individual. Reason is a specifically human faculty, but that which lies beyond reason is truly "non-human"; it is this which makes metaphysical knowledge possible, and that knowledge, one must again emphasize, is not a human knowledge. In other words, it is not as man that man can attain it, but because this being which is human in one of its aspects is at the same time something other and more than a human being. It is the attainment of effective consciousness of supra-individual states which is the real object of metaphysics, or better still, of metaphysical knowledge itself. We come here to one of the most vital points, and it is necessary to repeat that if the individual were a complete being, if he made up a closed system like the monad of Leibnitz, metaphysics would not be possible; irremediably confined in himself, this being would have no means of knowing anything outside his own mode of existence. But such is not the case; in reality the individuality represents nothing more than a transitory and contingent manifestation of the real being. It is only one particular state amongst an indefinite multitude of other states of the same being; and this being is, in itself, absolutely independent of all its manifestations, just as, to use an illustration which occurs frequently in Hindu texts, the sun is absolutely independent of the manifold images in which it is reflected. Such is the fundamental distinction between "Self" and "I," the personality and the individuality; as the images are connected by the luminous rays with their solar source, without which they would have neither existence nor reality, so the individuality, either of the human individual or of any other similar state of manifestation, is bound by the personality to the principial center of being by this transcendent intellect of which we are speaking. It is impossible, within the limits of this exposition, to develop these lines of thought more completely, or to give a more exact

idea of the theory of multiple states of being; but I think I have said enough to show the extreme importance of all truly metaphysical doctrine.

I said "theory," but here it is not a question of theory alone; this is a point which needs further explanation. Theoretical knowledge, which is only indirect and in some sense symbolic, is merely a preparation, though indispensable, for true knowledge. It is, moreover, the only knowledge which is communicable, even then only in a partial sense. That is why all statements are no more than a means of approaching knowledge, and this knowledge, which is in the first place only virtual, must later be effectively realized. Here we find another discrepancy in the more limited metaphysics to which we referred earlier, for example that of Aristotle. This remains theoretically inadequate in that it limits itself to being, and its theory seems to be presented as self-sufficient instead of being expressly bound up with a corresponding realization, as is the case in all Oriental doctrines. However, even in this imperfect metaphysics (we might be tempted to say this demi-metaphysics), sometimes statements are encountered which, if properly understood, would lead to totally different conclusions; thus, did not Aristotle specifically state that a being is all that it knows? This affirmation of identification through knowledge is the same in principle as metaphysical realization. But here the principle remains isolated; it has no value other than that of a merely theoretical statement, it carries no weight, and it seems that, having propounded it, one thinks no more about it. How was it that Aristotle himself and his followers failed to see all that here was implied? It is the same in many other cases, where apparently other equally essential things are forgotten, such as the distinction between pure intellect and reason, even after having defined them quite explicitly; these are strange omissions. Should one see in this the effect of certain limitations inherent in the Occidental mind, apart from some rare but always possible exceptions? This might be true in a certain measure; nevertheless it is not necessary to believe that Western intellectuality has always been as narrowly limited as it is in the present age. But after all, we have been speaking only of outward doctrines, though these are certainly superior to many others since, in spite of all, they comprise a part of the true metaphysics. For our part we are certain that there has been something other than this in the West during the Middle Ages and in olden times; there certainly have existed amongst an elite purely metaphysical doctrines which could be called complete, including their realization, a thing which, for most moderns, is barely conceivable. If the West has lost the memory of this

completely it is because it has broken with its proper tradition, which explains why modern civilization is abnormal and deviationist.

If purely theoretical knowledge were an end in itself and if metaphysics went no further, it would still assuredly be worth something, but yet it would be altogether insufficient. In spite of conferring the genuine certainty, even greater than mathematical certainty, which belongs to such knowledge, it would yet remain, though in an incomparably superior order, analogous to that which, at an inferior level, constitutes terrestrial and human, scientific and philosophical, speculation. That is not what metaphysics is meant for; if others choose to interest themselves in a "mental sport," or suchlike, that is their affair; these things leave us cold, and moreover we think that the curiosities of psychology should be completely indifferent to the metaphysician. What he is concerned with is to know what is, and to know it in such fashion as to be oneself, truly and effectively, what one knows.

As for the means of metaphysical realization, we are well aware of such objections as can be made by those who find it necessary to challenge its possibility. These means, indeed, must be within man's reach; they must, in the first stages at least, be adapted to the human state, since it is in this state that the being now exists which subsequently will assume the higher states. Thus it is in these formal means, appropriate to this world as presently manifested, that the being finds a fulcrum for raising itself beyond this world. Words, symbolism, signs, rites, or preparatory methods of any sort have no other reason for existence and no other function; as we have already said, they are supports and nothing else. But some will ask, how is it possible that merely contingent means can produce an effect which immeasurably surpasses them and which is of a totally different order from that to which the instruments themselves belong? We should first point out that these means are, in reality, only fortuitous. The results they help to attain are by no means consequential; they place the being in the position requisite for attainment and that is all. If the above-mentioned objections were valid in this case they would be equally so for religious rites, for the sacraments, for example, where the disproportion between the means and the end is no less; some of those who have raised the above objections might have thought of this too. As for us, we do not confuse a simple means with a cause in the true sense of the word and we do not regard metaphysical realization as an effect, since it is not the production of something which does not yet exist, but the knowing of that which is, in an abiding and immutable manner,

beyond all temporal succession, for all states of the being, considered under their primary aspect, abide in perfect simultaneousness in the eternal now.

Thus we see no difficulty in recognizing that there is nothing in common between metaphysical realization and the means leading to it, or, if preferred, which prepare for it. This is why, moreover, no means are strictly or absolutely necessary; or at least there is only one indispensable preparation, and that is theoretical knowledge. This, on the other hand, cannot go far without a means which will play the most important and constant part: This means is concentration. This is something completely foreign to the mental habits of the modern West, where everything tends towards dispersion and incessant change. All other means are only secondary in comparison; they serve above all to promote concentration and to harmonize the diverse elements of human individuality in order to facilitate effective communication between this individuality and the higher states of being.

Moreover, at the start, these means can be varied almost indefinitely, for they have to be adapted to the temperament of each individual and to his particular aptitudes and disposition. Later on the differences diminish, for it is a case of many ways which all lead to the same end; after reaching a certain stage all multiplicity vanishes, but by that time the contingent and individual means will have played their part. This part, which it is unnecessary to enlarge upon, is compared, in certain Hindu writings, to a horse which helps a man to reach the end of his journey more quickly and easily, but without which he would still have been able to arrive. Rites and various methods point the way to metaphysical realization, but one could nevertheless ignore them and by unswervingly setting the mind and all powers of the being to the aim of this realization could finally attain the supreme goal; but if there are means which make the effort less laborious, why choose to neglect them? Is it confusing the contingent with the absolute to take into account the limitations of our human state, since it is from this state, itself contingent, that we are at present compelled to start in order to attain higher states, and finally the supreme and unconditioned state?

After considering the teachings common to all traditional doctrines we must now turn to the principal stages of metaphysical realization. The first is only preliminary and operates in the human domain and does not go beyond the limits of the individuality. It consists of an indefinite extension of this individuality of which the corporeal modality, which is all that is developed in the ordinary man, represents the smallest portion; it is from this corporeal modality that it is

necessary to start by means borrowed from the sensible order, but which, however, must have repercussions in the other modalities of the human being. The phase in question is, in short, the realization or development of all the potentialities which are contained in the human individuality, and which, comprising, as they do, manifold extensions, reach out in diverse directions beyond the realm of the corporeal and sensible; and it is by these extensions that it is possible to establish communication with the other states.

This realization of the integral individuality is described by all traditions as the restoration of what is called the "primordial state" which is regarded as man's true estate and which moreover escapes some of the limitations characteristic of the ordinary state, notably that of the temporal condition. The person who attains this "primordial state" is still only a human individual and is without effective possession of any supra-individual states; he is nevertheless freed from time and the apparent succession of things is transformed for him into simultaneity; he consciously possesses a faculty which is unknown to the ordinary man and which one might call the "sense of eternity." This is of extreme importance, for he who is unable to leave the viewpoint of temporal succession and see everything in simultaneity is incapable of the least conception of the metaphysical order. The first thing to be done by those who wish to achieve true metaphysical understanding is to take up a position outside time, we say deliberately in "non-time," if such an expression does not seem too peculiar and unusual. This knowledge of the intemporal can, moreover, be achieved in some real measure, if incompletely, before having fully attained this "primordial state" which we are considering.

It might be asked perhaps: Why this appellation of "primordial state"? It is because all traditions, including that of the West (for the Bible says nothing different) are in agreement in teaching that this state was originally normal for humanity, whereas the present state is merely the result of a fall, the effect of a progressive materialization which has occurred in the course of the ages, and throughout the duration of a particular cycle. We do not believe in "evolution" in the sense that the moderns give the word. The so-called scientific hypotheses just mentioned in no way correspond to reality. It is not possible here to make more than bare allusion to the theory of cosmic cycles, which is particularly expounded in the Hindu doctrines; this would be going beyond our subject, for cosmology is not metaphysics even though the two things are closely related. It is no more than an application of metaphysics to the physical order, while the true

natural laws are only the consequences, in a relative and contingent domain, of universal and necessary principles.

To revert to metaphysical realization: Its second phase corresponds to supra-individual but still conditioned states, though their conditions are quite different from those of the human state. Here, the world of man, previously mentioned, is completely and definitely exceeded. It must also be said that that which is exceeded is the world of forms in its widest meaning, comprising all possible individual states, for form is the common denominator of all these states; it is that which determines individuality as such. The being, which can no longer be called human, has henceforth left the "flow of forms," to use a Far-Eastern expression. There are, moreover, further distinctions to be made, for this phase can be subdivided. In reality it includes several stages, from the achievement of states which though informal still appertain to manifested existence, up to that degree of universality which is pure being.

Nevertheless, however exalted these states may be when compared with the human state, however remote they are from it, they are still only relative, and that is just as true of the highest of them, which corresponds to the principle of all manifestation. Their possession is only a transitory result, which should not be confused with the final goal of metaphysical realization; this end remains outside being and by comparison with it everything else is only a preparatory step. The highest objective is the absolutely unconditioned state, free from all limitation; for this reason it is completely inexpressible, and all that one can say of it must be conveyed in negative terms by divestment of the limits which determine and define all existence in its relativity. The attainment of this state is what the Hindu doctrine calls "Deliverance" when considered in connection with the Supreme Principle.

In this unconditioned state all other states of being find their place, but they are transformed and released from the special conditions which determined them as particular states. What remains is that which has a positive reality, since herein it is that all things have their own principle; the "delivered" being is truly in possession of the fullness of its own potentialities. The only things which have disappeared are the limiting conditions, which are negative, since they represent no more than a "privation" in the Aristotelian sense. Also, far from being a kind of annihilation, as some Westerners believe, this final state is, on the contrary, absolute plenitude, the supreme reality in the face of which all else remains illusion.

Let us add once more that every result, even partial, obtained by the being in the course of metaphysical realization are truly its own. This result constitutes a permanent acquisition for the being, of which nothing can deprive it; the work accomplished in this way, even if interrupted before it is completed, is achieved once and for all since it is beyond time. This is true even of merely theoretical knowledge, for all knowledge carries its benefit in itself, contrary to action, which is only a momentary modification of a being and is always separated from its various effects. These effects belong to the same domain and order of existence as that which has produced them. Action cannot have the effect of liberating from action, and its consequences cannot reach beyond the limits of individuality considered in its fullest possible extension. Action, whatever it may be, is not opposed to, and cannot banish, ignorance which is the root of all limitation; only knowledge can dispel ignorance as the light of the sun disperses darkness, and it is thus that the "Self," the immutable and eternal principle of all manifest and unmanifest states, appears in its supreme reality.

After this brief and very imperfect outline, which can only give the merest idea of metaphysical realization, it is absolutely essential to stress one point in order to avoid grave errors of interpretation; it is that all with which we are here concerned has no connection whatever with phenomena of any sort, however extraordinary. All phenomena are of the physical order; metaphysics is beyond the phenomenal, even if we use the word in its widest sense. It follows from this, amongst other inferences, that the states to which we are referring are in no way "psychological"; this must be specifically stated since strange confusions sometimes arise in this connection. By definition psychology can only be concerned with human states, and further, what it stands for today is only a very limited part of the potentialities of the individual, who includes far more than specialists in this science are able to imagine. The human individual is, at one and the same time, much more and much less than is ordinarily supposed in the West; he is greater by reason of his possibilities of indefinite extension beyond the corporeal modality, in short, of all that refers to what we have been studying; but he is also much less since, far from constituting a complete and sufficient being in himself, he is only an exterior manifestation, a fleeting appearance clothing the true being, which in no way affects the essence of the latter in its immutability.

It is necessary to insist on this point that the metaphysical domain lies entirely outside the phenomenal world, for the moderns hardly ever know or investigate anything other than

phenomena; it is with these that they are almost exclusively concerned, as is demonstrated by the attention they have given to the experimental sciences. Their metaphysical ineptitude arises from the same tendency. Undoubtedly some phenomena may occur during the work for metaphysical realization, but in a quite accidental manner. They can also have unfortunate consequences, as things of this nature are only an obstacle for those who are tempted to attach importance to them. Those who are halted or turned aside by phenomena, and above all those who indulge in search for extraordinary "powers," have very little chance of pressing on to a realization beyond the point already arrived at before this deviation occurred.

This observation leads naturally to the rectification of some erroneous interpretations on the subject of the term "yoga." Has it not been claimed that what the Hindus mean by this word is the development of certain powers latent in the human being? What we are about to say will suffice to show that such a definition should be rejected. In reality the word "yoga" is the same as that which we have translated as literally as possible by the word "union" and which, correctly defined, thus means the supreme goal of metaphysical realization; the "yogi," in the strictest sense of the term, is solely the man who attains this end. However, it is true that in a wider sense the same terms, in some cases, may be applied to stages preparatory to "union" or even to simple preliminary means, as well as to the being who has reached states corresponding to those stages which these means are employed in order to attain. But how can it be supposed that a word primarily meaning "union" applies correctly and originally to breathing exercises or other things of that sort? These and other exercises, usually based on what we might call the science of rhythm, admittedly figure amongst the most usual means for the promoting of realization; but one must not mistake for the end that which amounts to no more than contingent and accidental aids, nor must one confuse the original meaning of a word with a secondary acceptation which is more or less distorted.

Referring to the original "yoga," and while declaring that it has always meant essentially the same thing, one must not forget to put a question of which we have as yet made no mention. What is the origin of these traditional metaphysical doctrines from which we have borrowed all our fundamental ideas? The answer is very simple, although it risks raising objections from those who would look at everything from an historical viewpoint: It is that there is no origin; by which we mean no human origin subjected to determination in time. In other words, the origin of tradition, if indeed the word origin has any applicability in such a case, is "non-human," as is

metaphysics itself. Doctrines of this order have not appeared at any particular moment in the history of humanity; the allusion we have made to the "primordial state," and also what we have said of the intemporal nature of all that is metaphysical, enables one to grasp this point without too much difficulty, on condition that it be admitted, contrary to certain prejudices, that there are some things to which the historical point of view is not applicable. Metaphysical truth is eternal; even so, there have always existed beings who could truly and completely know. All that changes is only exterior forms and contingent means; and the change has nothing to do with what people today call "evolution." It is only a simple adaptation of such and such particular circumstances to special conditions of some given race or epoch. From this results the multiplicity of forms; but the basis of the doctrine is no more modified and affected than the essential unity and identity of the being is altered by the multiplicity of its states of manifestation.

Metaphysical knowledge, as well as the realization that will turn it into all that it truly ought to be, is thus possible everywhere and always, at least in principle and when regarded in a quasi-absolute sense; but in fact and in a relative sense, can it be said that this is equally possible in any sphere and without making the least allowance for contingencies? On this score we shall be much less positive, at least as far as realization is concerned; which is explained by the fact that in its beginning such a realization must take its support from the realm of contingencies. Conditions in the modern West are particularly unfavorable, so much so that such a work is almost impossible and can even be dangerous in the absence of any help from the environment and in conditions which can only impede or destroy the efforts of one who undertakes such a task. On the other hand, those civilizations which we call traditional are organized in such a way that one can find effectual aid, though this is not absolutely necessary, any more than anything else of an external kind; nevertheless without such help it is difficult to obtain effective results. Here is something which exceeds the strength of an isolated human individual, even if that individual possesses the requisite qualifications in other respects; also we do not want to encourage anyone, in present conditions, to embark thoughtlessly upon such an enterprise, and this brings us to our conclusion.

For us, the outstanding difference between the East and West (which means in this case the modern West), the only difference which is really essential (for all others are derivative), is on the one side the preservation of tradition with all that this implies, and on the other side the

forgetting and loss of this same tradition; on one side the maintaining of metaphysical knowledge, on the other complete ignorance of all connected with this realm. Between civilizations which open to their elite the possibilities of which we have caught a glimpse and offer the most appropriate means for their effective realization (thus allowing of their full realization by some at least)—between those traditional civilizations and a civilization which has developed along purely material lines, what common measure can be found? And how, without being blinded by I know not what prejudices, dare one claim that material superiority compensates for intellectual inferiority? When we say intellectual, we mean by that the true intellectuality, that which is restricted by neither limitations of the human nor the natural order and which makes pure metaphysical knowledge possible in its absolute transcendence. It seems to me that only a moment's reflection on these questions leaves no doubt or hesitation as to the answer that should be given.

The material prosperity of the West is incontrovertible; nobody denies it, but it is hardly a cause for envy. Indeed one can go further; sooner or later this excessive material development threatens to destroy the West if it does not recover itself in time, and if it does not consider seriously a "return to the source," using an expression which is employed in certain Islamic esoteric schools. Today one hears from many quarters of the "defense of the West," but unfortunately it does not seem to be understood that it is against itself that the West needs to be defended, and that it is its own present tendencies which are the chief and most formidable of all the dangers which really threaten it. It would be as well to meditate deeply on this; one cannot urge this too strongly on all who are still capable of reflection. So it is with this that I will end my account; I have done my best to make it, if not fully comprehensible, at least suggestive of that Oriental intellectuality which no longer has any equivalent in the West. This has been a sketch, even if imperfect, of the true metaphysics, of that knowledge, which, according to the sacred works of India, is alone completely true, absolute, infinite, and supreme.

10

Rationalism Real and Apparent

Frithjof Schuon

The effectiveness of reasoning depends essentially upon two conditions, one internal and the other external: on the one hand the acuity and profundity of the intelligence and on the other hand the value or extent of the available information; these conditions lie outside the sphere of rationalism, the first because it goes beyond the indirect processes of reason in calling upon pure Intellection and the second because it implies, above and beyond simple sensorial and psychological facts, the supernatural—though in no way irrational—phenomenon of Revelation.[119] The rationalist is not someone who reasons adequately in light of the total and supralogical intelligence and on the basis of the necessary data—data that are of traditional origin when it comes to matters escaping the limitations of common experience; on the contrary he is someone who thinks he can solve every problem by means of logic alone on the basis of any arbitrarily exploited fact, even if it means denying the existence of the problem altogether.

This being so, all thoroughgoing rationalism is false by definition; and since nothing is ever rejected without being replaced by something else, individual tendencies come to supplant the missing Intellection. A line of reasoning that is square in shape—if this image is permitted—will reject a spherical reality and replace it with a square error, and it will do so on the inner basis of a personal tendency that is opposed to the global reality of existence and the spirit; in other words profane thought is always the portrait of an individual even when it is mingled with some glimmerings of knowledge, as must always be the case since reason is not a closed vessel.

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Thus reason gives way to individualism and arbitrariness insofar as it is artificially divorced from the Intellect. This is exactly what happens in the case of someone like Kant, who is a rationalist even while rejecting "dogmatic rationalism"; no doubt what he rejects is a form of rationalism, but Kantian criticism is even more so—in fact it is the very acme of rationalism. It is well known

[119] In the course of this book what we understand by this term, or rather in what way we understand it, will be made sufficiently clear. For the moment we would simply say that Revelation is a kind of cosmic Intellection whereas personal Intellection is comparable to a Revelation on the scale of the microcosm.

that metaphysics for the critical philosophy is not the science of the Absolute and the true nature of things but the "science of the limits of human reason", and reason (*Vernunft*) is identified with intelligence pure and simple; this is an utterly contradictory axiom, for how could the intelligence limit itself, seeing that by its very nature it is in principle unlimited or else it is nothing? And if the intelligence as such is limited, what guarantee do we have that its operations, including those of criticism, will be valid? For an intellectual limit is a wall of which a given man is unaware; hence one of two things: either the intelligence by definition includes a principle of illimitability or liberty,[120] whatever the degree of its actualization, in which case there is no need to attribute limits to it—and certainly no excuse for the arbitrariness with which such limits are imposed, since the actual power of a particular individual intelligence or mode of intelligence is not necessarily a criterion for the appraisal of intelligence as such; or else on the contrary the intelligence includes—again by definition—a principle of limitation or constraint, in which case it no longer includes any certainty and can function no differently from the intelligence of animals, with the result that all pretension to a "critical philosophy" is vain.

If the normal functioning of the intelligence must be subjected to a critique, then the criticizing consciousness must be subjected to a critique in turn by asking, "What is it that thinks?", and so forth—a play of mirrors whose inconclusiveness, proved in advance by the very nature of cognition, demonstrates its absurdity. A thought is "dogmatist", or else it is nothing; a "criticist" thought is in contradiction with its own existence. A subject who casts doubt upon normal subjectivity thereby casts doubt upon his own doubting; and this is just what has happened to the critical philosophy, which has been swept away in turn and through its own fault by existentialism in all its forms.

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According to empiricists, all knowledge is derived from sensory experience; theologians hasten to add that this applies only to our "natural" capacity for knowledge—a comment that does not render the opinion any less debatable—whereas extreme sensationalists go as far as to maintain

[120] The proof of this liberty or illimitability lies in the capacity to conceive the absolute and thereby the relative as such, as well as in the capacity for objectivity.

that human knowledge can have no other source than the experience in question. This merely proves that they themselves have no access to suprasensory knowledge and are unaware of the fact that the suprasensible can be the object of a genuine perception and hence of a concrete experience; it is therefore upon an intellectual disability that these thinkers build their systems, and they do so without being in the least impressed by the fact that countless men as intelligent as themselves, to put it mildly, have thought otherwise. How could someone like Kant explain to himself the fact that his thesis, so immensely important for mankind were it true, was unknown to all the peoples of the world and had not been discovered by a single sage and that, on the contrary, men of the highest abilities had labored under lifelong illusions—which is what his thesis assumes—that were totally incompatible with these abilities, even founding religions, producing the fruits of sanctity, and creating civilizations? Surely the least one might ask of a "great thinker" is a little imagination.

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Aside from the forms of sensory knowledge, Kant allows for the categories, which he regards as innate principles of cognition; these he divides into four groups inspired by Aristotle,[121] while at the same time subjectivizing the Aristotelian notion of category; he develops in his own way the peripatetic categories that he chooses to accept while discarding others, without realizing that the highest and most important of the categories have eluded his grasp, Aristotelianism notwithstanding.[122] The categories are *a priori* independent of all experience since they are innate; Kant recognized this, but he thought they could be "explored" by a process he called "transcendental investigation"; but how will one ever grasp the pure subject who explores and investigates?

Another feature of this suicidal rationalism is the following: we are asked to believe that

[121] Quantity, quality, relation, and modality; the last of these no doubt replaces the Aristotelian "position".
[122] Such as the principial and cosmic qualities that determine and classify phenomena and the universal dimensions that join the world to the supreme Essence and include, each in its own way, the qualities mentioned above. Aristotle had a right not to speak of them since his acceptance of God was assertorial—and not from a moralist and empiricist angle—and therefore without any pretence to universality on the plane of the categories.

knowledge, thus reduced to a combination of sensory experiences and innate categories, shows us things as they appear to be but not as they are—as if the inherent nature of things did not pierce through their appearances; the whole point of knowledge is the perception of a thing-in-itself—an aseity—and without this the very notion of perception could not exist. To speak of a kind of knowledge that is incapable of adequation is a contradiction in terms and is disproved moreover by experience at every level of the knowable; it is obvious that our knowledge cannot become totally identified with its objects—insofar as these objects are relative[123]—but it is absurd to deduce from this fact that all speculations on the aseity of things are "empty and vain" (*leer und nichtig*). Converting this dictatorial conclusion into an argument against metaphysical "dogmatism", far from unmasking the latter, serves only to demonstrate the "emptiness" and "vanity" of the critical philosophy, thus turning its thunderbolts against itself.

All the appalling pedantry of this philosophy becomes glaringly apparent in the notion of "subreption": this is the name it gives to reasoning that is devoid of "empirical premises" and that allows us to infer something about which—or so it appears—we have no idea, as when we infer the reality of God from the existence of the world or the qualities it manifests. A philosopher who in other respects displays little of the poet nonetheless has enough poetic imagination to describe conclusions of this kind as "sophistical mirages" (*sophistische Blendwerke*); it apparently never crosses the minds of pure logicians that a line of reasoning might simply be the logical and provisional description of something that is intellectually self-evident and that the function of this reasoning might be the actualization of a self-evidence in itself supralogical.

This brings us to a point overlooked by every form of rationalism inasmuch as it replaces intellection with mere logic: with regard to intellection the rational faculty has two functions, one descending or communicating and the other ascending or actualizing. In the first case reason endeavors to formulate direct intellectual perceptions dialectically, making use of symbolical expressions or logical demonstrations, but without the perceptions themselves being in any way dependent on the dialectic; in the second case the reason of the hearer or reader for whom the teaching is intended participates in the intellection that is being communicated, not only to the extent that the logical operation appears irrefutable, but first and foremost—even if only *a*

[123] What this reservation means is this: whereas our vision cannot exhaust the nature of a visible object, the Intellect—precisely because it can reach beyond the relative—is capable in principle of becoming identified with the absolute essence of the object in question.

posteriori—because this operation actualizes the intellection in question through the instrumentality of the reason, however partial the actualization may be.

A rationalist is a person who upholds the primacy, or rather the exclusive worth, of reason against both Intellection and Revelation, each of which he accuses of being "irrational": he will claim, for example, that a miracle is irrational because it is contrary to reason, which is an altogether useless pronouncement since nothing in any religion is opposed to reason as such; the most one can say is that the supernatural is contrary to common experience and to certain subjective tendencies that have been systematized and then given the name of logic.[124]

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We touched earlier upon an argument that we would now like to develop a little further: it is symptomatic that the initial error of the critical philosophy—the claim that the only valid experiences are sensory but that the human mind is inclined for some unknown reason to imagine others—is accompanied at least implicitly by a complete disregard for an extrinsic factor to which the greatest attention ought to have been paid, namely, the unanimity of the sages, the saints, and the millions of believers of every nation, who for countless centuries have upheld all that this critical philosophy writes off with one stroke of the pen. If metaphysical—or more generally spiritual—convictions were a feature in the life of a few savage tribes alone, we could understand how someone with no spiritual knowledge might be tempted not to acknowledge them; but how is it possible to brush aside entirely the intellectual and moral qualities of the ancient sages and to put oneself blithely on the other side of the balance? If a maximum of intelligence and virtue and a maximum of error could coincide in one and the same consciousness, as the demolishers of the human spirit and its innate truths unhesitatingly take for granted, then man would be nothing, and the emergence of philosophical luminaries—supposing them truly to be such—would by the same token be impossible. If human reason is capable of criticism, then it has always been capable of it, and there was no need to await the appearance of

[124] If the term "natural" is paradoxically extended to include everything subject to laws, then miracles are also "natural", the only difference being that in their case the laws are not psycho-physical and hence are beyond the reach of human techniques.

some pedant in order for a capacity inherent in its nature to become manifest, assuming of course that a higher capacity is involved; it would be understandable if all previous thinkers had been *minus habentes*, but this conjecture bespeaks a monstrous lack of imagination and sensitivity and is belied at every turn—we repeat—by the intellectual and moral eminence of the men at whom it is aimed. One almost feels the need to apologize for drawing attention to something so obvious.

In other words, if reason is concerned, and can be concerned, only with the sensory order—since this alone is said to be real—how can one explain in good faith the fact that the greatest spokesmen of metaphysics, men so powerfully intelligent and so little given to deception of any sort, completely failed to perceive it? And let us remind those who may have lost sight of the fact that Christ himself is included in their number. This arrogant unconsciousness on the part of philosophers—this inability to sense the intelligence and greatness of those they would like to kill with their petty, vitriolic thoughts—is for us a criterion of the most damning sort, and one that is sufficient and decisive in itself. One glance at the Psalms, the Sermon on the Mount, or the *Bhagavad Gītā* should be enough to make even the most enterprising thinker aware that he cannot possibly be more intelligent or perspicacious than the authors of these texts, so steeped in intelligence and profundity.

It follows that the intellectual and human superiority of the demolishing philosophers would have to be indeed overwhelming if their systems were true. For if their superiority is not overwhelming, if it is not proportionate to the value their systems claim, which must be measured by the greatness of what they set out to destroy, then their systems are all the more false; and the flagrant character of the disproportion, along with the gravity of the attempted destruction, redounds upon their own heads.

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It is impossible to stress the following point too much: what completely escapes the notice of the critical philosophy is that reason requires data if it is to function at all—data which it cannot extract from itself and without which its activity is illusory; here is the source of all the

differences and misunderstandings between Greek rationalism and "Oriental dogmatism": this dogmatism, far from being a product of imagination, credulity, and illogicality, proceeds essentially from suprarational knowledge, which it no doubt clothes in symbolic imagery but which nonetheless provides it with data that are strictly objective. The fact that this knowledge is inaccessible to the average intelligence and to empirical methods of investigation does not in the least alter its intrinsic certainty, nor of course does it hinder reason from basing its own operations on the knowledge in question, as indeed in certain cases it is compelled to do; it is just as impossible to reason about a country concerning which one has no knowledge as it is to reason about suprasensory realities without drawing upon the data that pertain to them, data supplied on the one hand by Revelation and traditional symbolism and on the other by intellective contemplation—when this contemplation is within the grasp of a given intelligence. Our principal criticism of modern philosophy and science is that they venture directly or indirectly onto planes beyond their compass and operate without regard to indispensable data; the most patent example of this is evolutionism, which replaces what we might call suprasensory "spaces" with fantasies projected into time. The position of science is exactly like that of a man who could grasp only two dimensions of space and denied the third because he was unable to imagine it; now what one spatial dimension is to another, so is the suprasensible to the sensible, or more precisely: so is the animic to the corporeal, the spiritual to the animic, and the Divine to the humanly spiritual.

As a matter of principle, autonomous rationalism endeavors to "start from scratch", that is, to think without any initial "dogma";[125] this is an illusion as much as it is an inconsistency, for rationalism itself starts fairly and squarely with a "dogma", namely, its gratuitous axiom that nothing exists except what is supplied to us by the reason in its service to sensible perceptions. If we are told, by means of the now classic quibble, that the burden of proof belongs to whoever makes an affirmation—regarding for example the "existence of God"—we reply that the whole question here is to know what one means by "affirmation"; to apply this term to the thesis of the suprasensible alone and to present doubt or negation as being the normal and neutral attitude, in order to escape the obligation of furnishing a proof in one's turn, is to adopt an entirely arbitrary position. In an environment where everyone acknowledges God, it is clearly atheism that stands out as the affirmation needing proof, and to claim that this is merely a question of external

[125] Which is not so in the case of religious rationalism or any other semi-rationalism.

circumstances and that unbelief is the "in-itself" or *a priori* assumption of the intelligence is to compound the error by begging the question; it is the story of the blind man philosophizing about visibility. Whoever wants to be a realist must resign himself to the obvious fact that all thought has to start from an initial premise, which cannot come from thought itself but which must include an element of certainty whose soundness thought can delineate. People sometimes boast of the "cast-iron logic" of such and such an ideological system, but they forget the essential, namely, that without a point of departure that is in keeping with the integral nature of things, or quite simply the truth, all the logic and all the "cast-iron" in the world are of no avail.

Once again, it is by no means obvious why the peremptory denial of causes lying outside our sensory experience should be regarded as conforming to reason or why it should be reasonable to label things impossible merely because they appear improbable or extraordinary from the standpoint of current experience. Equating the supernatural and the irrational is characteristic in this respect: it amounts to claiming that the unknown or incomprehensible is the same as the absurd. The rationalism of a frog living at the bottom of a well is to deny the existence of mountains: perhaps this is "logic", but it has nothing to do with reality.

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Relativistic speculations on the "thing-in-itself" are a useless luxury, for the things perceived are situated at the same level of reality, hence relativity, as the perceiving subject; the "thing-in-itself" in an absolute sense is none other than absolute Reality, which is perceptible by the Intellect alone to the extent—or in the manner—that it coincides with its essential Object. To declare that our perceptions fail to convey the whole object amounts to saying that things are not perceived by the whole Subject; for if it were the divine Subject—in reality the only subject there is—who perceived the things or who perceived them on its own unconditioned plane, they would reveal themselves in their essences, which are the archetypes or "divine names", or in their single essence as the conjunction of the pole Being and the pole Knowing. Between the relative perception of our senses and reason on the one hand and the pure Object on the other, there extends the whole hierarchy of the degrees of relativity, or degrees of reality if their positive contents are

considered.

The objection that we cannot know things as they are in themselves utterly fails to do justice to the fact of cognitive adequation, hence to the very nature of knowledge; what is decisive here is that the whole purpose of knowledge is to become conscious of a given reality: it is not the mode that counts but the thing. Differences in the viewpoints of different spectators do not prevent their perception of one and the same object from being adequate and unanimous; the fact that a tree appears smaller when seen from a distance creates no difficulty as far as objectivity and certainty are concerned. Once there is a separation between subject and object—this is cognitive polarization—there can be no absolute knowledge, but this does not prevent relative knowledge from still being knowledge and not something else, and thus "relatively absolute", if one may use such an expression.[126]

Had we five thousand senses in place of just five, we would see visible objects differently from how we see them now, but only in a certain respect since in another respect the perception would be identical—otherwise it would not be a perception at all but something else—and it is this adequation between subject and object that counts and that allows one to speak of knowledge. If we could have an absolute rather than a merely relative knowledge of a given thing, we would perceive the divine Substance within it, and we would do so through and beyond not only the angelic substance but other, intermediary cosmic envelopes; we have mentioned this already. Our knowledge of things is inevitably relative, and being relative it is also fragmentary; the cosmos is woven of relative objectivity and relative subjectivity; without relativity, there could be no existence.

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Agnostics and other relativists dispute the value of metaphysical certainty; in order to demonstrate the illusory character of the *de jure* certainty of truth, they set it in opposition to the *de facto* certitude of error, as if the psychological phenomenon of false certainties could prevent

[126] One is even obliged to use it, for otherwise real differences within relativity could not be distinguished. The same thing can be said about knowledge as about liberty: liberty is limited to the extent it is relative, but it is really liberty insofar as it is liberty and not something else.

true certainties from being what they are and from having all their effectiveness, and as if the very existence of false certainties did not prove in its own way the existence of true ones. The fact that a lunatic feels certain he is something that he is not does not prevent us from being certain of what he is and what we ourselves are, and the fact that we are unable to prove to him that he is mistaken does not prevent us from being right; or again, the fact that an unbalanced person may possibly have misgivings about his condition does not oblige us to have them about our own, even if we find it impossible to prove to him that our certainty is well founded. It is absurd to demand absolute proofs of suprasensorial realities that one thinks one ought to question while refusing in the name of reason to consider metaphysical arguments that are sufficient in themselves; for outside of these arguments the only proof of hidden realities—as we have already said—is the realities themselves. One cannot ask the dawn to be the sun or a shadow to be the tree that casts it; the very existence of our intelligence proves the reality of the relationships of causality, relationships that allow us to acknowledge the Invisible and by the same token oblige us to do so; if the world did not prove God, human intelligence would be deprived of its sufficient reason. First and foremost—leaving aside any question of intellectual intuition—the very fact of our existence necessarily implies pure Being; instead of starting with the idea that "I think; therefore I am", one should say, "I am; therefore Being is": *sum ergo est Esse* and not *cogito ergo sum.*[127] What counts in our eyes is most definitely not some more or less correct line of reasoning but intrinsic certainty itself; reasoning is able to convey this in its own way: it describes the certainty in order show to forth its self-evident nature on the plane of discursive thought, and in this way it provides a key that others might use in actualizing this same certainty.[128]

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In the wake of the critical philosophy people have come to the point of inventing axioms that

[127] Franz von Baader—a distant disciple of Boehme—proposed the formula *cogitor, ergo cogito et sum*: "I am thought (by God); therefore I think, and I am", which is a pertinent expression of the causal or ontological relationship under consideration here.

[128] How well reason performs this function depends on our dialectical capacity as well as on the need for logical satisfaction—or the degree of understanding—of our interlocutor.

destroy all possible axioms, and the most incredible thing is that they have failed to notice the fact. It is put forward as an absolute truth that no truth is absolute or as knowledge that no knowledge is possible, or that every idea has a merely psychic, passional, and shifting origin—as if a total relativism were not a contradiction, and hence absurdity itself.

We are told that philosophy must reach out beyond all necessarily subjective and limited formulations and become a freely moving flow of immediate experience. This simply proves one is ignorant of what intelligence really is; thought by definition establishes a certainty, so that every coherent doctrine is a form of dogmatism; even the fiercest empiricism is no exception to this rule but simply the dupe of its illusion of escaping it. The fact that a dogmatic concept does not itself constitute total truth has always been understood; only modern man has forgotten this: every traditional, non-theological dogmatism knows that it furnishes, and can furnish, only pointers or keys and that the inward discovery of pure truth is always a leap in the void—a leap incommensurate with mental premises, concepts, or other symbols.

We shall perhaps repeat ourselves in the following reflections, but no matter. From the exclusive standpoint of a logician, the metaphysical doctrines of the Universe are open to two criticisms: first for being naive attempts at explanation and second for having been undertaken without previous investigation of our faculties of knowledge. The first criticism is based on the utterly false assumption that a metaphysical doctrine is a logical attempt at explanation; the second, which is Kantian, is flagrant nonsense, for if nothing proves that our intelligence is capable of adequation—and what then is the intelligence?—there is likewise nothing to prove that the intelligence expressing this doubt is competent to doubt. If the optic nerve must be examined in order to be sure vision is real, it is likewise necessary to examine what examines the optic nerve, an absurdity that proves in its own indirect way that knowledge of suprasensible things is intuitive and cannot be other than intuitive; and since philosophy by definition could never limit itself to the description of phenomena available to common observation, it is forced to admit—in good logic at least—the intuitive and supralogical character of the faculty of knowledge it claims to possess. What this means is that logic is perfectly consistent only when surpassing itself.

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Our intention here is to show or recall not only what rationalism is in the strict sense of the term but also what it is not—or rather what is not it, certain similarities notwithstanding; this second task, which we now begin, may differ so considerably from the first as to give the impression of a change of subject. The synopses and comparisons to follow will be kept as succinct as possible, too succinct no doubt to cover the many questions involved but perfectly sufficient for our doctrinal intentions; to be simple is not necessarily to be simplistic, while the contrary is equally true.

Plato is sometimes included among the rationalists; this is unjust despite the unduly rationalistic style of his dialectic or his manner of thinking in a way that is too geometrical. But what puts Plato in the clearest possible opposition to rationalism properly so called is his doctrine of the eye of the soul; this eye, he teaches, is mired in a slough from which it must extricate itself in order to mount to the vision of real things, namely, the archetypes. There can be no doubt that Plato has in mind an initiatic regeneration, for he says that in the case of the ordinary man the eyes of the soul are not strong enough to bear the vision of the Divine; this mysterial background helps to explain the somewhat playful character of the Platonic dialogues, for what we are most probably dealing with here is a deliberately dialectical exoterism destined to adapt sacred teachings for a promulgation that had become desirable at the time.[129] Be that as it may, all the speculations of Plato or Socrates converge upon a vision that transcends the perception of appearances and opens onto the essence of things; this essence is the "Idea", and it confers upon things all their perfection, which coincides in turn with beauty.[130]

In Plotinus the essence of Platonism reveals itself without reserve: here it is a question of passing from the passional body to the virtuous soul and from the soul to the knowing spirit, and then from the spirit—and through it—to the suprarational and unitive vision of the ineffable One, which is the source of everything that exists; in the One the thinking subject and the object thought coincide. The One projects the Spirit as the sun projects light and heat: this means that the Spirit, *Nous,* emanates eternally from the One and contemplates it, and by this contemplation

[129] We are on the eve of the epic of Alexander: Socratic-Platonic Pythagoreanism could not be withheld from the transmission, otherwise so equivocal, of Hellenic genius; and in Greece itself the baleful influence of the Sophists had to be neutralized. Plato's anti-sophistry proves moreover the fundamentally non-rationalistic tendency of this sage.

[130] The claim that Plato was heir not only to Pythagoreanism but also to the Egyptian tradition is perhaps not to be disregarded; in this case the wisdom of Thoth would have survived in alchemy as well as partially or indirectly in Neo-Platonism—within Islam no less than in Christianity and Judaism.

it actualizes in itself the world of the archetypes or ideas—the totality of essential or fundamental possibilities—from which it produces the animic world; this in turn engenders the end point that is the material world, where the reflections of possibilities coagulate and combine. The human soul, brought forth by the One from the world of archetypes, recognizes these archetypes in their earthly reflections, and it naturally tends toward its celestial origin.

With Aristotle we are much closer to the earth, though not yet so close as to find ourselves cut off from heaven. If we begin with the idea that rationalism is the reduction of the intelligence to logic alone—hence the negation of intellectual intuition, which in reality has no need of mental crutches even though they may have to be used for communicating self-evident truths of a supramental order—then we shall see that Aristotelianism is a form of rationalism in principle but not absolutely so in fact, for its theism and hylomorphism depend on intellection and not reasoning pure and simple.[131] This is true of every philosophy conveying metaphysical truths; total rationalism is impossible except where these truths or intellections are absent.[132]

From the standpoint of this thoroughgoing rationalism, Aristotle has been criticized for stopping halfway and contradicting his own principle of knowledge; but this impression results from an illegitimate exploitation of Aristotelian logic, and it is the product of a form of thinking that is artificial to the point of perversion. A logical automatism, which the Stagirite would have been the first to repudiate, is set in opposition to Aristotle's implicit axioms, which his detractors are incapable of perceiving. On the contrary, if Aristotle is to be criticized it is because his formulation of metaphysics is governed by a tendency toward exteriorization, a tendency opposed to the very essence of all metaphysics; Aristotelianism is a science of the Inward expanding toward the outward and thus to the benefit of exteriorization, whereas all traditional metaphysics is invariably formulated for the sake of interiorization and is thus of no use for the expansion of the natural sciences, or at least not their excessive expansion. This flaw in Aristotelianism explains the superficiality of its method of knowledge[133] as well as the corresponding mediocrity of Aristotelian ethics—not to mention the resulting scientism, which proves the deviation of the epistemological principle in Aristotle's philosophy. Be that as it may,

[131] Hylomorphism is a plausible thesis, but what is much less plausible is this philosopher's opposition to the Platonic Ideas, of which his thesis is really only a prolongation, one that tends to exteriorize things to a dangerous degree owing precisely to the absence of these Ideas.

[132] The theism of Kant does not benefit from this positive reservation since for him God is merely a "postulate of practical reason", a claim that takes us to a point infinitely distant from the real and transcendent God of Aristotle.

[133] This method was inherited by Thomism and there exploited as a religious pretext for limiting the intellective faculty, despite the fact that this faculty has a capacity in principle for absoluteness and thus the supernatural.

it is important to understand that Semitic or Semitized Monotheists could not have incorporated Aristotle into their teachings if he had been exclusively a rationalist; but in incorporating him they nonetheless became poisoned, and the partial or virtual rationalism—or rationalism of principle—that results has finally given way to totalitarian rationalism: a rationalism that is systematic and self-satisfied and therefore closed to every subjectively or objectively suprarational element.[134]

The Aristotelian Pandora's Box is scientism coupled with empiricism; it is through them that Aristotle deviates from Plato by replacing the interiorizing tendency with its opposite. It is said that the Church has kept science in chains; what is certain is that the modern world has unchained it, and as a result it has escaped from all control, and in the process of destroying nature it is headed toward the destruction of man. For genuine Christianity, as for every other traditional perspective, the world is what appears to us empirically, and there is no reason for it to be anything else; here is the real meaning of the naiveté of the Scriptures and the trial of Galileo. To try to pierce the wall of collective, normal, age-old experience is to eat of the forbidden fruit; the euphoria engendered by a completely unrealistic auto-divinization of man cannot but lead fatally to the loss of essential knowledge and earthly equilibrium.

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Theology is certainly far from disdaining the assistance of logic; while it could never fall into rationalism pure and simple since it is based on Revelation, it nonetheless finds itself in a similar position insofar as its arguments display limitations in relation to both the subject and the object: in relation to the subject because the theologian relies on a certain kind of logic alone and not on intellection, and in relation to the object because the premises are reduced to fixed and exclusive conceptual forms, namely dogmas or their scriptural roots. Nevertheless the intrinsically supernatural character of the dogmas and a certain grace inherent in religion guarantee that

[134] It might seem surprising that Scholasticism chose Aristotle and not Plato or Plotinus, but the reason is plain: the viewpoint of objective faith has an interest in promoting a form of wisdom that offers no competition and that makes it possible to neutralize that spoilsport Intellection while at the same time giving free rein to any theological contradictions that might come about by calling them "mysteries".

correct theological reasoning will be free from the arbitrariness of profane thought, and they allow it to remain to a certain degree a vehicle of truth or at least a point of reference; the reasoning in question is nevertheless restrictive because of its exclusiveness, and it can even be aberrant in relation to total truth. In any case theology, whether Aristotelized or not, assumes a partially rationalistic form because of its fear of *gnosis*, a fear explained by the nonformal, supra-dogmatic, and in principle universalist character of this *gnosis*. From this follows the paradox of an intellectuality—or spirituality—with an interest in limiting the definition of intelligence, which it thinks can be reduced to a purely "natural" level, in order that the quality of the "supernatural" may be reserved for dogmas and "mysteries", whether real or not.

When Christian polemicists set the "vain wisdom" of the Hellenists in opposition to the "wisdom of Christ", they misuse the word "wisdom", which cannot bear the same meaning in both cases; the wisdom of the Greeks, whether in principle or in fact, is an objective description of the nature of things—and if its highest concepts do not lead toward God, this does not prove the falsity of the concepts but the insufficiency of men—whereas the "wisdom" Christians want to oppose to Plato is a body of moral and mystical attitudes which, on the basis of dogmas and in concert with certain means of grace, leads man away from the world and up to Heaven; this is not "wisdom", however, if the word is given the meaning of metaphysical knowledge, as one is obliged to do when speaking of Pythagoras, Plato, Plotinus, or Aristotle. The Christian invective against Hellenism can be explained by the equation of intelligence with the "natural" and by a prejudice that identifies only an ascetical and sacramental mysticism with the "supernatural";[135] it is also explained by a partisan exploitation—natural enough in this case—of Christ as the "light of the world": if Christ is this light, there can be no light elsewhere, or at least no "supernatural" light, which is alone worthy of interest. It is true that the opposite conclusion could and should be drawn, namely, that the Word is present wherever truth is found and that truth is "supernatural" because of its content and not because of its confessional origin, but in

[135] When reading the Christian polemicists, even the greatest of them, it is not always possible to avoid the suspicion that they are motivated in part by an unacknowledged feeling of jealousy; for there is something too lofty in Platonism and its characteristic serenity—not for Christianity certainly but for its zealots insofar as they are impassioned and sentimental and believe they have a right to be so. No doubt the divine Mercy accepts many things, but man for his part and before God does not have an absolute right to errors or weaknesses merely because they are in the nature of the average man, including the average among the elect. Hypatia, a great and noble figure who was not a Christian but a Neo-Platonist saint and martyr, rises out of the depths of the centuries as an ineffaceable reproach and a witness to the truth.

general this conclusion is avoided for obvious reasons of religious subjectivism.[136] "Spiritual nationalism", which is altogether natural to man, plays a role in this, as does the corresponding instinct for self-preservation, examples of which can be found in all spiritual climates.

The dialogue form of Hellenic expositions, with their aspect of debate and hence profane tone, reinforces the impression Christians have that every Greek idea is simply a rational opinion and not a certainty from above, and it likewise facilitates a confusion between sages and Sophists, despite the condemnation of the latter by the former. In order to better evaluate this Christian response, which is largely anti-rationalistic, let us recall here the general characteristics of the average Greek mentality during the "classical" period: partisans of the "Greek miracle" extol first the independence of Hellenic thinking and then the artistic naturalism that expressed this tendency; everything converges upon man, and the ideal is the perfection of man and not the transcending of his spiritual inadequacy and earthly misery; the prescriptions for improvement are rational, moral, social, and political, and they stop short at a humanistic and profane perfectionism, which is truly stifling in the absence of spiritual motivations and means. The ideal is human and earthly equilibrium, which is deprived of a vertical dimension that pierces and transmutes; from this comes an unmitigated individualism, to which a mediocre moral "reasonableness" and the sentimental naturalism of the art bear witness. The esoterism of the mysteries stands at the antipodes of these tendencies; its spirit, to which Pythagoreanism testifies, breaks through in Platonism and to a lesser degree in Aristotelianism, and it is explicitly affirmed in Neo-Platonism, which should no doubt be seen as a final reaction against the strictly "pagan" tendencies we have been describing.

These tendencies or flaws, however, do not justify the fideist opponents of Hellenism when they resort to arguments like the following, if we may speak metaphorically: Christ never said that two and two make four, and therefore anyone who says so is a miscreant or even a satanist;[137] someone who did say so had a concubine, which is one more proof that two and two

[136] Gregory Palamas, who does not shrink from basing an argument on the moral standards of Aristotle and even Plotinus—which in our view were normal in their context—in order to invalidate Hellenistic and even Neo-Platonic wisdom, criticizes the philosophers for repeatedly contradicting themselves and for having nothing but their logical constructs as a foundation; this is plausible if one sees only logic and not truths in philosophy, but these truths are present nonetheless, and they coincide by definition with Christic truth to the extent that they are essential and Christic truth is essential. In any case, despite their logic—which is certainly no weakness in itself—the philosophers have no monopoly when it comes to controversy; there are also theological disputes, as Palamas had every reason to know since his principal work is a polemic against Barlaam, a Christian monk and not a pagan philosopher.

[137] An utterly bizarre accusation, from which the Hellenists have not been spared and which appears to be based on a

do not make four; and no logic please, since the pagans use it! Those who reason along these lines—which are to be taken *cum grano salis*—readily put holiness in place of intelligence and truth, as if we had to choose between them and as if man had no other resources but morality and mystical inspiration; as we said earlier, all intelligence is reduced to the "natural" in order that it might be debarred from performing operations of which it is perfectly capable but which interfere with the program of the fideists.[138] And when it is necessary for these fideists to make use of intelligence themselves, they refer to the Holy Spirit, whose assistance is modestly claimed on the grounds that they possess the right credentials, which are of a moral rather than an intellectual order.

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Theological or, to be more precise, exoteric thought—the two do not always coincide exactly—generally shows itself incapable of grasping two divergent aspects of one and the same reality simultaneously: it works by readily moralizing alternatives, the more "pious" choice being the "truer" one in its eyes and the piety being determined by the characteristic perspective of the Revelation in question, even though this Revelation may not necessarily imply the same choice on the plane of pure truth. It is not Christ who is anti-Platonic; it is Christians who are—that is, insofar as they are: the anathemas hurled against Platonists in certain liturgical practices of the Greek Church, traditional though they may be, are nonetheless clearly derived from what we may call the "human margin". Theologically, the alleged falsity of the Platonic thesis can amount to no more than a hypothesis, one that is all the more senseless since no theologian can dispute the fact that the principles of things necessarily pre-exist in the creative Intellect—or in Providence, if one prefers—and that each positive cosmic possibility is presided over by an angelic power, which is its prototype or "idea". It is true that the dialectic of Plato leaves room

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declaration by Saint Paul that was aimed at the deviant cults of the Roman and Near Eastern world. Its extension to every non-Christian intellectual or spiritual phenomenon is in any case an abuse that cannot be excused entirely, even in the case of men who profess to scorn intelligence.

[138] It is difficult if not impossible to fix the boundary line among the early, and indeed all fundamental, Christian theologians between anti-Hellenism on the one hand and Aristotelian, Platonic, and Stoic influences on the other, especially since the latter do not exclude the former.

for some ambiguity since it does not specify where the limit lies between the contingent and the essential, whether within things or archetypes; we would say that the archetypes represent only perfections and totalities, not privative and thus fragmentary manifestations, and that there are therefore earthly phenomena that are not to be found as such in the Platonic ideas precisely because they are either privative or existentially fragmentary as a result of privation. It must be added that normal human evaluations on this plane have nothing arbitrary about them; the sufficient reason for man is to be the measure of things or values, and because of this man is capable in principle of distinguishing between what is qualitative and what is privative, and between the total and the partial.

The protagonists of an unconditional anti-Hellenism, who wish to reduce all wisdom to a strictly voluntarist and emotional perspective, strangely lose sight of the overwhelmingly obvious fact that conceptualizing and speculative metaphysical thought is in the theomorphic nature of man and that such thought cannot therefore by definition be "carnal" and "vain", and thus opposed to the penitential and mystically experimental "wisdom" they themselves advocate.

History and experience teach us that there is one thing human nature finds particularly difficult, and this is to be just; to be perfectly objective is in a way to die, either because the stakes are high or simply because the soul is little inclined to such impartiality. Religious zealots are the first to know the meaning of spiritual death, and one of the motives for their zeal is precisely their ignorance of the presence of this mystery among their adversaries; but there are different ways of dying and different degrees of death, and the death that does away with religious prejudice—to the extent one's information makes this possible and provided it is in the name of what constitutes the very essence of religion—is by no means the least of deaths, though it is certainly the least well known. "Die to oneself": this injunction has been followed by many, but all too often within the framework of a passion which, though it may have become victoriously detached from carnal things, has remained intact on a plane where it is in fact more difficult to address; here we are touching upon the mystery of the nature of the *pneumatikos* as distinct from that of the *psychikos.* And yet the polyvalent scope of "every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" is such that spiritual excellence must be the concern, not only of those who possess it, but of every man insofar as he carries it in the depths of his being.

11

To be Man is to Know

Frithjof Schuon

The evidence for the transcendent unity of religions results not only from the oneness of Truth but also from the oneness of the human race. The sufficient reason for the existence of the human creature is the capacity to think; not to think just anything, but to think about what matters, and finally about what alone matters. Man is the only being on earth able to foresee death and to desire survival, the only being who desires to know and is capable of knowing the why of the world, the soul, existence. No one can deny that it is in the fundamental nature of man to ask himself these questions and to have, in consequence, the right to answers—and to have access to them, furthermore, precisely by virtue of this right, whether through Revelation or Intellection, each of these sources of knowledge acting according to its own laws and within the framework of the conditions that correspond to it.

One would sometimes like to apologize for seeming to force doors that are already open, were it not for the fact that we live in a world in which doors that are normally open are now cunningly closed, and this to an ever-increasing extent through the influence of a psychological and subjectivist—even biologistic—relativism that still dares to call itself "philosophy." Indeed we live in an age in which intelligence is systematically undermined in its very foundations and in which it therefore becomes all the more opportune to speak of the nature of the mind if only by way of "consolation" or to furnish certain arguments for what it might be worth.

In saying this we recall a passage in the Koran in which Abraham asks God to show him how He raises the dead. God answers with the question: "Dost thou not yet believe?" Abraham answers: "Indeed I believe, but I ask this that my heart may be appeased." It is in this sense that it is, in our view, always permissible to recall truths which in themselves are quite evident, or even known by all, especially since the most widely known truths are often the most misunderstood

The distinctive mark of man is an intelligence that is total, hence objective and capable of conceiving the absolute; to say that it possesses this capacity amounts, precisely, to saying that it is objective or that it is total. Objectivity, whereby human intelligence is distinguished from animal intelligence, would lack sufficient reason without the capacity to conceive the absolute or the infinite, or without the sense of perfection.

It has been said that man is a reasoning animal, which is true in the sense that reason is the distinctive mark of man; but reason could not exist without the supra-rational intelligence that is the Intellect, which it prolongs in the direction of the world of sensorial phenomena. In the same way, language is the distinctive mark of man in the sense that it proves the presence of reason and *a fortiori* of the Intellect. Language, like reason, is proof of the Intellect, both having as their profound motivation the knowledge of transcendent realities and of our final ends.

Intelligence as such is prolonged in will and sentiment: if the intelligence is objective, will and sentiment will equally be so. Man is distinguished from animals by free will and by generous sentiment because he is distinguished from them by an intelligence that is total: totality of intelligence gives rise, by extension, to freedom of will and to generosity of sentiment or character. For man alone is capable of willing what is contrary to his instincts or his immediate self-interest; he alone can put himself in the place of others and feel with them and through them; and he alone is capable of sacrifice and pity.

The will is for realizing, but its realization is determined by the intelligence; sentiment—as regards its intrinsic and positive nature—is for loving, but its love is determined also by the intelligence, whether rational or intellectual; otherwise it would be blind. Man is intelligence, therefore objectivity, and this objective intelligence determines all that he is and all that he does.

It is logical that those who rely exclusively upon Revelation and not upon Intellection should be inclined to discredit intelligence, hence the notion of "intellectual pride." They are right when it is a question of "our" intelligence "alone," but not when it is a question of intelligence in itself, inspired by the Intellect, which is ultimately divine. For the sin of the philosophers consists, not in relying upon intelligence as such, but in relying upon their own intelligence, hence upon intelligence severed from its supernatural roots.

Two things must be understood: first, that intelligence does not belong to us, and that what does belong to us is not intelligence in its entirety; second, that intelligence, insofar as it belongs to us, is not sufficient unto itself, but has need of nobleness of soul, piety, and virtue if it is to rise above its human particularity and be reunited with intelligence as such. In fact, intelligence without virtue lacks the quality of sincerity, and the lack of sincerity necessarily limits its horizon. One must be what one wishes to become, or, in other words, one must anticipate morally—we would even say "aesthetically"—the transcendent order one wishes to know, for God is perfect in every respect. Moral integrity—and it is a question here of intrinsic morality—certainly does not guarantee metaphysical knowledge; but it is a condition for the integral functioning of the intelligence on the basis of adequate doctrinal data.

This is to say that intellectual pride—or more exactly, intellectualist pride—is excluded first of all from intelligence as such, and second from intelligence when accompanied by virtue, the latter implying as much a sense of our littleness as it does a sense of the sacred. It should also be said that if there is an intelligence which is conceptual or doctrinal, there is another which is existential or moral: it is necessary to be intelligent not only in thought, but also in our being, for it too is fundamentally an adequation to Divine Reality.

Intelligence is either individual or universal; it is either reason or Intellect; if it is individual it must find its inspiration in its universal root to the extent that it seeks to go beyond the domain of material facts. From another point of view, it is either conceptual or existential, and here too it needs to be extended: it must combine with its moral complement in order to be fully in conformity with what it seeks to perceive. Will for the Good and love of the Beautiful are the necessary concomitants of knowledge of the True, and their repercussions are incalculable.

Intelligence in principle is infallible; but it is so through God and not through us. Through God: through its transcendent root, without which it is fragmentary; and through its volitive and affective modalities, without which it is condemned in the last analysis to being no more than a play of the mind. Inversely and *a fortiori*, neither will nor sentiment can ever be dissociated from intelligence, which enlightens them and determines their applications and operations.

It has been said that reason is an infirmity, which is true if one compares it with the direct vision that is Intellection. If contingency is an infirmity, so is reason, but not in its positive aspect of adequation; this discursive adequation is necessary to man inasmuch as he finds himself situated between the outward and the inward, the contingent and the absolute. The whole debate regarding the capacity or incapacity of the human mind to know God resolves itself thus: our intelligence can know God only "by God," and therefore it is God who knows Himself in us. Reason can participate instrumentally and provisionally in this knowledge insofar as it remains united to God. It can participate in Revelation on the one hand and in Intellection on the other, the first relating to God "above us" and the second to God "within us." If by the "human mind" one understands reason divorced from Intellection or from Revelation—the latter being, in principal necessary to actualize the former—it goes without saying that this mind is capable neither of illuminating us nor, *a fortiori*, of saving us.

For the fideist, only Revelation is "supernatural"; Intellection, of whose nature he is ignorant and which he reduces to mere logic, is in his eyes "natural." For the gnostic, on the contrary, both Revelation and Intellection are supernatural given the fact that God—or the Holy Spirit—operates in the one as in the other. The fideist has every interest in believing that the convictions of the gnostic result from syllogisms, and he believes this all the more readily in that a logical operation, like any symbolism, can provoke a flash of Intellection and remove a veil from the mind. Moreover, the fideist cannot totally deny the phenomenon of intellectual intuition, but he will refrain from attributing it to the "naturally supernatural" and indwelling Revelation that is the Intellect; he will attribute it to "inspiration" and to the Holy Spirit, which is basically the same thing but safeguards the axiom of the incapacity of the "human mind."

Thomism distinguishes the knowledge "obtained by natural reason" from that "obtained by grace," which suggests that metaphysical certitudes would be gifts granted incidentally,[139] whereas in reality there is also in man what we would paradoxically call a "naturally supernatural" grace, namely the Intellect. For a light that comes to us by sudden inspiration is

[139] From the point of view of the theory of knowledge, Saint Thomas is a sensualist, thus almost a rationalist and empiricist; and yet, according to him, the principles of logic are situated in God, so that a contradiction between our knowledge and Divine Truth is impossible. This is one of the axioms of all metaphysics and all epistemology.

one thing, and a light to which we have access through our "supernatural nature" is another; nevertheless, we could call this nature a "divine immanence" and thus dissociate it from the human. as indeed we do when we affirm that God alone can know God, whether within or outside us. However that may be, the "natural" receptacle proportionate to the "supernatural" already has in itself something supernatural or divine.[140]

The essence of epistemology is what constitutes the sufficient reason and very possibility of intelligence, namely adequation, or in other words "knowledge," whatever agnostics may say; and to say adequation is to say prefiguration and even immanence of the knowable in the subject that knows or is destined to know.

The root of the polarization of the real into subject and object is situated in Being; not in the pure Absolute, Beyond-Being, but in its first self-determination. The divine *Maya* is the "confrontation," if one may say so, of God as Subject or Consciousness and God as Object or Being; it is the knowledge that God has of Himself, of His Perfection and His Possibilities.

This principial polarization is refracted endlessly in the universe, but it is so in an unequal manner—according to the requirements of manifesting Possibility—and the subjectivities as a result are not epistemologically equivalent. But to say that man is "made in the image of God" means precisely that he represents a central and not a peripheral subjectivity, and consequently a subject which, emanating directly from the Divine Intellect, participates in principle in the power of the latter; man can know all that is real and hence knowable, for otherwise he would not be the earthly divinity which in fact he is.

Relative knowledge is limited subjectively by a point of view and objectively by an aspect; since man is relative, his knowledge is relative to the extent that it is human, and it is human in the reason, but not in the intrinsic Intellect; it is human in the "brain," not in the

[140] By analogy, we could say that Mary is "divine" not only through Jesus, but also, and *a priori*, by her receptivity proportionate to the Incarnation, whence the "Immaculate Conception," which is an intrinsic quality of the Virgin. This being so, the *Logos* "was incarnated" in her already before the birth of Christ, which is indicated by the words *gratia plena* and *Dominus tecum*, and which explains why she could be represented—by Muslims as well as Christians—as the "Mother of all the Prophets." The Lotus (*Padma*) could not be the bearer of the Jewel (*Mani*) if it were not itself a theophany.

"heart" united to the Absolute. And it is in this sense that, according to a *hadīth,* "Heaven and earth cannot contain Me [God], but the heart of the believer containeth Me"—this heart which, thanks to the miracle of Immanence, opens onto the Divine "Self" and onto the infinitude, both extinctive and unitive, of the knowable, hence of the Real.

Why this detour—one may ask—by way of the human intelligence? Why should God, who knows Himself in Himself, wish to know Himself also through man? Because, as a *hadīth* tells us, "I was a hidden treasure, and I wished to be known; hence I created the world." Which means that the Absolute wishes to be known from the starting point of the relative. And why? Because this is a possibility pertaining, as such, to the limitlessness of Divine Possibility; a possibility, and thus something that cannot but be, something whose "why" resides in the Infinite.

V

Buddhism

12

Is There Room for "Grace" in Buddhism?

Marco Pallis

Marco Pallis (1895-1989) was a widely respected author on Buddhism and the Perennial Philosophy, as well as a gifted musician, composer, mountaineer, and translator. His book *The Way and the Mountain* came from his experiences with Tibetan Buddhism while traveling in the Eastern Himalayas. This selection is taken from his last publication, *A Buddhist Spectrum*.

To the question "Is there room for grace in Buddhism?" there are many today who without further reflection would give a negative reply. It is a commonplace of neo-Buddhist apologetics with an eye on the fashionable "humanism" of the Western world to stress both the exclusively self-directed achievement of the Buddha as "discoverer" of the way to enlightenment and also, on the strength of the Buddha's example, the purely empirical character of the opportunity open to those who would follow in his footsteps. Within its proper traditional context the first of these two statements is valid, whereas the second one rests on more doubtful grounds and certainly needs qualifying in several important respects. However, it can be admitted that a perspective that does not include the idea of a personal God may seem, at first sight, to leave little room for the idea of grace either. How could a merciful action from above, definable in terms of an unsolicited gift offered to men independently of their own effort, be reconciled, so some will argue, with the inflexible dispensation ascribed to the manifested universe itself, as expressed in the doctrine of concordant action and reaction, karma and its fruits? Yet this idea of "grace", which translates a divine function, is by no means unintelligible in the light of Buddhist teachings, being in fact implicit in every known form of spirituality, the Buddhist form included. The question, however, is how to situate the said idea in a manner that implies no contradiction, since it must be freely admitted that Buddhist wisdom has not given to the idea of grace the same form as it has received in the personalist and theistic doctrines of Semitic provenance; nor is such a thing to be expected, inasmuch as the "economy" of the respective traditions rests on very different premises, thus affecting both doctrines and the manner of their application in practice. Each kind of wisdom determines the nature of its corresponding method.

Buddhism has always made of this a governing principle of spiritual life at any degree or level.

Evidently the nature of the Christic revelation was such as to require a strong affirmation of the element of grace from the very outset, which was not the case with Buddhism. Such differences in the line of approach to the saving truth are in the nature of things and should cause no surprise, given the diversifying of mankind in the course of its karmic development. The important thing to recognise in this case is the fact that the word "grace" corresponds to a whole dimension of spiritual experience; it is unthinkable that this should be absent from one of the great religions of the world. In fact, anyone who has lived in a traditionally Buddhist country knows that this dimension finds its expression there too, vehicled by the appropriate forms. For us it is of interest to observe these forms and clarify for ourselves the teaching they carry explicitly or else latently. The present essay should be regarded as contributing to this clarification.

The pursuit of enlightenment, which is the purpose for which Buddhism exists, is paradoxical by its own showing inasmuch as this aim appears to require an encompassing of the greater by the less, of the imperishable by the ephemeral, of absolute knowledge by a relative ignorance; it seems to make of man the subject and of enlightenment the object of the quest. Moreover, a similar paradox applies in the theistic forms of religion; people speak of seeking God and of contemplating his perfections even while knowing that in terms of human measurement and however far along the road a man may have proceeded, God lies farther still and that no unilaterally directed human perception or effort is adequate to the divine truth, even one of its aspects, to say nothing of its essence. In Buddhist terms no human powers however stretched can possibly match up to the suchness of enlightenment. Yet Buddhahood, to which we are invited by the teaching and tradition of the Buddha and still more by his example, is just this. Nothing less is offered to us, since it is axiomatic to the Buddhist revelation as such that to reach this transcendent goal does, in principle, lie within the scope of every human being in virtue of that being's place on the axis of Buddhahood—for this is what to be human really means—and also, more indirectly, within the scope of every being whatsoever "down to the last blade of grass", as the saying goes, via the prior attainment of a human birth in this world or, if another world be in question, a birth of corresponding centrality.

For a start, it is worth pointing out that, if from the non-personalist standpoint of Buddhism the supreme goal is presented as "a state" (hence the use of a word like "Enlightenment"), from the standpoint of the Semitic religions that goal is most commonly clothed in the attributes of personality. Nevertheless in the latter religions the word "God" will always include, more or less unconsciously, the idea of the unqualifiable *Godhead*, and this is true even when the word is being quite loosely used. Despite the anti-metaphysical bias of much Western theological thinking, it would be a mistake to conclude that the qualifying of God as "person" constitutes a limit in principle. In Islam this particular danger of confusion is in practice less marked than in Christianity. Outside the Semitic world, Hinduism reconciles the two points of view, personal and impersonal, with perfect ease.

Where Buddhism is concerned, despite its preference for impersonal expressions, one could yet ask oneself "Whose is the state of enlightenment?" since the word itself, as used, does not altogether keep clear of anthropomorphic overtones; neither does one speak of Buddha, once enlightened, as "It"—all of which goes to prove that in this sphere, as in others, it is not the words used but the manner of using them in a given context that counts. Both modes of expression, the personal as well as the impersonal, are possible and therefore legitimate, since each may serve as an *upāya,* or provisional means, for the purpose of evoking, rather than defining, a reality that is inexpressible in terms of our earthly experience. Provided it has this effect on those for whom it is intended, the means in question becomes acceptable. Given our common human condition as thinking and talking animals, there is no reason to fight shy of a more or less anthropomorphic terminology when discussing even the most sublime of subjects provided one does not forget the truth that if speech is good, speech nevertheless arises from the rupture of a silence that is better still. "The Buddha's silence" regarding the nature of the Ultimate is, among his many and various *upāyas*, the most enlightening of all. When the Buddha spoke no word but merely held up a flower, Zen took birth; there is a profound lesson in this story. Fortified by this precaution, it is now possible to approach our chosen theme by quoting a famous passage from the Pali Canon (*Udana* 7:1-3) wherein lies concealed a key to the understanding of what "grace" means in a Buddhist setting. Here is the passage in question:

> There is, O monks, an unborn, an unbecome, an unmade, an uncompounded; if, O monks, there were not here this unborn, unbecome, unmade, uncompounded, there would not

here be an escape from the born, the become, the made, the compounded. But because there is an unborn, an unbecome, an unmade, an uncompounded, therefore there is an escape from the born, the become, the made, the compounded.

The above quotation is plainly couched in the language of transcendence; any Christian or Muslim could have used these same words when referring to God and the world. This transcendence is propounded by the *sutra* as providing real grounds for human hope. What it does not do, however, is to define the link between the two terms under comparison; we still need to be shown the bridge over which changefulness must pass to reach the eternal. This link or bridge in fact corresponds to that very function of divine grace that is the object of our present investigation.

The key to the problem lies in a property of transcendence itself. Given the incommensurable gap apparently fixed between enlightenment and the seeker after enlightenment—ignorant by definition—it is self-evident to anyone who thinks at all, and still more so to anyone possessed of a metaphysical flair, that such a seeking on the part of a human being with his necessarily imperfect vision and limited powers does not really make sense when taken at its face value alone. Enlightenment (or God for that matter) cannot possibly be situated at the passive pole in relation to man's endeavour, cannot *per se* become object to man as subject. If our human language sometimes makes things seem so, it is high time we became aware of its inadequacy. Buddhism for its part will add that here is patent evidence of the illusory character of the human claim to selfhood, to which all our conceptual aberrations are severally and collectively imputable.

To put the above argument somewhat differently, man cannot possibly be the active agent in an operation wherein enlightenment plays the passive part. Whatever may or may not be suggested by appearances, the truth has to be read the other way round, since enlightenment, awareness of the divine reality, belongs outside all becoming by definition; it is wholly "in act", so that wherever one discerns contingency or potentiality, as in the case of our human seeking, this of necessity pertains to *samsāra*, to the changing, the impermanent, the compounded. It is this very character of potentiality, experienceable positively as arising and negatively as subsiding, which makes *samsāra*, the Round of Existence, to be such as it is.

The consequences of the above observation are momentous; for, if there is to be a wooing of enlightenment by man, it is nevertheless the former that, in principle and in fact, remains the

real subject of the quest as well as its ostensible object. It has often been said that in enlightenment the subject-object distinction is cancelled out—a truth to bear in mind even if, in our present state, this remains more of a puzzling thought than a verified reality. Metaphysical intuition, however, already allows one to know—or shall we say, to sense—that intrinsically enlightenment is the active factor in our situation and that it is man who, for all his apparent initiative and effort, represents the passive term of the supreme adequation. Meister Eckhart puts this whole question into proper perspective when he says that "in the course of nature it is really the higher which is ever more ready to pour out its power into the lower than the lower is ready to receive it", for as he goes on to say, "there is no dearth of God with us; what dearth there is is wholly ours, who make not ready to receive his grace". Where he said "God", you have but to say "enlightenment", and the result will be a Buddhist statement in form as well as content.

The great paradox, for us, is that we still cannot help viewing this situation in reverse; a misplaced egocentricity makes us do so: we all have to suffer the congenital illusion of existence, in which every creature as yet undelivered shares in greater or lesser degree. Buddhism invites us to get this thing straight in the first place, prior to showing us that the two viewpoints on reality, the relative and absolute, *samsāra* and *nirvāna*, essentially coincide, as the Heart Sutra explicitly teaches.

In China the Taoists have always spoken of the "activity of heaven"; for us to speak of the "activity of enlightenment" is in no wise far-fetched. This is in fact the function of grace, namely to condition men's homecoming to the centre from start to finish. It is the very attraction of the centre itself, revealed to us by various means, which provides the incentive to start on the way and the energy to face and overcome its many and various obstacles. Likewise grace is the welcoming hand into the centre when man finds himself standing at long last on the brink of the great divide where all familiar human landmarks have disappeared. Only he who came down from heaven can ascend to heaven, as the Gospel says, but about this mystery it is useless for ignorance to speculate, let alone speak. Till the great leap in the dark is taken, faith in the Buddha's enlightenment must be our lamp, since all that stems from light is light, and even our darkness, did we but know it, is none other than the dazzlement inflicted by a radiance too intense for samsaric eyes to bear.

The attractive influence of enlightenment, experienced as providential and merciful emanation from the luminous centre, strikes on human consciousness in three ways, which might be described respectively as: (1) invitation into enlightenment, (2) companionship of enlightenment, and (3) reminders of enlightenment.

The first-named corresponds to "conversion", the gift of faith. The second corresponds to man's being "in a state of grace", in virtue of which his apparent weakness is enabled to envisage tasks and surmount obstacles far beyond ordinary human strength. The third way coincides with the supplying of various "means of grace", that is to say *upāyas* consecrated by tradition—scriptural teachings, methods of meditation, initiatic rites, and the like. Moreover, the whole inspiration of an art properly describable as "sacred" issues from this source. In short, whatever serves as a reminder of enlightenment or helps to keep attention in that line of vision is a "means of grace" in the sense here intended. It is worth dwelling on the above three factors of attraction in somewhat greater detail.

Invitation into enlightenment. This phrase has been coined by way of describing a man's first clear experiencing of an overriding call to turn his religious life into a reality. Antecedent circumstances, such as a person's background formation or the degree of his or her intellectual maturity, need not be taken into account in the present instance; all one is concerned with is the nature of the event itself.

Until "the thought of enlightenment" (*bodhi-citta*) has gained a place in one's consciousness, one can hardly claim to be "travelling" in a Buddhist sense. The awakening of faith remains a great mystery; its negative concomitant will always be a certain turning away from the world, and it is only later (save by rare exception) that any question of integrating the world positively, in the sense of the essential identity of *samsāra* and *nirvāna* as expressed in the Heart Sutra (this was mentioned before), can play an effective part in one's preoccupations. "Non-duality" is not for the beginner; presented as an abstract theory, this idea can even be harmful for a mind insufficiently prepared, because it leads only too easily to pretensions of an ego-inflating kind—hence the danger of much that passes for Zen or *Vedānta* today. The extreme reticence of some religious groups on the subject, which it is the fashion to blame, is by no means unjustified in the light of results.

An important thing to notice here is that the sense of spiritual urgency, whether coming to a person suddenly or else by hardly perceptible steps, is experienced as a call to activity whereof

the person himself is in the first place the passive recipient, having done nothing particular to bring it about; this is typical and normal and admirably fits in with the description of a grace as being "free gift". All at once a peremptory urge takes root in that man's soul, telling him that enlightenment is the only thing of worth in its own right and that all other things, be they great or small, can only be properly valued in proportion as they contribute to that end or else impede its attainment. Once this has happened, the essentials of spiritual life are there, namely discernment between the real and the illusory and the will to concentrate upon the real; this latter definition comes from Frithjof Schuon. However elementary may be one's present awareness of this twofold call, whereof wisdom and method are the respective expressions, it can be said with certainty that a foretaste of enlightenment has been received; it is as if a ray spontaneously emitted from the centre has come in to effect a first incision in the shell of human ignorance because the Buddha-nature in a man wishes to be delivered. More than this cannot be said about something that baffles all the calculations of the ordinary mind.

Companionship of enlightenment. If invitation into the Way is something of a unique event in a human life, the graces to be experienced in the course of following that way are multiple in the sense that they repeat that first call at various stages of spiritual development in the form of an urge to proceed further, to deepen this experience or that, to eliminate such and such causes of distraction, or to concentrate on this or that aspect of awareness. This process can be illustrated by comparing it to the climbing of some mountain ridge leading to a summit. At the start of the ascent the thought of the summit alone possesses one's mind, but when once one is actually on the ridge each successive pinnacle or gash needing to be surmounted will engage all one's attention to the point of temporarily eclipsing remembrance of the summit itself. The nearer obstacles do in fact continue to reveal the existence of the summit by implication, but also in a sense they veil it; in other words, each obstacle in turn serves to symbolise the summit and thus becomes a factor of awareness in a relative sense. Thus do the things encountered in samsaric existence prove the latent presence of enlightenment even while appearing to hide it. A "symbol" is a key to knowledge; an "idol" is a symbol taken for a reality in its own right. This is a fundamental distinction to bear in mind, because symbolism, properly understood and applied, is the very stuff of the spiritual alchemy whereby the samsaric lead may be transmitted into the Buddhic gold it is in principle. In all

this process, be the way long or short, the companionship of enlightenment is operating like a ferment, an ever-present grace filling the gap, as it were, between our human incapacity and the apparently superhuman task to which we are committed, thanks to a human birth.

Seeing that the Way with its stages has just been mentioned in correlation with the effusion of grace, this will provide an opportunity to discuss one question that has often been a cause of confusion, namely how we are to situate our own present life in the general scheme of transmigration as set forth by Buddhism. For this purpose a brief digression will not come amiss.

The question might be put this way: When considering the path to enlightenment, are we to take into account, as some might ask, the extended possibilities implied in successive births (sometimes reckoned by the million), or should we confine our attention to present existence while ignoring the rest except in the sense of a more or less schematic representation of *samsāra*, the world's flow, as conditioned by the continual interplay of action and reaction, karma and its fruits? This is indeed a pertinent question to put, since it touches something quite fundamental in Buddhism, namely the truth that to know *samsāra*'s true nature is to know *nirvāna*, nothing less. The converse also holds good; for, if one may be allowed to paraphrase a sentence of Saint Thomas Aquinas, "A false opinion concerning the world will fatally engender a false opinion concerning enlightenment" (Saint Thomas says "concerning God"); the two awarenesses hang together as a single reality.

Coming as a fresh and unfamiliar idea, transmigration often makes a strong appeal to a Western mind just because it seems to provide for "a second chance", for the possibility of taking the way to enlightenment by easy stages instead of having to stake one's all on a single throw, as the Semitic eschatologies would appear to suggest. For one who takes this complacent view of his human opportunities, it is only too easy to read into the doctrine of samsaric rebirth something closely akin to the current belief in a one-directional "progress"; whether this belief is clothed in the more scientific-sounding phraseology of "evolution" on Teilhardian lines or otherwise makes no matter.

Obviously such a view disagrees with Buddhism inasmuch as it misses the chief point about transmigration, namely its essential *indefinitude*—this can never be said too often—as also, incidentally, the high degree of improbability attaching to any kind of human rebirth when weighed up in terms of karmic consequence. It is not very logical (to say the least of it) to

spend most of one's earthly life in the pursuit not of enlightenment but of all that is unnecessary and trivial and then to expect this life to repeat itself in human form; yet this is precisely the life led by a majority of people and not least by those whom the world regards as highly civilised and admires for their manipulative dexterity or their insatiable erudition. What right have these people to expect privileged treatment when the time comes for them to be weighed on the karmic scales? Have they ever given a thought to that saying about "human birth hard to obtain", which runs through Buddhism like a refrain? If one wishes to be honest with oneself, one has to admit that in most cases rebirth as a worm would be a merciful requital; certainly one is being less than prudent if one assumes that the hells of Buddhism are only there to accommodate murderers and gangsters. How many of us would ever have the nerve to commit murder? To what kind of rebirth, then, is it likely that a frittered consciousness will lead, or a persistent lukewarmness in respect of truth?

The Semitic eschatologies, which offer man the single alternative "salvation or perdition", can at least claim an empirical realism for this narrowing of choice on the grounds that such an attitude makes for a sense of urgency in life and is therefore, spiritually speaking, an *upāya* adjusted to its purpose. For the Buddhist, what in fact replaces the Christian's fear of God's wrath is the fear of interminable wandering through *samsāra*, now up, now down, but never free from suffering. Any attempt to read into the samsaric process an idea of something like a uniform cosmic movement endowed with an optimistic trend is as un-Buddhist as it is improbable in itself.

In point of fact, whenever enlightenment is attained, this is always from the vantage point of a particular human life, or an equivalent state if another world system is in question; the individual called Prince Siddhartha who became Sakya Muni Buddha perfectly illustrates the above statement. One must not slip into thinking of enlightenment as if it were the last and sweetest of a long-drawn-out harvest of samsaric fruits. Good karma, any life well spent, contributes to one's enlightenment, first because virtue is dispositive to knowledge while vice does the reverse and second because, within the scale of samsaric possibilities, good karma promotes the emergence of fresh creations in relatively favourable surroundings as, for instance, in countries where enlightenment is not forgotten, which is no small advantage in this world. To this extent a life well and intelligently spent is not irrelevant to one's attainment of the goal, even if one stops short somewhere on the path. To admit this is, however, very

different from turning this possibility of good karma into an excuse for postponing one's best efforts till a future life assumed to be better than the present one. This very attitude almost makes it certain that it will be worse. In any case, so long as one remains a samsaric being, any kind of relapse is possible; it is salutary to bear this in mind while putting all one's effort into immediate opportunities consonantly with present grace. Above all it should be remembered that enlightenment, if and when it comes, spells a reversal of all samsaric values or, in a still deeper sense, their integration. If it is currently said of a Buddha that "he knows all his anterior births", this is because he is identified with the heart of causality, the mysterious hub of the wheel of becoming where no motion ever was or could be. Beings still in *samsāra* do not enjoy this possibility, so that it would seem in every way more practical for them to make the best of a human opportunity while they have it, instead of banking on a future that could be anything from a paradise of *deva*s to an infernal sojourn amid fire or ice.

A most important thing to remember in all this is that the attainer of enlightenment is not "this man so-and-so" but rather that it is by the ending of the dream of one's own "so-and-so-ness" that enlightenment arises. As far as knowledge of *samsāra* is concerned, what is needed is for each thing to be put in its own place, neither plus nor minus, including one's own person. When all things have become transparent to the point of allowing the Uncreated Light to shine right through them, there is nothing further to become. Becoming is the continual process of resolving internal contradictions, fruits of the dualistic tree, by means of partial compensations leading to fresh contradictions, and so on indefinitely. To understand this process with full clarity is to escape its domination. The Buddha has shown the way.

With this question behind us, let us take up the last of our three headings, *reminders of enlightenment,* but this need not long detain us; it is enough to have listed a certain number of type examples of "means of grace" as supplied by the tradition under various forms and in view of various uses. All traditional civilisations abound in such reminders; once one is aware that they exist, it is easy to observe the workings of grace through the medium of these forms. Nevertheless, there remains one example that deserves quite special attention as a supreme reminder and means of grace: this is the sacramental image of the Blessed One found in every corner of the Buddhist world. We will take up this subject in due course.

The next channeling of grace to be offered to the reader's attention is one that takes us into a spiritual dimension close to the heart of things. This is the function of *guru*, or spiritual master, of him who initiates a man into the path that leads via the higher states of consciousness to the threshold of enlightenment itself—so near and yet so far, since the final passage remains pure mystery whereof grace alone holds the key. In a very special sense the spiritual master is the representative of "the spirit that bloweth where it listeth". His qualification for such an office devolves on him outside any determinable test. If he is not yet discovered, his very seeking confers light; when found, his favour may yet be granted or withheld without any reasons given. His displeasure is the bitterest medicine for any man to swallow. In his master's presence the disciple is expected to behave as if the Buddha himself stood before him; in the Christian initiation centred on the Jesus Prayer, the same advice is given, with substitution of the person of Christ.

In relation to the *Sangha* the *guru* stands for its essence; this is true even if the master is not himself a *bhikku*, though obviously he often is that too. The famous *guru* of Mila Repa, Marpa, was a consecrated layman with a family, than whom no greater master has existed anywhere; just as in the matter of discipleship Mila Repa is unsurpassed, to say the least of it. His own poems, the most beautiful in the Tibetan language, ring of the *guru*'s grace at every turn, even though as far as personal effort is concerned Mila Repa's persistence in the face of Marpa's calculated (but ever so compassionate) snubbing is something so unheard of as to make one think that a man must be born a Tibetan to stay such a course.

However, the human *guru* is not the whole story; there is another *guru* to be considered, interior this time and whose visible counterpart the outward *guru* is. "Intellect" is his name, Socrates's *daemon*; it is unfortunate that later usage has debased a word that by rights should be confined to the intuitive intelligence indwelling at the heart of every being and especially of man, the immanent grace about which Christ said "the Kingdom of Heaven is within you". When the outer *guru* has done his work, he hands over to the *inner* guru, leaving him to do the rest.

Intellect can save us because it is that in us which needs no saving, seeing that enlightenment is in its very substance. Stemming from light, it itself is light, leading back to light. The great puzzle is our egotism, our false sense of selfhood and consequent reluctance to let go what never makes us really happy. Our recurring dissatisfactions are also *guru*; all we

have to do is to trace these dissatisfactions to their primary cause. This is the positive message of suffering, a message that also harbours a hope, one that surely cannot forever remain unheeded. The Buddha's "First Truth" really teaches nothing different.

Let us now take a brief flight out of this suffering world in order to visit the homeland of grace and the source of its bountiful stream. Mahayana Buddhism speaks of three *kayas*, or bodies of Buddhahood, or, if one so prefers, three mansions of enlightenment considered respectively as essence or suchness, fruition or bliss, and avataric projection into the world; the corresponding Sanskrit names are *Dharma-kaya*, *Sambboga-kaya*, and *Nirmana-kaya,* and it is especially of this third body that something must now be said, as relating directly to the question of grace and its manifestation among beings.

A quotation from a short but highly concentrated Tibetan *sutra* composed in verse, *The Good Wish of Great Power*, will provide us with the essential data: "Uninterruptedly my *avatāra*s [incarnations] will appear in inconceivable millions and will show forth various means for the conversion of every kind of being. Through the prayer of my compassion, may all sentient beings of the three spheres be delivered from the six samsaric abodes."

Traditionally, the "revealer" of this *sutra* is given as the Buddha Samanta Bhadra, the "All Good"; significantly his name is preceded by the prefix *Adi*—or primordial—thus stressing the principial nature of the attribution. Concerning the primordial reality whereof this Buddha is spokesman, it is also said that neither the name of *nirvāna* nor of *samsāra* applies to it, for it is pure "non-duality" (*advaita*) beyond all possible distinction or expression. To realise this truth fully is to be *buddha*, awake; not to realise it is to wander in samsaric existence; the *sutra* says this expressly.

In their ceaseless warfare waged against men's proneness to superimpose their own concepts on the Divinity as such, the Buddhist *sutra*s have introduced the word "void" to suggest the total absence of positive or negative definability; hence also the Buddha's title of *Shunya-murti*, "Form of the Void"—a contradiction in terms that again serves to underline a truth that eludes all attempts at positive enunciation.

As soon as one passes over to attribution, by saying of divinity that "it is" or "is not" this or that or else by giving names such as "all good", etc., one is perforce in the realm of being; the merciful epithet mentioned above is, among names, one of the first to impose itself. The visible sign of this merciful presence is to be seen in the stream of avataric revelation

(hence the use of the word "millions" in the *sutra*), the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who appear in the various world systems and, through their own enlightenment, show the way of deliverance to creatures. Our *sutra* concludes with the following words: "May beings of the three spheres one and all by the prayer of my contemplation… finally attain Buddhahood." This grants the very charter of grace and of its operation in the world; it hardly calls for further comment.

All that can usefully be added is perhaps to point out that if, in Christianity for example, the aspect of "Divine Personality" may sometimes seem to have obscured the Suchness of the Godhead itself, in the case of Buddhism, though this danger has been sedulously avoided, a certain personal expression of the Divine is nevertheless to be found in "distributive" form, namely as the heavenly company or *sangha* of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, with the former standing for its static and the latter for its dynamic aspect, as mercy when projected into *samsāra* itself. In the final section of this essay, when the Pure Land doctrine is discussed, this question will be taken up again.

After this excursion to the heights we must come down to earth again and examine one concrete means of grace, mentioned before, which perhaps more than all others has helped to keep remembrance of enlightenment alive among men. This is the image of the Buddha making the "earth-touching" (*bhumi-sparsha*) gesture. Every corner of the Buddhist world knows and loves this image; both Theravada and Mahayana have produced marvelous examples of it. If there is a symbolical representation to which the word "miraculous" properly applies, this surely is the one.

The story of how a Buddha image came to exist at all is instructive, since Buddhism at the beginning did not incline to anthropomorphic imagery, preferring more elementary symbols. It is said that several abortive attempts were made to put the Buddha's likeness on record from motives of a personal kind, such as the wish to remember a loved and revered figure and so on; a certain confusing of appearance and reality is always involved in such cases, hence the prohibition of the "graven image" by Judaism and Islam, for instance. However, in this case the compassion of the Victorious One intervened; he was prepared to allow an image of himself, provided this was a true symbol and not a mere reproduction of surfaces—this distinction is very important. Yielding to his devotees' prayers, the Buddha projected his own form miraculously, and it was this projection that provided the model for a true icon, fit to

serve a purpose other than that of personal adulation, such as a sacred theme by definition precludes.

I should like to quote here from *Sacred Art in East and West* by Titus Burckhardt, in which a whole chapter is devoted to the traditional *Buddha-rupa*. After mentioning the above story about the frustration of the artists and the miraculous projection, the author continues:

> The sacred icon is a manifestation of the grace of the Buddha, emanating from his supra-human power…. If one considers the matter fully one can see that the two aspects of Buddhism, the doctrine of *karma* and its quality of grace, are inseparable, for to demonstrate the real nature of the world is to transcend it; it is to manifest the changeless states … and it is a breach made in the closed system of becoming. This breach is the Buddha himself; thenceforth all that comes from him carries the influx of *Bodhi***.**

The enlightening function of the sacred image could not have been better put.

Before going into the various details of the image itself, it were well to refresh our memory about the episode in the Buddha's life which this particular posture is meant to perpetuate. Everyone will remember that shortly before his enlightenment the Buddha-to-be proceeded into the great primeval forest near the place in Bihar now called Bodh-gaya and there found a spreading pipal tree (*Ficus religiosa*), at the foot of which a seat stood ready prepared for one destined to become the Light of the World; the tree itself obviously stands for the world's axis, the Tree of Life, as Genesis calls it. Just as he was about to take his seat there, Mara the tempter appeared before him, challenging his right to the adamantine throne. "I am prince of this world," Mara said, "so the throne belongs to me." Then the Bodhisattva stretched forth his right hand and touched the earth, mother of all creatures, calling on her to witness that the throne was his by right, and earth testified that this was so.

In the classical form of this image the Buddha is always shown sitting upon a lotus; choice of this water plant is in itself significant inasmuch as in traditional lore "the waters" always symbolise existence with its teeming possibilities, that *samsāra* which the Buddha was to show the way to overcome, not by mere denial but by showing forth its true nature. As for the figure itself, its right hand points downward to touch the earth as in the story while its left hand is turned upward to support the begging bowl, sign of a *bhikku*'s estate. Just as the *bhikku* in his bowl catches whatever the passer-by may choose to cast into it, whether much

or little, not asking for more but letting it serve his own sustenance for the day, so also man has to accept the heavenly grace as the free gift it is. In the two gestures displayed by the Buddha image the whole programme of man's spiritual exigencies is summed up.

Toward the earth, that is to say toward the world to which he belongs by his existence, man's gesture is *active*; such an active attitude is always needed where the world and its manifold temptations and distractions are concerned. Toward heaven and its gifts, on the other hand, the spiritual man is *passive*; he is content to receive the dew of grace as and when it falls and to refresh his more or less flagging powers with its aid. As for the ignorant man, he does just the reverse, showing himself soft and accommodating toward the world while making all kinds of conditions of his own choosing where the things of heaven are concerned, if indeed he deigns to give them any thought at all. For the truly mindful man, even his own *karma* can be both grace and *guru*, not merely in the sense of reward or sanction imposed by a cosmic law, but because *karma* is a potent and inescapable reminder of enlightenment as the crying need of man and as the only unequivocably reasonable object of his desires. Accepted in this sense, *karma*, whether good or evil, can be welcomed as Savitri once welcomed Death when he came to claim her husband and by her resignation overcame him. Contemplated rightly, the Buddha's sacramental image tells us all these things. For us, it is the means of grace *par excellence*.

Sufficient has by now been said (or so one hopes) by way of answering our original question as to whether Buddhism leaves any room for grace. One last illustration, however, will serve to clinch the argument by showing that the idea of grace can play a predominant part in a doctrine that nonetheless remains Buddhist in both form and flavour. This is the Pure Land doctrine (*Jodo* in Japanese), developed around the vow of the Buddha Amitabha and using, for its single operative means, the invocation of his name. The name itself means "Infinite Light", and the Buddha thus denoted is the one who presides over the Western quarter, where his own "Buddha-land" is symbolically situated. It must be mentioned, in passing, that Europeans who feel drawn to Buddhism have hitherto been inclined to avoid the Pure Land form of it just because of its insistence on grace, described there as *tariki* (other power), which reminded them too much of the Christianity they believed themselves to have left behind. Western seekers have on the whole felt more drawn to *jiriki* (own power) methods, those where personal initiative and heroic effort are greatly stressed—hence their

preference for Zen (or what they take for such) or else Theravada interpreted in an ultra-puritanical, not to say humanistic, sense; not for anything would these people be mistaken for miserable, God-dependent Christians! I hope, however, to show that the two lines of approach, *jiriki* and *tariki*, are by no means as incompatible as some affect to believe and that, despite contrasts of emphasis, the two belong together and are in fact indispensable to one another.

Taking Zen first, one thing that many of its foreign admirers are apt to lose sight of is the fact that, in its own country, those who feel called into that way will already, since childhood, have been moulded by the strict discipline of Japanese tradition in which respect for authority, an elaborate civility, and the acceptance of many formal restraints all play their allotted part and where all the basic assumptions of Buddhism can also be taken for granted. Nor must one forget the Shinto element in the tradition, with its cult of nature on the one hand and its inculcation of the chivalrous virtues on the other; the Japanese soul would not be what it is without both these influences to fashion it. Thus prepared, a man can face both the severity of a Zen training and also that element of the outrageous in Zen which so fascinates minds anxious to react against the conventional values of their own previous background, with its ready-made morality and its conceptual triteness. All these things have to be seen in proportion if they are to be rightly understood.

For those who think that Zen is pure "self-power" without any "other power" admixture, it is well to point out that at least one of the manifestations of grace listed in this essay plays a most important part there: this is the *guru*, or *roshi*, who, since he is not the disciple, must represent "other power" in relation to the latter, say what one will. That Zen, despite its constant exhortation to personal effort, does not exclude the *tariki* element was proved to me (if it needed proof) by a Japanese Zen lecturer who came to England some years ago. At the end of his talk I went up to the platform and asked him: "Is it correct to say that, as between 'own power' and 'other power', each always will imply the other? If one is affirmed, can one then assume the other as latent, and vice versa?" "But of course," the speaker answered. "They are two sides of the same coin. This is self-evident. Moreover, is not Zen a non-dualistic doctrine?"

A story that has provided many Japanese painters with a subject will further serve to illustrate this same point. This is the story of Zen's redoubtable Patriarch, Bodhidharma, and of

his crossing the ocean borne on a reed or sprig of bamboo; for "ocean", *samsāra* is to be understood, this being the traditional symbolism of the waters all the world over.

It is said that on one occasion Bodhidharma came to the seashore, wishing to cross to the other side. Finding no boat, he suddenly espied a piece of reed and promptly seized and launched it on the water; then, stepping boldly on its fragile stalk, he let himself be carried to the farther shore. Now, Bodhidharma was a sage; he knew that "own power" and "other power", dedicated free will and grace, are in essence the same, and his own use of the reed for a vehicle rests on that very awareness. For us onlookers, however, the point to note is that Bodhidharma *found* that reed on the seashore; he neither created it nor brought it with him. Who was it, then, that placed that reed there ready to be discovered? The "other power"; it could be no other. The reed came to the Zen Patriarch as a grace, to which in the first place he could but be passive; then, having received it, he responded actively by an appropriate initiative and crossed the waters of *samsāra* to the other shore. Hereby the moral of the Buddha image is pointed once again, if in different form.

By contrast with Zen, the Pure Land doctrine offers itself as a typical way of grace; hence the suggestion put forward by some that *Jodo*, in its early Chinese days, was influenced by Christian teachings brought to China by members of the Nestorian sect from Syria—a gratuitous hypothesis if ever there was one, since *Jodo* in all essentials remains a typically Buddhist form of wisdom. The following brief outline of the Pure Land teaching will make its theoretical position sufficiently clear for present purposes.

A certain Bodhisattva by the name of Dharmakara was about to enter the state of enlightenment when, moved by compassion, he said to himself: "How can I bear to enter *nirvāna* when all the multitude of beings have to stay behind, a prey to indefinite transmigration and suffering? Rather than leave them in that state, I vow that if I am not able to deliver them down to the last blade of grass, then let me never reach enlightenment!" But in fact (so the argument runs) he did reach enlightenment and now reigns, as the Buddha Amitabha, over the Western quarter; therefore his vow cannot have failed in its object; suffering beings can and must be delivered, if only they will have faith in Amitabha's vow and call upon his name. This they do through the *nembutsu*, the formula "Praise to Amitabha Buddha" (in Japanese *Namu Amida Butsu*). Invocation of this formula in selfless reliance on the vow is, for the Pure Land devotee, his constant means of grace, the sign of his

unconditional surrender to the "other power". To think of effort or merit or knowledge as "one's own" inevitably implies clinging to a fancied selfhood, disguise this as one will; it violates the first and last condition of deliverance. Who can speak of self-power when he lacks the first idea of what self means?

From here, the Pure Land dialectic goes on to say that in the early days of Buddhism men doubtless were stronger, more self-reliant; they could take severe disciplines and follow ways of meditation of the *jiriki* type. But now, thanks to our bad *karma*, we are living in the latter days, dark and sin-ridden, when men have grown weak, confused, and above all hopelessly passive. Well, then, says the Pure Land teacher, let this very weakness of theirs be turned to good account; let it offer itself humbly to Amitabha's grace, yielding before the power of his vow. If by the force of his vow the righteous can be delivered, how much more will this be true of sinners whose need is so much greater! Compare with this the words of Christ: "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance"; in their implications the two statements are not so very different.

It is of interest to note that in Tibet a method of invocation exists that is in many ways reminiscent of *nembutsu*. It uses a six-syllable formula of which the mystical associations are too complex to be discussed in a few words; it is enough to know that it is called the *mani mantra* and that its revealer is the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara (Chenrezig in Tibetan), who in the heavenly *Sangha* personifies compassion. For present purposes the significant point to notice is that Chenrezig himself is an emanation of the Western Buddha Amitabha, having taken birth from his head, a mythological feature showing the evident kinship of *mani* and *nembutsu*. A difference worth noting, moreover, is that, whereas Amitabha's mercy, being that of a Buddha, has a "static" quality, the compassion of Chenrezig is dynamic, as befits a Bodhisattva who, by definition, operates *in the world* as helper of suffering creatures. Every Bodhisattva as such is in fact a living embodiment of the function of grace.

Before concluding this essay I cannot forbear from pointing out a case of what may be called "spiritual coincidence", as between two widely separated traditions, the Buddhist and the Islamic; this coincidence is attributable neither to borrowing nor to any cause of a haphazard kind, but stems from the very nature of things.

The opening line of the Koran is "Bismi 'Lahi 'r-Rahmani 'r-Rahim", which has usually been translated as "In the Name of God, the Clement, the Merciful"; in Arabic a common root

renders the connection between these two names still closer. Now, some well-instructed Muslim friends have explained to me the difference between the above names consists herein, namely that *Ar-Rahman* refers to God's clemency as an intrinsic quality of the Divine Being, whereas *Ar-Rahim* refers to that quality as projected into the creation. It expresses the dynamic aspect of clemency, mercy poured forth and reaching creatures in the form of grace as well as in other ways. Like the Buddhist compassion, it has a dynamic quality; it must find an object for its exercise. It is easy to see that these two names respectively correspond, in all essentials, to Amitabha and Chenrezig: a shining confirmation from an unexpected quarter!

But let not this surprise us unduly; for in the Pure Land of enlightenment, is it not true to say that all religious ways must surely meet?

13

The Mystery of the Bodhisattva

Frithjof Schuon

There is a side of Buddhism which makes it akin not only to Christianity but also to the Semitic religions in general—paradoxically so, considering its nontheistic character—in the sense that its starting point is related to a human point of view rather than to the metaphysical nature of things. Indeed, when it is said that Existence is but suffering and that the Absolute is the cessation of suffering, and further that human perfection lies in "compassion for all living beings," this opens up a perspective conformable to our human situation and ultimate interests, but it does not straightaway give the most direct possible definition of "that which is," if one may thus express it when thinking of both the manifested Universe and that which transcends it. Such an observation is not, however, of a kind that logically need embarrass Buddhists,[141] and this for two reasons: first, because they are not unaware of the fact that the doctrines of the Buddhas are only "celestial mirages" intended to catch, as in a golden net, the greatest possible number of creatures plunged in ignorance, suffering, and transmigration, and that it is therefore the benefit of creatures and not the suchness of the Universe which determines the necessarily contingent form of the Message; and second, because Buddhism, within the framework of its own wisdom, goes beyond the formal "mythology" or the "letter" and ultimately transcends all possible human formulations, thus realizing an unsurpassable contemplative disinterestedness as do the Vedanta, Taoism, and analogous doctrines.

Hence the question that Shakyamuni might have asked himself—if he had needed to ask one—was, "Which is the most effective way of conveying the saving Truth to men—or to certain men—in these latter times?" and not "Which is the most adequate—or least inadequate—formulation of the metaphysical nature of things?" Neither the Vedanta nor Neo-Platonism includes the possibility of usefully addressing all men and serving as the vehicle of an integral tradition, nor indeed is this their purpose. But Buddhism wishes to and has to include this possibility and cannot therefore fail to offer itself first of all as an *upāya*, a "provisional means," with an aim that is above all charitable, in the broadest and most complete sense of

[141] No more so than the anthropomorphism of the Semitic Scriptures need embarrass Kabbalists, Gnostics, or Sufis.

that word. Buddhists, it must be stressed, find it all the easier to recognize this because they are—especially in Zen—far from claiming that the nirvanic Truth can be enclosed definitively within the mold of any dialectic. Nevertheless there results from this general situation—apart from any fluctuations of terminology—a certain difficulty in speaking of Knowledge in such a way as to satisfy simultaneously the metaphysical truth and the voluntaristic and emotional side of Buddhism.

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Primitive Buddhism distinguishes extrinsically between a *Samyaksam-Buddha* and a *Pratyeka-Buddha*; the former corresponds to what Hindus would call a major *Avatāra*, having by definition the function of "founder of a religion," and the latter to *a jīvan-mukta*—a man "delivered in this life"—who has neither the quality of a major or plenary *Avatāra* nor consequently the function attaching to such a one; and not having had a Buddha as master, neither does he have disciples.[142] After this comes the *Shrāvaka*, who is a disciple—or the disciple of a disciple—of the Buddha; like the *Pratyeka-Buddha,* he is an *Arhat* or perfected saint, but is such thanks to the direct influence of the Master. Finally there is the Bodhisattva who, in principle, is a saint on the way to becoming a Buddha.

Now, when it is stated, as in the Mahayana writings, that the station of a *Pratyeka-Buddha* is inferior to that of a Bodhisattva because the realization of the former is "self-centered" and lacks compassion for creatures, it seems to be forgotten—or at least this logical objection comes to mind *a priori*—that *Nirvāna* implies by definition the abolition of all egoism and the realization of total charity. This is an objection which the Mahayana itself raises in its own way and in its sapiential dimension, without really contradicting itself since it recognizes two

[142] It could be that the *Pratyeka-Buddhas* are in fact identical to the Hindu *Yogis* and *Avatāras*, of whom earliest Buddhism could obviously not be unaware and whom it needed to "situate" in one manner or another. The saints of Brahmanism indeed "have no master" in the sense that they do not follow the Buddha, and they "have no disciples" because they do not teach Buddhism and do not address the Buddha's followers. But it might also be admitted—and one thing need not exclude the other—that the *Pratyeka-Buddhas* correspond to the category of saints whom the Sufis call "solitaries" (*afrad*, from *fard*) and who likewise have neither masters nor disciples. Be that as it may, the Sutra of the Rhinoceros (*Khaggavisāna-Sutta*), in which Shakyamuni has a *Pratyeka-Buddha* speak, seems to indicate that this type of sainthood is based essentially on the mystery of solitude (*mauna*), which calls to mind an inscription we once saw in a medieval hermitage: *O beata solitudo, o sola beatitudo*.

truths, the one relative and provisional and the other absolute and definitive, and since its doctrinal form is essentially apophatic and antinomic. In other words, when it is said that the Mahayana is "great" (*mahā*) for the sole reason that its aim is the salvation of "all sentient beings"—thanks to the sacrificial ideal of the Bodhisattva—and not the salvation of a single individual as is the case with the Hinayana, then it is proper to object, in accordance with the higher teaching of the selfsame Mahayana, that the alleged reason carries no weight with respect to Nirvāna or, what amounts to the same thing, with respect to Knowledge; not to mention the fact that this world of ignorance and suffering—this *samsāra*—is metaphysically necessary and must not be considered solely from a volitional and emotional angle.

Be that as it may, sapiential Mahayana intends to maintain its solidarity with the heroic ideal of the Bodhisattva, but by bringing it back to a strictly metaphysical perspective: it specifies that compassion is a dimension of Knowledge, then it adds that the neighbor is non-real and that charity must therefore be exercised "quietly when the occasion arises" and without slipping into the dualist and objectivist illusion, for, as it says, there is no one whom our charity could concern, nor is there a charity which could be "ours." Thus, on the very basis of the bhaktic interpretation of the Bodhisattva, mahayanic *gnosis* rejoins as if by a roundabout way the most rigorous and hence the most objective or most disinterested metaphysical positions.

To speak as precisely as possible, Buddhism can be said to present itself under the following fundamental aspects: first of all, primitive Buddhism; then Theravada Buddhism, which is its continuation as to form if not as to all its content; finally, Mahayana (the "Great Vehicle"), which qualifies the preceding as Hinayana ("Lesser Vehicle") and which in its general form exalts the heroic ideal of the Bodhisattva; then, within the actual framework of the Mahayana, a sapiential perspective which corrects and counterbalances the specifically bhaktic elements in the mahayanic ideal; and parallel with this perspective there is another which is devotional and centered particularly on the cult of the Buddha Amitabha. Therefore, if we admit the greatness of the "Great Vehicle," this is not because of the altruistic ideal which appears as its mythological mantle and its elementary thesis, but because of the

two quintessences just mentioned—the one sapiential and the other devotional—the ultimate crystallizations of which are, in Japan, Zen and Jodo.[143]

While maintaining solidarity with the sacrificial ideal of its basic doctrine, but without following it into its literal and too human interpretations, the sapiential Mahayana adopts the terminology of this doctrine and projects into it its own certitudes: consequently it will say, not that *Nirvāna* requires charity to complete it, but that the state of the *Pratyeka-Buddha* is not *Nirvāna* in the fullest sense, or that it is a *Nirvāna* on a transitory level, comparable no doubt to the *Brahma-Loka* of the Hindu *Krama-Mukta*; in this case, the use of the title "Buddha" seems to prove that there has been a change of terminology, for it is *a priori* abnormal to call a man "Buddha" when he is placed lower than a Bodhisattva. It is possible, however, to justify such a use of this title insofar as it refers to a state which is already nirvanic in the sense that there is "extinction" at least in relation to the formal world, and that from this fact alone there is no obligatory return to the round of births and deaths.[144]

These considerations bring up the matter of the authenticity of the mahayanic sutras, since these supposedly report—as do the texts in Pali—the discourses of the Buddha. Now, it is not the authenticity itself which is in question, but the mode of authenticity: in other words, these texts, or some of them, while certainly based on the teachings of Shakyamuni—for otherwise they would not assert this[145]—seem to present developments or commentaries rather than the sermons themselves, and they do so in the terminology in use in the environment in which they were put into writing.[146] However, whether it is a question of the Buddha himself or of his inspired commentators, it is important not to lose sight of a principle to which we have already alluded and which finds an application in all sacred Scriptures, namely, the distinction between two kinds of truth, the one relative or provisional and the other absolute

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[143]This juxtaposition may well appear paradoxical to many of the faithful of these two schools, although both were recommended by the great Nagarjuna himself, while Honen, the illustrious spokesman of Jodo, expressly admitted all the forms of traditional Buddhism.

[144] The mahayanist polemic against the *Pratyeka-Buddhas* should not astonish us unduly, representing as it does a perspective of sacrificial idealism; the Vishnuite *bhakta* readily represents the Shaivite *jnāni* as a sterile and sad rationalist, lacking what is essential until, touched by Grace, he discovers devotional love—as if this love were not eminently contained in *jnāna*.

[145] This argument will surprise those scholars who have no idea either of the nature of spiritual inspiration or of the organic laws governing—and guaranteeing—Tradition.

[146] On the other hand, it is not out of the question—and is even probable—that certain particularly homogeneous and concise texts, such as the *Mahā-Prajnā-Pāramitā-Hridaya* or the *Vajracchedikā*, render faithfully, and without development or commentary, the sacred discourse word for word.

and definitive,[147] insofar as there can be anything definitive on the plane of verbal fixations.[148] Or again, from a more contingent point of view: the Buddha, in his long career, could have presented diverse perspectives to audiences of unequal levels, and could even have used varying terminologies.[149]

As far as the mahayanic ideal of the Bodhisattva is concerned—an ideal of sacrificial compassion in the heroic Mahayana and a symbol of spiritual totality in the sapiential doctrine—the following fundamental situation must be taken into account: Buddhism unfolds itself in a sense between the empirical notions of suffering and of the cessation of suffering; now the notion of compassion springs from this very fact: it is an inevitable or necessary link in what might be called the spiritual mythology of Buddhism. To say suffering and cessation of suffering is to say compassion, given that man is not alone on earth. And this is where the Bodhisattva enters the scene: he incarnates the element compassion—the ontological link as it were between pain and Felicity—just as the Buddha incarnates Felicity and just as ordinary beings incarnate suffering; he must be present in the cosmos as long as there is both a *samsāra* and a *Nirvāna*, this presence being expressed by the statement that the Bodhisattva wishes to save "all beings."[150]

From a more contingent point of view, it could also be pointed out that concern for personal Deliverance, while irreproachable in itself, does involve a certain danger of egoism

[147] When Christ strikes the Temple merchants, he manifests a partial and conditional truth, namely, that there are phenomena—of the hypocritical or blasphemous type—which by their nature authorize or call for violence; but when he enjoins us to turn the left cheek to him who smites us on the right, he is teaching a total and unconditional truth concerning, as such, our inner attitude and hence also our general tendency, which means that holy anger and holy patience can and must be combined, the levels being different. The Scholastic distinction between a truth *secundum fidem* and another *secundum rationem* stops halfway between belief and intellection; it is more like a syncretism than a synthesis.

[148] This reservation brings into question, not the immutability of intellectual evidences or sacred formulations, but the absoluteness of concepts as such from the standpoint of the Divine Aseity and in the context of direct Knowledge.

[149] For example, in presenting the *Shrāvaka*, the *Pratyeka-Buddha,* the *Arhat*, and the *Bodhisattva,* in the latter sermons, as so many different degrees of realization.

[150] The Buddhist adage "May all beings be happy," or the will of the Bodhisattvas to save "all sentient beings," has its equivalent in the Islamic "Blessing on the Prophet" *(Salāt 'ala 'n-Nabi),* which proceeds from above to below in the sense that Muhammad, who is mentioned first, is the center of the cosmos, upon which all other creatures depend, these being designated—in descending order—by the terms "Family" (*āl*) and "Companions" (*sahb*). But even if it were not specified that the blessing extends to the "Family" and the "Companions," the graces would reach the totality—or a totality—of mankind by virtue of the avataric character of the name *Muhammad*, which includes all human beings while at the same time indicating their summit; for he is at once summit and circumference. In the Buddhist perspective, the blessing—actualized, to take one example, by the prayer wheels—concerns all sentient beings without exception.

once it becomes the sole motive of a tradition lived by a large collectivity whose tendencies are bound to be exoteric; from this angle the intervention of the Mahayana appears to be providential. At the time when it first asserted itself, the Buddhist tradition had doubtless given rise to all kinds of narrow and pharisaical currents; the same had been the case with Brahmanism in the Buddha's time as also with Judaism at the time of Christ, which does not mean that these crises affected either of these traditions in their entirety or in their inmost life: there can be no question of taking up the polemic of the early Mahayanists against the Theravadins of Ceylon and Indo-China. Or again, in a more fundamental sense concerning religion as such: the very necessity of an emotional element—in the absence of a theism properly so called and given the conditions of the "latter times"[151]—explains the opportuneness of the cult of the Bodhisattva in its connection with the path of works and the path of love; in this respect, the difference between the Buddhism of the North and that of the South is no more than one of style and mythology, without prejudice of course to their supraformal essences. Be that as it may, it can be admitted that if in the climate of the Mahayana the Buddha Amitabha is the object of a special cult, this is *a priori* because, as Bodhisattva, he was able to accumulate the merits capable of creating a "Buddha-field" and a "Pure Land." But this retrospective motive evidently need not concern contemplation, whether devotional or other, especially since the same causal connection may also be conceived in the opposite way: this is to say that the prime mover is not a contingency like the merit accumulated by an individual, or by a "karmic nexus" if one so prefers, but a principle of Mercy that creates at the same time both the merit itself and the saint who accumulates the merit. The principle of Mercy results from the very nature of the *Ādi-Buddha*, the Absolute who is at once Knowledge and Love.

The doctrine of Shinran provides a wonderful synthesis between the devotional and the sapiential paths: to start with, it envisages the "Pure Land," the *Sukhāvatī* Paradise, in its

[151] According to the *Nirvāna Sutra,* "Those who despise the Dharma will be like the volume of earth of the ten directions, and those who remain faithful to it will be like the crumb of earth that can be put on a fingernail." And similarly according to the *Saddharma-Pundarika Sutra*, "At the horrible time of the end, men will be malevolent, false, evil, and obtuse, and they will imagine they have reached perfection when it will be nothing of the sort." According to the caliph Ali: "The inhabitants of the here-below are like barking dogs and ferocious beasts howling at one another; the strong devour the weak and the great subjugate the small." Under such circumstances, a spiritual treasure can no longer be imposed collectively except by means of a sentimental, even a passion-rousing, element, which alone is capable of acting effectively in a world of this kind.

aspect of transcendence, hence of identity with *Nirvāna*; similarly, it reminds us that by virtue of universal analogies, death can serve to rend the veil of *Māyā*, and hence can be an occasion for Illumination and Deliverance,[152] provided that we are in a spiritual situation that allows this junction to be effected or this analogy to be actualized, and this precisely is made possible by the Grace of Amitabha and by our trust in it. The whole stress here is laid on the element faith, which is not without analogy, *mutatis mutandis*, with the *satori* of Zen,[153] and this faith is a trust which, by its quality, coincides with the forgetting of the ego. The Absolute—which has revealed itself under the particular name of Amitabha—is essentially Wisdom and Compassion, Knowledge and Mercy; this means that in the symbolism of the Buddha Amitabha, the "original vow" to enter *Nirvāna* only on condition that all those who invoke the sacred Name with faith be saved, is in fact the Absolute's aspect of Mercy. It is as if the Absolute were paraphrasing the vow and saying: "I would not wish to possess Beatitude if there existed between Me and contingent beings an insurmountable barrier preventing them from drinking deeply of my Beatitude"; or again: "I would not be the Absolute were I not blissful and merciful."[154]

But this path of Amitabha, of which Shinran, after Honen, was the last great spokesman, likewise includes, short of the nirvanic miracle of which we have spoken, a properly human finality: it opens out onto the *Sukhāvatī* Paradise where the faithful will await *Nirvāna* until the end of the cycle. This Paradise—which Hinduism also knows, analogically speaking, since it is the condition of the *Krama-Mukta*—is of quite a different order from the ones comprised in the round of transmigration; it is the exact equivalent of the Paradise of the Semitic religions, in which "eternity" means precisely this nirvanic conclusion and the ceasing of *samsāra*..[155]

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[152] This is the case with the Hindu *Videha-Mukta*.

[153] It has been possible to say in Zen: "If you meet the Buddha, kill him." This means, paraphrasing the first phrase of the *Tao Te Ching* ("the Tao that can be grasped is not the real Tao"): the Buddha whom you can meet is not the real Buddha. This is the point of view of the absolute, thus infinitely transpersonal subject, and of perfect non-objectification. It is met with also in Western *gnosis*, for example when it is said that God could not "live a single instant" without us: what then is meant by "God" is only the mental objectification—hence the relativization—of the Ineffable, which for Its part is beyond all polarity.

[154] In Christianity, the Name of the Virgin signifies Mercy, and it is joined with that of Christ, which is an indirect Name of the Absolute. In Islam, the Name of the Absolute—*Allāh*—is followed immediately by the Names of Mercy, *Rahmān and Rahīm*—the one intrinsic and the other extrinsic—in the formula of consecration at the beginning of every Revelation and every rite.

[155] If there is no place for the concept of the Bodhisattva in the Semitic monotheisms, it is because these perspectives take into consideration neither what is before birth nor what may be situated outside the human Paradise. The function of the celestial and compassionate Bodhisattva is nonetheless represented

A distinction must be made between the personal and transmigrating Bodhisattva and the celestial or universal Bodhisattva endowed with ubiquity; the first, if he is not simply a manifestation of the latter, accumulates merits by his virtues and actions;[156] the second is the cosmic emanation of a Buddha, or, in Western terms, he is the Archangel who manifests a given Divine Quality; his reintegration into *Nirvāna* coincides with the *Mahāpralaya*, the *Apokatastasis*, which effects the return of all manifestation to the Principle or all contingency to the Absolute.[157] The human Bodhisattva can be—to use Hindu terminology—either a *bhakta* or a *jnāni*: in the former case the path evolves between devotion and compassion—devotion toward the Buddhas and celestial Bodhisattvas and compassion toward the creatures wandering in *samsāra*—while in the latter case it is the path of *gnosis* that takes precedence over everything else: compassion is not something added in sentimental fashion to an imperfect mode of knowledge but is on the contrary the secondary dimension or internal complement of a knowledge which is virtually or effectively perfect, because it is situated on the axis of Buddhahood or is identified with Buddhahood itself.[158]

Some will doubtless object that the *gnosis* of the Bodhisattva is not that of the Buddha, that the compassion of the latter is intrinsic in the sense that he carries all things in himself,[159]

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in the West by the "apotropaic" saints or "Holy Helpers" (in German *Nothelfer*), not to mention the guardian or protecting angels.

[156] "A hundred beatitudes of the *Gandharvas* are as one beatitude of the *Devas* who have attained to their divinity by the accumulation of meritorious works, and a hundred beatitudes of the *Devas* by merit are as one beatitude of the *Devas* by birth" *(Brihādaranyaka Upanishad,* IV, 3, 33). The personal Bodhisattvas, as to their samsaric situation, belong in the category *of Devas* by merit; these have less beatitude than the *Devas* by origin because merit can always be exhausted and cannot be maintained, save by means of new merits. As to the *Gandharvas*, they are "celestial musicians," creatures that are more or less "peripheral," and in certain respects comparable, perhaps, to our terrestrial birds, or on the contrary incomparable in relation to the things of this world.

[157] Saint Gregory of Nyssa alludes to the *Apokatastasis* in speaking of the demons: "And these, it is said, the Apostle accounts as subterranean beings, wishing to indicate by this turn of phrase that no creature will remain excluded from the Kingdom of Good when, after long periods of centuries, all evil shall be destroyed" (*Conversation with Macrina,* IX. 2.)

[158] A Buddhist has rightly pointed out to the author that the merits, compassion, and knowledge of the Bodhisattva correspond respectively to *karma*, *bhakti*, and *jnāna* and consequently are addressed to those who follow those ways; for each of them the Bodhisattva reveals himself under a particular aspect. To use Buddhist terms, these are the three aspects called *upekshā* (passionlessness), *maitrī* (love of one's neighbor), and *prajnā* (knowledge). In the framework of *gnosis*, however, compassion changes its mode: Jacques Bacot was justified when, in his introduction to *Le Poete tibetain Milarepa*, he declared, "Buddhic pity has no relationship with sensibility. It is entirely objective, cool, and connected with a metaphysical conception. It is not spontaneous, but the outcome of long meditations. The idealism which tends to no longer differentiate between 'me' and 'not-me' is the generator of this pity for all that lives and is the victim of illusion." It is the compassion comprised in *prajnā*.

[159] In any case, at that degree *samsāra* cannot oppose *Nirvāna* or be associated with it in any manner whatsoever, which means that the opposition "existence-Void" has no meaning except at the degree of existence and is resolved in the principial Void.

whereas the universal pity of the Bodhisattva is extrinsic and therefore still situated under the sign of duality. But this would not do full justice to the nature of the great Bodhisattvas, for the sacrificial sojourn in the world necessarily combines with *Nirvāna*; it is a way of realizing *Nirvāna* in a certain sense also "outwardly," within the samsaric condition itself.[160] This must be so for the simple reason that a being cannot deprive himself, from life to life, of that very Enlightenment which constitutes the meaning and end of all his efforts, all his virtues, and all his merits. It is neither possible to persist in an exclusively negative situation nor to regard the ultimate Wisdom merely as a means of coming to another's aid, which would amount to making a means of the end or a contingency of the Absolute; Knowledge as such cannot be an instrument designed for charity any more than the Real can be subordinate to the illusory.[161] The condition of the gnostic Bodhisattva would be neither conceivable nor tolerable if it were not a matter of contemplating the Absolute at once in the heart and in the world; and above all it must be stressed that Knowledge, by definition, has no connection with the quantity of merits or the number of incarnations.[162] Only a bhaktism with an exoteric bias could imagine perfect Knowledge as being the fruit of a process of accumulating elements of one kind or another, even if they are sublime from the human point of view;[163] in short there is nothing quantitative or moral about the Spirit. And the following should also be stressed: *Nirvāna* seen or lived from the standpoint of the formal condition—as is the case with the Hindu *Jivan-Mukta* and the Buddhist *Arhat*—is not absolutely the same as the *Nirvāna* experienced beyond all form; the refusal on the part of the great Bodhisattvas to enter *Nirvāna*—and here we have in mind not only their celestial prototypes, where the thing is self-evident—is not a

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[160] This brings to mind the Arabic Divine Names "the Inward" and "the Outward" (*Al-Bātin* and *Az-Zāhir*) and the mystery of the Divine "outwardness," in connection with the concepts of the "metaphysical transparency of phenomena" and the "relatively absolute."

[161] As the Tibetan *Arhat* Milarepa put it, "One should not show oneself rash and hasty in the intention to serve others as long as one has not realized the Truth oneself; otherwise one risks being a blind man leading the blind."

[162] This is what *Dhyāna*—Zen—teaches in the most uncompromising manner: texts like the Diamond Sutra or the Chinese Sutra of Huang-Po formulate the decisive truth in the most explicit possible fashion and thereby express, in terms of doctrine, the very quintessence of Buddhism.

[163] According to the *Lankāvatāra Sutra,* the Bodhisattvas, while holding back from entry into *Nirvāna*, are there already in fact, "for in their love and compassion there is no cause for illusory distinction and consequently no intervention of such distinction." The Diamond Sutra mentions this saying of the Buddha: "A Bodhisattva who would say: 'I will deliver all beings'— do not call him a Bodhisattva."

refusal, in itself impossible, of total Knowledge, but a merciful hesitation to cast off the final veil and definitively leave the formal Universe.[164]

Here one has to insist on the difference between *Nirvāna* and *Parinirvāna:* only death allows of a total reintegration—for those who in their lifetime have realized "Extinction"—in that "Supreme Extinction," which is none other than the Vedantic "Self." Living beings, whatever their degree of spirituality, remain of necessity linked with Being, which belongs to the realm of *Nirvāna*, since it represents a perfect transcendence in relation to all manifestation and to the whole cosmic enmeshment, but which, being still of the realm of *Māyā* whereof it is the summit or quintessence, is not yet the Self. If in a certain respect death brings no change for one who has realized *Nirvāna*, in another respect it nonetheless effects a considerable change, so that it can be said that death for the "living liberated one" is neither a modification nor a non-modification, or that it is both at once. However: if we say that the Buddha, in dying, entered *Parinirvāna*, this is again only an earthly way of speaking: in reality, he was always there as *Dharmakāya*, "body of the Dharma"; similarly he did not cease to dwell in Heaven in his manifestation as *Sambhogakāya,* "body of Bliss," even while manifesting himself among mortals by virtue of *Nirmānakāya*, the "body of supernatural metamorphosis." In monotheistic terms, we would say that to every Prophet or *Avatāra* there corresponds an Archangel and, beyond creation, a divine Name, and that every divine Name reflects in its own way the whole Divinity.

A question that might be asked about the supreme Bodhisattvas—given the virtually divine cult surrounding them—is the following: can they not be more than archangels, that is to say, do they remain at the summit of the cosmos, thus below Being, or can they be situated at the summit of *Māyā*, thus at the degree of Being and below Beyond-Being? To the latter part of this question the reply must be negative, despite certain hyperboles or verbal syntheses that could suggest the contrary; for the "Divine Names" or Qualities of Being are represented, in Buddhism, by the different Buddhas—notably, the "*Dhyāni-Buddhas*"—or in other words, by absolute Buddhahood envisaged under the aspect of differentiation, which—being already contingent—is specific to *Māyā*. Let us add that for the celestial Bodhisattva,

[164] The attitude of the great Hindu *bhakta* Shri Chaitanya is akin to the ideal of the Bodhisattva: "Lord, I desire neither riches, nor servants, nor a beautiful damsel, nor the poetic muse. Let me, O Lord, from birth to birth, have only devotion to Thee—a devotion which seeks nothing in return" (*Shrī Shrī Shiksāstakam*).

who even while becoming "incarnate" does not leave his Paradise, "to become incarnate" may also mean "to delegate a power," and it is in this sense that a particular saint or great lama may be described as an "incarnation" of Avalokiteshvara or Manjusri.[165]

Another question that may be asked is this: whence originates the initiative for the coming into being of a Bodhisattva and *a fortiori* of a Buddha? Does it come from man or from the heavenly *Logos*? The two things coincide: once the human support is ready and has attained a degree of perfection, the *Logos* descends upon him and dwells in him, just as light automatically dwells on a clear and smooth surface; but precisely, the ripening of the human support is in its turn and by anticipation an effect of the *Logos*—which is at once Wisdom and Mercy, Knowledge and Love, light and warmth—so that we are obliged to admit that the original initiative comes from Heaven and that the support has been brought forth in the realm of the cosmic play solely in view of the manifestation of the *Logos* and by the *Logos* itself. It is in an analogous sense that it has been paradoxically affirmed, in the language of various traditions, that the world has been created for the Prophet or *Avatāra* or for the sake of his manifestation.

An important point touching the mystery of the "virtual Buddha" is the comprehension of the nirvanic essence of *samsāra*: just as we have said elsewhere that the finite is a sort of internal dimension of the Infinite—an indispensably necessary dimension, by reason of infinity itself or the intrinsic character of infinity—so could we define *samsāra* as a sort of dimension of *Nirvāna*, or as an "ignorant" manner (in the sense of the term *avidyā*) of envisaging it, the factor "ignorance" being called forth by the very infinity of the divine "Void." The actual substance of this "reality in reverse" is constituted by those countless "grains of sand" which are the *dharmas*—the elementary qualities—these being like the segmented, innumerable, and "inverted" crystallizations of the Void or the pure nirvanic Substance. The impermanence of things is none other than their own relativity.

[165] The terrestrial charity exercised by the celestial Bodhisattva brings to mind a Saint Theresa of Lisieux, who wanted "to spend her time in Heaven doing good on earth"—symbolized by the "shower of roses"—although in this case the intention is situated in the context of an altogether different eschatology.

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To sum up what has just been explained and at the same time to complete it, it is necessary to distinguish between three *Nirvānas*, or three degrees of Extinction, two of which are still in the order of *Māyā* or contingency, while the third, *Parinirvāna,* is the Absolute; if another *Nirvāna* were the Absolute, there could not be a question of a *Parinirvāna.* The first *Nirvāna* is ontologically that of the Bodhisattva: it is extinction in relation to formal manifestation and corresponds to the degree of the Archangels, Heaven, Existence; we say "ontologically" because the Bodhisattva "lives" at this level even if he has already realized the second *Nirvāna*, the one which coincides with the state of the terrestrial Buddha, that is, with extinction in regard to universal manifestation, which corresponds to the degree of pure Being. The third *Nirvāna*, beyond *Māyā*, is that of the celestial or absolute Buddha: this is *Parinirvāna,* extinction in relation to Being or *Maya*, which corresponds to the supreme Self of the Vedantists.[166] Now to say that the Bodhisattva renounces *Nirvāna* is to say that he intends to remain, not in formal manifestation alone, but in transmigration, whatever the degree of extinction he may inwardly have attained. What the Bodhisattva aims at is a perfection not divine but cosmic, one which will result in his obtaining a divine mission; now this function—that of *Samyaksam-Buddha*—requires a perfection of cosmic Knowledge which the *Pratyeka-Buddha* does not possess and which moreover is—like the fact of Revelation itself—devoid of importance in regard to absolute Knowledge.[167] In Islamic terminology, we would say that the Prophet is sublime, not by virtue of his prophetic mission (*nubuwwah*), but by virtue of his perfect sanctity (*wilāyah*), which has led certain people to claim that saints are superior to Prophets, whereas in reality prophecy, without being in itself a degree of sanctity, requires or implies total sanctity.[168] The Bodhisattva can "renounce" *Nirvāna* only on condition of having attained it in the mode accessible within formal existence, and it is only then that his aspiration to become a *Samyaksam-Buddha* has an intrinsic meaning; prior to that, his desire even to "become a Buddha" or to "save all sentient beings" is at the same time a stimulus

[166] The point at the lower extremity of what could be called the "nirvanic axis" is the heart or the pure Intellect, or again the mind in a state of perfect truth and purity, or the *mantram*, the *nembutsu*. In monotheistic, or simply theistic, language we would speak of the "heavenly axis" or the "divine axis."

[167] Shri Shankara realized this Knowledge without having produced the Veda; and in an analogous sense, Mary Magdalene was perfectly holy without possessing the cosmic and quasi-divine greatness of the Virgin Mary.

[168] A further distinction must be made between minor Prophets (*nabī*, plural *anbiyā'*), who have a limited mission within a given tradition, and major Prophets (r*asul*, *rusul*) who have a universal mission and are founders of a religion.

and an obstacle, depending on whether his path is primarily related to *bhakti* or *jnāna*. On attaining *Nirvāna* he will know whether the *Ādi-Buddha*—the supreme Buddhahood, identified with the nirvanic Infinite—has chosen him or not; or in other words whether the universal economy, or the equilibrium or rhythm of the Cosmos, has decided whether he is to be a Messenger or whether he is finally to be integrated—until the exhaustion of the "life of Brahma"—into the state of an Archangel, such as Avalokiteshvara or Manjusri. All that has just been pointed out implies that the specific Knowledge of the *Samyaksam-Buddha* is "neither superior nor inferior," but simply "other"—although in a certain sense more "ample"—than the Knowledge of the *Arhat*; it is a kind of existential penetration of worlds and creatures, a dilation in the direction of *samsāra*—which is as a projected shadow, so to speak, of his dilation in *Nirvāna* or *Parinirvāna*; and this is doubtless connected with the "remembrance of former births," for the penetration in question simultaneously embraces both "time" and "space," symbolically speaking.

The Enlightenment which occurred in the lifetime of Shakyamuni beneath the Bodhi tree is none other than what in more or less Western parlance would be called "Revelation," namely, the reception of the Message or prophetic function:[169] just as the soul descends suddenly on the embryo once it is sufficiently formed—neither before nor after—so Enlightenment descends on the Bodhisattva who has acquired, side by side with his Knowledge and his *Nirvāna*, the cosmic perfections required for the prophetic radiation.

At the risk of repetition it is necessary to return here to a particularly important point: if there is in the Mahayana an element which calls for some caution from the metaphysical point of view, it is not the path of the Bodhisattva but, what is quite different, the ideal of the Bodhisattva insofar as it is polemically opposed to the "non-altruistic" spirituality of the pure contemplative, as if, first, all true spirituality did not necessarily include charity, and second, as if the consideration of a contingency could enter into competition with pure and total Knowledge. But if the wish to deliver all beings, as expressed under this elementary and even sentimental form, is of necessity opposed to Knowledge—since it is here a question of

[169] This Revelation is summed up in the highly elliptic formula of the *Bodhi* of Shakyamuni: "This being, that becomes, from the becoming of that which becomes; this non-becoming, which does not become, from the cessation of that which ceases." Here is the commentary on it by one of the Buddha's disciples: "Of those things which proceed from a cause the *Tathāgata* has explained the cause, and likewise their cessation he has explained. This is the doctrine of the great *Shramana*."

"interested disinterestedness"[170]—one may well ask what, from the point of view of tradition, can be the profound meaning or alchemical function of a desire objectively so disproportionate and subjectively so contingent? The answer is that here is a means of "canalizing" certain mentalities towards Virtue and Truth: it is this idealism of heroic abnegation, this heroism at once karmic and bhaktic—and nothing else—which will attract goodwill and enflame it, and this is a factor that tradition must take into account in its many-sided formulation. As for the Bodhisattva himself, his refusal of *Nirvāna*—not of the "nirvanic axis" which passes through him, but of the repose in Extinction—is simply the will to be reborn despite the ability not to be reborn; since this possibility exists and is offered to him, he has a right to it in keeping with his own vocation and destiny.[171] What then the Bodhisattva lacks is not the formless, nor even the supra-existential, *Nirvāna*—that which the terrestrial Buddha enjoys—but solely the mandate of prophecy, which would make him into a *Samyaksam-Buddha* and which would lead to his retirement into unmanifest, hence extra-samsaric, Reality. The absence of such a mandate is evidently involuntary, whereas staying in transmigration is vocational and aims either expressly at obtaining the mandate or mission, or else at a state of beneficent and angelic presence in *samsāra*. It is this, and this alone, which is meant by the refusal to enter into *Nirvāna*, since it is obvious that no one can prevent, or could wish to prevent, the flowering forth of Knowledge.

Humanly speaking, the Bodhisattva is an altogether extraordinary being owing to the acuteness, amplitude, and scope of his faculties, something which, on this scale, cannot be the case with the *Pratyeka-Buddha*, who, while "delivered in this life" and possessing supreme Knowledge to the extent that it can be imparted to one still bound to the earthly or formal condition, may only be endowed with individual faculties which—apart from intellectuality and contemplativity—do not really go beyond the general norm, as the example of a Ramakrishna or Ramana Maharshi goes to show; leaving aside their inner realization, their human breadth—which is the sole consideration here—is obviously less than that of a Rama or Krishna, or of the young prince Siddhartha, the future Buddha; there is here no common measure, and even the mightiest genius is nothing in comparison with this order of greatness,

[170] In a parallel and inverse manner, the actionless solitude of the contemplative could be described as "disinterested interest," at least from a certain point of view.
[171] We may recall here the text of Chaitanya, already cited, according to which he has a sole desire: to "have only devotion to Thee, from birth to birth."

speaking strictly from the point of view of human constitution and without bringing in any later spiritual consequences. Or let us take the example of the Mother of Jesus: tradition tells us that in a natural—or "supernaturally natural"—manner she possessed every virtue and all science in the fullest possible measure; this super-eminent perfection was indispensable for her role as "Co-Redemptress," but it is a case of providential ordering or cosmic bountifulness, which, while necessarily joined at a certain point to Knowledge, is nonetheless not the prerequisite for it, for otherwise it would be useless to speak of *gnosis* and to teach it to mere mortals. The "superhumanly human" perfection of the Bodhisattva is necessary, not for Knowledge as such and thus for going beyond this world, but for the earthly manifestation of the Divine Principle, of the liberating Truth, of *Nirvāna*—which is an altogether different matter; far from being exclusively directed towards the unmanifest, the properly angelic human nature of the virtual Buddha on the contrary unfolds in the cosmos, as the sun illumines the night. This, we repeat, is what renders his nature capable of conveying that crystallization of the Infinite—or that Truth "become flesh"—which is Revelation, the seed and nourishment of a universal and millenary tradition.

To the question of whether this perfection, combined with the *Bodhi* for which it is the predisposed receptacle, constitutes a degree of Knowledge, the answer is both yes and no; it is as if one were to ask whether *samsāra* is real; the answer can be either affirmative or negative, depending on the viewpoint, provided that the absolute truth be acknowledged. "Every thing is *Ātmā*," to be sure, but "the world is false, *Brahman* is true," and "there is no divinity save the one Divinity." The problem basically comes down to the "divine character" of *Maya*, or the nature of *Maya* as "modality," "play," "unveiling," or "aspect" of the ineffable Self, of *Paramātmā*. The supreme Knowledge attributed to the *Samyaksam-Buddha* comprises essentially three factors: the unimaginable cosmic deployment of the perfection of the Bodhisattva, then the *Nirvāna* comprised in that perfection, and finally the "celestial weight" of Revelation, of the *Dharma*. As for knowing whether extra-nirvanic factors, however incomparable they may be at their respective levels, add something to *Nirvāna* or constitute an element of principial Knowledge, this seems to be a question that metaphysically answers itself.

There is nonetheless a factor which allows one to accept, with the necessary reservations, the interpretation of the specific Illumination of the *Samyaksam-Buddha* as a degree—or the

supreme degree—of Knowledge, and it is the following: in the Bodhisattva ready to receive it, Revelation coincides with the recollection of the Wisdom previously acquired, but transitorily "forgotten" through the fact of incarnation. This "forgetfulness" or this initial lack occurs for the simple reason that it is not in this new world of forms that the Bodhisattva had acquired his Wisdom. The passing obscuration in question is in a way comparable, in the natural order, to infancy, which also transitorily veils faculties which are nonetheless pre-existing. Under the Bodhi tree there was therefore a double Illumination: on the one hand the recollection which was bound to occur after the inevitable gropings of a new body and in a new space, and on the other hand the Revelation accompanied by the cosmic Knowledge which characterizes the *Samyaksam-Buddha*. If we admit that the term "Buddha" can have two or more meanings, as the Mahayana obliges us to do, we must equally admit two or more kinds *of Bodhi*; there is one *Bodhi* which belongs to every Buddha, whether he is externally a Bodhisattva or not, and there is another *Bodhi* which concerns solely the Buddha as Revealer and in which an extrinsic dimension is blended with the intrinsic *Bodhi*.[172]

As we have remarked, the Bodhisattva who has become Buddha possesses absolute Knowledge not by virtue of his quality of *Samyaksam-Buddha,* but by virtue of his quality of *Arhat* or fully perfected saint; that is to say he can be—but does not have to be—a *Samyaksam-Buddha* because he enjoys this Knowledge. We also pointed out that the altogether illusory opposition *samsāra-Nirvāna* exists only from the point of view of the world and is resolved in and by *Nirvāna* and not otherwise, for there is no possibility of any reciprocity or symmetry, so that the particular science of the Buddha in his capacity of Revealer could add nothing whatever to nirvanic Knowledge. Now it must not be lost sight of—and we have already alluded to this fact—that it is possible to consider *samsāra* under its aspect of indirect "Nirvanahood," in other words as an internal dimension of the Void or the Infinite, and in that case one may—if need be, by observing the proper precautions and evidently in a relative sense—speak of a supreme Knowledge belonging to the *Samyaksam-Buddha* alone.[173] We will

[172] A distinction is made, moreover, between the unconditional *Bodhi* of the Absolute and its heavenly and earthly reflections, the three levels belonging to every Buddha, according to the theory of the three "bodies" of the "Awakened."

[173] *Samyak* means "upright," "perfect," or "whole," while the prefix *sam*—as in the Latin words *summum* and *summa* or the German words *samt, zusammen, sammeln*—expresses the related ideas of "summit" and "totality." The scientific transcription attaches this prefix to the following word, which renders the familiar terms of *Buddha* and *Bodhi* visually somewhat indistinct. A term such as *Sambodhi* serves well in bringing out the "synthetic" character—both supreme and non-supreme—of the Enlightenment Founding of the Buddha.

say no more of this, if only for the simple reason that it is impossible to speak adequately of the dimensions of space in planimetric terms.

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The Buddha wished at first to keep the Revelation—or the corresponding Knowledge—to himself, and it was only after the thrice-repeated insistence of the gods[174] that he decided to communicate it. This initial hesitation is deeply symbolic, for it manifests an aspect of the very process of Revelation, rather like the breaking of the first Tables of the Law by Moses on Sinai. Later, the Buddha declared that he had hidden nothing, but had on the contrary made the Truth radiate as the daylight which illumines everything. These words, far from contradicting the graded plurality of meanings in the sacred teaching, as some imagine, really affirm the universality and totality of the *Dharma*: even the most subtle aspects of the Truth have been expressed with a clarity sufficient for "those who have ears to hear"; the Teaching has yielded all the keys necessary, if only in the form of a flower in the hand of the *Tathāgata*.[175] Moreover, no truth is esoteric in itself; it is so only in relation to a particular degree of understanding; now the source of incomprehension resides more often in the will than in the intelligence, which means that the obstacles are above all of a passional order, taken in the broadest sense; and this brings us back in fact to the distinction between two kinds of limitations, the one fundamental and the other accidental, and to the problem of their entanglement within human nature, or again, in other words, to the question of knowing to what extent an apparent substance is accidental or whether an appearance of accident denotes on the contrary a substance.

When we say that the Buddha's Revelation is accompanied by a concrete and penetrating consciousness of the rhythms of *samsāra*—of the world as an indefinite chain of causes and effects—it must be clearly understood that the kind or style of this knowledge depends on the style of the Revelation it accompanies: whatever the Revelation declares becomes immediately known to the *Avatāra* without its being always possible to assign a priority, in the avataric soul,

[174] The *Devas*, who correspond to the angels of monotheism.
[175] "He who has thus gone," a name of the Buddha.

to the Knowledge itself or to the "divine fact" of the Revelation. As for the question of spiritual style, it is for example possible to know space in diverse ways and starting from different symbolisms by applying different measures: it can be known in terms of a circle, a cross, a star, or a spiral, and it is thus that *samsāra* can be known according to diverse perspectives, analogically speaking; but this science will always have a character which is no more than a "relative absoluteness," like every reflection of the absolute in the contingent.

Monotheism seems to teach that the world has a beginning and not an end whereas Buddhism seems to assert no less paradoxically that the world has an end, but had no beginning. The above remark made by a Buddhist to the writer calls for the following comment: the resolution of these paradoxes is contained in the idea of *Apokatastasis*, which satisfies the demands of both the above metaphysics by bringing creation to an end—but without annihilation, quite the contrary—and by realizing the humanly impossible ideal of the Bodhisattvas. When Buddhists admit that *samsāra* will come to an end thanks to the Bodhisattvas and Buddhas who will have saved "all sentient beings" down to the last one, they implicitly attribute the final reintegration to the *Ādi-Buddha*, the universal or divine Buddha, whose Act is in effect identified with the transmutative *Logos*. In other words, the *Apokatastasis* or *Mahāpralaya* is the *Bodhi*—the passage to the state of Buddha—of all celestial Bodhisattvas, such as Avalokiteshvara, Manjusri, Kshitigarbha, Akashagarbha; the nirvanic light which submerges, penetrates, transmutes, and devours *samsāra* is their Enlightenment, saving the Universe; and in fact it is through the celestial Essences that this Light will act, before reabsorbing them in their turn in its infinite Silence.

In Buddhism, which is refractory to speculations of a cerebral literalism, language seeks to communicate or release a state of "being" rather than of "thinking": understanding and being tend to merge as far as this is possible, whence the widespread use of *upāyas*, "instrumental concepts," the justification of which is not so much a truth conceived in the abstract as an inward transformation and a kind of existential intuition, if such a paradox be permissible. Thus the idea of the Bodhisattva has for its aim above all to destroy egotism and then the ego itself; perhaps the Mahayana at bottom reproaches its Southern opponents less with an imperfection of doctrine than with one of method; in other words it considers that the ideal of *Bodhi* is in practice unrealizable without the ideal of the Bodhisattva, which alone is capable of cutting the Gordian knot of egoity. Other views can

assuredly be held on this point, but however that may be, if the Bodhisattva is supposed to save all sentient beings, this indicates above all a total gift of self, hence a perfect victory over the ego. Compassion then appears as the criterion of authenticity of Knowledge, as is the case with love in Christian *gnosis*,[176] for which wisdom without love is but "sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal." Love is that which enables "understanding" to pass into "being," or that which attaches us ontologically to Truth and thus opens us to the transforming magic of the Symbol.

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By way of conclusion, let us return and give precision to some fundamental ideas. The Bodhisattva could not accumulate innumerable merits and thereby an inexhaustible karma if he were not inwardly a Buddha and freed, as such, from transgression; it is because he can no longer fall into sin or passion that the Bodhisattva gains uninterrupted merits and realizes sublime perfections; the sacrificial actions attributed to him symbolize both his perfections—the *Parāmitās*—and the sacrifice which his samsaric condition represents. What distinguishes the Bodhisattva from the Buddha is not necessarily an inferior knowledge—as we have said—but the fact of being in *samsāra*, or more precisely of being there in a certain fashion and as a matter of principle. The terrestrial Buddha is distinguished from the Bodhisattvas by the fact that a celestial "Word" has become incarnate in him and that he has thus obtained the function of founding a religion—to use Western terms—and of leaving transmigration thereafter; the one does not go without the other, for he who has effected an "exit" out of this world must henceforth keep watch over this Path and has no further function to exercise with regard to "sentient beings."[177]

[176] We specify that here it is a question of *gnosis*, since this is self-evident for the way of love, which more often than not coincides with a relative exoterism.

[177] The Mahayana is sometimes presented as being the doctrine, not of the earthly Buddha—hence in the *Nirmānakāya*—as is the case with the Hinayana, but of the "divine Buddha," in the *Dharmakāya*. What is absolutely certain is that in no case could the Mahayanic sutras be of human origin and reflect an "evolution" of any kind, whatever their dialectical means may be.

There are, in short, four realities to be considered: *Samsāra*, *Nirvāna*, the Bodhisattva, and the Buddha; the latter may be described, in his capacity of *Tathāgata*, as "*Samsāra* entered into *Nirvāna*," while the Bodhisattva is on the contrary and in principle "*Nirvāna* present in *Samsāra*." It has also been said that the Buddha represents the contemplative aspect and the Bodhisattva the dynamic aspect of *Nirvāna*, or that the former is turned toward the Absolute and the latter toward contingency. The Buddha is a ray coming forth from the Center and returning to it, and the Bodhisattva is a circle projecting the Center into the periphery; the Buddha illumines or saves by radiation, while the Bodhisattva saves by a spiral movement. Or again, the Buddha transmits Light or Knowledge "vertically," while the Bodhisattva manifests "horizontally" Warmth, Compassion, Mercy.

The Buddha manifests the truth that "*Samsāra* is *Nirvāna*"; and the Bodhisattva the truth that "*Nirvāna* is *Samsāra*"; but it could also be said that each manifests both truths after his own fashion, according to the aspect or function which is dominant in each case. This amounts to saying that Bodhisattva and Buddha alike are manifestations at once free and necessary of the *Ādi-Buddha* or of *Mahā-Vairochana*.

VI

Religion and Science

14

Cosmos as Theophany

Seyyed Hossein Nasr

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> In the depth I saw ingathered, bound by love in one single volume, that which is dispersed in leaves throughout the universe: substances and accidents and their relations, as though fused together in such a way that what I tell is but a simple light.[1]

Although the goal of sacred knowledge is the knowledge of the Sacred as such, that is, of that Reality which lies beyond all cosmic manifestation, there is always that stage of the gathering of the scattered leaves of the book of the universe, to paraphrase Dante, before journeying beyond it. The cosmos plays a positive role in certain types of spirituality that any integral tradition must account for and include in its total perspective, which is not to say that the adept of every kind of spiritual path need study the pages of the cosmic book. But precisely because the cosmos *is* a book containing a primordial revelation of utmost significance and man a being whose essential, constitutive elements are reflected upon the cosmic mirror and who possesses a profound inner nexus with the cosmic ambience around him, sacred knowledge must also include a knowledge of the cosmos, which is not simply an empirical knowledge of nature nor even just a sensibility toward the beauties of nature, no matter how noble this sensibility of the kind expressed by so many English Romantic poets might be.

In the traditional world there is a science of the cosmos—in fact many sciences of the cosmos or cosmological sciences, which study various natural and cosmic domains ranging from the stars to minerals, but from the point of view of metaphysical principles. All traditional cosmology is in fact the fruit of the applications of metaphysical principles to different domains of cosmic reality by an intelligence which is itself still wed to the Intellect and has not completely surrendered to sensorial impressions. Such sciences also deal with the natural world and have produced knowledge of that world which is "scientific" according to the current understanding of this term, but not only scientific.[2] Even in these instances, however, the aim of such traditional sciences has been to

produce, not knowledge of a particular order of reality in a closed system, and cut off from other orders of reality and domains of knowledge, but a knowledge which relates the domain in question to higher orders of reality as that knowledge itself is related to higher orders of knowledge.[3] There is such a thing as traditional science distinct from modern science which deals with the same realms and domains of nature that are treated in the sciences today. Yet these traditional sciences, although of much importance in understanding the rise of modern science, which in many cases employed their outward content without comprehending or accepting their worldview, have a significance wholly other than the modern sciences of nature.[4]

The traditional sciences of the cosmos make use of the language of symbolism. They claim to expound a *science* and not a sentimental or poetic image of the domain which is their concern, but a science which is expounded in the language of symbolism based on the analogy between various levels of existence. In fact, although there are numerous cosmological sciences, sometimes even several dealing with the same realm and within a single tradition, one can speak of a *cosmologia perennis* which they reflect in various languages of form and symbol, a *cosmologia perennis* which, in one sense, is the application and, in another, the complement of *sophia perennis*, which is concerned essentially with metaphysics.

There is also another type of the "study" of the cosmos in the traditional context which complements the first. That is the contemplation of certain natural forms as reflecting Divine Qualities and the vision of the cosmos *in divinis*. This perspective is based on the power of forms to be occasions for recollection in the Platonic sense and the *essential* and of course not *substantial* identity of natural forms with their paradisal origin. Spiritual realization based on the sapiential perspective implies also this "metaphysical transparency of natural forms and objects" as a necessary dimension and aspect of "seeing God everywhere."[5] In reality the traditional cosmological sciences lend themselves to being such a support for contemplation besides making available a veritable science of various realms of the cosmos. What is in fact traditional cosmology but a way of allowing man to contemplate the cosmos itself as an icon! Therefore, both types of knowledge of the cosmos, as viewed from the perspective of sacred knowledge and through eyes which are not cut off from the sanctifying rays of the "eye of the heart," reveal the cosmos as theophany.[6] To behold the cosmos with the eye of the intellect is to see it not as a pattern of externalized and brute facts, but as a theater wherein are reflected aspects of the Divine Qualities, as a myriad of mirrors reflecting the face of the Beloved, as the theophany of that

Reality which resides at the Center of the being of man himself. To see the cosmos as theophany is to see the reflection of one-Self in the cosmos and its forms.

In traditions based upon a sacred scripture the cosmos also reveals its meaning as a vast book whose pages are replete with the words of the Author and possess multiple levels of meaning like the revealed book of the religion in question. This perspective is to be found in Judaism and Islam where the eternal Torah and the Quran as the *Umm al-kitab* are seen as prototypes of both the revealed book and that other grand book or virgin nature, which reflects God's primordial revelation. In Christianity also, where there is greater emphasis upon the Son as *Logos* than on the book, the vision of the universe as the book of God is not only present but has been repeated through the ages especially in the utterance of those who have belonged to the sapiential perspective. In fact, this view, so majestically depicted by Dante, did not disappear until the inner meaning of revelation itself became inaccessible. Exegesis turned to the interpretation of the outward, literal meaning of the sacred text while cosmic symbols were becoming facts and, instead of revealing the cosmos as theophany, were limiting the reality of the world to the categories of mass and motion. The veiling of pontifical man and his transformation to Promethean man could not but result in the cosmic book becoming illegible and sacred Scripture reduced to only its outward meaning.

In Islam the correspondence between man, the cosmos, and the sacred book is central to the whole religion. The sacred book of Islam is the written or composed Quran (*al-Qur'an al-tadwini*) as well as the cosmic Quran (*al-Qur'an al-takwini*). Its verses are called *ayat*, which means also signs or symbols, to which the Quran itself refers in the verse, "We shall show them our portents upon the horizon [*afaq*] and within themselves [*anfus*], until it be manifest unto them that it is the truth" (XLI; 53).[7] The *ayat* are the Divine Words and Letters which comprise at once the elements of the Divine Book, the macrocosmic world, and the inner being of man. The *ayat* manifest themselves in the Holy Book, the horizons (*afaq*) or the heavens and earth, and the soul of man (*anfus*). To the extent that the *ayat* of the sacred book reveal their inner meaning and man's outer faculty and intelligence become wed once again to the inner faculties and the heart, and man realizes his own being as a sign of God, the cosmos manifests itself as theophany, and the phenomena of nature become transformed into the *ayat* mentioned by the Quran, the *ayat* which are none other than the *vestigia Dei* which an Albertus Magnus or John Ray sought to discover in their study of natural forms.[8] Likewise, the theophanic aspect of virgin nature aids in man's discovery of his own

inner being. Nature is herself a divine revelation with its own metaphysics and mode of prayer, but only a contemplative already endowed with sacred knowledge can read the gnostic message written in the most subtle manner upon the cliffs of high mountains, the leaves of the trees,[9] the faces of animals, and the stars of the sky.

In certain other traditions of a primordial character where the revelation itself is directly related to natural forms, as in the tradition of the American Indians, especially those of the Plains, and in Shintoism, the animals and plants are not only symbols of various Divine Qualities but direct manifestations of the Divine Principle in such a way that they play a direct role in the cultic aspect of the religion in question. Moreover, in such traditions there exists a knowledge of nature which is direct and intimate yet inward. The Indian not only sees the bear or the eagle as divine presences but has a knowledge of what one might call the eagle-ness of the eagle and the bear-ness of the bear as if he saw in these beings their Platonic archetypes. The revelation of God in such cases embraces both men and nature in a way that would be inconceivable for that exteriorized reason of postmedieval man, who externalized his alienation from his own inner reality by increasing his sense of aggression and hatred against nature, an aggression made somewhat easier by the excessively rigid distinction made in Western Christianity between the supernatural and the natural. In any case, the animal masks of certain archaic traditions or the waterfalls of Taoist paintings depicting the descent of the One into the plane of multiplicity are neither animism in its pejorative sense nor a naive projection of the human psyche upon creatures of the external world. They are epiphanies of the Sacred based on the most profound knowledge of the very essence of the natural forms involved. They represent a knowledge of the cosmos which is not by any means negated or abrogated by what physics may discover about the dynamics of a waterfall or anatomy about the animal in question. One wonders who knows more about the coyote, the zoologist who is able to study its external habit and dissect its cadaver or the Indian medicine man who identifies himself with the "spirit" of the coyote?[10]

Not only do the traditional sciences of the cosmos study the forms of nature with respect to their essential archetypes and not only do contemplatives within these traditions view the phenomena of virgin nature as theophanies, but also the astounding harmony of the natural world is seen as a direct result and consequence of that sacrifice of the primordial man described in different metaphysical or mythical languages in various traditions. The unbelievable harmony which pervades the world, linking in an incredible pattern the life cycles of fishes on the bottom of tropical oceans to land

creatures roaming northern tundras, has been all but neglected by Western science until very recent times. But it forms an important element of that traditional science of nature which, whether in terms of the Pythagorean theory of harmony related to the World Soul or in other terms, remains always aware of that harmony between animals, plants, and minerals, between the creatures of various climes and also between the physical, subtle, and spiritual realms of beings which make the life of the cosmos possible. This harmony, whose grand contour has been only partly revealed by some recent ecological studies, is like the harmony of the parts of the human body as well as of the body, soul, and spirit of pontifical or traditional man and, in fact, is profoundly related to this concretely experienced harmony of man, because this latter type of harmony, like that of the cosmos, is derived from the perfect harmony of the being of the Universal Man who is the prototype of both man and the cosmos. If the cosmos is a crystallization of the sounds of music and musical harmony a key for the understanding of the structure of the cosmos, from planetary motion to quantum energy levels, it is because harmony dwelt in the very being of that archetypal reality through which all things were made. If God is a geometer who provides the measure by which all things are made, He is also the musician who has provided the harmony by which all things live and function and which is exhibited in a blinding and miraculous fashion in the cosmos.

The cosmos has of course its own laws and rhythms. Modern science speaks of laws of nature and even in modern physics, although this concept has been modified, the idea of statistical laws dominating over aggregates remains while the laws of macrophysics continue to be studied as the proper subject of science. Through a long history related to the rise of the idea of natural law as opposed to revealed law in the Christian tradition, whose own laws were in fact general spiritual and moral injunctions rather than a detailed codified law as in Judaism and Islam, a cleavage was created in the mind of Western man between laws of nature and spiritual principles. While the integral Christian tradition was alive in the Middle Ages, the cleavage was overcome by sapiential and even theological teachings, such as those of Erigena and Saint Thomas, which related natural laws themselves to God's Wisdom and Power. Nevertheless there was no Divine Law in the sense of the Islamic *Shariah* within Christianity itself, a Law which could be seen in its cosmic aspect to include the laws according to which other beings in the cosmos function. The cleavage was never totally overcome so that with the advent of the revolt against the medieval synthesis during the Renaissance, the "laws of nature" and the "laws of God" as found in religion began to part ways

to the extent that viewing the laws whose functioning is to be observed everywhere in the cosmos as Divine Law became soon outmoded and relegated to the pejorative category of "anthropomorphism." Moreover, since Christianity emphasizes the importance of the unparalleled event of the birth of Christ and his miraculous life, the evidence of religion seemed to many a European mind to rely upon the miracle which breaks the regularity of the laws observed in nature, whereas that regularity itself is no less evidence of the primacy of the *Logos* and the Wisdom of God reflected in His creation.[11] The fact that the sun does rise every morning is, from the sapiential point of view, as much a cause for wonder as if it were to rise tomorrow in the West.

It is of interest to note how Islam views this same subject of law. The Quranic revelation brought not only a set of ethical practices and a spiritual path for its followers but also a Divine Law, the *Shariah*, by which all Muslims must live as the means of surrendering their will to God's will.[12] By extension the *Shariah* is seen by Muslims as embracing all orders of creation and corresponding to what is understood in Western intellectual history as "laws of nature." Many an Islamic source has spoken of the Divine Law of this or that animal.[13] Interestingly enough, the Greek word for cosmic law, *nomos*, which reached Muslims through translations of Greek texts, especially of the *Laws* of Plato, became Arabized as *namus*—the *Laws* of Plato itself being called *Kitab al-nawamis.* Through such figures as al-Farabi in his *Arff ahl al-madinat al-fadilah* (The Views of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous State),[14] it entered into the mainstream of Islamic thought, and its meaning became practically synonymous with the *Shariah*. To this day Muslim philosophers and theologians, as well as simple preachers in the pulpit, speak of the *nawamis al-anbiya*, the Divine Laws brought by the prophets, and the *namus al-khilqah*, the Divine Law which governs creation. There is no difference of nature between them. God has promulgated a law for each species of being and order of creatures, which for man becomes religious law or the *Shariah* as understood in its ordinary sense. The only difference is that other creatures have not been given the gift of free will and therefore cannot rebel against the laws which God has meant for them, against their "nature,"[15] while man, being the theomorphic creature that he is, participates also in the Divine Freedom and can revolt against God's laws and himself. From a metaphysical point of view the rebellion of man against Heaven is itself proof of man's being made "in the image of God," to use the traditional formulation.

In this crucial question as in so many others, the Islamic perspective joins that of other Oriental traditions where no sharp distinction is made between the laws governing man and those governing the cosmos. The Tao is the origin of all things, the law governing each order of

existence and every individual being within that order. Each being has its own Tao. Likewise *dharma* is not limited to man; all creatures have their own *dharma.* From the point of view of *scientia sacra* all laws are reflections of the Divine Principle. For man to discover any "law of nature" is to gain some knowledge of the ontological reality of the domain with which he is concerned. Moreover, the discovery of such laws is always through man's own intelligence and the use of logic which reflects an aspect of his own ontological reality. Therefore, in an ultimate sense, the study of the "laws of nature" is inseparable from the study of the reality of that Universal Man or macrocosmic reality whose reflection comprises the cosmos. It is a study of man himself. To study the laws of the cosmos, like studying its harmony or the beauty of its forms, is a way of self-discovery, provided the subject carrying out such a study does not live in a truncated order of reality in which the study of the external world serves only to fragment further man's soul and alienate him from himself, creating, paradoxically enough, a world in which man himself no longer has a place.

What pertains to cosmic laws also holds true for causes which are reduced to the purely material in modern science, as if the material order of reality could be totally divorced from other cosmic and metacosmic orders. The traditional sciences take into consideration not only the material or immediate causes of things but also the nonmaterial and ultimate ones. Even the four Aristotelian causes, the formal, material, efficient, and final, are systematized approximations of all the causes involved in bringing about any effect, for these causes include not only what is outwardly understood by the formal, efficient, and final causes but all that such causes mean metaphysically. The formal cause includes the origin of a particular form in the archetypal world, the efficient cause the grades of being which finally result in the existentiation of a particular existent, and the final cause a hierarchy of beings belonging to higher orders of reality that terminates with the Ultimate Cause which is the Real as such. It is in fact in this perspective that many later metaphysical rather than only rationalistic commentators of Aristotle viewed the significance of the Aristotelian four causes.

In any case, the causes which are responsible for various effects in the natural world are not limited to the natural world but embrace all orders of being. Moreover, these causes operate within man himself and between man and his cosmic environment. Each being in fact is related by a set of causes to the milieu in which it exists, the two being inseparable.[16] Man is bound to his world not only by the set of physical causes but also by metaphysical ones. The net of causality is much

vaster than that cast by those sciences which would limit the cosmos to only its material aspect and man to a complex combination of the same material factors, caught in the mesh of that external environment which penetrates within him and determines his behavior and manner of being. Modern behaviorism is in many ways a parody of the Hindu doctrine of *karma*, which expresses the central importance of causality in the domain of manifestation without either limiting it to only the psycho-physical realm or denying the possibility of deliverance, or *moksha*, from all chains of cause and effect, even those belonging to higher levels of existence. To behold the cosmos as theophany is not to deny either the laws or the chain of cause and effect which pervade the cosmos but to view the cosmos and the forms it displays with such diversity and regularity as reflections of Divine Qualities and ontological categories rather than a veil which would hide the splendor of the face of the Beloved. To achieve such a goal and see the cosmos as theophany and not veil, it is necessary to return again and again to the truth that reality is hierarchic, that the cosmos is not exhausted by its physical aspect alone. All traditional cosmologies are based in one way or another on this axial truth. Their goal is to present in an intelligible fashion the hierarchy of existence as reflected in the cosmos. The "great chain of being" of the Western tradition, which survived in the West until it became horizontalized and converted from a ladder to Heaven to an evolutionary stream moving toward God knows where,[17] was a synthesis of this idea which has its equivalence in Islam,[18] India, and elsewhere, even if not as thoroughly elaborated in all traditions. The cosmologies which appeal to the immediate experience of the cosmos by terrestrial man have no other aim but to convey this metaphysical and central truth concerning the multiple states of existence in a vivid and concrete fashion. Cosmologies based on Ptolemaic astronomy or other astronomical schemes based on the way the cosmos presents itself to man are not in any way invalidated by the rejection of this geocentric scheme for the heliocentric one, because they make use of the immediate experience of the natural world as symbol rather than fact, a symbol whose meaning like that of any other symbol cannot be grasped through logical or mathematical analysis.

If one understands what symbols mean, one cannot claim that medieval cosmologies are false as a result of the fact that if we were standing on the sun we would observe the earth moving around it. The fact remains that we are not standing on the sun and if the cosmos, from the vantage point of the earth where we were born, does possess a symbolic significance, surely it would be based on how it *appears* to us as we stand on earth. To think otherwise would be to destroy the symbolic significance of the cosmos. It would be like wanting to understand the meaning of a

mandala by looking at it under a microscope. In doing so one would discover a great deal about the texture of the material upon which the *mandala* has been drawn but nothing about the symbolic significance of the *mandala*, which was drawn with the assumption that it would be looked upon with the normal human eye. Of course, in the case of the cosmos the other ways of envisaging and studying it, as long as they conform to some aspect of cosmic reality, also possess their own profound symbolism—such as, for example, the heliocentric system, which was in fact known long before Copernicus, or the vast dark intergalactic spaces—but the destruction of the immediate symbolism of the cosmos as it presents itself to man living on earth cannot but be catastrophic.

To look upon the vast vault of the heavens as if one lived on the sun creates a disequilibrium which cannot but result in the destruction of that very earth that modern man abstracted himself from in order to look upon the solar system from the vantage point of the sun in the absolute space of classical physics. This disequilibrium would not necessarily have resulted had the type of man who rejected the earth-centered view of the cosmos been the solar figure, the image of the supernal Apollo, the Pythagorean sage, who in fact knew of the heliocentric astronomy without this knowledge causing a disruption in his world view. But paradoxically enough, this being who abstracted himself from the earth to look upon the cosmos from the sun, through that most direct symbol of the Divine Intellect, was the Promethean man who had rebelled against Heaven. The consequences could, therefore, not be anything but tragic.

The destruction of the outward symbol of traditional cosmologies destroyed for Western man the reality of the hierarchic structure of the universe which these cosmologies symbolized and which remains independent of any particular type of symbolism used to depict it. This structure could be and in fact has been expressed by other means, ranging from traditional music which reflects the structure of the cosmos to mathematical patterns of various kinds to metaphysical expositions not directly bound to a particular astronomical symbolism. The exposition of the hierarchic levels of reality as the "five Divine Presences" (*al-hadarat al-ilahiyyat al-khams*) by the Sufis, such as Ibn Arabi, is a perfect example of this latter kind.[19] Ibn Arabi speaks of each principal order of reality as a *hadrah* or "Divine Presence" because, metaphysically speaking, being or reality is none other than presence (*hadrah*) or consciousness (*shuhud*). These presences include the Divine Ipseity Itself (*hahut*), the Divine Names and Qualities (*lahut*), the archangelic world (*jabarut*), the subtle and psychic world (*malakut*), and the physical world (*mulk*).[20] Each higher world contains the principles of that which lies below it and lacks nothing of the lower level of

reality. That is why in God one is separate from nothing. Although these presences possess further inner divisions within themselves, they represent in a simple fashion the major level of cosmic existence and metacosmic reality, without there being the need to have recourse to a particular astronomical symbolism. This does not mean, however, that certain other later cosmologists did not point to correlations between these presences and various levels of the hierarchic cosmological schemes that still possessed meaning for those who beheld them.

In Islam we encounter numerous cosmological schemes associated with the Peripatetics, Illuminationists, the Ismailis, alchemical authors like Jabir ibn Hayyan, Pythagoreans, various schools of Sufism, and of course the cosmologies based upon the language and text of the Quran and related to its inner meaning, which served as source of inspiration and principle for the other cosmologies drawn from diverse sources.[21] But throughout all of these cosmological schemes, there remains the constant theme of the hierarchic universe manifested by the Divine Principle and related intimately to the inner being of man. The same theme is found at the center of those sometimes bewildering cosmologies found in India, in Kabbalistic and Hermetic texts, in the oral traditions of the American Indians, in what survives of ancient Sumerian and Babylonian religions, among the Egyptians, and practically everywhere else.[22] The diversity of symbolism is great but the presence of the vision of the cosmos as a hierarchic reality bound to the Origin and related to man not only outwardly but also inwardly persists as elements of what we referred to earlier as *cosmologia perennis*. This vision is that of pontifical man and therefore has had to be present wherever and whenever pontifical man, who is none other than traditional man, has lived and functioned.

Likewise, these traditional cosmologies as perceived within the sapiential perspective have been concerned with providing a map of the cosmos as well as depicting it as an icon to be contemplated and as symbol of metaphysical truth. The cosmos is not only the theater wherein are reflected the Divine Names and Qualities. It is also a crypt through which man must journey to reach the Reality beyond cosmic manifestation. In fact man cannot contemplate the cosmos as theophany until he has journeyed through and beyond it.[23] That is why the traditional cosmologies are also concerned with providing man with a map which would orient him within the cosmos and finally enable him to escape beyond the cosmos through that miraculous act of deliverance with which so many myths have been concerned.[24] From this point of view the cosmos appears as a labyrinth through which man must journey in a perilous adventure where

literally all that he is and all that he has is at stake, a journey for which all traditions require both the map of traditional knowledge and the spiritual guide who has himself journeyed before through this labyrinth.[25] It is only by actually experiencing the perilous journey through the cosmic labyrinth that man is able to gain a vision of that cathedral of celestial beauty which is the Divine Presence in its metacosmic splendor.[26]

Having journeyed through and beyond the cosmos, man, who is then "twice born" and a "dead man walking" in the sense of being spiritually resurrected here and now, is able finally to contemplate the cosmos and its forms as theophany.[27] He is able to see the forms of nature *in divinis* and to experience the Ultimate Reality not as transcendent and beyond but as here and now.[28] It is here that the cosmos unveils its inner beauty, ceasing to be only externalized fact or phenomenon but becoming immediate symbol, the reflection of the noumenon, the reflection which is not separated but essentially none other than the reality reflected. The cosmos becomes, to use the language of Sufism, so many mirrors in which the various aspects of the Divine Names and Qualities and ultimately the One are reflected. The Arabic word *tajalli* means nothing but this reflection of the Divine in the mirror of the cosmos which, metaphysically speaking, is the mirror of nothingness.[29] Objects appear not only as abstract symbols but as concrete presence. For the sage a particular tree is not only a symbol of the grade of being which he has come to know through his intelligence and the science of symbolism that his intelligence has enabled him to grasp. It *is* also a tree of paradise, conveying a presence and grace of a paradisal nature.

This immediate experience, however, is not only not separate from the science of symbols, of sacred geometry, and of the significance of certain sacred forms, but it provides that immediate intuition which only increases the grasp of such sciences and makes possible their application to concrete situations. Zen gardens are based on the science of sacred geometry and the metaphysical significance of certain forms but cannot be created by just anyone who might have a manual on the symbolism of space or rock formations. The great gardens are expressions of realized knowledge leading to the awareness of natural forms as "presence of the Void," which in turn has made possible the application of this knowledge to specific situations resulting in some of the greatest creations of sacred art. The same rapport can be found *mutatis mutandis* elsewhere in traditions which do not emphasize, as much as Zen does, knowledge of natural forms as immediate experience but where complete teachings in the cosmological sciences are available. Everywhere the knowledge of cosmic symbols goes hand in hand with that direct experience of a

spiritual presence which results from spiritual realization, although there are always individual cases where a person may be given the gift of experiencing some aspect of the cosmos or a particular natural form as theophany without a knowledge of the science of symbolism or, as is more common in the modern world, a person may have the aptitude to understand the meaning of symbols, which is itself a precious gift from Heaven, but lack spiritual realization and therefore lack the possibility of ever experiencing the cosmos as theophany. In the sapiential perspective, in any case, the two types of appreciation of cosmic realities usually go hand in hand, and certainly in the case of the masters of *gnosis*, complement each other.

Of special significance among cosmological symbols which are related to the contemplation of the cosmos as theophany and the experience of the presence of the sacred in the natural order are those connected with space. Space and time along with form, matter or substance, and number determine the condition of human existence and in fact of all existence in this world. Tradition therefore deals with all of them and transforms all of them in order to create that sacred world in which traditional man breathes. The symbolism of number is revealed through its qualitative aspect as viewed in the Pythagorean tradition, and certain theosophers in the West have even spoken of an "arithmosophy" to be contrasted with arithmetic. Form and matter are sacralized through their symbolic rapport and their relation to the archetypal realities reflected by forms on the one hand and the descent or congelation of existence, which on the physical plane appears as matter or substance,[30] on the other. The nature of time is understood in its relation to eternity and the rhythms and cycles which reflect higher orders of reality. Finally space, which is central as the "container" of all that comprises terrestrial existence, is viewed not as the abstract, purely quantitative extension of classical physics but as a qualitative reality which is studied through sacred geometry.

Qualitative space is modified by the presence of the sacred itself. Its directions are not the same; its properties are not uniform. While in its empty vastness it symbolizes the Divine All-Possibility and also the Divine Immutability, it is the progenitor of all the geometric forms, which are so many projections of the geometric point and so many reflections of the One, each regular geometric form symbolizing a Divine Quality.[31] If Plato specified that only geometers could enter into the temple of Divine Knowledge, it was because, as Proclus was to assert in his commentary upon the *Elements* of Euclid, geometry is an ancillary to metaphysics.[32] The orientation of cultic acts, the construction of traditional architecture, and many of the traditional sciences cannot be

understood without grasping the significance of the traditional conception of qualified space. What is the experience of space for the Muslim who turns to a particular point on earth, wherever he might be, and then is blessed one day to enter into the *Kabbah* itself, beyond the polarization created upon the whole earth by this primordial temple built to celebrate the presence of the One? Why are the remarkable Neolithic structures of Great Britain round and why do the Indians believe that the circle brings strength? Most remarkable of all is the immediate experience of a wholly other kind of space within a sacred precinct. How did the architects of the medieval cathedrals create a sacred space which is the source of profound experience even for those Christians who no longer follow their religion fully? In all these and numerous other instances what is involved is the application of a traditional science of space, which makes possible the actualization of a sacred presence and also the contemplation of an element of the cosmic reality as theophany. It is through this science of qualified space that traditional science and art meet and that cosmological science and experience of the sacred become wed in those places of worship, rites, cites of pilgrimage, and many other elements which are related to the very heart of tradition.

This science is closely associated with what has been called "sacred geography" or even "geosophy," that symbolic science of location and space concerned with the qualitative aspects of points on earth and the association of different terrestrial sites with traditional functions, ranging from the location of sanctuaries, burial sites, and places of worship to places for the erection of gardens, planting of trees, and the like in that special form of sacred art associated with the Japanese garden and the traditional art of the Persian garden with all its variations, ranging from Spanish gardens to the Mogul ones of India. The science of sacred geography ranges from, on the one hand, popular and often folkloric practices of geomancy in China to the most profound sensitivity to the grace of the Divine Presence which manifests itself in certain natural forms and locations on the other.

This science is thus closely allied to that particular kind of sapience which is wed to the metaphysics of nature and that spiritual type among human beings who is sensitive to the *barakah* or grace that flows in the arteries of the universe. Such a person is drawn by this *barakah* into the empyrean of spiritual ecstasy like an eagle that flies without moving its wings upon an air current which carries it upward toward the illimitable expanses of the heavenly vault. For such a person nature is the supreme work of sacred art; in traditions based upon such a perspective, like Islam or the American Indian tradition, virgin nature as created by God *is* the sanctuary par excellence. The

mosque of the Muslim is the earth itself as long as it has not been defiled by man, and the building called the mosque only extends the ambience of this primordial mosque which is virgin nature into the artificial urban environment created by man. Likewise, for the American Indian, that wilderness of enchanting beauty which was the American continent before the advent of the white man was the cathedral in which he worshiped and wherein he observed the greatest works of art of the Supreme Artisan, of *Wakan-Tanka*. This perspective, moreover, is not limited to only certain traditions but is to be found in one way or another within all integral traditions. This sensitivity to the *barakah* of nature and the contemplation of the cosmos as theophany cannot but be present wherever pontifical man lives and breathes, for nature is a reflection of that paradisal state that man still carries within the depth of his own being.

Such a vision has, needless to say, become blurred and is denied in the world of Promethean man, whose eminently successful science of nature has blinded human beings to possibilities of other sciences and other means of beholding and understanding nature. Moreover, this negation and denial has occurred despite the fact that the cosmos has not completely followed man in his rapid fall. It might be said that, although both nature and man have fallen from that state of perfection characterized as the paradisal state, what still remains of virgin nature is closer to that prototype than the type of Promethean man who increases his domination upon the earth every day. That is why what does remain of virgin nature is so precious not only ecologically but also spiritually. It is the only reminder left on earth of the normal condition of existence and a permanent testament to the absurdity of all those modern pretensions which reveal their true nature only when seen in the light of the truth. Excluding revealed truth, nothing in the orbit of human experience unveils the real nature of the modern world and the premises upon which it is based more than the cosmos, ranging from the starry heavens to the plants at the bottom of the seas. That is why Promethean man has such an aggressive hatred for virgin nature; why also the love of nature is the first sign among many contemporaries of their loss of infatuation with that model of man who began his plunder of the earth some five centuries ago.

During the last few years so many critiques have been written of modern science and its recent handmaid, technology,[33] that one hardly needs to go once again into all the arguments ranging from the ecological and demographic to the epistemological and theological. In any case that would require a major separate study of its own. But to bring out fully the meaning of the traditional sciences of nature and the significance of the cosmos as theophany, it is necessary to recapitulate the

main points of criticism made of modern science by the traditional authorities and from the traditional point of view. The first point to assert in order to remove all possible misunderstanding is that the traditional criticisms against modern science are not based on sentiments, fanaticism, illogicality, or any of the other terms with which anyone who criticizes modern science is usually associated. The traditional critique is based on intellectual criteria in the light of the metaphysical truth which alone can claim to be knowledge of a complete and total nature.[34] That is why traditional authors never deny the validity of what modern science has actually discovered provided it is taken for what it is. The knowledge of any order of reality is legitimate provided it remains bound to that order and within the limits set upon it by both its method and its subject matter. But this would in turn imply accepting another science or manner of knowing which, being of a more universal nature, would set the boundary within which that science could function legitimately.

Herein lies the first and foremost criticism of modern science. In declaring its independence of metaphysics or any other science, modern science has refused to accept the authority which would establish the boundary for its legitimate activity. That is why despite all the pious platitudes and even well-intentioned and earnest pleading of honest scientists, modern science does transgress beyond the realm which is properly its own and serves as background for monstrous philosophical generalizations which, although not at all scientific but scientistic, feed upon the tenets and findings of the sciences and the fact that modern science has signed its declaration of independence from metaphysics. Moreover, by token of the same fact, the metaphysical significance of scientific discoveries remains totally neglected by the supposedly scientifically minded public which usually knows very little about science but is mesmerized by it. And here again, despite the loud protests of some reputable scientists, instead of the metascientific significance of what science has actually discovered becoming revealed, the reverse process takes place whereby, through wild interpolations and usually well-hidden assumptions, metaphysical truths become rejected in the name of scientific knowledge. What tradition opposes in modern science is not that it knows so much about the social habits of ants or the spin of the electron but that it knows nothing of God while functioning in a world in which it alone is considered as science or objective knowledge.

This divorce of science from metaphysics is closely related to the reduction of the knowing subject to the *cogito* of Descartes. It is usually forgotten that despite all the changes in the field of modern physics, the subject which knows, whether the content of that knowledge be the pendulum

studied by Galileo or wave functions of electrons described mathematically by de Broglie, is still that reason which was identified by Descartes with the individual human ego who utters *cogito*. The other modes of consciousness and manners of operation of the mind are never considered in modern science. The findings of that reason which is wed once again to the Intellect and that mind which is illuminated by the light of the "eye of the heart" is not considered as science at all, especially as this term is used in the English language.[35] Hence, the irrevocable limitation of a science caught within the mesh of the functioning of only a part of the human mind but dealing with a subject of vast import which it then seeks to solve in manners that are characteristically "unscientific," namely, intuition, artistic beauty, harmony, and the like. Many first-rate scientists, in contrast to most philosophers of science, would in fact accept our contention that, if one considers all that which is called science has achieved even in modern times, one cannot speak of *the* "scientific method" but has to accept the assertion that science is what scientists do, which might include playing with possibilities of musical harmony to solve certain physical problems.

Despite the reality of this assertion, however, the rationalism inherent in what the modern world considers to be science continues and has had its lethal effect upon the humanities, the social sciences, and even philosophy and theology. Strangely enough, precisely because of the inherent limitation of the original epistemological premises of modern science, more and more modern science has come to see in the objective world not what is there but what it has wanted to see, selecting what conforms to its methods and approaches and then presenting it as the knowledge of reality as such. Modern men, influenced by science, think that according to the scientific point of view one should only believe what one can see, whereas what has actually happened is that science has come to see what it believes according to its a priori assumptions concerning what there is to be seen.[36] This epistemological limitation, combined with the lack of general accessibility in the West since the rise of modern science to that *scientia sacra* of which we have spoken, has prevented this science from being integrated into higher orders of knowledge with tragic results for the human race. In fact, only a high degree of contemplative intelligence can enable man to look upon the sun and see at once the visible symbol of the Divine Intellect and an incandescent mass diffusing energy in all directions.[37]

These limitations of modern science are to be seen also in its neglect of the higher states of being and its treatment of the physical world as if it were an independent order of reality. This neglect of the unmanifested and in fact nonphysical aspects of reality has not only impoverished the vision of

cosmic reality in a world dominated by scientism, but it has caused confusion between vertical and horizontal causes and brought about incredible caricatures of the cosmic reality as a result of relegating forces and causes which belong to higher orders of existence to the physical domain. It is not accidental that the more physics advances in its own domain, the more does it become aware of its need for another complete paradigm which would take into consideration domains of reality that many physicists feel almost intuitively to exist, but which have been cast aside from the world view of classical and modern physics.[38]

One of the consequences of this systematic neglect of higher orders of existence has been the denial of life as an animating principle or energy that has penetrated into the physical realm. Rather, life is seen as an accidental consequence of molecular motion according to that well-known reductionist point of view that does not realize that if life or consciousness "result" from certain activities of molecules and their combinations, they must either have already been present there in some way or come from elsewhere.

This difficulty in solving the question of the origin and meaning of life, despite its being discussed over the centuries by vitalists and mechanists, is related to the desacralization of the world which became the subject matter of seventeenth-century science and the gradual deformation and finally destruction of the concept of the World Soul. In all traditional cosmologies there is an *Anima mundi* or its equivalent like the *Janna Caeli* of antiquity, *Spenta Armaiti* of Mazdaean cosmology, or the Universal Soul (*al-nafs al-kulliyyah*) of Islamic sources. This soul must not of course be confused with the immanent Deity, and belief in the World Soul does not imply a kind of pantheism. But the World Soul played a major cosmological function as the soul of the natural order and its link with the Intellect. It also had a central epistemological role as the Divine Sophia, often identified with the Virgin Mary as the *Theotokos*, the Soul in which the Son of the Intellect is born, or as Fatimah, who is the mother of the Imams who embody and symbolize the Divine Light.

In the West the World Soul was typified by the Virgin. Its expulsion from the world of modern man, which was also a direct consequence of Cartesian dualism, was almost synchronous with the loss of the significance of Mary in the rites and doctrines of the Christian churches of those countries where the scientific world view was developing most rapidly.[39] Gradually, the very idea of *animated* meaning "possessing a soul" or "ensouled" (*enpsychos*) was replaced by "moved" (*kinetos*), which soon came to mean moved by history. The *Anima mundi* or *Weltgeist* became the *Zeitgeist* of Hegel and the other dialectical philosophers. Instead of the cosmos being animated by a

soul which was its intermediary link with the Intellect, as we find in many traditional schools of cosmology and philosophy, especially Islam,[40] it became the passive instrument of an ambiguous *Zeitgeist*, which could not but mean the apparent tyranny of becoming over Being Itself, if one is permitted such an elliptical formulation. The consequence of this change for religion as such was immense. It was not long before men began to change the very rites and doctrines of religion not according to the inspiration received from the Holy Ghost or *Heilige Geist* but from the *Zeitgeist,* or "the times" with which everyone tries to keep up.

Moreover, this impoverishment of the reality with which modern science deals removed from the consciousness of modern man, influenced by this science and the philosophies derived from it, the reality of that intermediate world which has been traditionally referred to as the imaginal world. Without this world, which stands between the purely intelligible and the physical world and which possesses its own nonmaterial forms, there is no possibility of a total and complete cosmology nor of the explanation of certain traditional teachings concerning eschatology. Nor is it possible to comprehend those mysterious cities and palaces, those mountains and streams, which appear in both traditional myths and cosmological schemes. Where is the Holy Mountain wherein is to be found the Grail? Where are those cities of the imaginal world which in Islam are called Jabulqa and Jabulsa[41] and which Suhrawardi considered to exist in the eighth clime, in that land of "no-where" which he called *na kuja abad,* literally *utopia*? When the eighth clime was destroyed, the gnostic and visionary *utopia* could not but become the Utopia of those European secularists and atheists, who, often aided by certain messianic ideas, sought to establish the kingdom of God on earth without God, as if the good without the Good had any meaning. When the *Weltgeist* became *Zeitgeist,* history replaced the Divinity, and *na kuja abad,* instead of being the abode of the gnostic in which he contemplated paradisal forms, became the Utopia in whose name so much of what has remained of tradition has been destroyed throughout the world.

This neglect of the multiple levels of existence by the modern scientific perspective has forced the exponents of this science to take recourse to belief in the uniformity of "laws of nature" over long periods of time and expanses of space. This theory, which is called "uniformitarianism" and which underlies all those geological and paleontological speculations which speak of millions of years past, was rapidly promoted from the status of hypothesis to that of "scientific law"; and when most honest scientists are asked on what basis do they believe that the laws of nature, the so-called constants of the law of gravitation, the law of electromagnetic theory or quantum jumps have

always been the same, they answer that since there is no other choice they have adopted the uniformitarian thesis. Actually from the modern scientific point of view itself there is of course no other way of speaking about what was going on in the planetary systems eons ago except by considering the laws of physics to be uniform and simply admitting that this science cannot provide an answer to such questions without extrapolating cosmic and natural laws back into earlier periods of time or into the future. Of course it is not the physical conditions which modern science assumes to have been the same but the laws and forces which bring about different physical conditions at different times while supposedly remaining uniform themselves. As far as these laws and forces are concerned, whatever means are employed by modern science to check whether or not there were changes in such laws and forces in the past are themselves based on the condition of the uniformity of the laws and forces used to carry out the process of checking. A science aware of its limits would at least distinguish between what it means to say that the specific weight of aluminum is such and such or how many protons are found in the nucleus of a helium atom and to claim that such and such an astronomical event occurred 500 million years ago or a particular geological formation was formed so many millions or even billions of years ago. One wonders what exactly the word *year* means in such a statement and what assumptions are made upon the nature of reality to give the kind of definition of years which is usually given when a question such as this is posed to a scientist.

What is most unfortunate from the traditional point of view in this presumptuous extrapolation of physical laws to include long stretches of time, and in fact all time as such, is that it results in the total neglect and even negation of cosmic rhythms, the qualitatively different conditions which prevail in the cosmos in different moments of the cosmic cycle and that absorption of the whole physical world into its subtle principle at the end of a cosmic cycle. The denial of the traditional doctrine of cycles or even one cycle, which ends with the majestic and tremendous events described in all sacred scriptures and associated with eschatology, is one of the greatest shortcomings of modern science because it has made eschatology to appear as unreal. It has helped destroy in the name of scientific logic, but in reality as a result of a presumptuous extrapolation based on metaphysical ignorance, the reality of that vision of ultimate ends which gives significance to human life and which over the ages has had the most profound effect upon the behavior of man as an ethical being. It has also destroyed in the minds of those affected by scientism the grandeur of creation and the meaning of the sacrifice of primordial man. That is why

this science has been so impervious to the amazing harmony that pervades the heavens and the earth. Where does this harmony come from? This question, which is metaphysical but which has profound scientific consequences, has been left unanswered as a result of the hypothesis of uniformitarianism, which is metaphysically absurd but which passes as scientific law as a result of the loss of vision of the hierarchic universe and understanding of cosmic rhythms.

Also, closely related to this loss of the awareness of the vertical dimension of existence, is the reductionism so characteristic of modern science. From the point of view of *scientia sacra*, this reductionism is the inversion of the traditional doctrine according to which each higher state of existence "contains" the lower, the Principle containing the root of all that is real in all realms of metacosmic and cosmic existence. In this reversal of the normal rapport between grades of being, the Spirit is reduced to the psyche, the psyche to biological form, living forms to aggregates of material components, etc. Of course one cannot lay the responsibility for all the levels of this reductionism at the feet of physics; but even on the nonmaterial levels, the effect of a purely phenomenal science wed to the sensually verifiable is to be observed, as, for example, the reduction of the Spirit to the psyche so characteristic of the modern world and concern with proofs of the existence of not only the psychic but also the spiritual through various experiments which indirectly emulate the physical sciences.[42]

To be sure, a group of biologists and others concerned with the life sciences have at least tried to resist this reductionism on the level of life forms, for those who are concerned with such sciences know full well how the whole is a totally other entity than its parts, that form signifies a reality which is irreducible to its physical or chemical components, and that the energy associated with life functions differently from material energy. This "morphic" science, to quote the terminology used by L. L. Whyte,[43] is closely akin to the *Naturphilosophie* tradition and is fully supported by such important biologists as A. Portmann,[44] who has opposed scientific reductionism as far as "forms" are concerned. In fact there is a whole critique of modern science based on this perspective and the quest for the study of forms of nature from a wholistic point of view;[45] but the fact that such a critique has been made does not hide the fact that reductionism continues to be associated with modern science, and especially with the world view of its popularizers, and that this reductionism is one of the main obstacles which prevents modern man from seeing the reflection of the hierarchy of existence in the mirror of cosmic manifestation.

This reductionism has its opposite but complementary pole in the completely unjustifiable generalization of science and its findings in such a way that it passes itself off as a science of things as such or metaphysics and, despite the denial of many of its practitioners, plays the role of a theology while hiding the presence of God and drawing a veil over the vestiges of God upon the face of His creation. Being a science of the world wed to a particular manner of envisaging and studying the external, modern science nevertheless claims absoluteness as *the* science of the world as it is, which could not but be the function of a "divine science." Hence it cannot but usurp the place of metaphysics and theology for those who see in it the only possible way of gaining certitude while everything else appears to them as conjecture.[46]

A science which thus reduces the scope of both knowledge and reality to its particular manner of envisaging the world, and that aspect of the world which can be envisaged by its way of seeing things, cannot but aid in the secularization of the world and the spread of agnosticism. This is especially true since this science functions in a world in which its tenets become almost automatically generalized far beyond the confines acceptable to many scientists themselves, for this "world" is already one molded to a great extent by the generalization of scientific thought, especially in its earlier seventeenth-century form. By refusing to consider the several facets of a particular reality and by reducing symbols to facts, this science cannot but contribute to that agnosticism and desacralization of knowing and being which characterizes the modern world,[47] although such would not necessarily have had to be the case had this type of science been integrated into knowledge of a higher order.

The traditional perspective sees as the reason behind these limitations of modern science a concept of nature which goes back even before the seventeenth century to the traditional schools of Christian thought, where, despite a Hildegard of Bingen, Saint Francis, or Saint Bonaventure,[48] a kind of polemical attitude was entertained toward nature at least in the official theology.[49] It was in Christian Hermeticism and alchemy that one had to seek an integral vision of nature and its spiritual significance.[50] The quantification of nature by the seventeenth-century physics was carried out upon a natural order which was already depleted of its sacred presence. But this science rapidly accentuated this alienation of man from nature and the mutilation of nature whose catastrophic results now face contemporary man. The mainstream of Western thought saw in nature an obstacle to the love of God. Furthermore, Promethean man and the humanism associated with him had an innate hatred for nature as a reality possessing its own harmony, equilibrium, and

beauty not invented or created by man and opposed in principle to the tenets of humanism. These elements, added to the more active than contemplative mentality of Western man, especially in the modern period, complemented each other to make possible that disrupting and finally destructive relationship which Western man has entertained vis-a-vis nature at the expense of veiling its sacramental qualities and its revelatory function as theophany.

That is why there is and there must be another science of nature which is not metaphysics or *scientia sacra* itself but its application to the realm of nature. Such a science would not exclude what is positive in modern science but would not be bound by its limitations.[51] It would not veil but reveal the theophanic character of the cosmos and relate the knowledge of the sensible domain to higher levels of reality and finally to Reality as such.[52] It would be a science whose matrix would be the Intellect and not the dissected *ratio* associated with the Cartesian *cogito*. Such a science existed already in traditional civilizations and embraced *their* sciences of the sensible order which in many cases were of considerable breadth and depth. Its principles are still to be found in *scientia sacra* from which could be created a science to embrace and integrate the sciences of nature of today once they are shorn of the rationalistic and reductionist propositions, which do not have to be their background, but which have accompanied them since their birth during the Scientific Revolution. Only such an embrace can nullify the disruptive and, in fact, dissolving effect of a partial knowledge which parades as total knowledge or is paraded by others as such. Those "others" include not only scientistic philosophers but many philosophers and historians of science infected by a dogmatic positivism[53] and a number of modern mystifiers and pseudognostics who, instead of integrating science into the gnostic vision, have mutilated the verities of gnosis into a pseudoscientific science fiction which is no more than another way of generalizing the partial knowledge represented by modern science into total knowledge, but with esoteric pretensions.[54] This other science, which is traditional in the most profound sense of implying a transmission in conformity with the destiny of the person who is able to possess such a knowledge,[55] cannot but manifest itself when *scientia sacra* becomes a reality once again, because it is none other than the application of this supreme form of knowledge to the cosmic realm.

It is not possible to say whether such a science, which is intermediary between pure metaphysics and modern science, can be created and expounded to integrate modern science in time to prevent the applications of this science in the form of modern technology from bringing further devastation upon nature and destruction upon man himself. What is certain, however, is that

however omnipotent Promethean man may feel himself to be, it is nature that shall have the final say.[56] It is her rhythms and norms which shall finally predominate. Since truth always triumphs, according to the old Latin adage *vincit omnia veritas*, and nature is closer to the truth than the artificial world created by Promethean man, she cannot but be the final victor.

The spiritual man, whose mind is sanctified by the Intellect and whose outward eyes have gained a new light issuing from the eye of the heart, does not even see himself in such a dichotomy. He is always on nature's side, for he sees in her the grand theophany which externalizes all that he is inwardly. He sees in the forms of nature the signatures of the celestial archetypes and in her movements and rhythms the exposition of a metaphysics of the highest order. To such a person nature is at once an aid to spiritual union, for man needs the world in order to transcend it, and a support for the presence of that very reality which lies at once beyond and within her forms created by the hands of the Supreme Artisan. To contemplate the cosmos as theophany is to realize that all manifestation from the One is return to the One, that all separation is union, that all otherness is sameness, that all plenitude is the Void. It is to see God everywhere.

Notes

1. See Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy, Paradiso,* trans, with a commentary by C. S. Singleton, Princeton, 1975, p. 377. Singleton explains (pp. 576-77) some of the symbolism of this remarkable passage including the reference of *squaderna* to the number four and the verb *s'intema* to the triune God.

2. In contrast to those who have spoken of Eastern wisdom and Western science and have tried to pay tribute to the East by exalting its wisdom and belittling its "science," which is then considered to be the crowning achievement of the West, we believe that besides Eastern wisdom, which of course possesses an exalted nature and is of inestimable value, the sciences of the Oriental civilizations are also of much significance in making available alternative sciences and philosophies of nature to those prevalent in the West. It is of much interest to note that in contrast to this juxtaposing of Eastern wisdom and Western science of the early part of this century, many seekers of authentic knowledge today are practically as much interested in Eastern sciences as in Eastern wisdom. We do not of course want to depreciate in any way Eastern wisdom without whose knowledge the traditional sciences would become meaningless. But we wish to defend the significance of the traditional sciences against those who would claim that the Oriental civilizations may have contributed something to philosophy or religion but little of consequence to the study of nature. Despite the presence of practitioners of acupuncture and Hatha Yoga in practically every European and American city and the appearance of a whole library of popular works on the Oriental sciences, one still encounters such a point of view rather extensively.

3. On the traditional meaning and significance of cosmology see T. Burckhardt, "Nature de la perspective cosmologique," *Etudes Traditionnelles* 49 (1948): 216-19; also his "Cosmology and Modern Science" in J. Needleman (ed.), *The Sword of Gnosis,* esp. pp. 122-32. As far as Islamic cosmology is concerned, see Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*.

4. The modern discipline of the history of science, with a few notable exceptions, is able to trace the historical link between the traditional sciences and the modern ones but is not capable of unraveling their symbolic and metaphysical significance precisely because of its own philosophical limitations and its totally secularized conception of knowledge. On the difference between traditional and modern science see R. Guenon, "Sacred and Profane Science" in his *Crisis of the Modern World,* pp. 37-50.

5. On the theme of seeing the Divine Presence in all things see Schuon, "Seeing God Everywhere" in his Gnosis, *Divine*

Wisdom, pp. 106-21.

6. Theophany, literally, "to show God," does not mean the incarnation of God in things but the reflection of the Divinity in the mirror of created forms.

7.

8. We have developed this idea extensively in our various works on the Islamic sciences, esp. *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines,* prologue; *Science and Civilization in Islam,* p. 24; and *Ideals and Realities of Islam,* pp. 54ff.

9. According to a famous Persian Sufi poem,

> *Upon the face of every green leaf is inscribed*
> *For the people of perspicacity, the wisdom of the Creator.*

10. On the spiritual significance of the identification of the American Indian with the spirit of a particular animal see J. Brown, *The Sacred Pipe,* Brown, Okla., 1967, esp. pp. 44ff., "Crying for a Vision"; C. Martin, *Keepers of the Game,* Los Angeles, 1980; A. I. Hallowell, "Bear Ceremonialism in the Northern Hemisphere," *American Anthropologist* 28/1 (1926);1-175; and *Artscanada* nos. 184-87 (Dec. 1973-Jan. 1974), which contains much documentation of interest concerning the relation between American Indians and the animal world.

11. This does not mean that the significance of miracles is to be denied or belittled in any way. Even Islam, which emphasizes the order in the universe as the most evident proof of the power and wisdom of the One, asserts that there cannot be prophecy without miracles (*ijaz*), which in fact occupies an important position in Islamic theological discussions.

12. For the meaning of the *Shari'ah* and its significance for Muslims see Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam,* chap. 4. Works on Islamic natural history take this practically for granted; in Arabic various species are often referred to as *ummah*, which means a religious community bound by a particular Divine Law, such as the *ummah* of Islam or Judaism. On the spiritual meaning of the animal kingdom having its own laws and religious significance see Ikhwan al-Safa', *Der Streit zwischen Mensch und Tier,* trans. F. Dieterici, Olms, 1969; and into English by J. Platts as *Dispute between Man and the Animals,* London, 1869.

14. See al-Farabi, *Idees des habitants de la citi vertueuse,* trans. R. P. Janssen, Cairo, 1949. An English translation with commentary and annotations was completed by R. Walzer before his death and is to be published soon by the Oxford University Press.

15. The Ash'arites reject the idea of the "nature" of things and laws relating to these "natures." But they do so in the name of an all-embracing voluntarism which transforms these "laws" into the direct expressions of the Will of God. Although this kind of totalitarian voluntarism is opposed to the sapiential perspective which is based on the integral nature of the Godhead including both His Wisdom and Power and not just His Power or Will, as far as the present argument is concerned, even the Ash'arite position would be included by the thesis here presented. They, too, like other schools of Islamic thought, see all laws governing both the human and the nonhuman world as expressions of the Divine Will even if they do not distinguish between what God wills and what reflects His Nature, which cannot not be.

16. On the metaphysical relation between a particular being and the milieu in which it exists see Guenon, *Les Etats multiples de I'etre.*

17. On the chain of being see the still valuable work of A. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being,* Cambridge, Mass., 1961.

18. For Islamic sources on the chain of being *(maratib al-mawjudat)* see Nasr, *Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines,* pp. 202ff.

19. On the "Five Divine Presences" see F. Schuon, *Dimensions of Islam,* pp. 142-58.

20. The last three worlds have their own subdivisions, the *malakut* including also the lower angels, and being identified with the soul, which has the possibility of journeying to and through the other realms or presences.

21. There is as yet no exhaustive work which would embrace all the different kinds of cosmology developed in Islamic thought. We have dealt with some of the most important ones in our *Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines.* It should be remembered that in Islam as in other traditions the whole of cosmology has also been expounded in terms of music since traditional music has a cosmic dimension and corresponds to the structure, rhythms, and modalities of the cosmos. That is why traditional sciences of music emphasize so much the cosmic and metacosmic correspondences of musical modes, melodies, and rhythms.

On the correspondence between music and the cosmos in Islam see R. D'Erlanger, *La Musique arabe, 5* vols., Paris, 1930-1939; N. Caron and D. Safvat, *Les Traditions musicales,* vol. 2, Iran, Paris, 1966; Ibn Ali al-Katib, *La Perfection des connaissances musicales*, trans A. Shiloah, Paris, 1972; A. Shiloah, "L'Epitre sur la musique des Ikhwan al-Safa'," *Revue des Etudes Islamiques,* 1965, pp. 125-62, and 1967, pp. 159-93; and J. During,

"Elements spirituels dans la musique traditionnelle iranienne contemporaine," *Sophia Perennis* 1/2 (1975): 129-54 (which deals with the spiritual and initiatic rather than cosmological aspect of traditional music).

See also the classical work of A. Danielou, *Introduction to the Study of Musical Scales,* London, 1943, which deals with the metaphysical and cosmological foundations of Indian music. This correspondence between cosmology and music is to be found wherever traditional music has survived along with the intellectual and spiritual tradition which has given birth to it.

22. On various cosmologies in the ancient world see C. Blacker and M. Loewe (eds.), *Ancient Cosmologies,* London, 1975. The essays in this volume having been written by different authors, although all informative, do not all possess the same point of view as far as their evaluation of the meaning of the traditional cosmological schemes is concerned.

23. On the gnostic journey through the cosmos in the Islamic tradition see Nasr, *Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines,* chap. 15.

24. Many traditional myths deal with the precarious and dangerous act of escaping from the prison of cosmic existence considered in its aspect of limitation. See, for example, Coomaraswamy, "Symplygades," in Lipsey (ed.), *Coomaraswamy*, vol. 1, pp. 521-44.

25. Some traditions envisage this labyrinth as so many dangerous mountains and valleys, dark forests and the like. The journey of Dante up the mountain of purgatory is a symbol of the journey through the cosmos seen as a mountain, a symbolism also found in 'Attar's *Conference of the Birds* (*Mantiq al-tayr*) and in many other traditions. The symbolism of the cosmic mountain (the Mount Meru of Hinduism, Alborz of the Zoroastrians, the Qaf of Islam, etc.) is one of the most universal symbols to be found in various traditions. On the symbolism of mountain climbing as related to journeying through the cosmos see M. Pallis, "The Way and the Mountain," in his *The* Way *and the Mountain,* pp. 13-35.

26. The maze of such cathedrals as Chartres relate to this same principle and is based on exact knowledge of the traditional cosmological sciences. See K., C., and V. Critchlow, *Chartre Maze, A Model of the Universe,* London. 1976.

27. The Prophet of Islam has said, "Die before you die." It is the person who has followed this injunction who is able to contemplate cosmic forms as reflections of Divine Qualities rather than opaque veils which hide the splendor of their Source.

28. This is essentially the perspective of Zen, which does not mean that one can experience the Divine in things by some form of naturalism which for many Western adepts of Zen is almost a carry over from a kind of sentimental nature mysticism into the world of Zen. Such people, in a sense, wish to experience Heaven without either faith in God or virtue, which alone would qualify a being for the paradisal state, for what is the contemplation of natural forms *in divinis* except an experience of the paradisal state? In any case, there is no such thing as natural mysticism from the traditional point of view; in practice man cannot experience God as the immanent before experiencing Him as the transcendent, however these concepts are translated in different traditional languages. One could also say that man can realize the identity of *nirvana* with *samsara* provided he has already gone beyond *samsara* and reached *nirvana.*

29. That is why *tajalli* is translated as theophany. In his incomparable *Gulshan-i raz,* Shabistari says,

> *Non-being is a mirror, the world the image [of the Universal Man], and man is the eye of the image, in which the person is hidden.*

See Nasr, *Science and Civilization in Islam,* p. 345.

30. We are not using matter here in its Aristotelian but in its everyday sense as the "stuff" or "substance" of which things are made.

31. During the last few years much interest has been shown in the West in the rediscovery of the meaning of sacred geometry. See, for example, K. Critchlow, *Time Stands Still;* idem, *Islamic Patterns*; and the various publications of the Lindesfarne Association including the *Lindesfarne Letters,* esp. no. 10 (1980), dealing with geometry and architecture.

32. See Proclus Lycius, *The Philosophical and Mathematical Commentaries of Proclus, on the First Book of Euclid's Elements,* trans, with commentary by Th. Taylor, London, 1792. This fundamental work, elucidated by Taylor's important commentaries, contains the basis for the understanding of the relation of geometry to first principles. Of course although geometry is an ancillary to metaphysics, it is not only an ancillary. Rather, it is one of the most important of the traditional sciences in its own right and as these sciences are related to art.

33. It is really only since the early decades of the nineteenth century that technology in the West has become wed closely to modern science and has constituted its direct application. Before this relatively recent past,

science and technology followed two very different courses with few significant reactions between them.

34. For traditional critiques of modern science see Guenon, "Sacred and Profane Science"; Schuon, *Language of the Self,* chap. 10; idem, *In the Tracks of Buddhism,* chap. 5; Lord Northbourne, *Religion in the Modern World,* London, 1963, esp. chap. 5; and F. Brunner, *Science et realite,* Paris, 1954.

35. The English usage of the term "science" possesses the most limited and restricted meaning when compared with the usage of *Wissenschaft* in German, *science* in French, or *scienzia* in Italian.

36. "Modern science believes what it sees but ends up seeing what it believes" (F. Schuon, *Du Divin a I'humain.*

37 "Modern man was not—and is not—'intelligent' enough to offer intellectual resistance to such specious suggestions as are liable to follow from contact with facts which, though natural, normally lie beyond the range of common experience; in order to combine, in one and the same consciousness, both the religious symbolism of the sky and the astronomical fact of the Milky Way, an intelligence is required that is more than just rational, and this brings us back to the crucial problem of intellection and, as a further consequence, to the problem of gnosis and esoterism…. Howbeit, the tragic dilemma of the modern mind results from the fact that the majority of men are not capable of grasping *a priori* the compatibility of the symbolic expressions of tradition with the material observations of science; these observations incite modern man to want to understand the 'why and where' of all things, but he wishes this 'wherefore' to remain as external and easy as scientific phenomena themselves, or in other words, he wants all the answers to be on the level of his own experiences: and as these are purely material ones, his consciousness closes itself in advance against all that might transcend them." Schuon, *Language of the Self,* pp. 226-27.

38. The attraction toward Oriental teachings about nature alluded to above is related to this same phenomenon. On the interest of contemporary physics in the traditional esoteric and mystical views of the universe, see M. Talbot, *Mysticism and the New Physics,* New York, 1981.

39. "L'Ame du Monde est done bien typified par la Vierge Marie du Christianisme." J. Brun, "Qu'est devenu L'Ame due Monde?" *Cahiers de I'Universite Saint]ean de Jerusalem,* no. 6, *Le Combat pour I'Ame du Monde,* Paris, 1980, pp. 164-65. This essay traces the steps by which the world as seen by modern man lost its soul.

On the relation of the Virgin Mary to the World Soul, see the article of G. Durand, "La Vierge Marie et 1'Ame du Monde," in the same volume, pp. 135-67.

40. For example, among all the later Islamic philosophers who followed the Avicennan and Suhrawardian cosmologies such as Qadi Sa'id Qummi, whose *Glosses upon the "Theology of Aristotle"* containing an elaborate discussion of this subject, has been analyzed by C. Jambet in his "L'Ame du Monde et 1'amour sophianique," in *Cahiers de I'Universite Saint Jean de Jerusalem,* no. 6, *Le Combat pour I'Ame du Monde,* pp. 52ff.

41. On the meaning of these cities which appear in folk tales, poetry such as that of Nizami, as well as texts of philosopy and metaphysics, see Corbin, *En Islam iranien,* vol. 2, p. 59.

42. It is the allure of empiricism which draws so many people to various kinds of spiritualism, magnetism, occultism, etc., where the supernatural is "proven" through phenomenal evidence. Although certain experiments in parapsychology have certainly demonstrated that there is more to reality than meets the eye and that the so-called scientific world view of a limited material-energy complex as the ultimate ground of all that constitutes reality cannot be sustained, no phenomenal evidence can prove the reality of the Spirit, which lies beyond all phenomena and belongs to the realm of the noumena.

43. See his *Universe of Experience,* New York, 1974.

44. His numerous articles and essays in the *Eranos-Jahrbuch* over the years comprise a major statement of a nonreductionist "philosophy of nature" by a contemporary biologist. On Portmann see also M. Grene, *Approaches to a Philosophical Biology,* New York, 1965.

For a philosophy of science opposed to reductionism see also the works of M. Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension,* New York, 1966; *Science, Faith and Society,* London, 1946; and *Knowing and Being,* London, 1969. His works have attracted during the past few years the attention of many students of science opposed to the reductionism inherent in the current scientific world view.

45. During the past few years much activity has taken place in Germany to criticize the segmented approach of modern science in the name of a more wholistic way of studying nature. There is even a review devoted to this subject with numerous articles by both scientists and philosophers who deal with this theme and its ramifications. See the *Zeitschrift fur Ganzheitsforschung* (1957-).

On the criticism of modern science from this perspective, see also W. Heitler, *Naturphilosophische Streifziige,* Braunschweig, 1970; and his *Der Mensch und die naturwis-senschaftliche Erkenntnis,* Braunschweig, 1970.

46. "Fondee non pas sur la consideration de Dieu, mais sur une technique particuliere, la science moderne cache Dieu et l'enveloppe au bien de s'ouvrir a la connaissance universelle et transcendante…. elle n'est proprement ni divine ni revelatrice de Dieu et ne peut definir la realite veritable du monde." F. Brunner, *Science et realite,* p. 205. This work contains

one of the most thorough intellectual criticisms of modern science by a contemporary European philosopher.

47. "Symbolic thought is gnostic, while scientific thought is agnostic; it believes that 'two and two make four' or it believes only what it sees, which amounts to the same thing." G. Durand, *On the Disfiguration of the Image of Man in the West,* Ipswich, U.K.; 1977, p. 15.

48. St. Bonaventure could write concerning the beauties of nature as the reflection of God's beauty and wisdom:

> *Whoever, therefore, is not enlightened*
> *by such splendor of created things*
> *is blind; whoever is not awakened by such outcries*
> *is deaf; whoever does not praise God because of all these effects*
> *is dumb; whoever does not discover the First Principle*
> *from such clear signs is a fool..*

From E. Cousins (trans.), *Bonaventure: The Soul's Journey into God,* p. 67. But it seems that many of those who followed him after the Middle Ages, even among theologians dominated to a great extent by nominalism, would have been classified by him according to the above definitions as blind, deaf, dumb, or fools.

49. "II nous semble que la pensee occidentale, traditionnelle ou moderne, religieuse ou athee, propose de la Nature une notion 'mutilee' ou limitee, correlative d'une attitude passionnelle ou polemique." G. Vallin, "Nature integrate et Nature mutilee," *Revue philosophise,* no. 1 (Jan.-Mars 1974): 77.

50. "La pensee occidentale nous offre, notamment dans le Neoplatonisme, dans 1'Hermetisme ou 1'alchimie, ou chez un Scot Erigene, une approache ou un equivalent de ces que nous proposons d'appeler la 'Nature integral'; mais c'est dans le cadre de la pensee orientale, et notamment de la metaphysique hindouiste du *Vedanta* que cette 'structure' a la fois cosmologique et theologique nous parait presenter toute son ampleur et sa richesse." Ibid., p. 84.

We have also dealt with this question in our *Man and Nature.*

51. "C'est pourquoi il faut quil existe une autre science que la science moderne. Cet autre type de connaissance du monde n'exclut pas la science sous sa forme actuelle, si l'on envisage la perfection pour qui sous-tend et justifie dans une certaine mesure la pensee technique elle-meme: la science veritable laisse subsister la science moderne comme une manifestation possible de 1'esprit en nous." Brunner, op. cit, p. 208-9.

52. Through such a science "1'ordre sensible, apres celui de 1'ame, exprime finalement 1'ordre de 1'intelligence auquel appartiennent les lois supremes de la production du monde, de la vie spirituelle et du retour des etres a Dieu." Brunner, op. cit., p. 215.

53. It is important to note that the founders of the discipline of the history of science, who were all either outstanding historians of thought or philosophers of science, were, with the exception of the much neglected P. Duhem, positivists. As a result, an invisible positivist air still dominates the minds of the scholars of this discipline despite several important exceptions such as A. Koyre, G. Di Santillana and, among the younger generation, N. Sivan and A. Debus. What is of special interest is that this positivism becomes rather aggressive when the question of the Oriental sciences and their metaphysical significance comes to the fore. That is why so few studies of the Oriental sciences which would reveal their significance as being anything more than quaint errors on the path of human progress have come out of those dominated by the tacit positivism of this discipline, no matter how learned they might be. S. Jaki in his *The Road of Science and the Ways to God,* Chicago, 1978, has referred to this positivism in connection with its neglect of the role of Christian elements such as a Creator whose will rules over an orderly universe. Although we do not agree with his appreciation of Western science as a positive result of the particular characteristics of Christianity, we certainly share his concern for the limitations imposed upon the discipline of the history of science by the positivism of its founders.

54. The recent work, R. Ruyer, *La Gnose de Princeton: des savants* a *la recherche d'une religion,* Paris, 1974, supposedly by the group of scientists at Princeton interested in *gnosis* but most likely the thoughts of one person using a fictitious group, is an example of this kind of phenomenon. The thirst for sacred knowledge in the contemporary world is such that this work became popular in France where, during recent years, many pseudognostic and pseudoesoteric works by scientists have seen the light of day.

55. Traditions emphasize that this knowledge, although attainable, is not attainable by everyone because not only does it need preparation but can be taught only to the person who possesses the capability and nature to "inherit" such a knowledge. That is why some of the Muslim authorities like Sayyid Haydar Amuli refer to it as inherited knowledge (*al-'ilm al-mawruthi*), which they contrast with acquired knowledge (*al-'ilm al-iktisabi*). See Corbin, "Science traditionnelle et renaissance spirituelle," *Cahiers de I'Universite Saint Jean de Jerusalem* 1 (1974):39ff.

56. "Nature … which is at the same time their sanctuary [of the American Indians], will end by conquering this artificial and sacreligious world, for it is the Garment, the Breath, the very Hand of the Great Spirit." Schuon, *Language of the Self,* p. 224.

15

The Veil of Isis

Frithjof Schuon

The explorers of substance, of energy, of the indefinitely small, and of the indefinitely large, proceeding from discovery to discovery and from hypothesis to hypothesis, may well plunge into the mechanism of the physical world; they will undoubtedly meet with a variety of instructive insights into the structure of the physical categories, but in fact they will never reach the end of their trajectory; the foundations of existence have something indefinite about them and will not surrender themselves. Isis is "all that has been, all that is, and all that shall be"; and "no one hath ever lifted my veil." It is useless to try to do so, all the more so in that in this order of magnitude the useless coincides with the pernicious, as is shown by the myths of Prometheus, Icarus, the Titans, and Lucifer, and as is proven to excess by the experiences of the last two centuries.[178]

Starting from the axiom that all knowledge by definition comprises a subject and an object, we shall specify the following: the subject of the knowledge of sensible phenomena is obviously a particular sensorial faculty or a combination of these faculties; the subject of the knowledge of physical principles, or of cosmic categories, is the rational faculty; and the subject of the knowledge of metaphysical principles—and it is of this that we wish to speak—is the pure Intellect and hence intellectual intuition: intuition or intellection and not discursive operation. A knowledge whose subject is not the Intellect could not be metaphysical; starting from the observation of phenomena, one cannot reach a reality that only "God in us" can cause us to perceive. Three subjectivities, three modes of certitude: from the relative to the absolute.

"No one hath ever lifted my veil": it is true, in virtue of the Platonic principle that the Good tends to communicate itself, that the Goddess can consent to unveil Herself; but only in part. She does so through the phenomena of beauty and goodness, thereby allowing mortals to participate in the mystery of infinitude and in the nectar of Her beatitude; but She does not unveil her very substance, nor could She wish to do so, given the imperatives of Her nature, those of the Infinite, precisely. As we have said, this restriction concerns only the strictly individual, hence narrowly rational and "profane" subjectivity, and not that divine presence in us which is situated "on the

[178] It should not be forgotten in this context that modern science operates with instruments that could not exist in a traditional civilization; this means that there are kinds of knowledge which, strictly speaking, have no right to exist.

other side" of the veil, and which coincides with the Subject as such, the only one that is; but it is certainly not this transcendent subjectivity that scientism requires and has in view.

Moreover, and this is essential: this latter subjectivity, which in reality is primary, reaches the metaphysical substance of the world starting from—and passing through—every positive phenomenon; there is no need for it to analyze indefinitely the physical categories in the hope of arriving at an end. Isis can lift her veil starting with an earthly beauty as well as with a quintessential substrate, on the assumption that it is accessible "from the outside."

One of two things: either one arrives by an objective path at what one believes to be the immanent omega of physical existence, in which case there will always remain an undeciphered element precisely because the supposed omega is objective; or else one goes beyond such an element, in which case the awareness is connected with the intellective subjectivity of man and it is no longer a question of investigation *ab extra*.

Unquestionably, supreme knowledge, which pertains to the absolute, can never depend intrinsically on cultural or historical contingencies; what matters to it, and what suffices, is that the world is the world and that man is man.

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When God created man in His image, He created a measure; the human perception of the world corresponds to God's creative intention.[179] Man by definition is a center, or "the center," in a given universe; not by accident, but in virtue of the very nature of Being, and this is why that which is large or small for man is large or small in the divine intention; man perceives things as they present themselves in the divine Intellect. And that is why the world of the indefinitely small, as well as the world of the indefinitely large, is as it were forbidden to man, who should not want to disproportionately enlarge the small or to disproportionately reduce the large. Man ought to feel that there is no advantage or happiness in such enterprises; and he would feel it if he had maintained a relationship with the Absolute, or if this relationship were sincere and sufficient. He who is really at peace with God is free from all unhealthy curiosity, if one may say so; he lives like

[179] According to the Bible, it was in fact man who gave all creatures their names. This innate science of the identity of things implies *a priori* the innate knowledge of God, and *a posteriori* the indirect vision of God on the basis of things.

a well-guarded child in the blessed garden of a grace that does not forsake him; the Creator knows the best place for the creature, and He knows what is good for man.

In a certain sense, the world of atoms as well as that of galaxies—to express ourselves *grosso modo*—is hostile to human beings, and comprises for them, in principle or potentially, a climate of alienation and terror. Some people will doubtless argue that "the man of our times" is an "adult," but this is pride, even satanism, for a normal man always keeps a childlike side, as all sacred Scriptures attest by their language; if such were not the case, childhood itself would not contain a positive aspect. Of course, a mature man ought to be "adult," but he can be so otherwise than by plunging into forbidden abysses; the spiritual victory over illusion is a matter appreciably more serious than the insensitivity of the explorers of the inhuman.

There are two points to consider in created things, namely the empirical appearance and the mechanism; now the appearance manifests the divine intention, as we have stated above; the mechanism merely brings about the mode of manifestation. For example, in man's body the divine intention is expressed by form, deiformity,[180] symbolism, and beauty; the mechanism is its anatomy and vital functioning. The modern mentality, having always a scientific and "iconoclastic" tendency, tends to over-accentuate the mechanism to the detriment of the creative intention, and it does so on all levels, psychological as well as physical; the result is a jaded and "demystified" mentality that is no longer "impressed" by anything. By forgetting the divine intention—which nonetheless is apparent *a priori*—one ends in an emptiness devoid of all reference points and meaning, and in a mentality of nihilism and despair, if not of careless and brutal materialism. In the face of this deviation it is the child who is right when he believes that the blue sky above us is Paradise.

That there are sciences, including physical sciences, is in man's nature because it is in the nature of things; but it is quite as much in the nature of things that man is unable to unveil Isis and that he must not try to do so. Human science has limits of principle; what in traditional civilizations prevents man from overstepping these limits is his relationship with God, with all the consequences that this relationship implies.[181]

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[180] We should specify: total or integral deiformity, for in animals too there is—or can be—a deiformity, but it is partial; similarly for plants, minerals, elements, and other orders of phenomena.

[181] Although a believer, Pasteur is supposed to have said that when entering his laboratory he left God outside; be that as it may, this plainly shows the false realism of scientists, while at the same time—in a quite different respect—it demonstrates the inferiority complex of those who are still believers toward the apparently victorious rationalists.

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One point that certain physicists do not seem to understand is that the mechanism of the world can be neither purely deterministic nor *a fortiori* purely arbitrary. In reality, the universe is a veil woven of necessity and freedom, of mathematical rigor and musical play; every phenomenon participates in these two principles, which amounts to saying that everything is situated in two apparently divergent but at bottom concordant dimensions, exactly as the dimensions of space are concordant while giving rise to divergent appearances that are irreconcilable from the standpoint of a planimetric view of objects.[182]

Another point that moderns do not grasp is that there is no reason for necessarily seeking the cause of a phenomenon on the plane where it is produced; on the contrary one has to consider the possibility of a non-material cause, above all when it is a question of a phenomenon whose beginning is unknown *a priori*, and unknowable materially, as is the origin of living beings. Transformist evolutionism is the classical example of the bias that invents "horizontal" causes because one does not wish to admit a "vertical" dimension: one seeks to extort from the physical plane a cause that it cannot furnish and that is necessarily situated above matter.

Even within the order of physical causes, one has to take into account the simultaneous presence of the immanent metaphysical Cause: if a seed is the immediate cause of a plant, it is because the divine archetype intervenes in the physical causality. Geometrically speaking, causes can be situated on the "concentric circles" that constitute the Universe, but other causes—and with all the more reason the First Cause—are situated at the Center and act through the radii emanating from it. The divine Intellect contains the archetypes of creation, and it is starting from this Cause—or from this causal system—at a given cyclic "moment" of the cosmogonic process, that the "ideas" are "incarnated" which will be manifested in the form of contingent creatures.

[182] Let us take the example of the human body: its principial form, which cannot be other than what it is, stems from the Absolute and from necessity, whereas its actual form—a particular body, and not the body as such—which gives rise to innumerable variations, stems from the Infinite and from freedom. Its principial form is as it were mathematical; it is measurable. On the contrary, its actual form is as it were musical; its beauty is unfathomable. Anatomy has its limits, but beauty does not; on the other hand, beauty can be relative, but anatomy cannot.

We do not ask physicists to be content with a naive and anthropomorphic creationism; but at least it would be logical on their part—since they aim at a total and flawless science—to try to understand the traditional onto-cosmological doctrines, especially the Hindu doctrine of the "envelopes (*kosha*) of the Self (*Atma*)"; a doctrine that, precisely, presents the Universe as a system of circles proceeding from the Center-Principle to that extreme limit which for us is matter. For human science does not derive solely from the need to know and register; more profoundly its origin is the thirst for the essential; now the sense of essentiality attracts us toward shores other than those of the limited plane of physical phenomena alone.

As regards the illegitimacy of any attempt to overstep the limits imposed by the mystery of Isis, it could be objected that metaphysics is also such an attempt. This argument applies to profane philosophy, but not to the *scientia sacra* by which Isis Herself consents to lift a veil, without however withdrawing it to the point of leaving no mystery. The goal of the profane thinkers on the contrary is to propose to the intelligence only what is rationally verifiable and to "free" thought from all transcendence; the intention is to "demystify" the universe by explaining it once and for all; thus rationalistic language wishes to exhaust the knowable to the last drop. Thought is then all that language expresses and nothing more.

To attempt to raise the veil of Isis is not to explain God and the world, the Principle and its Manifestation, while knowing that it is impossible to exhaust the mystery of the Real; it is rather to wish to discover and to explain all of Possibility with the intention of unveiling it totally. As we have specified more than once in our writings, metaphysics intends to furnish dialectically only reference points. Pedants will blame it for being incomplete, for not taking into account this or that; but articulated metaphysics is necessarily incomplete, precisely because it is articulated; nevertheless it offers—and this is its entire reason for being—a system of perfectly sufficient keys, through a language that cannot be other than indicative and elliptical. If, throughout the course of history, one such doctrine is added to other analogous doctrines, it is not—unless exceptionally and for reasons of accentuation—because the preceding doctrines were deemed erroneous, but simply because a new formulation was deemed opportune, in the first place by Heaven itself, which presides over the manifestations of the Spirit.

No one shall raise the veil of Isis, says the Egyptian tradition; nevertheless, it may happen not only that the Goddess Herself lifts her veil, but even that the veil disappears altogether; this Mystery, which appears to contradict what we have said before, is not however situated on the

same level as the gestures of mercy, and it is not addressed to the individual as such. The nudity of Isis pertains to the "heart," or to the immanent Self; instead of speaking of "unveiling," another image could be chosen, and it could be said that the Goddess takes the soul under Her veil, *ab intra*; this, in Sufic terms, is "knowledge through *Allah*," in which it is less the intelligence that perceives God than it is God who perceives Himself in the intelligence. What is involved, therefore, is that Intellect which Meister Eckhart termed "that something in the soul (*aliquid est in anima*) which is uncreated and uncreatable," and which belongs to us because we belong to it; "the kingdom of God is within you." The inward dimension is unitive by its nature because it is the projection of the divine Self, transcendent in itself but rendered immanent in virtue of the ontological homogeneity of the Universe.

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Since the veil of Isis is found within us as well as above us, certain considerations on the notions of objectivity and subjectivity can find a place here. The meaning of these two notions is either philosophical or psychological, according to whether they correspond either to definitions or to attitudes: thus we may consider each of these ideas either in an objective sense, having in view their suchness, or in a subjective sense, relating to our awareness. To consider subjectivity objectively is to define it as a phenomenon; to consider objectivity subjectively is to see it as a quality of the subject, as absence of subjectivism, precisely, and thus as the adequate perception of "external" reality.

If the fundamental quality of the object is reality—and objective things are precious to the extent that they manifest the absolute Real or come close to it in various modes and in different degrees—the fundamental quality of the subject will be intelligence, the Intellect, pure intellection, and hence metaphysical certitude; intellection being as exact and unquestionable as the objective reality that surrounds us.

Furthermore: if in the ordinary usage of the words "subjectivity" means a predominance of sentimentality which engenders bias, one could as well mean by "objectivity" an illegitimate preoccupation—to the detriment of inward values—with the things of the external world, something which nobody has dreamt of doing. In other words: when subjectivity is opposed to objectivity, the latter appears to be superior and normative; when, however, inwardness is opposed to outwardness, in the moral or spiritual sense of the terms, it is inwardness that has priority.

Obviously, subject and object form a complementarity that in itself is neutral and not an alternative comprising an opposition; on the other hand, the subject and the object each comprises such an alternative or quasi-Zoroastrian bipolarity: for the objective pole, Being and matter, and for the subjective pole, immanent divine Consciousness and the ego, or the Self and the "I".[183] The great perversion is to tend toward matter and the ego, thereby drawing away from the divine Principle, at once immanent and transcendent; this is materialism on the one hand and egoism or individualism on the other, both of which can be either theoretical or practical, that is, either philosophical or vital.

There is a "veil of Isis" on the side of the subject as well as on the side of the object: purely rational thought—cut-off from its intellective roots—cannot violate the mysteries of the Absolute-Object, any more than the empirical ego—it too separated from its substance—can violate the mysteries of the Absolute-Subject; "mystery" is that which remains inaccessible to a fragmentary consciousness. In other words: the veil of the Goddess hides at one and the same time that which is too "lofty" and that which is too "deep"—or too divinely "other" and too divinely "oneself"—for minds grown accustomed to stopping halfway, to perceiving only contingencies, and to being only a contingency.

In the final analysis, this Isis hidden behind her veil is none other than Divine Reality, in which the objective and the subjective coincide; and the veil is none other than the cosmogonic projection by which this Reality is bipolarized and gives rise to that play of innumerable mirrors that is the Universe. Isis is *Atma*; the veil is *Maya*.

[183] For the hierarchy of objective realities, the lower limit is the most solidified, opaque, and heavy matter; for subjective realities, it is the most outward consciousness, namely, the sensory faculties.

VII

The Exoteric and the Esoteric

16

The Transcendent Unity of Religions

Harry Oldmeadow

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The traditionalist view of religion can best be understood by a close examination of Schuon's writings in this field. Four *leitmotifs* run through his work on religion: the necessary diversity of Revelations and thus of religious forms; the principle of orthodoxy; the distinction between the exoteric and esoteric domains, and the relationship between these outer and inner dimensions of religion; and the transcendent unity of religions. He has repeatedly returned to these themes, to the exposition of the principles involved and their application to manifold religious phenomena.

Schuon's view of religion turns on the axiomatic notion of multiple and diverse Revelations; the principle is a kind of linch-pin in his work. In discussing it we shall have to tread carefully if we are not to stumble into the same confusions that have ambushed some of Schuon's critics. Schuon perceives humankind neither as a monolithic psychic entity nor as an amorphous agglomerate but as being divided into several distinct branches, each with its own peculiar traits, psychological and otherwise, which determine its receptivities to truth and shape its apprehensions of reality. Needless to say there is no question here of any kind of racialism or ethnocentricism, which attributes a superiority or inferiority to this or that ethnic collectivity. Nor, however, is there any sentimental prejudice in favour of the idea that the world's peoples are only 'superficially' and 'accidentally' different. 'We observe the existence, on earth, of diverse races, whose differences are "valid" since there are no "false" as opposed to "true" races.'[184] Each branch of humanity exhibits a psychic and spiritual homogeneity which may transcend barriers of geography and biology. An example: that shamanism should extend through parts of Northern Europe, Siberia, Mongolia, Tibet, and the Red Indian areas betokens, in Schuon's view, a certain spiritual temperament shared by the peoples in question, one quite

[184] Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, p. 32.

independent of physical similarities and leaving aside the question of 'borrowings' and 'influences'.

To the diverse human collectivities are addressed Revelations which are determined in their formal aspects by the needs and receptivities at hand. This is a crucial point. Thus

> . . . what determines the differences among forms of Truth is the difference among human receptacles. For thousands of years already humanity has been divided into several fundamentally different branches, which constitute so many complete humanities, more or less closed in on themselves; the existence of spiritual receptacles so different and so original demands differentiated refractions of the one Truth.[185]

This principle is of incalculable import. We have already met with the idea that Truth is one. Revelation marks a 'formalisation' of Truth and thus cannot be identical with it. This distinction must be maintained if the idea of multiple Revelations is to remain intelligible:

> Truth is situated beyond forms, whereas Revelation, or the Tradition that derives from it, belongs to the formal order, and that indeed by definition; but to speak of form is to speak of diversity, and thus of plurality.[186]

In a sense the Revelations are communicated in different divine languages. Just as we should baulk at the idea of 'true' and 'false' languages, so we need to see the necessity and the validity of multiple Revelations. This is not to suggest that all 'religions' which claim to derive from a 'Revelation' do so in fact, nor that there is no such thing as a pseudo-religion. We shall turn to this issue presently.

The principle of multiple Revelations is not accessible to all mentalities, and its implications must remain anathema to the majority of believers. This is in the nature of things. Nevertheless, from a traditionalist viewpoint, anyone today wishing to understand religion as such and the inter-relationships of the various traditions must have a firm purchase on this principle. It is one which can be supported by Scriptural and traditional authority, though the penetration of the passages in question will again be beyond the

[185] *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, p. 29.
[186] Ibid.

reach of most believers. As the Semitic traditions have been the ones most prone to extravagant claims of exclusivism we shall cite a few passages from their Scriptures which are suggestive in the light of the foregoing:

> 'Other sheep have I which are not of this fold' (John 10:16).
>
> 'For each we have appointed a law and traced out a path, and if God had wished, verily He would have made you one people' (Koran 5:53).
>
> 'And we never sent a messenger save with the language of his folk, that he might make the message clear for them' (Koran 14:4).

Revelation must be carefully distinguished from other intuitions and disclosures of the divine. In the traditionalist vocabulary, 'Revelation' always signifies a formal source for a whole religious tradition. When Martin Buber wrote that 'Revelation is continual, and everything is fit to become a sign of revelation' he was using the word in a different sense.[187] Likewise Archbishop Temple in writing, 'Unless all existence is a medium of revelation, no particular revelation is possible.'[188] The referent here is what Eliade might call a 'hierophany' and what the traditionalists would describe as an 'archetypal illumination'. 'Revelation' will here be used in the traditionalist sense and thus signalled by the use of the capital.

Furthermore, Revelation must be distinguished from 'inspiration', which can encompass all manner of workings of divine influence. This distinction has been scrupulously preserved in the Judaic, Islamic, and Hindu traditions, which is not to suggest that it is one of which all the adherents of these traditions will be aware. The neglect of this distinction in some quarters has produced abuses too numerous to catalogue, but the fundamentalist tendency to idolatrize Scripture is a case in point where the Revelation, Christ Himself, is confused with phenomena which are, in some cases, inspired.

As each religion proceeds from a Revelation, it is, in S. H. Nasr's words, both

> *the* religion and *a* religion, *the* religion inasmuch as it contains within itself the Truth and the means of attaining the Truth, *a* religion since it emphasises a particular

[187] M. Buber, *A Believing Humanism* (New York, 1967), p. 113.
[188] From *Nature, Man, and God*, quoted by J. Wach, *The Comparative Study of Religion* (New York, 1958), p. 44.

> aspect of Truth in conformity with the spiritual and psychological needs of the humanity for whom it is destined.[189]

In other words each religion is sufficient unto itself and contains all that is necessary for man's sanctification and salvation. Nevertheless, it remains limited by definition. The recognition and reconciliation of these two apparently antagonistic principles is crucial to the traditionalist perspective. Schuon re-states the point made by Nasr this way:

> A religion is a form, and so also a limit, which 'contains' the Limitless, to speak in paradox; every form is fragmentary because of its necessary exclusion of other formal possibilities; the fact that these forms—when they are complete, that is to say when they are perfectly 'themselves'—each in its own way represents totality does not prevent them from being fragmentary in respect of their particularisation and their reciprocal exclusion.[190]

This will be amplified in our discussion of esotericism and exotericism.

The diversity of Revelations raises the question of the 'status', so to speak, of the Messengers through whom the Revelations have been communicated. This is not a question which can be treated in any depth here, but the following remarks from Schuon at least disallow some of the more obvious confusions which might arise:

> The great Messengers, if they are assuredly one by their principle, in their *gnosis* and in the *Logos*, are not however of necessity equal on the phenomenal plane, that of manifestation on earth; what are equivalent are the Messages when each is taken in its entirety. It is necessary, in any case, not to confuse the phenomenal or cosmic with the spiritual reality; it is the latter which is one, and the former which is diverse.[191]

Each Messenger fulfils the appropriate function in a certain modality, or spiritual key, which determines the 'tone' of the tradition which is bound to flow from the Message. Thus it is that

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[189] *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (London, 1966), p. 15.
[190] Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, p. 144.
[191] Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, p. 14.

> when one says *the* Prophet it means the prophet of Islam . . . when one says *the* Incarnation it refers to Christ, who personifies this aspect. And although every prophet and saint has experienced 'enlightenment', *the* Enlightenment refers to the experience of the Buddha, which is the most outstanding and universal embodiment of this experience.[192]

Given this framework it hardly needs saying that the great religious founders must not be confounded with other religious figures, no matter how saintly or sagacious. Schuon goes to some lengths to point out why Vivekananda's sentimental trinity of Jesus, the Buddha, and Ramakrishna is quite unacceptable from many different points of view—not because the sanctity of the latter is in any way in doubt but because his spiritual function is of a quite different order, Ramakrishna being as a river besides the oceanic nature of the other two.[193]

A question which has exercised many minds, often to no very good effect, is this: what is 'religion'? In the traditionalist perspective this question cannot be met without reference to Revelation and tradition. Within this framework we can identify two elements which must always be present: doctrine and method. Nasr gives a compact definition:

> Every religion possesses two elements which are its basis and its foundation: a doctrine which distinguishes between the Absolute and the relative, between the absolutely Real and the relatively real . . . and a method of concentrating upon the Real, of attaching oneself to the Absolute and living according to the Will of Heaven, in accordance with the purpose and meaning of human existence.[194]

Plainly this kind of definition is not acceptable to everyone. It is incompatible with many of the definitions which have been in vogue at one time or another amongst scholars from several different academic disciplines. It is no part of our present purpose to debate the merits of various formulations about religion but simply to make the traditionalist position clear. It hardly needs to be pointed out that there is a yawning chasm between

[192] Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, p. 67.
[193] Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, p. 187n.
[194] *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, p. 15.

the traditionalist view and those which reduce religion to something less than it claims to be.

By what means can it be established whether something deserves the dignity of the term 'religion'? The answer to this question has, in part, been suggested by much that has already been said about tradition. Further ambiguities are dispelled by the principle of orthodoxy. Schuon articulates the principle thus:

> In order to be orthodox a religion must possess a mythological or doctrinal symbolism establishing the essential distinction between the Real and the illusory, or the Absolute and the relative . . . and must offer a way that serves both the perfection of concentration on the Real and also its continuity. In other words a religion is orthodox on condition that it offers a sufficient, if not always exhaustive, idea of the absolute and the relative, and therewith an idea of their reciprocal relationships.[195]

This is re-stated and expanded in another passage from Schuon:

> For a religion to be considered intrinsically orthodox—an extrinsic orthodoxy depends upon formal elements which cannot apply literally outside their own perspective—it must rest upon a fully adequate doctrine . . . then it must extol and actualise a spirituality that is equal to this doctrine and thereby include sanctity within its ambit both as concept and reality; this means it must be of Divine and not philosophical origin and thus be charged with a sacramental or theurgic presence .[196]

The insistence on divine origin, adequate doctrine, and an effective spiritual method is by now clear enough. How are these to be put to the test? There are several angles of approach.

Firstly, the origin of the 'religion' in question: according to the traditionalists any claim to a Revelation such as would provide the impetus for a whole new religious tradition is out of the question in post-Koranic times.

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[195] Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, p. 138.
[196] Schuon, *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, p. 14.

> It is quite out of the question that a 'revelation', in the full sense of the word, should arise in our time, one comparable, that is to say, to the imparting of the great sutras or any other primary scriptures: the day of revelations is past on this globe and was so already long ago. The inspirations of the saints are of another order.[197]

Neither the basis nor the ramifications of this claim can be rehearsed here except to say that it derives from the sacred Scriptures themselves, especially the Koran, and from the doctrine of cycles. The Koranic Revelation must be the last great Revelation in this cycle. Muhummad is the 'Seal of the Prophets', no later prophecies of this order being possible. From the traditionalist point of view, history has only gone to confirm this claim.

Under this view there can, in fact, be no new religions as such: there can only be conformity to the traditional orthodoxies on one side or a surrender to the confusions of the age on the other. The traditionalists have been intractable in refusing to grant religious 'status', as it were, to the various heterodox and quasi-spiritual movements of which there has been such an efflorescence in recent times. Amongst the traditionalist targets are the movements of 'reformist' bent (neo-Hinduism, liberal theology, 'Christian Marxism'), those of syncretic intention and esoteric trappings (theosophy), those centred on charismatic 'gurus' who are not faithful purveyors of any authentically traditional doctrine (Gurdjieff, Krishnamurti, Rajneesh), or those claiming a new divine dispensation (Mormonism, Subud). Although these groups and persons are rarely mentioned by name in traditionalist writings, it is clear that they fly in the face of the principles which the traditionalists espouse. It is clearly such movements that Schuon has in mind when he writes about heterodoxies which

> always tend to adulterate either the idea of the divine Principle or the manner of our attachment to it; they offer either a worldly, profane, or, if you like, 'humanist' counterfeit of religion, or else a mysticism with a content of nothing but the ego and its illusions.[198]

[197] Schuon, 'No Activity without Truth', *The Sword of Gnosis*, ed. J. Needleman, p. 35.
[198] Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, p. 138.

Secondly, the adequacy of the doctrine: this can only be determined by a metaphysical discernment, itself nurtured within the integral traditions. A third test of religion is offered by the Biblical maxim 'By their fruits ye shall know them' (Matthew 7:20). Any orthodox tradition, by being such, will necessarily bring forth from within itself saints and sages who are living testimony to the efficacy of the spiritual economy in question. Men indeed do not gather grapes from thorns nor figs from thistles. However, here again an acute metaphysical discernment and sensitivity is necessary to recognise spirituality in all its strange and sometimes scandalous guises. It might also be added that another fruit of tradition is a fully-fledged sacred art.

What of the attitude of one orthodoxy to another? We have already encountered Schuon's reference to 'formal elements which cannot apply literally outside their own perspective'. This provides the key. From the exoteric vantage point of any particular tradition there can only be one orthodoxy, namely, the one determining the outlook in question. Thus, for example, from a Hindu viewpoint Buddhism must appear as unorthodox, the test of orthodoxy here being the acceptance of Vedic authority. Here the Hindu viewpoint is both 'right' and 'wrong'. This paradox is resolved in an illuminating passage from Schuon:

> Traditional orthodoxy means being in accord with a doctrinal or ritual form, and also, and indeed above all, with the truth which resides in all revealed forms; thus the essence of every orthodoxy is intrinsic truth … and not merely the internal logic of a doctrine that may turn out to be false. What makes the definition of orthodoxy rather troublesome is that it presents two principal modes, the one essential or intrinsic, and the other formal or extrinsic: the latter is being in accord with a revealed form, and the former the being in accord with the essential and universal truth, with or without being in accord with any particular form, so that the two modes sometimes stand opposed externally. To give an example, it can be said that Buddhism is extrinsically heterodox in relation to Hinduism, because it marks a departure from the basic forms of the latter, and at the same time intrinsically orthodox, because it is in accord with that universal truth from which both traditions proceed; on the other hand the Brahmo-Samaj, like every other variety of 'progressive' neo-Hinduism, is

> doubly heterodox, first in relation to Hinduism itself and secondly in relation to truth unqualified.[199]

While on the subject of 'reformist' movements it might be as well to clarify a couple of points of some moment. There is a good deal of talk these days about the traditional religions being 'played out', 'inadequate to the problems of the age', 'irrelevant to contemporary concerns', and so on. 'New solutions' are needed, 'appropriate to the times'. This kind of thinking is by no means restricted to those who are openly hostile to religion; it is to be found among many people who, being deeply concerned about our spiritual welfare, sense that something has gone wrong. The traditionalists are the first to agree that we have indeed gone astray—our understanding of religion is in disarray. However, the solution is not to be found in any 'program' which has as its starting-point the belief that the religions must be 'reformed' in order to conform to the needs of 'our times'. Such thinking is part of the very problem which the reformers apparently want to solve.

Nothing is more likely to draw a combative response from the traditionalists than the suggestion that the plight of the modern world is to be explained in terms of the inadequacies of the traditional religions. Again we can do no better than allow Schuon to speak directly to the issue:

> Nothing is more misleading than to pretend, as is so glibly done in our day, that the religions have compromised themselves hopelessly in the course of the centuries or that they are now played out. If one knows what a religion really consists of, one also knows that the religions cannot compromise themselves and they are independent of human doings…. The fact that a man may exploit a religion in order to bolster up national or private interests in no wise affects religion as such…. As for an exhausting of the religions, one might speak of this if all men had by now become saints or Buddhas. In that case only could it be admitted that the religions were exhausted, at least as regards their forms.[200]

[199] Schuon, *Language of the Self*, p. 1.
[200] Schuon, 'No Activity without Truth', p. 29.

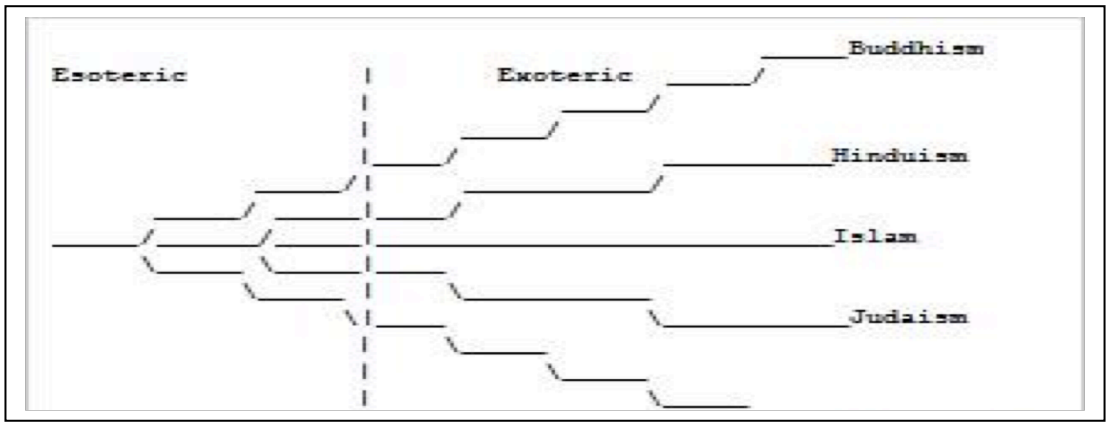
It is we who are compromised by our failure to conform to the timeless truths which tradition preserves.

A concept of the utmost importance in the Schuonian perspective on religion is the distinction, first made explicit by Guénon, between the exoteric and esoteric dimensions of any religious tradition. Huston Smith has made this distinction a conceptual fortress from which to repel attacks on Schuon's view of religion.[201] This strategy is not without its dangers; one might do better, as far as polemic and debate are concerned, to take one's stand on the idea of tradition itself. The exoteric-esoteric distinction only makes sense in the context of several more inclusive principles. To focus on it as *the* key to Schuon's work, as Smith tends to do, is perhaps to court unnecessary trouble. Be that as it may, no one will deny that the distinction is pivotal in Schuon's work and is intimately related to his affirmation of the transcendent unity of religions.

If the distinction between these two dimensions of religion and the relationship between them is not precisely understood, then the traditionalist perspective on the inner unity of the religions cannot be fully grasped. There has, after all, been no small number of people who have posited the 'essential' unity of the religions. The supports for this claim have all too often been inadequate and open to demolition from both within and without the religious traditions themselves. We shall not find in Schuon's work or in the writings of other traditionalists any Procrustean attempt to find a unity on a plane where it does not exist nor an insipid universalism which posits a unity of no matter what elements as long as they lay some claim to being 'religious' or 'spiritual'.

Generally we are accustomed to drawing sharp dividing lines between the religious traditions. The differences are, of course, palpably real, and Schuon has no wish to blur the distinctions. Indeed, his vigorous defence of the principle of orthodoxy should preclude any misunderstanding on this point. However, this notwithstanding, Schuon draws another kind of dividing line which in some senses is much more fundamental—that between the exoteric and esoteric. A diagrammatic representation of the idea may be helpful.

[201] H. Smith, 'Frithjof Schuon's *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*: Pro', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, XLIV, iv, 1976, pp. 721-24.



There is no question here of the lines being blurred. They issue from a single point of origin and converge on their 'destination', to the left of the exoteric domain. In the exoteric domain, we see the separate, distinct religious traditions each cleaving to an ensemble of formal elements deriving from a Revelation. In the esoteric domain, the different traditions converge on the Truth through a variety of means: esoteric doctrines, initiations and spiritual disciplines, intellection, the plenary experience. The necessity and the formal integrity of the different traditions is in no way compromised under this view, which fully respects the formal differences between the religions on the plane where such distinctions, even antagonisms, find their proper place. It is only through the exoteric realm that the esoteric can be reached. The universality of every great spiritual patrimony rests 'on a foundation of divinely instituted formal elements'.[202]

In discriminating between the exoteric and the esoteric we are, in a sense, speaking of 'Form' and 'spirit'. Exotericism rests on a necessary formalism:

> Exotericism never goes beyond the 'letter'. It puts its accent on the Law, not on any realisation, and so puts it on action and merit. It is essentially a 'belief' in a 'letter', or a dogma envisaged in its formal exclusiveness, and an obedience to a ritual and moral Law. And, further, exotericism never goes beyond the individual; it is centred on heaven rather than on God, and this amounts to saying that this difference has for it no meaning.[203]

Huston Smith has offered a useful gloss on Schuon's elucidation of the exoteric-esoteric distinction in these terms:

[202] Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, p. 137.
[203] Ibid., p. 76.

> For the exoteric God's personal mode is his only mode; for the esoteric this mode resides in one that is higher and ultimately modeless…. For the exoteric the world is real in every sense; for the exoteric it has only a qualified reality…. For the exoteric God is primarily loved; for the esoteric He is primarily known; though in the end the exoteric comes to know what he loves and the esoteric to love what he knows.[204]

It follows that exotericism must thereby embody certain inevitable and in a sense therapeutic limits or 'errors', which from a fuller perspective can be seen in both their positive and negative aspects. Religion, in its formal aspect, is made up of what the Buddhists call *upāya,* 'skillful means', which answer the necessities of the case, what Schuon calls 'saving mirages' and 'celestial stratagems'.[205] The limiting definitions of exoteric formalism are 'comparable to descriptions of an object of which only the form and not the colours can be seen'.[206] Partial truths which might be inadequate in a sapiential perspective may be altogether proper on the formal exoteric plane:

> The formal homogeneity of a religion requires not only truth but also errors—though these are only in form—just as the world requires evil and as Diversity implies the mystery of creation by virtue of its infinity.
>
> Absolute truths exist only in depth, not as a surface.
>
> The religions are 'mythologies' which, as such, are founded on real aspects of the Divine and on sacred facts, and thus on realities but only on aspects. Now this limitation is at the same time inevitable and fully efficacious.[207]

In other words the forms of exotericism represent certain accommodations which are necessary to bring various truths within the purview of the average mentality. As such they are adequate to the collective needs in question. Just as there exists within each tradition an exoteric and an esoteric dimension, so too, as Huston Smith's commentary makes clear, there exist corresponding spiritual dispositions. It is in the nature of things that only a

[204] H. Smith, Introduction to Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, p. xxvi.
[205] Schuon, *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*, p. 185n.
[206] Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, p. 80.
[207] Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, p. 70.

small minority will be blessed with the contemplative intelligence necessary to penetrate the formal aspects of religion. For the normal believer the exoteric domain is the only domain.

A specific example of an exoteric dogma might help to reinforce some of the points under discussion. In discussing the Christian dogmas about heaven and hell, Schuon has this to say:

> We are made for the Absolute, which embraces all things and from which none can escape; this truth is marvellously well presented in the monotheistic religions in the alternative between the two 'eternities' beyond the grave…. The alternative may be insufficient from the point of view of total Truth, but it is psychologically realistic and mystically efficacious; many lives have been squandered away and lost for the single reason that a belief in hell and in paradise is missing.[208]

The statements of a formal exotericism can thus be seen as partial truths, as intimations of Truth, as metaphors and symbols, as bridges to the formless Reality. Herein lies the point of Schuon's repeated affirmations of orthodoxy, such as this one: 'Orthodoxy includes and guarantees incalculable values which man could not possibly draw out of himself.'[209] If 'exotericism consists in identifying transcendent realities with dogmatic forms', then esotericism is concerned 'in a more or less direct manner with these same realities'.[210] Esotericism is concerned with the apprehension of Reality as such, not Reality as understood in such and such a perspective and 'under the veil of different religious formulations'.[211] While exotericism sees 'essence' or 'universal truth' as a function of particular forms, esotericism sees the forms as a function of 'essence'. To put it another way, exotericism particularises the universal, esotericism universalises the particular:

> What characterises esoterism, to the very extent that it is absolute, is that on contact with a dogmatic system, it universalises the symbol or religious concept on the one hand and interiorizes it on the other; the particular or the limited is

[208] Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, p. 22.
[209] Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, p. 113.
[210] Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*, p. 144.
[211] Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, p. 19.

> recognised as the manifestation of the principial and the transcendent, and this in its turn reveals itself as immanent.[212]

Esotericism is 'situated' on the plane of mystical experience, of intellection and realisation. If *gnosis* as such is under consideration, then the question of orthodoxy cannot arise, this being a principle which is only operative on the formal plane:

> If the purest esotericism includes the whole truth—and that is the very reason for its existence—the question of 'orthodoxy' in the religious sense clearly cannot arise: direct knowledge of the mysteries could not be 'Muslim' or 'Christian' just as the sight of a mountain is the sight of a mountain and not something else.[213]

Nevertheless, the two realms, exoteric and esoteric, are continually meeting and interpenetrating, not only because there is such a thing as a 'relative esotericism' but because 'the underlying truth is one, and also because man is one'.[214] Furthermore, even if esotericism transcends forms, it has need of doctrinal, ritual, moral, and aesthetic supports on the path to realisation.[215]

What of the attitude, so to speak, of the exoteric to the esoteric? Given the factors which have been mentioned it is not surprising that the exoteric elements in a religious tradition should be preserved and protected by traditional representatives whose attitude to esoterism will be, at best, somewhat ambivalent, at worst openly hostile. In addressing itself to the defence of the *credo* and of the forms which appear as guarantors of truth, the exoteric 'resistance' to esotericism is entirely positive. The esoteric can see and respect this guardianship of the 'incalculable values' of orthodoxy. On the other hand,

> the exoteric's assessment of the esoteric is likely to be less charitable, not because exoterics are less endowed with that virtue, but because a portion of the esoteric position being obscured from him, he cannot honour it without betraying the truth he does see.[216]

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[212] Ibid., p. 37.
[213] Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, p. 139.
[214] Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, p. 16.
[215] Ibid., p. 29.
[216] H. Smith, Introduction to *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, p. xv.

It is in this context that we should understand Coomaraswamy's remark, frequently made in his correspondence with 'exoterics': 'even if you are not on our side, we are on yours.' Sometimes the exoteric defendants of orthodoxy overstep themselves and in doing so beget results that are both destructive and counter-productive, especially when a religious tradition is endangered by a preponderantly exoteric outlook:

> The exoteric viewpoint is, in fact, doomed to end by negating itself once it is no longer vivified by the presence within it of the esotericism of which it is both the outward radiation and the veil. So it is that religion, according to the measure in which it denies metaphysical and initiatory realities and becomes crystallized in literalistic dogmatism, inevitably engenders unbelief; the atrophy that overtakes dogmas when they are deprived of their internal dimension recoils upon them from outside, in the form of heretical and atheistic negations.[217]

How much of post-medieval Christian history bears witness to this truth! As to the theological ostracisms that have befallen some of the mystics and metaphysicians seeking to preserve the esoteric dimension within their respective religious traditions, Schuon reminds us of Aesop's fable about the fox and the grapes, a story which 'repeats itself in all sectors of human existence'.[218]

The principles which determine the transcendent unity of religions have already come into view. The supra-human origin of a religious tradition in a Revelation, an adequate doctrine concerning the Absolute and the relative, the saving power of the spiritual method, the esoteric convergence on the Unitive Truth—all these point to the inner unity of all integral traditions which are, in a sense, variations on one theme. However, there remain certain puzzling questions which might stand in the way of an understanding of the principial unity which the *religio perennis* discloses. If we need to repeat some of the considerations already outlined above, then no matter; their reiteration may consolidate some points which might otherwise remain precarious.

[217] Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, p. 9.
[218] Schuon, *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, p. 46.

One frequently comes across formulations such as the following: 'It is sometimes asserted that all religions are equally true. But this would seem to be simply sloppy thinking, since the various religions hold views of reality which are sharply different if not contradictory.'[219] This kind of either/or thinking, characteristic of much that nowadays passes for philosophy, is in the same vein as a dogmatism which

> reveals itself not only by its inability to conceive the inward or implicit illimitability of a symbol, but also by its inability to recognise, when faced with two apparently contradictory truths, the inward connection that they apparently affirm, a connection that makes of them complementary aspects of one and the same truth.[220]

It is precisely this kind of incapacity which must be overcome if the transcendent unity of the religions is to be understood.

Let us rehearse some of the points made earlier through the following passage from Schuon:

> A religion is not limited by what it includes but by what it excludes; this exclusion cannot impair the religion's deepest contents—every religion is intrinsically a totality—but it takes its revenge all the more surely on the intermediary plane . . . the arena of theological speculations and fervours…. Extrinsic contradictions can hide an intrinsic compatibility or identity, which amounts to saying that each of the contradictory theses contains a truth and thereby an aspect of the whole truth and a way of access to this totality.[221]

Examples of 'contradictory' truths which effectively express complementary aspects of a single reality can be found not only across the traditions but within them. One might instance, by way of illustration, the Biblical or Koranic affirmations regarding predestination and free will.

From an esoteric viewpoint the exclusivist claims of one or another religion have no absolute validity. It is true that 'the arguments of every intrinsically orthodox religion are

[219] Owen Thomas, 'Introduction' to *Attitudes to Other Religions* (London, 1969, quoted by H. Smith, Introduction to *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, p. xiii.
[220] Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, p. 3.
[221] Schuon, *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, p. 46.

absolutely convincing if one puts oneself in the intended setting'.[222] It is also true that orthodox theological dogmatisms are entitled to a kind of 'defensive reflex' which makes for claims to exclusivism. However, and this is crucial,

> The exoteric claim to the exclusive possession of a unique truth, or of Truth without epithet, is … an error purely and simply; in reality, every expressed truth necessarily assumes a form, that of its expression, and it is metaphysically impossible that any form should possess a unique value to the exclusion of other forms; for a form, by definition, cannot be unique and exclusive, that is to say it cannot be the only possible expression of what it expresses.[223]

The argument that the different religions cannot all be repositories of the truth because of their formal differences and antagonisms rests on a failure to understand this principle. The lesson to be drawn from the multiplicity of religious forms is quite different:

> The diversity of religions, far from proving the falseness of all the doctrines concerning the supernatural, shows on the contrary the supra-formal character of revelation and the formal character of ordinary human understanding: the essence of revelation—or enlightenment—is one, but human nature requires diversity.[224]

In connection with this need for diversity, which is explained by the fact that humanity is divided into different branches, we might mention in passing Junayd's maxim that 'the color of the water is the color of the vessel containing it'. Or, if a more abstract formulation be preferred, this from Aquinas: 'The thing known is in the knower according to the mode of the knower'.

Schuon has deployed several images to clarify the relationship of the religions to each other. He likens them to geometric forms. Just as it would be absurd to imagine that spatial extensions and relationships could only be expressed by one form, so it is absurd to assert that there could be only one doctrine giving an account of the Absolute. However, just as each geometric form has some necessary and sufficient reason for its existence, so too with the religions. To affirm that the Truth informing all religious traditions is one and that they

[222] Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, p. 14.
[223] Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, p. 17.
[224] Schuon, 'No Activity without Truth', p. 4.

essentially all vehicle the same message in different forms is not to preclude qualitative discriminations concerning particular aspects of this and that tradition. Schuon extends the geometric analogy:

> The differentiated forms are irreplaceable, or else they would not exist, and they are in no sense various kinds of imperfect circles; the cross is infinitely nearer the perfection of the point . . . than are the oval or the trapezoid, for example. Analogous considerations apply to traditional doctrines, as concerns their differences of form and their efficacy in equating the contingent to the Absolute.[225]

The inter-relationships of the religions today is an issue which has taken on a new urgency in the cyclical conditions in which we live. In former times, just as man appeared as 'man' and not as 'yellow man' or 'black man', and just as each language seemed to its practitioners to be language as such, so too each religion, for most believers, appeared as 'religion' without further qualification. To choose one example from a multitude of possibilities, the Tibetans referred to their beliefs and practices not as 'Mahayana Buddhism' but simply as 'the way', *tehen*.[67]

We have now discussed the four themes in Schuon's work heralded at the beginning of this chapter. By way of a footnote to our discussion, two other points deserve brief mention: Schuon's views with respect to the limits of religious expansion and the inclusive nature of the great traditions. A corollary to the principle of multiple Revelations is the notion that there are certain natural, or better, providential limits to the possible expansion of each tradition. Here we shall only mention the principle without exposing its supports. The principle of providential limits is confirmed, as it were, by the relative inefficiency of religious expansionism outside its own perimeters: 'If God were on the side of one religious form only, the persuasive power of this form would be such that no man of good faith would be able to resist it.'[226] Another thread in the same web is the idea that all the great religious traditions will include under their canopy different spiritual perspectives and methods necessary for different temperaments and dispositions. Beyond the characteristics and prevalent spiritual economy of any one tradition each

[225] Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, p. 139.
[226] Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, p. 14.

> particular spiritual perspective is commonly discoverable somewhere within the framework of a tradition that seems to exclude it; thus theism appears in a certain sense in the framework of Buddhism despite its non-theism.[227]

Here, of course, Schuon is referring primarily to the cult of the Buddha Amitabha in the Pure Land Schools. To attempt, as historians often do, to explain this away as a 'deviation' resulting from Nestorian influences is to fail to understand that analogous phenomena are bound to appear where circumstances are favourable and that 'no profound possibility of man's nature can fail to emerge in some form or another within so vast a framework as that offered by a great Revelation'.[228]

[227] Schuon, *In the Tracks of Buddhism*, p. 18.
[228] Ibid., p. 122.

17

The Ambiguity of Exoterism

Frithjof Schuon

Cathedrals often, and perhaps even always, include intentional irregularities, signifying that God alone is perfect and capable of perfection—that human works, like man himself, are necessarily imperfect. And this applies to the entire universe, hence to all that is not God; "Why callest thou me good?" said Christ. It is not surprising, therefore, that this principle also includes the domain of the sacred—we have just mentioned cathedrals—and above all religions themselves; thus humility as well as a sense of reality demand that we not be scandalized disproportionately by the dissonances we may encounter in celestial ambiences on earth; that we not be shocked, for example, by particular "providential excesses." The natural shadows, in a particular earthly beauty, do not prevent us from seeing that beauty; to see it with gratitude and to sense that the earthly reflection transmits a flawless archetype. Since he who judges is himself not exempt from imperfection and must be aware of it, by what right and with what logic would he require that other cosmic phenomena be exempt from it? "God alone is good."

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The term "exoterism" designates three different orders: first, a system of symbols and means; second, a way; and third, a mentality. The first category embraces dogmas and rites, then legal, moral, and other prescriptions, as well as liturgy in the widest sense; the second embraces the general religious practices, those which are incumbent upon all; and the third category comprises the psychism corresponding to a particular religious climate, thus all the manifestations of sentimentality and imagination determined by a particular religion, a particular piety, and particular social conventions.

In other words, it is important to distinguish the following aspects in exoterism: the formal system, which offers symbols and means; the exoteric way, which is based exclusively upon this system; the exoteric mentality, which is formalistic, voluntaristic, and individualistic, and

which adds all kinds of restrictive sentimentalities to the simple forms. These are three altogether different meanings of the term "exoterism": according to the first, the religious Law is necessary and venerable, and it becomes a constitutive element of esoterism; according to the second meaning, the Law is different from esoterism without necessarily excluding certain elements of the latter; according to the third meaning, there is an antinomy between the "outward" and the "inward," or between the "letter" and the "spirit."

It is of the highest importance not to confuse these three levels; in particular, not to lose sight of the fact that esoterism is able to make use of the first—Dogma and Law—in both interpretation and practice. In order to determine whether a spiritual support is exoteric or esoteric, we need to ask not only what doctrinal and legal forms are involved, but also "who" accepts and practices them, and thus "how" they are accepted and practiced. In Dogma and Law, only those aspects are exoteric that are restrictive if taken literally, but not the aspects of pure symbolism and thus of universality.

When, on the contrary, there is an exclusively literal interpretation of the ideas and symbols on the one hand and a voluntaristic and sentimental practice of the rites and prescriptions on the other—and this individualism corresponds to an anthropomorphic conception of the Divinity—then the way itself pertains to exoterism; the believer accomplishes what the Divine Person has ordained and abstains from what He has forbidden, for the sake of salvation and without necessarily concerning himself directly with the nature of things as regards human attitudes and divine intentions.

What we have just said shows that the exoteric way cannot be entirely disassociated from the exoterist mentality; nevertheless, extremes—notably pedantry and fanaticism—are independent of religious practice as such; religious practice can inspire human temperaments and comportments, but quite obviously it is not inseparably linked to them by definition. Dogmatic and legal exoterism is of divine institution; the exoterist mentality has a right to exist as long as piety wards off abuses, but it has nothing supernatural about it; its rights coincide more or less with those of human nature.

Dogmatic exoterism, as we have mentioned more than once, exhibits providential limitations determined by its mission and thus its reason for being. To begin with, it excludes the idea of universal relativity—of *Māyā*—and therefore is unaware of the diverse and at times antinomic aspects of things, as well as of the points of view which take them into account; this

amounts to saying that it identifies itself with a particular point of view determined by a particular aspect. By excluding the notion of *Māyā,* exoterism situates itself entirely within *Māyā,* the summit of which is the personal God, who creates and legislates; ***Paramātmā***, the supreme Self—Boehme's *Ungrund*—could not produce a world or found a religion. But religion could not be closed to the total truth, for God is one, and where the Divine Person is, there also is the Divine Essence;[229] the latter is accessible through esoterism, precisely, by full right and despite a certain inevitable opposition on the part of the exoteric framework.

One has to realize that outward religion is not disinterested; it wants to save souls, no more and no less, and it endeavors to do so at the cost of the truths that do not serve its holy strategy. Sapience, by contrast, wants only the truth, and the truth necessarily coincides with our final interests because it coincides with the Sovereign Good.

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In Hinduism, as in other primordial traditions—to the extent that they have kept a sufficient vitality—the relationship between exoterism and esoterism presents itself in another way than in the Semitic religions: what is merely of social relevance, or what is taken literally, is exoteric; whereas the esoteric is not what of itself pertains to pure metaphysics—*Advaita Vedānta* is not technically an "esoterism"—but what for some reason or other, social reasons above all, must be kept secret.

Like the religions of ancient Europe, Hinduism is not exclusively interested in the salvation of souls; it is true that it tries to prevent men from falling into hell, but it abandons them to transmigration, which in monotheistic language amounts to the same thing. Among the ancient Europeans—Greeks, Romans, Celts, Germans—only the initiates go to Paradise, and possibly also the heroes, who then are assimilated to the initiates; the others remain in the darkness, in some underworld Hades, which in practice combines the state of the perishable

[229] When it is said that the personal God is situated in *Māyā*, which runs the risk of sounding offensive, one must be careful to make it clear that this God is the Supreme Principle "entering" into universal Relativity, hence still "Supreme" despite the "entering," which enables one to affirm that God the Creator and Legislator is at one and the same time *Ātmā* and *Māyā*, or *Ātmā* in *Māyā*, but never simply *Māyā*.

psychic elements with the great unknown that is transmigration through non-human and extraterrestrial states. Thus the reproach of "paganism" on the part of the Semitic religions is not altogether unjustified, except of course as regards initiates, Platonists and Vedantists.

But it is not enough to acknowledge the difference—or even the divergences—between religious perspectives and their exoteric-esoteric structures; we need essentially to know their causes, which result *a priori* from the refraction of the Divine Light in the cosmic darkness. The "descent" (*tanzīl*) of the Koran signifies that the ordaining Will of the Personal God—the Principle which, upon contact with *Māyā,* becomes personalized, and thus limits itself by virtue of the universal radiation required by the very nature of the Sovereign Good—enters into a collective soul determined by particular racial and ethnic factors; it enters therein with "temporal" as well as "spatial" purposes—in other words for the sake of eschatological destinies as well as immediate social situations, succession and the afterlife as well as simultaneity and the earthly city. In descending into a collective soul, the Divine Word becomes refracted into the possibilities of this soul: it becomes Judaized, Arabized, Hinduized, or Mongolized, as the case may be; and in making itself human it cannot maintain, in every respect or modality, its original majesty and beauty; the human requires the little and the ambiguous and cannot live without them; but greatness, transcendence, and harmony without admixture subsist always in the supernatural substance of the revealed Word. Christ is "true man and true God"; the same is true for every Revelation; it is this that must never be forgotten when one encounters elements that at first sight seem too human—to the point of seeming unlikely—in the variform stream of the divine Messages.

To understand, at least morally, certain apparent contradictions in the Scriptures, the following principial situation must be borne in mind: Divine All-Possibility, ontologically "prior" to the Divine Personification, pours into creation what is ontologically possible; it is a manifestation of Infinitude, and necessarily involves contrasting and amoral aspects because in a certain manner it includes the impossible, owing to the limitlessness of Possibility itself; whereas the Divine Personification, which hypostatically reflects the essential Goodness of the Essence, coordinates the chaos of possibilities and "desires" the good, whence precisely the half-divine, half-human phenomenon that is Revelation.[230]

[230] This precisely is the Muslim point of distinction between the ontological "Will" of God and His moral "Desire"; the weak point in the theory is that it attributes two hypostatic degrees to one and the same anthropomorphic

The ambiguity of exoterism is largely a consequence of the complexity of the Divine Order; we say "Divine Order" to indicate that we have in mind here not the Principle in itself but its "extension" within universal Relativity. Now exoterism, which must restrict itself to being a minimal doctrine, so to speak—whatever the mode of its emphasis—could not render an account of this Divine Order, both transcendent and relative,[231] without allowing enigmas and pitfalls to remain, or rather, without creating them.

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A typical feature of the monotheistic exoterisms is their dogmatization of theological speculations; it is the fixed prejudice that not only wishes to "dot all the I's," but to do so at the level of "faith," and hence of dogmatic constraint—this being the role of the councils and of promulgations *ex cathedra*—whereas it would suffice in many a case to let the scriptural enunciations stand as they are, in a holy indetermination that excludes no aspect of truth and does not crystallize one aspect to the detriment of the others. In fact, the evil lies less in the existence of speculations and precisions—for man cannot be prevented from thinking—than in their dogmatic fixation; one threatens with hell not only those who doubt God and immortality, but also those who dare doubt some exorbitant theological conclusion; and this threat is all the less plausible in that one postulates the incomprehensibility of God and always holds in reserve this substitute for a reply that is "mystery." The more one adds precisions *ex cathedra*, the more one increases the chances of scission and the risks of persecution, which would not be the case if one remained content with a level of "admissible" or "probable opinions" in varying degrees.[232] There is no point in objecting that pure metaphysicians do as much, for it is not the

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subjectivity, as we have noted more than once. According to Ibn Arabi, God confines Himself to "bringing into existence" that which "wants to exist"; He is not "personally" responsible for the possibilities as such.

[231] Purely transcendent at its summit, relative in its reverberation in accordance with *Māyā*, and yet transcendent in this aspect as well, at least in relation to the world. The mystery of mysteries—pointed out in the West by Eckhart—is that there is in our Intellect a "divine point" which is linked to pure Transcendence, of which otherwise we would have no notion; and moreover it is this point which explains the possibility of the "central" phenomenon that is man.

[232] One example of ostracism by exoterists is the case of the Pope Honorius I, accused of "heresy" in a disproportionate manner, to say the least; for the idea that Christ has only one will, the Divine—this is the Monothelite thesis—takes nothing away from the glory of Christ, quite the contrary, since it is based upon the axiom that there is nothing in the nature of Christ that could be opposed to the Divine Will. All in all, it is a simplistic and "implausible" theological opinion—since the human will certainly exists in the soul of Jesus—

action of explaining or specifying which is at issue here, but the formalistic and therefore restrictive character of the specification, and above all the constraining dogmatization that is added to it, which in no way forms part of the intentions and functions of pure and disinterested knowledge.[233]

Given its mission, exoterism has to take into account the weaknesses of men, and thus also, let it be said without euphemism, their stupidity; like it or not, it must itself take on something of these shortcomings, or at least it must allow them some room, on pain of not being able to survive in human surroundings. Thus one must not be too surprised, nor above all scandalized, at the paradoxical phenomenon of pious stupidity; to be sure, this phenomenon is far from being harmless, for it sometimes affects the canonical domain, and yet it cannot but exist since religion addresses itself to everyone, and everyone must be able to recognize himself in it, if one may so express the matter. A climate of religious belief appeals to emotivity, and emotivity is obviously opposed to perfect objectivity, at least when it goes beyond its rightful limits; when it does so, excessive emotivity damages the power of reflection or even—with all due reservations—intelligence itself, while plainly favoring a fundamental sentimentalism, extending from an initial biased attitude to harmless prejudices.[234] However: remove emotivity from religion and you kill it; moreover, a stream has need of banks in order to flow, and thus it is that exoterism, or the religious form, has need of limitations in order to be a living influence; "grasp all, lose all," as a proverb has it.

The exoterist mentality is largely the result of associations of ideas inspired by religious imagery: for example, in Islam, the sun does not enjoy an unmixed prestige because of the danger of becoming a rival with God and because of the sun-worship which existed in the Near East, and

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but the opinion is not subversive for all that; it is an ellipsis, and it suffices to take note of the intention, or to put it in parentheses.

[233] Those American Indians who retain a traditional outlook point out, against disputatious confessionalism, that one can always argue about concepts, but not about the immutable symbols of virgin nature; and that books are perishable, whereas the symbols of the Great Spirit abide; what matters is to understand them. When one goes to the root of things, one sees that the argument is far from simplistic, and it even coincides with the Koranic doctrine of the divine "signs" (*ayāt*) in the world.

[234] Very typical of the sentimental, and paradoxically individualistic, humilitarianism, is this Hesychast's opinion: to remember God constantly is not a great thing; on the contrary, what is great is to believe oneself lower than all other creatures. A surprising ignorance of the sacramental quality of the Name of God is here combined with a strange misappreciation of the qualities and merits of holy perseverance, and with a no less strange abdication of intelligence in the name of virtue. "He that raiseth up himself shall be brought low": which could not mean that humility is incompatible with that prerogative of man which is discernment, hence objectivity; besides, one may well wonder whether "to make oneself low in order to be raised up" is really humility. Such *non sequitur*s, it is true, are not the prerogative of any one religion.

this is attested to by certain symbols very unflattering to the sun. Aside from this imagery, and prior to it, the Koran speaks of the sun, moon, and stars as slaves upon whom God has imposed forced labor (*sakhara*) in the service of men, and it moreover enjoins men not to bow down to the heavenly bodies; thus it is considered advisable, whenever one looks upon the sun or the moon, to say that "God is greater" (*Allāhu akbar*). Analogous remarks apply to fire: whereas for the Indo-Iranian, or simply Aryan traditions, fire is sacred like the sun—*Agni* and *Surya* being theophanies—in the monotheism of the Semites it takes on a baleful coloration because of its association with hell.[235] Christianity, which is not based upon jealous zeal for Unity, does not have such worries in relation to the sun, as is proved by the "Canticle to the Sun" of Saint Francis of Assisi; for the Christian, it is all too evident that the sun is not God or that it is not Christ; thus he can love the sun in all innocence and without the least complex of guilt. A question that arises here incidentally is the following: Would a Westerner who has serious motives for following the Sufic path be obliged to adopt the Muslim attitude toward the royal orb? We chose this example among others. Should he feel obliged to experience an imaginative and sentimental reaction that he does not have and cannot have? Clearly not, and all the more so since essential Sufism would not require it; for the confessional mentality is one thing, and spiritual realization another.

But let us return to the Arabs: by a curious derogation from the sensibility we have described above, the expressions "Sun of Princes" *(Shams al-Umarā'),* "Sun of the Learned" (*Shams al-'Ulamā'*), and "Sun of (spiritual) Guidance" (*Shams al-Hudā*) are honorific titles; "Sun of Religion" (*Shams ad-Dīn*) is a man's name, and "Like unto the Sun" (*Shamsī* or *Shamsiyyah*) and "Sun of Daytime" (*Shams an-Nahār*) are women's names—all of which express the unanimous sentiment of primordial man, or of man as such, and thus of esoterism. Moreover, when the Koran declares that "God is the Light of the heavens and the earth" (*Sura* "Light"), it is impossible, by the very nature of things, for the sun to be excluded from this hierarchy, even though no Muslim could acknowledge this, except perhaps in esoteric surroundings. Besides, all these considerations on the solar orb also apply, to one degree or other and in an appropriate manner, to the moon and even the stars: "Full Moon of the Religion" (*Badr ad-Dīn*) and "Star of the Religion" (*Najm ad-Dīn*)

[235] This is far from Heraclitus, for whom fire—or rather its divine prototype—is at the origin of everything.

are masculine names; "Like the Full Moon" (*Badrī* or *Badriyyah*), "Star" (*Najmah*), and other images of the kind are feminine names.

In the Koran, the sun is described three times as a "lamp" (*sirāj*), and this word is also applied to the Prophet, whence his name *Sirāj,* which—we have been told—establishes a scriptural and liturgical connection between Muhammad and the sun.[236] This "rehabilitation" of the sun, and above all its indirect glorification by proper names and other metaphors, seems to indicate that the sensibility of Muslims is not greatly affected by the pejorative symbolism in question nor by the sacred ostracism of the theologians;[237] all of which has to be granted with some reservations, for the "evidence," namely certain classical formulations, cannot be brushed aside entirely. A further remark while we are on the subject: in Muslim imagery, rain is most favored, as can be easily understood in a desert country; the Koran misses no opportunity to mention it with praise, and the Prophet loved to bare his head in the rain because of the blessing it brings.

In passing, and before going further, we would like to say a few words concerning the integration of a foreign element into a particular traditional formalism; this problem places us between syncretism, which is intrinsically heterodox, and esoterism, which in certain cases can admit such coincidences. This is because, in principle, esoterism is "open to all forms," as Ibn Arabi expressed himself in speaking of his heart; but in fact, such exceptions depend upon certain subjective as well as objective conditions; therefore we must ask, not only what has been done, but also by whom and for what reason.

In esoterism there are two principles which may be actualized sporadically and at different levels, but always in a partial and contained manner: the first is that, fundamentally, there is only one religion with various forms, for humanity is one and the spirit is one; the second principle is that man bears everything within himself, potentially at least, by reason of the immanence of the one Truth.

[236] It should be noted, however, that the image of the lamp is less offensive to Muslim sentiment than that of the sun, for no one is tempted to worship a handmade object, even if it is a symbol of light. When praying in a mosque, the believer necessarily bows down in the direction of the lamp in the *mihrāb*; he would not do so in the direction of the sun.

[237] The same is true for the question of secondary causes: the average Muslim does not doubt that fire has the attribute of burning, despite Hanbalite or Asharite hairsplitting.

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The only plausible explanation for the theological excesses of an Ashari, aside from religious zeal, is the principle of "functional" truth—as distinct from "informative" truth—of which we have spoken above; what is "true" is not necessarily what gives an adequate account of a reality but what serves a particular psychological purpose in view of salvation and in relation to a particular mentality. From this standpoint, heresy is not objective error; it is subjective inopportuneness: it is better to reach Paradise with a limb missing than to be thrown into hell with all of one's limbs; this principle, purely moral and mystical in the intention of Christ, becomes intellectual or doctrinal in the domain of certain theological speculations. If Ashari maintains that fire does not burn by its own nature, that it burns only because God decides to bring about the burning, this is because the faithful have to be convinced that "God is without associate," despite the evidence that He surrounds Himself with Angels and Prophets;[238] and if this same doctrine goes so far as to affirm that evil comes from God and could not occur otherwise, or that God can impose obligations that man is incapable of accomplishing, or that God can make a creature suffer—or even punish it—for no reason and without compensation, or that, being free from all obligation, He can do "what He wills" with man, and that consequently it would not be unjust for Him to send the good to hell and the bad to Paradise[239]—if the Asharite doctrine upholds such enormities, this is, at bottom, in order to wage preventive warfare against certain vicious predispositions of man, rightly or wrongly, and in the context of a particular mentality—doubtless heroic, but prone to heedlessness and insubordination.[240]

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[238] Despite the idea that every single drop of rain is sent down by an angel, and other inconsequentialities of the kind.

[239] Quite as absurd is Asharite atomism, which stems from a defective conception of causality: from the inability to see—or refusal to understand—that far from being excluded by metaphysical causes, physical causes on the contrary manifest or reflect them and are relatively real precisely by virtue of the absolute reality of their prototypes *in divinis*.

[240] All these excesses are contradicted by the Hanafite theologian Maturidi, who considers that man's freedom is relatively real and not imaginary, and that God "desires" (*ridā*, "being pleased") only good actions; that when He demands something of the creature, God confers upon it *ipso facto* the capacity to do it; that injustice is incompatible with the Divine Nature, and not that injustice is justice when the doer is God. Let us add that prior to Maturidi, the Mutazilites had the merit of teaching unambiguously that God is obliged to be just to men; an obligation freely assumed and resulting on the one hand from the Divine Perfection itself and on the other from the intelligent and responsible nature bestowed by God

Different opinions may be held as to the legitimacy or efficacy of such stratagems, but what matters here is not their quality but their purpose, hence the principle of "functional truth," which is indirect and conditional and not direct, informative, and categorical.[241] The non-interference of the Holy Spirit in theological matters—if one may so express it—can be explained, in short, by the necessity of having to accommodate the limited capacities of the majority and consequently of having to renounce the intellectual element to a greater or lesser extent, and to emphasize all the more the moral and emotional element as well as eschatological interests. Muhammad knew what he was saying when he asserted that "disagreements **(***ikhtilāf***)** between the doctors of the Law are a Mercy": differences of opinion are all the more useful in that it is impossible to satisfy the needs of a collectivity of believers by presenting a homogeneous metaphysical doctrine; something more is needed, even in religion, for "it takes all kinds to make a world."

There is no room for polytheism or idolatry in Islam; and yet they are to be found in it, insofar as they have a positive and thus legitimate meaning: "Muslim polytheism" is represented by the ninety-nine Names of God, and "Muslim idolatry" by the Kaaba and the Black Stone, the Kaaba being prolonged by the prayer niche in mosques. One could object that these are not images; no doubt, and yet they are material objects, situated in space; a tree is not an image either, and yet if one were to pray toward a particular tree intentionally, while disregarding the canonical direction—the *qiblah*—Islam would term it an idol. Logically, and strictly speaking, Muslims ought to pray with their eyes closed—which they do not—and without regard to a ritual direction; abstraction would then be complete; but in fact, they pray before one visible thing—the *mihrāb*—and in the direction of another thing—the Kaaba. Thus it can be seen that the purism of a religion is necessarily relative when it is a question of things that are justified in themselves and, moreover, opportune. Iranian and Indian Muslims,[242] and even certain Arabs, are not afraid to practice painting, whereas the *Sunnah* forbids it; it is true that there are differences of opinion as to whether the indictment

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upon the human creature. It could be said, paradoxically: if the Divine Nature allows God to claim all rights in all circumstances, He would not have created man; a formulation worthy of Zeno of Elea, but without being devoid of meaning.

[241] Despite the warrant given by Ghazali to the extreme opinions we have quoted above, Sunnite theology has hardly retained them; the great majority of Sunnites, despite being Asharites, side in practice with the ideas of Maturidi which can be described as "reasonable."

[242] We mean the Iranians in the proper sense of the term, and not the Persians alone.

of images refers simply to statues, which "cast a shadow"; but the predominant attitude of the *ulamas* is plainly hostile towards figurative art, and admits no exceptions. Here again, one has to take into consideration the motive of the Law, namely, the tendency of Semitic peoples toward idolatry; the Aryans do not have this tendency, which means that they are not idolaters when they worship images; Hindus—apart from cases of popular deviation—are at bottom no more idolaters than Christians, who certainly are not. Logically, Christians should be as iconoclastic as Jews since they base themselves on the Bible, but in this case as in others it is the instinct for the "nature of things" which has prevailed and which has even given rise to certain modes of spirituality; the sacramental icon conveys graces and works miracles.

Let us add that music and above all dancing fall into the same category of traditional ambiguities; disapproved in Islam, they are nonetheless practiced in Sufism, always by reason of the profound justification conferred upon them by that universal criterion which is the nature of things. Inopportuneness is neither error nor wickedness, and there can always be cases wherein opportuneness changes sides, not only because men differ, but also—and above all—because man is one.

An example of excessive formalism—and of a conventionalism which is definitely superstitious—is provided by certain garments of Muslim women: in Islamic India there are certain ways of veiling women that have something truly sinister about them—they are like walking prisons or phantoms—which to say the least is contrary to nature, and which demonstrates to what extent the exoteric spirit can be pedantic, blind, and desiccated; by contrast, the veil of Moroccan women is morally and aesthetically acceptable, being so to speak "one point of view among others." In the Maghrib, Berber women go unveiled—this should be recalled here—and the same is true for many Muslims of the black and yellow races, not to mention other examples difficult to categorize; which shows that this convention of dress is in no way essential from the point of view of the Law.[243]

In all climates of formalistic super-saturation, the instinct for the "nature of things" or for the archetypal and primordial norm sporadically regains the upper hand; while this is not technically an expression of esoterism, it is nonetheless linked with its spirit, with the

[243] The prescription to "veil one's charms" allows of various interpretations, including the most paradoxical, since modesty is sometimes concentrated on the face alone.

distinterested and universal vision of good and evil, useful and useless, beautiful and ugly, and also, it must be said, serious and ridiculous, or human and monstrous, as the case may be.[244] And it is normally one of the functions of esoterism, not to play the *mufti* or the *pandit*, but as far as possible to bring visible forms as well as moral comportments back to the serenity of a Paradise lost, but still accessible in the depth of our hearts.

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From the standpoint of pure or total truth, the unavoidable drawback of the Semitic or monotheistic religions is that they reduce man to a privative or negative aspect of the average man, to a "minimal aspect," so to speak: Christianity defines man as a "sinner" who must do penance, whereas Islam defines him as a "slave" who must simply obey and whose intelligence exists merely to register orders; it is true that this is not all of the religion, and also that it is not unjustified at a certain level or given a certain end in view, but in any case this reduction suffices to create misunderstandings and uneasiness on a higher level and above all to open the door to the abuses of sentimentalism. Moreover, if it lies within human possibility to present the most stupid ideas in the most intelligent manner—which is the case of modern philosophers—the converse must be possible too, namely, that the most intelligent ideas be presented in the most stupid manner, as happens precisely in religions.

As for the general question of the balance between faith and intellection, or between their respective rights, it cannot be solved juridically, for it depends upon personal imponderables; the imbalance between the two points of view or domains is consequently a kind of natural calamity, but man is what he is.

And yet it is in the nature of things that there be means of regulating this balance by taking into account the factors of harmony in the world and in our spirit. We have in mind here the complementarity between the sense of the true and the sense of the beautiful, the sense of the evident and the sense of the sacred; now the second intuitive capacity contributes toward

[244] As for the gratuitous hyperbolism of certain kinds of religious language, it is important not to confuse it with symbolism in the proper sense of the term, which in any case is not a matter of style. Let us note in this connection that for the Westerner it is difficult to conceive that exaggeration pure and simple can form part of eloquence; and yet, it suffices to think of it; it is as with Columbus' egg.

regulating the demands of the first. The wise man sometimes abstains from asking questions, not because he despairs of his intelligence, but because his sense of beauty imposes upon him a limit—not of darkness, but of light; moreover, there is no sacred science without some modes of holy ignorance. Otherwise, the Absolute would enter just as it is into the relative, and the Infinite into the finite; Necessary Being would cause contingency to burst, and there would no longer be either relativity or, consequently, existence and existing wisdom.[245] To say manifestation is to say limitation.

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When two religions have to exist side by side, as in India, or in Palestine at the time of the Crusades, two things happen: on the one hand a stiffening on the part of the formal religion and on the other hand a greater flexibility and a certain interpenetration in the domain of spirituality; it is true that religions exist side by side everywhere, but what we have in mind here are those cases where there is virulent antagonism, unmitigated by habit and indifference. A crucial truth emerges from such confrontations and reciprocities: when a man has grasped the validity of a religion other than his own—which comprehension results from concrete experience as much as from intellectual intuition—God cannot but take into account the widening of this man's spiritual perspective and the awareness he will have of the relativity of forms as such; God, therefore, will absolutely not demand of him what he asks of believers who are totally enclosed in the formal system of their religion, but at the same time He will make new demands. Knowledge is not a gift that entails no obligations, for all knowledge has its price; the "minus" on the side of formal religion will have to be compensated by a "plus" on the side of non-formal religion, which coincides with the *sophia perennis*.

Esoterism, with its three dimensions of metaphysical discernment, mystical concentration, and moral conformity, contains in the final analysis the only things that Heaven demands in an absolute fashion, all other demands being relative and therefore more or less

[245] The Koran expresses this as follows: "(O man), follow not that whereof thou hast no knowledge. Lo! the hearing and the sight and the heart—of each of these reckoning will be asked. . . . They will ask thee concerning the Spirit [the universal Spirit, *Ruh*]. Say: The Spirit is by command of my Lord [by radiation or hypostatic prolongation], and of knowledge [of divine mysteries] ye have been vouchsafed but little. And if We [God] willed We could withdraw that which We Have revealed unto thee" (*Sura* "The Children of Israel," 36, 85, and 86)

conditional. The proof of this is that a man who would have no more than a few moments left to live could do nothing more than: first, look toward God with his intelligence; second, call upon God with his will; third, love God with all his soul, and in loving Him realize every possible virtue. One may be surprised at this coincidence between what is most elementarily human and what pertains quintessentially to the highest wisdom, but what is most simple retraces precisely what is highest; *extremitates aequalitates*, "extremes meet."

18

Two Esoterisms

Frithjof Schuon

The word "esoterism" suggests in the first place the idea of complementarity, of a "half" if one might put it this way. Esoterism is the complement of exoterism, the "spirit" that completes the "letter"; where there is a truth of revelation, hence a formal and theological truth, there must also be a truth of intellection, hence a non-formal and metaphysical truth—not a legalistic or obligatory truth but a truth which flows from the nature of things and which is also vocational since not every man grasps this nature.

But in fact this second truth exists independently of the first; hence it is not a complement or half in its intrinsic reality but only extrinsically and as it were "accidentally". This means that the word "esoterism" designates not only the total truth insofar as it is "colored" by entering a system of partial truth but also the total truth as such, which is colorless. This *distinguo* is not a mere theoretical luxury; on the contrary it leads to extremely important consequences.

Thus esoterism as such is metaphysics, to which an appropriate method of realization is necessarily joined; on the other hand the esoterism of a particular religion—of a particular exoterism precisely—adapts itself to this religion and thereby enters into theological, psychological, and legalistic complexities foreign to its nature while nonetheless preserving in its secret center its authentic and plenary nature, without which it would not be what it is.

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The monotheistic Scriptures each manifest an *upāya*, a religious perspective, which is by definition particular and limiting, and more often than not hermeneutics is affected by this perspective; this is not the case, however, for the fundamental formulations—or fundamental symbols—of the religions, which in themselves are not restrictive in any way.

In Christianity the Patristic formula of saving reciprocity is a priceless jewel: "God became man that man might become God"; it is a revelation of paramount importance, of the same rank as Scripture; this may seem surprising, but it is a "paracletic" possibility, examples of

which are found—very rarely, it is true—in all traditional worlds. The saying *anāʾl-Haqq* of al-Hallaj, which is so to speak the Sufic equivalent of the Vedic *aham Brahmāsmi*, is a case of this kind; al-Hallaj himself affirmed the possibility of post-Koranic sayings situated at the level of the Koran, for which other Sufis did not pardon him, at least not in his time.

In Islam the *Shahādah*—the affirmation of Unity in the form of the *Yin-Yang*, so to speak, and "the most precious thing that I have brought to the world," according to the Prophet—expresses essential metaphysics in a way that contains no confessional limitation; in Hindu terms we could say that it is the equivalent at once of an *Upanishad* and a *mantra*. The same is true for the second *Shahādah*, which attests to the mission of the Prophet and thereby evokes the mystery of immanence; this it joins to the mystery of transcendence, which is indicated by the first *Shahādah* at least *a priori*, for the first *Shahādah* also contains an "immanentist" meaning.[246]

But there are not only formulas; there are also phenomena of another order, notably human theophanies. As a universal symbol, and from the point of view of an esoteric application, Christ represents first of all the *Logos* in itself and then the immanent Intellect—*aliquid est in anima quod est increatum et increabile*—which both enlightens and liberates; the Blessed Virgin personifies the soul in a state of sanctifying grace, or this grace itself. There is no theophany that is not prefigured in the very constitution of the human being, made as it is "in the image of God", and esoterism aims to actualize the divine element in that mirror of God which is man. Meister Eckhart spoke of immanent sacraments; "congenial" symbols can be supports, he said, no less than sacraments in the proper sense of the word.

Thus it is necessary to distinguish, we repeat, between an esoterism that is largely based on a particular theology and linked to the speculations offered us *de facto* by traditional sources—and it goes without saying that these doctrines or insights can be of the greatest interest—and another esoterism that springs from the truly crucial elements of the religion and, for that very reason, from the simple nature of things; the two dimensions can certainly be combined and in fact most often are. To be concrete: Christian esoterism is *de facto* Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Dionysius the Areopagite, and Meister Eckhart, as well as Boehme and his

[246] We interpret the words "immanent", "immanence", and "immanentism" according to their etymological meaning: *immanens* means "dwelling within". The modern philosophical interpretation, from Spinoza onward, is mistaken; immanence is neither identity, nor negation of transcendence, nor—all the more—epistemological subjectivism.

school;[247] but it is also, and even above all and *de jure*, the universal truths—and corresponding attitudes—that issue from the doctrinal, ritual, and "phenomenological" foundations of Christianity.

As for hermeneutics, which plays such an important role in the esoterism of Semitic monotheism, respect for given authors or established conventions should not allow us to forget that this science is meant to proceed according to strict rules; Ghazzali and others insist on this. But it is far from the case that this principle has always been followed in a climate of religious and mystical enthusiasm; abuses of interpretation are encountered even in someone like Ibn Arabi and even in the *Zohar*, usually because of an insufficiently restricted *bhakti*. In this domain three modes or degrees should be distinguished: first, an interpretation that springs harmoniously from a given symbolism; second, an interpretation that imposes a heterogeneous symbolism on the literal sense which this sense could not possibly imply; third, an interpretation which is actually contrary to the literal meaning but which profits from the assumption that every word of God, even if it is negative, allows for a positive interpretation—which in the opinion not only of the *ʿulamāʾ* but of many esoterists constitutes a flagrant abuse and a kind of pious perversion.

But let us return to the subject at hand: *Advaita Vedānta* is unquestionably an intrinsic esoterism and as such suffices unto itself; but it is not an esoterism-complement, that is, an esoterism found alongside a religious system of a sentimental character. This does not mean that its place within the economy of the spiritual means of Hinduism is one of complete isolation; beside it there is in fact the bhaktic *Vedānta* of Ramanuja, which corresponds to a religious mysticism in the sense that it is based on a conception of the personal God; as a result it is dualistic and voluntaristic, like the Semitic spiritualities in their general manifestation. But advaitists are the first to acknowledge that *bhakti* corresponds to a degree of the one truth, hence to a necessity, and that it is legitimate for this very reason.

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[247] And without forgetting the esoterisms of pre-Christian origin, such as Hermeticism and the craft initiations, or chivalry, whose origin, however, seems uncertain to us.

Strict and universal esoterism—of the "advaitic" type so to speak—has always existed in the climate of Semitic monotheism, and necessarily so, and this opinion can be supported by the following arguments. First, if such an esoterism is to be found in every religious climate, it is for the simple reason that there are people everywhere whose nature requires it, people in other words whose intelligence, discernment, and contemplativity are proportioned to pure metaphysics and thus to the corresponding path. Second, if there are no documents proving the more or less traditional existence of this *gnosis*, this is because it was of necessity transmitted orally—apart from certain providential exceptions that are also required in this domain—for *gnosis* is independent of the exoteric systems that can serve as its vehicle, and it therefore inevitably contains certain aspects that are incompatible with them.

It is thus not surprising that from a strictly theological point of view *gnosis* is "enemy number one"; because of its recourse to intellection it seems to make Revelation redundant and even superfluous, which in theological language is called "submitting Revelation to the judgment of reason"; this confusion—which is far from disinterested—between reason and intellection is altogether typical. Plato's anticipated retort is the following, and it is all the more justified in that religious sentimentalism has had extremely serious consequences—consequences that are at the same time providential since "it must needs be that offenses come": "All force of reasoning must be enlisted to oppose anyone who tries to maintain any assertion about anything while at the same time suppressing knowledge or understanding or intelligence" (*Sophist*, 249).

Fideist mentalities like to insist that pure intellectuality—which they confuse with the most profane philosophy since they have in mind reason alone—has as its goal and result only "speculations" and "theses", things purely "natural", whereas only religion, according to this perspective, offers "life" and the "supernatural". This is a perfect begging of the question; it is to hold that "life" and the "supernatural" are obtained only outside intelligence; in the final analysis it is to deny that man—who alone is endowed with an intelligence capable of absoluteness—is "made in the image of God".

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The rationalistic pseudo-*gnosis* of our times represents a backlash against the theological anti-

gnosis of the first centuries; and this vengeful effect of a distant cause not only comes from without, from the unbelieving world, but is produced within the very bosom of the Church. In fact two causes combine here: hatred of *gnosis* on the one hand and thirst for novelty and need for change on the other; these are typical features of the creative and adventurous, and in its extreme effects even luciferian, mentality of the West. This mentality has combined, both providentially and unfortunately, with what we may term Christian "innovationism" and even, though more indirectly, with Jewish Messianism.

Be that as it may, it is neither metaphysical discernment nor contemplativity that is primarily lacking in Europeans but rather a sense of the static, of the principle of immutability—in short, of the "unmoved mover". The "worldliness" of Westerners lies in their inventive hypertrophy—the Westerner always feels the need to "burn what he has worshipped"—and in their cultural mutability, whereas the "worldliness" of Easterners lies only in the excessiveness of the ordinary passions of body and soul. This is bad enough when it is recalled that passions becloud the intelligence, whatever the ethnic climate in which they arise and whatever the natural gifts of a particular individual or collectivity.

The point will perhaps be made that a lack of the sense of the Immutable or of an appreciation for static values or functions evinces a corresponding lack of metaphysical intelligence; this is true for the majority—in a manner that is necessarily relative—but it in no way excludes the presence of metaphysics and contemplativity, so that it would be a mistake to conclude that the West possesses nothing in this respect and has everything to learn from the East. It is true that it would be in the greatest interest of the Western elite to draw inspiration from the Vedantic doctrine and to assimilate thoroughly the key notion of *Māyā in divinis*, even though this notion is to be found in someone like Meister Eckhart and doubtless also in others in a more or less incidental manner; but in the final analysis intellectuality does not depend entirely upon this notion, as is proven by Thomism and Vishnuite *Vedānta*. *Grosso modo*, the West possesses everything essential, but it does not wish to hear of it, and in this consists its drama and absurdity.

VIII

Christianity

19

Christianity and Other Sacred Traditions

Philip Sherrard

Philip Sherrard (1922-1995) was a British author, translator, theologian, and philosopher. His work includes important translations of the *Philokalia* as well as several modern Greek poets, and books on Greek literature and culture, metaphysics, theology, art, and aesthetics. This essay is taken from a posthumous collection of his writings, *Christianity: Lineaments of a Sacred Tradition*.

One of the conditions of any renewal within the Christian Church is that the Church renounces the claim that the Christian revelation constitutes the sole and exclusive revelation of the universal Truth. For it has to be admitted—with regret, not to say with shame—that, in the past, Christians by and large have regarded all non-Christian religions and all non-Christian religious experience as so obviously suspect as to be either too dangerous to study or else not worth the trouble of being studied. Indeed, the characteristic Christian reaction to non-Christian religions has been a mixture of repugnance, fear, and aggression.

At the same time it is said that the Incarnation of the one true God in the historical figure of Jesus Christ and the consequent founding of the Church on earth represent a radical change in the whole nature of reality, and so make all previous religious doctrine spurious and outmoded, since such doctrine relates to an order of things that has now been displaced and superseded. The only doctrine that now authentically represents the new order of things is that proclaimed by the Church on the basis of the new revelation of the Truth as expressed in the Gospels. Christianity is the one true religion, and access to it is possible only through subscription to the Christian creed and membership of the Christian Church. Salvation is an exclusive prerogative of Christians, and is automatically precluded by adherence to any doctrine other than that proclaimed by the Church.

Yet today, when the age-old barriers between the major sacred traditions of the world have broken down, the question arises as to whether Christianity is so inherently exclusive as it has claimed to be. Is belief in such exclusivity incumbent upon a Christian? Can we be Christian and at the same time recognize that salvation is equally possible without formal membership of the Christian Church? And if we can be, what must be the positive theological grounds for this recognition, since clearly unless it is based on principles compatible with Christian dogma it can be

no more than an expression of goodwill and may even be no more than a matter of sentimentality?

This question is not simply a practical one. It concerns more than the question of Christian mission and world peace. It is a question about the Truth itself. If the Spirit is present and operative only within the framework or the bounds of the Christian Church as a historical institution, then the way in which the spiritual life is lived is one thing; if He is present and operative in many other forms throughout the world, it is quite another. It has been well-said[248] that in practice and in content, love is one thing if Christianity is exclusive, and a very different thing if Christianity is inclusive. Obviously a dialogue conducted on whatever level can never have any serious meaning if, in the minds of those who engage in it, there continues to lurk the suspicion that the non-Christian religions are all at heart corrupt and that what they claim to be their highest perfection and their ultimate fulfillment is nothing but a form of illusion.

It might be said that few intelligent Christians retain such a suspicion today. Be that as it may, it is none the less true that a certain legalistic dogmatism that has long prevailed in the Christian world and was based largely on ignorance of other religions still persists. And, more important, there is still an absence of an understanding that can accommodate and justify a recognition of the spiritual authenticity of non-Christian traditions in positive theological terms.

What possibilities for such an understanding does the Christian tradition appear to offer? Here the starting point must be the Acts of the Apostles, which is indeed the first book of Christian ecclesiology. In Acts (10:35) it is stated that "in every nation the man who is god-fearing and does what is right is acceptable." Barnabas and Paul tell the people of Lystra that "in past ages God allowed all nations to go their own way"; and yet, they add, "He has not left you without some clue as to His nature" (Acts 14:16-17). There is among the Gentiles a yearning for the "unknown God" (Acts 17:23), a search for God who "is not far from each one of us, for in Him we live and move and in Him we exist" (Acts 17:27-8).

This indicates some degree of openness to the non-Christian world. But there is no sign that this world is given any positive theological status. Rather the opposite would appear to be the case, for "gods made by human hands are not gods at all", the assumption being that all gods other

[248] By Georges Khodr, in his article "Christianity in a Pluralistic World" (*Sobornost,* Summer 1971, pp. 166-74), to which I am indebted here. I am also indebted to William C. Chittick's essay, "A Sufi Approach to Religious Diversity", published in *Religion of the Heart*, ed. S. H. Nasr and W. Stoddart (Foundation of Traditional Studies, Washington D.C., 1991), pp. 50-90.

than the Christian God are made by human hands. Indeed, Paul is quite categorical: "a false god has no existence in the real world" (1 Cor. 8:4); and in Revelation, a very ecclesiological book, any non-Christian religion is identified as a lie (21:8) and as a deceit (22:15). It would seem therefore that the New Testament simply continues the line of the Old Testament, and that for the apostles of Christ, as for the prophets of Israel, religions other than their own are an unmitigated abomination. The famous exception to this general rule is Paul's speech to the Athenians, in which he tells them that they worship the true God without recognizing Him, for His true identity has not been revealed to them. In other words, they were Christians without knowing it.

Thus from the beginning there appear to be two different attitudes to the non-Christian world. First, there is the entirely negative attitude inherited from Judaism, in which the gods are identified with man-made images of wood or stone and viewed as demons fighting against the one true God. This attitude progressively hardened as dogmatics crystallized into an official body of doctrine and as the Church and Christianity assumed an explicit institutional identity. Evidence of this hardening is provided by the battle against heresy, which aroused in the minds of apologists of all periods a hostility to error often amounting to hatred. Moreover, the intolerance of Christians towards each other had direct repercussions on their attitude to non-Christian religions, and this only made the hatred worse. One must either save the other man or kill him.

Yet alongside this negative attitude is the more positive attitude implicit in Paul's speech to the Athenians. This attitude was given a basis in doctrine by many Christian theologians. As one might expect, it was related to the understanding of the divine *Logos* and His incarnation in human form. For Justin Martyr, for instance, a seed of the *Logos*—the *Logos spermatikos*—is implanted in the whole human race and throughout creation before Christ's birth in the flesh,[249] so that those who lived according to the *Logos*, like Socrates and Herakleitos among the Greeks, and Abraham and Elijah and many others among the "barbarians", were Christians before Christ.[250]

Clement of Alexandria sees the whole of mankind as a unity and as beloved of God. Basing himself on Hebrews (1:11), he affirms that it was not only to Israel but to the whole of mankind that "God spoke in former times in fragmentary and varied fashion". Mankind as a whole is

[249] *Apologies,* II, 8.
[250] Ibid. 1,46.

subject to a process of education, a pedagogy. The whole world "has had as its teacher Him who filled the universe with His energy in creation, salvation, beneficence, lawgiving, prophecy, teaching and indeed all other instruction".[251] Within this divine economy, philosophy has a special role: it is not merely a stepping-stone to a specifically Christian philosophy. It is even "given to the Greeks as their Testament".[252] Greek, and by implication all other non-Christian, philosophies are fragments of a single whole, which is the *Logos*. And this "living according to the *Logos*" that is a capacity inherent in all peoples, Christian and non-Christian, is not simply to be equated with living rationally, nor is the *Logos* implanted in creation merely equivalent to the "rational law" of the medieval Scholastics; for "the *Logos* of God … ordered our world and, above all, this microcosm man, through the Holy Spirit".[253]

Faced with the question of whether what Christ's mission signifies is a reaffirmation of an understanding of things that had always been known, and by some fully known, but had been forgotten or distorted, or a radical change in the nature of reality itself, and hence in the nature of what is to be known, Origen chooses the first alternative. There is, he writes, "a coming of Christ before his corporeal coming, and this is his spiritual coming for those men who had attained a certain level of perfection, for whom the whole plenitude of the times was already present, as for example the patriarchs, Moses, and the prophets, who saw the glory of Christ."[254] The prophets, he adds, "have received the grace of the plenitude of Christ", and "led by the Spirit they have attained, after having been introduced to the figures (*typoi*), to the vision itself of the truth".[255] For St. Maximos the Confessor, before His advent in the flesh the *Logos* of God dwelt among the patriarchs and prophets in a spiritual manner, prefiguring the mysteries of His advent.[256]

A similar attitude is to be found in certain western theologians. A figure as venerable as St. Augustine affirmed that since the dawn of human history men were to be found within Israel and outside Israel who had partaken of the mystery of salvation, and that what was known to them was in fact the Christian religion, without it having been revealed to them that this was the

[251] *Protrepticus* XL.
[252] *Stromateis* V: 8.3.
[253] *Protrepticus* I:5.
[254] *Commentary in John,* I, 7.
[255] Ibid. VI, 3.
[256] PG 90,II37BC.

case. And St. Irenaeus sums up this line of patristic thought when he says, "There is only one God, who from beginning to end, through various economies, comes to the help of mankind".[257]

Complementing and underpinning this doctrine that prior to His advent in the flesh the *Logos* is present in man and in all creation, and may be apprehended by all men irrespective of time and place, is an understanding of the universality of the Incarnation itself. This understanding affirms that through the Incarnation the divine *Logos* incorporates Himself not in the body of a single human being alone but in the totality of human nature, in mankind as a whole, in creation as a whole. Thus St. Cyril of Jerusalem writes: "Not in vain does John assert that the *Logos* came and dwelt among us, for in this way he teaches us the great mystery that we are all in Christ and that the common personality of man is brought back to life by His assumption of it. The new Adam is so called because he acquires for all human nature all that pertains to happiness and glory, just as the old Adam acquired what pertains to its corruption and shame. Through the medium of one the *Logos* came to dwell in all, so that the only Son of God being established in power, His dignity should be shed upon the whole human race by the holiness of the Spirit; and thus should be verified in each one of us that saying of Scriptures: 'I said you are Gods and sons of the most High'…. The Logos dwells in us, in that one temple He took through us, so that we should possess all things in Him and He should bring us all back to the Father in one Body."[258] Or as the Pseudo-Chrysostom puts it, "By the sacrifice of Christ the first man was saved, that man who is in all of us."[259] This means that all human nature—in fact, all created being—participates in divine life, whether single individuals are aware of it or not. Each single human being, through energizing in his individual life that original Adamic nature in each of us which has been fully restored or resurrected or transfigured in and through the incarnation of the *Logos*, can realize his own participation in the life and character of ultimate Reality itself.

Unfortunately this understanding, rooted in a doctrine of the universal *Logos* inherent in the creation that He has brought into existence, succumbed to an ecclesiology which identified the Church on earth more or less exclusively with a corporate collective institution operating within history and with a definite outlook on history. In short, ecclesiology was historicized. The Church took on an increasingly sociological form, identified with Christendom.

[257] *Adversus haereses,* III, 12.13.
[258] *PG* 73,161-4.
[259] PG 59,725,723.

Christendom—the Christian society or the Church—was the dwelling-place of peace, light, and knowledge. The non-Christian world was the dwelling-place of war, darkness, demons. The area outside the Church, outside the historical, institutional, sociologically defined community of the Church, had either to be christianized—saved by being incorporated into Christendom—or it would perish. Non-Christians, heretics, and schismatics had to be brought into or returned to the Church by all means available—by missionary activity, by proselytism, or by cultural colonialism when persecution and war and military occupation became impracticable or unacceptable—for only in this way might the reality of "one flock and one shepherd" be achieved.

The established institutional Church becomes the center of the world. The history of the Christian Church, as a sociological entity, becomes history itself. What occurs in the experience of the Christian world fashions history. The rest of the world is a-historical until it accepts and adopts Christian experience and Christian modes. This experience and these modes are in fact destined to dominate the world. Non-Christian religions—religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam—are regarded as by definition inferior and even diabolical. Consequently those who adhere to these religions can be saved only by becoming historicized and by adopting the superior hierarchical form of Christianity. The rest of the world must come into the time-continuum of the Church through a salvation achieved by the universal extension of the Christian way of life founded on the authority of the Christian tradition.

This attitude stems from a linear view of history bound up with a monolithic ecclesiology which sees Christianity as a series or succession of salvation events destined to culminate in the appearance of Christ as the end of the history of the Old Covenant and as the end of human history. It is a view which tacitly ignores the idea of an ever-present eternity that transcends history. Similarly it ignores the idea of the Church in which Christ the *Logos* is seen, not merely chronologically but ontologically, as the immanent principle of the mystery in which the divine is disclosed at every point of time and in every creature, so that every human being and every created thing is a theophany and stands in an immediate, trans-historical relationship to the divine archetype of which he or it is the manifestation. Concomitantly, it also tacitly ignores the idea of the universality of the Incarnation: that the divine event signified by the Incarnation is not simply the incorporation of the *Logos* in the body of a single historical human being but also, and more importantly, an incorporation of the divine in the human as such, so there cannot

be an individual human being of whom the *Logos* is not the ultimate subject, however unactualized He may be in any particular case.

Finally, this view of history and the type of theology that lies behind it are basically anti-contemplative. For the mentality nourished on this theology, contemplation is little more than a form of escape from the "real" world, a retreat from history and from time that is selfish and ultimately barren. What is important for this mentality is the idea that the *Logos* of God has broken through the structures of a collapsing world to establish a new eon, a new age. Contemplation, with its abstraction, its turning inwards towards the self in the expectation of a pure and gnostic light, is therefore regarded as but a refinement of the old and unregenerate eon, before God entered into history, and thus as having little to do with the Christian Kingdom of God. We are not called to purity of heart or to the gifts of wisdom and understanding. We are not invited to that virginity and simplicity of spirit which even now apprehends the light of the Transfiguration. We are simply asked to wait for the Second Coming of the *Kyrios* and for the definitive establishment of the Kingdom. Our contemplation should take no other form than the song of praise and the pure and spotless sacrifice which we continue to offer in memory of the Lord "until He comes".

This description, if taken in an absolute sense, would of course be an exaggeration; but it none the less remains true that the major thrust of post-medieval Christianity has largely displaced the contemplative vision of things expressed by people like St. Symeon the New Theologian or Meister Eckhart and the tradition to which they belong. This makes dialogue with other religions, especially with the dominantly contemplative Asiatic religions, virtually impossible. In fact, if Christians are to integrate other religions, positively and creatively, with their own doctrinal perspective they have to go beyond and discard this concept of linear "salvation history", which represents the final flowering of that negative attitude of exclusivity which Christianity has inherited from Judaism and which, as we saw, is already explicit in the Acts of the Apostles.

This attitude must be replaced by a theology that affirms the positive attitude implicit in the writings of Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, the Cappadocians, St. Maximos the Confessor, and many others. The economy of the divine *Logos* cannot be reduced to His manifestation in the figure of the historical Jesus: the idea of God-manhood possesses a significance that is intrinsic to human nature as such, quite apart from its manifestation in a historical figure who exemplifies it. Correspondingly the Church cannot be reduced to a visible

institutional and sociological form. The Church, in Origen's words, is the cosmos of the cosmos. It is the innermost reality of humanity and of creation itself, even if this is not recognized. It is the *locus* within which the Christic mystery is continually unfolded. It is also the *locus* of the Pentecostal event—of the manifestation of the Holy Spirit, who in person reveals to creation the interior presence of the *Logos*.

It is the task of Christians and above all of Christian theologians to recognize and affirm this presence and this mystery not only within the boundaries of the historical Church, but also in those other testimonies to this presence and this mystery that are to be found in other religions. It matters little whether the religion in question has a historical character or not. It is superfluous to ask whether it regards itself as compatible with the Christian Gospel. The *Logos* in His *kenosis*, His self-emptying, is hidden everywhere, and the types of His reality, whether in the forms of persons or teachings, will not be the same outside the Christian world as they are within it. Yet these types are equally authentic: any deep reading of another religion is a reading of the *Logos*, of Christ. It is the *Logos* who is received in the spiritual illumination of a Brahmin, a Buddhist, or a Muslim. Indeed, if the tree is known by its fruits, only spiritual blindness can prevent us from recognizing that those who live and yearn for the Divine in all nations already receive the peace the Lord gives to all whom He loves (Lk. 2:14).

Yet given that Christians themselves are willing to recognize the implications of the doctrine of the universal *Logos*, and that sacred traditions other than their own are divinely-instituted ways of spiritual realization, this still does not resolve the problem of accounting for the divergencies between these various traditions. How are we to account for the appearance of conflict and disagreement between their doctrinal forms? We could say that there are many different Gods, and that each God has an individual and distinct form in which He expresses Himself. But this, quite apart from the other problems it raises, still does not get us much further forward, for we are then faced with the question of determining which of these Gods is the Supreme God, for clearly, if things are to have any coherence at all, there cannot be more than one God who is supreme. If on the other hand we start with the idea that there is one Supreme God or Reality, one absolute and all-embracing Truth (and this in one form or another is the common confession of all the great traditions), how is it that this Truth reveals itself in forms that appear to be so incompatible?

One answer to this question is that these divergencies or apparent incompatibilities in the external forms in which the Supreme God reveals Himself do not correspond to any inherent oppositions in His own nature, but to the difference in aptitudes, capacities, and temperaments of the various groups of humanity to which each particular form is addressed. Truth is one; but in expressing Itself in a way which is accessible to the human intelligence, It has to take account not only of the limitations of the human state as such, but also of the various, though relative, divisions within mankind that are themselves expressive of various facets of the divine plenitude. Put in its broadest terms, one might say that the differences between the various traditions are due to the differences in the cultural *milieux* for which each is providentially intended and to which each has therefore to be adapted.

What is involved in this proposition? Behind the changing appearances of the phenomenal world—of the world as it appears to us through the organs of our senses—is an underlying metaphysical order, a series of changeless and universal principles from which all derives and on which all depends. Our life, in any true sense of the word, in its turn depends not only on the recognition, but also on the realization of these principles. But because of the inherent limitations of the human state, we cannot recognize and realize them directly, in their naked essence. We can only be gradually, and stage by stage, initiated into them. This is where the various traditional forms come in: they are the indispensable aids and supports whereby we can be led into the full recognition and realization of the metaphysical principles on which our proper life depends.

At different times and different places, the Supreme, either through direct revelation of a Messenger or *Avatar*, or through the inspired activity of sages and prophets, has condescended to clothe the naked essence of these principles in exterior forms, doctrinal and ritual, in which they can be grasped by us and through which we can gradually be led into a plenary awareness of their preformal reality. These forms may be many—in a sense there may be as many ways to God as there are individual human beings—but beneath this multiformity may always be discerned, by those who have eyes to see, the essential unity of the unchanging, non-manifest, and timeless principles themselves.

This of course is not in itself a new idea. One need go no further than the western Gnostics to find it applied to an extreme and often, it would seem, ludicrous degree. Basing themselves on the notion of the essential unity of the Truth underlying the various forms of religious myth

and symbol, they felt justified in interpreting these latter in the light of the former. Thus Zeus, Dionysos, Orpheus, Epimenides, the mysteries of Eleusis, the laments for Attis, all had their equivalents in the Christian cult. Adonis, Endymion, Attis were all images of the soul, and myths about them could all be interpreted on this supposition. Support for such interpretations might be found in a passage from the Bible (torn violently out of context) and in Assyrian, Phrygian, and Egyptian mysteries. Oceanos is a symbol like the Jordan; the cup found in Benjamin's sack of wheat is the mystic cup celebrated by Anacreon; and so on. One Gnostic sect had in its meeting-place crowned images of Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, and Christ. It is the fashion nowadays to pour scorn on such Gnostic assimilations of, and speculations from, one religious form to another, and indeed the tendency was to make a kind of amalgam out of all the religions. But it should be remembered that at their base was an assumption similar to the one of which we have been speaking: that "all truth is one"; that it is this Truth which underlies the diversity of its formal expressions; and that he who is initiated into a realization of the preformal nature of the eternal principles of this Truth is thereby qualified to discern the essential unity which these formal expressions represent. It is with these presuppositions too that those who today accept the "traditionalist" or "perennialist" position seek to resolve the appearance of diversity, and often of conflict and disagreement, between the traditional forms that, in spite of everything, still function in the modern world. This way of looking at things may help those who are affiliated with a particular religious tradition to admit that their tradition does not possess a monopoly of the universal Truth, and that traditions other than their own may very well be revelations of the same Truth given quite a different form because of the differences in aptitudes, capacities, and temperament of the various groups of humanity to which each particular form is addressed. There is the Truth as it is "laid up in heaven" in its preformal and purely metaphysical state; and there is this Truth as it is when translated into the various doctrines and symbolic languages of the human race, each of which by definition possesses its own color and limitations, although this does not in any way prevent it from being an authentic language through which one can approach a knowledge of the Truth in its universal and unarticulated stage. After all, this is not so very different from what happens on the purely human plane when we translate, for instance, an abstract philosophical idea from one language to another.

Yet although in this way the door may be closed to the claim of the unique exclusivity of any one particular tradition, it is still left open to what is virtually a disguised form of this same claim to exclusivity, and that is the claim that one particular tradition is a superior, and perhaps even infinitely superior, revelation of universal Truth, and in this respect is, if not exclusive, at least so preeminent that to all intents and purposes it is unique. For while it is one thing to say that all traditional forms ultimately express the same universal Truth, it is quite another to say that they all express it to the same degree. Thus in spite of the first proposition, one is still left with the question of determining whether or not one particular tradition represents it more fully than the others.

This question, it is true, need never become acute until and unless there is some conflict or disagreement between the traditions themselves; and even then, once again in theory, this is only possible where there has been some faulty interpretation, so that it may be resolved the moment one has situated it correctly. But when it comes to the point, it does seem to be impossible to avoid making, implicitly or explicitly, a qualitative judgment about the relative completeness or incompleteness of the various traditions, and attributing to the principles of one tradition a certain superiority or priority.

In effect, to resolve an apparent conflict or disagreement between traditions one requires initial principles in the light of which it can be resolved. These principles one may say are "laid up in heaven", and this is a justified attitude as long as one is content to leave the apparent conflict or disagreement to be resolved "in heaven". But as soon as one seeks to resolve it through humanly intelligible interpretation, then one must bring one's principles down from heaven and recognize them in a humanly intelligible form—in, that is, the doctrinal form of one of the traditions which, because of its superior nature, is capable of resolving the conflict or disagreement with which one is presented.

Thus the Gnostics, to return to them, although they claimed to interpret in the light of universal principles, actually recognized these as most fully enshrined in a form of Greek religious speculation allied to the Christian religion, and this became for them the tradition according to whose criteria they interpreted and resolved the appearance of conflict and disagreement between the various religious forms. Or the Neoplatonist Proklos, although he claimed to speak in the name of "the truth which is as old as the universe", actually recognized this truth as most adequately revealed in the inspired writings of Plato and in the Chaldaean

Oracles uttered through their servant Julianos, the theurgist "whom it is unlawful to disbelieve" (though even so, according to the later Neoplatonist Psellos, the perfect coincidence of the inner content of these two forms of revelation was due to the fact that Julianos had been in consultation with Plato's ghost); and this for Proklos became the tradition. Or in our own time, those who seek a primordial and universal tradition behind the. particular religious forms tend to see its principles contained in essence in one particular form—in, for instance, Neoplatonism, or the Vedanta, or in some form which is a fusion of several forms.

It is worth examining more closely quite how this shift from the idea that there is what we have called a paradigmatic body of Truth or of universal principles "laid up in heaven" to the idea that this is most fully expressed in one particular formal tradition, comes about, for it is the crux of the difficulty with which we are dealing. The assumption, we said, is that behind all traditional religions lies the same metaphysical Truth or, conversely, that each tradition embodies in diverse ways the same unchanging and eternal principles. The Truth itself is therefore what is truly universal, while the various traditions at best amount to a translation of this Truth into a humanly intelligible mode. Thus the traditions themselves are not universal or, rather, are only universal to the degree to which they participate in the Truth itself. Theoretically then there is this paradigmatic body of total and disembodied Truth, and there are the various traditions over which it stands and within which it is partially enshrined.

Yet when, we said, any conflict or disagreement between the traditions arises, one is faced with the question of deciding where the Truth is most fully represented: which tradition, that is, most fully represents the disembodied and universal principles. To answer this question implies that one is already in possession of the knowledge according to which it can be answered: clearly to discern to what degree a particular tradition is universal already presupposes that one has the knowledge which makes it possible for one to do this, this knowledge necessarily being no less than the highest humanly possible. It is precisely here that what one might call a *petitio principii* is involved and that the shift in question takes place.

As we have seen, the degree of knowledge one possesses will be that represented in the tradition from which one has obtained it: otherwise one would not be in possession of it. To say then that this is the highest degree of knowledge, the fullest expression of the Truth possible (which one must say if one is to carry out the act of discernment with which we are concerned), and consequently that the tradition through which one has obtained it is a universal tradition in

the full meaning of the words, is simply to argue in a circle. It is to use as one's criteria of what constitutes the highest degree of knowledge, and hence of where this is fully represented, precisely those principles enshrined in the tradition from which one has obtained them in the first place.

One may then go on to recognize that these same principles are also represented fully in other traditions, or even in a superlative way in one other particular tradition, so that it is this latter and not one's own tradition that one regards as the most purely universal in character. But this does not alter the fact that the assumption that the degree of understanding and knowledge one has obtained through a particular tradition is the highest there is, is an arbitrary assumption or an act of faith; and that had one obtained one's knowledge and understanding from a tradition whose basic principles do not, at least on the level of human intelligibility, harmonize with those of one's own tradition, one might, and probably would, have been led to quite a different assessment of what constitutes the highest understanding and knowledge and hence in which tradition they are most fully expressed.

Does this mean that the proposition with which this discussion opened—that each of the great religious traditions is a valid expression of the Truth—must be rejected, and that Christians are quite justified in claiming, if not that their tradition is the sole authentic revelation of the Truth, at least that in so far as the doctrine of other traditions diverges from that of the Christian it is simply false and misguided, possibly even the work of the devil? This does not follow at all, and certainty there can be no justification for the claim in question, since such a claim cannot be made without violating some of the most profound insights that lie at the heart of the Christian tradition itself. To conclude this chapter I will try to show in what sense this is the case.

Here the first thing to be borne in mind is that the form or tradition through which an individual or group of individuals worships and is brought into communion with God depends upon a two-way relationship: it involves both God and man equally. In the Christian tradition, the basis of the understanding of this relationship is the affirmation that God creates man in His own image. Human beings are images of God and as such they share in all God's qualities. In our original state—our original ontological state, that is to say—this image is not simply potential; it is actual, or in the process of actualization: we actively and consciously participate in God's deifying energies and through such participation we may fully actualize all the divine qualities inherent in us by virtue of the fact that we are created in the image of God. The full actualization

of these divine qualities is what is meant by our perfection: we become perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect and thus achieve our deification.

This is the situation when we are in our original or natural state, the state symbolized for us by the figures of Adam and Eve in paradise, when the channels of communication between God and ourselves are unblocked, and the reciprocal flow of life and love from the divine to the human and from the human to the divine is unimpeded. When in this state, to achieve deification—to actualize the qualities of God in ourselves in such a way that they become our own qualities—does not require that we receive spiritual guidance through any indirect means: we receive it directly from God, for our consciousness is open and transparent to the divine consciousness.

As a consequence of what in Christian terminology is described as the fall, the channels of direct communication between God and human beings are, if not blocked, at least so impeded that the human consciousness is no longer transparent to the divine consciousness. Instead, it becomes subject to the illusions, distortions, fantasies, and so on that typify the ego-dominated human state. We are, as it were, sundered from God—sundered from that which is real—and so can no longer commune with the source of our own being or, correspondingly, with the source of the being of anything else. Our mind becomes tied up in knots of our own making, those that Blake calls the "mind-forged manacles".

In this situation we cannot rely on our own counsel as to how we can actualize the potentialities of the divine image within us; for not only is this image now occluded, hidden, veiled by the ignorance and confusion of our fallen state, but in addition such actualization demands that we give up what we now think we are—the false identity we now attribute to ourselves—and this we cannot do without guidance as to what constitutes our true reality and on how we are to recover it. Without such guidance we cannot become perfect. Without divine intervention we cannot attain beatitude or immortality, or escape from our wretchedness.

This intervention and guidance are provided in the divine revelation that lies at the root of every sacred tradition. Generally speaking, such revelation takes the form of a Holy Book or scriptures, and of teachings of prophets, saints, and holy men and women based on the scriptures though verified in the light of personal spiritual experience and divine inspiration. It is by means of the guidance provided in this way that we are able to follow a spiritual path through which we may eventually recover the fullness of our divine image, and to do this with the

assurance that we are not merely being seduced and deluded by the false lights of our confused and distorted ego-consciousness.

It is at this point, however, that we confront the question of the limitations which necessarily and inescapably characterize every such divine revelation. These limitations are imposed from both poles of the two-way relationship between God and man. They are imposed from above, from the side of God, and they are imposed from below, from the side of man. They are imposed from the side of God in the sense that it is impossible for all God's knowledge or all His wisdom to be *in actu* and fully expressed in one single form of revelation, or even for that matter in multiple forms of revelation. God in His non-manifest nature transcends all forms, whether intelligible, imaginable, or sensible. In this sense He is beyond all determination and limitation. But if He is to reveal Himself to human beings in their fallen state, He has to determine Himself, and hence to limit Himself, in a specific intelligible, imaginable, or sensible form; for unless He does so we cannot possess the concrete and determined inner vision of God which alone makes it possible for us to worship Him. And since God is infinite, there is nothing to prevent Him from choosing to reveal Himself in an infinite number of limited forms, all of which He Himself, in His non-manifest nature, infinitely transcends, and all of which, both singly and collectively, fail to exhaust the plenitude of His knowledge and wisdom: however many the forms in which He reveals Himself, aspects of His full reality will always remain undisclosed.

This does not mean that every form we take to be a revelation of God is necessarily a revelation of God; nor does it mean that certain forms in which He reveals Himself do not enshrine His reality more fully than others. But it does mean that no single form of revelation can justifiably claim to be the only, still less the total, form of revelation through which human beings can attain a concrete and personal vision of God and so achieve salvation; for to make such a claim is to do violence to the nature of God Himself.

What I have just said also points to the limitation imposed on every form of revelation from below, from the side of man. God is the source of revelation, and from the side of God the form of a particular revelation will be determined by the aspects of His infinite Truth that God chooses to express through it. But man, in the individual and collective sense, is the *locus* or medium of this revelation; and a corollary of the affirmation that man is created in the image of God is that each single individual, let alone the cultural and linguistic group of human beings to which he

belongs, will express this image, and therefore the divine qualities that constitute it, in a unique way.

At the same time, the degree to which a particular human being actualizes, or fails to actualize, these qualities will determine the mode in which that person exists and knows—will determine his or her mode of consciousness. This in its turn is another way of saying that the mode in which each human being exists and knows, or the mode of his or her consciousness, depends upon his or her experience of God. Everything is a particular mode of God's self-disclosure. A tree is a divine reality that expresses itself in the form of a tree.

Yet the degree to which I can consciously experience the unique divine reality, of which I am the self-disclosure, will depend on the degree to which I have actualized, or failed to actualize, its presence within me, for it is such actualization, or failure to actualize, that determines the mode of consciousness through which I am able to experience things, God and His image within me being among them. It is the limitations of my mode of consciousness that limits my experience of God and consequently my experience of myself.

This means that I have to realize, first, that God is not limited to the mode in which He is epiphanized in me or to the form in which I am capable of perceiving Him; and, second, that the mode in which God is epiphanized in me and the form in which I am capable of perceiving Him will be different from those in which He is epiphanized in and can be perceived by other human beings. Not to recognize this, and not to act in the spirit of such a recognition, is for me to commit, actively or passively, an act of tyranny.

In the light of what has just been said we can now see more clearly why God's revelation of Himself, or His self-disclosure, is inevitably limited from below, from the side of man, both in the individual and, *a fortiori*, in the collective sense. Divine revelation cannot but accommodate itself to the mode of existence and knowledge—the mode of consciousness—of the being or beings to whom it is addressed, for the simple reason that unless it is so accommodated it cannot be experienced or received. There is absolutely no point in God revealing His Truth to me in a way that I am incapable of experiencing or receiving it. At the same time, the Holy Spirit does not force people, and He cannot inspire people beyond their capacity to receive inspiration. Correspondingly, the most lucid revelation is concealed from us when we have become incapable or unworthy of perceiving it.

If I and the section of humanity to which I belong are incapable of receiving and experiencing the Truth except in a form that is perceptible to the senses, then the Truth must put on the "robe", or the appearance, of the dark world into which it has to descend in order to communicate itself to us. It has to clothe itself in sensible images, of one form or another. In making such a descent, or in putting on such a robe, the pure light of the Truth is in its turn occluded, hidden, and veiled by the darkness of our ignorance, ineptitude, and sin. Had the eyes of our heart not been blinded in this manner God could simply have projected spiritual, non-sensible forms of His wisdom into our sanctified intellect, open and transparent to the divine consciousness as it is in the pre-fallen Adamic state. Then the injunction, "Be fruitful and multiply", would be understood to signify that we should propagate these intelligible or spiritual forms (of beauty, of love) throughout the world.

In eating of the forbidden Tree, Adam was forced to perpetrate the violence that consists in *naturalizing* things of the spirit instead of spiritualizing—or perceiving the spiritual dimensions of—created, sensible realities. Correspondingly, it is our state of blindness, ignorance, and ineptitude that, in the case of the Christian revelation, forces God, in order to disclose Himself, and the reality of things created and uncreated, to take on a visible, "historical" human form. In this sense, both the Incarnation and the Crucifixion are the consequences of our ignominy. This is nothing for Christians to be proud or self-congratulatory about. Had the Judeo-Hellenistic world, the type of consciousness that typifies it, been capable of receiving that revelation in a more subtle or more spiritual form, then it would have been communicated in such a form.

Correspondingly, the fact that the revelations of other sacred traditions are not centered in and do not depend upon an incarnation equivalent to that of Christ does not mean that what they claim to be the wisdom enshrined in their doctrine is spurious or false, or is in any way inferior to the wisdom enshrined in Christian doctrine. It may simply mean that the consciousness of the *milieux*, human and cultural, to which these revelations are given is of such a type or quality that God does not have to manifest Himself in a visible, historical human form in order to communicate a true knowledge and understanding of things. Or, to put this in another way, it could be said that had God manifested Himself in such a form to these other *milieux*, He would not have been crucified.

When Christians attack or vilify a faith other than their own on the grounds that its doctrinal or other forms, viewed in the most literal and exoteric manner, conflict with their own, they are

simply usurping the role played by the Jews in the Gospels, who crucified Christ because it appeared to them that certain of His utterances and actions, again viewed in the most literal and exoteric manner, cut directly across the tenets of their own faith. That the Jews themselves acted in this way because they had become blinded to the inner significance of central aspects of their own faith, and that it was the awareness of this significance that Christ wished to restore to the lapsed human consciousness, is testified to by the account of Christ's meeting with Nicodemos (Jn. 3:1-11): at this meeting Nicodemos confesses his ignorance of the whole doctrine of spiritual rebirth, of which, as a "master of Israel", he should have been fully cognizant.

As I said before, none of this means that all religious traditions that claim to be based on a true revelation of God are in fact based on such a revelation; nor does it mean that even when religious traditions are rooted in true revelation, one of them may not express God's wisdom and knowledge more fully than the others. What it does mean, though, is that the fact that a particular religious community embraces a form of belief and worship rooted in divine revelation, and entirely valid for human salvation, does not in the least justify that community in maintaining that its form of revelation, and the tradition rooted in it, are the only such form and tradition through which salvation may be obtained.

Our primary loyalty and faith must of course be directed towards our own tradition and to a deepening experience of it—though even here we must remember that the significance that our tradition has for us, and the degree and firmness of the assent we give to it, may well depend not so much on its own inherent "objective" qualities and possibilities as on the strength of our acceptance of it, or faith in it, in the first place, and that this may be conditioned by many factors, cultural, ethnic, political and so on, which have little to do with the tradition in the spiritual sense. If we are at all concerned with the inner nature of other traditions, we must seek to understand them as fully as we can in the light not of our own prejudices, but of their own criteria, bearing in mind always that no one can be aware of the living dimensions and potentialities of a particular sacred tradition without first experiencing them through active participation in that tradition's forms of belief and liturgical practice. Above all, we are in no position to pronounce on the spiritual value of other sacred traditions, or on the relationship of Christianity to these other traditions, unless we have first freed ourselves from the hostility, bigotry, and arrogance which make a true understanding of anything impossible. Until we are free from such passions, and

have replaced them with love and sympathy, we can do nothing but reveal our own ignorance and pettiness.

Liberation from this ignorance and pettiness is not possible without an act of repentance, a *metanoia*, which banishes all confessional bias and all feelings of cultural and historical superiority. It is not possible without the kind of humility which, while not avoiding compassionate admonition and even criticism, is yet able to accept, even in the form of positive unbelief, a courageous rejection of the lies which Christians themselves have for too long been unwilling or unable to reject.

Finally, it will not be possible to achieve this liberation until the contemplative tradition of Christianity once again occupies a central position in the Christian consciousness. This means that we have to disabuse ourselves of the notion that Christian contemplation is solely a matter of withdrawal and recollection, or that it is simply a folding inward upon a mysterious inner presence in "prayer of stillness", "prayer of union" or "spiritual marriage". This is a foreshortened idea of its significance. We have to recover the full liturgical and patristic dimension of Christian contemplation. We must realize that Christian *theoria* is in fact first of all a response to God's manifestation of Himself in His *Logos*. It is at the same time a contemplative understanding of the whole of creation in the light of the Transfiguration.

Christian contemplation, in common with that of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, is centered not upon some vague inner apprehension of the mystery of man's own spiritual essence. It is centered upon God's self-emptying, *kenosis*, which must have its counterpart in man's self-emptying, the emptying of all purely human knowledge and even of man's whole ego-consciousness. We have to lose our soul in order to find it, or in order to be in a position to encounter directly the light and power of God. It is precisely here, at the heart of the Christian way, where we encounter the Christian expression of the dialectic of fullness and emptiness, all or nothing, void and infinity, that we can make a creative response to and engage in a creative encounter with the profound realizations that lie at the heart of other sacred traditions. Outside this ground, or short of it, we will always be in a state of non-comprehension, confusion, or conflict. Whether we shall celebrate the reconciliation that we have spurned for so long before the passing away of the present form of this world is something we cannot know. But we can at least make ourselves aware of what we have to do before such a reconciliation can come about.

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Some Observations on Christianity

Frithjof Schuon

In the perspective of *gnosis*, Christ, "Light of the world", is the universal Intellect, as the Word is the "Wisdom of the Father". Christ is the Intellect of microcosms as well as that of the macrocosm; he is thus the Intellect in us[260] as well as the Intellect in the Universe and *a fortiori* in God; in this sense it can be said that there is no truth or wisdom that does not come from Christ, and this is obviously independent of all consideration of time and place.[261] Just as "the Light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not", so too the Intellect shines in the darkness of passions and illusions. The relationship of the Son to the Father is analogous to the relationship of pure Love to Being or of the Intellect to the "Self", and this is why in the Intellect or in sanctifying Grace we are "brothers" of Christ.

But Christ is likewise prefigured in the whole creation, and this has an aspect of incarnation and another of crucifixion. On a lesser scale humanity, and with it the individual human, is an image of Christ and includes both aspects: man is "incarnation" by his Intellect and freedom and "crucifixion" by his miseries.

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From the doctrinal point of view Christian *gnosis* is nothing other than Trinitarian metaphysics,[262] with its microcosmic application: our pure existence corresponds to the Father, our pure intelligence to the Son, and our pure will to the Holy Spirit. The vertical line of the

[260] The Word "was the true Light, which lighteth every man" (John 1:9).

[261] "Now faith," says Saint Paul, "is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. . . . Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear" (Hebrews 11:1, 3); this proves that faith is, to say the least, not contrary to *gnosis*; doubtless not all faith is metaphysical knowledge, but all metaphysical knowledge, being an "evidence of things not seen", is of the domain of faith. *Gnosis* is the perfection of faith in the sense that it combines this knowledge with the corresponding realization; it is wisdom and sanctity: sanctifying wisdom and sapiential sanctity. The most external expression of the element "realization" is works, which on the one hand prove and on the other hand give life to faith, and without which it is "dead, being alone" (James 2:17).

[262] In a generally analogous way, the metaphysics of Islam is unitary in the sense that it proceeds by principial reductions to Unity, whereas the metaphysics of Judaism is at once unitary and denary (Decalogue, *Sephiroth*).

cross denotes the relationship of the Father to the Son, whereas the horizontal line symbolizes the Holy Spirit; the latter "proceeds from the Father and is delegated by the Son", which signifies that the Spirit, being at once Beatitude and Will, proceeds from the Father, then also from the Son (*Filioque*) insofar as he represents the Father, but not insofar as he is distinct from Him. The Father is Beyond-Being, the Son is Being, and the Spirit is Beatitude and Manifestation; when the perspective is limited to ontology, the Father is Being as such and the Son the "Consciousness" of Being. To say that the Spirit is Beatitude and Manifestation—whatever the level of the perspective, ontological or supra-ontological—means that It is at once the "inner life" and the "creative projection" of Divinity: It is thus an "expansion" or "spiration" *in divinis* at the same time as a "springing forth" *ex divinis*; It is on the one hand "internal" or "contemplative" Beatitude and on the other hand "external" or "active" Beatitude. This is why in the sign of the cross the Holy Spirit "occupies" the whole of the horizontal line; it could even be said that in the making of this sign the words *Spiritus Sanctus* designate the Spirit *in divinis* and the word *Amen* the Spirit "in creation", if one may venture such an expression.

The Spirit "as creation" is none other than the Virgin in three aspects, macrocosmic, microcosmic, and historical: It is Universal Substance, then the soul in a state of sanctifying grace, and finally the human manifestation of these aspects, the Virgin Mary. In this sense we could say that the word *Amen* is a name of the Virgin, perfect creature—or perfect creation—and that if the vertical line of the sign of the cross denotes the relationship of the Father and the Son, the horizontal line will denote the relationship of Husband and Spouse. The entire soul of the Virgin is one great *Amen*; there is nothing in it which is not an acquiescence to the Will of God.

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Christian art includes essentially three images: the Virgin and Child, the Crucifixion, and the Holy Face: the first image is related to the Incarnation, the second to the Redemption, and the third to the Divinity of Christ. Man recapitulates these three symbols or mysteries respectively by purity, which is the vehicle of "Christ in us", by death to the world, and by sanctity or wisdom.

Strictly speaking, art forms part of the liturgy—in the broadest sense—for like the liturgy it is "public work" (λειτουργία);[263] this being so one cannot leave it to the arbitrary disposition of men. Art, like the liturgy properly so called, constitutes the terrestrial "garment" of God; it both envelops and unveils the divine Presence on earth.[264]

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The Church of Peter is visible and is continuous like water; that of John—instituted on Calvary and confirmed at the sea of Tiberias—is invisible and is discontinuous like fire. John became "brother" of Christ and "son" of the Virgin, and he is moreover the Prophet of the Apocalypse; Peter is charged to "feed my sheep", but his Church seems to have inherited also his denials, whence the Renaissance and its direct and indirect consequences; nevertheless, "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it". John "tarries till I come", and this mystery remains closed to Peter;[265] there is here a prefiguration of the "schism" between Rome and Byzantium. "Feed my sheep": there is nothing in these words that excludes the interpretation put upon them by the Greeks, according to which the Bishop of Rome is *primus inter pares* and not *pontifex maximus*.

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The Holy Spirit is given by Confirmation through the medium of fire, for oil is none other than a form of liquid fire, as is wine; the difference between Baptism and Confirmation could be defined by saying that the first has a negative—or "negatively positive"—function since it "takes

[263] According to Saint Augustine, the liturgy is essentially simple, so that this simplicity is almost a criterion of authenticity; if it were otherwise, says the Bishop of Hippo, the liturgy would be lower than the Jewish Law, which was itself given by God and not by liturgists; furthermore he stresses the fact that Christian feasts are few in number.
[264] We have had occasion at various times to underline the sacred, hence immutable, character of religious art: it is not a purely human thing, and above all it does not consist in seeking impossible mysteries in nonexistent profundities, as is the intention of modern art, which, instead of adapting "our times" to the truth, aims at adapting the truth to "our times". In relation to artistic or artisanal—hence "liturgical"—expression, the terms "Christian" and "medieval" are in fact synonymous; to repudiate Christian art on the pretext that Christianity stands above "cultures" is a failure to see the context and value of this art; it is to repudiate elements of truth and thereby also of sanctity.
[265] It is significant that the Celtic Church, that mysterious springtime world appearing like a sort of last prolongation of the golden age, held itself to be attached to Saint John.

away" the state of the fall, whereas the second sacrament has a purely positive function in the sense that it "gives" a light and a power that are divine.[266]

This transmission acquires a new "dimension" and receives its full efficacy through the vows that correspond to the "Evangelical counsels"; these vows—true initiatic leaven—denote at the same time a death and a second birth, and they are in fact accompanied by symbolic funeral rites; the consecration of a monk is a sort of burial.[267] By poverty man severs himself from the world; by chastity he severs himself from society; and by obedience he severs himself from himself.[268]

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The whole of Christianity hangs on these words: Christ is God. Likewise on the sacramental plane: the bread "is" his body, and the wine "is" his blood.[269] There is furthermore a connection between the Eucharistic and onomatological mysteries: the Named one is "really present" in his Name; that is to say, he "is" his Name.

The Eucharist is in a sense the "central" means of grace in Christianity; it must therefore express integrally what characterizes this tradition, and it does so by recapitulating not only the Christic mystery as such, but also its double application to the "greater" and the "lesser" mysteries: the wine corresponds to the first and the bread to the second, and this is indicated not only by the respective natures of the sacred elements, but also by the following symbolic facts: the miracle of the bread is "quantitative" in the sense that Christ multiplied what already existed,

[266] According to Tertullian, "The flesh is anointed that the soul may be sanctified; the flesh is signed that the soul may be fortified; the flesh is placed in shadow by the laying on of hands that the soul may be illumined by the Holy Spirit." As for Baptism, the same author says that "the flesh is washed that the soul may be purified". According to Saint Dionysius, Baptism, Eucharist, and Confirmation refer respectively to the ways of "purification", "illumination", and "perfection"; according to others, it is Baptism which is called an "illumination"; this clearly does not contradict the foregoing perspective since all initiation "illumines" by definition: the taking away of "original sin" opens the way to a "light" pre-existing in Edenic man.

[267] These funeral rites make one think of the symbolic cremation which, in India, inaugurates the state of *sannyâsa*.

[268] The married man can be chaste "in spirit and in truth", and the same necessarily holds good for poverty and obedience, as is proved by the example of Saint Louis and other canonized monarchs. The reservation expressed by the words "in spirit and in truth", or by the Pauline formulation "the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life", has a capital importance in the Christian perspective, but it also contains—moreover providentially—a "two-edged sword".

[269] For Clement of Alexandria, the body of Christ—or Eucharistic bread—concerns active life or faith, and the blood or the wine contemplation and *gnosis*.

whereas the miracle of the wine is "qualitative", for Christ conferred on the water a quality it did not have, namely, that of wine. Or again: the body of the crucified Redeemer had to be pierced in order that blood might flow out; blood thus represents the inner aspect of the sacrifice, which is moreover underscored by the fact that blood is liquid, hence "non-formal", whereas the body is solid, hence "formal"; the body of Christ had to be pierced because, to use the language of Meister Eckhart, "if you want the kernel, you must break the shell". The water that flowed from Christ's side and proved his death is like the negative aspect of the transmuted soul: it is the "extinction" which, depending on the point of view, either accompanies or precedes the beatific plenitude of the divine blood; it is the "death" which precedes "Life" and which is as it were its outward proof.

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Christianity hangs also on the two supreme commandments, which contain "all the law and the prophets". In *gnosis* the first commandment—total love of God—implies taking hold of the consciousness of the Self, whereas the second—love of neighbor—refers to seeing the Self in what is "not-I". Likewise for the injunctions of *oratio et jejunium*: all Christianity depends on these two disciplines, "prayer and fasting".

Oratio et jejunium: "fasting" is first of all abstention from evil and then the "void for God"—*vacare Deo*—a void in which "prayer", the "remembrance of God", is established and which is filled by the victory already won by the Redeemer.

"Prayer" culminates in a constant recalling of divine Names insofar as it is a question of an articulated "remembrance". The *Golden Legend*, so rich in precious teachings, contains stories that bear witness to this: a knight wished to renounce the world and entered the Cistercian order; he was illiterate and moreover incapable of retaining from all the teachings he received anything but the words *Ave Maria*; these words "he kept with such great recollectedness that he pronounced them unceasingly wherever he went and whatever he was doing". After his death a beautiful lily grew on his grave and on each petal was written in golden letters *Ave Maria*; the monks opened the grave and saw that the root of the lily was growing from the knight's mouth. To this story we have only one word to add concerning the "divine quality" of the Name of the

Virgin: he who says Jesus says God; and in the same way he who says Mary says Jesus, so that the *Ave Maria*—or the Name of Mary—is of the divine Names the one which is closest to man.

The *Golden Legend* recounts also that the executioners of Saint Ignatius of Antioch were astonished by the fact that the saint pronounced the Name of Christ without ceasing: "I cannot keep from doing so," he told them, "for it is written in my heart." After the saint's death, the pagans opened his heart and there saw, written in golden letters, the Name of Jesus.[270]

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God is Love just as He is Light, but He is also in Christ sacrifice and suffering, and this too is an aspect or extension of Love. Christ has two natures, divine and human, and he also offers two ways, *gnosis* and charity: the way of charity, to the extent it is distinguished from *gnosis*, implies pain, for perfect love desires to suffer; it is in suffering that man best proves his love; but there is as it were a price to be paid for the "intellectual easiness" of such a perspective. In the way of *gnosis*, where the whole emphasis is on pure contemplation and the chief concern is with the glorious aspect of Christ rather than with his grievous humanity—and where there is in certain respects a participation in the divine nature, ever blissful and immutable—suffering does not apply in the same way, which means that it does not in principle have to exceed the demands of a

[270] The same fact is recounted of a Dominican saint, Catherine dei Ricci. Apart from the *Ave Maria* and the Name of Jesus, let us mention as well the double invocation *Jesu Maria*, which contains as it were two mystical dimensions, as also the *Christe eleison*, which is in effect an abridgement of the "Jesus Prayer" of the Christian East; it is known that the mystical science of ejaculatory prayer was transmitted to the West by Cassian, who appears retrospectively as the providential intermediary between the two great branches of Christian spirituality, while in his own time he was for the West the representative of the mystical tradition as such. And let us also recall here these liturgical words: *Panem celestem accipiam et nomen Domini invocabo* and *Calicem salutaris accipiam et nomen Domini invocabo*. In Greek and Slavic monasteries, a knotted rope forms part of the investiture of the Small Schema and the Great Schema; this rope is ritually conferred on the monk or nun. The Superior takes this rosary in his left-hand and says: "Take, brother N., the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, to pray to Jesus without ceasing, for you must constantly have the Name of the Lord Jesus in the mind, in the heart, and on the lips, saying: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'" In the same order of ideas, we would draw attention to the "act of love"—the perpetual prayer of the heart—revealed in our times to Sister Consolata of Testona (see *Un appel du Christ au monde* by Lorenzo Sales).

general *ascesis*, such as the Gospel designates by the term *jejunium*; a quasi-impersonal detachment here takes precedence over an individual desire for sacrifice. All Christian spirituality oscillates between these two poles, although the aspect charity-suffering greatly preponderates in practice—and for obvious reasons—over the aspect *gnosis*-contemplation.

In the soul of the gnostic, the question "What is God?" or "What am I?" outweighs the question "What does God want of me?" or "What must I do?", although these questions are far from precluded since man is always man. The gnostic, who sees God "everywhere and nowhere", does not base himself in the first place on outward alternatives even though he cannot escape them; what matters to him above all is that the world is everywhere woven of the same existential qualities and poses in all circumstances the same problems of remoteness and proximity.

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The emphasis in the Christian climate on the virtue of humility—or rather the mode of the emphasis or the virtue—leads us to return to this issue, which is at once moral and mystical.[271]

Humility has two aspects, which are prefigured in the Gospel by the washing of the feet on the one hand and the cry of abandonment on the cross on the other. The first humility is effacement: when we are brought, rightly or wrongly, to see a quality in ourselves, we must first attribute it to God and secondly see in ourselves either the limits of this quality or the defects that could neutralize it; and when we are brought to see a defect in others, we must first try to find its trace or the responsibility for it in ourselves and secondly exert ourselves to discover qualities that can compensate for it. But truth—provided it is within our reach—surpasses every other value, so that to submit to truth is the best way to be humble; virtue is good because it is true, and not conversely. Christ humbled himself in washing the feet of his disciples; he abased himself by serving while he was yet the Master, but not by calumniating himself; he did not say: "I am worse than you," and he gave no example of virtue contrary to truth or intelligence.[272]

[271] We have already spoken of it toward the end of our *Perspectives spirituelles et faits humains*.

[272] Christ gave other teachings on humility, for example when he said that he had not come to be served but to serve or when he said that "whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven"; now the true nature of all children is purity and simplicity, not rivalry. Let us recall also the

The second—the great—humility is spiritual death, the "losing of life" for God, the extinction of the ego*;* this is what saints have had in view in describing themselves as "the greatest of sinners"; if this expression has a meaning, it applies to the ego as such, and not to such and such an ego. Since all sin comes from the ego and since without it there would be no sin, it is indeed the ego that is the "most vile" or the "lowest of sinners"; when the contemplative has identified his "I" with the principle of individuation, he perceives as it were in himself the root of all sin and the very principle of evil; it is as if he had assumed, after the example of Christ, all our imperfections in order to dissolve them in himself in the light of God and in the burnings of love. For a Saint Benedict or a Saint Bernard, the "degrees of humility" are stages in the extinction of the passional "I", stages marked by symbols-attitudes, by disciplines that further the transmutation of the soul; the key to this wisdom is that Christ was humbled on the cross through identifying himself in the night of abandonment with the night of the human ego and not through identifying himself with a given "I"; he felt himself forsaken not because he was Jesus, but because he had become man as such; he had to cease being Jesus that he might taste all the straitness, all the separation from God, of the pure ego and thereby of our state of fall.[273]

That we may not be able to determine our place in the hierarchy of sinners by no means signifies that we do not have the certitude of being "vile", not only as ego in general, but thereby also as a particular ego; to believe oneself "vile" for the sole reason that one is "I" would empty humility of its content.

Humility in Christianity is conceived as a function of love, and this is one of the factors conferring upon it its characteristic texture. "The love of God," says Saint Augustine, "comprises all the virtues."

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parable of the uppermost rooms at feasts. According to Saint Thomas Aquinas, humility demands neither that we should submit what is divine in us to what is divine in another, nor that we should submit what is human in us to what is human in another, nor still less that the divine should submit to the human; but there is still the question, sometimes delicate but never insoluble, of the proper definition of things.

[273] The saying of Christ: "Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is, God" refers to the greater humility that is in question here; it is the same when Christ cites little children as examples. If it were necessary to take literally the mystical conviction of being the "vilest of sinners", one would not be able to explain how saints who have had this conviction could speak about the evil of some heretic; moreover it would be absurd to ask men to have an acute sense of the least defects of their nature and at the same time to be incapable of discerning these defects in another.

"And the Light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not." By its form the message of Christ is addressed *a priori* to the passional element in man, to the point of fall in human nature, while remaining gnostic or sapiential in Christ himself and therefore in Trinitarian metaphysics, to say nothing of the sapiential symbolism of Christ's teachings and parables. But it is in relation to the general form—the volitive perspective—of the message that Christ could say: "They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick: I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Mark 2:17). In the same way when Christ says: "Judge not, that ye be not judged," he is referring to our passional nature and not to pure intelligence, which is neutral and is identified with those "that are whole". If Christ shall come to "judge the quick and the dead", this again relates to the Intellect—which alone has the right to judge—and to the equation "Christ-Intellect".

The volitive perspective we have just alluded to is affirmed in the clearest possible way in Biblical history: we see there a people at once passionate and mystical, struggling in the grip of a Law that crushes and fascinates them, and this prefigures in a providential way the struggles of the passional soul—of every soul to the extent it is subject to passions—with the truth, which is the final end of the human state. The Bible always speaks of "what happens" and almost never of "what is"; the Cabalists tell us that it does the latter implicitly, which we are the first to recognize, but this changes nothing in the visible nature of these Scriptures nor in the human causes of this nature. From another angle Judaism had hidden what Christianity was called upon to make openly manifest;[274] on the other hand the Jews had openly manifested from the moral point of view what Christians later learned to hide; the ancient coarseness was no doubt replaced by an esoterism of love, but also by a new hypocrisy.

It is necessary to take account of this as well: the volitive perspective has a tendency to retain the ego because of the idea of moral responsibility, whereas *gnosis* tends on the contrary to reduce it to the cosmic powers of which it is a combination and a conclusion. And again: from the point of view of will and passion, men are equal; but they are not so from the point of view of pure intellection, for intellection introduces into man an element of the absolute, which as such transcends him infinitely. To the moralizing question: "Who art thou that judgest another?"—a

[274] Commentators on the *Torah* state that the impediment of speech from which Moses suffered was imposed on him by God so that he would not be able to divulge the Mysteries which, precisely, the Law of Sinai had to veil and not unveil; now these Mysteries were at root none other than the "Christic" Mysteries.

question by which some would like to obliterate all "wisdom of serpents" or all "discerning of spirits" in a vague and charitable psychologism—one would have the right in every case of infallible judgment to reply, "God"; for intelligence, insofar as it is "relatively absolute", escapes the jurisdiction of virtue, and therefore its rights surpass those of man regarded as passional and fallible ego; God is in the truth of every truth. The saying that "no one can be judge and party in his own cause" can be applied to the ego to the extent it limits or darkens the mind, for it is arbitrary to attribute to the intelligence as such a fundamental limit in connection with an order of contingencies; to assert as certain moralists would that man has no right to judge amounts to saying that he has no intelligence, that he is only will or passion, and that he has no kind of likeness to God.

The sacred rights of the Intellect appear moreover in the fact that Christians have not been able to dispense with Platonic wisdom and that later the Latins felt the need for recourse to Aristotelianism, as if thereby recognizing that *religio* could not do without the sapiential element, which a too exclusive perspective of love had allowed to fall into disrepute.[275] But if knowledge is a profound need of the human spirit, it is by this very fact also a way.

To return to our earlier thought, we could express ourselves also this way: contrary to what is the case in *gnosis*, love scarcely has the right to judge another; it takes everything upon itself and excuses everything, at least on the plane where it is active, a plane whose limits vary according to individual natures; "pious fraud"[276]—out of charity—is the price of volitive individualism. If *gnosis* for its part discerns essentially—and on all levels—both spirits and values, this is because its point of view is never personal, so that in *gnosis* the distinction between "I" and "other" and the subtle and paradoxical prejudices attaching to it scarcely have meaning; but here too the application of the principle depends on the limitations imposed on us by the nature of things and by our own nature.

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[275] The ancient tendency to reduce *sophia* to a "philosophy", that is, an "art for art's sake" or a "knowledge without love", hence a pseudo-wisdom, has necessitated the predominance in Christianity of the contrary viewpoint. Love in the sapiential perspective is the element that surpasses simple ratiocination and makes knowledge effective; this cannot be emphasized enough.

[276] Veracity, which in the end has more importance than moral conjectures, implies in short the use of logic in a manner that is consequential, that is, putting nothing above the truth, not falling into the contrary fault of believing that to be impartial means not to consider anyone right or wrong. One must not stifle discernment for the sake of impartiality, for objectivity does not consist in absolving the wrong and accusing the good, but in seeing things as they are, whether this pleases us or not; it is therefore to have a sense of proportion as much as a sense of shades of meaning. It would be pointless to say such elementary things if one did not meet at every turn this false virtue, which distorts the exact vision of facts and which could dispense with its scruples if only it realized sufficiently the value and efficacy of humility before God.

Charity with regard to our neighbor, when it is the act of a direct consciousness and not just a moral sentiment, implies seeing ourselves in the other and the other in ourselves; the scission between *ego* and *alter* must be overcome in order that the division between Heaven and earth may be healed.

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According to Saint Thomas, it is not in the nature of free will to choose evil, although this choice comes from having freedom of agency connected with a fallible creature. Will and liberty are thus joined together, which means that the Doctor introduces into the will an intellectual element and makes the will participate, quite properly, in intelligence. Will does not cease to be will by choosing evil—we have said this on other occasions—but it ceases fundamentally to be free, hence intellective; in the first case it is the dynamic faculty, passional power—animals also have a will—and in the second the stimulation of discernment. It could be added that neither does intelligence cease to be itself when in error, but in this case the relationship is less direct than for the will; the Holy Spirit (Will, Love) is "delegated" by the Son (Intellect, Knowledge), and not conversely.

Christian doctrine does not claim that moral effort produces metaphysical knowledge, but it does teach that restoring the fallen will—extirpating the passions—releases the contemplativity latent in the depths of our theomorphic nature; this contemplativity is like an aperture that divine Light cannot but accede to, whether as Justice or *a fortiori* as Mercy; in *gnosis* this process of mystical alchemy is accompanied by appropriate concepts and states of consciousness.[277] Seen from this angle, the primacy of love is not opposed to the perspective of wisdom, but illumines its operative aspect.[278]

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[277] Knowledge is then "sanctifying" and is not limited to satisfying some more or less justifiable need for explanation; it accords fully with the Pauline doctrine of charity. The implacability of such knowledge is not arrogance, but purity. *Gnosis* makes of knowledge something effective, ontological, "lived". Outside of *gnosis* it is not a question of extirpating the passions, but of directing them toward Heaven.

[278] The Augustinian-Platonic doctrine of knowledge is still in perfect accord with *gnosis*, while Thomistic-Aristotelian sensationalism, without being false on its own level and within its own limits, is in accord with the demands of the way of love in the specific sense of the term *bhakti*. But this reservation is far from applying to the whole of Thomism, which is identified in many respects with truth unqualified. It is necessary to reject the opinion of those who believe that Thomism, or any other ancient wisdom, has an effective value only when we "re-create it in ourselves"—we "men of today"!—and that if Saint Thomas had read Descartes, Kant, and the philosophers of the

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The morality that offers the other cheek—so far as morality can here be spoken of—does not mean an unwonted solicitude toward one's adversary, but complete indifference toward the fetters of this world, or more precisely a refusal to let oneself be caught up in the vicious circle of terrestrial causations; whoever wants to be right on the personal plane at any price loses serenity and moves away from the "one thing needful"; the affairs of this world bring with them only disturbances, and disturbances take one further from God. But peace, like every spiritual attitude, can dissociate itself from outward activity; holy anger is inwardly calm, and the unavoidable role of the office of judge—unavoidable because motivated by higher and non-personal interests—is compatible with a mind free from attachment and hatred. Christ opposes the passions and personal interest, but not the performance of duty or the collective interest; in other words he is opposed to personal interest when that interest is passionate or harmful to the interests of others, and he condemns hatred even when it serves a higher interest.

The "non-violence" advocated by the Gospels symbolizes—and renders effective—the virtue of the mind preoccupied with "what is" rather than with "what happens". As a rule man loses much time and energy in questioning himself about the injustice of his fellows as well as about possible hardships of destiny; whether there is human injustice or divine punishment, the world—the "current of forms" or "cosmic wheel"—is what it is, simply following its course; it is true to its own nature. Men cannot not be unjust insofar as they form part of this current; to be detached from the current and to act contrary to the logic of facts and the bondage it engenders is bound to appear madness in the eyes of the world, but it is in reality to adopt here below the point of view of eternity. And to adopt this point of view is to see oneself from a great distance: it is to see that we ourselves form a part of this world of injustice, and this is one more reason for remaining indifferent amid the uproar of human quarrelling. The saint is the man who acts as if he had died and returned to life; having already ceased to be "himself" in the earthly sense, he

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nineteenth and twentieth centuries, he would have expressed himself differently; in reality he would then only have had to refute a thousand more errors. If an ancient saying is right, there is nothing to do but accept it; if it is false, there is no reason to take notice of it; but to want to "rethink" it through a veil of new errors or impressions quite clearly has no interest, and any such attempt merely shows the degree to which the sense of intrinsic and timeless truth has been lost.

has absolutely no intention of returning to that dream, but maintains himself in a kind of wakefulness, which the world with its narrowness and impurities cannot understand.

Pure love is not of this world of oppositions; it is by origin celestial, and its end is God; it lives as it were in itself, by its own light and in the beam of God-Love, and this is why charity "seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things" (1 Cor. 13:5-7).

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The Cross

Frithjof Schuon

If the Incarnation has the significance of a "descent" of God, Christ is thus equivalent to the whole of creation, containing it in a way; he is a second creation, which purifies and "redeems" the first. He assumes with the cross the evil of Existence; to be able to assume this evil, it was necessary that God should become Existence. The cross is everywhere because creation is necessarily separated from God; Existence affirms itself and blossoms out through enjoyment, but enjoyment becomes sin to the extent that God is not its object, although all enjoyment contains a metaphysical excuse in the fact that it is directed to God by its existential nature; every sin is broken at the foot of the cross. But man is not made solely of blind desire; he has received intelligence that he may know God; he must become conscious of the divine end in everything, and at the same time he must "take up the cross" and "offer the other cheek", which means he must rise even above the internal logic of the existential prison; his logic, which is "foolishness" in the eyes of the world, must transcend the plane of this prison: it must be "vertical" or celestial, not "horizontal" or earthly.

Existence or "manifestation" has two aspects: the tree and the cross; the joyful tree, which bears the serpent, and the sorrowful cross, which bears the Word made flesh. For the impious, Existence is a world of passion that man justifies by a philosophy "after the flesh"; for the elect, it is a world of trial transpierced by grace, faith, *gnosis*.

Jesus is not only the new Adam, but also the new Creation. The old is totality and circumference; the new, unicity and center.

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We can no more escape the cross than we can escape Existence. At the root of all that exists, there is the cross. The ego is a downward path that leads away from God; the cross is a halting of this path. If Existence is "something of God", it is also something "which is not God", and it is

this that the ego embodies. The cross brings the latter back to the former and in so doing permits us to vanquish Existence.

What makes the problem of Existence so complex is that God shows through everywhere since nothing could exist outside Him; the whole object is never to be separated from this distant perception of the Divine. And this is why enjoyment in the shadow of the cross is conceivable and even inevitable; to exist is to enjoy, even though at the foot of the cross. This is where man must keep himself since such is the profound nature of things; man can violate this nature only in appearance. Suffering and death are none other than the cross reappearing in the cosmic flesh; Existence is a rose signed with a cross.

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Social morals distinguish between the rightness of one man and the wrongness of another; but the mystical morals of Christ, strictly speaking, admit no one to be right, or rather they are located on a plane where no one is entirely right since every man is a sinner, and "there is none good but one, that is, God."[279] The Mosaic Law has a man stoned for wronging society, an adulterer for example, but for Christ only God can be wronged, which excludes all forms of vengeance; every man is guilty before the Eternal. Every sin is that of Adam and Eve, and every human being is Adam or Eve;[280] the first act of justice will therefore be to forgive our neighbor. The fault of the "other" is at root our own; it is only a manifestation of the latent fault that constitutes our common substance.

But Christ, whose Kingdom is "not of this world", leaves open a door for human justice insofar as it is inevitable: "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's." To deny this justice on every plane would amount to setting up injustice; even so it is necessary to overcome hatred by bringing evil back to its total root, to the "offence" that must needs come, but above all by discovering it in our nature, which is that of every ego; the ego is an optical

[279] "For I know nothing by myself; yet am I not hereby justified: but he that judgeth me is the Lord" (1 Cor. 4:4).
[280] Saint Gregory the Great says in a letter—quoted by the Venerable Bede in his *Histoire de l'Eglise et du peuple anglais*—that "every sin proceeds from three causes, namely, suggestion, pleasure, and consent. Suggestion comes from the devil, pleasure from the body, and consent from the will. The serpent suggested the first sin, and Eve, as flesh, found in it a carnal pleasure whereas Adam, as mind, consented to it; but only the most subtle intelligence can distinguish between suggestion and pleasure and between pleasure and consent".

illusion that makes a mote out of a beam and conversely, according to whether it is a question of "ourselves" or "another". It is necessary to find through Truth the serenity that understands all, "forgives all", and reduces all to equilibrium; it is necessary to vanquish evil with the peace that is beyond evil and hence not its contrary; true peace has no contrary.

"He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone": we are all of a same sinful substance, a same matter susceptible to the abscess that is evil, and we are therefore all joint partners in evil in a way that is doubtless indirect but nonetheless real; it is as if everyone carried in himself a particle of responsibility for all sin. Sin then appears as a cosmic accident, exactly like the ego on a larger scale; strictly speaking, he is without sin who is without ego and who is thereby like the wind, of which no man can "tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth". If God alone has the right to punish, it is because He is beyond the ego; hatred means to arrogate to oneself the place of God, to forget one's human sharing of a common misery, to attribute to one's own "I" a kind of absoluteness, detaching it from that substance of which individuals are only so many contractions or knots. It is true that God sometimes delegates His right of punishment to man insofar as he rises above the "I", or must and can so rise; but to be the instrument of God is to be without hatred toward man. In hatred man forgets "original sin" and thereby burdens himself in a certain sense with the sin of the other; it is because we make God of ourselves whenever we hate that we must love our enemies. To hate another is to forget that God alone is perfect and that God alone is Judge. In good logic one can hate only "in God" and "for God"; we must hate our ego, not the "immortal soul", and hate him who hates God to the extent he hates God and not otherwise, which amounts to saying that we should hate his hatred of God and not his soul.

Likewise, when Christ says it is necessary to "hate father and mother", this means that it is necessary to reject whatever in them is "against God", that is, the attachment that serves as an obstacle in regard to "the one thing needful". Such "hatred" implies for those whom it concerns a virtual liberation and is thus, on the plane of eschatological realities, an act of love.

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“To take up the cross” is to keep oneself close to the existential cross: there is in Existence the pole “sin” and the pole “cross”, the blind launching into enjoyment and the conscious stopping, the “broad way” and the “narrow way”. “To take up the cross” is essentially not to “follow the crowd”; it is to “discern spirits”, to keep oneself incorruptible in the apparent nothingness that is the Truth. “To take up the cross” means therefore to endure this nothingness, this threshold of God; and since the world is pride, egoism, passion, and false knowledge, it means to be humble and charitable, to “die” and become “as a little child”. This nothingness is suffering to the extent we are pride and are thereby caused to suffer; the fire of purgatory is nothing else: it is our substance that burns, not because God wishes to hurt us, but because it is what it is—because it is “of this world” and in proportion to its being so.

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The cross is the divine fissure through which Mercy flows from the Infinite.

The center of the cross, where the two dimensions intersect, is the mystery of forsakenness: it is the “spiritual moment” when the soul loses itself, when it “is no more” and when it “is not yet”. Like the whole Passion of Christ, this cry is not only a mystery of grief in which man must share by renunciation, but also by contrast an “opening” that God alone can effect and did effect because He is God; and this is why “my yoke is easy, and my burden is light”. The victory that devolves upon man has already been won by Jesus; for man nothing remains but to open himself to this victory, which thus becomes his own.

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What is “abstraction” in the case of the logician becomes virtually corporeal in the case of the Word made flesh. The spear of the centurion Longinus has just pierced Christ’s side; a drop of divine blood flowing down the spear touches the man’s hand. At that moment the world collapses for him like a house of glass; the darkness of existence is torn away; his soul becomes like a weeping wound. He is as if drunk, but with a drunkenness that is cold and pure; all his life

is henceforth like an echo repeating a thousand times that single instant at the foot of the cross. He has just been reborn, not because he has “understood” the Truth, but because the Truth has seized him existentially and torn him with a “concrete” gesture from this world. The Word made flesh is the Truth that has in a way become matter, but by that very fact a matter transfigured and new-minted, a matter that is burning light, transforming and delivering.

IX

Art and Symbolism

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Traditional Art and Symbolism

Titus Burckhardt

Titus Burckhardt (1908-1984), for many years artistic director of the Urs Graf Publishing House, was noted for his work on traditional art and symbolism, as well as on metaphysical and cosmological themes. His books include *The Foundations of Christian Art, Chartres and the Birth of the Cathedral*, *The Foundations of Oriental Art and Symbolism*, *Fez: City of Islam*, and *Alchemy: Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul*.

The Seven Liberal Arts and the West Door of Chartres Cathedral*

According to the medieval theologians, the Virgin Mary, by virtue of the innate perfection of her soul, possessed all the wisdom of which man is capable. A direct reference to this wisdom is to be found in the allegories of the seven liberal arts which, just outside an inner circle of adoring angels, decorate the tympanum of the Door of the Virgin.** In the medieval context the seven sciences—which were classified as the *trivium* of grammar, logic, and rhetoric and the *quadrivium* of arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy—were not exclusively empirical sciences, as are those we know today. They were the expression of so many faculties of the soul, faculties demanding harmonious development. This is why they were also called arts.

* From *Chartres und die Geburt der Kathedrale* [Chartres and the Birth of the Gothic Cathedral] (Urs Graf Verlag, Olten Switzerland, 1962, 60-64.

** The Door of the Virgin is the right-hand of the three constituent doors of the Royal Door of the West Facade. On the tympanum of the central door is a portrayal of Christ in Majesty.

Following an ancient tradition, Dante, in his *Convivio*, compares the Seven Liberal Arts to the seven planets, grammar corresponding to the moon, logic to Mercury, rhetoric to Venus, arithmetic to the sun, music to Mars, geometry to Jupiter, and astronomy to Saturn. The creators of the Royal Door of Chartres were certainly aware of this correspondence. It is thus doubly significant that on the tympanum of the left of the three doors the signs of the zodiac are portrayed. These belong to the unchanging heaven of fixed stars and thus represent the kingdom of the Divine Spirit, to Whom this door, with its representation of the ascension of Christ, is dedicated. The seven planets, on the other hand, govern, according to the ancient viewpoint, the world of the soul. And Mary is the human soul in all its perfection.

By means of the signs of the zodiac—not all of which, incidentally, appear on the same door since Pisces and Gemini had to be transposed for want of room to the Door of the Virgin—the arches surrounding the representation of Christ's ascension (on the left-hand door) can be seen to represent the firmament. Beside each of the twelve signs of the zodiac the corresponding month is represented pictorially in the form of its natural activity. These natural activities—one for each month—are the terrestrial reflections of the twelve signs of the zodiac. From them one learns to what extent the course of human existence depends upon the heavens: in seedtime and harvest, in work and leisure; for the heavens, in their cycle, bring heat after cold, dry after wet, and thus keep life in being.

This is significant for medieval art: in two tympanums and in the arches surrounding them, the whole cosmos is represented in its three great divisions: spiritual, psychic, and corporeal. Medieval man always kept the profounder order of things in mind.

The order in which the Seven Liberal Arts are listed, when properly understood, testifies to a Pythagorean view of things, and this was not without influence on medieval art. The division of these sciences—and all their elements—into *trivium* and *quadrivium* came into Christian culture from Greek antiquity in a late and simplified form. The medieval spirit, however, was able to reanimate the integral vision originally inherent in it.

"Philosophy has two main instruments", writes Thierry of Chartres, "namely intellect (*intellectus*) and its expression. Intellect is illumined by the *quadrivium* (arithmetic, music,

geometry, and astronomy). Its expression is the concern of the *trivium* (grammar, logic, and rhetoric)."

In fact the *trivium* was a schooling both in language and in thought. It is language which makes man man; and this is why grammar comes at the beginning. Not without humor, the sculptor of the Door of the Virgin has portrayed this art as a woman threatening with a rod two young children who are writing. The figures of the famous grammarians Donat and Priscian stand beside her. Dialectic, whose feminine representation in Chartres carries a scorpion and has Aristotle as a companion, is none other than logic. Rhetoric is the art of speaking, or rather, speaking in so far as it is an art; Cicero accompanies its allegorical figure.

The four members of the *quadrivium* are likewise represented in a feminine form in Chartres. They are: arithmetic with a reckoning board; music with a glockenspiel; geometry with a drawing-board; and astronomy, contemplating the heavens and accompanied by Noethius, Pythagoras, Euclid, and Ptolemy. These four arts or sciences refer to the four conditions of corporeal existence: number, time, space, and motion. Music, of course, is not only concerned with time, but also with sound, but it is in the realm of sound that time manifests itself most immediately and characteristically; otherwise, we can grasp it only in movement, in which it is united with space.

"Everything proceeding from the profound nature of things", writes Boethius, the great transmitter of the *quadrivium*, "shows the influence of the law of number; for this is the highest prototype contained in the mind of the Founder. From this are derived the four elements, the succession of the seasons, the movement of the stars, and the course of the heavens."

It is a qualitative, and not a quantitative, conception of number that lies at the basis of medieval arithmetic. It is thus less a method of reckoning than a way of understanding the nature of number, its properties, and the uniqueness of numerical series obtained by certain constant relationships. That each individual number does not merely represent a sum of elements, but in itself is an expression of an essential unity, appears most clearly when one transposes each number into its corresponding geometrical form: three into an equilateral triangle, four into a

square, five into a regular pentagon, etc. In each of these figures innumerable relationships appear, which multifariously throw light on the inner law proper to the figure in question.

The connection between arithmetic, geometry, and music can be seen in that the relationship of musical notes to one another is made visible in the mutual relationship of the variously long strings which produce them. This can be easily demonstrated on a monochord, which has a single string and a movable bridge.

Following Greek tradition, Boethius distinguishes three kinds of proportions: the arithmetical, in which the same interval obtains between all members of the series, as, for example: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6…; the geometrical, which progresses by means of a constant multiplication (a : c = c : b); and the harmonic, which unites the preceding two, according to the formula a : c = a-b : b-c. This is the most perfect proportion: in music it is made manifest as harmony, and in geometry as the "golden section."

THE SEVEN LIBERAL ARTS

Trivium 'the expression of intellect'	Grammar *language*	–	Moon
	Dialectic *logic*	–	Mercury
	Rhetoric *speech as an art*	–	Venus
Quadrivium 'intellect'	Arithmetic *number*	–	Sun
	Music *time (harmony)*	–	Mars
	Geometry *space (proportion)*	–	Jupiter
	Astronomy *motion (rhythm)*	–	Saturn

The regular relationship of different movements to one another is rhythm. The day, the year, and the cycle of the moon are the great rhythms which measure all change, and in this regard astronomy, the last member of the *quadrivium*, is the science of cosmic rhythms.

Number, proportion, harmony, and rhythm are clear manifestations of unity in diversity and also clear indications of how to find the way back from diversity to unity. According to Boethius, the essence of things is intimately connected with unity: the more unity a thing possesses in itself, the more profoundly it participates in being.

In medieval science, it is less a question of knowing many things than of having a "whole" view of existence. Its method was anything but designed for the investigation of the material world and the furthering of technology. On the contrary: it possessed the means to open the spiritual eye to the beauty of mathematical proportions, and the spiritual ear to the music of the spheres.

The Void in Islamic Art

Strictly speaking, the forbidding of images in Islam refers only to images of the Divinity; it is thus situated in the perspective of the Decalogue, or more exactly of Abrahamic monotheism, which Islam renews: in its last as in its first manifestation, this monotheism is directly opposed to idolatrous polytheism;[281] the plastic image of the Divinity—according to a "dialectic" both historical and divine—is seen as the mark of the error of "associating" (*shirk*) the relative with the absolute, or the created with the uncreated, the latter, in each case, being reduced to the former. The denial of idols, and even more so their destruction, is a translation into concrete terms of the fundamental testimony of Islam, the formula *lā ilaha illā 'Llāh* ("there is no divinity apart from God"), and just as this testimony in Islam dominates and consumes everything, after the fashion of a purifying fire, so the denial of the idols, whether effective or merely virtual, tends to become generalized: thus the portraying of divine envoys (*rusul*), prophets (*anbiyā'*) and saints (*awliyā'*) is avoided, not only because such images could become the object of an idolatrous cult, but also out of respect for what is inimitable in them; they are the vicegerents of God on earth; it is through them that the theomorphic nature of man becomes manifest; but this

[281] It is not a pleonasm to speak of "idolatrous polytheism", as is shown by the example of Hinduism, which is polytheist but in no wise idolatrous, since it recognizes both the provisional and symbolic nature of the idols and the relativity of the "gods" (*devas*) as "aspects" of the Absolute. The Muslim esoterists, the Sufis, sometimes compare idols to Divine Names, whose meaning the pagans have forgotten.

theomorphism is a secret whose appearance in the corporeal world remains ungraspable; the inanimate and congealed image of the man-god would be merely a shell, an error, an idol. In an Arab Sunni context, there is even a reluctance to represent any living being whatsoever, out of respect for the divine secret contained in creation.[282] And if the prohibition of the image is not quite so far-reaching in other ethnic environments, it is none the less observed in the case of everything forming part of the liturgical framework of Islam: aniconism[283] to some extent becomes co-extensive with the sacred; it is even one of the bases, if not the basis, of the sacred art of Islam.

This may seem paradoxical, for the normal basis of a sacred art is symbolism; in a religion which elsewhere expresses itself in anthropomorphic symbols, the rejection of images seems to undermine the roots of any visual art of a sacred character. But it is necessary to take account of a complex play of subtle compensations and especially of the following: a sacred art is not necessarily composed of images, even in the widest sense of this term; it may simply be the exteriorization of a contemplative state, and in this case it will not reflect particular ideas, but will qualitatively transform the ambiance, with a view to its integration in a spiritual equilibrium whose center of gravity is the invisible. It is easy to recognize that such is the nature of Islamic art: its object is above all the ambiance of man—whence the dominant role of architecture—and its quality is essentially contemplative. Aniconism does not lessen this quality; on the contrary, by excluding every image that could invite man to fix his mind on something outside himself and to project his soul in an "individualizing" form, it creates a void. In this respect the function of Islamic art is analogous to that of virgin nature, of the desert especially, which likewise favors contemplation, although from another point of view the order created by art is opposed to the chaos inherent in the nature of the desert.

Let it be said at once that ornamentation with abstract forms, so richly developed in the art of Islam, does not exist to fill this void, as some seem to think; in reality it corroborates it by

[282] According to a saying of the Prophet, artists who seek to imitate the work of the Creator will be condemned in the hereafter, to give life to their works, and their inability to do so will throw them into the worst of torments. This saying can obviously be understood in various ways; in fact it has not prevented the flowering, in certain Moslem environments, of a figurative art entirely free from naturalistic pretensions.

[283] "Aniconism" can have a spiritually positive character, whereas "iconoclasm" has only a negative sense.

its continuous rhythm and its character of an endless piece of weaving: instead of ensnaring the mind and dragging it into some imaginary world, it dissolves mental “coagulations”, just as the contemplation of a stream of water, of a flame or of leaves trembling in the wind can detach the consciousness from its inward “idols”.

Islamic ornamentation knows two principal modes, that of the arabesque in the strict sense of the term, made up of sinuous and spiral forms more or less related to vegetable motifs, and that of geometrical interlacing. The first is all rhythm and fluidity and continuous melody, whereas the second is crystalline in nature: the radiating of lines from multiple geometrical foci recalls snowflakes or ice; it gives the impression of calm and freshness. It is in Maghribi art in particular that these two ornamental modes appear in all their purity.

However rich it may be, ornamentation never destroys the simplicity, not to say the sobriety of the architectural whole; such at least is the rule that is observed in all ages and milieu that are not decadent. In a general manner the architectural whole manifests equilibrium, calmness and serenity.

Whereas the interior of a Romanesque basilica progresses towards the altar, and the apse of a Gothic church tends upwards, the interior of a mosque does not comprise any dynamic element; whatever be its type of construction, from the primitive mosques with a horizontal roof on pillars to the Turkish mosques with cupolas, space is ordered in such a way that it reposes entirely in itself; it is not an expanse which waits to be traversed; its void is like the mould or womb of a motionless and undifferentiated plenitude.

Turkish architects such as Sinan, who took up the theme of construction of the Hagia Sophia in order to develop it in a typically Islamic way, sought a perfectly static and fully intelligible synthesis of the two great complementary forms: the hemisphere of the cupola and the cube of the building itself. They achieved this in various ways, which would take too long to describe here; it will suffice to mention an architectural detail characteristic of their conception of space. It is known that Byzantine cupolas—like Roman cupolas, moreover—are supported on pendentives which vaguely prolong their curve and merge “surreptitiously” with the four corners of the supporting walls. This somewhat irrational passage from the circular base of the cupola to

the square of the supports is something that Turkish architecture seeks to avoid; it replaces the pendentives by a clearly articulated element, which is called *muqarnas* in Arabic and which is often compared to stalactites, whereas it is really more in the nature of an alveola composed of niches which overlap into one another; by means of their geometrical play, the passage from the continuous and "fluid" form of the cupola to the rectangular and "solid" form of the supporting walls appears as a gradual crystallization: the cube of the building "coagulates" from out of the undifferentiated unity of the cupola, and since the latter always represents heaven, it is the continuous movement of the heavenly sphere which is suddenly immobilized in the plenitude of the pure present.

This architectural conception is typical of Islam; at the same time, it is very far removed from that of Greco-Roman architecture, which is always more or less anthropomorphic, in the sense that it invites the spectator to participate subjectively in the drama of the forces of construction; one may mention especially the classical column, made to the measure of man—and also the architrave, corbels, and cornices—which make one feel the weights and forces which they support; in Romanesque and Gothic architecture this drama is transposed to the spiritual plane: the clustered columns of a Gothic cathedral are as if animated by an irresistible impulse to ascend. There is nothing of all this in Muslim architecture, which remains objective.

This void which Islamic art creates by its static, impersonal, and anonymous quality enables man to be entirely himself, to repose in his ontological center where he is both the slave (*'abd*) of God and His representative (*khalīfah*) on earth. Certainly, the sacred image in its turn is a support for contemplation, wherever its use is called for by the nature of the doctrine,[284] and on condition that its symbolism and formal language are guaranteed by the tradition. But the religious art whose forms are anthropomorphic is of an eminently precarious nature because of the psychic tendencies, both individual and collective, which may all too easily gain access to it, and drag it into a naturalistic "evolution", with reactions that are well known. Islam deals with this problem at its very root by excluding from its liturgical framework any image of man. By this very fact it maintains in a certain fashion, and on a higher and spiritual plane, the position of

[284] As in Christianity, in which "God became man so that man might become God", according to the saying of St. Irenaeus.

the nomad, who is not involved in the turbulent evolution of a world composed of the mental projections of man and of his reactions towards these projections.

The aniconism of Islamic art comprises fundamentally two aspects; on the one hand, it preserves the primordial dignity of man, whose form, "made in the image of God",[285] is neither imitated nor usurped by a work of art that is inevitably limited and one-sided; on the other hand, nothing that could possibly be an idol, even in a relative and wholly provisional manner, may interpose itself between man and the invisible presence of God. What comes before all is the witnessing that there is "No divinity but God": this dissolves every objectivization of the Divine even before it can occur.

The Sacred Mask[286]

The mask is one of the most widespread and doubtless one of the most ancient modes of sacred art. It is to be found as much in the most elaborated of civilizations, such as those of India and Japan, as among the so-called primitive peoples. The only exception is that of the civilization attached to Semitic monotheism.[287] Indeed, the tenacity of their survival in the face of all modern thought proves indirectly their sacred origin.

For Christianity, as for Judaism and Islam, the ritual use of the mask can only be a form of idolatry. But in fact the mask is linked not with idolatry but with polytheism, if one

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[285] According to a saying of the Prophet, "God created Adam in His form" (*'alā sūratihi*). From the Islamic point of view, the "divine form" of Adam is essentially constituted by the seven universal faculties, which are likewise attributed to God, namely: life, knowledge, will, power, hearing, vision and speech; they are limited in man, but not in God.

[286] From *Mirror of the Intellect: Essays on Traditional Science and Sacred Art*, chapter 14.

[287] Although in fact the mask has been preserved in the folklore of Christian peoples as well as among certain Muslim peoples, especially among the Muslims of Java and Black Africa. The mask is also to be found among the Berbers of North Africa, where it has a carnivalesque character. The grotesque mask—of an "apotropeic" character and used above all in the solsticial masquerades—as well as the fairy mask, and even the heroic mask, are to be found among the Germanic peoples. The heroic mask also features in Spanish folklore.

understands by this term, not paganism, but a spiritual vision of the world that spontaneously personifies cosmic functions without ignoring the single and infinite nature of Supreme Reality.

This vision implies a conception of the "person" that is somewhat different from that familiar to us from monotheism. It derives from the expression *persona* itself. We know that in the ancient theater, derived from the sacred theater of the Mysteries, this word designated both the mask and the role.[288] Now the mask necessarily expresses, not an individuality—whose representation scarcely requires a mask—but a type, and hence a timeless reality, cosmic or divine. The "person" is thus identified with the function, and this in turn is one of the multiple masks of the Divinity, whose infinite nature remains impersonal.

There is a hierarchy of functions and thus of divine "persons"; but their very multiplicity means that no single one of them can be regarded as the unique and total mask of the infinite Divinity. The Divinity can clothe itself in one mask or another in order to reveal itself more directly to the worshipper; or alternatively the latter can choose one particular mask as his support and way of worship; he will always end by finding in it every celestial dignity, for each of the universal qualities essentially contains the others. This explains the apparently fluctuating character of the ancient pantheons.[289]

The essence of the universal qualities is one; this is what monotheism seeks to affirm when it proclaims the unicity of the divine "person". It is as if it made use of the idea of the person—the only idea that a polytheism that has become forgetful of the Absolute can still grasp—in order to affirm the unity of the Essence. On the other hand, monotheism had to make a distinction between the person and his various functions and qualities, a distinction that is indeed evident since it is similar to that which exists between the human subject and his faculties. Nonetheless it remains true that the personal divinity is always conceived by means of one or other of His qualities, which on the plane of manifestation are distinguishable and even sometimes mutually exclusive. They can never all reveal themselves at the same time, and where

[288] *Persona* has been derived from *personare*, "to sound through"—the mask being literally the mouthpiece of the cosmic Essence that is manifested through it—but according to Littré this etymology is doubtful for phonetic reasons. Even so it retains a certain value from the point of view of significant coincidences—which are by no means accidents—in the sense of the Hindu *nirukta*.

[289] We have in mind the fact that a subordinate god can sometimes "usurp" the highest role.

they coincide—in the undifferentiated plenitude of their common essence—one can no longer truly speak of a person, since this essence is beyond all distinctiveness, and thereby beyond the person. But the distinction between the personal God and the impersonal Essence pertains to the domain of esoterism, and thus rejoins the metaphysics that underlies traditional polytheism.[290] Be all that as it may, by denying the multiplicity of persons, monotheism also had to reject the ritual use of the mask.

But to return to the sacred mask as such: it is above all the means of a theophany; the individuality of its wearer is not simply effaced by the symbol assumed, but merges into it to the extent that it becomes the instrument of a superhuman "presence". For the ritual use of the mask goes far beyond mere figuration: it is as if the mask, in veiling the face or the outward ego of its wearer, at the same time unveiled a possibility latent within him. Man really becomes the symbol that he has put on, which presupposes both a certain plasticity of soul and a spiritual influence actualized by the form of the mask. In addition, a sacred mask is generally regarded as a real being; it is treated as if it were alive, and it is not put on until certain rites of purification have been performed.[291]

Moreover, man spontaneously identifies himself with the role that he plays, one that has been imposed on him by his origin, his destiny, and his social ambience. This role is a mask—most often a false mask in a world as artificial as our own, and in any case one that limits rather than liberates. The sacred mask, on the contrary, along with all that its wearing implies as regards gestures and words, suddenly offers one's "self-consciousness" a much vaster mold and thereby the possibility of realizing the "liquidity" of this consciousness and its capacity to espouse all forms without being any one of them.

Here we should make an observation: by "mask" we mean above all an artificial face that covers the face of its wearer. But in many cases—for example in the Chinese theater or among

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[290] In Muslim esoterism, for example, the multiple gods of the polytheists are often compared to divine names; paganism, or polytheism in the restrictive sense of the term, thus corresponds to a confusion between the "name" and the "named".

[291] The same is true for the making of masks among most of the African peoples: the sculptor of a sacred mask has to undergo a certain ascetic discipline. See Jean-Louis Bédouin, *Les Masques* (Paris: Les Presses Universitaires, 1961).

the North American Indians—a simple painting of the face has the same function and the same efficacy. Usually the mask is complemented by the dressing or ornamentation of the whole body. Furthermore, the ritual usage of the mask is mostly accompanied by sacred dancing, whose symbolic gestures and rhythm have the same purpose as the mask, namely the actualizing of a superhuman presence.

The sacred mask does not always suggest an angelic or divine presence: it can also be the support of an "asuric" or demonic presence, without this necessarily implying any deviation; for this presence, malefic in itself, can be tamed by a higher influence and captured with a view to expiation, as in certain lamaist rites. Also worthy of mention, as a well-known example, is the combat between the Barong and the sorceress Rangda in the sacred theater of Bali: the Barong, who has the form of a fantastic lion, and is commonly considered as the protective genius of the village, is in reality the solar lion, symbol of divine light, as is expressed by his golden ornaments; he has to confront the sorceress Rangda, personification of tenebrous forces. Both of these masks are supports for subtle influences that are communicated to all who participate in the drama; between the two a real combat develops. At a given moment, young men in a trance throw themselves upon the sorceress Rangda in order to stab her; but the magical power of the mask forces them to turn their *kris* [daggers] on themselves; finally the Barong repulses the sorceress Rangda. In reality she is a form of the goddess Kali, of the divine power envisaged in its destructive and transforming function, and it is by virtue of this implicitly divine nature of the mask that its wearer can assume it with impunity.

The grotesque mask exists at many different levels. It generally possesses an "apotropeic" power, for, in unveiling the true nature of certain evil influences, it puts them to flight. The mask "objectivizes" tendencies or forces whose danger is increased to the extent that they remain vague and unconscious; it reveals to them their own ugly and despicable face in order to disarm them.[292] Its effect is thus psychological, but it goes far beyond the plane of ordinary psychology since the very form of the mask and its quasi-magical efficacy depend on a science of the cosmic tendencies.

[292] The healing masks of the Iroquois—called "false faces"—are a well known and very typical example of the function in question; strangely enough, they recall certain popular masks of the Alpine countries.

The "apotropeic" mask has often been transposed to the sculptural decoration of temples. When its grotesque and terrifying character is conceived as an aspect of the divine destructive power, it is in its turn a divine mask. The Gorgoneion of archaic Greek temples must no doubt be interpreted in this way, and this is also the meaning of the *Kāla mukha*, the composite mask that adorns the topmost point of the niches in Hindu architecture.[293]

The sacred mask necessarily borrows its forms from nature, but it is never "naturalistic", since its purpose is to suggest a timeless cosmic type. It achieves this purpose either by emphasizing certain essential features or by combining different but analogous forms of nature, for example human and animal forms, or animal and geometrical forms. Its formal language is much less often addressed to the emotive sensibility than one might be tempted to think: the ritual masks of the Eskimos, for example, or of the Indians of the north-west coast of America, or of certain African tribes, are intelligible only to those who are familiar with all their symbolic references. The same can be said about the masks of the Hindu sacred theater: the mask of Krishna, as it is represented in southern India, is like an assemblage of metaphors.

As regards masks of animal form, the following may be said: the animal is in itself a mask of God; what looks at us from its face is less the individual than the genius of the species, the cosmic type, which corresponds to a divine function. One might also say that in the animal the different powers or elements of nature assume the form of a mask: water is "personified" in the fish, the air in the bird; in the buffalo or bison the earth manifests its generous and fertile aspect, and in the bear it shows its darker face. Now these powers of nature are divine functions.

Nevertheless, dances with masks of animal forms can have a practical purpose, namely that of conciliating the genius of the species hunted. This is a magical action, but one that can well be integrated with a spiritual vision of things. Since subtle links between man and his natural ambience exist, one can make use of them just as one makes use of physical conditions. What is important from the spiritual point of view is an awareness of the real hierarchy of things.

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[293] See A. K. Coomaraswamy, "*Svayamātrinnā: Janua Coeli*", in *Coomaraswamy, Vol. 1, Selected Papers: Traditional Art and Symbolism*, edited by Roger Lipsey, and also my book *Sacred Art in East and West*.

Certainly the ritual use of the mask can degenerate into magic pure and simple, but this happens much less frequently than is generally assumed.

Likewise the anthropomorphic masks of "ancestors" do not merely evoke an individual; they represent the cosmic type or function of which the ancestor was the human manifestation: in the case of peoples where the spiritual filiation coincides in practice with an ancestral descendence, the ancestor who is at the origin of this descendence necessarily assumes the role of solar hero, half-human, half-divine.

In a certain sense, the sun is the divine mask *par excellence*. For it is like a mask in front of the divine light, which would blind and consume earthly beings if it were unveiled. Now the lion is a solar animal, and the mask in the form of a lion's head is the image of the sun. This same mask is also to be found on fountains, and the jet of water that gushes from it symbolizes the life that comes from the sun.

Typical stylization of the human face is also to be found in the masks of *Nō*, the ritual theater of Japan, where the intention is both psychological and spiritual. Each type of mask manifests a certain tendency of the soul; it lays this tendency bare, showing what is either fatal or generous within it. Thus the play of the masks is the play of the *gunas*, the cosmic tendencies, within the soul.

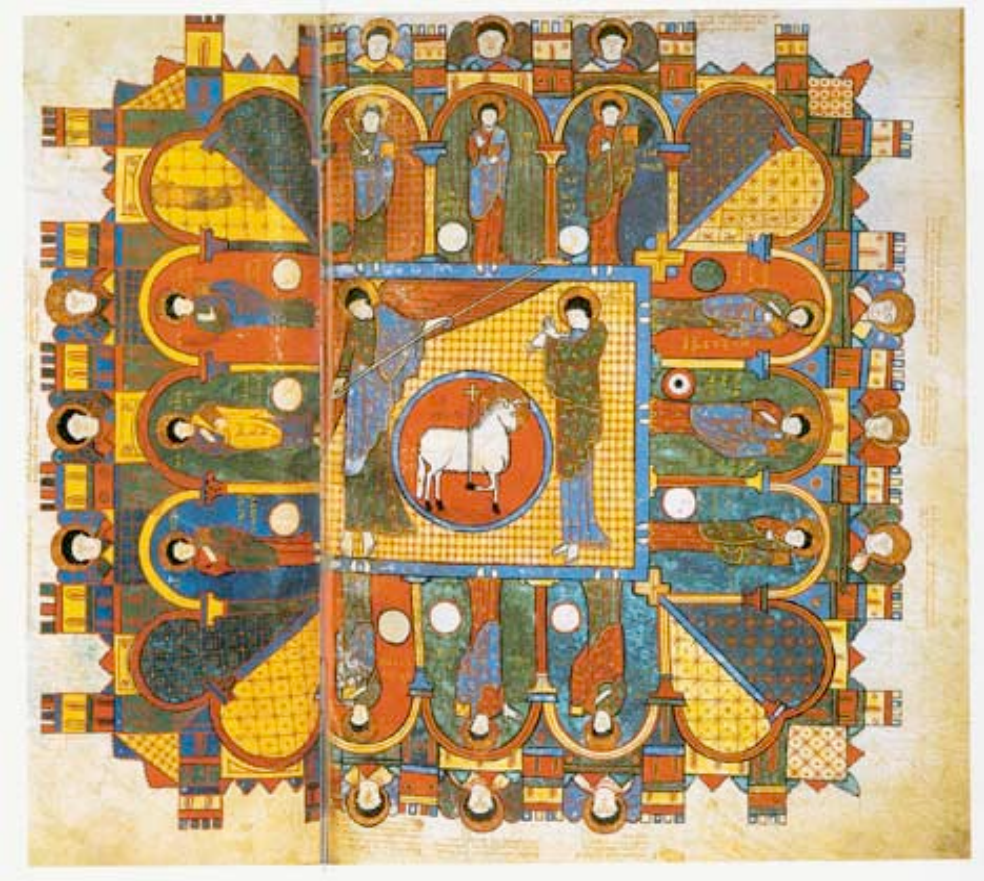
In *Nō*, the differentiation of types is obtained by extremely subtle methods; the more the expression of a mask is latent and immobile, the more it is living in its play: each gesture of the actor will make it speak; each movement, causing the light to glide over its features, will reveal a new aspect of the mask; it is like a sudden vision of a depth or of an abyss of the soul.

The Heavenly Jerusalem and the Paradise of Vaikuntha[294]

We reproduce a miniature of the Heavenly Jerusalem taken from a manuscript of the eleventh century, the so-called "Apocalypse of Saint-Sever",[295] which belongs to a certain group of

[294] *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Winter, 1970). © World Wisdom, Inc..

medieval manuscripts, mostly of Spanish origin and all stemming from a single prototype, a commentary on the Apocalypse written by the Asturian monk Beatus de Liébana towards the end of the eighth century. The same image of the Heavenly Jerusalem occurs in most of these manuscripts, with only slight variations, so that one can admit that its composition goes back to the prototype, which is now lost.



The Heavenly Jerusalem from the Apocalypse of Saint-Sever (11th century)

The artist made use of a kind of abstract perspective, familiar to medieval readers or spectators: he represented the heavenly city as if seen from above, with its walls projected on to the horizontal plane. In this way, he could figure the twelve gates facing the four cardinal points: east, north, west and south, according to the sacred text (XXI, 13). The same iconographical scheme shows clearly the square form of the city: "And the city lieth foursquare, and the length

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[295] Cod. Lat. 8878 of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, fol. 207 v-208. 11.

is as large as the breadth" (XXI, 16). The Heavenly Jerusalem is in fact the "squaring" of the heavenly cycle, its twelve gates corresponding to the twelve months of the year, as well as to the analogous divisions of the greater cycles, such as the precession of the equinoxes which, in the ancient world system, is the greatest of all the astronomical cycles and therefore the largest measure of time. The Apocalypse mentions "twelve thousand furlongs" as the measure of the city's circuit; this number corresponds to the "great year" of the Persians and is in fact an approximate measure for half the equinoxial cycle, namely for the time of the reversion of the equinoxes (12960 years). Upon the walls of the heavenly city are seen twelve angels, who are the guardians of the gates (XXI, 12), and under each gate is figured one of the twelve apostles, whose names are written on the city's foundations (XXI, 14). Under the gates are also figured twelve circles or spheres with inscriptions referring to the twelve precious stones garnishing the foundations of the wall (XXI, 9). In older manuscripts of the same group, however, these circles clearly represent the pearls of which the gates are made: "And the twelve gates were pearls: every several gate was of one pearl" (XXI, 21).

In the midst of the city the divine Lamb is standing; on his right we see the Evangelist, and on his left the Angel with the golden reed measuring the city (XXI, 15).

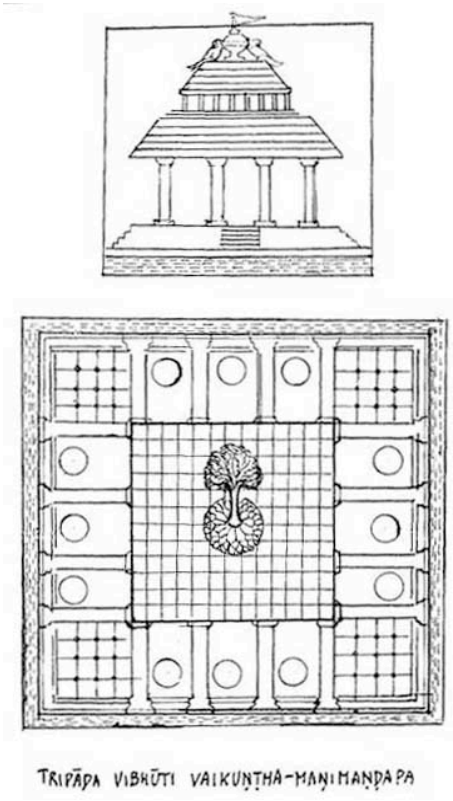
For the medieval spectator it would have been clear that the city was in fact not only a square but a cube: "The length and the breadth and the height of it are equal" (XXI, 16). The heavenly Jerusalem is really a crystal, not only because of its transparent, incorruptible and luminous substance but also because of its crystalline form. It is the "crystallization", in the eternal present, of all the positive and essentially indestructible aspects of the temporal or changing world.

* * *

This miniature of the Heavenly Jerusalem was published in a book dealing with the symbolism of the cathedral,[296] which prompted a reader in India to send the here inserted drawing of the *mandala* of the Paradise of *Vaikuntha,* the celestial abode of *Vishnu,* together with a translation

[296] Titus Burckhardt, *Chartres und die Geburt der Kathedrale*, Olten 1962.

of the corresponding passages of the *Skanda Purana.*[297] The resemblance of the *mandala* with our miniature of the heavenly city is indeed surprising; it is even more complete if one compares the corresponding scriptural texts.



Tripāda Vibhūti Vaikuṇṭha-Maṇimaṇḍapa

Like the Heavenly Jerusalem, the divine abode of *Vaikuntha* has twelve gates facing the four cardinal points. The *mandala* shows these in exactly the same manner as our miniature. There is one feature, however, which seems to mark an essential difference between the two images, namely the Tree of Life pictured in the center of the *Vaikuntha-mandala,* whereas the center of the Heavenly Jerusalem is the Lamb. But this difference is due to an iconographical economy only; it veils an even deeper analogy, for the Apocalypse mentions also the Tree of Life in the center of the divine city: "In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month" (XXII, 2).

[297] For this documentation we are indebted to Miss Alice Boner, Benares, the author of important studies on Hindu sculpture and architecture; cf. *Principles of Composition in Hindu Sculpture,* Leiden 1962, dealing with the geometrical patterns (*yantras*) underlying the Hindu sculptures of the cave period, and *Silpa Prakāśa,* a manual of Hindu architecture, translated by Alice Boner and Sadāśiva Rath Śarmā, Leiden 1966.

The central field of the *Vaikuntha-mandala* is divided into small squares; there should be 12 x 12 = 144 compartments according to the *Purana;* our drawing has 13 X 12, probably by mistake. The same division into 12 x 12—and sometimes 13 x 12—squares marks the central field of the celestial city in some of the older manuscripts of the Beatus-group.[298] The number 144 is mentioned in the Apocalypse as the measure of the city's wall (XXI, 17); its nature is solar and cyclical, 144 X 180 = 25920, being the number of years contained in the complete cycle of the equinoxes.

The four corners of the *Vaikuntha-mandala* represent secondary shrines; they are divided into 16 compartments each, which makes 64 altogether, the number of cosmic perfection. This is also the number of squares in the chequer, the *astapāda,* which is *a mandala* of the cosmos in the form of a battlefield of the *devas* and *asūras*.[299]

Like the gates of the Heavenly Jerusalem in our miniatures, the gates of *Vaikuntha* are adorned with twelve circles; they probably indicate the twelve guardians or *Pratiharinīs*, who embody twelve spiritual or divine qualities; these in a way correspond to the twelve angels of the Heavenly Jerusalem as well as to the twelve precious stones, the nature of which is incorruptibility and luminosity. It is the windows of the upper story of *Vaikuntha* that are made of pearls.

Both the Heavenly Jerusalem and the sacrificial hall (*mandapa*) of *Vaikuntha* are said to be built of crystal and gold, precious stones and pearls. Both are self-luminous: "In this self-luminous, brilliant sanctuary no sun is shining, no moon and no stars", says the *Purana,* and the Apocalypse: "And this city has no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof" (XXI, 23).

On the top of the roof of *Vaikuntha* is a golden pitcher filled with the Milk of Immortality. It has no direct analogy in the Heavenly Jerusalem; but it clearly reminds one of the

[298] Cf. Ms. of San Isidoro in Le6n, National Library Madrid, B. 31.

[299] See "The Symbolism of Chess", by Titus Burckhardt, *Studies in Comparative Religion* (Spring 1969).

symbolism of the Graal; incidentally, we may observe that the sanctuary of the Holy Graal, as described in "Titurel", is directly related to the Heavenly Jerusalem and its cyclical implications.

We now reproduce the extract from the *Skanda Purāna* (*Utkala Khanda,* Ch. 48, *Suta Samhita* and *Kapila Samhita*) and beside it the analogous passages of the Apocalypse.

Tripāda Vibhūti Vaikuṇṭha-Maṇimaṇdapa	***Apocalypse***
Behold the Temple of Gems standing on the White Island surrounded by the Ocean of Milk. In the midst of the Milk-Ocean the Sacrificial Hall is made of precious stones. It is built of pure crystal and is unshakable.	And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, Having the Glory of God: and her light was like unto a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone, clear as crystal (XXI, 10, 11).
The interior of the Temple is in twelve by twelve parts and is shining with the fiery brilliance of the Sun.	And he measured the wall thereof, an hundred and forty and four cubits (XXI, 17).
It is resting on sixteen pillars made of emeralds and has twelve portals towards the four directions of space.	And had a wall great and high, and had twelve gates... On the east three gates; on the north three gates; on the south three gates; and on the west three gates (XXXI, 12, 13).
Deathlessness (*amrta*), Bliss (*ānanda*), Growth or Increase (*pusti*), Happiness *(tuṣṭī),* Prosperity (*pusā*), Delight (*rati*), Steadfastness *(dhriti),* Moon-like Luster (*śaśini*), Illumination (*candrikā*), Splendor (*kânti*), Heavenly Light (*jyoti*), Fortune (*śrī*), these are the twelve guardians of the portals. These *Pratiharinīs,* who are guarding the portals, are all very young and beautiful.	And at the gates twelve angels, and names written thereon, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel (XXI, 12). And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and in them the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb (XXI, 14). And the foundations of the wall of the city were garnished with all manner of precious stones. The first foundation was jasper; the second, sapphire; the third, a chalcedony; the fourth, an emerald; the fifth, sardonyx; the sixth, sardius; the seventh, chrysolyte; the eighth, beryl; the ninth, a topaz; the tenth, a chrysoprasus; the eleventh, a jacinth; the twelfth, an amethyst (XXI, 19, 20).
The walls of the secondary shrines in the four corners are made of rubies and have perforated windows with sixteen openings. These are sixteen parts *(kalās),* by adding which the full number of 64 *kalās* is obtained.	
The beautiful sacrificial Hall is emitting a light equal to	And there shall be no night there; and they need no

a crore of Suns, and that light will endure to the end of all the *kalpas*.	candle, neither light of sun; for the Lord God giveth them light: and they shall reign for ever and ever (XXII, 5).
In the center of the Hall there is the stainless Tree (of Life) arising from the shining, hundred-petaled lotus.	And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations (XXII, 1, 2).
Its roof has two stories and is covered with golden tiles. Between the stories there is a perforated wall made of pearls. On the top of the roof is a beautiful *kalaśa,* a golden pitcher filled with the Milk of Immortality. The flagstaff is made of coral, and the flag is motionless. Two divine birds are sitting by the side of the *kalaśa* in perfect silence.	
In this self-luminous, brilliant sanctuary no sun is shining, no moon and no stars. This is the abode of *Nārāyana,* who is beyond the changeable world and beyond the unchangeable. I worship this *Puruṣottama,* who in all the three worlds is the most difficult to approach.	And this city has no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof (XXI, 23.)

The Symbolism of Chess*

It is known that the game of chess originated in India. It was passed on to the medieval West through the intermediary of the Persians and the Arabs, a fact to which we owe, for example, the expression "check-mate" (German: *Schachmatt*), which is derived from the Persian *shah*: "king" and the Arabic *mat*: "he is dead". At the time of the Renaissance some of the rules of the game were changed: the "queen"[300] and the two "bishops"[301] were given a greater mobility, and

* *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 3, No. 2. (Spring 1969) © World Wisdom, Inc.

[300] In Oriental chess this piece is not a "queen" but a "counsellor" or "minister" to the king (in Arabic *mudaffir or wazir,* in Persian *fersan* or *fars*). The designation "queen" in the Western game is doubtless due to a confusion of the Persian term *fersan*, which became *alferga* in Castillian, and the old French *fierce* or *fierge* for "virgin". Be that as it may, the attribution of such a dominant rôle to the king's "lady" corresponds well with the mentality of chivalry. It is significant also that the game of chess was passed on to the West by that Arab-Persian current, which also brought with it heraldic art and the principal rules of chivalry.

thenceforth the game acquired a more abstract and mathematical character; it departed from its concrete model strategy, without however losing the essential features of its symbolism. In the original position of the chessmen, the ancient strategic model remains obvious; one can recognize the two armies ranged according to the battle order which was customary in the ancient East: the light troops, represented by the pawns, form the first line ; the bulk of the army consists of the heavy troops, the war chariots ("castles"), the knights ("cavalry"), and the war elephants ("bishops"); the "king" with his "lady" or "counsellor" is positioned at the centre of his troops.

The form of the chess-board corresponds to the "classical" type of *Vāstu-mandala*, the diagram which also constitutes the basic layout of a temple or a city. It has been pointed out[302] that this diagram symbolizes existence conceived as a "field of action" of the divine powers. The combat which takes place in the game of chess thus represents, in its most universal meaning, the combat of the *devas* with the *asuras,* of the "gods" with the "titans", or of the "angels"[303] with the "demons", all other meanings of the game deriving from this one.

The most ancient description of the game of chess which we possess appears in "The Golden Prairies" by the Arab historian al-Masʿūdī, who lived in Bagdad in the 9th century. Al-Masʿūdī attributes the invention—or codification—of the game to a Hindu king "Balhit", a descendant of "Barahman". There is an obvious confusion here between a caste, that of the Brahmins, and a dynasty; but that the game of chess has a brahmanic origin is proved by the eminently sacerdotal character of the diagram of 8 x 8 squares (*ashtāpada*). Further, the warlike symbolism of the game relates it to the *Kshatriyas*, the caste of princes and nobles, as al-Masʿūdī indicates when he writes that the Hindus considered the game of chess (*shatranj,* from the

[301] This piece was originally an elephant (Arabic: *al-fil*), which bore a fortified tower. The schematic representation of an elephant's head in some medieval manuscripts could be taken either for a "fool's cap" or a bishop's mitre: in French the piece is called *fou*, "fool"; in German it is called *Läufer*, "runner".

[302] See the author's *Sacred Art in East and West* (Perennial Books, London, 1967), Chapter I, "The Genesis of the Hindu Temple".

[303] The *devas* of Hindu mythology are analogous to the angels of the monotheistic traditions; it is known that each angel corresponds to a divine function.

Sanscrit *Chaturanga*)[304] as a "school of government and defence". King Balhit is said to have composed a book on the game, of which "he made a sort of allegory of the heavenly bodies, such as the planets and the twelve signs of the Zodiac, consecrating each piece to a star." It may be recalled that the Hindus recognize eight planets: the sun, the moon, the five planets visible to the naked eye, and *Rāhu,* the "dark star" of the eclipses[305]; each of these "planets" rules one of the eight directions of space. "The Indians", continues al- Mas'ūdī, "give a mysterious meaning to the redoubling, that is to say to the geometrical progression, effected on the squares of the chess-board; they establish a relationship between the first cause, which dominates all the spheres and in which everything finds its end, and the sum of the squares of the chess-board." Here the author is probably confusing the cyclical symbolism implied in the *ashteipada* and the famous legend according to which the inventor of the game asked the monarch to fill the squares of his chess-board with grains of corn, by placing one grain on the first, two on the following, four on the third, and so on up to the sixty-fourth square, which gives the sum of 18,446,744,973,709,551,661 grains. The cyclical symbolism of the chess-board resides in the fact that it expresses the unfolding of space according to the quaternary and octonary of the principal directions (4 x 4 x 4 = 8 x 8), and that it synthesizes, in crystalline form, the two great complementary cycles of sun and moon: the duodenary of the zodiac and the 28 lunar mansions; furthermore, the number 64, the sum of the squares on the chess-board, is a submultiple of the fundamental cyclic number 25,920, which measures the precession of the equinoxes. We have seen that each phase of a cycle, "fixed" in the scheme of 8 x 8 squares, is ruled by a heavenly body and at the same time symbolizes a divine aspect, personified by a *deva*.[306] It is thus that this *mandala* symbolizes at one and the same time the visible cosmos, the world of the Spirit, and the

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[304] The word *chaturanga* signifies the traditional Hindu army, composed of four *angas* = elephants, horses, chariots, and soldiers.

[305] Hindu cosmology always takes account of the principle of inversion and exception, which results from the "ambiguous" character of manifestation: the nature of stars is luminosity, but as the stars are not Light itself, there must also be a dark one.

[306] Certain Buddhist texts describe the universe as a board of 8 x 8 squares, fixed by golden cords; these squares correspond to the 64 *kalpas* of Buddhism (Cf. *Saddharma Pundarika,* Burnouf, *Lotus de la bonne Loi,* p. 148). In the *Ramayana,* the impregnable of the gods, *Ayodhya*, is described as a square with eight compartments on each side. We also recall, in the Chinese tradition, the 64 signs which derive from the 8 trigrams commented on in the I-Ching. These 64 signs are generally arranged so as to correspond to the eight regions of space. Thus we again encounter the idea of a quaternary and octonary division of space, which resumes all the aspects of the universe.

Divinity in its multiple aspects. Al-Mas'ūdī is therefore right to say that the Indians explain, "by calculations based on the chess-board, the march of time and the cycles, the superior influences which are exerted on this world, and the bonds which attach them to the human soul."

The cyclical symbolism of the chess-board was known to King Alphonsus the Wise, the famous troubadour of Castille, who in 1283 composed his *Libros de Acedrex*, a work which draws largely from Oriental sources.[307] Alphonsus the Wise also describes a very ancient variant of the game of chess, the "game of the four seasons", which takes place between four partners, so that the pieces, placed in the four corners of the chess-board, move in a rotatory direction, analogous to the movement of the sun. The 4 X 8 pieces must have the colours green, red, black, and white; they correspond to the four seasons: spring, summer, autumn, and winter; to the four elements: air, fire, earth, and water, and to the four organic "humours". The movement of the four camps symbolizes cyclical transformation.[308] This game, which strangely resembles certain "solar" rites and dances of the Indians of North America, brings into relief the fundamental principle of the chess-board.

The chess-board can be considered as the extension of a diagram formed by four squares, alternatively black and white, and constitutes in itself a *mandala* of Shiva, God in his aspect of transformer: the quaternary rhythm, of which this *mandala* is, as it were, the spatial "coagulation", expresses the principle of time. The four squares, placed around an unmanifested centre, symbolize the cardinal phases of every cycle. The alternation of the black and white squares in this elementary diagram of the chess-board[309] brings out its cyclical significance[310]

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[307] In 1254 St. Louis had forbidden chess to his subjects. The saint had in mind the passions which the game could unleash, especially as it was frequently combined with the use of dice.

[308] This variant of chess is described in the *Bhawisya Purana*. Alphonsus the Wise also speaks of a "great game of chess" which is played on a board of 12 x 12 squares and of which the pieces represent mythological animals; he attributes it to the sages of India.

[309] Given that the Chinese chess-board, which likewise had its origin in India, does not possess the alternation of the two colours, it is to be assumed that this element comes from Persia; it nevertheless remains faithful to the original symbolism of the chess-board.

[310] It also makes of it a symbol of inverse analogy; spring and autumn, morning and evening are inversely analogous. In a general manner the alternation of black and white corresponds to the rhythm of day and night, of life

and makes of it the rectangular equivalent of the Far-Eastern symbol of *yin yang.* It is an image of the world in its fundamental dualism.[311]

If the world of the senses in its integral development results to some extent from the multiplication of qualities inherent in space and time, the *Vāstu-mandala* for its part derives from the division of time by space: one may recall the genesis of the *Vāstu-mandala* from the never-ending celestial cycle, this cycle being divided by the cardinal axes, then "crystallized" in a rectangular form.[312] The *mandala* is thus the inverted reflection of the principial synthesis of space and time, and it is in this that its ontological significance resides.

From another point of view, the world is "woven" from the three fundamental qualities or *gunas*,[313] and the *mandala* represents this weaving in a schematic manner, in conformity with the cardinal directions of space. The analogy between the *Vāstu-mandala* and weaving is brought out by the alternation of colours, which recalls a woven fabric of which the warp and the woof are alternately apparent or hidden.

Moreover, the alternation of black and white corresponds to the two aspects of the *mandala*, which are complementary in principle but opposed in practice: the *mandala is* on the one hand a *Purusha-mandala*, that is to say a symbol of the Universal Spirit (*Purusha*) inasmuch as it is an immutable and transcendent synthesis of the cosmos; on the other hand it is a symbol of existence (*Vāstu*) considered as the passive support of divine manifestations. The geometric quality of the symbol expresses the Spirit, while its purely quantitative extension expresses existence. Likewise its ideal immutability is "spirit" and its limiting coagulation is "existence" or *materia*; here it is not *materia prima*, virgin and generous, which is being referred to, but *materia secunda*, "dark" and chaotic, which is the root of existential dualism. In this connection one may

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and death, of manifestation and of reabsorption in the unmanifest.

[311] For this reason the type of *Vastu-mandala* which has an uneven number of squares could not serve as a chess-board: the "battlefield" which the latter represents cannot have a manifested centre, for symbolically it had to be beyond oppositions.

[312] See *Sacred Art of East and West,* Chapter 2, "The Foundations of Christian Art".

[313] Cf. René Guénon, *The Symbolism of the Cross* (Luzac, London, 1958).

recall the myth according to which the *Vāstu-mandala* represents an *asūra*, personification of brute existence: the *devas* have conquered this demon and have established their "dwelling-places" on the stretched-out body of their victim; thus they confer their "form" upon him, but it is he who manifests them.[314]

This double meaning which characterizes the *Vātstu-Purusha-mandala*, and which, moreover, is to be found in every symbol, is in a sense actualized by the combat which a game of chess represents. This combat, as we have said, is essentially that of the *devas* and the *asūras*, who dispute the chess-board of the world. It is here that the symbolism of black and white, already present in the squares of the chess-board, takes on its full value: the white army is that of Light, the black army that of darkness. In a relative domain, the battle which takes place on the chess-board represents, either that of two terrestrial armies each of which is fighting in the name of a principle,[315] or that of the spirit and of darkness in man; these are the two forms of the "holy war"; the "lesser holy war" and the "greater holy war", according to a saying of the Prophet Muhammad. One will see the relationship of the symbolism implied in the game of chess with the theme of the *Bhagavad Gita*, a book which is likewise addressed to *Kshatriyas*.

If the significance of the different chessmen is transposed into the spiritual domain, the king becomes the heart, or spirit, and the other pieces the various faculties of the soul. Their movements, moreover, correspond to different ways of realizing the cosmic possibilities represented by the chess-board: there is the axial movement of the "castles" or war chariots, the diagonal movement of the "bishops" or elephants, which follow a single colour, and the complex movement of the knights. The axial movement, which "cuts" through the different "colours", is logical and virile, while the diagonal movement corresponds to an "existential"—and therefore feminine—continuity. The jump of the knights corresponds to intuition.

[314] The *mandala* of 8 x 8 squares is also called *Manduka*, "the frog" by allusion to the "Great Frog" (*maha-manduka*), which supports the whole universe and which is the symbol of obscure and undifferentiated *materia*.

[315] In a holy war it is possible that each of the combatants may legitimately consider himself as the protagonist of Light fighting the darkness. This again is a consequence of the double meaning of every symbol: what for one is the expression of the Spirit may be the image of "dark" "matter" in the other's eyes.

What most fascinates the man of noble and warlike caste is the relationship between will and destiny. Now it is just this that is so clearly illustrated by the game of chess, inasmuch as its moves always remain intelligible without being limited in their variation. Alphonsus the Wise, in his book on chess, relates how a king of India wished to know whether the world obeyed intelligence or chance. Two wise men, his advisers, gave opposing answers, and to prove their respective theses, one of them took as his example the game of chess in which intelligence prevails over chance, while the other produced dice, the symbol of fatality.[316]

Al-Mas'ūdī writes likewise that the king "Balhit", who is said to have codified the game of chess, gave it preference over *nerd*, a game of chance, because in the former intelligence always has the upper hand over ignorance. At each stage of the game, the player is free to choose between several possibilities, but each movement will entail a series of unavoidable consequences, so that necessity increasingly limits free choice, the end of the game being seen, not as the fruit of hazard, but as the result of rigorous laws.

It is here that we see not only the relationship between will and fate, but likewise between liberty and knowledge; except in the case of inadvertence on the part of his opponent, the player will only safeguard his liberty of action when his decisions correspond with the nature of the game, that is to say with the possibilities that the game implies. In other words, freedom of action is here in complete solidarity with foresight and knowledge of the possibilities; contrariwise, blind impulse, however free and spontaneous it may appear at first sight, is revealed in the final outcome as a non-liberty.

The "royal art" is to govern the world—outward and inward—in conformity with its own laws. This art presupposes wisdom, which is the knowledge of possibilities; now all possibilities are contained, in a synthetic manner, in the universal and divine Spirit. True wisdom is a more or less perfect identification with the Spirit (*Purusha*), this latter being symbolized by the geometrical quality[317] of the chess-board, "seal" of the essential unity of the cosmic possibilities.

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[316] The *mandala* of the chess-board, on the one hand, and dice, on the other, represent two different and complementary symbols of the cosmos.

[317] We may recall that the Spirit or the Word is the "form of forms", that is to say the formal principle of the universe.

The Spirit is Truth; through Truth, man is free; outside truth, he is the slave of fate. That is the teaching of the game of chess; the *Kshatriya* who gives himself over to it not only finds in it a pastime or a means of sublimating his warlike passion and his need for adventure, but also, according to his intellectual capacity, a speculative support, and a "way" which leads from action to contemplation.

23

The Question of Forms in Art

Frithjof Schuon

It may be surprising that we would treat a subject that seems to have only a secondary importance, but in fact the question of forms in art is by no means a negligible one.

Before proceeding, a few words of explanation are called for concerning our terminology. In speaking of "forms in art" and not merely "forms" in general, our purpose is to make it clear that we are not dealing with something "abstract" but on the contrary with things that are physically sensible; if on the other hand we avoid speaking of "artistic forms", it is because in current usage the adjective connotes the idea of luxury and thus superfluity, and this is diametrically opposed to what we have in mind. In the sense we intend, the expression "forms in art" is actually a pleonasm, for it is not possible—traditionally speaking—to dissociate form from art since art is the very principle of the manifestation of form; we have nonetheless been obliged to make use of this pleonasm for the reasons just given.

If the importance of forms is to be grasped, the first thing one must understand is that at the level of symbolism a sensible form corresponds most directly to the Intellect,[318] and this is because of the inverse analogy connecting the principial and manifested orders; hence the highest realities are most clearly manifested in their most distant reflections, that is, in the sensible or material order; here can be found the deepest meaning of the saying "extremes meet". And it is for the same reason, let us add, that Revelation descends into the bodies and not only the souls of the Prophets, a fact presupposing the physical perfection of those bodies.[319] Sensible forms thus correspond more exactly to intellections; this is why traditional art has specific rules which are meant to apply cosmic laws and universal principles to the domain of forms and which, beneath their more general outward aspect, reveal the style of the civilization in question, a style that in turn makes the form of intellectuality of this civilization explicit. When art ceases

[318] According to Saint Thomas Aquinas, "Art is associated with knowledge."

[319] Speaking of the *laylat al-qadr*—the night of the "descent" (*tanzīl*) of the Koran—René Guénon observes, "This night, according to Muhyi al-Din Ibn Arabi's commentary, is identified with the actual body of the Prophet. What is particularly important to note is the fact that the revelation is received not in the mind but in the body of the being who is commissioned to express the Principle: 'And the Word was made flesh,' says the Gospel ('flesh' and not 'mind'), and this is a very precise mode of expression—in the form proper to the Christian tradition—for the reality represented by the *laylat al-qadr* in the Islamic tradition" ("The Two Nights", *Études traditionnelles*, April-May, 1939). This truth is closely bound up with the relationship already mentioned between forms and intellections.

to be traditional and becomes merely human, individual, and therefore arbitrary, this is infallibly the sign—and secondarily the cause—of an intellectual decline; from the point of view of those who are skilled in the "discernment of spirits" and who can look upon such phenomena with an unprejudiced eye, this decline can be seen in the more or less incoherent and spiritually insignificant—we would go even as far as to say unintelligible—character of the forms in question.[320]

In order to forestall a possible objection, we readily acknowledge the fact that in civilizations which are intellectually sound—the Christian civilization of the Middle Ages, to take just one example—spirituality is often expressed by an indifference to forms and sometimes even by a tendency to turn away from them, as is shown by the example of Saint Bernard, who proscribed images in the monasteries; it is important to emphasize, however, that this indifference no more signifies an acceptance of ugliness and barbarism than does poverty imply the possession of many things that are base. Be that as it may, in a world such as our own where traditional art is dead—where form itself has been invaded by everything contrary to spirituality and where nearly every formal expression seems corrupted at its very roots—the traditional regularity of forms assumes a very special spiritual importance which it could not have possessed in the beginning, for the absence of the spirit in forms of art was at that point something nonexistent and inconceivable.

What we have said concerning the intellectual quality of sensible forms must not cause us to overlook the fact that the further back one goes toward the origins of a given religious tradition, the less those forms appear in a state of full development; as already noted, the pseudo-form—that is, the arbitrary form—is always ruled out, but it is possible for form as such to be lacking, or at least nearly so and in certain more or less peripheral domains. On the other hand

[320] We have in mind the decadence of certain branches of religious art during the Gothic period, especially toward its end, and of Western art as a whole from the Renaissance onward. Formerly sacred, symbolical, and spiritual, Christian art—including architecture, sculpture, painting, and liturgical goldsmithery—gave way before the invasion of a neo-antique and naturalistic, individualistic, and sentimental art; this art, which contained absolutely nothing "miraculous"—whatever those who believe in the "Greek miracle" may care to think—is quite unsuited for the transmission of intellectual intuitions, answering instead only to collective psychic aspirations; it is thus completely opposed to intellectual contemplation and takes into consideration sentimentality alone, which itself becomes degraded insofar as it reflects nothing more than the needs of the masses and ends up in a sickly sweet and pathetic vulgarity. It is strange that no one seems to have understood to what a degree this barbarism of forms, which reached a zenith of empty and miserable boastfulness in the period of Louis XV, contributed, and still contributes, toward driving many souls—and by no means the least—from the Church; they feel suffocated in surroundings that do not allow their intelligence room to breathe. Let us note in passing that the historical connection between the new Saint Peter's in Rome—in a Renaissance style and therefore anti-spiritual and ostentatious, or simply "human" if one prefers—and the origin of the Reformation is unfortunately very far from fortuitous.

the nearer one draws toward the end of the traditional cycle in question, the greater the importance of formalism[321]—even from what is called an "artistic" standpoint—for by then the forms have become virtually indispensable channels for actualizing the spiritual deposit of the tradition. In any case the absence of a formal element is in no way equivalent to the presence of the unformed, nor conversely; the unformed and barbarous can never attain to the majestic beauty of the void, whatever those with an interest in passing off a deficiency as a superiority may wish to believe.[322] This law of compensation, by virtue of which certain relationships become gradually inverted during the course of a traditional cycle, can be applied in all spheres. We may quote for example the following *hadīth* of the Prophet Muhammad: "In the beginning of Islam he who omits a tenth of the Law is damned, but in the latter days he who shall accomplish a tenth thereof will be saved."

The analogical relationship between intellections and material forms explains how it was possible for esoterism to be grafted onto the practice of the crafts, especially architecture; the cathedrals left behind by Christian initiates offer the most explicit as well as the most dazzling proof of the spiritual exaltation of the Middle Ages.[323] It should be noted that we are touching here on a most important aspect of the question before us: the effect which esoterism can have on exoterism through the medium of sensible forms, whose production is the prerogative of an artisanal initiation. Such forms can serve as true vehicles of an integral traditional doctrine, translating this doctrine—because of their symbolism—into a language that is at once immediate and universal. By making use of these forms esoterism is able to infuse an intellectual quality into the properly exoteric part of a religious tradition and in this way to ensure equilibrium; without this equilibrium, the whole civilization will eventually dissolve, which is precisely what happened in the Christian world. The abandonment of sacred art deprived esoterism of its most direct means of action while the outward tradition insisted more and more on its own particularity, hence its own limitation; in the end the absence of the current of universality,

[321] This is ignored by certain pseudo-Hindu movements, whether of Indian origin or not, which abandon the sacred forms of Hinduism while believing themselves to represent its purest essence; in reality it is useless to give a man a spiritual method without having first of all forged in him a mentality in harmony with this method, a prerequisite quite apart from an obligatory attachment to an initiatic line; spiritual realization is inconceivable outside the appropriate psychic climate, one which conforms to the traditional surroundings of the method in question.

[322] It has sometimes been claimed that Christianity, since it stands above forms, cannot be identified with any particular civilization; we understand completely why one would seek consolation for the loss of Christian civilization—including its art—but this opinion is nonetheless inexcusable.

[323] When standing before a medieval cathedral, a person truly feels that he is located at the center of the world; standing before a church of the Renaissance, Baroque, or Rococo periods, he merely feels himself to be in Europe.

which had previously quickened and stabilized the religious civilization through the language of forms, brought about reactions of a contrary sort. Formal limitations, instead of being compensated and thereby stabilized by means of the supra-formal interventions of esoterism, gave rise through their very opacity or massiveness to infra-formal negations, these negations resulting in turn from an individual arbitrariness, which—far from being a form of the truth—is merely a formless chaos of opinions and whims.

Returning to our initial idea, we would add that the Beauty of God corresponds to a deeper reality than His Goodness; at first glance this may seem surprising, but all one needs to do is to recall once again the metaphysical law by virtue of which the analogy between the principial and manifested orders is reversed. The principially great is small in the manifested order, and what is inward in the Principle appears as outward in manifestation; it is because of this reversal that beauty is outward in man while his goodness is inward—at least in the ordinary sense of these words—whereas the opposite prevails in the principial order, where Goodness is as an expression of Beauty.

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One is often struck by the fact that Oriental peoples, including those reputed to be the most artistic, prove to be almost entirely lacking in aesthetic discernment with regard to what comes to them from the West; all the ugliness born of a world more and more devoid of spirituality spreads over the East with unbelievable ease, not only under the influence of politico-economic forces, which would not be so surprising, but above all with the free consent of those who by all appearances had created a world of beauty—a civilization in which every expression, including the most modest, bore the imprint of the same genius. Since the very beginning of Western infiltration, it has been astonishing to see the most perfect works of art set side by side with the worst trivialities of industrial production, and these disconcerting contradictions have come about not only in the realm of art as such—of course in a normal civilization everything accomplished by man is related to the domain of art at least in some way—but in nearly every sphere.

The resolution of this paradox is actually quite simple, however, and it has already been suggested in the preceding pages. Forms, even the most unimportant, are the work of human hands only in a secondary manner, for they are derived above all from the same supra-human source from which all tradition originates, which is another way of saying that the artist who lives in a traditional world still devoid of fissures works under the discipline or inspiration of a genius that surpasses him; fundamentally he is but the instrument of this genius, if only because of his craftsman's qualification.[324] As a result individual taste plays only a relatively subordinate part in the production of the forms of such art, and this taste is in fact reduced to nothing as soon as the individual finds himself face to face with a form that is foreign to the spirit of his own tradition; this is what happens when people unfamiliar with European civilization encounter the forms imported from the West. For this to occur, however, the people accepting such confusion must no longer be fully conscious of their own spiritual genius and no longer be living at the level of the forms with which they are still surrounded, and this proves that they were already suffering from a certain decadence; this being so they accept modern ugliness all the more easily because it reflects certain inferior possibilities which they were already spontaneously seeking to realize, in whatever fashion and perhaps quite unconsciously; the unreasoning readiness with which too many Easterner people—in fact the great majority—accept things that are utterly incompatible with the spirit of their tradition is best explained by the fascination exercised over an ordinary man by something corresponding to an as yet unexhausted possibility, the possibility in this case simply being that of arbitrariness or the absence of principles. While one should be cautious about making sweeping generalizations as to what appears to be a total lack of taste

[324] "A thing is not only what it is visibly, but also what it represents. Natural or artificial objects are not … arbitrary symbols of some other and higher reality but actual manifestations of this reality; the eagle or the lion, for example, is not so much a symbol or image *of* the Sun as it *is* the Sun in a likeness (the form being more important than the nature in which it may be manifested); and in the same way every house *is* the world in a likeness, and every altar situated at the center of the earth" (Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "The Primitive Mentality", *Études traditionnelles*, August-September-October, 1939). It is solely and exclusively traditional art—in the widest sense of the word and implying everything that is of an outwardly formal order and therefore *a fortiori* everything belonging in some way or another to the ritual domain, transmitted with tradition and by tradition—which can guarantee an adequate analogical correspondence between the divine and cosmic orders on the one hand and the human or artistic order on the other. Therefore the traditional artist does not limit himself simply to imitating nature but "imitates nature in her manner of operation" (Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part I, Question 117, Article 1), and it goes without saying that the artist cannot with his own individual means improvise an operation that is so specifically cosmological. The full conformity of the artist to this "manner of operation", a conformity subordinated to the rules of tradition, is what makes the masterpiece; this conformity presupposes a knowledge that may be either personal, direct, and active or inherited, indirect, and passive; the latter is the case with those craftsmen who, unconscious as individuals of the metaphysical content of the forms they have learned to fashion, do not know how to resist the corrosive influence of the modern West.

among Easterners, one fact is absolutely certain: Too many of them no longer grasp the meaning of the forms, or indeed the whole tradition, which they inherited from their ancestors.

Of course everything that we have just said applies above all and indeed *a fortiori* to Westerners, who after having created—we do not say "invented"—a perfect traditional art proceeded to disown it in favor of the residues of the individualistic and empty art of the Greco-Romans; this is what has finally led to the artistic chaos of the modern world. We realize that some people will refuse at any price to admit the unintelligibility or ugliness of the modern world and will readily employ the word "aesthetic" with a derogatory nuance—like that of the words "picturesque" and "Romantic"—in order to discredit in advance a concern for forms and thus make themselves more comfortable in the self-sustaining system of their own barbarism; there is nothing surprising about such an attitude when it concerns avowed modernists, but it is rather illogical—indeed quite despicable—coming from those who still claim to be Christian. To reduce the spontaneous and normal language of Christian art, a language whose beauty can hardly be deserving of criticism, to a worldly matter of "taste"—as if medieval art could have been the product of whim—amounts to admitting that the imprint given by the genius of Christianity to all its direct and indirect expressions was only a contingency unrelated to this genius and devoid of serious importance, or even due to a mental inferiority; "only the spirit matters", according to certain ignorant people, who are imbued with a hypocritical, iconoclastic, blasphemous, and impotent Puritanism and who pronounce the word "spirit" all the more readily because they are the last to know what it means.

In order to have a better grasp of the causes of the decadence of art in the West, it is important to note that there is a certain dangerous idealism in the European mentality, which is not without relevance to this decadence nor thus above all to the decay of Western civilization as a whole. This idealism has found its most dazzling—one might say its most "intelligent"—expression in certain forms of Gothic art, where a kind of dynamism that seems to want to remove the heaviness from stone is predominant.[325] Except in the case of sculpture and painting, which were already well on the way to decadence, this flamboyant form of Gothic art, however passionate it became, was nevertheless still a traditional art; or rather, to be more exact, it was the swan song of that art, for from the time of the Renaissance, which was truly the posthumous

[325] Byzantine and Romanesque art, as well as a certain form of Gothic art in which the static power is preserved, are essentially intellectual and therefore realistic.

revenge of classical antiquity, European idealism began pouring itself more and more into the exhumed sarcophagi of Greco-Roman civilization, suicidally placing itself at the service of an individualism in which it believed it had discovered its own genius, only to end—after a number of intermediate stages—in the most vulgar and wildly fanciful affirmations of this individualism. This was really a double suicide: first the abandonment of medieval art, or simply Christian art, and second the adoption of Greco-Roman forms, which intoxicated the Christian world with the poison of their decadence.

But it is necessary to consider a possible objection here: Was the art of the first Christians not in fact Roman art? The answer is that the real beginnings of Christian art are to be found in the symbols inscribed in the catacombs and not in the forms which early Christians, themselves belonging in part to the Roman civilization, temporarily borrowed in a purely outward manner from the classical decadence; indeed Christianity was called upon to replace this decadence with an art springing spontaneously from an original spiritual genius, and if in fact certain Roman influences have always persisted in Christian art, this applies only to more or less superficial details.

We said that European idealism succumbed to individualism and ended up stooping to the crudest expressions of this individualism; as for those things which the West finds to be crude in other civilizations, they are nearly always the more or less peripheral aspects of a realism that has no delusive and hypocritical veils. Of course it is important not to lose sight of the fact that idealism is not something bad in itself, for it finds its place in the outlook of heroes, who are rightly inclined toward the sublime and majestic; what is bad, and at the same time specifically Western, is the introduction of this mentality into all domains, including those in which it has no place. Islam, with its desire for equilibrium and stability, or simply realism, wished to avoid at all costs this errant—and therefore all the more fragile and dangerous—idealism, and it did so by taking into account the restricted possibilities of the present cyclic period, already far removed from man's origin; this is the source of that "down-to-earth" aspect for which Christians believe they must reproach Muslim civilization.

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In order to provide some idea of the principles of traditional art, let us call attention to a few of the most general and elementary. In the first place a work of art must conform to the use to which it will be put and must express this conformity, and if there is an added symbolism it must be consistent with the symbolism inherent in the object; second there must be no conflict between the essential and the accessory but instead a hierarchical harmony, which results moreover from the purity of the symbolism; third the treatment of the material used must be in keeping with the nature of this material even as the material must be in keeping with the use of the object; finally the object must not give an illusion of being other than what it really is, for such an illusion always leaves a disagreeable impression of uselessness, and when illusion is the goal of the finished work—as is the case with all classicist art—it is the mark of a uselessness that is only too obvious. The great innovations of naturalistic art can be reduced to so many violations of these principles. With respect to sculpture this involves a violation of the inert material, whether stone, metal, or wood, and with painting there is a violation of the plane surface; in the first case the material is treated as if it were endowed with life even though it is basically static and therefore suited only for the representation of motionless bodies or essential or schematic phases of movement instead of arbitrary, accidental, or quasi-instantaneous movements; in the second case—that of painting—the plane surface is treated as if it had three dimensions by means of foreshortening and the use of shadows.

It should be understood that the traditional rules are not dictated by merely aesthetic considerations but represent on the contrary the application of cosmic and divine laws, beauty being their necessary result. Such beauty as may be found in naturalistic art does not reside in the work as such but solely in the object it copies, whereas in symbolic and traditional art it is the work itself that is beautiful, whether it is abstract or borrows its beauty to a greater or lesser extent from a natural model. There is no better illustration of this distinction than that afforded by a comparison between so-called classical Greek art and Egyptian art; the beauty of Egyptian art is not solely in the object represented but simultaneously and *a fortiori* in the work as such—in the inward reality which the work expresses. It is true that naturalistic art has sometimes succeeded in expressing nobility of feeling or vigorous intelligence, but this can be explained by cosmological considerations, the absence of which would be inconceivable; nevertheless its occasional successes have no connection with the art as such, and no individual value could ever make up for the falsification involved in this art.

The majority of moderns who claim to understand art are convinced that Byzantine or Romanesque art is in no way superior to modern art and that a Byzantine or Romanesque Virgin resembles Mary no more than do her naturalistic images, indeed just the opposite. The response is quite simple, however: A Byzantine Virgin—which traditionally goes back to Saint Luke and the Angels—is infinitely closer to the truth of Mary than a naturalistic image, which of necessity is always that of another woman. For there are only two possibilities: Either an artist presents an absolutely correct portrait of the Virgin from the physical point of view, in which case it will be necessary for the artist to have seen her, a condition that obviously cannot be fulfilled—leaving aside the fact that naturalistic painting is ruled out by tradition—or else the artist presents a perfectly adequate symbol of the Virgin, but in this case physical resemblance, without being absolutely excluded, is no longer in question. It is this second solution—the only one that makes sense—which is realized in icons. What they do not express by means of a physical resemblance they express by the abstract but immediate language of symbolism, a language composed of both precisions and imponderables; the icon thus transmits not only the beatific power that it contains by virtue of its sacramental character but also the holiness of the Virgin herself—her inner reality—and thereby the universal reality of which she is an expression; in contributing both to a state of contemplation and to a metaphysical reality the icon becomes a support for intellection, whereas a naturalistic image transmits only the fact—apart from its obvious and inevitable falsehood—that Mary was a woman. It is true that in the case of a given icon the proportions and features may well be those of the living Virgin, but if such a likeness really came to pass, it would be independent of the symbolism of the image and could result only from a special inspiration, no doubt unconscious on the part of the artist himself. Naturalistic art could be legitimate up to a certain point if it were simply used to record the features of the saints, for the contemplation of saints—Hindu *darshana*—can be a precious help on the spiritual path since their outward appearance conveys the perfume as it were of their spirituality; but the use in this limited manner of a partial and at the same time disciplined naturalism is a most precarious possibility.

But let us return to the icon's symbolic and spiritual quality, the perception of which depends upon a contemplative intelligence as well as "sacred science". It is false to claim as a justification for naturalism that people need an art that is accessible, which is to say platitudinous, for it is not the "people" who gave birth to the Renaissance; on the contrary the art

of the Renaissance—like all the "great art" derived from it—is an offence to the piety of the simple man. The artistic ideals of the Renaissance and of all modern art are thus very far from what people truly need, and this is proven moreover by the fact that nearly all the miraculous Virgins to which they flock are Byzantine or Romanesque; and who would dare claim that the black color of some of them agrees with the "taste" of most Europeans or is particularly "accessible" to it? Besides, the Virgins made by the hands of the people, when they have not been spoiled by the influence of academic art, are very much more real—if only in a subjective fashion—than those of such art. Be that as it may, even if one were to agree that the masses need empty or unintelligent images, are the spiritual needs of an elite never to be taken into consideration?

In the preceding paragraphs we have already implicitly answered the question as to whether sacred art is meant for an exclusively intellectual elite alone or whether it has something to offer the man of average intelligence; the question in fact answers itself when one takes into account the universality of all symbolism, for this universality enables sacred art to transmit—apart from metaphysical truths and facts derived from sacred history—not only spiritual states but also psychological attitudes that are accessible to everyone. In modern parlance one might say that such art is at once profound and naive; indeed the simultaneity of profundity and naiveté is precisely one of the most prominent characteristics of sacred art. The ingenuousness or candor of this art, far from being a spontaneous or affected inferiority, reveals on the contrary the normal state of the human soul, whether that of the average or the superior man; on the other hand the apparent intelligence of naturalism—its quasi-satanic skill in copying nature and thus in transmitting nothing more than appearances or emotions—corresponds only to a deformed mentality, one that has deviated from primordial simplicity or innocence; it should go without saying that such a deformation, resulting as it does from intellectual superficiality and mental virtuosity, is incompatible with the traditional spirit and therefore finds no place in a civilization that has remained faithful to this spirit. If sacred art speaks to contemplative intelligence, it likewise speaks to normal human sensibility, and this means that such art alone possesses a universal language and that no other art is better suited to appeal not only to an elite but to people at large. As for the apparently childish aspect of the traditional mentality, let us remember Christ's injunction to be "as little children" and "harmless as doves", words which quite plainly refer to psychological realities, whatever their spiritual meaning.

The Fathers of the eighth century, unlike those religious authorities of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries who betrayed Christian art by abandoning it to the impure passions of worldly men and the ignorant imagination of the profane, were fully conscious of the holiness of all the means by which tradition expresses itself; therefore they stipulated at the Second Council of Nicea that "art [the integral perfection of the work] alone belongs to the painter, whereas the arrangement [the choice of the subject] and disposition [the treatment of the subject from the symbolic as well as the technical or material points of view] belong to the Fathers". *Non est pictoris—ejus enim sola ars est—rerum ordinatio et dispositio Patrum nostrorum*. This amounts to placing all artistic initiative under the direct and active authority of the spiritual leaders of Christianity.

But if this is the case, how can one explain the fact that during recent centuries religious circles have for the most part shown such a regrettable lack of understanding with regard to all those things which, having an artistic character, are in their opinion only "external" matters? First of all, besides the *a priori* elimination of every esoteric influence, there is the fact that a religious perspective as such tends to identify itself with the moral point of view, which appreciates merit alone and believes it necessary to ignore the sanctifying quality of intellectual knowledge and hence the value of the supports of such knowledge; now the perfection of a sensible form is no more "meritorious" in the moral sense than the intellection which the form reflects and transmits, and it is therefore only logical that when a symbolic form is no longer understood it will be relegated to the background—and even forsaken—in order to be replaced by a form that no longer speaks to the intelligence but only to a sentimental imagination capable of inspiring meritorious action; or so believes the narrow-minded man.

But speculating in this way about the likely reactions of people and resorting to means that are superficial and crude prove to be mistakes in the final analysis, for in reality nothing is better suited to influence the deeper dispositions of the soul than sacred art; profane art on the contrary, even if it has some psychological value for less intelligent people, exhausts its resources by the very fact of their superficiality and crudeness and ends up provoking reactions of contempt, which are only too well-known and may be considered a backlash against the contempt in which sacred art was held by profane art, especially in its earlier stages.[326] Present

[326] In the same way the hostility of the representatives of exoterism toward all that surpasses their comprehension results in an increasingly massive exoterism, which cannot but suffer from fissures; once the "spiritual porosity" of

experience makes it clear that nothing is able to offer a more immediately tangible nourishment to irreligion than the insipid hypocrisy of religious imagery, for what was meant to stimulate piety in believers merely confirms unbelievers in their impiety; sacred art does not possess this character of a "two-edged sword", for being itself more abstract it offers less hold to hostile psychological reactions.

In any case, regardless of speculations which attribute to the masses a need for images that are unintelligent and warped in their essence, elites do exist and certainly require something different; what they need is a language which evokes divine profundities and not human platitudes—a language which cannot spring simply from profane taste nor even from genius but which must proceed essentially from tradition, which implies that a work of art must be executed by an artist who is saintly or "in a state of grace".[327] Far from serving merely for the more or less superficial instruction and edification of the masses, the icon—like the Hindu *yantra* and every other visible symbol—establishes a bridge from the sensible to the spiritual: "By the visible aspect," says Saint John Damascene, "our thoughts must be drawn up in a spiritual flight and rise to the invisible majesty of God."

But let us return to the errors of naturalism. As soon as art is no longer determined, illumined, and guided by spirituality, it is at the mercy of the artist's individual and purely psychic resources, and these must exhaust themselves in much the same way as the platitude of the naturalistic principle, which calls for nothing more than a copy of visible nature; reaching the end point of this platitude, naturalism inevitably engendered the monstrosities of "surrealism", which is nothing but a decomposing cadaver of art and which in any case should instead be called "infra-realism", for properly speaking it is the Satanic consequence of naturalistic Luciferianism. Naturalism is clearly Luciferian in its wish to imitate the creations of God, not to mention its emphasis on the psychic to the detriment of the spiritual, the individual to the detriment of the universal, and above all the bare fact to the detriment of the symbol. Normally man must imitate the creative act, not the thing created; this is what all symbolic art accomplishes, and the results are "creations" which, far from being duplicates of the creatures of

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tradition was lost—that is, the immanence of a transcendent dimension existing within the substance of exoterism and compensating for its heaviness—these fissures could be produced only from below; hence the replacement of the masters of medieval esoterism by the protagonists of modern unbelief.

[327] Traditional iconographers, many of them monks, prepare themselves for their work by fasting, prayer, confession, and communion; sometimes the colors are mixed with holy water and the dust from relics, which would not be possible if the icon were not meant to possess a truly sacramental character.

God, are rather reflections of them according to an analogy revealing the transcendent aspects of things; in this lies the sufficient reason for art, apart from any practical use of such objects.

What one finds here is the same metaphysical inversion of relationship we have already discussed. For God the creature is a reflection or exteriorized aspect of Himself while for the artist the work reflects on the contrary an "inward" reality, of which he himself is only an outward aspect; God creates His own image whereas man fashions so to speak his own essence, at least symbolically. On the principial plane the inward shows itself forth in the outward, but on the manifested plane the outward fashions the inward; a sufficient reason for all traditional art—of no matter what kind—is the fact that in a certain sense the work is greater than the artist himself and brings him back, through the mystery of artistic creation, to the proximity of his own divine Essence.[328]

[328] This explains the danger, as far as the Semitic peoples are concerned, in the painting and especially in the carving of living things; Hindus and Far Easterners worship divine Reality through a symbol—a symbol truly being what it symbolizes as far as its essential reality is concerned—but Semitic peoples have a tendency to deify the symbol itself. One of the reasons for the prohibition of plastic and pictorial arts among the latter was undoubtedly the wish to prevent a naturalistic deviation, a very real danger for men whose mentality is predominantly individualistic and sentimental.

X

Eschatology

24

What We Are and Where We Are

Charles Le Gai Eaton

Charles Le Gai Eaton (1921-2010) served in India, Africa, and the Caribbean for the British Diplomatic Service, and later in life as a consultant to the Islamic Cultural Center in London. His books include *The Richest Vein: Eastern Traditions and Modern Thought*, *Islam and the Destiny of Man*, and *The King of the Castle: Choice and Responsibility in the Modern World*, from which this selection is taken.

Contemporary thought dismisses as naive or childish a great many of the beliefs which our ancestors regarded as essential elements of Christianity; but there is one particular notion which has been cast aside in anger and indignation. This is the doctrine that human acts have repercussions far beyond the frontiers of the human world and may provoke, in the very nature of things, reactions which our language defines in terms of punishment and suffering. In earlier times the process whereby these consequences come home to roost was seen as a divine Judgment and this suffering was described in the picturesque imagery—necessarily borrowed from the conditions of our own familiar world—of the pains of hell.

How could the God of the Sunday Schools allow his decent, well-meaning children to suffer in perpetuity for faults and weaknesses which are 'only human' and which, in any case, very often derive from environmental factors rather than from the ill will of the sinner? Obviously he could not. But then one is logically compelled to ask how he can permit many other things which do, undeniably, exist: war and oppression, the early death of loved ones, cancer and the wide spectrum of mental and physical 'handicaps'. If, as no one can deny, people suffer pain and grief in this world, then it is clearly illogical to maintain—as do some modern Christians—that God could not permit suffering to exist elsewhere.

Muslims, although by no means immune to modernism, have on the whole had less difficulty in reconciling the vicissitudes of earthly existence both with the divine Power and with the divine Mercy. They have been less disposed to fall into the trap which awaits those who push anthropomorphic symbolism to its extreme limit. 'Glorified be God with a Glory remote from all representations of him': this is one of the basic themes of Islam. Remote from the representation of a good man writ large and infinitely remote from the Dear Old Man in the Sky. Being human we have need of images as rungs on a ladder leading to That which is ultimately

without image, incomparable; but when we try to rest too heavily upon these supports their provisional character becomes apparent.

The fear of hell has made countless men and women turn round, face their true goal and move towards it when, but for this fear, they might have wandered away into the shadows. If fear sets a man on the path to safety and towards the recognition of his real identity, then fear has a useful function; and, since human responsibility exists and acts do have owners to whom their consequences relate, there are indeed things to be feared (who, among the living, could doubt this?), and there is no deception in the imagery of fire and brimstone. It is, however, an imagery that suggests punishment coming exclusively from outside ourselves, quite alien to all that we are. In an age in which men are already profoundly alienated from their roots and from their world, this imagery threatens a further alienation, not because it is inherently false but because it is readily misunderstood by those who have lost all sense of unity and inter-connection.

Since the idea of responsibility carries little weight if it is confined entirely to the social realm and since any extension of responsibility beyond this realm implies that supernatural consequences attach to human acts, we need to be reminded that, in religious terms, we are judged, not by some alien despot who rules—or misrules—the universe, but by the Norm inherent within us.

'Fire will invade, envelop all,' says Thibon, writing from the Catholic point of view: 'All will be judged from within and, so to say, by its own self'.[329] 'Whosoever sins, sins only against himself,'[330] says the Quran; and again, 'Read thy book. Thy soul suffices as a reckoner against thee this day.'[331] In every religious context we find the doctrine that divine Judgment (under whatever name it goes) is neither more nor less than the stripping away of every kind of falsehood and self-deception, with a consequent exposure of what we really *are.* Our identity had been mercifully veiled from us—this was our freedom and our opportunity to exercise responsibility within our own field—but at the last the veils are drawn away, the comedy is over, and we face ourselves.

Our actions are the outward sign of what we are. This is their chief significance and this is why a change in a man's basic nature— 'repentance'—is said to free him from the burden of his past sins, however black they may have been. Those who regard as absurd the notion that a man

[329] *L'Echelle de Jacob*: Gustave Thibon, p. 94.
[330] Quran, 4:3.
[331] Quran, 17:14.

could deserve supernatural punishment for some apparently trivial sin are right, so long as the situation is defined in this way. But it is not the sin that is punished. It is the profound inner warping which betrayed itself through this sin that stands revealed—and is to be measured against the Norm—when time and obscurity are brought to an end.

And yet our acts can never be disowned, any more than we can disown our limbs. 'This Day', says the Quran, 'We seal up mouths; and hands speak out and feet bear witness to their acts.'[332] As was suggested earlier, the distinction commonly made between a hard core of individuality and the web of action within which it operates is a convenient but superficial distinction. The person as a whole, as the manifestation of a particular pattern in time and space, is not subject to chance or accident; whatever happens to him and—most important of all, in view of contemporary efforts to exempt from responsibility those who act 'under orders'—everything in which he takes part is an aspect of his total nature. The paradox in which human reason can find no reconciliation lies in the fact that this total nature, though already complete beyond our existential context, is—from our point of view and in our experience—in the process of formation, still malleable, still alterable. And our experience represents something inherent in the nature of reality. We do not merely have an illusion of freedom. We are free, but only relatively so. Absolute freedom is a quality that belongs to God alone.

There is no need to labour this riddle, for no amount of twisting and turning in the corridors of reason will solve it; but the emphasis upon experience—our consciousness of happenings, together with the ideas and feelings which they provoke—is essential to an understanding of what the traditional doctrines have meant by 'hell'. 'The damned souls are in Paradise', said Simone Weil, 'but for them Paradise is Hell'. It is in rather the same paradoxical spirit that the Zen Buddhists tell us that this present world of space and time (and suffering) is none other than the timeless Nirvana. Hell is not a locality but a state of being and therefore, in our terms, a state of experience. The experience, perhaps, of the intractably imperfect in the presence of the Norm from which it has departed and to which it refuses to return. The damned soul, says Thibon, is 'an essentially refractory being, for ever consumed by flame and for ever powerless to become flame.'

Hell is an alienation so extreme that the only way in which the damned can experience their own totality is in terms of pain. Like the madman convinced that the person who loves him most

[332] Quran, 36:64.

is his deadliest enemy or like the victim of hydrophobia who dies in an agony of thirst though water is at hand, the damned are meshed in an evil dream which disguises the most benign objects in shapes of terror and malignancy. This infernal state is the result (from our point of view, here and now) of a misuse of our relative freedom, a refusal not only to be what we are—in terms of our Norm—but also to accept the burden imposed upon us as responsible beings and to face the fact that our actions and their consequences have a significance far beyond the narrow field in which they are initiated. 'Since we are "not other" than the Self,' says Schuon, 'we are condemned to eternity. Eternity lies in wait for us, and that is why we must find again the centre, that place where eternity is blessedness. Hell is the reply to the rim which makes itself centre or to the multitude which usurps the glory of Unity; it is the reply of Reality to the ego which wants to be absolute.' We are condemned to totality because no amount of wishful thinking and no amount of theorising, no sheltering under the earth's weight and no act of self-destruction, can make us less than we are. We can only pretend to be other than viceregal creatures with a viceregal responsibility, and this is the pretence that is to be stripped away on the Day of Judgment.

According to Martin Buber, 'The greatest evil is to forget that thou art the son of a King'. This forgetfulness is closely bound up with the desire of the human 'ego' to set itself up as a false absolute (on however petty a scale), which is why it has even been suggested that hell contains only those who prefer to be where they are and reject the offer of release. So it is sometimes said in Islam that the souls in hell enjoy, each of them, some particular pleasure or apparent advantage which roots them in their condition of misery, unwilling to break out of this dark dream and face the light.

In denying or forgetting his viceregal identity—his divine ancestry—man loses a dimension of his being, but through this amputation he gains an illusion of self-sufficiency and of freedom from responsibility, a robber baron who no longer recognises that his castle is held in fief and that he has an account to render. This deceptive freedom has made possible the development of contemporary science and technology and has led to the unprecedented exploitation of the natural world (both animate and inanimate). It has enabled modern man to commit monstrous crimes against his fellows and against his environment (therefore ultimately against himself) without any awareness of guilt so long as he has been acting as massman, as a member of an organised multitude 'doing his duty'. Yet this has in no way freed him from an obsessive sense of guilt in his

personal life, as an individual acting alone; indeed there has never been a greater fear of taking risks than there is among the bourgeoisie of our time.

The exercise of human responsibility may well involve the readiness to take tremendous risks and to assume an unavoidable burden of guilt; but this burden is intolerable only so long as we refuse to see it as a condition of our existence. The soldier who kills because he is commanded to do so and the civil servant administering regulations which cause harm and suffering imagine themselves exempt from responsibility—'I didn't make the rules!'—without being able to say to whom their acts belong, if not to themselves, and imagining that so long as they are in uniform or dressed for the office they are less than men.

Do they suppose that responsibility rests solely with those who give them their orders? They are servants of God, not of their fellow men; and if they obey their fellow men this is their choice, and the responsibility is theirs. 'I had no power over you,' says Satan in the Quran, 'except that I called to you and you obeyed me; so blame me not, but blame yourselves.'[333]

The Christian tradition has given an intensely emotional flavour to ideas of sin and guilt, partly by taking the view that the sinner is hurting a loving Saviour through such acts of disobedience and partly by the emphasis it has placed upon the fatherhood of God, so that emotions derived from childhood situations attach to the sins of the adult. This emotional attitude, perfectly in place within the body of the Church, has persisted among those who are no longer Christians and for whom, therefore, there can be no confession, no expiation, and no forgiveness. In the Christian guilt may be an aspect of health; in the ex-Christian it is often a sickness.

Awareness of guilt in the sense of a personal, intellectual recognition of what we are and where we are is the beginning of realism and of the knowledge that we are responsible beings. But guilt as an emotional condition tends to be at once paralysing (so far as the individual is concerned) and destructive (in terms of human relationships); it is in essence a feeling of alienation. Whereas the intellectual awareness of guilt is essentially a recognition that we are not what we should be, that we misuse our powers and misrule our kingdom. In Christianity it is bound up with the knowledge of an original sin constantly sustained, in Islam with the knowledge that the compact made by all souls 'when they lay within Adam's loins' has been broken, and in Hinduism with the doctrine of 'karma' and of the chain of actions and reactions which has brought us to this twilight place. To say

[333] Quran, 14:22.

that we should be better than we are reduces the question to the level of moralism and sentimentality. What we should be is other than we are, more truly ourselves in terms of our own Norm.

But since we can only start from where we are and only initiate action in the place in which we find ourselves, it is as sick men that we begin our work, and the world with which we have to deal is a ruined paradise. Perfection is far off and, under the circumstances in which good is inextricably mixed with ill and every light projects a shadow, none but the saints can act responsibly without incurring some further burden of guilt.

What is required of us is not that we should try to achieve an impossible purity of action but that we should learn to discriminate between the relative goods presented to us as our field of operation, situating each thing in its place and at its proper level in the total order, reconnecting where connection has been broken and reuniting where unity has been shattered. This we can do only if we are prepared to understand our real situation and, at the same time, to turn our faces towards our own true centre and, by focusing our attention upon it, begin to draw the scattered elements of our present circumstances towards it.

Man is committed at birth to two journeys (or to journeying on two different levels). The first he cannot escape, for this is the journey of action and experience as he travels down the stream of his own lifetime and creates, as a man of his period (localised in time and space), a story which expresses, in this particular mode, his ultimate identity or the human possibility which is the reason for his existence.

The second journey, which can—at least in a certain sense— be avoided, is upstream, using time and locality only as starting points, leading beyond their zone. This is the journey described in countless myths and legends, the arduous, perilous way towards the centre of being, the passage from the ephemeral and illusory towards the eternally real. In terms of universal myths, it was to provide a landscape for this journey that the monster 'Chaos' was slain and an ordered world raised from the waters, and it was to provide a negotiable way through this landscape that the prophets laboured, Christ died, and Muhammad led the people of the City into battle in the Arabian wastes.

In a normal society the circumstances of the first journey provide supports for the second, and it was man's aim in the past to build and maintain a physical and social environment in which every element had a dual character, existing as a 'thing' in terms of the first journey, standing as a symbol and signpost in terms of the second.

For a very long time now the routes of these two journeys have been diverging, and it is not by chance that the last of the great, world-transforming Revelations laid such particular emphasis upon the duty of pilgrimage. The pious Muslim on his way to Mecca is like a dancer who, by the steps he takes towards the physical symbol of all centrality, acts out the drama of his own inner, timeless journey, just as, in his obligatory prayers, he creates a tiny area of consecrated territory—confined to the dimensions of his prayer-mat—in an environment that has become almost totally profane. From this point of view it might be said that the sacred rules of Islam were specially designed to protect the traveller in a world which no longer offers him any foothold.

But the fact that the two paths have now diverged so far that they can scarcely any longer be related to each other is not, in the last analysis, a senseless accident. The human world, being what it is, could only decay in the course of time, but, since decay is itself a necessary aspect of a larger pattern and since there are possibilities which can only find existential expression in such a context as ours, this is where we belong. We live out our lives here and now (rather than in some paradisal environment) because it is our nature to be where we are. And we are told that there are compensations available to such as us which were not available to the less degenerate men of earlier times. 'You are in an age in which, if you neglect one-tenth of what is ordered, you will be condemned,' the Prophet of Islam told his Companions, 'but after this a time will come when he who observes one-tenth of what is now ordered will be saved.'

Modern man is weak, not to say feeble, and he is at the same time subject to pressures and to temptations unknown to the people of earlier times. Moreover he lives in an environment so hostile to religion and to the sacred in its terrestrial forms that divine Justice must allow for this and we cannot be judged by the standards which might fairly be applied to our ancestors, living, as they did, in an environment in which it was 'natural' to be religious. But if the wind is tempered to the shorn lamb and if we have a quite special claim to Mercy, there is still one vice, sin, or crime which excludes the possibility of forgiveness, and this is refusal of the Mercy offered us. One might say that we are like drowning men to whom a hand is held out. If we refuse to recognise this hand for what it is and will not grasp it, then there is no hope for us.

The great revealed religions and the truths inherent in the ancient traditions of humanity are, by definition, 'a mercy to mankind'. So, to a lesser degree, are the saints and men of true piety. So also is the sacred in all its ramifications, whether in the form of temples and sanctuaries built by hand or in the splendour and beauty of virgin nature. To scorn sanctity when we find it among men or to

defile the sacred is therefore the gravest form of what Christians call the sin against the Holy Ghost. It is to trample Mercy underfoot.

Here, in human terms, we meet with a paradox. The relative can make no impact upon the Absolute. Man, however much he may blaspheme or rebel, can do no injury to God. But the manifestations of Mercy in this world are, of necessity, more fragile than their author. The sacred is vulnerable. We have to tread very carefully upon this earth, for it is scattered with the signs of divine Mercy. We have to be aware of the wonders that surround us and take care not to damage them, both for our own sakes and for the sake of others who might find their salvation here or there, among the little things which are so easily destroyed.

On the one hand there are these 'little things' in which Mercy lies half-concealed; on the other, the daily trivialities which seem so important to the men of our time and which they cherish with blind devotion. What is required of us is an act of discrimination between gold and straw, between sacred and profane; required of us precisely because it is our nature to be capable of this act. And, in a world encumbered with distractions, such discrimination becomes increasingly necessary. The further the world moves from its source and is stripped—or appears to be stripped—of supernatural meaning, the greater the necessity to concentrate our attention upon essentials. For creatures who are here so short a time, whose powers decay just as they are learning to use them and who die long before they are ready to go, there cannot be many essentials. In our situation very little matters, but that little matters enormously.

The complexity of modern life is a surface complexity in that most of the strands which compose it are woven from artificial needs, unreal obligations, trivial ambitions and, above all, glossy but unsatisfying substitutes for the few things really necessary to the accomplishment of the human journey (in either of its aspects).

The hostility of all religions to 'riches', their praise of 'poverty', is to be understood primarily in a spiritual sense and is closely related to archaic man's indifference to actions and events which do not bear the stamp of That Time, the stamp of eternity. In both cases it is the unreal—or the less real—that is to be feared in so far as it threatens to dissipate man's energies (and his capacity for giving attention) in the wilderness of quantity. And it is precisely by giving the whole weight of our attention—an attention so powerful that it is said to be capable of penetrating the veils which hide the light of heaven from us—upon the realm of quantity and relativity that we have been able to build the scientific and technological wonders of our age.

Anyone, any race, could have done it, given the willingness to make the Faustian sacrifice upon which the whole edifice depends. It happened to be the Europeans who first turned their backs upon the light in order to conjure marvels out of the darkness, but other races have lost no time in following suit; the notion that it is possible to have the best of both worlds is ludicrous, since human attention cannot be focused in two opposite directions.

In the long run, we can get no effective purchase on quantity. We are real and need to be matched with reality, whereas the realm of quantity (as opposed to the world of unique and significant objects) becomes increasingly shadowy as we pursue it down the corridors of time. The danger lies in the fact that the more shadowy and unrewarding this realm becomes, the more feverish is our pursuit of a satisfaction which constantly eludes us and the more involved we become in haste and hullabaloo. The search for plenitude in the region of number, the pursuit of reality among husks and fragments which have become no more than units in a numbered sequence, is dissipation, and its final outcome can only be a fierce and despairing destructiveness. Everything disappoints and so everything must be punished for not giving us the satisfaction we crave. The thirst for the Absolute which is inherent in human nature is focused with a terrible and distorting power upon the partial and the fragmentary, and under the blaze of this attention even the most harmless objects are twisted into monstrous shapes, as though the sun were concentrated upon them through a burning glass.

Simone Weil speaks of the 'monotony of evil', and monotony is one of the chief characteristics of the realms of quantity: 'Nothing new—all here is equivalent.' Evil as we know it in action is closely bound up with certain typical reactions to monotony; on the one hand an almost manic overvaluation of particular relative goods for their own sake and, on the other, boredom and despair in the face of a state of existence without grandeur and without ultimate significance. The man who clothes trivial things in splendour and projects upon them his huge appetite for the real and the truly important is, in fact, father to the disillusioned cynic who perceives the hollowness of all such inflated goods but does not know how to go beyond this perception and refill the empty gourds. Thus we gravitate between an idealism which refuses to face facts and a cynicism incapable of penetrating beneath the surface of the factual.

Given the peculiar conditions of our time, there is a need for disillusionment. Illusions are sticky things and hold a man in their web, content when he should be discontented, happy to be where he is and unaware that any further journeying is required of him. In other periods, in protected environments, a certain optimism, a certain tendency to see the best in everything and to ignore

the worm in the apple, did no harm at all; but in our case, hemmed in by so many illusions and led astray by phantoms, a recognition that the profane world as such is 'a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury signifying nothing' may be the beginning of wisdom and recall certain men to their responsibility for re-consecrating a desecrated environment.

But disillusionment when it is entirely passive, and when it represents little more than the angry disappointment of the greedy 'ego', issues only in despair. And despair, in the sense of a deadend to journeying and a profound alienation from destiny, is more common than might be supposed. 'Mon cas n'est pas unique: j'ai peur de mourir et je suis navrée dê'tre au monde.'[334] The term 'navré' suggest something more subtle than grief. It suggests the boredom and disappointment of the soul which finds only monotony where it looked for splendour and dry wells where water should have flowed. But despair is not necessarily a state of constant unhappiness. There are a great number of men and women in our time who are quite without hope, in the Christian sense of the word, seeing only grey days ahead and a meaningless extinction when the grey days are done, but who are reasonably happy most of the time, find a certain satisfaction in their families and friendships and an even greater satisfaction in their work.

Yet they lead lives of quiet despair and are happy only on condition that they discipline their minds to reject disturbing or 'morbid' thoughts. Less enterprising—perhaps less courageous—than those who seek satisfaction in danger, narcotics, or sexual adventures, they are determined to make the best of a bad job. But this is not good enough, and under such sober and sensible attitudes there runs a current of bitterness which comes to the surface when certain notes are struck or when quite trivial ambitions are thwarted. It is in this context that ambition is so dangerous: not so much the great ambition which is focused upon power and glory, but the little ambitions which are adjusted to the rungs of a promotional ladder or to 'keeping up with the Joneses'. In the first place, these offer a palliative to despair at times when despair should be squarely faced and transcended. Secondly, they force a man to take seriously occupations so trifling as to be unworthy of his full attention. Thirdly, they lead ever further into the realm of quantity, their goal a will-o'-the-wisp that constantly recedes. And finally they provide a handle by which men are all too readily manipulated.

[334] Opening words of the novel *La Bâtarde* by Violette Leduc.

In a highly competitive society trivial ambitions force us to devote all that we have it in us to give—and more than we have any right to give—to entirely local and profane tasks. A man cannot serve two masters. Our energies are limited (and our time is short), which is why they have to be contained and directed and why the human communities of earlier times were concerned that the tasks of the practical life should reflect and even embody the spiritual or ritual work through which we make our way towards the central place.

When the activities which keep the community in being, keep the wheels turning, and provide for men's basic needs take on the character of distractions, when they are irrelevant to any purpose beyond the immediate, practical one, then it becomes important that people should be frequently distracted from distraction (as, for example, the Muslim is by the prayers which interrupt his day's work) if they are not to be completely absorbed into natural process. We do not have the right to use ourselves up in profane tasks unless under the spur of hunger or some equally urgent natural necessity.

It may be said that there is nothing to prevent a man combining intense spiritual concentration with an extremely active life in the world; many of the saints, both Christian and Muslim, have done so. But this is quite beyond the capacities of the majority of people, and a view which ignores the incapacities of the majority is a totally impractical view. The social factors which compel the majority to give their best to their jobs compel them also to ignore everything outside and beyond these jobs. This being so, the price we pay for the comforts and advantages of contemporary civilisation is too high. We cannot afford them.

Perpetuating into adult life the young child's competitiveness among his siblings, a society in which a man's position depends entirely upon his own efforts and talents (and in which these efforts and talents must be fully applied throughout his working life) is precisely the kind of society required if all our energies are to be exploited in the production of social wealth. But this can only be a society in which all values are subordinated to the productive process. No one can rest without falling behind in the race; but it is only in rest from activities of this kind that a man can pursue the 'second journey' or, in Christian terms, take care of his own salvation. And only by turning his back upon the realm of quantity and of quantitative rewards so that he faces the centre, the human Norm, can he exercise the responsibility which—as king of his small castle—he is born to exercise.

Compromise is possible in many fields, and the paradoxical nature of the world itself (so far distant from heaven, and yet not-other-than heaven in its ultimate essence) makes compromise a condition of human living. But there is one matter in which no compromise is possible. We are not two-headed creatures, we cannot face two ways at once, and sooner or later we have to choose in which direction our basic attention is to be focused. In the end it is not in terms of relative good or relative evil that a man is judged, but in terms of the direction in which he faces.

The fact that we are creatures made for choosing is no longer apparent to the majority of people. As has already been suggested, the modern world is dominated by a sense of fatality, the kind of fatality inherent in natural processes, and those who find fault with it do so chiefly on the grounds that it is not all it might be in terms of its own aims and ideals. Bettelheim's view that we have a simple choice between renouncing freedom and giving up the comforts of modern technology is not widely shared, difficult though it is to ignore the evidence that the free society and the technological society are mutually incompatible.

Living so much closer to the operations of cause and effect than we do and believing in supernatural rewards and punishments as the ultimate repercussions of the choice they made in the course of their lives, our ancestors could not doubt the significance of their own decisions. We have no such certainty. Believing that the consequences of what we do are confined to our own locality, and overwhelmed by the complexity of this place in which we find ourselves, we interpret significance in quantitative terms and value action only as a contribution to some form of corporate achievement.

This is bound to be the case so long as we regard ourselves as no more than clever animals dwarfed by the immensity of a hostile universe and as self-contained units dwarfed by the multitude. It seems that the decisions which shape the only world in which we believe are made by a very few people and that our contribution is at most an infinitesimal fraction of the decisive act.

It is not that we deliberately reject the normal, traditional view that one man's action may shake the very fabric of the heavens and the earth, that the descendant of Adam (before whom, according to the Quran, the angels were commanded to bow down) cannot be merely a contributor, and that our responsibility is to God alone. There is no occasion to reject it, since people have forgotten that it was ever normal to our kind. This is the measure of our diminution from man to manikin, from priest-king to monkey.

The world overwhelms us by sheer size and multiplicity. Our environment crushes us. We are faceless in a mob which numbers billions. Yet all this matches with perfect correspondence the beliefs and mental climate of our time. The whole fabric of our world is, in a very real sense, a projection of our ideology and of what we are within ourselves. It exists because it is, basically, what we want; or, to state this more accurately, it is the objective crystallisation of our wants and of their inevitable consequences. It is the desert which faces those who turn their backs upon the Mountain. A single centrifugal force is at work both within the most intimate recesses of our nature and throughout the theatre in which our life's experience unfolds.

This process is, in one sense, inevitable. In another sense it can proceed only by our permission. The traditional doctrines saw creation itself as a centrifugal process moving ever further from its centre, outwards into the wilderness, downwards into the abyss, until it reaches its limit ('a fraction of a degree above absolute zero') and is, in cataclysmic fashion, caught up, redeemed, brought back. The process is necessary because there are elements in the totality of Perfection which can only manifest themselves in distant places, like small lights which could never be seen in the neighbourhood of the sun, and there are values which are made complete only when tested among the fragments of a dissolving world. But, according to these same doctrines, man is made not only for choosing but also for returning and for bringing back. He alone of all that is created can maintain a direct connection with the centre and, by penetrating the thickening layers of cloud, remain aware of sunlight. So long as he holds to this, his viceregal function, the fragments are kept whirling in meaningful patterns. Only when he lets go can chaos come again.

What the Muslims call the Holy War is in fact the opposition of the unified and God-centred man to the forces of dissipation and chaos both within and outside himself. Such warfare is likely, in our times, to provide a history of defeats and failures—at least so far as our environment taken as a whole is concerned—but this is precisely why we are told that less is expected of us than was expected of the men of earlier periods. Defeat does not matter, because it is by fighting this war that we become what we are, and the achievement of integrity is not dependent upon the quantitative and temporal outcome of the struggle. Our concern is only with doing what we are capable of doing. The rest is out of our hands.

Defeat is one thing, abdication another. And despair grows out of abdication rather than out of defeat. 'What is the good of ... ', 'What is the use of ...', are the catchwords of an age which measures everything in terms of immediate and seemingly objective success. We have the

presumption to believe that we can foresee the ultimate effects of our actions, and this belief makes us impotent. Deprived in this way of our true function as men, there is nothing to prevent our being carried away downstream with the other debris of a broken world.

Ours is not a time for impotence. The events of the past fifty years suggest that the process to which Western man committed himself some centuries ago is speeding up at an all but uncontrollable rate and that the moment—the point of no return on the curve of progression—beyond which no real choice will be possible (short of the madman's compulsive decision to break free) is fast approaching. The world we have made is closing in upon us, the pressures are mounting, and techniques whereby men can be reduced to a condition only fractionally different from that of automata are improved year by year. The 'developed' world, as it is so curiously called, with the 'developing' world close on its heels, now seems to be possessed by an impersonal force quite outside the reach of our will, a force which means to prevail, regardless of the transformation this requires in man's nature and in his status. Development, understood in this sense, obeys its own laws. They are not ours—or God's.

Yet it is only the little man meshed in this process, frightened of shadows, aware of his own weakness and dependence, who can stand up against the great wind. The big men will not help, for present circumstances must inevitably bring to power chiefly those who co-operate wholeheartedly with the course events are taking and lend themselves as ready instruments to the prevailing force. It is not in their nature to cry 'Stop!'.

According to certain traditions, the burden of personality, which is also the burden of viceregal responsibility, was offered around creation in That Time, the time of the beginnings, and was refused on every side—the very mountains are said to have trembled and fallen back in fear—until, at last, man accepted it. We are not free to lay the burden aside. Whether we know it or not, we are accountable for what happens to our province.

And this means that neither a lack of worldly power nor subordination to many masters in a giant organisation suffice to exempt us from the necessity for choosing or to save us from the consequences of our choice. The little man in a big world may think himself weak as a kitten, seeking only to 'get by' and glad that the necessity for making great decisions devolves, not upon him, but upon those others, whose orders he so readily obeys. He is deceived. Those others cannot bear his burden for him. He was born to it, having been born a man, and it is as much a part of him as his own flesh. Those who think they have some kind of right to a quiet life have come to the wrong place.

The most menacing among the tendencies now at work in the world—menacing, that is, to what remains of man's freedom of movement—depend upon a general conviction that our responsibility is limited on the one hand to the realm of personal relationships and, on the other, to doing our duty, understood in the sense of conscientiousness towards our employers and towards the organisation in which we work. Behind this there is also a sense of obligation to keep the wheels turning, and we are subjected daily to a flood of propaganda aimed at strengthening this sense of obligation and persuading us to play our part in the 'march of progress' and to adjust to the 'needs of the modern world'. The notion that each individual man is accountable, not merely for what he does 'of his own free will', but also for every action in which he participates or assists is destructive of these limitations and calls into question the nature of this obligation. It is totally incompatible with the mechanism of the modern age and, above all, with the process whereby an age of complete human abdication—already prefigured in the Socialist societies—may be brought into being.

Accountability does not really diminish in proportion to the size of the organisation in which a man is enmeshed ; but the personal sense of accountability withers away. If three or four men band together in some enterprise, each will have at least a certain power of decision and a certain sense of responsibility for what is done. The larger the organisation, the less scope there is for decision and the easier it becomes to forget that the consequences of our acts relate to us personally and directly. All that seems to be required of us is conformity.

And yet the conformist has made a choice, even if it was little more than the choice of abdication, and he is accountable for what is done with his co-operation. When a number of men unite to commit a crime which results in killing, all stand equally accused of murder. They are treated by the Courts, not as though a single act had been fragmented and the responsibility for it parcelled out among them, but as though each, individually, was the one murderer. There can be no corporate ownership of human acts and no diminished responsibility when a man is acting in concert with others. We stand alone, each of us, burdened with all that we have done and all that has been made possible through our presence in a particular place at a particular time. This is an aspect of the grandeur of the human state, and this is what we are fit for; and from this there is no escape.

No escape, that is, at the worldly level and within the purely existential frame of reference; no escape so long as we think ourselves alone, abandoned and without refuge. If the matter rested there

we would indeed be solitary stars in a firmament of darkness. But there are other dimensions than these.

'I take refuge', says the Muslim; 'I take refuge with Thee from the evil of my hearing and the evil of my seeing; from the evil of my tongue and from the evil of my heart and from the evil of my sexual life. I take refuge with Thee, O God, from unprofitable knowledge and from a heart without reverence, and from an ever-demanding self, and from unheard petition. I take refuge with Thee from hunger, the worst of bedfellows, and from treachery that ruins friendships, and I take refuge with Thee from the evil suggestions of the breast and from the frustration of affairs …', until the final cry which completes the circle: 'Behold, I take refuge with Thy good pleasure from Thy wrath and with Thy pardon from Thy punishment; and I take refuge with Thee from Thyself.'[335]

This belongs to the border country, where the human creature sets foot on the bridge provided. Beyond lies a less fearful region, and the 13th century Muslim saint, the Lady Rabiya, prayed, 'My Lord, eyes are at rest, the stars are setting, hushed are the movements of birds in their nests, of monsters in the deep. And Thou art the Just who knows no change, the Equity that swerves not, the Everlasting that passes not away. The doors of kings are locked, watched by their bodyguards. But Thy door is open to him who calls on Thee. My Lord, each lover is now alone with his beloved. And I am alone with Thee.'[336]

The taking of refuge is from an imperfect world in which even heavenly fruit is worm-eaten and from a selfhood pitted and riddled with the same imperfection; and in this world the man who depends upon his own strength, the self-reliant man, is inevitably a pathetic figure. There are a thousand ways in which his strength may be destroyed. It is a question only of the degree of pain, fear, or deprivation required to reduce him to abject weakness. 'There is no force and no strength save in Allah!' is among the most common of Muslim sayings, and to forget it is to put all one's weight upon a matchwood crutch.

The place of refuge—and the source of all strength—is at the centre, where the grim dichotomies are resolved and man is supplied with all the strength he needs; and the 'evil' from which refuge is taken is not an evil inherent in human faculties or in their objects. It is the quality of obscurity which clings like a cobweb to these faculties and these objects in so far as they are fragmentary and incomplete in themselves unless their connection with totality is constantly renewed. Only through

[335] Quoted by Constance Padwick in *Muslim Devotions* (published by SPCK).
[336] Ibid.

prayer, understood in its widest sense and ranging from the highest contemplation to the most desperate cry for help, is that connection made and maintained. Only in prayer is man fully himself.

Since the centre is the place of unity and the source of all such peace and strength as we can know in our experience here, on the periphery, it is also the source of love; love's only source. Already, in our human experience, the lover's eye participates in the unifying clarity which belongs to all central (as against peripheral) vision.

The fact that some may think that what they saw when their sight was clarified was an illusion, a mere gloss on the ugly data of practical experience, alters nothing. For a person or a thing is, in truth, what God sees; not what we see with a cold eye, an avaricious heart, and a jaundiced temper. Recounting the tale of Layla and Majnun, the heroic lovers of Islamic tradition, Rumi tells how Layla was brought before the Ruler and how he said to her: 'Art thou she by whom Majnun was distracted and led astray? Thou art no better than other fair ones'. 'Be silent', she said, 'for thou art not Majnun!'

All that has been said of viceregal power and of that shabby King of the Castle who tends the crumbling walls while the waves eat them away and all that has been said about responsibility as a dimension of our lives which cannot be measured against the standards which this world provides pre-supposes a doctrine of man's nature in terms of which his everyday personality is no more than the tip of an iceberg. It assumes his rootedness in a central place untouched by the winds and the tides we know and implies that the castle over which he rules is important only for the patterns which it briefly embodies in sand.

Meanwhile the supposed masters of this world, the leaders who have fought their way to the top of the human pile (and must fight without respite to stay on top), are too enmeshed in the processes now at work to look up for a moment from their eighteen-hour-day labours and see where they are going. Responding as best they can to crisis following upon crisis, and faced with logistic and administrative problems which are becoming increasingly unmanageable, they cannot afford to cultivate the lover's eye or the vision of the God-centred man.

They are no less competent than the average man-in-the-street, whom they officially represent, but the demands made upon their time and energy would incapacitate better men than these and effectively prevent them from giving serious thought to any issue. Yet it is not necessity which makes these demands. They are galvanised into ceaseless activity by a fever for change which is self-generating and serves no purpose. More and more laws are made for the sake of law-

making; more and more interference in every aspect of human life prevents anything from functioning in accordance with its own nature; solid buildings are pulled down so that shoddy ones may be put up, and everything is out-of-date by the time it is ready for use.

In the grip of this fever and seized by the momentum of the world's descending course, they pull their carts as blinkered horses, seeing nothing but the small stretch of road immediately ahead. To stop now, even to pause for breath, would bring the turning wheels to a halt. To attempt to reverse the process or to check its gathering momentum would be to destroy the modern world as we know it. So the process continues, and its momentum increases.

Anyone who could fling himself out of the vehicle and, in some last sanctuary, stand at the still centre of the world might expect to hear a huge din of overheated metal fading into the distance, in the direction of nothingness; a juggernaut with its great load of human souls.

And still, in the midst of unprecedented change, flurry, and pandemonium, the human situation remains what it always was. Man is still either Viceroy or usurper, still noble when he achieves beauty of form both within himself and in his environment, and still able to look upon Layla with the eyes of Majnun. And Truth is what it has always been: accessible, in varying degrees, to those who focus their attention, their love, and their deepest hunger in the right direction.

To say that it is possible for man to have access to the truth and so to pass beyond the region of mere opinion is to take great risks. The tolerance so highly valued in a number of Western countries rests upon a kind of agreement that no one can really be sure of anything and that all sincere opinions should therefore be respected. This, at least, is the theory. In practice there are many opinions which are firmly censored, and anyone in Britain or the United States today who expresses views totally at variance with the contemporary climate of opinion soon comes up against the limits of 'tolerance'. The fact remains, however, that the ideology of our time cannot admit that some people may be right in an absolute sense and others may be totally wrong.

There are good reasons for this. It is no longer commonly believed that the world, with all its business, rests in the hands of God. People think that everything depends upon themselves, or at least upon chosen leaders no better than themselves; they see some of the dangers which surround us—not least that of physical annihilation in nuclear war—and hope that if we all keep very quiet, do nothing to 'rock the boat', and tolerate evil and error for the sake of peace (or *detente*) we may

survive. Unfortunately this is not an attitude shared by enemies of the free society, who tend to regard peace as a strategem of war and recognise weakness when they see it.

At the root of the contemporary gospel of tolerance lies a conviction that our earthly life is all that matters and that the peaceful ordering of human society takes precedence over every other consideration. The priests who fixed their gaze beyond the temporal realm are gone. So are the knights, the warriors, who valued glory and honour above life itself. Only the bourgeoisie and the proletariat remain, and for them piggery and trough are the sole reality. In this context a man's worth can be assessed only in terms of his usefulness to the society in which he happens to find himself, regardless of whether that society has any intrinsic worth in terms of our ultimate end, our *raison d'etre*.

Truth, by its very nature, disturbs the peace when it breaks in upon the realm of error and relativity, taking possession of human minds which are by definition partial, limited, and easily swayed by passion. In West Africa the tale is told of a trickster divinity, Edshu, one of those trouble-makers found in a number of mythologies who set snares for the foolish and, at the same time, enlighten the wise. This same Edshu walked one day down the path between two fields wearing a hat that was red on one side, white on the other, green in front and black behind (these being, for the Yoruba people, the colours of the four directions or four compass points). The farmers watched him pass and, meeting that evening in the village, discussed the odd-looking stranger they had seen. 'A little fellow in a red hat,' said one. 'Red? Nonsense! It was a white hat.' Another: 'Green!' And another: 'Black!' The farmers came to blows, each knowing himself to be right, and they were brought before the headman for judgment. Now Edshu revealed himself, complete with multicoloured hat; deceptive dancer, trickster, prankster.

Until 'Edshu' reveals himself, can we blame men for fighting on behalf of their partial truths? Passionate attachment to a particular formulation (and for many temperaments there can be no faith without passion) often involves intolerance towards other, complementary formulations; but to replace this narrow fervour with a tolerance based on agnosticism and indifference to everything that really matters is to substitute a greater evil for a lesser one.

Good will does not require us to overestimate the intelligence of ordinary people, whether in the West or elsewhere. Stupidity exists. Stupid people exist, and it is pointless to pretend (from a misplaced principle of charity) that they do not or should not exist. Now it is undeniable that the stupid believer, unless he has a quite uncommonly gentle disposition, is intolerant by nature. At least this is

preferable to his being a stupid unbeliever. He has got hold of the right end of the stick, even if he is incapable of understanding what kind of stick this is. So long as he holds to it he will be drawn to the right destination.

The man who has grasped one aspect of the truth, seeing—for example—that 'Edshu's' hat is red (or green, as the case may be) has made effective contact with reality. He may have a long way to go, but at least he is not marooned in the desert. If we tell him that he is indeed right, but only up to a point (certainly the hat is red, but it is also green) we may leave him so confused that he no longer knows true from false. A certain narrowness of view can have a protective function and therefore has a right to exist, but we pay a price for this in terms of human conflict.

The risk, the potentiality for disorder in the social realm, which is inseparable from faith in an absolute truth, attaches also to the doctrine of viceregal responsibility. If jobholders and petty officials are to take it upon themselves to question (whether inwardly or actively, according to circumstances) the orders they receive and the policies they are required to implement, we are indeed on dangerous ground. How is the machine to function unless its servants put aside all personal judgment and all sense of individual responsibility?

One can only reply that the question is irrelevant. We were not created to make such a machine work or to behave as automata in a collectivity. It is essential that first things should be put first. A civilisation which does not obey this simple and obvious rule—within the limits of the possible—carries within itself the seeds of its own necessary destruction. There is little point in trying to preserve the furniture from damage if the result of our efforts is to bring the house down.

In any case, however much we may hanker after comfort and security, we have to face the fact that under the peculiar conditions of this age and, above all, under the conditions likely to be imposed in our children's time, there are many worse things than disorder; and we do well to recall the nature of the obedience that made possible the existence and smooth-functioning of the Nazi concentration camps and the Soviet labour camps. What is most feared under present conditions is anything that interferes with the process which is carrying us so swiftly downstream. Organisational man wants a quiet life, freedom from real responsibility, an artificial world in which nothing is left to chance and, quite particularly, the absence of 'difficult' people who create 'complications'. We are under no obligation to give him what he wants.

What is being attempted in contemporary societies is the achievement of the kind of order and predictability that is characteristic of the machine, and this involves closing all the doors and windows

through which a wayward breeze might bring disorder and unpredictability. Just as the laws with which our societies are encumbered are, in so many cases, designed to prevent a very few people from gaining an 'unfair' advantage over their fellows, so the structure of these societies is increasingly determined by the desire to eliminate risk from human life. It is no coincidence that a world which goes to such lengths to play safe now faces dangers greater and more threatening than any known in the past.

We do better to face the natural and, in a sense, providential hazards inherent in our condition as human beings, rather than huddle together in a hygienic prison of our own making. There is no freedom that is not open to abuse, and abuses cannot be abolished without abolishing the freedom we need to become what we are. The history of human sanctity, both in the Islamic world and in Christendom, suggests that civil disorder, social injustice, the breakdown of amenities, or the disintegration of central authority have not, in the past, been an obstacle to the achievement of man's true end. The real threat comes from a society which attempts to be all-embracing—in effect, 'totalitarian', however democratic its forms—since such a society threatens, by its pseudo-absolute claims, to suffocate those elements in man which are by their nature fitted to take him on his 'second journey', the only journey that truly matters.

We are, indeed, outwardly and partially social animals and, through one aspect of our multiform nature, members of a herd; but this is not the whole story nor anything like the whole story. Each of us stands alone before God, as though the earth were a desert in which no other man or woman was to be found; and each of us is alone in death as though there had never been companions, husbands, wives, children. Alone, too, in pain and in our inmost and incommunicable thoughts.

'Now have you come unto us, solitary as We created you at the first, and you have left what We conferred upon you behind your backs, and We see not with you those—your intercessors—of whom you claimed that they possessed a share in you. Now is the bond between you broken, and that which you counted upon has failed you.'[337]

When all is said and done, each goes his own way. The parents who were once all people to him fade into the shadows, young love becomes a sentimental memory, children grow up and take their leave, and old friends die. This man plods on, and only one thing does not change: the choice he has, the choice he makes while it is still his to make.

[337] Quran, 6:94.

The Hindus speak of 'the human state hard to obtain', and their doctrine illuminates much that might seem obscure in the Muslim and Christian teaching that human life presents a stark alternative: win or lose all. For the Hindus, a being may pass through numberless states of existence—or, allegorically speaking, numberless 'births'—before reaching the moment of truth, the human state, and standing upright before the door which offers an exit from imprisonment in the chain of 'transmigration'. To arrive at this door after such long travail and refuse to pass through it is therefore a kind of suicide. It is as though a man, surfacing briefly as he is carried along in a rushing stream, were offered the means of coming to dry land yet missed this opportunity only to be submerged again in the raging waters.

Such doctrine may seem foreign to our thought, but here is a solid English voice speaking: 'A life devoted to the interests and enjoyments of this world … may be truly called a dream as having all the shortness, vanity, and delusion of a dream; only with this great difference: that when the dream is over nothing is lost but fictions and fantasies; but when the dream of life is ended by death, all that eternity is lost for which we were brought into being.'[338]

In so many different languages and in terms of different symbolisms it is said that a door onto all that lies beyond our 'bubble' opens when we are born. At death the door closes, the way is barred. There are therefore no words to describe the loss suffered by those who slide through their human life, getting by as best they can and content to do no better than this.

We are fashioned for passing through this door and an awareness of the reality behind the dream is implanted in our deepest nature, though for the most part only in embryonic form. A human environment, a culture or a political system, can only be judged in terms of whether it develops and nourishes this awareness or kills it. Children and adolescents, unless warped by an evil heredity or by quite monstrous circumstances, have a sense of glory which is, in essence, an inkling of what lies beyond the door, outside our 'bubble'. It is the nature of the modern world first to stultify and then to destroy this sense of the sublime (a word which is, significantly, among the most devalued in our language), doing so in the name of 'realism' and 'common sense'. Those whose eyes are thick-horned with cataract assure the sighted—immature and suggestible as they are—that their vision has nothing to do with the real world; and this monstrous process makes use both of the adult's gravity (for he takes life seriously) and his humour (for he takes it 'with a grain of salt').

[338] William Law.

Such humour is often no more than a malign instrument for pulling down all that is high and noble through belittlement and trivialisation, a mockery rooted in fear and expressed as a nervous snigger in the face of immensity. There is no fun in it and no joy. But the young are terribly vulnerable to its corroding effects. They do not know how to cope with a mockery directed against dreams and feelings and intimations associated with an innocence which seems to find no echo and no response in the adult world. The want, after all, to qualify for entry into that world as soon as possible and, for lack of any better model, they must believe that this poor wisdom—narrow, obtuse, and short-sighted—is the badge of maturity.

There is, on the other hand, a different kind of humour which serves a useful, sanitizing function in puncturing worldly pretensions and, perhaps, in cutting the adult world down to size. An irreligious age is also an age of sentimental idealism, of self-important people, and pretentious trivialities; and, having lost so much, the humanist finds it necessary to pretend that men and women are wiser than they really are, 'nicer' and less selfish than the facts suggest.

The boy or girl whose inarticulate sense of glory is dismissed as no more than a symptom of immaturity, is nonetheless encouraged to believe palpable untruths about the adult world. The young are not so easily deceived and, before they consent to join the charade (persuaded that there is no alternative), they suffer a disillusionment which, only too often, spreads like a stain until it encompasses the noble as such, the sublime as such. It is a sad thing that so many modern Christians—forgetting that Christ himself said: 'Why callest thou me good? none is good save one, that is God'—make a virtue of sentimental falsehoods and therefore discredit religion as such in the eyes of the young. A proven liar is not readily believed when he tells the truth.

The sense of glory is therefore threatened both by a cynicism which claims to be realistic and by an idealism which refuses to accept the facts of human nature. Not that it could remain intact through the passage of the years. At the start it may be no more than a child's joy in a new present, the excitement of a holiday in a place full of wonders, or the miracle of first love. All this must wither away unless transformed into a sense of the sacred, nourished, stabilised and perpetuated through contact with an authentic religious tradition. But if the sense of glory is strangled at birth there can be no transformation. A fragile sapling, it requires the company of great trees if it is to come to maturity. Its truth needs to be confirmed and reinforced, as it is when the babble of present-day voices is silenced by the great voices out of our human past and when certitude, established in authority, stands firm against all passing opinions. 'The most ignorant of all people', said a

thirteenth century sufi Master, 'is the one who abandons the certitude he has for the opinion people have.'[339] Just so do the young grow into ignorance.

But the sense of the sacred implies a sense of awe, and one would have to be either more than human or less than human for fear not to have some part in this. The child knows fear as he knows glory. The mature man unites a noble fear—for how could something so small not fear the Tremendous?—with his sense of the sacred. 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the holy is understanding', said the Psalmist, underlining the connection between fear and intellectual clarity. The fear of God,' says Schuon, 'is no more a matter of sentiment than is the love of God; like love, which is the tendency of our whole being towards transcendent Reality, fear is an attitude of the intelligence and of the will: it consists in taking account, at each moment, of a Reality which infinitely surpasses us, against which we can do nothing, opposing which we could not live, and from whose teeth we cannot escape.'[340]

Only the very simple, who trust as a child trusts ('I am too little to damn myself', said St. Therese of Lisieux) may think of God entirely without fear. Ultimately, no doubt, love casts out—or absorbs—fear, but this in no way alters the fact that fear is the realistic and rectifying point of departure. Nor is there understanding at any level without knowledge of the holy, at once lovable and awe-inspiring, since understanding cannot exist in the context of ignorance of that which is the supreme object of knowledge. It might be added that the fear of God casts out lesser fears, whereas love of God enriches and perpetuates lesser loves provided they are subordinated to it.

If it is stupid not to fear what is to be feared and not to love what is to be loved, the very root of stupidity is located in the lack of self-knowledge. Above all, to be quite unaware of our own weakness and of our dependence upon other-than-self is to be incapable of sound and realistic judgment in any sphere.

Modern man refuses to acknowledge his need for Mercy, his need for forgiveness, and his total dependence upon other-than-himself. The Edwardian poet who wrote, 'I am the Master of my Fate, the Captain of my Soul' was a lonely and neurotic cripple who deserves recognition as a great ironist; precisely because the absurdity of this claim stands out so clearly in Henley's case we can detect the corresponding absurdity in other, less immediately obvious cases. For all their addiction to psychology, our contemporaries dare not see either themselves or others in a clear light, hence

[339] *Hikam* of Ibn Ata' illah (E. J. Brill, Leiden).
[340] *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts:* Frithjof Schuon (Faber & Faber), p. 207.

the lethal combination of cynicism and idealism which tears them apart. They cannot believe in anything and yet they must believe in something; and this is a plain invitation to fantasy and illusion, which come flooding in to fill the space left behind by departing religious faith.

Even so, there is a corrective always close at hand. Pain, misfortune, and bitter loss break in to awaken the man of our time from the slumberous passage of the days and to bring him face to face with an aspect of reality. This is always a moment of truth and therefore a moment of choice. He may, of course, burrow even deeper into the dream-haunted darkness, like a child diving under the sheets and making himself very small; but it is also possible that he will, in such a moment of truth, emerge from the coverings which define the *kafir*'s situation and, in the unfamiliar land of real choice, seek for a direction, a way out, an answer.

Unless he combines folly and arrogance in so potent a combination that he imagines he can invent his own religion (in which case he is back under the covers again), he has no alternative but to turn to traditional religion and re-examine his forgotten heritage. His education and the conditioning of the period are likely to make this an act of condescension, in which case he will expect the full welcome accorded to the prodigal son. He may be disappointed. Moreover he will find no justification, in the religious doctrines which have come down to us, for picking and choosing in terms of personal taste and personal prejudices or for sifting through a religious doctrine in the hope of stealing certain 'nuggets of wisdom' which might come in useful. To possess what he wants to possess he will have to accept a great deal that he never thought he wanted.

If he is sincere it must be assumed that he has some desire to escape from the prison in which he finds himself rather than to prettify his familiar cell with a few embroidered mottos. To come out from this cell and from the vicious circle in which he finds himself trapped he will have to leave behind a whole complex of thoughts and prejudices (reflecting the current climate of opinion), together with many personal desires and ambitions. One does not slip out of prison with a cluster of suitcases; and if this escape were not, to some extent, a leap in the dark it would not be an escape.

There can be no new growth unless the ground is cleared. Our minds and hearts are so clogged with false opinions and false desires that there is a great deal of clearing to be done. This seemingly negative task is the essential chore upon which all positive spiritual progress depends. It cannot be undertaken without divine grace, but no man can say with certainty

where personal effort ends and the activity of grace begins, and it is not our business to be over-concerned with this demarcation. We do what we can because it is what we can do. The rest is out of our hands.

There remains, however, what is probably the greatest of all obstacles facing the man whose mind and personality are moulded by this age: a profound distaste for the paraphernalia of organised religion and for its readiness to temporise with the forces of this world.

So far as the institutional side of religion is concerned, this is the necessary basis for its existence through the ages. An abstract and disembodied spirituality disappears like a whiff of smoke when the wind blows hard upon it, and institutions have a protective function which is, in practical terms, indispensable (whether we like it or not). One of the first things a man must know about himself is the fragility of his existence, which can be ended by a pin-prick, an air bubble in the blood, or a moment's inadvertence; and the institutions which embody traditional values are scarcely less vulnerable. People think it easy to survive in this world—easy for the human soul, easy for the Word of God—and seem not to realise how much depends upon the survival of certain repositories of truth and of divine grace (crystallised, as it were, in religious forms) in an environment entirely hostile to the other-worldly.

To withstand the destructive tide of time it is necessary to exercise certain practical skills, not least in the political realm, and compromise is both necessary and legitimate, always provided it does not extend to falsifying doctrine or tolerating systems and ideologies which kill the spirit. We do not live in a bland or sunny place, but in the midst of turbulent seas and clashing rocks. There have been periods of history when this fact might be overlooked. It can scarcely be ignored today.

Before, for example, condemning the historical manoeuvres of the Catholic Church or the 'political' Popes we do well to remember that, had there been no such strategems, there might by now be nothing left and little or no hope for men and women born into the Western world at this late stage. At the same time, there is always the danger that the Church, finding itself a prisoner of the unbeliever's world, may behave like those inmates of the concentration camps who came to accept their guards' scale of values and to cooperate willingly with the system. Here everything is a matter of judgment and tactics, governed by an implacable integrity.

The fact remains that there are many people born in our time who have no clear and immediate access to an authentic religious tradition. It may still be natural for the man born into

the sector of the world shaped by almost two thousand years of Christianity to seek a traditional framework and spiritual home in Catholicism or in the Eastern Orthodox Church; but under present conditions, when competent spiritual directors are hard to find outside the monasteries and when the acid of modernism has bitten so deeply into the structure of the Churches, he may be frustrated in his search. Providence, however, has provided compensations for the decline of spirituality in our time; the destruction of the barriers which formerly separated one traditional 'world' from another has made it possible for us to look further afield if we must.

Those who do so run very real risks, like tourists wandering innocently in an unfamiliar land. They may expect to meet 'gurus' who claim to offer easy access to the peaks of Hinduism quite outside the enduring body of the Hindu tradition, neo-Buddhists who have little acquaintance with the orthodox schools of Buddhism, 'sufis' who have turned their backs on Islamic orthodoxy, and even certain 'geniuses' who have borrowed bits and pieces from every religion under the sun (adding a little magic for good measure) and offer some brand new religion to the brand new people of this age. One way or another, these false prophets make their appeal to pride and ignorance, inflating the ego with a poisonous wind. One need only place such 'masters' and their adepts beside an old peasant telling his beads to make a very fair guess as to which is the more likely to be pleasing to God.

Even so there are certain people who find themselves compelled, under the quite abnormal circumstances of our time, to turn away from the Christian heritage and to seek their home in Islam, Buddhism, or elsewhere. Only in appearance is this a choice made by the individual; in truth the choice is made for him, the way indicated by unmistakeable signs, and the matter concluded without too much fuss. But no one should assume, from the doctrine of the transcendent unity of the religions, that there are no real differences between them. If this were so, they would have no *raison d'etre*. Each represents a unique Revelation and a unique perspective, and each creates around it a unique psychological and emotional climate, moulding the most intimate contours of the human personality.

Unity between the religions lies at the centre or, in effect, at the journey's end. Here and now diversity predominates and, as we have already seen, one perspective necessarily excludes all others on the purely human level; a man cannot be in two places at once. It is no more possible to mix the religions together and produce some kind of Highest Common Denominator than it is to express oneself eloquently in a mixture of Arabic, Sanskrit, and Latin. No one denies that the same truths

may be expressed in any one of these different languages, but no one imagines that the vocabularies are the same.

From the firm standpoint of his own religion, however, anyone can look around and find both confirmation of his faith and illumination of his doctrine in other shapes of wisdom as he does in the divine messages imprinted upon the phenomena of nature and of destiny. 'All wisdom', say the Muslims, 'is the believer's lost camel'. Whatever our path—provided it is authentic and founded upon Revelation—we have an owner's rights over every riding beast and every milk-giver that comes our way. Adhere to one synthesis of the human heritage, and you have access to the whole of that heritage and may seek knowledge in every corner of the globe.

Just as surely as they seek the treasures of this world, men seek the truth, though often enough they fall asleep on the way or are diverted by counterfeits and forget where they were going. It is as much our nature to look upwards as it is the cow's nature to look down at the grass she is cropping. But to follow our nature in this respect means to conform ourselves to the human Norm and, in an entirely abnormal age, this is hard, uphill work. Spiritual life is not theory, although it is the more firmly established when backed by theory; it is not sentimentality, although it requires the support of sentiment, nor idealism, although it makes use of our capacity for idealism. Spiritual life is primarily an effort to drag our attention away from the pandemonium and uproar which rivet it and to turn towards the 'open', towards the splendour of the Real. It is also a work of transformation—alchemist's work—since our leaden nature is to be turned into gold, a metal fit for heaven.

Every day is a good day to begin this work, but every day provides its crop of reasons for delay and hesitation—we are busy, we have problems—and time passes. We behave, many of us, like senile old people who, when the house is on fire, mumble over small possessions, fuss and natter, while their end roars all about their ears.

It is said in Islam that when a man takes one step towards God, then God himself comes down from the Throne of Power and Dominion and takes ten steps towards this man. The taking of that first step however requires both a child's spontaneity and a grown man's decisiveness; one must indeed 'become as a little child', undoing all the false maturity which was so ill done and learning to walk again. The man who is truly seized by the sense of the sacred and by the 'divine attraction', as iron shavings are drawn to a magnet, is concerned with the object of his love, the infinitely desirable Beauty, which he recognises again and again in all contingent and delegated loveliness. We have been

given eyes, and we must look; ears, and we must listen. There is much to be seen and heard if we are attentive and not entirely absorbed in the buzzing of our own thoughts and the itch of our own needs. But, above all, we have been given the power of movement—'Had We willed it so, We would indeed have fixed them in their place, unable to go forward ,' says the Quran—and the power of decision. Having taken a first step, it is by placing one foot in front of the other that we advance; and it is by travelling that we arrive.

Seen from here it may look like a hard journey and a lonely one; yet none can number the multitude who have gone before us on this way and reached the other shore, and we are told in so many traditions—in religious doctrine, in universal myths, and under the subtle disguise of 'fairy tales'—that the traveller, far from being alone, is surrounded by helpers and that the very forces which once seemed most hostile now come to his aid. So it is often said that he does not, in truth, leave the world behind him, but draws it after him into the pattern of unity and reconciliation for which it craved. The self-enclosed man is friendless in a necessarily hostile environment, whereas the traveller, like those ancient heroes who were aided in their moments of greatest peril by birds and beasts and plants, is nowhere rejected and everywhere at home.

'Just as it is the nature of fire to burn,' says a contemporary Buddhist writer, 'it is the nature of man—would he but remember it—to become Awake.' We sleep, troubled by a multiplicity of dreams, but the traveller walks towards an awakening in which are known, at last, and fully enjoyed the realities foreshadowed in his dreaming; until his night is done and an unimaginable daylight encompasses him.

It is from a man's choice between sleeping and waking or between drifting with the tide and making his way upstream that the pattern of his destiny is built up. Here we stand, as creatures made for choosing; and we do not know, until the veils are lifted, how much depended upon our choice.

25

Universal Eschatology

Frithjof Schuon

Eschatology is part of cosmology, and cosmology is a prolongation of metaphysics, which in turn is essentially the same as the *sophia perennis*. It may be asked by what right eschatology is part of this *sophia* since, epistemologically speaking, pure intellection does not seem to reveal our destinies beyond the grave, whereas it does reveal universal principles; in reality, however, the knowledge of these destinies is accessible thanks to the knowledge of principles or their correct application. In fact it is by comprehending the profound nature of subjectivity and not solely by the outward way of Revelation[341] that we can know the immortality of the soul, for to speak of total or central subjectivity—not partial and peripheral like that of animals—is to speak thereby of a capacity for objectivity, an intuition of the Absolute, and immortality.[342] And to say that we are immortal not only means that we existed before our human birth—for what has no end cannot have a beginning—but that we are subject to cycles; life is a cycle, and our former existence must also have been a cycle within a chain of cycles. Our future existence may also proceed by cycles; at least it is condemned to this if we have not been able to realize the purpose of the human state, which—precisely because it is central—allows us to escape from the "round of existences".

The human condition is the door to Paradise, to the cosmic Center, which—though forming a part of the manifested Universe—is nonetheless situated, thanks to the magnetic proximity of the divine Sun, beyond the rotation of the worlds and of destinies and thus beyond "transmigration". It is for this reason that "human birth is difficult to attain", according to a Hindu text; to be convinced of this, it is enough to consider the incommensurability between a center point and the innumerable points of the periphery.

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[341] Revelation, however, constitutes the occasional cause or initial condition of the corresponding intellection.
[342] As we have demonstrated on other occasions, above all in the chapter "Consequences Flowing from the Mystery of Subjectivity".

Some souls are fully or sufficiently conformed to the human vocation, and they therefore enter directly into Paradise; these are either the saints or the sanctified. In the first case they are great souls illumined by the divine Sun who are the dispensers of beneficent rays; in the second case they are souls that have neither faults of character nor worldly tendencies and are therefore free—or freed—from mortal sins and sanctified by the supernatural action of the means of grace which they have made their viaticum. Between the saints and the sanctified there are doubtless intermediary possibilities, but God alone is the judge of their position and rank.

Nevertheless, among the sanctified—those saved by a sanctification at once natural and supernatural[343]—some are not perfect enough to enter Paradise directly; hence they must await their maturity in a place which the theologians have termed an "honorable prison" but which in the opinion of Amidists is more than that, for according to them this place is located within Paradise itself; they compare it to a golden lotus bud, which opens when the soul is ripe. This state corresponds to the "limbo of the fathers" (*limbus* = "border") of Catholic doctrine; according to this very specific perspective, the righteous of the "Old Covenant" found themselves in this limbo before the Christ-Savior's "descent into hell"[344]—a conception above all symbolic and very simplistic, and yet perfectly adequate with regard to the principle and even literally true in cases that we need not define here, given the complexity of the problem.

After the "lotus" we must consider "purgatory" properly so called. The soul which is faithful to its human vocation and which is sincere and persevering in its moral and spiritual duties cannot fall into hell, but before entering Paradise it may have to pass through that intermediary and painful state which the Catholic doctrine calls "purgatory"; this it does if it has faults of character or worldly tendencies or if it is weighed down by a sin for which it has not been able to compensate by its moral and spiritual attitude or by the grace of a sacramental means. According to Islamic doctrine "purgatory" is a temporary abode in hell: God saves from the fire "whomsoever He wills", which is to say that He alone is judge of the imponderables of our nature, He alone knowing what our fundamental possibility or substance is. If there are Christian denominations that deny purgatory, it is for the same basic reason—because the souls

[343] This is not a contradiction, for the specific nature of man includes by definition certain elements that are receptive to the supernatural.

[344] All things considered, it is here that Dante places *de facto* the sages and heroes of antiquity, even though he makes them a part of his *Inferno* for theological reasons since they were "pagans".

of those who are not damned and who *ipso facto* are destined for salvation are in the hands of God and are His concern alone.

Regarding Paradise, it is necessary to take into account its "horizontal" regions as well as its "vertical" degrees; the first correspond to circular sections and the second to concentric circles. The first separate the various religious or confessional worlds from one another, and the second distinguish the various degrees within each of these worlds. On the one hand there is the *Brahmaloka* of the Hindus, for example, which is a place of salvation like the Heaven of Christians, although it does not coincide with it;[345] but on the other hand, within one and the same Paradise, the place of Beatitude reserved for simple saints or the "sanctified" is not the same as that of great saints. "In my Father's house are many mansions",[346] and yet there are no impenetrable barriers between the various degrees, for the "communion of saints" is a part of Beatitude;[347] there is no reason to maintain that communication is impossible between the various religious sectors, at least on the esoteric plane where it can have a meaning.[348]

Before going further we would like to make the following remark regarding eschatology in general: It has often been argued that neither Confucianism nor Shintoism explicitly accepts the ideas of the Hereafter and immortality, but this means very little since they do in fact have the cult of ancestors; if there were no afterlife, this cult would make no sense, and there would be no reason for an emperor of Japan to go to the tombs of departed emperors and solemnly inform their souls of this or that event. It is well known in any case that one of the characteristics of shamanistic traditions is the parsimony—though not the total absence—of eschatological information.

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[345] The Hindu Paradises from which one is expelled after the exhaustion of "good *karma*" are not places of salvation but of transient reward; they are "peripheral" not "central" and are located outside the human state since they pertain to transmigration.

[346] This saying contains implicitly an esoteric reference to the celestial sectors of the different religions.

[347] And let us specify that if there are degrees in Paradise, there are also rhythms, which the Koran expresses by saying that the blessed will have their nourishment "morning and evening". In any case there is no such thing as a world without hierarchic levels or cycles, that is, without "space" or "time".

[348] The possibility of inter-religious communication is borne out by the fact that one and the same personage, at once historical and celestial, can appear in different religions; this is the case with the Biblical Prophets, even though their functions differ according to the religion in which they are found.

We must now consider the infernal possibility, which maintains the soul in the human state, as well as the possibilities of "transmigration", which on the contrary cause the soul to leave this state. In the final analysis hell is also a phase of transmigration, but before releasing the soul into other phases or states it imprisons it "perpetually"—though not "eternally"; eternity belongs primarily to God alone, though also in a certain manner to Paradise because of the mystery of participation in the divine Immutability. Hell crystallizes a vertical fall; it is "invincible" because it lasts until the exhaustion of a certain cycle, whose duration is known only by God. Those who enter hell are not those who have sinned accidentally, "on the surface" so to speak, but those who have sinned substantially or with their "kernel", and this is a distinction that may not be perceptible from the outside; they are in any case the proud, the wicked, the hypocrites—hence all those who are the opposite of the saints and the sanctified.

Exoterically speaking, a man is damned because he does not accept a given Revelation, a given Truth, and does not obey a given Law; esoterically, he damns himself because he does not accept his own fundamental and primordial Nature, which dictates a given knowledge and a given comportment.[349] Revelation is none other than the objective and symbolic manifestation of the Light which man carries within himself in the depths of his being; it reminds him of what he is and of what he should be since he has forgotten what he is. If before their creation all human souls must attest that God is their Lord—the Koran says so explicitly[350]—it is because they know "pre-existentially" what the Norm is; for the human creature, to exist is to know "viscerally" what Being, Truth, and Law consist in; fundamental sin is a suicide of the soul.

It remains for us to speak of another possibility of the afterlife, namely "transmigration",[351] a possibility lying completely outside the "sphere of interest" of Semitic Monotheism, which is a kind of "nationalism of the human state" and which for this reason takes into consideration only what concerns the human being as such. Outside the human state— and

[349] "God wrongeth not mankind in aught; but mankind wrong themselves" (*Sūrah* "Jonah" [10]:44).

[350] "And (remember) when thy Lord brought forth from the Children of Adam, from their reins, their seed, and made them testify of themselves (saying): Am I not your Lord? They said: Yea, verily. We testify. (That was) lest ye should say at the Day of Resurrection: Lo! of this we were unaware; or lest ye should say: (It is) only (that) our fathers ascribed partners to God of old and we were (their) seed after them" (*Sūrah* "The Heights" [7]:172-73). These pre-existential creatures are the individual possibilities necessarily contained within All-Possibility and called forth to Existence—not produced by a moral Will—by existentiating Radiation.

[351] Not to be confused with metempsychosis, in which the psychic elements—perishable in principle—of a dead person graft themselves onto the soul of a living person, giving the illusion of a "reincarnation". The phenomenon is benefic or malefic depending on whether the psychism is good or bad, that of a saint or a sinner.

setting aside angels and demons[352]—there is only a sort of nothingness for this perspective; according to Monotheism, to be excluded from the human condition amounts to damnation. Nevertheless, between this point of view and that of the transmigrationists—Hindus and Buddhists especially—there is a point of connection, namely, the Catholic notion of the "limbo of infants", where those who have died without baptism are said to abide without suffering; now this place or condition is none other than transmigration through worlds other than our own and consequently through nonhuman states, inferior or superior as the case may be.[353] "For wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat": Since Christ could not have meant that most men go to hell and since "destruction" in monotheistic and Semitic language also means leaving the human state, one is obliged to conclude that this saying concerns in fact the mass of the lukewarm and worldly, including unbelievers who benefit from extenuating circumstances; these are souls which do not love God and which deserve, if not hell, then at least expulsion from that privileged state which is man—privileged because it provides immediate access to paradisiacal Immortality. As a matter of fact the "paganisms" offered access to the Elysian Fields or the Isles of the Blessed only to initiates in the Mysteries, not to the mass of the profane, and the case of the "transmigrationist" religions is more or less similar. The fact that transmigration almost always begins—when setting out from the human state—with a kind of purgatory clearly reinforces the image of "destruction", that is, a definitive disgrace from the human point of view.

Aside from its intrinsic purpose, the baptism of newborns is intended to save them from this disgrace, and it has *de facto* the effect of keeping them within the human state if they die, which in their case will be a paradisiacal state; for all intents and purposes this outcome—which the "nationalism of the human state" has in mind—coincides with the celestial end that the sacrament intends for adults; Muslims pronounce the Testimony of Faith in the ear of the newborn with precisely the same motive, a practice which evokes the whole mystery of the

[352] Islam also acknowledges the *jinn*, "spirits", such as the elementals—gnomes, water-spirits, sylphs, salamanders—and other immaterial creatures, which are sometimes attached to mountains, caves, trees, and sanctuaries; they intervene in white or black magic, that is, in either therapeutic shamanism or sorcery.

[353] In other words, either "peripheral" or "central", like the state of animals in the first case or like that of men in the second; the fact that there is something absolute in the human state—just as there is something absolute in the geometric point—precludes the evolutionist and transformist hypothesis. Like earthly creatures, angels are also either "peripheral" or "central"; either they personify a divine Quality, which confers upon them both a given perfection and a given limitation, or they reflect the divine Being itself, in which case they are fundamentally one: This is the "Spirit of God", the celestial *Logos*, which is refracted among the Archangels and inspires the Prophets.

sacramental power of the *Mantra*. The motivation is just the opposite in the very special case of the voluntary transmigration of *bodhisattva*s, which passes only through states that are "central" and thus analogous to the human state; for the *bodhisattva* does not desire to remain within the "golden prison" of the human Paradise but instead seeks to radiate in nonhuman worlds until the end of the great cosmic cycle. This is a possibility which Monotheism excludes and which is in fact confined to *Mahāyāna* Buddhism—though without being obligatory for all Mahayanists, even saints; Amidists in particular aspire only to the Paradise of Amitabha, which in practical terms is equivalent to the Hindu *Brahmaloka* and the Paradise of monotheistic religions and which is not considered a "celestial dead end", if one may put it this way, but on the contrary a virtuality of *Nirvāna*.

There is another aspect of the problem of destinies beyond the grave that cannot be passed over in silence. Theology—Islamic as well as Christian—teaches that animals are included in the "resurrection of the flesh",[354] but whereas human beings are sent to either Paradise or hell, animals will be reduced to a state of dust, for they are not assumed to have an "immortal soul"; this opinion is based on the fact that the Intellect is not actualized in animals, hence the absence of the rational faculty and language. In reality the infra-human position of the animals does not mean that their subjectivity is unaffected by the law of *karma* and unconnected to the "wheel of births and deaths";[355] even the various vegetable species—though not a given isolated plant—are subject to this law, for each of them corresponds to an individuality, though it is not always possible to discern the limits of a species and what groups amount merely to modalities of it.

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[354] Bodily death and the subsequent separation of body and soul resulted from the fall of the first human couple, a provisional situation to be rectified only at the end of this cosmic cycle—except in the case of certain privileged beings such as Enoch, Elijah, Christ, and the Virgin, who mounted up to Heaven with their bodies "transfigured".

[355] In Sufism it is "unofficially" agreed that particularly blessed animals were able to enter Paradise by following their masters, who were full of a *barakah* of exceptional power; all things considered this is not at all implausible. As for the question of knowing whether there are animals in Heaven, we cannot deny that there are, and this is because the animal world—like the vegetable world that constitutes the Heavenly "Garden" (*Jannah*)—is part of the natural human environment; but neither the paradisiacal animals nor the plants of the "Garden" need to come from the terrestrial world. According to Muslim theologians, the plants and animals of Heaven have been created then and there for the elect, which amounts to saying that they are of a quasi-angelic substance; "and God knoweth best".

We have distinguished five posthumous outcomes of earthly human life: Paradise, limbo-lotus, purgatory, limbo-transmigration, hell. The first three outcomes maintain the human state; the fourth brings one out of it; the fifth maintains it only to bring one out of it ultimately. Paradise and the lotus are beyond suffering; purgatory and hell are states of suffering in varying degrees; transmigration does not necessarily involve suffering for the *bodhisattva*s, but it is a mixture of pleasure and pain in other cases. Or again: There are two places of waiting for Paradise, one gentle and one rigorous, namely, the lotus and purgatory; and there are two exclusions from Paradise, also one gentle and the other rigorous, namely, transmigration and hell; in both of these latter cases the human condition is lost, either all at once as in the case of transmigration or ultimately as in that of hell. As for Paradise, it is the blessed summit of the human state, and strictly speaking it has no symmetrical opposite, notwithstanding certain simplifying schematizations that have a moral purpose;[356] for the Absolute—to which the celestial world pertains "by adoption"—has no opposite, except in appearance.

Eternity belongs to God alone, as we have said; but we have also alluded to the fact that what is called "eternity" in the case of hell is not the same as in the case of Paradise, for there is no symmetry between these two domains, the one feeding upon cosmic illusion and the other being nourished by divine Proximity. Paradisiacal perpetuity is nonetheless relative by the very nature of things in the sense that it opens onto the *Apocatastasis*, through which all positive phenomena return to their Archetypes *in divinis*; but in this there is neither loss nor privation, first because God never gives less than He promises or never promises more than He intends to give and second—or rather above all—because of the divine Plenitude, which can lack nothing.

Considered in this light, Paradise is really eternal;[357] the end of the "manifested" and "extra-principial" world is a cessation only from the point of view of the limiting agency of manifestation, but not from the standpoint of intrinsic and total Reality, which on the contrary allows beings to become again "infinitely" what they are in their Archetypes and in their single Essence.

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[356] The cosmic "opposite" of Paradise is not only hell but also transmigration, a fact that illustrates the transcendence and independence of Paradise. Let us add that there are *ahādīth* testifying to the disappearance—or the final emptiness—of hell; "watercress will spring up therein," the Prophet is supposed to have said, and also that God will pardon even the worst of sinners.

[357] Which is indicated in Sufism by the expression "Garden of the Essence", *Jannat al-Dhāt*; this Garden divinely transcends the "Gardens of the Qualities", *Jannat al-Sifāt*.

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All of our preceding observations may seem arbitrary and imaginative in the highest degree to anyone still clinging to that immense simplification which is the scientistic perspective; but they become quite plausible when one acknowledges the authority of various traditional data—and we need not return here to the validity of this authority, which coincides with the very nature of the "naturally supernatural" phenomenon that Tradition constitutes in all its forms—and when one knows how to draw from human subjectivity all the immediate and far-reaching consequences it implies. It is precisely this subjectivity—this mystery of dazzling self-evidence—that modern philosophers, including the most pretentious psychologists, have never been able to grasp nor wished to grasp, which is not at all surprising since it offers the key to metaphysical truths as well as mystical experiences, both of which demand from us all that we are.

"Know thyself," said the inscription on the temple at Delphi;[358] the same is expressed by this *hadīth*: "Whoso knoweth his soul knoweth his Lord"; and similarly the *Veda*: "Thou art That", namely *Ātmā*, the Self at once transcendent and immanent, which projects itself into a myriad of relative subjectivities, themselves subject to cycles as well as localizations and extending from the least flower to that direct Manifestation of the Divine which is the *Avatāra*.

[358] Recorded by Thales, then commented upon by Socrates.

XI

Islam

26

Sufi Doctine and Method

Martin Lings

Martin Lings (1909-2005), a student and lifelong friend of C. S. Lewis, was for many years Keeper of Oriental Manuscripts in the British Museum. Translator, editor, Arabist, and poet, Lings was the author of a widely acclaimed biography of Muhammad, but he is best known for his writings on Sufism and on the esoteric meanings of Shakespeare's plays.

The Doctrine

All doctrine is related to the mind; but mystical doctrine, which corresponds to the Lore of Certainty, is a summons to the mind to transcend itself. The Divine Name *Allāh* is the synthesis of all truth and therefore the root of all doctrine, and as such it offers certainty to the Heart and to those elements of the soul which are nearest the Heart. But being a synthesis, it cannot in itself meet the needs of the mind; and so, in order that the whole intelligence including the mind may participate in the spiritual path, the Name as it were holds out a hand to the mental faculties, an extension of itself, which offers them lore as well as certainty and which, in addition to being a synthesis, has an analytical aspect on which they can work. This extension of the Name is the divinely revealed testification (*shahādah*) that there is *no god but God* (*lā ilāha illā 'Llāh*).[359]

No god but God: for the mind it is a formulation of truth; for the will it is an injunction with regard to truth; but for the Heart and its intuitive prolongations of certainty it is a single synthesis, a Name of Truth, belonging as such to the highest category of Divine Names. This synthetic aspect makes itself felt even when the *Shahādah* is taken in its analytical sense, for the synthesis is always there in the background, ever ready as it were to reabsorb the formulation back into itself. Thus while necessarily inviting analysis, as it must, the *Shahādah* seems in a sense to defy analysis. It is both open and closed, obvious and enigmatic; and even in its obviousness it is something of a stranger to the mind, which it dazzles with its exceeding simplicity and clarity, just as it also dazzles because it reverberates with hidden implications. Very relevant are the following lines about the Divine Essence:

'It is Hidden in Its Own

[359] One of the reasons why the Name as an invocation is 'greatest' is that, by refusing to address itself to the mind, it compels the centre of consciousness to recede inwards in the direction of the Heart.

Outward Manifestation wherein It doth appear
As Veil after Veil made to cover Its Glory.'[360]

Analogously, the essential meaning of the *Shahādah* is veiled by its outer meanings. One such veil, as the author of the above lines remarks elsewhere, is the meaning 'none is worshipable but God'; and he adds that this meaning can be a veil so thick as to make it difficult even for a would-be Sufi to see the meaning which lies at the root of all Sufi doctrine.

To understand this deepest meaning it is necessary to bear in mind that each of the Names of the Divine Essence comprises in Itself, like *Allāh*, the totality of Names and does not merely denote a particular Divine Aspect. The Names of the Essence are thus in a sense interchangeable with *Allāh*, and one such Name is *al-Haqq*, Truth, Reality. We can just as well say that there is no truth but the Truth, no reality but the Reality, as that there is no god but God. The meaning of all these is identical. Every Muslim is obliged to believe in theory that there is no reality but the Reality, namely God; but it is only the Sufis, and not even all those who are affiliated to Sufi orders, who are prepared to carry this formulation to its ultimate conclusion. The doctrine based on that conclusion is termed 'Oneness of Being', for Reality is that which is, as opposed to that which is not; and if God alone is Real, God alone *is*, and there is no being but His Being. It will now be apparent why it was said that the doctrine pre-supposes at least some virtual degree of certainty in the soul, for the mind that is left to itself, unaided by any ray of intellectual intuition, will be in danger of supposing this term to mean that God is the sum of all existing things. But Absolute Oneness excludes not only addition but also division. According to the Islamic doctrine of Unity, the Divine Infinitude is without parts. The Name *Ahad* (One), for full justice to be done to its meaning, must be translated 'the Indivisible One-and-Only'. The doctrine of Oneness of Being means that what the eye sees and the mind records is an illusion, and that every apparently separate and finite thing is in Truth the Presence of the One Infinite. *Wheresoever ye turn, there is the Face of God. Verily God is the Infinitely Vast, the Infinitely Knowing*, says the Qur'an;[361] and the Name of Omniscience is added here to the Name of Omnipresence partly as an argument: if the Divinity knows everything, it follows that the Divinity must be everywhere, for in the

[360] The Shaykh al-'Alawi, *Diwān*, quoted in *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, p. 220.

[361] II: 115

Absolute Oneness there is no separative polarity between Subject and Object, between knower and known. To be known by God is thus, mysteriously, to be God.

The chapter of the Qur'an[362] which, except for the opening chapter, is certainly the best known and the most often recited was revealed to give the Prophet the answer to a question that had been put to him about the nature of God. It begins, like many other passages, with an imperative addressed to him: *Say: He, God, is One (Ahad)—God, the Absolute Plentitude Sufficing-unto-Himself (as-Samad).* It is no doubt in virtue of this last Name in apposition to *Allāh* and as complement to the Name of Oneness that the chapter is called the Chapter of Sincerity (*Surat al-Ikhlās*). For sincerity implies an unreserved assent, and for this to be achieved, the soul needs to be made aware that the oneness in question is not a desert but a totality, that the One-and-Only is the One-and-All, and that if the Indivisible Solitude excludes everything other than Itself, this is because Everything is already there.

For the mind alone and unaided it is impossible to resolve into Oneness the duality of Creator and creation. The Moroccan Shaykh al-'Arabi ad-Darqawi tells us in his letters how one day, when he was absorbed in the invocation, a persistent inward voice kept repeating to him the verse of the Qur'an *He is the First and the Last and the Outward and the Inward*.[363] To begin with he paid no attention and continued his own repetition of the Name. 'But finally'—to quote his words—'since it would not leave me in peace, I answered it: "As to His saying that He is the First and the Last and the Inward, I understand it; but as to His saying that He is the Outward, I do not understand it, for we see nothing outward but created things." Then the voice said: "If by His words *and the Outward* anything other than the outward that we see were meant, that would be inward and not outward; but I tell thee *and the Outward*." And I realised that there is no being but God nor anything in the worlds of the universe save Him Alone, praise and thanks be to God!'[364] To be remembered also in this connection is the saying of the Prophet: 'Thou art the Outward, and there is naught that covereth Thee.' The mind can understand that just as the Names the First and the Last and the Inward exclude the possibility of there being anything before or after God or more inward than God, so His Name the Outward excludes the possibility of there being anything more outward than He. Similarly,

[362] CXII.
[363] LVII:2.
[364] ar-Rasā'il ad-Darqawiyyah, no. 12 (See Letters of a Sufi Master, p. 8).

with regard to the saying of the Prophet in connection with the process of creation 'God was, and there was naught with Him' and the Sufi commentary on this, 'He is now even as He was', every sound mind can see that from the point of view of orthodoxy this commentary constitutes an overwhelming 'proof' of the Oneness of Being because it demonstrates, as with a lightning flash of clarity, that this doctrine can only be denied on pain of the heresy of implying that God is subject to change. But the mind cannot understand *how* Being can be One any more than it can understand *how* God can be the Outward as well as the Inward; and in accepting these truths theoretically it brings itself to the extreme limit of its own domain. We are here at the parting of the ways: the exoterist will involuntarily recoil, reminding himself and others that to dabble in theological speculation is strongly discouraged; but the virtual mystic will recognise at once that what lies before him is something other than the domain of dogmatic theology, and far from drawing back he will seek to escape from the apparently firm ground of his purely mental standpoint at the risk of being out of his depth.

'Relax the mind and learn to swim', said the Shaykh 'Ali al-Jamal, the Master of the Shaykh ad-Darqāwi, with regard to the state of perplexity. In other words, let go of your mind so that your soul, now out of its depth, may experience the spontaneous stirrings of intuition, just as a body, out of its depth in water, may experience the spontaneous stirring of its limbs in the movements of swimming, provided that there is no 'straw' to clutch at. Thus the Shaykh ad-Darqāwi himself says, leading up to the above quotation from his Shaykh: 'If thou art in a state of perplexity (*hayrah*) hasten not to cling to anything, lest thou close the door of necessity with thine own hand, because for thee this state taketh the place of the Supreme Name.'[365] In other words, an extremity of need is a door held open for the Divinity through which He will enter in response, just as He has bound Himself to respond to invocation,[366] which is itself just such an open door; and in respect of invocation, the Supreme Name *Allāh* is, as we have seen, the 'greatest'. The Shaykh ad- Darqāwi is here stressing the alchemical power of spiritual poverty

[365] See *Letters of a Sufi Master,* p. 11. Titus Burchkardt, the translator, gives the following note on the word *hayrah*: 'Dismay or perplexity in the face of a situation apparently without issue, or in the face of truths which cannot rationally be reconciled—a mental crisis, when the mind comes up against its own limit. If we understand *hayrah* on the mental plane, the advice given here by the Shaykh ad- Darqāwi is reminiscent of the Zen method of the *koan*, that is, of persistent meditation on certain paradoxes in order to provoke a mental crisis, an utter perplexity, which may open out into supra-rational intuition.' The word *hayrah* is closely related to *tahayyur*, which has the purely positive sense of 'wonderment', 'marvelling', as in the saying of the Prophet: 'Lord increase me in marvelling at Thee'.

[366] *I answer the invocation of the invoker when he invoketh me* (Qur'an II: 186).

(*faqr*) as a vacuum which demands to be filled; and perplexity is a mode of *faqr*, for it is nothing other than an imperative need—the need to be enlightened.

The study of the doctrine brings the mind to its own upper boundary across which, between it and the Heart, lies the domain of intellectual intuition, or of perplexity, as the case may be. Every mystical doctrine contains aphoristic formulations which can galvanise the soul into transcending the mind and crossing this boundary. But the purpose of the main body of the doctrine is to convey to the mind as much as can be mentally understood, so that reason, imagination, and the other faculties may be penetrated by the truth, each after its own fashion. For the spiritual path is an offering; it is ultimately an offering of the individual self in exchange for the Supreme Self. But the offering must be acceptable, and the Infinite cannot be expected to accept anything less than a totality. The offering must be all that the offerer has to offer, that is, it must be sincere. The Shaykh ad- Darqāwi was once asked by an exoteric authority why he used a rosary, the implication being that the Prophet had not used one, and that therefore there could be no justification for such a practice. He replied that he did so in order that even his hand might take part in the remembrance of God.

An example of doctrinal formulation which the mind can assimilate is the Sufi doctrine of the five Divine Presences. This exposition of the Oneness of Being allows for appearances, deceptive though they are, by representing the Truth as a circle of Infinite radiation. One Being means, needless to say, One Presence; but this Presence is both the Outward and the Inward, which makes it possible to speak of two Presences, namely, this world and the next; and since the Outward is a Name of the One Divinity, it cannot be isolated and cut off from the other Names, but must partake of the Qualities they denote, amongst which is Inwardness. This world must therefore have an inward as well as an outward aspect, a domain of souls as well as a domain of bodies, just as conversely within the next world the Unmanifested Creator has His outer aspect in the Heavens, which are the domain of the Spirit. It is thus in the nature of things to speak of four Presences, beyond which is the Divine Essence Itself, the All-Penetrating All-Embracing Presence of Absolute Oneness.

The *Shahādah* not only corroborates this doctrine by telling us that insofar as anything is real it is divine, that there is no reality but Reality. It also, in its verbal sequence, traces out the five-fold hierarchy. 'In the formula *Lā ilāha illā 'Llāh* (no god but God) each of the four words denotes a

degree, and the final *ha* of the Name *Allāh* symbolises the Self (*Huwa*[367]).'[368] This may be commented upon by saying, from the point of view of the spiritual path, that the first word is as the light of truth cast upon the material world to counterbalance the illusion 'here is reality at its greatest' and to be for the soul as a signpost 'not in this direction'. The second word corresponds to the world of souls which is, precisely, the dangerpoint as regards idolatry. The Qur'an continually refers to *those who make gods of their passions*; but this usurpation is only possible because the soul is virtually divine. The second word of the *Shahādah* denotes a potential divinity which is placed between two closed doors, one locked and the other unlocked, that is, between an absolute 'no' on the one hand and on the other a conditional 'no' (literally 'if not'), which amounts to a conditional 'yes', namely the third word, which stands for the Spirit; and the Spirit and the Angels, which constitute this third Presence, do in fact mediate on behalf of the soul like a 'but' or an 'except'. The word *illā* is as a sigh of relief, an escape from the prison of coagulated forms, and it points the way to the final solution of the fourth word which stands for the two highest Presences. The *Shahādah* is thus as an amulet or talisman of guidance, for it bars the soul from error while being itself, in the flow of its words, a compulsive motion from the predicament of mere virtuality to the Peace of Actuality.

Another example of doctrinal formulation which is immensely helpful to the mind is to be found in the Sufi 'Abd al-Karim al-Jili's[369] use of the image of water and ice to represent Creator and creation in their apparent difference and secret identity. The image is all the truer in that the frozen crystallisation appears to be far more substantial than unfrozen water; and yet when a large piece of ice melts the result is a surprisingly small quantity of water. Analogously the lower worlds, for all their seeming reality, depend for their existence upon a relatively unample Presence[370] compared with that which confers on the Paradises their everlasting bliss; everlastingness is not Eternity, however, nor are the joys of these Paradises more than shadows of the Absolute Beatitude of the Supreme Paradise.

The fiveness of the Divine Presence does not contradict its Oneness, that is, the Oneness of Being, for it is always the Same Presence. Nonetheless, from the point of view of Absolute

[367] Literally 'He', a Name of the Essence.
[368] Frithjof Schuon, *Dimensions of Islam,* p. 147; but for a full exposition of this doctrine see pp. 142-58, i.e. the final chapter, which is entitled 'The Five Divine Presences'.
[369] In his treatise *al-Insān al-Kāmil* (ch. VII) and in his poem *al-'Ayniyyah*.
[370] Nor is the Presence uniform within one world. In the material world, for example, the great symbols or signs of God and of His Qualities, whether in the animal, vegetable, or mineral world, are what they are in virtue of an outstanding concentration of Divine Presence.

Reality, the fiveness is an illusion since from that point of view the hierarchy has 'already' been folded up, *like the rolling up of a written scroll*;[371] the ice has 'already' melted. The *Shahādah* expresses both points of view, the relative and the Absolute, in its very substance. Its letters are crystallised into words which correspond, as we have seen, to the different degrees of the hierarchy. But if the words are melted down to the letters they consist of, we find that there is nothing amongst them but *alif, lām,* and *hā'*, and these are the letters of the Supreme Name.

The 'eye of ice', that is, the eye of illusion, can see nothing but ice. Only the Eye of Water can see water. Thus the Qur'an says: *Their sight overtaketh Him not, but He overtaketh their sight, and He is the All-Pervading-All-Prevailing, the Infinitely Aware.*[372] Here again what is in one sense a Name of Omnipresence (*al-Latif*) is followed by a Name of Omniscience (*al-Khabir*). In Reality Being and Seeing are One, and they are God's prerogative. The melting of the ice is the withdrawal of all pretension to usurp this prerogative.

If it be asked: 'Since only God can see God, why is it promised that the pure in heart shall see Him?', the answer is that the 'pure in heart' are precisely those in whom the melting has taken place, and who see with the 'Eye of Water'. The subjectivity which fallen man is conscious of results from the impact of the transcendent inner light upon the semi-opaque and thus impure coagulation which is a barrier between that light and the soul. The ego is a gleam which appears to begin at the barrier, whence the illusion of being a separate and independent unit. Purity is the transparency of meltedness. It reveals subjectivity as being no less than a whole 'vertical' dimension, a Ray which passes through the Heart, infinitely transcending it on the one hand and on the other passing from it unimpeded into the substance of the soul according to the measure in which that substance is, by its nature, capable of receiving it. The Qur'an speaks of the Saint as *he who was dead and whom We have brought to life, making for him a light whereby he walketh among men.*[373] The death referred to is the melting of the illusory subject; and it is along the stream of new-born subjective consciousness compounded of Life and of Light that the Divine 'overtakes' the human….

The Shaykh al-'Alawi represents the Divinity as saying:

'The veil of creation I have made
As a screen for the Truth, and in creation there lie

[371] Qur'an XXI: 104.
[372] VI: 103.
[373] VI: 122.

Secrets which suddenly like springs gush forth.'[374]

It follows almost analogously from this that although the mind must be satisfied as far as possible, perplexity is always lying as it were in ambush. Nor could it be otherwise, for there is a sequence to be followed: doctrine, understanding, perplexity,[375] enlightenment; the seed, the stalk, the bud, the flower. The tightly closed bud of perplexity (*hayrah*) will open, if given the right conditions, into the flower of wonderment (*tahayyur*), and the essential of these conditions is 'light'. But the possibilities of enlightenment are not limited to such fragmentary intuitions as a novice might expect to receive. As is clear from the Shaykh ad- Darqāwi remarks about perplexity, what seems to be a closure from the point of view of the perplexed is in fact an open door through which help adequate to the need is bound to come; and the initial help to be hoped for is enlightenment in the form of the Spiritual Master. His is the Sun in which the novice needs to bask. But the 'door of necessity' must be opened to the full; and the necessity in question is compounded on the one hand of the presentiment of the Truth as an imperative end, and on the other of the consciousness of the intervening gulf and or impotence to cross it by one's own resources.

The Method

'Nothing is more pleasing to Me, as a means for My slave to draw near unto Me, than worship which I have made binding upon him; and My slave ceaseth not to draw near unto Me with added devotions of his free will until I love him; and when I love him I am the Hearing wherewith he heareth and the Sight wherewith he seeth and the Hand whereby he graspeth and the Foot whereon he walketh.'[376]

The whole of Sufism—its aspirations, its practice, and in a sense also even its doctrine—is summed up in this Holy Tradition, which is quoted by the Sufis perhaps more often than any other text apart from the Qur'an. As may be inferred from it, their practices are of two kinds: rites which are binding on all Muslims, and additional voluntary rites. When a novice enters an order, one of the first things he or she has to do is to acquire an extra dimension which will confer a

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[374] *Diwan*.
[375] Needless to say, perplexity in this sense is altogether compatible with serenity, for since serenity is essential both to *faqr* (poverty) and *islam* (submission, resignation), nothing that is incompatible with it could be considered as a normal phase of the spiritual path.
[376] Bukhari, Riqaq, 37.

depth and a height on rites which (assuming an Islamic upbringing) have been performed more or less exoterically since childhood. The obligations of Islam, often known as 'the five pillars', are the *Shahādah*, the ritual prayer five times a day, the almsgiving, the fast of the month of *Ramadan*, and the pilgrimage to Mecca if circumstances allow, this last obligation being the only one that is conditional.

We have already seen the difference between the *Shahādah* as fathomed by the Sufis and its superficial meaning 'none is worshipable but God'. But this objective difference involves a corresponding subjective difference, for there arises the question: Who is it that can bear witness that there is no god but God, no reality but the Reality? And for the Sufis the answer to this question lies in the Divine Name *ash-Shahid* (the witness), which, significantly enough, comes next to *al-Haqq* (the Truth, the Reality) in the most often recited litany of the Names. If God alone *is*, no testimony can be valid except His. It is hypocrisy to affirm the Oneness of Being from a point of view which is itself in contradiction with the truth, and it was no doubt to galvanise his disciples into awareness of this that Hallaj uttered his devastating paradox: 'Whoso testifyeth that God is One thereby setteth up another beside Him (namely his own individual self as testifier)'.[377]

The Witness must be, not the self, but the Self, which means that the soul is not competent to voice the *Shahādah*. All the Sufi Orders are in agreement about this, though they may differ in their methods of bridging the gap between hyprocrisy and sincerity. In some orders, by contrast with the single recitation, which is legally sufficient, the novice is made to recite the *Shahādah* hundreds of thousands of times in order that he learn to bring it out from a deeper point of consciousness; and even then, although he is allowed doctrinal knowledge of the Oneness of Being, he will not be allowed to meditate on that doctrine if he is judged to be intellectually too dormant.

So far only the first part of the *Shahādah* has been considered. But this first Pillar of Islam is two-fold. The testifier must testify also that Muhammad is Messenger of God—*Muhammadun Rasulu 'Llāh*. The 'traveller' must learn to see in this also an epitome of the spiritual path, of the wave that can take him to the end of his journey. Both testifications end alike. But whereas *Lā ilāha illā 'Llāh* begins with a negative, which signifies the turning of one's back on

[377] *Akhbar al-Hallaj*, no. 49.

the world, *Muhammadun Rasulu 'Llāh*[378] begins with the state of human perfection as starting point for the realisation of all that lies beyond. In other words, there is a chasm between this formula and the novice, who is not allowed in some orders to repeat it methodically until the repetition of the first *Shahādah* has loosened certain constrictions in his soul and brought him to a point of being able to bridge the gap in aspiration and place his subjectivity in the name *Muhammad*. The repetition of *Muhammadun Rasulu 'Llāh* with emphasis on the first word is like the donning of a splendid robe which is far too large but which has the magic power of making its wearer grow out to its dimensions. Meantime the wearer must scarcely admit to himself that he does not fill it; and it is an important part of the spiritual courtesy (*adab*) of the path that he should also see his fellow disciples as wearers of the same robe and reverence them accordingly. This is instance of *ka'anna* (as if), which is so characteristic of Sufism, and another example of the primordiality of its perspective. The second *Shahādah* can be taken, methodically, as a refusal to admit that the fall of man has ever taken place.[379] But this point of view needs to be combined with an acute consciousness of the results of the fall, of one's own shortcomings and if need be those of others, a consciousness which finds its expression in the first two words of the first *Shahādah, lā ilāha*, or simply in the negative first word. The two-fold initial Pillar of Islam can thus be taken as a combination of the standpoints of fallen and unfallen man, and the Sufi must always be ready to move from one to the other and back again.

The second Pillar of Islam—to give one more illustration of the difference between the legal and mystical conception of worship—is the ritual prayer, together with the ablution which is an inseparable part of it. All believers would agree that a rite is a symbolic act and that the ablution symbolises the purification of the soul. But it would no doubt be true to say that the generality of believers look on the ablution simply as a rite which confers a degree of purity judged by Heaven to be sufficient for the performance of the prayer—whence the consciousness of being in a state of legal or ritual purity, a consciousness which must not be underestimated for it is by definition a 'state of grace' and therefore open to all manner of blessings. The Sufi necessarily shares this point of view and this consciousness; but beyond this legal state he is concerned with actual purity which he can 'taste' and which has to be

[378] If *Muhammadun Rasulu 'Llāh* expresses the ebb of the wave, the corresponding expression of its flow is to be found in the three letters *Alif-Lām-Mim*.
[379] So also can the first *Shahādah*, needless to say, in its highest sense.

made total and permanent; and for him this ablution is above all a means of extending the purity that has already been achieved and of intensifying his consciousness of it with the help of the transparent and luminous element.

The secret identity between the linguistic root from which *sufi* comes and another root which has the basic meaning of 'pure' has already been mentioned;[380] and there can be little doubt that the term *sufi* came to be accepted and established largely because it conjures up the word *sāfi* (pure), thus pointing to a quality which is the beginning and end of all mysticism. In fact Bishr al-Hāfi,[381] one of the great early Sufis of Baghdad, said expressly in explaining this term: 'The Sufi is he who keeps his Heart pure (*sāfi*).' It must be remembered moreover that not only the ritual act but also the element itself is a symbol, which means that it is linked to a chain of archetypes going back to its Divine Origin. In other words, the water must be considered as flowing into this finite world from the next; and according to the Qur'an, water is one of the symbols of Mercy (which includes purification), and of Life.[382] The quantity used does not enter into the question. A drop of water as well as a lake symbolises the Infinite Beatitude into which Mercy reintegrates; and the water used in the ablution, when consecrated by the aspiration to return, is above all a vehicle of reintegration or, from another angle, of liberation, for water is likewise a symbol of the Living Substance of Reality set free from the ice of finite forms.

The same End, looked at from a different point of view, is 'enacted' in the ritual prayer in which each cycle of movements leads to a prostration followed by a sitting posture. The Sufis interpret these in the light of the Quranic verse *Everyone therein (in the worlds of creation) passeth away; and there remaineth the Face of thy Lord in Its Majesty and Bounty.*[383] The passing away corresponds to the prostration, and the remaining to the seatedness, which is the most compact and stable posture of the whole prayer.[384] From this verse are derived two basic Sufi terms: *fanā'* (extinction) and *baqā'* (remaining, subsistence, Eternality); it is not as himself but as the Self that one who has been extinguished can be said to subsist.

Of the voluntary rites of Islam as performed by the Sufis, the invocation of the Name *Allāh* is by far the most important. There might seem to be a certain contradiction between the opening of

[380] [In a previous chapter. Ed.]
[381] d. 842.
[382] See the author's 'The Quranic Symbolism of Water' in *Studies in Comparative Religion* (Summer, 1968).
[383] LV: 26-7
[384] For a fuller treatment of the significance of these movements, see *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century,* pp. 187-90.

the Holy Tradition quoted at the outset of this chapter which sets the obligatory above the voluntary and the Quranic affirmation that *dhikr Allāh*, which is voluntary, is *greater* even than the ritual prayer, which is obligatory. But it must be remembered that although what is obligatory serves to confer a spiritual rhythm on the flow of the hours, the time that it actually takes is relatively short. The voluntary has therefore a potential precedence over it by being capable of embracing and penetrating the whole of life, and this is what those who practice methodically the invocation aim at making it do. The meaning of the Holy Tradition is clearly that what is a legal obligation cannot be replaced, at the whim of an individual, by something which is not. Thus the Sufis are in agreement that the invocation of the Name, in itself the most powerful of all rites, is only acceptable to God on the basis of the invoker's having performed what is obligatory. It could not be a legal obligation itself, for power necessarily means danger; and by no means every novice is allowed to proceed at once to the invocation of the Supreme Name.

The recitation of the Qur'an is no doubt the voluntary rite which is most widely spread throughout the Islamic community as a whole. The Sufis may be said to differ from the majority in that when they recite it—or when they listen to it, which is ritually equivalent—they do so as a prolongation *of dhikr Allāh*, with no abatement of their aspiration to return to God. The doctrine of the Uncreatedness of the Revealed Book holds out a means of union which is not to be refused. Moreover the soul has need of the Qur'an as a complement to the Name, being as it is by its very nature what might be called a multiple unity, and its God-given multiplicity demands a certain direct recognition which it is not the Name's function to accord. The following passage will find an echo in every reader of the Qur'an. But it concerns the Sufis above all, for they alone are fully conscious of the problem it touches on:

> The Quran is, like the world, at the same time one and multiple. The world is a multiplicity which disperses and divides; the Quran is a multiplicity which draws together and leads to Unity. The multiplicity of the holy Book—the diversity of its words, sentences, pictures, and stories—fills the soul and then absorbs it and imperceptibly transposes it into the climate of serenity and immutability by a sort of divine 'cunning'. The soul, which is accustomed to the flux of phenomena, yields to this flux without resistance; it lives in phenomena and is by them divided and dispersed—even more than that, it actually becomes what it thinks and does. The revealed Discourse has the virtue that it accepts this tendency while at the same time

reversing the movement thanks to the celestial nature of the content and the language, so that the fishes of the soul swim without distrust and with their habitual rhythm into the divine net.'[385]

The Name and the Book are two poles between which lie a wealth of possibilities of invocation and litany, some being nearer to one pole and some to the other. The recitation of the two *Shahādahs*, for example, and the invocation of the two Names of Mercy are nearer to the Supreme Name, whereas certain long and complex litanies are more comparable to the Qur'an and as often as not they largely consist of extracts from it. But the Name may be said to have another complement which is very different from the Revealed Book though parallel to it in the sense that it directly recognises the diffuse nature of the soul, and this is the individual prayer when the suppliant speaks directly to the Divinity as to another person, telling him of his difficulties and his needs, for himself and for those near to him, both living and dead, and asking for favours of various kinds—or not, as the case may be, for it is essential that this prayer should be a spontaneous laying bare of the individual, and no two individuals are alike.

In this connection it must be remembered that night is the symbol of the soul, and that even the unclouded shining of the full moon does not change night into day. Whatever faith the soul may be said to possess can only be very relative as compared with the certainty of the Heart, but it can be more or less a prolongation of that certainty. There is a significant passage in the Qur'an where Abraham asks God to show him how He brings the dead to life. *Hast thou not faith?* is the divine rejoinder. *Yes, but (show me) so that my heart may be at rest*[386] is his answer. These last words could be glossed: So that the certainty in the depth of my being may be left in peace, untroubled by the surface waves of reason and imagination. The answer is accepted and followed by a miracle of vivification, which proves that the soul has a right to certain concessions. It could in fact be said that the purpose of a miracle is to enable the whole soul to partake supernaturally of an 'absolute' certainty which is normally the prerogative of the Heart; but a small part of this effect can be produced through that most natural and human means, the individual prayer—not by any superimposition of faith but by the elimination of obstacles and distractions. This prayer, like the recitation of the Qur'an, is shared by the whole community and is generally considered as an adjunct to the ritual prayer, which it normally follows, preceded by the words of the Qur'an: *Your Lord*

[385] Frithjof Schuon, *Understanding Islam,* p. 50.
[386] II: 260

hath said: Call upon Me and I will answer you.[387] But the majority are not concerned with method, whereas the Sufi Shaykhs insist on this prayer above all for its methodic value, not only as a means of regular communion for the soul but also as a means for it to unburden itself, that is, to unload some of its inevitable cares and anxieties so that it may be, at any rate in its higher reaches, a prolongation of the peace of the Heart rather than a discontinuity. Nor should the gestural value of this prayer be underrated, for the suppliant, head slightly bowed and hands held out with hollowed empty palms upturned, becomes a soul-penetrating incarnation of spiritual poverty.

It may be concluded from what is taught about human perfection—and this has already been touched on in relation to the Messenger—that the primordial soul is a unified multiple harmony suspended as it were between the next world and this world, that is, between the Inward and the Outward, in such a way that there is a perfect balance between the pull of the inward signs—the Heart and beyond it the Spirit—and the *signs on the horizons*. This balance has moreover a dynamic aspect in that the Heart sends out through the soul a ray of recognition of the outer signs, the great phenomena of nature; and these by the impact they make on the senses give rise to a vibration which traverses the soul in an inward direction, so that with man, the last created being, the outward movement of creation is reversed and everything flows back as it were through his Heart to its Eternal and Infinite Source. But in the fallen soul, where the attraction of the Heart is more or less imperceptible, the balance is broken and the scales are heavily weighted in favour of the outer world.

To ask how the true balance can be restored is one way of asking 'What is Sufism?' And the first part of the answer is that the Divine Name must take the place of the veiled Heart, and a movement towards it must be set up in the soul to counteract the pull of the outer world so that the lost harmony can be regained.

The mention of this most essential aspect of Sufism brings us to a consideration of the two terms *qabd* (contraction) and *bast* (expansion), which occur so frequently in the Sufi treatises. The initial effort to establish the Name as centre of conciousness and to set up a movement towards it is one of *qabd*; and something of this contraction must be retained in the sense that it must still be there to control its concordant reaction of *bast*, not so as to diminish its amplitude but on the contrary to rescue it from being a return to the limitations of mundanity. The growth of the soul to primordial stature is none other than an aspect of this spiritual expansion as the complement of spiritual

[387] XL: 60

contraction. The Qur'an continually makes a connection between the *qabd* of sacrifice and the *bast* of growth. It is worth noting also that in Arabic the word for promoting growth (*tazkiyah*) has also the meaning of purification, which can scarcely be brought out in translation, though the two ideas are nonetheless intimately connected, for impurity impedes growth; it is because the channels to and from the Heart are blocked that the fallen soul is stunted, at least in some of its elements. The symbolism of pruning, which is also a means of purification, is particularly illustrative of the principle in question, for pruning, like a *qabd* of the soul, is a diminishment with a view to an increase which will go far beyond what was there before the sacrifice. *Who will lend unto God a goodly loan that He may double it for him and add thereunto a bountiful reward?*[388] Such texts are basic in all religions.

An obvious example of *qabd* is fasting, but it must be remembered that the Islamic fast is broken at sunset. The month of Ramadan, together with the voluntary fasts which are an extension of it, is thus assimilated by the Sufis into the general alternation to which their method subjects them, the days of the month being an aspect of their *qabd* just as the nights are an aspect of their *bast*.

It is always possible—and this is the highest aim of *qabd*—that the concordant *bast* will be towards the Heart and beyond it. Nor is this higher possibility, which is a pure grace, precluded by the relatively outward *bast* which is all that the soul can command but which is itself a symbol of the inward expansion and therefore a potential instrument of releasing it. The two together constitute the balance of the primordial soul in which *qabd* is as it were replaced by the transcendent *bast.*

Of all the means at the disposal of the Sufis, it is the spiritual retreat, *khalwah* (literally 'solitude'), which constitutes the most rigorous *qabd*. This is a prolonged contraction which refuses any expansion other than the grace of a transcendent one. After the example of the Prophet, some orders maintain that the retreat should be made in natural surroundings. In other orders it is made under the supervision of a Shaykh in a room set aside for that purpose.

The term *jalwah*[389] is used collectively to express 'expansive' practices which are a complement to *khalwah,* and the most obvious example of *jalwah* is to be found in the sessions of remembrance (*majālis adh-dhikr*), more or less regular meetings at which the brethren of the order meet to chant litanies and invoke the Divine Name together. In many orders a sacred dance is performed at

[388] Qur'an LII: 11.
[389] More correctly *jilwah*, literally 'unveiling' (of a bride), but the vowel change is deliberate to make a phonetic complement to its opposite.

these meetings, often as a prelude to a session of silent invocation. The most celebrated of these dances is the one given by Jalal ad-Din ar-Rumi (d. 1273) to his order, the *Mawlawi* (in Turkish Mevlevi) *tariqah*, whose members are thus better known to Westerners as 'the whirling dervishes', 'les derviches tourneurs', or some other equivalent. This dance, which constitutes a most ample *bast*, begins nonetheless with the initial *qabd* of a stately procession for which the dancer crosses his arms over his breast and clasps his shoulders. A singer chants, to the accompaniment of flutes and drums and sometimes of other instruments. Then at a given moment the Shaykh takes up his position for the folded-up figures to file solemnly past him; and each dancer, as he enters the orbit of the Shaykh's presence, begins to unfold his arms and turn his body round, slowly at first but soon more quickly with his arms now stretched out on either side to their full extent, the right palm upwards as receptacle of Heaven and the left palm downwards to transmit Heaven to earth, and so the whirling continues.

This summary account fails to do justice to the complexity of the dance, but it serves to bring out one essential feature which it has in common with the dances of other orders, namely that the body stands for the Axis of the Universe which is none other than the Tree of Life. The dance is thus a rite of centralisation, a foretaste of the lost Centre, and therefore of a lost dimension of depth and of height. It is thereby the equivalent of the Name which also, as we have seen, replaces the centre, and in fact the invocation of the Name, aloud or in silence, usually accompanies the dance, which in any case is intended above all to plunge the dancer into a state of concentration upon *Allāh*.

Instead of 'usually' it would have been no exaggeration to say 'always', for even if the dancer has not consciously the Name *Allāh* on his tongue, he has another Name of the Essence in his breath, and that is *Huwa* (He) which, as the Sufis know, transforms the very act of life into a perpetual invocation. In the Darqawi order, a Moroccan branch of the great Shadhili order, the dance is rigorously reduced to the two essential elements, verticality (implying centrality) and breath, everything else being eliminated and these two being stressed by a rhythmic up and down movement of the body together with a rhythmic rise and fall of the breast as the lungs are filled and emptied.

In connection with the regaining of the transcendent dimension, which is the immediate consequence of regaining the Centre, and which is symbolised dynamically by these movements and statically, as in other dances, by the axial significance of the body, it may be mentioned that

the mysterious identity between the dance and the Name is confirmed by the verse of the Qur'an: *A good word is as a good tree; its root is firm, its branches are in heaven.*[390] This may be interpreted: an invocation, and above all the Supreme Name which is the best of good words, is not a flat utterance which spreads horizontally outwards in this world to be lost in thin air, but a vertical continuity of repercussions throughout all the states of being. It is this most essential aspect of *dhikr Allāh* which is symbolised by the sacred dance.

Not every order has its dance, but litany is always a characteristic feature of the sessions of remembrance; and in connection with *qabd* and *bast* it is important to mention a threefold litany which is of such basic importance that it is regularly recited in most of the orders, varying from one to another only in certain unessential details. The first of its three formulae—they are usually repeated a hundred times—is 'I ask forgiveness of God', to which is added, at its final utterance, 'The Infinite—there is no God but He, the Living, the Self-Subsistent, and to Him I turn in repentance';[391] and in this connection we may quote a saying of a great Sufi of Egypt, Dhu 'n-Nun al-Misri (d. 861): 'The repentance of the generality is from sins, whereas the repentance of the elect is from distraction (*ghaflah*).[392] This last word could also be translated 'scattered negligence', which is precisely a mode of the profane expansion to which the *qabd* of repentance is, for the Sufi, an antidote. As a complement to this turning away from the world in the direction of the Heart, the second formula of the litany is the already mentioned invocation of blessings on the Prophet, which is virtually an extremity of *bast*. In these two formulae together, recited successively twice a day, there lies a powerful discipline of consecration. It is not so difficult to turn one's back on the world for a phase of *qabd*—or rather, let it be said that the fact of belonging to a Sufi order means, or should mean, that the difficulty has in a sense been overcome: but it can be very difficult at first to prevent the subsequent relaxation from being no more than a relapse. The invocation of blessings on the Prophet offers the soul a means of expansion and therefore a virtual relaxation which precludes mundanity. Needless to say, it has to become spontaneous and sincere in order to be an operative *bast*. The resistance of the soul in this respect, according to how much of it retains a nostalgia for its former habits, is often surprising to the novice and always instructive. It is the state of expansion, not that of contraction, which is the

[390] XIV: 24.
[391] As regards these last four words—one word in Arabic—it is worth mentioning that repentance, in the Islamic conception of it, is essentially a turning towards God, an image of His turning towards man. In English we normally say that God relents and man repents, but in Arabic exactly the same word is used for both turnings.
[392] Qushayri, *Risālah*.

gauge of spiritual maturity, for no virtue can be said to have been definitely acquired if it recedes when *qabd* recedes, nor has a fault been eradicated if it reappears when the pressure of *qabd* has been taken off. But more precisely, since *bast* has two aspects, which the Sufis term drunkenness[393] (*sukr*) and sobriety (*sahw*), it is the more prevalent state, namely sobriety, which is the true criterion of what has been spiritually achieved. It is to be expected that the soul will be in what might be called a state of sober *bast* for by far the greater part of each day.[394] Nonetheless, it is normal that the grace of drunkenness should leave each time its mark, and in fact some Shaykhs describe the Supreme Station as the state of being inwardly drunk and outwardly sober.[395]

The third and last formula of the litany takes *qabd* and *bast* back to their transcendent archetypes, which are respectively *fanā'*[396] (extinction) and *baqā'* (subsistence). The first part, 'There is no god but God, Alone, no sharer', is an extinction. The second part, 'His is the Kingdom and His this Praise, and He is Infinite in Power' is an expression of the Divine Plentitude—for *baqā'* is at the level of Absolute Reality, which excludes all being other than His Being. The already quoted saying 'I went in and left myself outside' could be paraphrased: 'Leaving myself outside (*fanā'*) I went in and found none but myself *(baqā'*).' We may quote also the lines of Shustari:[397]

> After extinction I came out and I Eternal now am, though not as I,
> Yet who am I, O I, but I?

The last formula of the litany is an expression of truth and the subjective counterpart of truth is knowledge. Analogously, in relation to the first and second formulae, instead of *qabd* and *bast* we may use the terms 'fear' and 'love'; and this brings out even more clearly the basic importance of this litany as an epitome of Sufism, which is often said to consist of fear

[393] Owing to the frequent mention of wine in Sufi poetry, it is perhaps worth mentioning here that the only wine that the Sufis allow themselves is that which the Qur'an allows, namely the wine of Paradise. It is extremely unlikely, for example, that earthly wine ever crossed the lips of 'Umar ibn al-Farid (d. 1236), the greatest of Arab Sufi poets and the author of the famous *Khamriyyah* (Winesong), which begins: 'We have drunk to the remembrance of the Beloved a wine wherewith we were made drunk before the vine was created.'

[394] Of the two blessings invoked on the Messenger, it is that of Peace which corresponds to sobriety, whereas that of being whelmed in Glory corresponds to drunkenness.

[395] See for example *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century,* p. 168. The Shaykh al-'Alawi uses here the term 'uprootedness' (*istilām*) more or less as an equivalent of drunkenness.

[396] It must be remembered, however, that whereas *qabd* is merely an approach, *fanā'* is the actual passage through 'the eye of the needle' and therefore cannot be altogether dissociated from its immediate result of *bast* and perhaps also of *sukr* (drunkenness).

[397] An Andalusian Sufi (d. 1269).

(*makhāfah*), love (*mahabbah*), and knowledge *(ma'rifah*) inasmuch as these three standpoints comprise between them the whole of man's subjective obligation towards God. Nor is there anything permissible for man with regard to God which they do not comprise.

Meditation (*fikr*), which is an essential aspect of the spiritual path as an accompaniment to *dhikr*, is based on these three standpoints, each of which has two aspects. For example, fear implies danger. One solution is flight. *Flee unto God*,[398] says the Qur'an, and *There is no refuge from God except in Him*,[399] which recalls the Holy Tradition: '*Lā ilāha illā 'Llāh* is My fortress, and whoso entereth My fortress is safe from Mine anger.' But danger is also a motive for attack and this standpoint, which is that of the Greater Holy War, has already been touched on.

Both aspects of fear are related to duty and therefore to will-power. 'Human nature comprises three planes: the plane of the will, the plane of love, and the plane of knowledge; each plane is polarised into two complementary modes which appear, respectively, as renunciation and action, peace and fervour, discernment and union.'[400] The third plane transcends man as such, except insofar as it offers him a theme for meditation. 'The two stations or degrees of knowledge could be respectively characterised by the following formulae: "To know only That which is: God"; "To be only That which knows: the Self".'[401]

For the Sufi the great source of meditation is the Qur'an itself; and with special reference to Sufism the author of the above passages quotes elsewhere[402] Quranic verses to illustrate the profound connection between *dhikr* and *fikr*, that is, between the act of invoking and the different modes of conformity to it which are to be induced into the soul by meditation: *Are not hearts at peace in the remembrance of God?*[403] *Call upon Him in fear and in eager desire;*[404] *Call upon God in humility and in secret.*[405]

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[398] LI: 50.
[399] IX: 118.
[400] Frithjof Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom* (Perennial Books), p. 148.
[401] Ibid., p. 153.I know of no writing on meditation which can compare with the final chapter of this book, unless it be the closing pages of another book by the same author, where the six stations of wisdom are defined as antidotes to the six 'great troubles of the soul' (see *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* [Perennial Books, 1970], p. 211).
[402] In an unpublished text.
[403] XIII: 28.
[404] VII: 56.
[405] VII: 55.

The word 'fear' can be taken here to include both its modes, and this station has already been illustrated from other verses. The two modes of love are 'peace' and 'eager desire',[406] whereas the last verse affirms the two stations of knowledge as bases for the invocation. The truest humility, as enacted in the prostration of the ritual prayer, is, no less than *fanā'*, extinction. As to secrecy, it is a question of 'Let not the left hand know what the right hand doeth'. The 'left hand' in this case is the human ego, which is excluded from participating in this pro-foundest of all invocations where the Self is the Invoker as well as the Invoked.

The Qur'an continually stresses the importance of meditation, as do also the sayings of the Prophet; and in fact *dhikr* and *fikr* may be said to have a function in the spiritual life which is as vital as that of the blood and the veins in the life of the body. Without *fikr*, *dhikr* would be largely inoperative; without *dhikr*, *fikr* would serve no purpose. Meditation predisposes the soul to receive the invocation by opening up channels along which it may flow. It is a question of overcoming all those habits and reactions which are strictly speaking unnatural but which have become 'second nature'. As the above quoted author remarks in another unpublished text on Sufism: 'The result of the persevering practice of comprehension—by meditation—is the inward transformation of the imagination or the subconscious, the acquisition of reflexes that conform to spiritual reality. It is all very well for the intelligence to affirm metaphysical or eschatological truths; the imagination—or subconscious—nonetheless continues to believe firmly in this world, not in God or the next world; every man is *a priori* hypocritical. The way is precisely the passage from natural hypocrisy to spiritual sincerity.'

This last word is the key to the understanding of the whole chapter. In defining the spiritual ideal, the Qur'an uses more than once the phrase *sincere unto Him in religion*, which means, with regard to the Object in question, total absence of reserve and total assent.

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[406] Peace implies the possession of all that one loves. The realism of this standpoint, like that of the other already given examples of the methodic *ka'anna* (as if) of Sufism, lies in the deceptiveness of appearances. In reality the absence of the Beloved is pure illusion, as was expressed by the Moroccan Sufi poet Muhammad al-Harraq (a spiritual grandson of the great Shaykh ad-Darqawi) in the following lines: 'Seekest thou Layla, when she in thee is manifest? Thou countest her other, yet other than thee she is not' (Bughyat al-Mushtaq, p. 170, Bulaq, 1881). Nor has the other standpoint of love, that of 'eager desire', merely the relative realism of corresponding to a lack that is actually experienced even though it be illusory. This standpoint is above all realist in virtue of the Object of desire, *The Infinitely Precious (al-Aziz)*, in whose Eternal Present eagerness can never grow old.

The practices of Sufism need to be varied in order to meet the variety and complexity of the human soul, whose every element must be impregnated with sincerity in both its aspects. *Ridwān*, Acceptance, is mutual; and sincerity is nothing other than the human *rida*,[407] without which there can be no Divine Acceptance.

[407] This is the term normally used to express the human reflection and complement of *Ridwān*.

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The Koran

Frithjof Schuon

The great theophany of Islam is the Koran; it presents itself as being a "discernment" (*furqān*) between truth and error.[408]

In a sense the whole of the Koran—one of the names of which is indeed *Al-Furqān* (the Discernment)—is a sort of multiple paraphrase of the fundamental discernment expressed by the *Shahādah*; its whole content is summed up in the words: "Truth hath come and error [*albātil,* the empty, or the inconsistent] hath vanished away; lo! error is ever bound to vanish" (Koran, XVII, 83).[409]

Before considering the message of the Koran, we wish to speak about its form and the principles determining that form. An Arab poet once claimed that he could write a book superior to the Koran, disputing its excellence even from the mere standpoint of style. Such a judgment, which is clearly contrary to the traditional thesis of Islam, is explicable in the case of a man who does not know that the excellence of a sacred book is not *a priori* of a literary order; many indeed are the texts conveying a spiritual meaning in which logical clarity is joined to powerful language or grace of expression without their having on this account a sacred character. The sacred Scriptures are not such because of the subject of which they treat or the manner in which they treat it but by reason of their degree of inspiration or, what amounts to the same thing, by virtue of their divine provenance; it is this which determines the content of the book, not the converse. Like the Bible, the Koran may speak of a multitude of things other than God; for example, it speaks of the devil, of the holy war, of the laws of succession, and so on without being on that account less sacred, whereas other books may treat of God and of sublime matters without being on that account the Divine Word.

For Muslim orthodoxy, the Koran is not only the uncreated Word of God—uncreated though expressing itself through created elements such as words, sounds, and letters—but also the

[408] In this context it is significant that in Islam God Himself is often called *Al-Haqq*, The Truth. The Sufi Al-Hallaj exclaimed: *Anā al-Haqq,* "I am the Truth," not "I am Love."

[409] Or, in another passage: "We (*Allah*) strike error with Truth that it may be crushed, and lo! error vanisheth away" (XXI, 18).

model *par excellence* of the perfection of language. Seen from outside, however, this book appears (apart from approximately the last quarter, the form of which is highly poetic, though it is not poetry) to be a collection of sayings and stories, a collection that is more or less incoherent and sometimes incomprehensible at first approach. The reader who is not forewarned, whether he reads the text in translation or in Arabic, runs up against obscurities, repetitions, tautologies, and—in most of the long *surahs*—a certain dryness, unless he has at least the "sensory consolation" of that beauty of sound which emerges from ritual and correctly intoned reading. But such difficulties are to be met with in one degree or another in most sacred Scriptures.[410] The seeming incoherence of these texts[411]—for instance the Song of Songs or certain passages of the Pauline Epistles—always has the same cause, namely, the incommensurable disproportion between the Spirit on the one hand and the limited resources of human language on the other: it is as though the poor and coagulated language of mortal man would break into a thousand fragments under the formidable pressure of the Heavenly Word, or as if God, in order to express a thousand truths, had but a dozen words at his disposal and so was compelled to make use of allusions heavy with meaning, of ellipses, abridgements, and symbolical syntheses. A sacred Scripture—and let us not forget that for Christianity Scripture includes not only the Gospels but the whole Bible with all its enigmas and seeming scandals—is a totality, a diversified image of Being, diversified and transfigured for the sake of the human receptacle; it is a light that wills to make itself visible to clay, or wills to take the form of that clay; or in still other words, it is a truth which, since it must address itself to beings compounded of clay, has no means of expression other than the very substance of the nescience of which our soul is made.[412]

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[410] There are two principal modes or levels of inspiration—one direct and the other indirect—represented in the case of the New Testament by the sayings of Christ and by the Apocalypse as regards the former mode, and by the stories in the Gospels and by the Epistles as regards the latter. In Judaism this difference is expressed by comparing the inspiration of Moses to a luminous mirror and that of the other prophets to a darkened mirror. Among Hindu sacred books the texts of secondary inspiration (*smriti*) are in general more easily accessible and seem more homogeneous than the Veda, which is directly inspired (*shruti*), and this shows that the immediate intelligibility and readily perceived beauty of a text are in no way criteria of inspiration or of the level of inspiration.

[411] It is this "incoherent" surface of the language of the Koran—not the grammar or the syntax—with which the poet mentioned above considered he should find fault. The style of the revealed Books is always normative. Goethe characterized very well the style of sacred texts in his *Westostlicher Diwan*: "Thy song turns like the vault of heaven; the origin and the end are ever identical."

[412] In his *Kitāb fihi mā fit*, Jalal ad-Din Rumi wrote: "The Koran is like a young married woman: even if you try to unveil her she will not show herself to you. If you discuss the Koran you will discover nothing, and no joy will

"God speaks tersely," say the Rabbis, and this also explains both the bold ellipses, at first sight incomprehensible, and the superimposed levels of meaning found in the Revelations.[413] Moreover—and herein lies a crucial principle—for God the truth lies in the spiritual or social efficacy of the words or the symbol, not in factual exactitude when this is psychologically inoperative or even harmful; God's first wish is to save, rather than instruct, and His concern is with wisdom and immortality, not with outward knowledge, still less with curiosity. Christ called his body "the Temple," which may seem astonishing when one thinks that this term primarily, and to all appearances with better reason, designated a stone building; but the stone Temple was much less than Christ the receptacle of the living God—given that Christ had come—and in reality the term "Temple" applied with far more reason to Christ than to the building made by the hands of men; it can even be said that the Temple, whether that of Solomon or that of Herod, was the image of the body of Christ, temporal succession being of no import to God; it is thus that sacred Scriptures at times displace words and even facts in function of a higher truth which eludes men. But it is not merely intrinsic difficulties that are found in the revealed Books; there is also the matter of their distance in time and the differences in mentality in different periods, or rather the qualitative inequality of the phases of the human cycle. At the origin of a tradition—whether we are speaking of the age of the Rishis or that of Muhammad—the language was different from what it is today; the words were not worn-out, and they contained infinitely more than we can divine. Many things which were evident for the reader of earlier times could be passed over in silence but need to be rendered explicit—not added to—at a later stage.[414]

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come to you. That is because you have tried to pull off the veil, and the Koran refuses itself to you; by employing cunning and making itself ugly in your sight and undesirable, it is saying to you: 'I am not that which you love.' And it can in this manner show itself under any kind of light." See also *Discourses of Rumi* (Murray, 1961) p. 236. According to the teaching of Saint Augustine and other Fathers, and repeated by Pius XII in his encyclical *Divino Affante:* "God has purposely strewn difficulties throughout the Holy Books that He has Himself inspired in order that we may be stimulated to read and study them with greater attention and in order to exercise us in humility by the salutary recognition of the limited capacity of our intelligence."

[413] For instance, it is said that the *Bhagavad Gita* can be read according to seven different threads of meaning. This principle has been mentioned several times in our previous works.

[414] We have no wish to devote space here to the deployment of unintelligence in modern textual criticism, whether it be "psychological" or of some other kind. Suffice it to point out that in our times the devil has not only laid hold on

A sacred text with its seeming contradictions and obscurities is in some ways like a mosaic, or even an anagram; but it suffices to consult the orthodox—thus divinely guided—commentaries in order to find out with what intention a particular affirmation was made and in what respects it is valid, or what the underlying implications are that enable one to connect elements which at first sight appear incongruous. These commentaries sprang from the oral tradition which from the beginning accompanied the Revelation, or else they sprang by inspiration from the same supernatural source; thus their role is not only to intercalate missing, though implicit, parts of the text and to specify in what relationship or in what sense a given thing should be understood, but also to explain the diverse symbolisms, often simultaneous and superimposed one on another. In short, the commentaries providentially form part of the tradition; they are as it were the sap of its continuity, even if their committal to writing or in certain cases their remanifestation after some interruption occurred only at a relatively late date in order to meet the requirements of a particular historical period. "The ink of the learned (in the Law or in the Spirit) is like the blood of the martyrs," said the Prophet, and this indicates the capital part played in every traditional cosmos by orthodox commentaries.[415]

According to the Jewish tradition it is not the literal form of the holy Scriptures which has the force of law, but solely their orthodox commentaries. The Torah is a "closed" book and does not surrender itself; it is the sages who "open" it, for it is in the very nature of the Torah to require from the beginning the commentary of the Mishna. It is said that the Mishna was given out in the Tabernacle, when Joshua transmitted it to the Sanhedrin; by this the Sanhedrin was consecrated and thus instituted by God like the Torah and at the same time. And this is important: the oral commentary, which Moses had received on Sinai and transmitted to Joshua, was in part lost and had to be reconstituted by the sages on the basis of the Torah: this shows very clearly that *gnosis* includes both a "horizontal" and a "vertical" continuity, or rather that it accompanies the written Law in a manner that is both "horizontal"

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charity, which he seeks to reduce to an atheistic and materialistic altruism, but has also taken hold of the exegesis of Holy Writ.

[415] Jalal ad-Din Rumi, in the work quoted above, wrote: "God Most High does not speak to just any man; like the kings of this world He does not speak with any casual fool; He has chosen ministers and deputies. Man accedes to God by going through the intermediaries He has appointed. God Most High has made an election among his creatures in order that a man may come to Him by going through him whom He has chosen." This passage, which refers to the Prophets, is also applicable to the authorized interpreters of the tradition.

and continuous and also "vertical" and discontinuous; the secrets are passed from hand to hand, but the spark may at any time leap forth on mere contact with the revealed Text in connection with a particular human receptacle and the imponderables of the Holy Spirit. It is also said that God gave the Torah during the daytime and the Mishna by night;[416] and again, that the Torah is infinite in itself whereas the Mishna is inexhaustible through its movement in time. We would add that the Torah is like the ocean, which is static and inexhaustible, and the Mishna like a river, which is always in motion. *Mutatis mutandis* all this applies to every Revelation and particularly to Islam. There must be authorities for the Faith (*imān*) and the Law (*islām*), but there must also be authorities for the Path (*ihsān*), and these latter authorities are none other than the Sufis and their duly qualified representatives. The logical necessity for authorities in this third domain—which the theologians of "the outward" (*'ulamā azh-zhāhir*) are forced to admit, though they cannot explain it—is one of the proofs of the legitimacy of Sufism, therefore also of its doctrines and methods as well as of its organizations and masters.

These considerations concerning the sacred Books call for some sort of definition of the epithet "sacred" itself: that is sacred which is attached to the transcendent order, possesses the character of absolute certainty and eludes the comprehension and control of the ordinary human mind. Imagine a tree whose leaves, having no kind of direct knowledge about the root, hold a discussion about whether or not a root exists and what its form is if it does: if a voice then came from the root telling them that the root does exist and what its form is, that message would be sacred. The sacred is the presence of the center in the periphery, of the immutable in the moving; dignity is essentially an expression of it, for in dignity too the center manifests outwardly; the heart is revealed in gestures. The sacred introduces a quality of the absolute into relativities and confers on perishable things a texture of eternity.

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In order to understand the full scope of the Koran we must take into consideration three things: its doctrinal content, which we find made explicit in the great canonical treatises of

[416] Here the reader will recall that Nicodemus came to find Christ by night, and this implies a reference to esoterism or to *gnosis*.

Islam such as those of Abu Hanifah and At-Tahawi; its narrative content, which depicts all the vicissitudes of the soul; and its divine magic or its mysterious and in a sense miraculous power.[417] These sources of metaphysical and eschatological doctrine, of mystical psychology and theurgic power, lie hidden under a veil of breathless utterances, often clashing in shock, of crystalline and fiery images, but also of passages majestic in rhythm, woven of every fiber of the human condition.

But the supernatural character of this Book lies not only in its doctrinal content, its psychological and mystical truth, and its transmuting magic; it also appears in its most outward efficacy, in the miracle of the expansion of Islam; the effects of the Koran in space and time bear no relation to the literary impression which the written words may give to a profane reader. Like every sacred Scripture, the Koran too is *a priori* a "closed" book, though "open" in another respect, that of the elementary truths of salvation.

It is necessary to distinguish in the Koran between the general excellence of the Divine Word and the particular excellence of a given content which may be superimposed, as for example when it is a question of God or His qualities; it is like the distinction between the excellence of gold and that of some masterpiece made from gold. The masterpiece directly manifests the nobility of gold; similarly the nobility of the content of one or another sacred verse expresses the nobility of the Koranic substance, of the Divine Word, which is in itself undifferentiated; it cannot, however, add to the infinite value of that Word. This is also related to the "divine magic," the transforming and sometimes theurgic virtue, of the divine discourse, to which allusion has already been made.

This magic is closely linked with the actual language of the Revelation, which is Arabic, and so translations are canonically illegitimate and ritually ineffectual. A language is sacred when God has spoken in it;[418] and in order that God should speak in it, it must have certain

[417] Only this power can explain the importance of the recitation of the Koran. In his *Risālat al-Quds*, Ibn Arabi cites the case of Sufis who spent their whole life in reading or in ceaselessly reciting the Koran, and this would be inconceivable and even impossible to realize were there not, behind the husk of the literal text, a concrete and active spiritual presence going beyond the words and the mind. Moreover it is by virtue of this power of the Koran that certain verses can chase away demons and heal illnesses, at least given the concurrence of certain circumstances.

[418] From this the reader might conclude that Aramaic is a sacred language since Christ spoke it, but here three reservations must be made; first, in Christianity, as in Buddhism, it is the *Avatāra* himself who is the Revelation so that, apart from their doctrine, the Scriptures do not have the central and plenary function which they have in other traditions; second, the precise Aramaic words used by Christ have not been preserved, which corroborates what has just been said; third, for Christ himself Hebrew was the sacred language. Though the Talmud affirms that "the

characteristics such as are not found in any modern language; it is essential to understand that after a certain cyclical period and the hardening of the terrestrial ambience which it comprises, God no longer speaks, at least not as Revealer. In other words, after a certain period, whatever is put forward as new religion is inevitably false;[419] the Middle Ages mark *grosso modo* the final limit.[420]

Like the world, the Koran is at the same time one and multiple. The world is a multiplicity which disperses and divides; the Koran is a multiplicity which draws together and leads to Unity. The multiplicity of the holy Book—the diversity of its words, aphorisms, images, and stories—fills the soul and then absorbs it and imperceptibly transposes it into the climate of serenity and immutability by a sort of "divine ruse."[421] The soul, which is accustomed to the flux of phenomena, yields to this flux without resistance; it lives in phenomena and is by them divided and dispersed—even more than that, it actually becomes what it thinks and does. The revealed Discourse has the virtue of accepting this tendency while reversing its movement, thanks to the celestial nature of the content and the language, so that the fishes of the soul swim without distrust and with their habitual rhythm into the divine net.[422] To the degree that it can bear it, the mind must be infused with a consciousness of the metaphysical contrast between "substance" and "accidents"; a mind thus regenerated keeps its thoughts first of all on God and thinks all things in Him. In other words, through the mosaic of passages, phrases, and words, God extinguishes the agitation of the mind by Himself taking on the appearance of mental agitation. The Koran is like an image of everything the human brain can think and

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Angels do not understand Aramaic," this language has nonetheless a particularly high liturgical value; long before Christ it was "made sacred" by Daniel and Esdras.

[419] The same can be said of initiatic orders. One can—or rather God can—create a new branch of an ancient lineage or found a congregation of people around a pre-existing initiation if there is an imperative reason for doing so and if this type of congregation is within the practices of the tradition in question, but in no circumstance has anyone a right to found a "society" having "Self-Realization" as its aim, for the simple reason that such a realization is exclusively the province of traditional organizations. Even if someone sought to incorporate a genuine initiation into the framework of a "society" or of some kind of "spiritual fellowship"—thus a profane association—one can be certain that this very framework would wholly paralyze its efficacy and inevitably bring about deviations. Spiritual treasures do not accommodate themselves to just any sort of framework.

[420] In fact Islam is the last world religion. As for the Sikh brotherhood, this is an esoterism analogous to that of Kabir, the special position of which is explained by the quite exceptional conditions arising from the contiguity of Hinduism and Sufism; but here too it is a case of a final possibility.

[421] In the sense of the Sanskrit term *upāya*.

[422] This is true of every sacred Scripture and is notably true of Biblical history: the vicissitudes of Israel are those of the soul seeking its Lord. In Christianity this function of "transforming magic" appertains especially to the Psalms.

feel, and it is by this means that God exhausts human disquiet, infusing into the believer silence, serenity, and peace.

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In Islam, as also in Judaism, the Revelation relates essentially to the symbolism of the book: the whole universe is a book whose letters are the cosmic elements—the *dharmas*, as Buddhists would say—which, by their innumerable combinations and under the influence of the divine Ideas, produce worlds, beings, and things. The words and sentences of the book are the manifestations of the creative possibilities: the words in respect of the content, the sentences in respect of the container; the sentence is, in effect, like a space or a duration comprising a predestined series of compossibles and constituting what may be called a "divine plan." This symbolism of the book is distinguished from that of speech by its static character; speech is situated in duration and implies repetition, whereas books contain affirmations in a mode of simultaneity; in a book there is a certain leveling out, all the letters being similar, and this is moreover highly characteristic of the Islamic perspective. But this perspective, like that of the Torah, also includes the symbolism of speech, which is then identified with the origin; God speaks, and His Speech is crystallized in the form of a Book. Clearly this crystallization has its prototype in God, and indeed it can be affirmed that the "Speech" and the "Book" are two sides of pure Being, which is the Principle that both creates and reveals; however, it is said that the Koran is the Word of God, not that the Word proceeds from the Koran or from the Book.

First of all the "Word" is Being as the eternal Act of Beyond-Being, of the Divine Essence;[423] but, taken as the sum of the possibilities of manifestation, Being is the "Book." Then, on the level of Being itself, the Word, or according to another image the Pen, is the creative Act, while the Book is the creative Substance;[424] here there is a connection with *Natura naturans* and *Natura naturata* in the highest sense attributable to these concepts. Finally, on the plane of Existence—or, it could be said, of Manifestation—the Word is the Divine Spirit, the central and universal Intellect, which brings about and perpetuates the miracle of creation, as it were by delegation; in this case the Book is the sum of the crystallized possibilities, the world of innumerable

[423] The *Gottheit* or *Urgrund* of Meister Eckhart's doctrine.
[424] According to Hindu doctrine this is the Divine *Prakriti*.

creatures. The Word is then the aspect of dynamic simplicity or of simple "act," while the Book is the aspect of static complexity or differentiated "being."

Or again: it can be said that God created the world like a Book and His Revelation came down into the world in the form of a Book; but man has to hear the Divine Word in Creation and by that Word ascend toward God; God became Book for man, and man has to become Word for God; man is a "book" through his microcosmic multiplicity and his state of existential coagulation, whereas God, when envisaged in this context, is pure Word through His metacosmic Unity and His pure principial activity.

In Christianity the place of the Book is taken by the "Body" with its two complements of "flesh" and "blood" or "bread" and "wine"; *in divinis* the Body is, first, the primary autodetermination of Divinity, and thus the first crystallization of the Infinite; next it is Universal Substance, the true mystical Body of Christ; and finally it is the world of creatures, the crystallized manifestation of this Body.

We have seen that God-as-Being is the Book *par excellence*, and that, on the plane of Being, the pole Substance is the first reflection of this Book; the Word, which is its dynamic complement, then becomes the Pen, the vertical axis of creation. In contradistinction, man too has an aspect of Word represented by his name; God created man in naming him; the soul is a Word of the Creator when envisaged from the aspect of its simplicity or unity.

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The most obvious content of the Koran consists not of doctrinal expositions, but of historical and symbolical narratives and eschatological imagery; the pure doctrine emerges from these two sorts of pictures in which it is enshrined. Setting aside the majesty of the Arabic text and its quasi-magical resonances, a reader could well become wearied of the content if he did not know that it concerns himself in a quite concrete and direct way, since the disbelievers (the *kāfirūn*), the associaters of false divinities with God (the *mushrikūn*), and the hypocrites (the *munāfiqūn*) are within ourselves; likewise that the Prophets represent our intellect and consciousness, that all the tales in the Koran are enacted almost daily in our

souls, that Mecca is our heart, and that the tithe, the fast, the pilgrimage, and the holy war are so many contemplative attitudes.

Running parallel with this interpretation there is another which concerns the phenomena of the world around us. The Koran is the world, both outside and within us, and it is always connected to God in the two respects of orign and end; but this world, or these two worlds, show fissures announcing death or destruction or, to be more precise, transformation, and this is what the apocalyptic and eschatological *surahs* teach us; everything that concerns the world also concerns us, and conversely. These *surahs* transmit to us a multiple and striking image of the fragility both of our earthly condition and of matter, then of the destined reabsorption of space and the elements into the invisible substance of the causal "protocosm"; this is the collapse of the visible world into the immaterial—a collapse, to paraphrase Saint Augustine, "inwards" or "upwards"; it is also the confronting of creatures, torn away from the earth, with the flashing reality of the Infinite.

By its "surfaces" the Koran presents a cosmology which treats of phenomena and their final end, and by its "pinnacles," a metaphysic of the Real and the unreal.

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Not surprisingly, the imagery of the Koran is inspired above all by conflict; Islam was born in an atmosphere of conflict, and the soul in search of God must fight. Islam did not invent strife; the world is a constant disequilibrium, for to live means to struggle. But this struggle is only one aspect of the world, and it vanishes with the level to which it belongs; the whole of the Koran is also suffused with a tone of powerful serenity. In psychological terms it could be said that the combative aspect of the Muslim is counterbalanced by his fatalism; in the spiritual life the "holy war" of the spirit against the seducing soul (*annafs alammārah*) is transcended and transfigured by peace in God, by consciousness of the Absolute; it is as if in the last analysis it were no longer we who are fighting, and this brings us back to the symbiosis of combat and knowledge in the *Bhagavad Gita* and also to certain aspects of the knightly arts in Zen. The practice of Islam, at whatever level, is to repose in effort; Islam is the way of equilibrium and of light which comes to rest upon that equilibrium.

Equilibrium is the link between disequilibrium and union, just as union is the link between equilibrium and unity, which is the "vertical" dimension. Disequilibrium and equilibrium, lack of rhythm and rhythm, separation and union, division and unity: such are the great themes of the Koran and of Islam. Everything in being and in becoming is envisaged in terms of Unity and its gradations, or the mystery of its negation.

For the Christian, what is necessary for coming to God is "unreservedly to renounce oneself," as Saint John of the Cross put it; and the Christian is astonished to hear from the Muslim that the key to salvation is to believe that God is One; what he cannot know from the outset is that everything depends on the quality—on the "sincerity" (*ikhlās*)—of this belief; what saves is the purity or the totality of the belief, and that totality clearly implies the loss of self, what ever the form in which this is expressed.

As for the negation of the Christian Trinity in the Koran —and this negation is extrinsic and conditional—we must take account of certain shades of meaning. The Trinity can be envisaged according to a "vertical" perspective or according to either of two "horizontal" perspectives, one of them being supreme and the other not. The vertical perspective—Beyond-Being, Being, and Existence—envisages the *hypostases* as "descending" from Unity or from the Absolute—or from the Essence it could be said—which means that it envisages the degrees of Reality. The supreme horizontal perspective corresponds to the Vedantic triad *Sat* (supraontological Reality), *Chit* (Absolute Consciousness), and *Ananda* (Infinite Beatitude), which means that it envisages the Trinity inasmuch as It is hidden in Unity.[425] The non-supreme horizontal perspective on the contrary situates Unity as an essence hidden within the Trinity, which is then ontological and represents the three fundamental aspects or modes of Pure Being, whence the triad: Being, Wisdom, Will (Father, Son, Spirit). Now the concept of a Trinity seen as a deployment (*tajallī*) of Unity or of the Absolute is in no way opposed to the unitary doctrine of Islam; what is opposed to it is solely the attribution of absoluteness to the Trinity alone, or even to the ontological Trinity alone, as it is envisaged exoterically. This last point of view does not, strictly speaking, attain to the Absolute, and this is as much as to say that it attributes an absolute character to what is relative and is ignorant of *Māyā* and the degrees of reality or of illusion; it does not conceive of the metaphysical—but not

[425] The Absolute is not the Absolute inasmuch as it contains aspects, but inasmuch as It transcends them; inasmuch as It is Trinity, It is therefore not Absolute.

pantheistic[426]—identity between manifestation and the Principle; still less, therefore, does it conceive of the consequence this identity implies from the point of view of the Intellect and the knowledge which delivers.

Here comment is called for on the subject of the disbelievers, the *kāfirūn*, those who according to the Koran do not belong, as do Jews and Christians, to the category of "people of the Book" (*ahl alKitāb*). If the religion of these disbelievers is false, or if disbelievers are such because their religion is false, why have Sufis declared that God can be present, not only in churches and synagogues, but also in the temples of idolaters? It is because in the classical and traditional cases of paganism the loss of the full truth and of efficacy for salvation essentially results from a profound modification in the mentality of the worshipers and not from an ultimate falsity of the symbols; in all the religions which surrounded each of the three Semitic forms of monotheism, as also in those forms of fetishism[427] still alive today, a mentality once contemplative and hence in possession of a sense of the metaphysical transparency of forms had ended by becoming passional, worldly,[428] and strictly speaking superstitious.[429] The symbol through which the reality symbolized was originally clearly perceived—a reality of which it is an aspect, rigorously speaking—became in fact an opaque and uncomprehended image or idol, and this decadence of the general mentality could not fail in its turn to affect the tradition itself, enfeebling it and falsifying it in various ways; most of the ancient paganisms were characterized by intoxication with power and sensuality. There is, assuredly, a personal paganism to be met with even within those religions which are objectively living, just as conversely truth and piety may be actualized in a religion which is objectively decadent—in which case, however, the integrity of its symbolism is to be presumed. But it would be completely mistaken to believe that any of the great world religions alive today could in its turn become pagan; they have not the time to become so, and their sufficient reason in a sense is that they should endure until the end of the world. That is why they are formally guaranteed by their founders, which is not the case with the great paganisms

[426] Not pantheistic since it is in no sense "material," nor even "substantial" in the cosmological sense of that term.

[427] This word is here used only as a conventional sign to designate decadent traditions, and there is no intention of pronouncing on the value of any particular African or Melanesian tradition.

[428] According to the Koran, the *kafir* is in effect characterized by his "worldliness," that is, by his preference for the good things of this world and his inadvertence (*ghaflah*) as regards those lying beyond this world.

[429] According to the Gospels, the pagans imagine they will be answered "for their much speaking." At root, "superstition" consists in the illusion of taking the means for the end or of worshiping forms for their own sake and not for their transcendent content.

that have disappeared; these had no human founders, and their perennial subsistence was conditional. The primordial perspectives are "spatial" and not "temporal"; Hinduism alone of all the great traditions of the primordial type has had the possibility of being renewed through the ages thanks to its *Avatāras*.[430] In any case our intention here is not to enter into details but simply to make it clear why, from the point of view of some Sufi, it is not Apollo who is false but the way of regarding him.[431]

But to return to the "people of the Book": if the Koran contains elements of polemic concerning Christianity and, for stronger reasons, concerning Judaism, it is because Islam came after these religions, and this means that it was obliged to put itself forward as an improvement on what came before it. In other words the Koran enunciates a perspective which makes it possible to go beyond certain formal aspects of the two more ancient monotheisms. Something analogous can be seen, not only in the position of Christianity in relation to Judaism—where the point is self-evident by reason of the messianic idea and the fact that the former is like a bhaktic esoterism of the latter—but also in the attitude of Buddhism towards Brahmanism; here too the later appearance in time coincides with a perspective that is symbolically, though not intrinsically, superior. The tradition that is apparently being superseded clearly has no need to take account of this fact, since each perspective is a universe unto itself— thus a center and a standard—and since in its own way it contains all valid points of view. By the logic of things the later tradition is "condemned" to the symbolical attitude of superiority,[432] on pain of non-existence one might almost say. But there is also a positive symbolism of anteriority and in this respect the new tradition, which is from its own point of view the final one, must incarnate "what came before," or "what has always existed"; its novelty—or glory—is consequently its absolute "anteriority."

[430] Moreover nothing prevents the possibility of other branches of the primordial tradition—of "hyperborean" or "Atlantean" affiliation—from having also survived on the fringes of the historical scene, though this could not be so in the case of the great traditions of urbanized peoples. Apart from this, when speaking of paganism—and we are adopting this conventional term without regard either to its etymology or its unpleasant associations, which chiefly arise from abuses—it is doubtless always necessary to include a reservation regarding a sapiential esoterism, inaccessible to the majority and in fact incapable of acting upon that majority.

[431] Thus also how he was represented, as is proven by classical art.

[432] This attitude is necessarily legitimate from a certain angle and at a certain level and is explained, in the field of monotheism, by the fact that the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic religions correspond respectively to the Paths of "action," "love" and "knowledge" to the extent that they can, as exoterisms, do so and without prejudice to their most profound content.

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Pure Intellect is the "immanent Koran"; the uncreated Koran—the *Logos*—is the Divine Intellect, which crystallizes in the form of the earthly Koran and answers objectively to that other immanent and subjective revelation which is the human Intellect.[433] In Christian terms it could be said that Christ is like the objectification of the Intellect, and the Intellect is like the subjective and permanent revelation of Christ. Thus there are two poles for the manifestation of Divine Wisdom: first, the Revelation "above us" and second the Intellect "within us"; the Revelation provides the symbols while the Intellect deciphers them and "recollects" their content, thereby again becoming conscious of its own substance. Revelation is a deployment and Intellect a concentration; the descent is in accord with the ascent.

But there is another *haqīqah* (truth) on which we should touch at this point, and it is this: in the sensory order the Divine Presence has two symbols or vehicles—or two "natural manifestations"—of primary importance: the heart within us, which is our center, and the air around us, which we breathe. Air is the manifestation of ether, the weaver of forms, and it is at the same time the vehicle of light, which in turn manifests the ethereal element.[434] When we breathe, the air penetrates us, and symbolically it is as though it introduced into us the creative ether together with light; we breathe in the Universal Presence of God. There is also a connection between light and coolness, for the sensation of both is liberating; what is light outwardly is coolness inwardly. We inhale luminous, cool air, and our respiration is a prayer, as is the beating of our heart; the luminosity relates to the Intellect and the freshness to pure Being. In Islam it is taught that at the end of time light will become separated from heat, and heat will be hell whereas light will be Paradise; the light of heaven is cool, and the heat of hell dark.

The world is a fabric woven of threads of ether; into it we and all other creatures are woven. All sensory things come forth from ether, which contains all; everything is ether

[433] It is "subjective" because empirically it is within us. The term "subjective," as applied to the intellect, is as improper as the epithet "human"; in both cases, the terms are used simply in order to define the way of approach.

[434] The Greeks passed over in silence the element ether, no doubt because they conceived it as being hidden in the air, which is also invisible. In Hebrew the word *avir* designates both air and ether: the word *aor* has the same root and means "light."

crystallized. The world is an immense carpet; we possess the whole world in each breath because we breathe the ether from which all things are made,[435] and we "are" ether. Just as the world is an immeasurable carpet in which everything is repeated within the rhythm of continual change, or in which everything remains similar within the framework of the law of differentiation, so too the Koran—and with it the whole of Islam—is a carpet or fabric, in which the center is everywhere repeated in an infinitely varied way and in which the diversity is but a development of the unity. The universal "ether," of which the physical element is only a distant and grosser reflection, is none other than the divine Word, which is everywhere "being" and "consciousness" and everywhere creative and liberating or revealing and illuminating.

The nature which surrounds us—sun, moon, stars, day and night, the seasons, the waters, mountains, forests, and flowers—is a kind of primordial Revelation; now these three things—nature, light, and breath—are profoundly linked with one another. Breathing should be linked with the remembrance of God; we should breathe with reverence, with the heart so to speak. It is said that the Spirit of God—the Divine Breath—was "over the waters" and that it was by breathing into it that God created the soul, as it is also said that man, who is "born of the Spirit," is like the wind; "thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth."

It is significant that Islam is defined in the Koran as an "expansion (*inshirah*) of the breast"; it is said, for example, that God "hath expanded our breast for Islam"; the connection between the Islamic perspective and the initiatic meaning of breathing and also of the heart is a key of the first importance for understanding the Sufic arcanum. It is true that by the very nature of things the same path also opens out onto universal *gnosis*.

The "remembrance of God" is like breathing deeply in the solitude of high mountains: here the morning air, filled with the purity of the eternal snows, dilates the breast; it becomes space, and heaven enters our heart.

But this image includes yet a more differenciated symbolism, that of the "universal breath": here expiration relates to cosmic manifestation or the creative phase and inspiration to reintegration, to the phase of salvation or the return to God.

[435] This is a symbolic manner of speech, for ether, being perfect plenitude, is motionless and could not move.

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One reason why Westerners have difficulty in appreciating the Koran and have even many times questioned whether this book contains the premises of a spiritual life lies in the fact that they look in a text for a meaning that is fully expressed and immediately intelligible, whereas Semites, and Eastern peoples in general, are lovers of verbal symbolism and read "in depth." The revealed phrase is for them an array of symbols from which more and more flashes of light shoot forth the further the reader penetrates into the spiritual geometry of the words: the words are reference points for a doctrine that is inexhaustible; the implicit meaning is everything, and the obscurities of the literal meaning are so many veils marking the majesty of the content.[436] But even without taking into consideration the sibylline structure of many sacred sentences, we can say that the Oriental draws much from a few words: when, for example, the Koran recalls that "the world beyond is better for you than this lower world" or that "earthly life is but a play", or when it affirms: "In your wives and your children ye have an enemy," or "Say: *Allāh*! then leave them to their vain talk"—or finally when it promises Paradise to "him who has feared the station of his Lord and refused desire to his soul"—when the Koran speaks in this way, there emerges for the Muslim[437] a whole ascetic and mystical doctrine, as penetrating and as complete as any other form of spirituality worthy of the name.

Man alone has the gift of speech, for he alone among all the creatures of this earth is "made in the image of God" in a direct and total manner. And since it is by virtue of this likeness—provided it is actualized by appropriate means—that man is saved, thus by virtue of the objective intelligence associated with free will and truthful speech, whether articulated or not, it is easy to understand the capital part played in the life of the Muslim by those sublime words which are the verses of the Koran; they are not merely sentences which transmit thoughts, but are in a way beings, powers, or talismans. The soul of the Muslim is as it were

[436] This is the way the Bible was read in the Middle Ages—following on the footsteps of Antiquity. The denial of the hermeneutical interpretation, which was the bulwark of traditional and integral intellectuality, inevitably led in the end to the "criticism"—and destruction—of the sacred Texts; there is nothing left of the Song of Songs once only the literal meaning is accepted.

[437] Note that we say "for the Muslim," not "for every Muslim."

woven of sacred formulas; in these he works, in these he rests, in these he lives, and in these he dies.

It was the objectivity of human intelligence which enabled Adam to “name” all things and all creatures; in other words it is this objectivity which enables man to know objects, plants, and animals, whereas they do not know him. But the highest content of this intelligence is the Absolute; to be able to compass the greater is to be able to compass the lesser, and it is because man can know God that he knows the world. After its own fashion human intelligence is a proof of God.

XII

Spirituality

28

Some Thought on Soliciting and Imparting Spiritual Counsel*

Marco Pallis

The function of *upaguru* or "occasional instructor", to which René Guénon devoted an article (*Etudes Traditionnelles*, January 1948), is one that cannot be defined in terms of any special qualification: any man, thanks to a particular conjunction of circumstances, may some day be called upon to exercise it, and it may even happen that the office in question will devolve, outside the circle of human relationships, upon an animal, plant, or even an "inanimate" object that becomes, at that moment, a substitute for the human instructor in bringing enlightenment to someone in need of it—here the word "enlightenment" is used in a relative sense, this goes without saying; but provided the knowledge thus gained really counts spiritually, being thus related in greater or lesser degree to the gaining of Enlightenment in the full sense, then the use of the self-same word is justified. Naturally the function itself is exercisable, in the case of a human being, in more or less active mode, that is to say with greater or lesser awareness of what is involved; in the most favourable case the agent of instruction will accept the responsibility that has come to him as being part of his own *karma*, a bi-product of anterior causes, that is to say in a spirit of submission to the universal law of causality or to that Divine Will which translates it in personal terms; but at the same time he will regard it as a spiritual opportunity, an episode of his own vocation or *dharma*, to be welcomed accordingly.

This experience is one which must have been shared by many of those who have themselves come to publish books or essays treating of the traditional doctrines: speaking from his own experience, the author of these notes has in fact repeatedly found himself in the position of being consulted by people anxiously seeking spiritual advice with a view to giving effect, in the face of the modern world and under its pressure, to that which, thanks to their reading of Guénon or other works imbued with the traditional spirit, had become for them a matter of pressing necessity.

These inquiries, however, though animated by a common motive, have in fact taken on many different and sometimes most unexpected forms, calling for answers no less variable: it is

* To one who provided the occasional cause for this essay.

nevertheless possible, looking back, to recognise some features of common occurrence that may allow of a few profitable generalisations touching the way in which a man should prepare himself to meet an opportunity of this kind. It must, however, be clearly understood that any suggestions offered here, even if they commend themselves, are intended to be carried out, whenever the occasion presents itself, in a resourceful spirit and with the greatest flexibility, lest by faulty handling on one's own part the person most concerned be driven back prematurely on his defences, as can so easily happen with temperaments either passionately or else timidly inclined. Ability or willingness to discuss a vital matter in a spirit of detachment, as experience has shown again and again, can but rarely be taken for granted in anyone; a certain failure in this respect at the outset must not cause the other person to be written off as "uninteresting", as a result of a summary estimate of his character and motives; in handling such matters a remembrance of one's own limitations can be of great service as a corrective to impatience or complacency.

At the same time, neither is it necessary to wrap up every statement or avoid every straight issue for fear of causing pain, and if some question productive of an answer from oneself couched in rigorous terms happens to awaken an unexpectedly strong sentimental reaction in one's interlocutor, this too must be accepted patiently and without surprise; the cause of such hitches may well lie in the fact that anyone with a mind seriously divided about spiritual questions will necessarily be living under some degree of strain, and this state of acute doubt may well give rise in season to symptoms of irritability. On the other hand it also sometimes happens that an inquirer, professedly asking for counsel, has already made up his mind, if unconsciously, and all he is really seeking is a peg on which to hang a decision prejudged on the strength of secret desires; in such a case a straight answer, which brings matters sharply to a head, may be the only way left open to one. Nevertheless, these cases are comparatively rare, and the greater number of consultations of the kind here referred to are more likely to follow a line of gradual and also of fluctuating approach.

For the sake of those who, either from natural diffidence or for any other reason, might feel dismayed at the possibility of having some day to impart spiritual counsel to another, and possibly even to one who, at the mental level, is more highly equipped than themselves, it should be repeated that the function here under discussion, that of *upaguru*, is not one that depends on the possession of any kind of transcendent qualification, though within the

very wide limits defining the field of its possible exercise all manner of degrees are to be found. If it be argued, rightly as it happens, that the function of instructor, even in its most relative sense, will always carry with it some implication of superiority over the person instructed, the answer in this case will be that the mere fact that the latter has come to one seeking spiritual advice itself constitutes recognition of a certain superiority, however temporary and however limited in scope. To accept this fact in no wise runs counter to true humility; for in fact no human instrument as such is ever adequate to a divinely imparted vocation at any degree; therefore also his own unworthiness can never rule a man out altogether. One can take comfort in the fact that the very disproportion of the two terms involved serves to illustrate the transcendence of the one and the dependence of the other: paradoxically, it is the "good man's" personal lustre which might, in the eyes of the world, seem to mask the seemingly distant source of its own illumination, but this can hardly be said of the sinner's!

So much for the call to *upaguruhood*: when it comes to the case of a Spiritual Master, however, *guru* in the full sense, his superiority rests on the twin poles of initiatic status, which is not a personal attribute, and of spiritual realization, which likewise confers an objective quality that once gained cannot afterwards be forfeited; in that sense the *guru* can be called infallible, and a mouthpiece of the Self. Should it happen, however, that the disciple becomes equal in knowledge to his master, then, if he wants further guidance he will have to go elsewhere, as indeed sometimes occurs in the initiatic life; there are even cases on record when a master, recognising the fact that a disciple has surpassed him, has exchanged places with him, descending willingly from the instructor's seat to sit at his feet, an example both of the highest humility and also of the purest realism. With the occasional office of *upaguru* the case is different, as already pointed out: apart from the temporary superiority conferred by the occasion, an adviser may well be, on balance, inferior by comparison with the person who has consulted him, though the reverse can just as well be true; in either case this question is irrelevant.

If, however, the questions as addressed by the inquirer are felt to be beyond one's powers of adequate handling it is always open to one—this hardly needs saying—to send him elsewhere to someone better equipped for the purpose; which is not the same as simply wanting to get rid of him, in a spirit of indifference lacking charity.

Cases may also occur which are of a very doubtful character, calling for an attitude of reserve on one's own part; besides which there are all sorts of inquiries having an obviously superficial bearing, when all that is needed is to refer the other person to suitable books which, if read attentively, might at least serve to awaken some understanding as to what the spiritual life really entails, and this in its turn might produce consequences of an incalculable kind. The present comments, however, are only meant to cover the case of the more or less serious seeker, without trying to extend the discussion to borderline cases. Having been compiled under the impulse of a recent experience, they have an almost entirely practical bearing, and in any case there has been no intention of treating the subject exhaustively.

A. *For the guidance of the person consulted: —*

(1) Speaking generally, it is usually good policy to start off by dealing with whatever question one's would-be client has chosen for a gambit, and this holds good even when one suspects that there may be other and deeper-seated perplexities still unavowed. Very often one's own first contribution will consist in framing the question itself correctly: half the unanswerable questions in the world remain so because they are already vitiated by the intrusion of special pleading (in other words, of passion) or because they harbour some undetected confusion between different orders of reality with consequent false comparisons—the history of religious controversy abounds in such examples, which does not mean, however, that it consists of nothing but that, as professed enemies of dogma would like to argue. Given that the case is such, however, once a question has been accurately and fairly re-phrased, it will already be half way to begetting its own right answer, which can then be left to the enquirer himself to elicit far better than if one tries to supply it for him. It often happens, however, that the questions addressed to one are of a very general kind, amounting, that is to say, to an inquiry how to find a spiritual way unaccompanied by any pointer indicating a particular line of approach, and in that case it will be advisable to begin by investigating those spiritual possibilities that appear to be most accessible to the person concerned and least beset by practical obstacles, while being careful to leave the door open to other and seemingly more remote possibilities. At the same time there should be a conscious attempt to prevent the scales from being hastily weighted, by either party, in favour of or against a particular solution (unless the form of the question as put is such as to admit of only one answer, which will not happen very often), because the considerations governing any

eventual choice of a path are necessarily complex and include not only practical factors of time and place and personal associations, but also factors of psychic affinity or incompatibility which cannot be assessed at a first glance.

(2) One should deliberately frame one's comments and answers on the basis of the traditional norms, with the minimum intrusion of one's personal opinions or preferences: it must all along be borne in mind that one is not called upon to substitute one's personal will for that of the other party, who must on the contrary be encouraged to take proper responsibility for any decisions taken, whether in a provisional or in a more far-reaching sense. One is there, in a situation not of one's own seeking, as the temporary spokesman of tradition itself, across its every form, and this requires an attitude of calculated detachment, which must not for a moment be abandoned under whatever provocation from the other party or because of some sentimental attachment of one's own. It is neither by getting involved in a debate nor by any one-sided advocacy of this or that but rather by consistently holding the mirror of pure metaphysical knowledge in the face of the other person's aspirations and difficulties that one will best succeed in dispelling the confusions and contradictions that beset the entrance to the Way: these are likely to be more than usually troublesome if the inquirer happens to be an "intellectual" (in the modern sense), one whose mind, that is to say, is haunted by a throng of abstract concepts, besides labouring under the mass of factual information which a man of retentive brain can hardly escape being burdened with under present circumstances.

(3) Sentimental prejudices, if they happen to reveal themselves, should be shown up for what they are; but in doing so, firmness should be duly tempered with courtesy and sympathy, since the realm of the feelings is one where, by definition, violent reactions are in the order of things, and once these have been evoked it is not easy for anyone to return to a state of impartial consideration; he must be given time to regain his balance.

(4) One must abstain from engaging in an attempted psychological analysis of the other person: the less one delves into his or her private life, antecedents, etc., the better, and questions of this kind should only be put where some fact or other appears quite indispensable for the purpose of rendering a spiritual problem more "concrete". Once again, it is well to remind oneself that for someone to be seeking advice of this nature does in itself argue a degree, and often an acute degree, of "spiritual distress" that deserves all one's sympathy. It should be added that in trying to probe the nature of another's spiritual need, small,

apparently irrelevant signs will often tell one more than any rationalised explanations, since the latter, even when honestly advanced, are almost bound to take on an apologetic and forensic character, affecting their usefulness as evidence to a greater or lesser extent.

B. *Concerning the need for a traditional framework: —*

In the case of one who is already attached to an authentic traditional form, the positive possibilities of that form must first be taken into account, if only for the reason that the individual concerned will already have been moulded psychically according to that form, at least in part, and will understand its language without special effort.

As for one who is "unattached" traditionally, the primary necessity of a traditional basis for a spiritual life must, as Guénon has done repeatedly, be stressed in unequivocal terms; an esoterism *in vacuo* is not to be thought of, if only from the fact that man is not pure Intellect, but is also both mind and body, the several faculties of which, because they are relatively external themselves, require correspondingly external means for their ordering. This insistence on the "discipline of form" is a great stumbling-block to the modernist mentality, and not least so when that mentality is imbued with pseudo-esoteric pretensions. Therefore it provides, over and above its own correctness, one of the earliest means for testing the true character of a man's aspiration, even to the point of bringing about an immediate "discrimination of spirits": only here again one must beware of making a system of this test, since it has become such a commonplace, on the part of modern writers on spiritual subjects, to decry the value of forms that a person not already forearmed can be pardoned, at least in some cases, for having developed a similar distaste in the sincere belief that he is merely escaping from the servitude of the letter in the direction of "pure spirit"; whereas all he is doing is to substitute mental abstractions for concrete symbols, and human opinions for the traditional wisdom and the laws that express it outwardly. Nevertheless, in the long run, a persistent unwillingness to accept any traditional formation for oneself, on the common plea that there is no form but has exhibited imperfections in greater or lesser degree in the course of its history, must be reckoned as evidence of spiritual disqualification. Form necessarily implies limitation, and this in its turn implies the possibility of corruption; it would be futile to wish things otherwise. This fact however does not invalidate the efficacy of a formal disposition for those elements in the individuality that belong themselves to the formal order, of which thought is one. For this

reason one must not allow oneself to weaken in regard to the principle of traditional conformity, which does not mean, however, that one should try to ignore incontestable facts concerning various manifestations of human corruptibility that have occurred in the traditional civilizations, especially in more recent times, from some of which, moreover, the modern profanity itself can be traced in lineal descent.

C. *What attachment to a traditional form implies: —*

Attachment to a revealed form which, to meet its corresponding necessity, must be an effective and not merely "ideal" attachment, will imply, as an indispensable condition: (a) The taking up of an *active* attitude towards the world, in opposition to the attitude of passive acceptance that has become so general in these latter days, and it also implies a symbolical but still relatively passive participation in the mysteries, firstly through faith and secondly through general conformity to the traditional institutions. This relatively (though not wholly) passive participation is in fact the distinguishing "note" of an attitude properly qualifiable as "exoteric", in contrast to an "esoteric" attitude (b) which, for its part, implies, over and above, an active, truly "intellectual" participation in the mysteries with a view to their effective realization, sooner or later, in the heart of the devotee. In the latter case the more external side of the tradition, with all its component elements, instead of appearing to fill the entire spiritual horizon, will rather be thought of as offering two advantages, namely (i) as imposing the indispensable discipline of form upon the psycho-physical faculties of the being, the rational faculty included, so that they may all serve, and never obstruct, the activity of the central organ or Spiritual Heart, and (ii) as providing teacher (when found) and disciple alike with appropriate "supports", symbolic or other, wherewith the more inward activities can be steadied in the course of development, and more particularly in the earlier stages.

These supports if they are to be utilisable in an effective sense, as instruments of a spiritual method, must be formally consistent (hence the objection, voiced by Guénon, against any arbitrary "mingling of forms"); otherwise all kinds of psychological dissonances are likely to arise. The modern mind, with its habit of conceiving progress in terms of an indefinite amassing of things regarded as beyond question beneficial and not so merely under a given set of conditions, finds it especially hard to admit that two elements, each advantageous in its own place, can nevertheless be mutually exclusive and capable, when brought into association, of

producing far more harm than good. Behind this reluctance there lies in fact a serious metaphysical fallacy, due to a radical inability to grasp the true nature of forms which, to be such, must each display aspects of inclusion and exclusion, both.

D. *Concerning the nature of tradition: —*

For any human being, his "traditional attachment" can be regarded as a minimum condition defining him as human, at least in intention, and this, regardless of the greater or lesser extent of that being's spiritual horizon: in this sense, tradition will appear as the chief compensating factor for Man's fall from Grace, and as a means for regaining a lost state of equilibrium. In a sense, it is untrue to speak of a man's attachment to tradition; it would be more accurate to say that by tradition man is connected with the source of Knowledge and Grace, as by an Ariadne's clue, one that gives him his direction as well as the hope and promise of safety, if he will but use the opportunity it offers him. For every man, his tradition will be evocative of certain spiritual "values", besides providing the ritual and formal supports (as explained before) which are the carriers and catalysts of celestial influences, at all degrees of receptiveness and participation. The tradition will dedicate that man or woman in principle to the Way, and it will unlock the door to all the possibilities of realization. Likewise it will serve to "regulate" all the more external aspects of human activity, and it will, under normal conditions, suffuse its characteristic "colour" or "flavour" over all the elements of daily life.

For an esoterist the same holds good, with the difference that the whole conception of the Way will be raised, as it were, to a higher power, its finality being transposed beyond individual and indeed beyond all formal limits.

E. *Digression on Orthodoxy.*

Faith has been defined as confident acceptance of a revealed truth, orthodoxy marking a parallel conformity of thought and expression to this same revealed truth. It is not our purpose here to attempt a detailed study of this important aspect of traditional participation, the one that imparts to spiritual life its formal consistency. There is, however, one aspect of the subject which must find a place here because in practice it often plays its part in the difficulties surrounding the early stages of spiritual quest: it is the distinction, not always apparent to everybody, between an expression of traditional orthodoxy in the strict sense and a private

opinion which happens to coincide with the orthodox teaching. From the point of view of its objective content, such an opinion can be accepted at its face value since, as St. Ambrose pointed out, truth by whomsoever expressed is always "of the Holy Ghost". Subjectively judged, however, the correctness of an opinion so held, though creditable to its author and in any case welcome, still remains "accidental" and therefore precarious; the traditional guarantees are not in themselves replaceable thanks to any purely human initiative, carried out, that is to say, outside that spiritual current whence the doctrine in question itself emanates.

The same question might also be presented in another way: it might be asked, which is preferable, that a man be regularly attached to an orthodox tradition while holding some erroneous opinions or that he hold correct views while remaining outside any actual traditional framework? To such a question the answer must be, unequivocally, that regular attachment is in itself worth more than any individual opinion for the simple reason that thoughts, whether sound or mistaken, belong "to the side of man" whereas a traditional doctrine, as deriving from a revelation, belongs "to the side of God"—this without mentioning the "means of Grace" which accompany the doctrine with a view to its realization and for which there exists no human counterpart whatsoever. Between the two positions the distance is incommensurable, and once this is seen the original question loses all its point. It was necessary to touch on it, however, because the pretension to share in the things of tradition "ideally", that is, without paying the price, is one to which many people are addicted from a somewhat clumsy wish to safeguard a non-existent freedom—non-existent because still waiting to be gained through knowledge.

F. *Concerning the structure of a tradition: —*

Every complete tradition implies three elements, utilisable by all concerned and at all degrees of knowledge, though in differing proportions. These elements are: (a) a form of doctrine, expressed in the appropriate "spiritual dialect" (which, to some extent at least, will exclude other dialects), the vehicle of that doctrine being not only the spoken or written word, but also arts, manners, and indeed everything great or small forming part of the tradition in question; (b) certain "means of Grace", whether transmitted from the origins or else revealed at some subsequent time, these being the specific supports of the spiritual influences animating that tradition; and (c) a traditional law regulating the scope of action, positively and negatively, in various ways.

For an exoterist (a), the doctrine, will largely be a field for faith in its more ordinary sense, which represents a relatively passive aspect of knowledge, whereas that same doctrine will, for an esoterist, be treated from the point of view of full awareness through "ontological realization", that is to say from the point of view of knowledge in its active mode. The Christian dialect may still continue to apply the word "faith" to the latter case also, but it must then be taken in the sense of "seeing is believing" and mountains are able to be moved in virtue of it. Similarly, in the case of the sacramental element (b), it will be accepted by the exoterist as a mystery which will often amount, for him, to little more than the implanting of a germ, one which, however, watered by faith and warmed by the other virtues, is bound to bring forth fruit in season.

An esoterist, for his part, will share in the rites with the conscious intention of actualising their fruits in the fullest degree; his attitude is active by definition—if the latter term can be applied to an intention which accepts no limits whatsoever. As for (c), legislative conformity whether ritual or moral, this is required of exoterist and esoterist alike so long as any of the components of a human individuality still remain unordered and uncentred. The final term of this condition of being "under the law" is a converting of one's human status, which since "the Fall", as variously pictured in the different traditions, has been merely virtual, into an irreversible actuality, by a return to the human norm symbolised by the axis passing through the centre of all the "worlds" or degrees of existence, that axis being in fact identical with the path by which the Intelligible Light descends from its source in order to illuminate the darkness of ignorance, thus also indicating the direction of escape along the same road.

G. *Concerning "Solitaries": —*

A passing allusion must be made to those rare beings, the *Afrad* of Islamic tradition, known also to other traditions, for whom initiation in the Supreme Knowledge comes, so to speak, directly from Heaven, if only to show that the Spirit bloweth where it listeth. These, the spontaneously illuminate, owe nothing to any living master, nor have they any reason to be attached to a visible traditional form, though they might so belong accidentally. The formless Truth is their only country, and their language is but the Inexpressible.

Given that their existence does represent a possibility, if a remote one, it is expedient to mention it here: all that need be said on the subject, however, is that any suggestion that such and such a person belongs to this rare category could only begin to be considered on the strength of quite overwhelming evidence; and even then only those who were themselves endowed with the insight born of profound Knowledge would be in a position to hold an opinion on the subject, let alone to claim certitude. As for a person who made such a claim on his own behalf, this would under all ordinary circumstances amount to an evident disproof of the claim, a case of "outer darkness" being mistaken for "solitude" in its higher sense. A genuine state of *fard* (= solitude, whence the derivative *afrad*), like "spiritual silence", "voidness" and other such terms, corresponding, as it does, to a possibility of non-manifestation, would seem to preclude any definable sign of its possession or any organised expression in action.

The true solitaries are in fact but "the exception that proves the rule", and their occasional appearance in the world, necessary in order to affirm the Divine Playfulness, as the Hindus have eloquently called it, does not in any way affect the need for a tradition, as far as the overwhelming majority of human beings is concerned, a need which is moreover attested, if further evidence is needed, by the fact that most if not all Spiritual Masters known to have existed in our time or in former times have spoken in the name of a tradition and have used its appropriate modes of expression when instructing their disciples: whereas it is almost a commonplace for self-appointed teachers to repudiate the traditional norms and to encourage a similar attitude in others, hoping thus to attract the unwary by playing upon their naive self-esteem as persons who supposedly stand beyond the need of outmoded formal disciplines. This is, moreover, a habitual stumbling-block for the Western "intellectual", as also for his westernised Eastern counterpart, being not *the* least among his accumulated spiritual disabilities.

H. *Concerning the viability of forms: —*

For a tradition to fulfil its purpose in any given case, it must be '"viable" in relation to the circumstances of the person concerned, that is to say it must be sufficiently accessible in time and space, as well as assimilable in itself, to render participation "operative". It would, for instance, be useless to try and attach oneself to an extinct form such as the Pythagorean

tradition; and even with a still extant form such as Taoism, it would be practically impossible to establish contact with it, save by rare exception, because of the immense physical and psychic obstacles standing in the way of any Occidental who wished to resort to a Taoist Master—always supposing that such is still to be found hidden in some remote corner of the Chinese world, which today is not easy to prove or disprove.

By pursuing this line of argument it will be seen that the range of choice is not actually very wide and that even within that range a distinction has to be made, in the case of a European, between traditions existing in his immediate vicinity, and those which, if assimilation is to become a practical proposition, can only be approached through travel to more distant regions; and even if this be possible, the question of maintaining contact subsequently is not without pertinence, given the small probability, in any average case, that a high degree of contemplative concentration will have been attained soon enough to reduce the formal aspects of the tradition to relative unimportance.

It must not be thought, however, because of the emphasis laid on accessibility, that this condition is to be treated as a completely overriding one or applied systematically to all cases alike. Though it is reasonable to give preliminary consideration to what seems to be the nearest solution, its apparent advantages may, despite all the extra difficulties consequent upon a more remote choice, have to yield before some alternative solution, one governed by considerations of natural affinity, for instance, or by some other factor not perceivable at the outset. It is in fact always good to bear in mind the oft-heard statement that in the end it is the tradition that chooses the man, rather than the reverse. All that human reasoning can do is to prepare the way for the final discrimination prior to which he can only preserve an attitude of "prayerful expectancy".

In the case of an Occidental it is evident, however, that his mental conformation, whether he likes it or not, will have been powerfully affected by Christian ways of thinking and acting and that the very words he uses are charged with inherited implications bearing a Christian tinge: this is as true of those who have cast off (or so they would have it) their traditional yoke as of those who still remain attached to some branch of the Christian Church, at least in name. Such being the case, it would seem most prudent to consider the possibilities offered by the Christian path first of all, provided one does so with a mind unbiased by irrelevancies, whether in a positive or negative direction: this last remark applies equally to

both parties in the discussion. As to the question of what criteria may be applied when investigating the spiritual possibilities presently offered by any particular traditional form, this will be reserved for a section to follow.

I. *A few remarks about existing forms: —*

Besides the two Christian traditional forms—their differences need not be stressed in the present instance—which between them cover the European world together with its American and other prolongations, there are also certain Eastern traditions, including the Islamic, which come within the bounds of practicability for Occidentals, at least in exceptional cases; this is especially true of the last-named, which both by reason of a certain kinship with the Christian form and still more by reason of its own structure is particularly fitted to meet the needs of men in the latter days of the cycle, a fact which is not generally recognised in the West, where ignorance on the subject of Islam and consequent prejudice is still rather general. Howbeit, it is in the direction of one or two of the Oriental traditions that those souls who, for any reason, find themselves out of tune with their dechristianised environment usually turn. Whoever does so ought not, however, to underrate the practical difficulties of an Oriental attachment on the part of one who intends to continue living a life which, in all other ways, will conform to the Occidental pattern. Whereas this is a very real drawback, it is not an altogether insurmountable one, though it does mean that rather exceptional qualities are required to overcome it, chief of which is a markedly contemplative turn of mind. Prudence demands that these obstacles should be faced from the start in a spirit of realism; otherwise a revulsion of feeling may wreck the whole enterprise after the first enthusiasm has begun to cool. On the other hand it does not do to be too cautious either where spiritual matters are concerned; a readiness to plunge boldly for the prize is also a quality of the spirit. The Way is beset with dangers, and to follow it at all is inseparable from certain oft-repeated discomforts, which have to be accepted for what they are, as part of the price to be paid by one who would fain walk with the Spirit. It is well to recognise that the very existence, for so many, of an apparent problem of choice is in itself an abnormal happening, due to the chaotic circumstances of the times. The alternative to solving it effectively is a relapse into indifference, a virtual atheism.

J. *Of attraction and aversion: —*

Wherever a person spiritually intent and not already in a tradition evinces a disproportionately violent aversion for a particular form (whatever arguments may be advanced in justification of the dislike), this feeling can be ascribed, roughly speaking, to one of two possible causes: the aversion may be due to the presence in that person's psychic make-up of elements which do not harmonize with some of the formal elements of the tradition in question and in that case the feeling of repulsion, though never insurmountable in itself, must be regarded as a negative sign affecting the choice of a form in a manner worth heeding: or else the aversion may be due to an inverted attraction for a form that really, in essentials, agrees with that person's psychic constitution, the apparent hostility then being due either to purely accidental causes such as inherited historical or racial oppositions or else to some deep-seated desire to remain in the profane world which, by covert means, is trying to hinder a positive decision of any kind. The passionate symptoms, in the first case, can be counted as of relatively small importance, froth upon the surface of an otherwise genuine aspiration; but in the second case passion betrays diabolical instigation, and means must be found to allay it before judgment on the main issue becomes even possible. Discernment in these matters is never easy for either party to the conversation, and the most one can say on the subject, in the early stages at least, is that attraction and aversion are twins, born of one mother, and that the intellect, by referring them both back to their common principle, should be able to effect an eventual discrimination between them. To hate a thing one may actually be very near that thing oneself, though this is not necessarily the case (two causes being possible as mentioned above); that is why one must not be too ready to take expressions of dislike at their face value, where spiritual problems are concerned, but must rather do all one can to restore a state of dispassion, after which difficulties of the kind described are likely to clear up of their own accord.

K. *Concerning criteria: —*

Among factors allowing one to distinguish between form and form, there will assuredly be some partaking of a subjective character, such as for example the way in which the art belonging to a certain tradition may have been instrumental in giving impulse to one's own spiritual yearnings, while others again will have a more objective bearing, such as the degree of corruption by which one or other form is presently affected, and still more the nature of that corruption, as well as the type of collective psychism prevailing in each of the traditional forms under

consideration—a most important element in any attempted judgment. Nevertheless these factors, though they cannot but affect the question, must still count as accessory, if only for the reason that none of them is such as to outweigh all others by its presence or absence alone. The essential criterion still remains to be applied, and till this has happened some degree of doubt will adhere to any choice one may have in mind.

The essential question to be asked is whether the traditional form one is thinking about does or does not, under present circumstances, actually provide the means for taking a man all the way in the spiritual life or not? In other words, are the formal limits such as to leave an open window looking towards the formless Truth, thus allowing room for the possibility of its immediate or ultimate realization? If the answer is in the affirmative then that form, however degenerate it may have become, must still be admitted to be adequate as regards the essential, which is all that, rigorously speaking, matters; if on the other hand that form, however pure it may have remained as regards its more peripheric aspects, does in fact fail to pass the essential test, then there is nothing further to be said in its favour.

When applying this criterion, moreover, important corroborative evidence can be drawn, in support of a positive decision, from the knowledge that some people at least, however few in number, have succeeded at this time, while attached to such and such a form and using the means of grace it provides, in cultivating their spiritual possibilities to the full in the face of whatever local difficulties have been created for them by the traditional environment in question. All the great traditions are necessarily affected at the human and historical level by corruption in larger or lesser measure, and even those sanctuaries that hitherto had been most immune, even Tibet, are now feeling the pressure of the modern profanity, over and above all the harm suffered as a result of petrifaction or dilution, which are the two types of natural corruption in a form. In such a changing situation there are many temporary distinctions to be made: sometimes evils which seem most blatant may turn out to have been relatively superficial, while others, though less noticeable, may go nearer the essence, and it is this last factor that will tell us, ultimately, whether the disease has reached the mortal stage or not.

One thing however is certain in all this, namely that at the level of forms anything like a watertight determination does not exist: for though under the most favourable conditions a given form may be conveniently described as perfect, this can only be taken in a relative

and therefore transient sense, since the very phrase "perfect form", strictly speaking, is a contradiction in terms. In adhering to the support of a form, therefore, one must never ask to be relieved of every cause of dissatisfaction of body or mind, for that is impossible at the level of the world even under the most favourable circumstances: in those ages which, to us, seem to have come closest to the ideal, the saints of the time were denouncing errors and vices and calling on men to abjure and repent—which does not mean we are wrong in our view of those ages, on the strength of the positive evidence. What it does mean is that every world is by definition a place of contrasts, and this will always necessitate an accepting of the rough with the smooth, even when leading the religious life at its best. As a Sufi master once said to the writer: "There is always something unpleasing about any spiritual way."

Actually, the kind of impediment that takes the form of saying "I would so gladly adhere to such and such a religion which attracts me, if only just this one feature in it could be different" is a very common one, especially among persons of apparent goodwill who are second to none in decrying the modern world and its materialism but who, when it comes to their taking any positive step, will invariably find yet another gnat to strain at. Repeated experience has shown that this is one of the most difficult obstacles to surmount from the very fact that the hard core of resistance to the call lies concealed behind such an evident show of theoretical understanding coupled with sympathy for sacred things. To such the answer can only be that revealed religion, like everything else in manifestation, will have its crosses as well as its consolations: to approach the Way with a mind full of inflated expectations of a pleasurable kind, or else with one charged with puritanical gloom, is quite unrealistic. What one needs is to keep a firm hold on essentials, on metaphysical truth, and, for the rest, to view the doings in the world with some sense of proportion though never without discernment, while getting on with the task in hand.

Defects apparent in a form, the inevitable abuses, the relativity of the formal order itself, negative factors though these be from one point of view, have at least one positive compensation inasmuch as by their presence they proclaim the fact that a form, however hallowed, is not God and therefore also the fact of their own ultimate nonentity in the face of His transcendence. It is not the image nor even the mirror that counts, but the Light which reflector and reflection alike veil and reveal.

L. *Further notes on discrimination: —*

Both the facts and causes of worldwide corruption not being contestable by anyone who rejects the profane view of things, there is but little profit in dwelling on this subject except for occasional and chiefly practical reasons; otherwise one might soon be reduced to despair. When however a cause does arise for so doing, the need for a nicely balanced discernment will be relatively greater or less according to the nature of one's own natural vocation or, as the Hindus would put it, of one's "caste".

For the man of action, since his focus of attention is external by definition, a more or less dualistic outlook, spelling inherent oppositions, is normal; though an attitude of non-attachment to the fruits of action can also lead him beyond the point where those oppositions have power to bind him. Again, for the *bhakta*, the man of devotional temperament, his whole spiritual field will properly be suffused with an emotional tinge (which does not mean "sentimental" in the sense of inhibiting intellectuality in the way that applies to certain forms of "mysticism" but not to true *bhakti*). In the first of these two human types judgment concerning forms other than one's own may be biased by loyalties, just as in the second case it may be blurred by a loving fervour that has no use for discernment; but in either case an occasional exaggeration on the lines described is of relatively small importance, because the feeling which prompts it, though not exactly desirable, goes with a temperament into the composition of which feeling largely enters as an integrating factor.

Not so, however, with the *jnani*, the man whose vocation is predominantly "intellectual" and for whom, consequently, the intellectual virtues of dispassion and discrimination are essential, and not accessory, constituents of his spirituality. For that man, a just appraisal of "foreign" forms will have positive importance, and the reverse also applies inasmuch as criticism that goes beyond its brief, as a result of a passionate intrusion, is liable to have subtle repercussions which, unless neutralised, may seriously affect that person's chances of rendering all forms (including his own) transparent and thus acceding to the formless Knowledge. That is why, if such a thing should occur with an inquirer of markedly *jnanic* type, the person consulted should, even at the risk of incurring a certain suspicion of favouring a particular form, do his best to discourage criticisms which, though partly justified, exceed the limits of accurately balanced discernment, based as this must be on traditional and not on arbitrary criteria. Over this matter of criticism none has been more severe than Guénon, and if he was ready to accept certain forms as

being still orthodox, despite admitted corruptions, it would certainly be wrong to attribute this fact to leniency on his part, or to think of outdoing him in rigour.

Mention has been made occasionally by Coomaraswamy and others of certain Occidentals living in fairly recent times, of whom the poet-painter Blake provides an oft-quoted example, who in their works displayed a power of metaphysical insight that seems, when viewed against the background of their time, to be explainable in terms of a hidden traditional connection or even, as some have maintained, of a quasi-prophetic gift. It would be difficult for a stranger to this field of study to offer an opinion upon the spiritual qualification, or otherwise, of these rather enigmatical figures, of whom a number made their appearance here and there during the centuries following the rupture of the Middle Ages. However, even where someone has special reason for devoting attention to this problem, it is yet well to remember that for purposes of spiritual precedent, there is little to be gained by searching among the anomalies of that twilight period in the West, when the traditional doctrine at its most rigorous and spirituality at its most normal are so much more plainly observable at other times and places. Whatever the intellectual antecedents of these exceptional exponents may be, one has no right to refer to them as "traditional authorities"; the fact that they showed that wisdom was still able to manifest itself sporadically in an age when the forces of materialism and rationalism seemed to be carrying all before them is already much to their credit, and one must not try and add to this in the absence of conclusive evidence.

What does emerge, however, from the foregoing discussion is that there is a distinction to be made between a man of greater or lesser "metaphysical genius" and the normally qualified spokesman of a traditional teaching—though the two things may, of course, coincide in one person, as in the case of Sri Shankaracharya, for instance. The principle of discrimination between the two states just mentioned is this: in the metaphysical genius his human mind will play an essential part, hence the often amazing powers of doctrinal expression displayed; whereas in the traditional teacher, whose mental powers will not necessarily be much above average, the intellect may manifest its presence more or less unsupplemented by special talent —the latter "incarnates" rather than "thinks out" the truths he communicates. It can also be said that the first-named in fact exemplifies the highest possible use of human reason, or in other words the use of reason placed at the service of intellect, while the second primarily

exemplifies an effacement of the human individuality (reason included) before the spiritual order and before the tradition that conveys its influence in the world.

Above all, it must be recognised that true metaphysical insight, in any degree, is only possible for one whose mind remains "open" to the things above; otherwise its activities must needs degenerate into philosophising, whether speciously brilliant or merely dull. It is by applying this criterion that one is able to distinguish without fail between the mind of a Coomaraswamy or a Guénon and that of a ratiocinative or manipulative *virtuoso* of the kind that occurs so commonly today and astonishes by its feats in various departments of the scientific field. The former, thanks to its intellectual non-limitation, is able to reach and therefore to communicate truths of the principial order; whereas the latter can reach no further than the general which, when cut off from the universal, can be a most fruitful source of errors.

It is on the basis of these distinctions that any eventual judgment must rest.

M. *On finding the* Guru: —

The question of how a man is to find his spiritual way in the midst of this labyrinth of a modern world is often accompanied by another, closely bound up with the first, which takes the form of asking where, if anywhere, a spiritual master or *guru* is to be found; in any case this second question is always more or less implicit in the first one, unless one is dealing with a person whose horizon does not for the time being extend further than the individual realm and for whom a religious attachment, in its more external sense, will provide all that is needed to regulate his life and quicken his fervour. It should be added that whereas access to tradition is everyman's right as well as his duty, the same does not apply to the initiatic path, which is selective by its own nature so that access to a master, even if his whereabouts be known, will always imply some degree of qualification in a would-be disciple before he is accepted. It is moreover evident that spiritual masters are not common anywhere today and that those who do exist are mostly to be found in the East, though obviously this is not a necessary condition. Nor is search for a master made any easier by the existence, in all directions, of bogus masters, usually persons of abnormal psychic development who, unlike the true kind, lose no opportunity of advertising their presence in an endeavour to attract disciples to their side.

In a normal civilization the urge to find a *guru* would arise naturally in a mind already conditioned by a whole tradition, and likewise the channel of approach to the *guru* would pass through that same tradition. Passage would, in any typical case, be from peripheric aspects, gradually, towards the centre, as represented by that innermost knowledge which it is the object of an initiatic teaching to awaken. But under the extremely anomalous conditions of our time the need for the most inward things will often strike on the consciousness of a person situated outside any tradition, as a result of reading or from some other accidental cause. In that case an aspiration already pointing, at least in principle, towards the centre has, as it were, to be "underpinned" by means of a traditional attachment of appropriate form, and the acceptance of things pertaining to the more peripheric orders would, in that case, have to be aroused *a posteriori* for the sake of the higher prize and not just as a matter of course or simply as forming part of the spiritual nationality into which one has been born and the language of which one both speaks and listens to continually. To follow an unusual process is perfectly reasonable in the circumstances.

From the above it follows that once having found his master, a hitherto unattached aspirant would adhere to that master's traditional form, and not to another, for obvious reasons. This would apply both in the case of someone who found his *guru* close at hand or who was compelled to travel far afield for this purpose, for example to some Asiatic country. It is perhaps well to point out, however, that there have been exceptions to this rule, especially in India where the number of Hindus resorting to Muslim masters or vice versa has been quite considerable. Where an ability to contemplate the metaphysical principle underlying all formal variety is common, the latter element largely ceases to oppose a barrier. But even nearer home there have been exceptional cases of this kind, so that it would be a mistake to exclude this possibility altogether, even while recognising that it answers to very special conditions, personal or other, in the absence of which the argument of normality and convenience holds good.

There is one case, however, that still remains to be considered, namely the case of one who, though already seeking a spiritual teacher, has not been able to find one up to the moment of speaking. Is that person to remain idle hoping that something will turn up, or can he be doing something already which will favour the purpose in view? Here the lesson offered by the Parable of the Talents applies: to sit back blaming one's bad luck because others have

found their teachers or been born in the right country or the right century while one has been able to get no farther oneself than mere aspiration is an unworthy attitude, and the passivity it expresses is in itself a sign of disqualification. The initiatic path is active by definition, and therefore an active attitude, in the face of difficulties that might even outlast a lifetime, is the proper prelude to entering that path; herein is to be seen the difference between hope, in the theological sense, and mere desire. The true seeker does not only wait for Grace to descend upon him, but he also goes out to meet it; he knocks continually at the door, while at the same time he accepts delays not of his own making in a spirit of submissiveness towards the Divine Will, whether this shows itself in bestowing or withholding.

It is in this situation that a man's traditional connections will count more than ever: for then he can reason to himself thus and say, "Though at present the mysterious gate appears closed, I can at least use the resources of the existing exoterism, not in a perfunctory way nor for the sake of a minimum of conformity, but generously, by pushing out as far as its very farthest frontier, to the point where the realm of my hope begins. Let me then take advantage of every rite and every traditional rule, and at the same time let me do all I can to fit myself for the reception of the initiatic grace, if ever it comes, both by study of Scriptures and of the more rigorous commentaries ('browsing' is to be avoided, even among traditional things) and also by the daily practice of the virtues and above all by assiduous attention to the smallest details—and who shall say what is small and what great under such circumstances?" An attitude of this kind (the writer had an actual example in mind) is well calculated, if one may so express it, "to attract the grace of the *guru*" when the moment is ripe for such a thing: besides which, twin terms like "exoteric" and "esoteric", convenient though they may be, are meaningless apart from one another, and likewise the supposed line of demarcation between their respective realms is but a point of reference, so that one who has realized the full possibilities of the one realm will, as it were, already have got one foot across the barrier into the other; also that barrier will grow more tenuous and transparent in proportion as the heart of the aspirant, pursuing this form of self-discipline, unhardens itself until one day (God willing) the barrier will simply cease to be—and on that day the *Guru* also surely will appear.

29

The Nature and Function of the Spiritual Master

Frithjof Schuon

The Vedantic ternary *Sat*, *Chit*, and *Ānanda* can serve as a key in considering a wide variety of topics; here it will be applied to the spiritual master, not because there is no other way of approaching this subject, but because it provides in this connection an especially appropriate means of access. For the master represents and transmits a reality of being (*Sat*), a reality of intelligence or truth (*Chit*), and a reality of love, union, and happiness (*Ānanda*).

The element "being", without which the master would be as if deprived of reality or existence, is the religion to which he belongs and by which he is mandated or else a spiritual organization within the framework of this religion; the religion, or the esoteric cell that sums it up and offers us its essence, confers upon man the "being" without which there can be no concrete and effective path. The function of the founders of religion is to restore to fallen man his primordial being; hence the first condition of spirituality is to be virtually "reborn" and thus to realize the quasi-ontological basis of the two constituent elements of the path, namely, discernment or doctrine on the one hand and concentration or method on the other.

Representing *a priori* a "substance" or "being", *Sat*, the spiritual master is *a posteriori* and on this very basis the vehicle of an "intellection" or "consciousness", *Chit*, by which is to be understood a providential doctrine determining the tone or style of every subsequent formulation. It needs to be stressed that this doctrine depends on Revelation—in the direct and plenary sense of the word—and that its orthodox ramifications therefore have a quality of absoluteness and infinitude, which makes all recourse to extraneous sources unnecessary, even though it is certainly possible for formulations originating in such a source to be extrinsically adopted by a given master and integrated into the perspective he incarnates insofar as they are mentally compatible with the dogmatic or mythological system in question. Noteworthy examples are provided by the Neo-Platonic concepts adopted by Sufis and by Christianized Aristotelianism; it would be wrong to see a form of syncretism in such cases, for the foreign concepts are accepted only because they can be assimilated, and they can be assimilated only because of their inward concordance with the tradition in question, and because Truth is one. Another aspect of this issue of intellectuality is infallibility: The master is in principle infallible with regard to the revealed

doctrine which he represents and which he even personifies by virtue of his "being" or "substance", but this infallibility, which is not unconnected with grace, is conditioned by the equilibrium between spiritual science and virtue or between intelligence and humility.

Thus the master must realize the ternary "being", "discernment", "concentration". By "being" we mean "new substance",[438] "consecration", or "initiation"; by "discernment", the truth that distinguishes between the Real and the illusory or between *Ātmā* and *Māyā*;[439] and by "concentration", the method that allows the "consecrated" contemplative to fasten himself—at first mentally and then with the center of his being—upon the Real, the self-evidence of which we carry within ourselves. As a reality of union and thus of "love" and "bliss", this fastening corresponds analogically and by participation to the element *Ānanda* in the Vedantic ternary.

The importance in spirituality of what may be called the existential element results from the fact that it is impossible to approach God or the Absolute or the Self without the blessing and aid of Heaven: "No man cometh unto the Father, but by Me" (Christianity), and "no one will meet Allah who has not met His Messenger" (Islam); "he that gathereth not with Me scattereth abroad" and "without Me ye can do nothing" (Christianity); and "ye will not, unless Allah willeth" (Islam). This *conditio sine qua non*, whose mainstays are first and foremost "consecration" and "orthodoxy"—which we have connected respectively to *Sat* and *Chit*—explains why a spirituality deprived of these bases can only end up as a psychological game without any relation to the unfolding of our higher states.

Since the profane man is "nonexistent" from the point of view at issue here, the master gives him "spiritual existence" by affiliation or consecration; next he gives him doctrine, or "intelligence" if one prefers; and finally he gives him "life", that is, a spiritual means pertaining to the element "concentration". Now this means, which is an engagement "unto death"—for in order to "live" inwardly one must "die" outwardly—is essentially a gift from the master and Heaven, for otherwise it would be lacking in the indispensable Grace; doubtless there have been very exceptional cases in which other modalities came into play, but these have always involved persons whose sanctity guaranteed purity of intention and protected the spiritual means from any profanation.[440]

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[438] "Put on the new man," says Saint Paul.

[439] Or between *Nirvāna* and *samsāra* in Buddhist terms.

[440] The seeds of sanctity are fear of God and a sense of the sacred, at the very least. It must be recognized that these qualities are totally absent from the general mentality of our time, all criticism of which is taboo.

In a word, we can make use of a spiritual means only if we enter into a concrete and solemn engagement, thereby accepting the fact that Heaven disposes of us according to its good pleasure; and this engagement is irreversible: The way is one of no return.

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As a guide for the disciple's personal path—which is always inscribed within the general path traced out by divine authority through tradition—the spiritual master becomes in a sense a continuation of the disciple's ego. Every spiritual alchemy involves an anticipated death and therefore losses of equilibrium or periods of obscuration in which the disciple is no longer fully master of his "self"; he is no longer completely of this world nor yet of the other, and his experience seems to call into question all the existential categories of which we are as if woven. In these "trials" and the "temptations" accompanying them—for lower *māyā* or the downward quality (*tamas*) takes advantage of the slightest fissure—the spiritual master plays the role of "motionless center"; he brings objective, immutable, and incorruptible truth to bear in opposing the temptation of giving rational form to irrational troubles. The same is true with regard to temptations of the opposite kind, when the disciple, overcome by some contemplative state beyond his usual reach—and such a state may be only accidental and is not a proof of any realization—may think that he has become superhuman to some degree; in this case lower *māyā*—or the devil, which here amounts to the same thing—will not fail to suggest to the disciple that he should declare himself master or give way to some other pretension of this kind. The case is rather like that of a drunken man, who no longer perceives the true proportion of things; the master for his part has realized "sober drunkenness", his human substance being adapted to his spiritual state, for mastery is precisely "keeping a cool head"—but without the least pretension—within the beatific experience. All that has just been said shows clearly that faith is an indispensable quality in a disciple; without faith there is no spiritual continuity and thus no traversing of "hells", nor any possible victory over the ego.

In a certain sense *gnosis* transcends and abolishes faith, but only when faith is understood as a quasi-moral acceptance of revealed truths and not as a concrete presentiment of the Inexpressible; certainly *gnosis* is a "vision" and not a "thinking", but it is so only in a certain

respect, for it never completely does away with the veil separating the earthly creature from pure Being.[441] Understood in this way, faith—the *shraddhā* of the Hindu *chelā*—is a necessary element of spiritual development; faith in the master is of the same order insofar as he incarnates the knowledge to be attained.[442] The master, being a living man and not a logical demonstration, corresponds to the element of non-fixation and limitlessness, which is present everywhere in the cosmos and which is indispensable for the subjective actualization of theoretical data.

What we have said clearly shows that spiritual mastership is a very special function and that it is therefore false to describe every teaching authority as a "spiritual master". The functions of "doctor" and "master" often coincide, but they need not do so in one and the same person; the master does not necessarily write treatises, but he always possesses a sufficient doctrinal authority.[443]

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The spiritual master is not obliged to reveal all his knowledge or all the graces he has received; here is the whole problem of secrecy and asymmetry[444] or of inward limitlessness and the laws of life. On the one hand a plant needs an invisible element, its roots, and on the other hand it manifests the potentialities of this element in a way combining strictness with play or the determinate with the indeterminate; a spiritual teaching should not aim to fully unveil or expend the truth that inspires it or to give it the implacable and exhaustive form of a mathematical equation. One must not seek to introduce a quasi-absolute element of conclusiveness, hence of petrifaction and sterility, into the very expression of truth; strictly speaking, this is no doubt an impossibility, but it is certainly possible to express a doctrinal teaching concerning the most intimate aspects of the spiritual life—as distinct from generalities or concomitances—with a prolixity having no relation to the recipient's power of concrete assimilation; this is condemned traditionally as creating a disequilibrium between doctrine and method. In other words

[441] To think otherwise is to misinterpret certain ellipses in sacred teaching.
[442] Shri Shankara: "My refuge is neither my mother nor my father, nor my children nor my brothers, nor anyone else. May my supreme refuge be the foot my *guru* has placed on my head" (*Svātmanirūpana*, 146, 148).
[443] The case of a saint with the quality of a *Pratyeka*-Buddha (Buddhism) or a *Fard* (Islam) should be remembered here; he has no spiritual posterity properly so called but nonetheless acts by his presence.
[444] According to an old adage, presumably Chinese, "He who knows ten must teach only nine." But this law of the secret also concerns the disciple: as a contemporary Hindu master has observed, "The *sādhaka* must not reveal his spiritual experiences except to his *guru* or a saint."

theoretical teaching must not exhaust in advance the capacities for awareness it aims to awaken in the disciple; the disciple needs light, but he also needs an element of obscurity, which will act as a leaven in connection with the light received and which will help him release the element of light he carries within his own substance; instead of "obscurity" we might also say "generative disequilibrium", for which the *kōan*s of Zen Buddhism doubtless provide the best example.

Verbal demonstrations are certainly indispensable, but the symbol—with its power of direct, total, and unlimited suggestion and its double function of unveiling (re-velation) and veiling—retains all its rights in the subsequent phase of contemplative realization. We should also mention teaching by sign or gesture: Where the spoken word is insufficient, the master makes a "gash" in the soul of the disciple, marking it with the red-hot iron of the pure symbol; this sign, which may well coincide with a humiliation, is meant to release the necessary awareness in the disciple and at the same time to actualize the corresponding virtue. One must take care not to fall into either extreme: One must neither despise words, which are venerable when they are what they ought to be—otherwise man would not possess the gift of speech—nor imagine that one can do everything with them; here as always wisdom consists in putting everything in its proper place. God instructs the collectivity *a priori* by the revealed Word, but He instructs the individual *a posteriori* by destiny; this principle is reflected in a particular way in every spiritual method.

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A question arises that has often been debated: Can the function of a spiritual master extend beyond the boundaries of a given religion? This cannot be ruled out categorically, but it is nevertheless a very precarious possibility because of the high degree of spirituality it demands on the part of the master as well as because of the difficulty with which he may be faced in assessing facts situated in a traditional world other than his own; moreover, in such a case he must act as the vehicle of a foreign *barakah*, and this presupposes a spirituality concretely transcending the world of forms; it is necessary to add the word "concretely" because universalist verbiage is one thing and realization of the Essence quite another. In a case of this kind there must also be a sufficient reason of overriding significance; such reasons do exist

accidentally, as is shown for example in the relationship between the young Ibrahim ibn Adham and the monk Symeon, a master of *gnosis*, and as indicated in a passage in "The Life of the Russian Pilgrim", which acknowledges that in the absence of a *starets* a seeker may receive instruction "even from a Saracen", with the help of Heaven. Such an encounter is conceivable only if the two parties are in full conformity with their respective traditions, for the Christian must be really Christian and the Muslim really Muslim, however paradoxical this may seem in view of the spiritual communion to be established between them;[445] since it is necessary for their mutual understanding to be based on more than a philosophical abstraction, it must incorporate points of departure that are extrinsically and provisionally separative, not because they are separative or exclusive but because they guarantee a true intuition of unity by their intrinsic veracity.

This seeming paradox is comparable to the paradox involved in our relationship with the Infinite. This relationship cannot be unitive without first having been separative or, to be more exact, without being separative at its base and in our individual consciousness, for there is at once an order of succession and a parallelism; the most accomplished gnostic or the perfect *jnānin* "prostrates himself at the feet of Govinda", which implies a separation. From a more contingent point of view the station of unity means that a sage has transcended the level of forms and hence also of doctrinal formulations; while these formulations are sacred and always remain valid in their own sphere, it must be noted that this station is not dependent upon a master's being informed about a given religion other than his own; in this particular connection the state of union does not imply a *de facto* attitude but a capacity in principle.[446] This means that the spiritual master must manifest both the particularity of the form and the unity of the spirit while at the same time taking into account the nature of their different levels; he must conform to holy separation at the base so as to be able to realize holy union at the summit,[447] a summit that can be reached only by first perceiving the element of unity in the revealed form itself and by loving this form as a quality of the Non-formal. For every sacred form is *Shūnyamūrti*, "Manifestation of the Void".

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[445] The situation may appear in a somewhat different light in the case of Hindus and Muslims in India. In our day, however, modernist influences seriously compromise the advantages of the spiritual climate of India.

[446] For example, the inward and essential knowledge of a theologically exclusive Muslim may be infinitely closer to the Christic mysteries than is the mental and sentimental universalism of a profane despiser of "separatist dogmas".

[447] "When one has attained (perfect) Love, one must not despise social rules (institutions and rites), but rather conform to them (without attachment to their fruits)" (*Nārada Sūtra*, 62).

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Since the very term "spiritual master" often gives rise to disproportionate and ill-sounding associations, it may be useful to say a few words on the question of hierarchical differences; all told, the misconceptions—whether serious or slight—are simply another form of the very common error which, analogically speaking, assimilates the circle to the sphere on the pretext that both figures are round; this is a type of error found in the most diverse domains but above all in history and psychology. One of two things: Either we apply the term "spiritual master" to the founders of religion, in which case the term can no longer be applied to the sages who succeed them and who are not prophets in the proper sense of the word, or else it is the sages whom we call "masters", in which case it would be improper to use the term "spiritual master" to refer to such beings as the founders of religion—or the *Avatāra*s of Vishnu—for this would be a tautology, undermining their super-eminent dignity by comparing them with their representatives. For a similar reason it might also be asked whether *mutatis mutandis* the title "master" is appropriate for the greatest of these representatives, such as Christ's Apostles, since their greatness is proven by the fact that they alone were the direct disciples of the "Word made flesh" and participated instrumentally in the Revelation;[448] this scruple is entirely legitimate in the present context, but in certain cases there are considerations which permit one to disregard it, as we shall see.

In comparing a Benedictine master or abbot—of the fifteenth century, for example—with Saint Benedict, and then comparing the latter with Saint John, we obtain a sufficiently clear picture of the principal degrees not of spiritual mastery in itself but of its manifestation in breadth, for it is important not to confuse what might be called the cosmic function with inward knowledge; certainly the most eminent saint or sage is always in possession of the "greater" or the "whole" by virtue of his traditional position, but a less eminent sage does not necessarily represent something "less" with regard to his inward reality, although even on this level certain relationships of dimension or breadth must be taken into account when considering the most

[448] On the one hand Saint John is not Christ, and on the other hand no Christian mystic could equate himself with the author of the Fourth Gospel and the Apocalypse; the relationship between the Prophet, his son-in-law Ali, and the Sufis is similar.

glorious figures of the traditional "iconostasis". This factor is of special importance when the figure concerned incarnates a non-supreme mode of spirituality, as is the case for someone like Ramanuja or Confucius—the function of Confucius, incidentally, being greater than that of Ramanuja—since one might be tempted to place these eminent figures below a *jnānin* of lesser breadth; this would be an optical illusion, especially in the case of the Chinese revealer, whose inward reality necessarily and immensely transcended the role assigned him by Providence.

Be that as it may, in comparison with the worldly and profane—and from their standpoint—every true master is quite close not only to the great teachers of "apostolic" rank but even to the founding *Avatāra*, and this is a compensatory truth that allows us to appreciate more fully the cult of the master in India and elsewhere. The cosmic breadth of the *Avatāra* and his direct extensions obviously presupposes spiritual perfection, but conversely this perfection does not imply the cosmic rank of the very greatest, whence the disparities that we have mentioned.

It is doubtless not always possible or even necessary to avoid every ambiguity—to settle the question, for example, of whether there is a real difference between the "apostolic" degree of someone like Nagarjuna and certain later but particularly eminent manifestations, such as Padma Sambhava in Tibet and Kobo Daishi in Japan, who may be said to represent central reverberations of the spiritual Sun in a new world;[449] but it is always possible—and even necessary in certain cases—to take factual evidence and traditional opinion into account in order to show respect for the irreplaceable majesty of divine manifestations.[450]

But these considerations must not cause us to lose sight of the compensatory truth just mentioned: namely, that every spiritual master—by his knowledge and function and by the graces attached to them—is mysteriously identified with his prototypes and, both through them and independently of them, with the primordial Prototype, the founding *Avatāra*. At the level of this synthesis, it could even be added that there is but one sole Master and that the various human supports are like emanations from Him, comparable to the rays of the sun, which communicate one and the same light and are nothing without it.

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[449] Saint Francis of Assisi and Saint Bernard are similar cases, for the first was "adopted" directly by Christ and the second by the Virgin.

[450] One of the worst abuses is the presumption involved in "psychologically" analyzing an *Avatāra*, basing oneself on deeds and gestures, when in fact one is in the presence of an order of greatness that completely eludes profane investigation. It may be noted that Ramakrishna often used the term *Avatāra* in a wide sense, including all the avataric modes—"total", "partial", "major", and "minor"—and in this he is hardly to be blamed, not only because he clearly defined the transcendent nature of the "God-Man" in his teaching, but also because he himself was effectively situated within the "divine Ray".

30

The Stations of Wisdom

Frithjof Schuon

Human nature comprises three planes: the plane of the will, the plane of love, and the plane of knowledge; each is polarized into two complementary modes, which appear respectively as renunciation and act, peace and fervor, discernment and union.

The will is divided in a certain sense into an affirmative mode and a negative mode, for it can only accomplish or abstain; it must either do "good" or avoid "evil". In the spiritual life the negative attitude comes in principle before the positive or affirmative act because the will is *a priori* entrenched in its state—natural since the fall—of passional and blind affirmation; every path must begin with a "conversion", an apparently negative turning around of the will, which consists in an indirect movement toward God in the form of an inward separation from the false plenitude of the world. This withdrawal corresponds to the station of renunciation or of detachment, sobriety, fear of God: What must be overcome is desire, passional attachment, idolatry of ephemeral things; the error of passion is proven by its connection with impurity, corruption, suffering, and death.[451] The divine prototype of the virtue of detachment is Purity, Impassibility, Immortality; this quality—whether we envisage it *in divinis*, in ourselves, or in the world around us—is like crystal or snow, or the cold serenity of high mountains; in the soul it is a spiritual anticipation of death and thereby a victory over it. It is fixation in instantaneity, spiritual immobility, fear of God.

The will, as we have said, must both deny and affirm: If it must deny because of the falsity of its habitual objects, which are impermanent, it must on the other hand affirm by reason of its positive character, which is freedom of choice. Since the spiritual act must assert itself forcefully against the lures of the world or the soul, which seek to capture and corrupt the will, it involves the combative virtues: decisiveness, vigilance, perseverance; and it is in turn conditioned by them, not in its unique actuality but in its relationship with duration, which demands repetition, rhythm, the transmutation of time into instantaneity. On its own plane the

[451] *Gnosis* objectifies sin—enacted error—by reducing it to its impersonal causes but subjectifies the definition of sin by making the quality of an action depend on personal intention; by contrast the moral perspective subjectifies the act by identifying it as it were with the agent but objectifies the definition of sin by making the quality of an action depend upon its form, hence upon an external standard.

spiritual act is a participation in Omnipotence, divine Liberty, pure and eternal Act. What must be actively conquered is natural and habitual passivity toward the world and the images and impulses of the soul; spiritual laziness, inadvertence, dreaming must all be overcome; what gives victory is the divine Presence, which is "incarnate" as it were in the sacred act—prayer in all its forms—and which thus regenerates the individual substance. The symbols of this spiritual station—the station of combat, victory, pure act—are lightning and the sword; *in divinis* it is fulgurating and invincible Perfection, and in man, holy anger or holy warfare, but above all the inward act as affirmation of the Self.

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On the plane of love, the affective life of the soul, we can distinguish an active mode and a passive mode, as we can in everything that lives. Passive virtue is made of contemplative contentment, hence also of patience: It is the calm of what rests in itself, in its own virtue; it is generous relaxation, harmony; it is repose in pure Being, equilibrium of all possibilities. This attitude loosens the knots of the soul; it removes agitation, dissipation, then the tension that is the static counterpart of agitation; there is within it neither curiosity nor disquiet. The quality of calm is derived from the divine Peace, which is made of Beatitude, infinite Beauty; beauty everywhere and always has at its root an aspect of calm, existential repose, equilibrium of possibilities;[452] this means that it has an aspect of limitlessness and happiness. The essence of the soul is beatitude; what makes us strangers to ourselves is dissipation, which casts us into destitution and ugliness, into a state of barren wastefulness similar to a trembling palsy, a disordered movement that has become a state, whereas normally the static is the basis of the dynamic and not conversely. Beauty bears within itself every element of happiness, hence its character of peace, plenitude, satisfaction; now beauty is in our very being, and we live by its substance. It is the calm, simple, and generous perfection of the pool, which mirrors the depth of the sky with its

[452] According to the *Philokalia*, "the natural state of the soul" is virtue; this teaching enables us to grasp what the Asian traditions mean when they speak of "going beyond the virtues": A virtue is a limit insofar as it is an expression of ourselves, and it is transcended—or realized to the full, which amounts to the same thing—when it no longer belongs to us in any way as our own.

serenity; it is the beauty of the water lily, of the lotus opening to the light of the sun.[453] It is repose in the center, resignation to Providence, quietude in God. We can distinguish in this station a gentle aspect and a stern aspect: a happy quietude founded on the certainty that all we love is to be found infinitely in God and an ascetic contentment based on the idea that God suffices us.

But besides this repose in our initial equilibrium or existential perfection, there is a positive tendency that is its opposite, a "going out of oneself" in active mode: This is fervor, trusting and charitable faith; it is the melting of the heart in the divine warmth, its opening to Mercy, essential Life, infinite Love. Man in his fallen state is closed to the Mercy that would save him; this is "hardness of heart", indifference toward God and the neighbor, egoism, avarice, mortal triviality; such triviality is as it were the inverse counterpart of hardness, the frittering of the soul among sterile facts, among their insignificant and empty multiplicity, their desiccating drab monotony; it is the feckless to and fro of "ordinary life" where ugliness and boredom pose as "reality". In this state the soul is as hard as stone and as pulverized as sand; it lives upon the dead husks of things and not in the Essence, which is Life and Love; it is at once hardness and dissolution. The spiritual liquefaction of the ego is entirely different from this dissolution; it is fervor, intense unification of the movements of the soul in an upward flow of faith in divine Mercy; it is also the warm and gentle quality of spring or of fire melting ice and restoring life to frozen limbs. Charitable acceptance of the neighbor is a necessary manifestation of this alchemical liquefaction of the heart; it is as it were the criterion of that tendency—or state—of the intelligence and the will which we may call "love of God": first because egoism, which is a form of petrifaction, is compensated and overcome whenever we "go outside" ourselves, and second because God appears in our neighbor; in other words one must love God not only in losing oneself but also in recognizing Him in others. This spiritual quality is like fire, which burns and liquefies, or like blood, which gives life to bodies from within; or again it is like love or wine, which produce intoxication and seem to bring everything back to the essences, or like the red rose, whose color burns and whose perfume is inebriating. In addition to its active aspect,

[453] It will be remembered here that Buddhist iconography represents the Buddha seated on a lotus and that the Buddha is called the "Jewel in the lotus" (*mani padme*). The Buddhas bring salvation not only by their teaching but also by their superhuman beauty.

which is founded on the conviction that God surely responds to our fervor,[454] this station includes a passive aspect, which is founded on the melting of the heart in the divine Warmth; there is in this second attitude a kind of noble sadness, something related to the gift of tears and mystical love; it is like nostalgia for the Beauty of the Beloved. Joy and melancholy meet in fervor, as beatitude and sobriety—or hope and resignation—meet in peace.

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The plane of knowledge, which by definition goes beyond the realm of the ego as such, contains a separative mode and a unitive mode as the very nature of *gnosis* requires; we could also say an objective mode and a subjective mode in the deepest sense of these terms. Knowledge in fact operates either by discernment or by identification; it is "perceiving" or "conceiving" or else it is "being". Discriminative knowledge separates the unreal from the Real: The mind must be conscious of the nothingness of the ego and the world; it must surmount the congenital confusion that attributes to the unreal the quality of the Real; it must empty the ego and empty itself of the ego, for the unique Reality can be known only in the void. To see the unicity of the Real is to see at the same time our own nothingness; to see our nothingness, however, is not to see Reality in a direct and total manner, for only unitive knowledge can realize wholeness. Discriminative knowledge is like a night when the moon is shining; we easily distinguish the moon from the night, but we are not in broad daylight even though moonlight is the light of the sun. In this perspective of metaphysical discrimination the subject is false, the Object alone being real; the subject is individuation, illusion, limitation; the Object—that which is "outside us"—is the Principle, the Absolute.

But if the intelligence can "know Reality", it can also "realize the Knower", in principle if not in fact; in this realization—unitive knowledge—the Subject is true and the object is false; the Subject is the infinite Self, and the object is that which veils it, namely, limited or objectified

[454] "Knock, and it shall be opened unto you," says the Gospel. Fervor is in fact affirmed by tirelessly repeated appeals, as several passages of the New Testament bear witness.

consciousness. In this ultimate knowledge there is no longer discernment, only pure Light;[455] it is identity, not confrontation. The "I" is otherness; it is separative illusion, the error of believing that I am identified with the empirical "I", which is composed of outward and inward experiences, mental images and volitions; it is introducing a division into Reality. The truth is "to become What we are", hence to identify ourselves with our own Essence; but our thought is incapable of passing ontologically beyond objectification and fundamental dualism, for it is by definition separative in its very substance; compared to Reality it is like the color white in relation to light: White is distinct from black, but it is invisible without light and can illuminate nothing. Now if our "being" must become "knowing"—and this is the point of view of discernment—our "knowing" must become "being"; if on the one hand it is necessary to "discern" instead of "exist", it is necessary on the other hand to "be" instead of to "think", for thought indicates a direction but does not attain the goal; it does not embrace our entire being, nor *a fortiori* total Reality.

The two stations or degrees of knowledge could be respectively characterized by the following formulas: "To know only That which is: God"; "To be only That which knows: the Self". Or again: "extinction of the subject by virtue of the unicity of the Object, which is without associate"; "extinction of objects by virtue of the unity of the Subject, which is without scission". If we represent Truth—or Reality—by a circle, we could say that the first point of view eliminates an error comparable to a duplication of the circle, whereas the second eliminates an error comparable to the division of this figure; as we have seen, the first error adds the world, including the ego, to the Reality of God, whereas the second error cuts off the knowing "I"—the intellectual and sensory subject—from its divine Source; the world and the ego are indeed separated from God when considered as contents, whether subjective or objective, but they are "identified" with Him—the world with Being and the ego with the Self—in the respective

[455] Once this viewpoint of unitive knowledge is stated in a doctrinal and thus mental form, however, it in turn needs discernment, for neither the mind nor the world in which it operates is in the state of union. This is why the *Vedānta* distinguishes between the pure Subject and objectification or illusion; its central truth is not this discernment, however, but the Self and identity with the Self. Let us recall once again that pure metaphysics is essentially symbolic and descriptive, not literal and conjectural; to describe what one sees is quite a different thing from trying to construct what one does not see. Put differently, the depth of a statement and its fecundity in no way depend on its formal complexity; the value of an expression lies in the profundity of the truth it actualizes for those to whom it is by its very nature addressed.

relationships of Existence and Intelligence.[456] God—in the total sense, which transcends "Person" and "Being"—is "pure Object" and "unique"; the Self is "pure Subject", the one and indivisible "Witness"; and God is the Self.

There is thus an inversion of the subject and its complement in passing from one of these metaphysical perspectives to the other: The first perspective is "to know Being", the exclusive Reality; the second is "to be Knowledge", undifferentiated Consciousness. It is necessary to know That which alone is and to be That which alone knows; in the first of these stations the subject is "empty" since it is determined by the Object, which is the unique Reality; it is reduced to its content,[457] or rather it is excluded or annihilated by objective Reality; in the second station the subject is "identified" with its Essence, that is, it is absorbed and integrated by infinite Consciousness, in relation to which the relative subject is an "objectification", as is the entire cosmos.

I am; therefore I am everything, principially and virtually; my being as such is all the Being there is. Likewise I know; therefore I know all; my knowledge as such is all the Knowledge there is. Nonetheless my knowledge, insofar as it is individual, must become being; and likewise my being, insofar as it is individual, must become knowledge, consciousness, ipseity.[458]

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The plane of the will, which comprises the stations of renunciation and act, and the plane of love, which comprises the stations of contentment and fervor, belong either to exoterism or esoterism, depending on the levels of understanding and application; because of its "liquid" nature, however, the plane of love is nearer to esoterism than is the plane of the will. As for the plane of

[456] The relationship "Existence" includes symbolism, which is its intellectual aspect and which connects the contents to the Prototypes; symbolism is in a way the intelligence of things. Conversely, the relationship "Intelligence" has an existential aspect: What symbolism is for things, the "person" is for consciousness; symbols are things "qualified" by Intelligence, and the person is consciousness "fixed" or "coagulated" by Existence.

[457] "The soul is all that it knows," says Aristotle.

[458] For the gnostic—always in the etymological and not sectarian sense of the term—or *jnānin*, there can be no question of "egoism" since the ego is not "himself". The "I" is for him the "other", objectification—the vital, tangible center of the world.

knowledge, it belongs exclusively to esoterism; as we have seen it includes both doctrinal understanding and unitive wisdom. All these stations concern God, the Metacosm, on the one hand, and the soul, the microcosm, on the other; but they are thereby also keys for the "alchemical" comprehension of the world, the macrocosm. From another standpoint, if these positions—by the very fact that they are contemplative—presuppose the fundamental virtues, still more do they imply these virtues and sublimate them.

The perspective of metaphysical discernment, of the unique and exclusive Reality, is like a synthesis—though on the plane of the intellect and in transcendent mode—of the two perspectives of the will, namely, detachment and action; in a similar way the perspective of identity, of the Self, is like a synthesis—though on the plane of unitive knowledge and beyond the human—of the perspectives of peace and fervor. The viewpoint of fervor or life can be placed in harmonious opposition to that of detachment or death just as the viewpoint of contentment or peace can be opposed without antinomy to that of action or combat.

These fundamental stations of wisdom can be combined in different ways, and each can serve as a point of departure. Christian mysticism is closely akin to the perspective of renunciation and purity as well as to that of love and mercy; Christianity thus compensates for its aspect of renunciation with the passion of love. Buddhism also takes renunciation as its starting point but is akin to the perspective of peace and beatitude; it compensates for its renunciation with nirvanic peace. As for Islam, it is like a combination between the perspective of combat and that of peace; it compensates for its combative aspect by its aspect of equilibrium, resignation, generosity. *Vedānta*—like all *gnosis*—is based on discernment between the Real and the unreal, and it compensates for the specifically intellectual—non-volitive—content of this perspective by an "existential", or rather supra-existential, concretization, which is identification with the Self. All these indications are no doubt very schematic; there are things which cannot be said without risk but which one must nonetheless risk saying. Be that as it may, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that each tradition includes in one way or another—and necessarily—all six stations of wisdom, even if the stations of *gnosis* must sometimes withdraw behind veils of esoteric symbolism.

In addition to these considerations, we would like to suggest the following relationships. The world is division, movement, becoming, disquiet, and thus we are divided, restless, changeable, anxious; it is to this cosmic spectacle that the truth of Unity (Islam) responds: unity

of God, the soul, society, metaphysical Reality;[459] likewise the truth of "God made man" (Christianity) is the response to the spectacle of sinful nature, human impotence, the downfall of our will; or again the truth of renunciation and extinction (Buddhism) responds to the spectacle of universal suffering and instability.[460]

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Some people see a kind of incompatibility between metaphysics—which they confuse with the more or less logical constructions of the mind—and the love of God, of which they seem to see only the most human side. Let us recall that "love of God" is something universal. The term "love" designates not only a path pertaining to the will and feeling but also—and this is its broadest meaning—every path insofar as it links us to the Divine; "love" is everything that makes us prefer God to the world and contemplation to earthly activity, wherever such alternatives have a meaning. The highest form of love will not be that which most resembles what the word "love" can evoke in us *a priori* but that which will attach us most steadfastly or most profoundly to Reality; to love God is to keep oneself near Him in the midst of the world and beyond the world; God wants our souls, whatever our attitudes or methods.

And likewise: "God is Love" not only toward creation and because He loves the world but also in Himself and because He is profoundly steeped in His own infinitude; in the first sense God is Love because He "wills" the world and is therefore "merciful", and in the second sense He is Love because He wills Himself or because He wills nothing outside the Self.

All great spiritual experiences agree in this: There is no proportion between the means put into operation and the result. "With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible," says the Gospel. What actually separates man from divine Reality is but a thin partition: God is infinitely close to man, but man is infinitely far from God. This partition for man is a mountain; man stands in front of a mountain that he must remove with his own hands.

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[459] The emphasis is placed on Unity because Unity is obvious; to speak of Unity is to speak of self-evidence, truth, reality, absoluteness, and in turn of a reason for being and living.

[460] *Nirvāna* is the "motionless center" of the "cosmic wheel"; the Buddha is the manifestation of the "Void" in the sense that nirvanic Reality appears as void in relation to the world; Buddhahood (*bodhi*, "enlightenment") is realizing that the wheel is none other than the "Void" in both the negative and the transcendent sense of the term.

He digs away the earth, but in vain, for the mountain remains; man however goes on digging in the name of God. And the mountain vanishes. It was never there.