

The Essential SOPHIA

The Journal of Traditional Studies



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**Cover: Carpet representing the dome of the
Shaykh Lutfullah Mosque, Isfahan**

The Essential SOPHIA

Edited by

SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR
&
KATHERINE O'BRIEN

Foreword by

Huston Smith

World Wisdom



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For complete bibliographical information on the articles
in this anthology, please see the List of Sources
at the end of the book, pp. 289-290.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The essential Sophia / edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr & Katherine O'Brien ; foreword by Huston Smith.

p. cm. -- (The perennial philosophy series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-933316-10-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-933316-10-1 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Religion. 2. Tradition (Theology)

I. Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. II. O'Brien, Katherine, 1954- III. Sophia (Oakton, Va.) IV. Series.

BL29.E87 2006

200--dc22

2006004017

ALD The essential
BL Sophia
29
.E87
2006

Printed on acid-free paper in USA.

For information address World Wisdom, Inc.
P.O. Box 2682, Bloomington, Indiana 47402-2682

www.worldwisdom.com

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FOREWORD

In the Introduction that follows this foreword, Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr sets forth the aims and accomplishments of *Sophia* in so exact and eloquent a manner that there is very little I can add, except to strongly endorse this volume and to say how much I have personally learned from the journal in the decade since its founding.

My next step would be to say how important—it would not be going too far to say “saving”—the traditionalist perspective is for redeeming our times. By directing our gaze toward the perennial wisdom of the traditional worlds, these authors show us that what our world most requires is nothing short of a wholesale reorientation of its outlook, for “as a man thinks, so he becomes,” said the Buddha.

What do the traditionalist authors have to say to our times? That neither scientific humanism nor religious fundamentalism can provide us with lasting solutions—for both options ultimately lead to ruin, whether of body or soul.

Scientific humanism has led, or rather, has fed us to the technological juggernaut of globalization—a monoculture world economy, fueled by consumerism and greed, which must inevitably lead to both cultural and environmental disaster as our planet’s finite resources are plundered at an alarming rate, leaving countless indigenous peoples and cultures destitute.

Religious fundamentalism, on the other hand, with its intolerant exclusivism and militant hatred of the “other,” can likewise find no viable principle for co-existence with people of other faiths and cultures. “Let not hatred of a people cause you to transgress the measure,” says the Koran, in response to those in our times who would have recourse to terror killings.

Having directed us away from these options, the traditionalists offer us a world—or better, a Reality—that is more than merely material, and a view of Religion that is more than merely exclusivist and literalist. And it is this wisdom-offering—none other than the Perennial Philosophy—that can become truly “saving” for our times, provided we have the courage to listen, learn, and truly live its teachings.

But anything more I might say about the traditionalists and their ideas is said so much better by the authors of this volume themselves, and the best service I can now perform is to stop standing between the reader and this important book.

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A final word, however, about Hossein Nasr: I never cease to be amazed by his—and I interrupt myself to say that I could complete that sentence with a wide choice of words. “Wisdom” and “energy” are high on the list, but in this case I choose “effectiveness.” He makes things happen. In the case at hand, he founded *Sophia*, and as its co-editor throughout, has built it into the leading journal of traditional studies.

Huston Smith

INTRODUCTION

Ten years have passed since the first issue of the journal *Sophia*, dedicated to traditional studies, appeared. During this decade the journal has become the premier periodical in the English language devoted to tradition. We mean here by tradition realities of ultimately sacred origin which have over the centuries provided meaning for human life, sources for authentic knowledge, principles for moral action, and inspiration for artistic creativity in various human societies throughout the world. In the pages of *Sophia* one finds access to the principles and philosophies at the heart of various traditions as well as their religious practices, arts, sciences, and social structures. Through compelling and thought-provoking articles the journal makes available in a contemporary language the extremely rich treasury of traditional wisdom and thought and provides a forum for examining the applications of these millennial traditional teachings to the contemporary situation and in the face of problems created by the advent of modernism. *Sophia* publishes articles which draw on traditional metaphysics, esoterism, and the perennial philosophy as well as traditional cosmologies, the arts, the sciences, spirituality, and ethics by contributors who include the most well-known expositors of the traditional perspective in the world as well as new voices in the field.

Sophia now has readers all over the world, from Australia to Sweden and of course throughout North America. It is not, however, the first journal devoted exclusively to tradition. It belongs in fact to a long line of journals going back to the early 20th century and the appearance of *Le Voile d'Isis*, which began publication in the early decades of that century in French in Paris. That journal was succeeded by *Les Études Traditionnelles* which ceased publication a couple of decades ago. It was primarily in these journals that the traditional point of view began to be first expressed in the West. René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon, Titus Burckhardt, Leo Schaya, Michel Vâlsan, Marco Pallis, Martin Lings, and occasionally Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, as well as a large number of other authors who had adopted the traditional world view as expounded by the great masters of this school, namely Guénon, Coomaraswamy, and Schuon, all wrote for it. Upon its demise, a number of other journals appeared and continue to appear in France such as *Vers la tradition*, *Science sacrée* and especially *Connaissance des religions*, which remains the most important journal of traditional

studies in French. Meanwhile, other journals inspired specifically by Guénon's teachings, such as *Studi tradizionali* in Italian, and those concerned with a more universal perspective on tradition such as *Cielo y tierra*, which has now ceased publication, and *Caminos* appeared in Spanish, in Spain and Mexico respectively.

The English-speaking world did not have a journal devoted exclusively to traditional studies until Clive Ross, the English editor of the journal *Tomorrow*, which had been devoted mostly to psychic phenomena, converted the journal to *Studies in Comparative Religion* in 1965, making it the most important journal devoted to the study of tradition in the English language until its demise in 1984. Meanwhile, from 1975 to 1981 the Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy of Tehran published *Sophia Perennis*, a multilingual journal which printed numerous articles by major traditionalist authors such as Schuon along with articles on various traditions. For several years it was the most widespread journal of this genre globally speaking. But with the advent of the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the journal soon lost its cadre of writers and soon ceased publication.

By the time the Foundation for Traditional Studies was established in 1984, there was therefore no journal in the English language to fulfill the function of these earlier journals. Some attempts were made in this direction, for example Suheyl Umar in Pakistan brought out *Studies in Tradition* and Arthur Versluis published *Avalóka*, but these journals were short-lived. Meanwhile, in 1981, Keith Critchlow, Brian Keeble, Kathleen Raine, and Philip Sherrard founded the journal *Temenos* in London. After its demise a decade later, Kathleen Raine founded the Temenos Academy which went on to issue its *Temenos Academy Review* yearly from 1998. But neither of these journals was or is strictly speaking a traditionalist journal although both have published, and the latter continues to publish, studies based on the traditional perspective from time to time. The same can be said of the more popular journal *Parabola* which, although it claims to be concerned with tradition, is not a traditionalist journal but does contain articles from time to time based on the traditional perspective.

Shortly after the Foundation for Traditional Studies was established it began to publish a newsletter which included short articles. But many readers requested that this be turned into a full-fledged journal and finally, despite the awareness of the problems involved, we accepted to launch *Sophia* in 1995. The foremost problem was being able to gain access to articles of high quality which would also be authentically traditional. When *Studies in Comparative Religion* began

Introduction

its publication, major traditionalist writers such as Schuon, Burckhardt, Pallis, Lings, W. N. Perry, and many others were alive and/or also still intellectually active. For every issue the editor had a choice of riches hardly imaginable three decades later. Nevertheless, we began *Sophia*. As long as Schuon was alive he graced the journal with articles as did other important traditionalist authors such as Martin Lings.

It is a tribute to the continuing living reality of tradition that gradually a younger generation of writers came forward, contributing many fine essays, which along with essays by already established authors, have made the continuation of the publication of *Sophia* possible. The journal has sought to preserve the highest quality possible in a world in which Schuon, Burckhardt, Pallis, Lings, and many other major traditionalist authors are no longer with us, while other important figures such as Whitall Perry, even before his recent passing, rarely wrote essays any more. The very continuity of the journal as an authentic voice of tradition is itself one more proof on a more external plane of the famous Islamic saying, *lā takhlu al-ard 'an hujjat Allāh*, that is, the earth shall never be empty of “the proof of God.” The journal has remained faithful to tradition including the major characteristics associated with it, namely universality, orthodoxy, and esoterism. The journal has not only succeeded in continuing to disseminate traditional knowledge, but also to draw many younger scholars from all over the world to the study and composition of traditional works.

The present volume is called *The Essential Sophia* in accordance with the title of the series being published by World Wisdom. But this does not mean that the essays included in this volume are the only “essential,” articles published by *Sophia* during the past decade. Rather, because of limitations of space, we have sought to make selections on the basis of the diversity of subjects and authors. All of the essays included in this volume are considered by us to be of significance and “essential,” but the reader should rest assured that there are also many other “essential” and very significant essays which have not been included because of limitations of space in this volume.

The main task of producing *Sophia* rests on the shoulders of Katherine O'Brien, the Executive Director of the Foundation for Traditional Studies and co-editor of this volume. As President of the Foundation, I must thank her on my own behalf as well as on behalf of the Board of the Foundation for her indefatigable efforts. I also wish to thank the members of the Board, Huston Smith, Rama Coomaraswamy, the late Alvin Moore, Jr., and James Cutsinger, all of whom are eminent authorities on traditional thought and have contributed to

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Sophia. Furthermore, I need to express my gratitude to all the writers of *Sophia* who have made the continued existence of the journal possible as well as the readers without whom the journal would not exist. Our hope is that this anthology will not only help readers understand many basic facets of tradition and the perennial philosophy by their leading living exponents today, but also draw the attention of a greater public to the journal itself and thereby to the perennial truths which are the surest guide of human life even—or one should say especially—in this spiritually and intellectually chaotic age; truths which like the sky endure, whereas the clouds of error come and go having only a transient existence.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr

I



TRADITION
AND
TRADITIONS



CHAPTER 1

With the Other¹

Rusmir Mahmutćehajić

Introduction

This period, this present moment, is the stage where the living act out their responsibility. They cannot avoid it and cannot avert their gaze from what manifests itself as the presence of evil, whether by seeking refuge in the past as dead passivity or by concocting images of a desirable future. One may escape reality in either of these ways, but both, as is now more evident than ever before, fail to resolve the issue of the responsibility of the living. This present moment is the only certainty, the only thing about which there can be no doubts. There is only one other moment that resembles it, and that is death. The present moment and death are the only absolute certainties of human existence, and yet both seem now to be more remote than ever. And neither the present moment nor death can be comprehended without two further certainties—Eternity, and God. These too are remote from modern individuals, who have distanced themselves from these certainties to such an extent that almost their entire existence is imbued with the very reverse of certainty.

Individuals living in these times are actually in greater uncertainty than at any other time. Without explicit certainty, everything that they attain through thought, everything that preoccupies them, is a source of fear—a fear that is the expression of ignorance. The more the will is focused on uncertainty, that is, on everything other than the present moment and death, than Eternity and God, and the greater and more profound the fear, the more complex it becomes. The individual, faced with the innumerable multiplicity of phenomena in the world, can thus never be free of fear in the face of these phenomena. And since today's individual sees only himself in the image reflected back by the mirror of the world, the fact that alterity is the fundamental condition of how one faces existence means that fear of the other pervades that individual's entire being. And the more

¹ This paper was delivered at the Alfred Herrhausen Society for International Dialogue at the European Academy of Sciences and Arts conference on "The Religious Foundations of Tolerance" in Vienna in October 2002.

directly the relationship with the world is experienced, and the more indirectly the relationship with Eternity and God, the deeper this all-pervasive fear becomes.

Without considering this uncertainty and the fear that it inspires, it is impossible to explain the underlying presence and regular upsurges of evil in the world—an evil which the world has always experienced, though it is felt particularly keenly by adults alive now, and their parents and grandparents. In particular, this insecurity and fear is the prism through which the other, as the inevitable determiner of the human self, is constantly viewed. The fundamental human question, therefore—that is, the only one that can draw us closer to the one Foundation—is the question of the other, of alterity.

The present age has brought about changes that until recently seemed unthinkable. The world's unity in diversity has been so transformed that the other, the different, is no longer out of sight and out of mind. He is right here, our immediate neighbor, but a stranger for all that. Though in our midst, he is alien to the majority around him—alien in language, alien in traditions; yet his foreign, alien nature does not make him any weaker, or further from the Truth. As an individual, he may be the intimate of his neighbor, involved in the circles the latter lives in, and seen as likeable and cultured. In thought and deed he may assist them in their aspirations, and thus be perceived as necessary to the majority group. But in his determination to remain part of the community from which he sprang, he also resolutely and passionately strives to preserve his foreignness, his alien nature—to rebuild, among strangers similar to him, his old community in a place where he is a foreigner and an alien. In so doing, he confirms not only his difference from the local majority, but also his belonging to a community that feels itself to be foreign to the host community. The majority group often believes, it is true, that the individual who is a foreigner and an alien must be welcomed and respected as a guest. But that same majority is not ready—or does not know how to make itself ready—to welcome into its midst a community of foreigners and aliens, and to make it part of itself.²

² This is where the essential differences lie between the way the self is shaped in the traditional and in the modern world-view. The boundaries of the community are more decisive for individual identity in the traditional world-view than in the modern. The modern state or national polity, which is grounded in ideology, cannot tolerate internal differentiation within the group identity. It may acknowledge the right of the individual to a distinct identity, but not the political rights of an entire community within the nation-state. Tolerance, in this world-view, is reduced to a relationship

With the Other

Since every outsider, regardless of how good or even saintly he may be, is seen as part of his own minority community (from which he may well indeed be inseparable or may not wish to detach himself), fear and hatred in the face of foreigners and aliens in general—who are inevitably lumped together with society's outcasts, its liars and thieves, its unclean and sick, its lazy and the greedy—give rise to a resistance that can have three outcomes. The first is persecution or even extermination, the second is assimilation, and the third is tolerance. There has been no time in which all have not been present, and there are countless instances of each. If one were to cite the worst examples of persecution and extermination in the century that has just ended, even deciding when to stop counting would be an insuperable moral challenge. But the assimilation of foreigners into the host majority is not the answer either. It is a sign of weakness on the part of both, for assimilation shows the arrogance of a majority that is unable to recognize or acknowledge the minority—which means the orphan, the poor, as well as the foreigner, the other—as the source of its debt to Oneness.

But if one were to list the best examples of tolerance, the task would be all too simple—and yet it would be recognized as the perennial expression of what is best in human nature. This, the acceptance of the need for unity in diversity, enables one to ascend towards perfection by enhancing one's own individuality, a perfection for which the human individual was created. This supreme tolerance, which is the perennial source of human striving, is what has been called the *Colloquium Heptaplomeres de Rerum Sublimium Arcanis Abditis*.³ And it is in tolerance as wisdom that we find confirmation that the moulding of the self—whether individual or collective—is in principle impossible without all other selves. Others delineate the self. Others may be remote or intimate, but they form the boundary that defines the beginning and end of the self.

between the individual and the nation-state as a whole. This is clear from the views expressed by Stanislaw de Clermont-Tonnerre in the National Assembly in 1789: "We must refuse everything to the Jew as a nation and accord everything to the Jew as an individual" (Michael Robert Shurkin, "Decolonization and the Renewal of French Judaism: Reflections on the Contemporary French Jewish Scene," *Jewish Social Studies* 6 (2), 2000, pp. 156/76).

³ See Jean Bodin, *Colloquium of the Seven about Secrets of the Sublime (Colloquium Heptaplomeres de Rerum Sublimium Arcanis Abditis)*, trans. Marion Leathers D. Kuntz (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1975.

And though they can be known in relation to one another, this is not sufficient, because knowledge, the process of coming to know and understand, is a relationship between knower and known, discoverer and discovered. Given that every phenomenon in the outer world and in the self is also constantly changing in relation to every other, there can be no such thing as final, immutable knowledge. In the sacred traditions, the “heart” stands for “reversion,” “mutability,” “flow” and “gentleness”;⁴ and it is only in the heart’s perfect sensitivity to the metamorphoses of all that is in the cosmos and within the self, in its delicacy of feeling, that the Perfection that is beyond all confines, beyond all mutability, can be affirmed. This is a matter of discerning the real from the unreal and assenting to the real—that is, of resolving the duality within the self which reflects the relation between motion and Stillness, between illusion and Truth. As long as the self is discerned from the Self, the contingent from the Absolute, knowledge can flow from this duality—though perfect knowledge lies only with the Self, while incomplete knowledge (or the illusion of perfect knowledge) is an attribute of the self. Thus, paradoxically, the self’s only true actuality lies in how far it is contained within the Self or the Self is contained within it.

There are two possible starting-points for the journey of discovery by which one strives to reflect this perpetual duality and resolve it within each self. The first starting-point is the external world; and central to this is the question: “What is the source of all that is external, and why?” This, however, is also a question to be asked of the self, and the answer is that everything that is in the cosmos speaks *In the Name of God*. Given that the self can range between the potential for ultimate evil and the potential for Stillness, for Perfection, accepting this answer as to the purpose of all existence (which is to speak God’s Name) may result either in the illusion of compassion, or in its antithesis, in seeing perfection as the reason and purpose of human existence. This range of choices both postulates and demands complete freedom—but this too implies accepting that there can be no proof of Perfection external to Perfection itself, for Perfection is not contingent upon anything else. In its most profound essence, human nature has no other possibility. If, accordingly, the questioner accepts

⁴ For more on the traditional meaning of the term *al-qalb* (heart), particularly in the wisdom of Ibn al-‘Arabi, see William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-Arabi’s Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 106-109.

the answer and sees the Self and Its Name as present in the outer world, this means that the self of the questioner has submitted, wholly and willingly, to the Self, an act of submission which is the only way to perfect oneness. The will has then become that which grounds and guides faith—which is the mutuality of love and knowledge—towards the good, which is the Absolute. And it is from the Absolute via the Name, in a process of irradiation both finite and inexhaustible in the potential forms it may assume, that the forms, relations and content of the good—and the enigma of evil too—become manifest in everyone. This is because the Self, with all Its knowledge and mercy, encompasses all things—just as the self, in and as space and time, is merely a potential manifestation of the Self. Actualized by its acceptance of the answer, the will of the self then becomes identical with the Will of the Self, with the Will of God. “And when thou threwest, it was not thyself that threw, but God threw” (Quran 8:17).

The second possibility is to start from the Self. If the Self is Perfection, is Absolute, the world is only its extension, its periphery lit by the rays of the Self at its center. Realizing this, the self can abjure the world and seek its own actualization in the Self. But both approaches resolve the duality between self and Self through the testimony that there is no god but God, no truth but the Truth—the testimony that imbues the whole of existence.

The heart, the human center, constantly veers between offering and repudiating both these possibilities. Depending on how relations between self and Self are encoded in different traditions, one or other of these starting-points (from the world or from the self) may be given greater emphasis. But both are present in the observer and in what he knows, for their difference is resolved only in the Self as Unicity. Moreover, their presence takes different forms, though these attest to one and the same essence. Forms circumscribe and limit, so that the essence cannot be reduced to any one of them or even to all of them combined. But this does not mean that forms are the antithesis of essence: indeed, they affirm it, though they cannot exhaust it.

I/We and Others

Every “I,” like every “we,” begins and ends in the indeterminate depths of one’s inner being. However, both also begin and end in the far from clear-cut boundary with alterity. Alterity is thus the crucial determinant—and also content—of the self, whether individual or collective. The Quran has to say of this:

Hast thou not seen that God knows whatsoever is in the heavens, and whatsoever is in the earth? Three men conspire not secretly together, but He is the fourth of them, neither five men, but He is the sixth of them, neither fewer than that, neither more, but He is with them, wherever they may be; then He shall tell them what they have done, on the Day of Resurrection. Surely God has knowledge of everything.⁵

It follows from the statement “neither fewer than that, neither more” that for every individual selfhood, just as for every collective identity, God is the ultimate Other. Though the self has the potential to attain the Absolute, as long as it has not done so, it cannot be the Absolute, and the same is true for the self’s boundaries with every other self or collective identity. The inner secrets and outer manifesta-

⁵ Sura 58:7. In this essay the Quran will be referred to, unusually but as a matter of principle, as the Recitation, the approximate meaning of the Arabic. The choice of this word is based on the conviction that no translation is possible if key terms that have become ossified over time, and have thus lost their connection with their standing and life in the speech as a whole to which they belong, are not reconnected with that totality, which implies being translated into the target language. God’s own words in the Quran tell us that it is His uncreated Word, expressed through His messenger, the Praiser. This means that it is the presence of the Absolute in linguistic finitude. In its original fact of being revealed, therefore, it is constituted by the contours of the Absolute in the human self. These contours differ from language to language, but they always remain connected to the Absolute that manifests Itself in them. That which is revealed cannot be reduced to any single contour out of all their countless manifestations in individual beings. Without that openness of every individual and every language to the Absolute, individuals would be merely that which manifests itself in them as comparable and quantifiable. In the light of this, there would be no human openness to the Absolute nor, as the Tradition teaches, the Spirit of God in the uncreated center of the individual. The prerequisite for a sacred tradition’s validity is its connection with the Absolute. For the *debt*, as the relationship between the individual as debtor and God as Creator, to be due, to be religion in the original sense of the word, its basis must be the doctrine of the Absolute. Nor is this all; that debt, as the relationship between the individual and God, must comprise a spirituality that is wholly consistent with that doctrine, which means that the doctrine is from God. It comprises communion and mystery, and manifests itself in them and in sacred art. When these conditions are not met, it is fair to speak of philosophical doctrine and ideology, in which neither symbol nor way are from God. The consequences of interpretation in which there is no lasting link with the Truth are plain to see wherever human will, and the action based on that will, have left their imprint. Given that, in such a view, society is the sum of these isolated individuals, it is consequential, and constitutes a greater value. This means that the social order and its interpretation determine the individual, not the individual the social order. The traditional postulate of the individual as openness to the Self, which includes the view that the illumination of society is possible solely through the open individual, is transformed into the conviction that society can be shaped solely by rational comparison, quantification and forecasts.

tions of human relationships—be these relationships with the world as a whole, or with other individuals or groups—are inevitably contingent, for God is the only Absolute Other. Yet God is also omnipresent: thus any relationship with another that is without His omnipresent alterity implies action *against* that other, which in turn implies action against God.

One who says he is a Christian acknowledges, directly or otherwise, that he regards his selfhood as beginning and ending with that of a Muslim, Jew, Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist or the follower of any other tradition.⁶ It is only through the boundary with the other, which means through contact with the other, that one's own distinctive identity is possible—for wherever one may be, the definition of one's individuality is impossible without the three, four, five (or fewer, or more) others. And with each of these individual and collective identities, God is one and the same alterity.

In the modern world-view, however, which is based on the notion of the autonomy of the self, this concept of alterity is disregarded or denied. This is the key cause of the weakening of those collective individualities through which the self is shaped and guided towards the transcendent first cause and final purpose. Modern secularism claims that, if bonds between the individual and the nation-state as a whole are to be established and maintained, any boundaries that correspond to traditions of subordination to the transcendent principle must be eliminated from the social scene. But recent trends towards the desecularization and re-spiritualization of the world are now calling for a re-examination of this hitherto dominant world-view, using tolerance as a basis.⁷ Thus the internal boundaries within modern communities are becoming ever more significant as markers of unity in diversity, in which relationships between different gender, ethnic and religious communities are becoming increasingly crucial for social stability.

One of the characteristics of the nation-state is that it has a defined territory, which implies external borders. But no state border, any more than any other phenomenon, can present an impermeable barrier

⁶ Given that the subject of this paper is *concordia mundi*, which means the quest for possible sources of a principled unity in diversity, or principled and justifiable tolerance for the other and different, the quest cannot exclude any tradition. When these diversities are defined as Jew/Judaism—Christian/Christianity—Muslim/Islam, which is most commonly the case here, this does not mean that the full range of diversity is thereby either excluded or disregarded.

⁷ See Peter L. Berger, *Le réenchâtement du monde* (Paris: Bajar, 2001).

to contacts and links with the other. If the totality of the individual includes the totality of alterity, therefore, the nation-state includes distinct entities that not only demarcate but also transcend physical boundaries; and, as we have seen, the nation-state inevitably includes group differences. Yet these boundaries have no standing without that external authority which—as the sacred traditions attest—is perfect, infinite and eternal. These boundaries of human togetherness or community, moreover, are not reducible to territory or to a simple, rational blueprint. And when the nation-state seeks to enhance the quality of life for its citizens, this need not necessarily imply the abolition of their group affiliations, their complex differences and interrelationships within the nation-state. Boundaries between citizens of a given nation-state need not present a problem if they are viewed as interrelationships between individuals within one state, one nation. In practice, however, this unity often does preclude a great many collective identities within the state, whether ethnic, religious or linguistic.

The recognition and acceptance of the boundaries between them are prerequisites for the recognition of individuals. If there are elements of the population of the nation-state that are not recognized and acknowledged within the boundaries of their collective identity, there can be no talk of majority rights either. Indeed, it is from lack of such recognition and acknowledgment within the political order embodied by the state, and within its internal “national” elements, that there springs the whole tragic experience of the twentieth century. As Dominique Schnapper notes, “Philosophes et juristes sont donc à nouveau tentés de concevoir une forme d’organisation politique, dans laquelle appartenance culturelle et organisation politique cesseraient de coïncider, au moins à titre d’idéal et d’idée régulatrice; en d’autres termes de remettre en question le principe et l’idéal politique de l’Etat-nation (Therefore, philosophers and jurists are again tempted to devise a form of political organization, in which cultural identity and political organization would cease to coincide, at least as an ideal and as a regulatory idea; in other words they would call into question the political principle and ideal of the Nation-state).”⁸

With these developments, Islam—both as sacred tradition and as a tool of modern and profane ideologies—is becoming a more central and complex issue for the Western world as a whole. Europe begins and ends with Islam. If it knows Islam, it knows itself—and vice versa:

⁸ Dominique Schnapper, *La communauté des citoyens: Sur l’idée moderne de nation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), p. 77.

if it does not know Islam, Europe does not know itself either.⁹ But what is this knowledge of Islam on the part of present-day Europe? This is a question of central importance for how one sees life—which implies seeing peace in motion and unity in multiplicity. It is so crucial that the very question itself must be subjected to scrutiny. The key terms here are “knowledge,” “Europe,” “Christianity,” and “Islam.” But before examining these terms, it would be worth focusing on their distinctive meanings within what may provisionally be called *historia sacra* and *l'âge de lumière*. These are two mutually contradictory outlooks, whose values are arranged along diametrically opposed scales. Any discussion of these four terms, therefore, is conditional on defining their status within each of these two outlooks, by which the world order as accomplished through history may also be interpreted. A preference for one and an aversion to the other interpretation arises from the opposing natures of the two outlooks, that of sacred history and that of the Enlightenment. The question of the religious foundations of tolerance may be addressed according to these differing outlooks as follows:

- Islam and Muhammad in European sacred history,
- the sacred history of Europe in Islam,
- European self-understanding as against that of Islam,
- Islamic self-understanding as against that of Europe.

All these concepts and relationships are present in historical reality, as two frequently independent trajectories—the social and the scientific/academic. They are known to everyone, although their definition varies from one individual to another, from one philosophy to another, from one period to another. There is, of course, nothing resembling a unity of assumptions or postulates for this field of knowledge which would make it possible to determine a set of principles similar to the mathematical principles of natural science. This essay, however, offers an elucidation of the terms under consideration—terms perhaps at odds with the body of knowledge that is the product of a heritage not subject to critical re-examination. It is hoped that this elucidation will minimize the lack of clarity attached to the terms used in these four relationships.

The subject-object distinction as the key expression of human existence is in constant flux. If rephrased as the relation between the

⁹ On the link between Islam and the identity of Europe see Tomaž Mastnak, *Crusading Peace: Christendom, the Muslim World, and Western Political Order* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

self and the world, one can neither say that the self does not belong to the world nor that the world does not belong to the self: they are both distinct and both interconnected. Thus it is not feasible to reduce and confine the self and the world to the quantifiable: any such attempt is ultimately bound to admit its own impotence. Moreover, the self and the world are mere illusions if denied or deprived of their basis in transcendence. The world manifests itself to the self as a universal illusion, being seen by each individual self in the same way, whereas the illusion of the self is more complex and malevolent, for its delusions are not only inverted but also specific, particular. But the two illusions are mutually reinforcing in their isolation from and distortion of their original, authentic createdness. Given that both self and world are contingent, it is only in orientation towards the Absolute, which both eternally transcends them and is eternally immanent in them, that they can manifest themselves as the revelation of the Mystery that is the undifferentiated and immutable Plenitude.

This, however, calls for a recognition of the relationship between philosophy, as the rational attitude to the duality between self and world, and metaphysics, as an attitude which transcends philosophy by acknowledging that reason is no more than a derived or reflected form of Intellect. This acknowledgment is a key element of the doctrine, way and ritual of every tradition, but it has become blurred or lost from sight in the modern era. But this does not mean that it is absent, for its source is Truth, which the self both looks towards and holds in its center; rather, it means that people have forgotten it, or deliberately distanced themselves from it by following the delusion that the self is Reality. Nor is this acknowledgment something that can be characterized as either “European” or “Islamic”: it is the human condition, and as such it is a matter of human concern.

Indebtedness and Connectedness

“Europe and Islam” is a commonplace apposition in modern discourse, an expression of the relation between two different religious, political and cultural entities—an apposition which is generally read as an opposition, whether or not this entails the desire to transcend that opposition. The terms of this apposition appear clear enough, but if the same process of deconstruction and construction is applied to both, the flaw that underlies their purported opposition will become clear.

Europe today is a geographical, cultural and political reality that is striving to transform its diversity into unity. The diversity that this

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unity encompasses covers an exceptionally wide spectrum—from monarchies to republics, from the poor to the extremely wealthy, from the industrialized to the agricultural, and so on. Unity is understood as transcending these differences and as achieving a shift that turns certain shared elements—such as Christianity and parliamentary democracy—into universal features. Islam, however, does not denote a similar entity that happens to be outside Europe. There is no geographical unit outside Europe that has a similar coherence to that of the European Union, for example. One may, it is true, compare Europe with another region of the world, large or small, and all that it comprises in the cultural, political and economic sense. Such features as levels of economic development, the extent of poverty, modes of governance and the way they are enacted into law, education systems, levels of technological development and the like may be compared. One may also speak of the role of religion and how it differs from one country to another. But if we take “Europe and Islam” as a baseline for charting such comparative relationships, it soon becomes clear that we are not comparing like with like.

More importantly, Europe is not a single person, or even a single people with a single language, any more than is Islam. Even if the relationship is changed to that between “Christianity and Islam,” which is what is generally implied by “Europe and Islam,” the same conclusion can be reached: neither “Christianity” nor “Islam” are people who speak and who thus might be construed as being in dialogue, nor are they uniform phenomena with clearly defined, comparable boundaries. They could not be regarded as such even when Christianity was tied to the geographical notion of Europe, and Islam to another part of the world—though, in reality, neither has ever been limited to a specific geographical region. Neither Christianity nor Islam, in fact, are reducible to a single expression. If nothing else, the fact that for centuries everyone from the saintly and the good to the criminal and the fraudster has put their trust in “their” religion, be it Christianity or Islam, is persuasive evidence of this. Further evidence lies in the fact that in some expressions of both religions (expressions which may be hard to differentiate from the authentic speech of Christianity or Islam) various forms of paganism old and new may be discerned.

Individual Muslims, Christians and Jews, however, may enter into dialogue, regardless of who and what they may be on the spectrum of their human potential. This dialogue may be motivated by equanimity in regard to difference, by political realism, by existential necessity, or by a principled need to preserve and enhance, understand and deepen

what they are, and to assist one another in so doing. But however they give form to their individual selfhoods, their identities are inseparable from the Quran and Muhammad, the Gospel and Jesus, and the Torah and Moses respectively.

At the center of all three traditions is the notion of indebtedness, of that which is due, as the relationship between the individual and the Absolute. In all three traditions, the relationship of the covenant encompasses God as the bestower and the individual as the recipient. According to this covenant, the individual owes a debt to the bestower, a debt which derives from the voluntary acceptance of the Divine offer. The bestower is the Absolute, the Truth—and there can be no two Absolutes. The Recitation says of this: “We believe in what has been sent down to us, and what has been sent down to you; our God and your God is One, and to Him we have surrendered” (29:46). This One and the Same God of the Muslims, Christians and Jews may have different names—“To God belong the Names Most Beautiful” (7:179)—but this multiplicity of names is only the confirmation of His Unicity, a Unicity which is the confirmation of the Ineffable. This Unicity is linked reciprocally with the totality of existence, and with the human individual as part of that existence.

This interconnectedness is displayed in the triads of God-Cosmos-Man, Truth-Way-Virtue, and Doctrine-Rite-Recollection. If God and the Truth are one, this necessarily entails the existence of a perennial Doctrine that is the unalterable essence of every Way and Rite. The forms taken by Doctrine, Way and Rite, however, may differ without betraying the potential for human virtue and perfection—which means submission to the One God, or repaying what is due to Him.

What is nowadays called “Islam” by its detractors, as a byword for disorder and fears associated with this particular Other, has for the most part little to do with the perennial content of the relationship between God, Cosmos and Man as told in the Recitation.¹⁰ Hence the word “Islam” is often used today to ascribe blame to the other, the “them,” in order to justify the arrogant, coercive or violent behavior of the more powerful, the “we.”¹¹ The members of humanity who share the epithet “Muslim” encompass almost every racial, ethnic, linguistic

¹⁰ On the fundamental elements of the *sciencia sacra* given in the Recitation, see, for example, Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam: The Foundations of Muslim Faith and Practice* (London: I.B.Tauris, 1996), and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2002).

¹¹ On understanding the rite of the *scapegoat* and resistance to it see, for example, Marc Gopin, *Between Eden and Armageddon: The Future of World Religions, Violence and Peacemaking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

and geographical element in the world, but tend to represent the weakest and poorest sections of humanity; and despite their numbers, they still constitute a minority in world terms, especially in terms of power or levels of development. It is thus of crucial importance for the whole of humanity to understand non-Muslim attitudes towards Muslims, an attitude that not infrequently takes the ideological shape of islamophobia—which is essentially identical with anti-Semitism, that well-known expression of blaming the other for one's own feelings of deprivation or misfortune. But it is impossible to say where the sources of this ideology lie without addressing the central issue of the relationship between philosophy and metaphysics, and between ideology and tradition.

The connection between man and God is the origin and first principle of all things, and is realized through man's openness to the Absolute and through Its presence in him as the insufflated Breath of God. This is the original human testimony: "And when thy Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their seed, and made them testify touching themselves, 'Am I not your Lord?' They said, 'Yes, we testify'" (7:172). This universal metahistorical recognition of man's covenant with God recognizes the relationship between the individual and God, but also that of different communities with Him. There are differences between individuals, and also between peoples, but these do not in principle exclude their connection with the One and the Same God. This individual and collective link with God is premised on the principled openness of every individual—regardless of racial, ethnic, linguistic or any other human attribute—to the Absolute. The diversity and multiplicity of religious doctrines, ways and rituals are plain to see; but this multiplicity is united in its transcendent principle. The issue of the relationship between the quantifiable and the Unquantifiable, the temporal and the Eternal, the finite and the Infinite is thus inseparable from the understanding and interpretation of diversity among people. Humanity's openness to the Unquantifiable, the Eternal, the Infinite may be termed a "debt" that is due to the latter, from which humanity's right to the latter derives.

Meeting that debt, those dues, and the attainment of that right demands the duality that the sacred traditions express as the relationship between "this world" and "the other world." Moreover, this very duality confirms the underlying unicity which makes the duality translatable into its different traditions, for there can be no translatability if different doctrines, ways and rituals are not founded in the One and Only God, or "sent down" by Him into existence. And there can be no translatability if every individual doctrine, way and ritual is not affirmed by virtue of every other, regardless of affiliation.

The liberal postulate of the private, individual nature of difference precludes a collective identity based on the covenant between man/community and God. But it is not enough simply to recognize the private and personal nature of the individual and make his political rights contingent on this recognition, for in the absence of public acknowledgment of the totality of distinctive identities, both individual and collective, the fragmentation of the self and hypocrisy become political necessities—hence the individual and the community can only be acknowledged if there are clear boundaries with the other.

The arrogance of the powerful, however, must also be ruled out. In Adam Seligman's words, "This approach is an essential element of the Islamic notion of *hilma*, as of the Jewish *anva*, and the prohibition on the use of force in attaining the truth."¹² Hence the prohibition on the use of force, as a condition of human clemency, is also a crucial part of one's attitude towards the "weaker" other, for it is where the other as neighbor begins that attitudes towards difference are established in qualitative and quantitative terms: the weaker has rights over the stronger, and the stronger a debt to the weaker. If it were not so, the inevitably finite power that can be measured in quantitative terms would have to be recognized as God: but God is not and cannot be finite. (He is incomparable and unquantifiable. Everything that is in existence manifests Him, for it is created with the Truth. Without that, it is meanness and depravity.) To threaten or jeopardize the weaker, by contrast, is to wreak havoc on one's own form and to block the insight that the self can orient itself towards the Absolute only through knowing and acknowledging itself as contingency.

It is with this acknowledgment that purification, or orientation towards the Absolute, begins—a purification, a detachment from the unreal, which orients the self towards the Self. This inner revolution demands acceptance that perfection entails praise of the Absolute, or anointment by It. It demands a return to original human perfection, a distancing from sin. Or, to put it another way: by drawing closer to the Praised One or the Anointed One, as persons who exemplify perfection, the individual renounces gods and draws closer to God. It is only in renouncing phenomena in the world and in the self as gods, and in drawing closer to God as unicity, that one may accept diversity—a diversity within which the self is shaped as the reading and recognition of the signs that speak of the Truth.

¹² Adam B. Seligman, "Jezici tolerancije," in *Forum Bosnae*, 16/02, p. 201.

The Reading of the Book

By their own claims, and in the belief of the majority of their recipients, the Torah, the Gospel and the Quran were revealed or “sent down” by God. This view of God as their source, as the One who first uttered them, and of man as their recipient, entails a relationship between higher and lower, and cannot be understood without the doctrine of signs. Thus accepting the revelation—that is, the sending down of the Book from heaven to man on earth—and the presence of the Divine in human speech means accepting that the heavens are the sign of the Intellect and Spirit, and that the earth is the sign of man. This acceptance is what makes interconnection between the world and the individual possible, via the unicity to which both are open. In the Semitic revelations, creation as a whole received its seal, its culmination, in man, who is at the center of the Divine intent, in the word that is the beginning. But humankind was set at the center only after the creation of the heavens and the earth and all that is in them. As a result, human nature is both beginning and end, inward and outward, expressed both finitely and in infinitude. The uncreated spirit of the Creator is within the individual, and with His actualization, the human self resolves its duality. There is no self but the Self, and hence the self resolves its duality in a multitude of ways, which may differ in their outward appearance, but invariably bear one and the same essence. This is what makes the individual into an open observer of the world, recognizing in both the outer world as a whole and in every separate manifestation within it the Perfection that is the One and Only. Everywhere and always, the individual faces Perfection, and between him and that face of Perfection lies the way that is marked and defined by the signs in external phenomena and their open or covert reflection in the self. In the light of that Perfection, all phenomena in the outer world and within the human self are signs and symbols that, as long as there is an observer, are more or less transparent windows on the Absolute that irradiates them and manifests its goodness in the innumerable forms of their multiplicity. And when the duality between self and Self is resolved, the signs become wholly transparent to the Truth. God is then in the individual and sees Himself through the individual, and He encompasses Himself in Intellect, giving the human self the principled potential to submerge itself in Intellect of the self’s own free will. Thus God announces Himself to man and sends His Word down to him out of the Silence. The Word is received and accepted, and then uttered to other people. Given that the initial recipients—Moses, Jesus and Muhammad—accepted the

Word out of their own free will, so too those who listen to them are free to accept or reject it. That which is accepted is remembered, witnessed and recorded, and then spoken, read and heard—but Silence is the source and outcome of both speech and listening.

The ability of Moses, Jesus and Muhammad to receive into their human selves the Divine Self that speaks is testimony that this is the supreme human potential. But its transmission to other people, in languages that enable it to be spoken, heard and interpreted, is testimony of the potential of the Infinite to abide in the finite. The fact that the Infinite may abide in the finite is what links man with God, through the uncreated center of his being and the Intellect as the mirror of unity in multiplicity. The interpretation of the revealed speech is accessible to man; but given that it can only be understood from the perspective of multiplicity, it is contingent, and as a result differs from one person to another. Only God can have the final and complete understanding of the Book that has been sent down:

It is He who sent down upon thee the Book, wherein are signs clear that are the Essence of the Book, and others ambiguous.

As for those in whose hearts is swerving, they follow the ambiguous part, desiring dissension, and desiring its interpretation; and none knows its interpretation, save only God. And those firmly rooted in knowledge say, “We believe in it; all is from our Lord” (3:17).

No human being, therefore, can say that he knows the complete interpretation of the revealed books. If it were so, it would contradict the claims made in them that they derive from God, and that they form a link between human contingency and His Absolute nature. As a result, every human interpretation of the books is limited, just as man, even in terms of his supreme potential, is set apart from God by the interdiction:

And We said, “Adam, dwell thou, and thy wife,
in the Garden, and eat thereof easefully where you desire;
but draw not nigh this tree,
lest you be evildoers” (2:35).

This original interdiction was established by God, who thereby showed that man’s freedom, and the confidence in it that was offered and accepted, are to be seen as the supreme measure of human rectitude; hence the interdiction is inseparable from the state of the human self. And it is not backed up by threat of force. Because the interdic-

tion is in reciprocity with the human center, to violate it entails loss of clarity regarding not only the outer signs, but also the inner selves of those who recognize that He is the Truth. Humanity's original perfection confers happiness upon creation, and upon all existence within creation, so long as the connection with and orientation to the Supreme is maintained. The interdiction makes it possible for free will to strive towards the greatest possible proximity to the Absolute. And acceptance of the interdiction means submission or compliance, by which the bestowed is transformed into indebtedness and confidence, so that it may be accepted and, finally, repaid.

Becoming a believer, one of the faithful, offers the individual the supreme potential: the relationship with God, Who is also Faithful. One of His "Names most beautiful," the Recitation tells us, is the All-faithful;¹³ thus God's faithfulness is absolute. The relationship between the faithful and the All-faithful is one of faith or trust in God. Since God is holy, His trust in man is holy too, whereas the individual's trust is invariably contingent, for there is no faithful but the All-faithful. The individual is given every opportunity to travel the way, on the basis of the trust which has been accepted, from the most profound state of evil in the self and/or hell to the most sublime state in Paradise/the self. Everything must eventually vanish save the Self or the Face of God, and the potential to travel from the depths of hell to That Face Which alone never vanishes is the condition for perfect human freedom, as the inevitable premise of the perfection of trust.

And just as the path taken by the individual from the depths to the heights is inseparable from trust in God, so ultimate redemption is inseparable from Divine Debt. It is only that Debt which enables the entirety of human potential for freedom, through the acceptance of the interdiction which determines the infinite proximity and distance between the individual and God. This interdiction is grounded in trust, which means that the individual has the freedom both to lose his original innocence and to regain it *In the Name of God*. But this trust in the Absolute and its manifestation in the totality of existence, and in humankind as the sum of all manifestation, rejects neither knowledge nor mercy, since both are attributes of the Absolute.

Existence, therefore, is the interpretation of the revelation by which the Creator brings together in human language His signs, scattered as they are in space and time. These are the words with which

¹³ See 59:23.

God showed mercy to man after his violation of the original interdiction: "Thereafter Adam received certain words from his Lord, and He turned towards him" (2:37). Orientation towards primal human perfection implies turning towards patience and the truth; but since human existence ranges from "the self that inclines to evil" to "the self at Peace," or from fear of phenomena to awe of God, interpretations of the books may also cover that entire spectrum.¹⁴ Indeed, the whole of human experience and its expression throughout history is testimony to this. But if it is hard to comprehend how it is possible for so many interpretations of the revealed books to have evolved and been pressed into the service of evil and violence, one thing is indisputable: the acceptance of God as Merciful and All-compassionate is diametrically opposed to such acts of conscription. In particular, no interpretation of the revealed books that fails to reinforce the view of the other as a companion and an equal part of creation before the Face of God can be justified from the perspective of God's all-encompassing mercy. This may seem to be an abstract view, but it is in fact very specific, even to those who have accepted existence as the immediate and specific, and God as intermediacy and abstraction.

Furthermore, the acceptance of one's revealed book as Divine speech, and the maintenance of one's link with the book, are impossible without humility, for "no compulsion is there in the debt" (2:256). Thus debate between the speakers, readers and listeners of the revealed books can approach the source only if it is conducted as fairly as possible¹⁵—fairness that means an awareness of change as a worldly constant, accompanied by a strengthening of the link with the good and the beautiful as the essence of human clemency. Awareness and patience relate to God, the world and people alike,¹⁶ and are inseparable from the attitude towards the other:

Surely the good shall be among gardens and fountains
taking whatsoever their Lord has given them;
they were good-doers before that.

¹⁴ On the differentiation of the self between its orientation towards evil and its inclusion in Peace, see, for example, the chapter entitled "The Degrees" in Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life based on the Earliest Sources* (London: Unwin, 1988), pp. 328-31.

¹⁵ See 29:46.

¹⁶ See Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1996), p. 224.

Little of the night would they slumber,
and in the mornings they would ask for forgiveness;
and the beggar and the outcast had a share in their wealth (51:15-19).

Will and Submission

A prerequisite for discussion of the term *Islam* within any of the relationships proposed above is that it be detached from the indeterminacy of contemporary political language. *Islam* is an Arabic noun deriving from the verbal root *s-l-m*, and its meanings are “submission,” “humility.” Since submission and humility also include the ability to distinguish between that which is submissive and humble on the one hand and that to which it submits or bows in humility on the other, submission encapsulates the relationship between temporal and eternal being. As a result, the notion of submission can have no meaning external to the order of being. This in turn means that submission is what differentiates being within the multiplicity of its manifestations as ordered from higher to lower. In this order, the Supreme is that which is manifest to all, and only that, for it may be signified by no other sign than itself. Existence is thus the revelation or creation of the Supreme.

From the human perspective, creation is arrayed in three levels—Heaven, Earth, and that which lies between them in the external world, which correspond respectively to the intellect, the soul and the body. In his earthly or bodily nature, man is submissive and subordinate to the two higher levels of being. Submission or humility is thus the recognition of the original nature of the self. Another stance is possible, however: the denial of that original nature. Both recognition and denial derive from the human will; the will thus confronts that duality or rift within the self, and must choose between the two. The consequences are wholly different depending on which choice is made, for the two are not equal: one path is higher in its relationship with the Truth than the other. If the latter path is chosen, the precedence of truth over falsehood, or good over evil, is overturned. Opting for the better path, by contrast, entails greater humility before the truth and the good. And this in turn means recognizing that man is created from clay, as the lowest manifestation of the Principle, and that to it he returns—dust to dust—and thereby bears witness to his submission to the Supreme. Indeed, the root of the Latin word *humilia*, and its direct derivation humility, is *humus*, meaning earth. The Hebrew word Adam, too, has the same root as *hā'ādām*, which also means earth. Thus the earthly nature of humankind, together with the insufflated Spirit of God, prompts and directs man to maintain his openness towards the Creator. This in turn implies that it is impossible for him ever to attain fully the Truth, but

also that he is never without the openness that continually directs his human self towards the First Principle. The *sajda* or prostration in prayer is the decisive sign or rite of the inclusion of human will in the reality of existence towards God. It denotes and attests to humility and proximity to the earth. In turn, the cultivation of the earth and its rites means discovering humankind's original nature, the same nature as in the Garden, where man was the appointed guardian and cultivator. To cultivate the earth is itself a rite—there is no cultivation without rite, and vice versa. Similarly, the denial of the outward signs means the denial of one's own nature; and the denial of one's own nature amounts to the denial of the other. It is only when the cultivation of the land is seen as a rite, and vice versa, that the indivisibility of humanity and earthliness can be grasped.

Clemency in Bosnian is *blagost*, the root of which is the Sanskrit *bhārgāh*, meaning light, of which the derivative is the Indo-European *bhel*, meaning to shine. As clemency is the acknowledgment of the humanity of the other, this in turn means that original perfection also always lies in the other. It is thus only in acknowledging the other that the humility of the self before the Other is possible, for every other is the image and sign of the Other. This is expressed in the testimony that *there is no other but the Other*. None of its specific features, i.e., its finitude, can exhaust Alterity, but neither can it have any meaning other than the manifestation of Alterity. And Alterity is sought by reading of the signs in the outer world and the inner self, signs whose openness is complete, since it is directed towards Perfection.

Thus, if Islam is regarded as something that somehow came to Europe at some time in the past, this is a denial of the fact that *islam*, as submission to God, is the nature of every individual and every phenomenon, and that there is no sacred Tradition without submission. If the Arabic term *din* (religion, faith) be taken in its original meaning—the Arabic root *dana*, *dayn*, with the meaning of debt—it can be seen to have the meanings of indebtedness, direction or course, subordination, response, requital. Each of these meanings implies two parties and a relationship between them. A debt is the relationship between donor and recipient; a direction or course is the relationship between those taking that course and their objective; subordination is the relationship between the subjected and that which is superior; response or requital is the relationship between someone and that to which he has been exposed. As a result, obligation—*ob-ligation*, with its root meaning of *binding*—is an invariable constituent of that relationship. If the individual is one party to that relationship, the other

party to that obligation—i.e., one of indebtedness, direction, response, reception or transmission—may be a phenomenon in the observable world and all that lies above and beyond it. There follows from this a clearer perspective on the words of the Recitation: “Today I have perfected your debt for you, and I have completed My blessing upon you, and I have approved submission for your debt” (5:3). “The true debt with God is submission” (3:19). This debt or indebtedness, obligation, direction, response, judgment and tradition may be expressed in various languages, but its essence is immutable, since the Other is Absolute:

That which you serve, apart from Him, is nothing but names yourselves have named, you and your fathers; God has sent down no authority touching them. Judgment belongs only to God; He has commanded that you shall not serve any but Him. That is the right debt; but most men know not (12:40).

The inalienable debt of submission, therefore, is the revelation of the Absolute through the contingent. The debt is true, given that it is Truth that imposes it. The debt thus binds the debtor to the Truth:

It is He who has sent His Messenger with the guidance and the debt of truth, that He may uplift it above every debt. God suffices as a witness (48:28).

The consequence of this is that the choice to honor the debt, to fulfill the obligation, to choose one’s direction, and so on, is “clear” and “sincere”: “Belongs not sincere debt to God?” (39:3) This debt includes, as a result, the truth that manifests itself on the path given to the debtor, who testifies through virtue that he is walking that path. The debt determines the truth, the way and virtue, and the indebted individual returns it with will, love and knowledge.

In the modern notion of knowledge, the present moment as the expression of eternity, and death as the confirmation of the mystery of life, are rejected as “other”; thus the concept of the present moment has been replaced by that of brevity, or smallness, and eternity by that of long-lastingness, or magnitude. Yet this smallness is never so minute that there is not something still smaller: hence it reveals itself as a sign pointing to emptiness, to the metaphysical zero which is absolute and, as such, independent of everything, however small or large it may be. It is into this emptiness that all the mysteries of minuteness flow, for it is the Mystery, the Silence, that can be spoken of only by saying what

it is not. The first full confirmation of the emptiness is none other than the One; and this One also confirms the unlimited multiplicity that neither adds to nor subtracts anything from it.

Similarly, “magnitude,” being comparable and quantifiable, is never so great that there is not something still greater; it is always exceeded by the non-existent, by that to which nothing is comparable or similar, by the Sacred. Indeed, the definition of the Sacred is that which surpasses every magnitude in existence. “God is with everything,” says ‘Ali bin Abi-Talib, “but not through association; and other than everything, but not through separation.”¹⁷ This unattainability on the part of every magnitude, notwithstanding Its orientation towards It, is none other than the corroboration that the Sacred is beyond all similarity and comparability, whilst everything that is in the outer horizons and the inner selves is Its sign. And the center of human nature, its uncreatedness, enables these signs to range incessantly from one level of meaning to another in their orientation towards the Sacred, the All-peaceful, the All-faithful. All this confirms that the world and the individual, in their totality, are created in the fairest stature relative to the Creator and in His image, but that He cannot be the image of anything. The relationship between quantifiables, regardless of what they are in existence, therefore, is not everlasting, nor are these quantifiables equivalent to the Alterity they confirm and reveal. The moment the individual takes a stance towards himself and the world—to any individual phenomenon within it and to all phenomena combined—without that Alterity which is their original and final principle, *tolerance* becomes impossible, and the impulse to and reason for intolerance lies in associating and attributing the Absolute and God to anything that is comparable or quantifiable. If it is impossible to see in every phenomenon the sign of the Absolute, and to hear the voice of the Silence, the innermost human yearning for knowledge and mercy is denied. The phenomenon then defeats the individual in his desire to transcend the stability of space and the mutability of time. This in turn gives rise to thoughts and acts by which the individual mocks, refutes and destroys the signs in the outer world and in his own self. And the worst form of intolerance of the world and its signs comes from taking the desires, thoughts and interpretations that are in the self—which

¹⁷ *Nahj al-Balagha: Selection from Sermons, Letters and Sayings of Amir al-Mu'minin, 'Ali Ibn Abi Talib*, vol. I, trans. Syed Ali Raza (Tehran: WOFIS, 1979), p. 16.

means in the non-absolute—and molding them into the language of sacred ritual and doctrine, into absolutes without the Absolute.

Faith: Knowledge and Love

When Satan attempts to turn Jesus away from God and make him “fall down and worship” him, Satan, instead, Jesus replies: “Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve” (Mt 4:10). The submission and prostration to God of all that exists—“and to Him has surrendered whoso is in the heavens and the earth, willingly or unwillingly, and to Him they shall be returned” (3:83); “To God prostrates itself everything in the heavens, and every creature crawling on the earth, and the angels” (16:49)—means that every phenomenon, in its own way, is linked to the Reality that is the One and Only. The only possible attitude to and connection with that Reality on the part of the individual lie in the recognition that all phenomena in the external world and within the self serve only to corroborate that unicity: they reveal It, originate from It and return to It. Without It they are nothing, a nothing that manifests itself in the illusion of associating others with, forgetting or denying Unicity.

Since Unicity has no alterity and yet is full of the alterity of everything, associating others with It is tantamount to allocating names to phenomena without regard for their nature. At the root of every phenomenon is God’s creative Word, as spoken through its name: thus the name is the center or essence of every form. The position of humankind, its “fairest stature” in the totality of creation, determines human knowledge of the names, and knowing the names of phenomena links the knower with the Creator. But when the individual distorts those names, forcing them into a coercive relationship with phenomena, this alters their original form, and himself. Every such change deprives the individual of his primal “fairest stature,” or distorts it. The names imposed on phenomena have no power to prevent these phenomena from returning to God; but nothing that is associated with God has any power,¹⁸ as the Recitation confirms: “They are naught but names yourselves have named, and your fathers’ God has sent down no authority touching them” (53:23). Thus, when the proper relationship is re-established between the individual as the one who owes and God to whom the debt is due, when phenomena return to their

¹⁸ See 35:13.

Creator, they will repudiate the false names that have been imposed on them. They will also repudiate those selves that thereby sought to sever them from their purpose: "On the Day of Resurrection they will disown your partnership" (35:14). The names will return to the original phenomena from which they were wrenched and forcibly imposed on others. The individual's interrelationship with God in "fairest stature," therefore, is grounded in knowledge of the names which are confirmed by the uncreated Word and its manifestation in creation; but everything which distances the individual from this turns him towards forgetting and non-reality.

This potential on the part of the individual is in fact the manifestation of the relationship between the self and the Self as confidence, a confidence which embodies the individual's perfection, cause and purpose: "If God should take men to task for what they have earned He would not leave upon the face of the earth one creature that crawls; but He is deferring them to a stated term" (35:45). The expressions "He would not leave upon the face of the earth one creature that crawls," if the yardstick is to be "what they have earned" and "God is with those who are aware and who do good," are only in apparent opposition. The incorruptibility of human nature is affirmed in both, the nature which makes human beings what they are—created in and for the sake of perfection. Individual salvation does not lie, therefore, in taking on a new nature, but in the restoration or rediscovery of one's original nature (perfection, or the fairest stature) through liberation from those gods that manifest themselves as illegitimate links between inner and outer phenomena on the one hand, and their names on the other.

Individual awareness and good, in their full meaning, are none other than that uncreated and perfect center; and as such that center belongs only to God: "Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is, God" (Mk 10-18). This explains the injunctions regarding one's attitude to the other: "Judge not, that ye be not judged" (Mt 7-1); "For all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword" (Mt 26:52); "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone" (Jn 8:7). These injunctions cannot be understood, however, without bearing in mind that they differentiate between original perfection and its distortion as regards the individual. Perfection, being complete and thus unalterable and true, is victorious over all illusion: "The truth has come, and falsehood has vanished away" (17:81). "He is the Truth, and that they call apart from Him—that is the false" (31:30). But judgment that comes out of falsehood and the hiding of humanity's "fairest stature" does not

acknowledge human weakness. The individual who is thus distorted must ultimately judge himself against his hidden, repudiated original perfection, and reaching for the sword out of that deformity means that one must ultimately succumb to the sword of the Truth that is victorious. In the meantime, however, the decision of the individual to condemn and punish another for his sin places that individual in a state of utter alterity, whereby the self is proclaimed as the Self. This is tantamount to associating oneself with God—and God forgives not that aught should be with Him associated (4:48). To the individual, being means discerning the unreal from the Real, the self from the Self, and it is only the Real that can condemn and punish—which it always does, with the Truth. Acting otherwise means accepting the superiority of the lower over the Higher and the imperfect over the Perfect. The root cause of this is forgetting that Truth and Presence are two expressions of Unicity, the first corresponding to human awareness, and the second to human virtue. Awareness is indivisible from knowledge, and virtue from will, and both knowledge and virtue strive to become being—a striving that becomes accomplished when one sees the Truth in every sign in the outer worlds and the inner selves, when one returns to oneself. “He who knows himself has known his Lord,” said the Prophet.¹⁹

But when the world is confined between the depths of interiority and the heights of externality, existence becomes closed. Phenomena are no longer signs pointing to what is deeper and higher. Minuteness and magnitude are both finite, and thus accessible to reason; but the signs themselves are repudiated and cease to signify, and man is closed off from Eternity and Life. His life has no continuation after death: he does not encounter his Lord and does not submit the account of his debt. Everything is extinguished with the cessation of his actions, because everything lies between the briefest and the longest that is imaginable in finitude; the present moment does not point to eternity, and death has nothing to do with life.

This repudiation is nothing other than the desire, transformed into a deluded conviction, to strip the veil from the face of God, to reveal all the mysteries of phenomena and to dis-enchant the world. Here, the veil denotes Intellect; man cannot draw back that veil, but He may receive it into Himself: “His veil is light,” says the Messenger, “and if it were to be drawn back, the brilliance of His Face would burn His cre-

¹⁹ For more on this tradition see, e.g. Ibn al-Arabi, *al-Futuhat al-makkiyya*, Vol. II (Cairo: Al-Hay'at al Misriyyat al-Amma li'l-Kitab, 1972), p. 292.2:168.

ation wherever His gaze reached.”²⁰ This veil of light does not render God remote: “We indeed created man; and We know what his soul whispers within him, and We are nearer to him than the jugular vein” (50:16). God’s proximity is also expressed in the words of Jesus: “The kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21). But the fact that there are seventy thousand veils of light between the self and the Self, that the Other sees everyone’s innermost self but not vice versa—“The eyes attain Him not, but He attains the eyes” (6:103)—and that none is closer in His absoluteness means that there is no self other than the Self, and that the Self becomes manifest in the inner selves and the outer world. Both the inner and the outer worlds are thus utterly poor, and at the same time close to Him. The Divine “I am near” (2:18) is not and cannot be limited by anything. It is an unconditional proximity, and the totality of existence is merely its confirmation.

Given man’s acceptance of the confidence that is offered, which means a relationship with the Absolute which is undertaken out of free will, the self must choose to remember or to forget. Remembering is the manifestation of that unconditional proximity in one’s self which precludes the illusion of distance. Forgetting turns one towards the quantifiable world as the only world, and reason then appears to be one’s supreme potential. As a result, the connection with the Truth becomes seen as contingent and mediated, which deprives the Truth of its autonomy and views it as identical with its various manifestations and confirmations. But even though man must choose between remembering and forgetting, the Truth and its manifestations can never be of equal value. The proffered and accepted relationship of trust between the individual and God means that the self is free to range between the two extremes of the minute and the immense (though these extremes are in essence one and the same). Living between these extremes, the individual forgets what he has received, but is also able to remember it again, thereby knowing himself as he faces himself, in the solitude that is perfect fullness and the totality that is perfect absence. Remembrance is thus a return to the perfect center, which nothing in existence can add to or subtract from. Through human remembrance, God becomes disclosed both to himself and to

²⁰ Sahih Muslim, I. p. 113. There are many expressions of this tradition. In Imam Ghazali’s *Mishkat* (Bab-ul-Masajid) a similar tradition is cited: “Between me and Him are seventy thousand veils of Light.” Ibn al-Arabi quotes and interprets this tradition in a number of its forms. See, for example, William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-Arabi’s Metaphysics of Imagination*.

humanity, since human existence consists of the Principle, the spirit inbreathed into the individual by God. The human center to which remembrance is directed, then, through the testimony that “there is no god but God,” is nothing other than that original uncreatedness, the sanctum that transmits the uncreated Word. To know the Absolute, therefore, is humankind’s unconditional potential.

The claim that the present moment and eternity do not exist, being reduced to what is merely very short or very long, is based on the assumption that there is nothing in man that has been insufflated into him, and that as a result he is not open to Life and Eternity. The teachings of all the sacred traditions, however, refute this. The human center is Eternity and Life. They are not accessible through experiment; what they are may be forgotten, but they cannot be lost—and the eternal human potential for the self to find itself, in what it ever has been and ever will be, is what we call intelligence. The connection with the Absolute enables everything that is manifested to the self in the outer worlds and the inner selves to be known and understood, through intelligence, as the speech of the Self. And if the Breath of the Self is at the human center, this means that the Self is within it: “He who knows himself knows his Lord,” as the Messenger said.²¹

Accepting all phenomena, and all knowledge of phenomena, as signs that can raise one towards higher levels of being, makes it possible for the manifest to ascend, through constant transformation, towards its Treasury. As the Recitation tells: “Naught is there, but its treasures are with Us, and We send it not down but in a known measure” (15:21).

There is no phenomenon, whether in the outer worlds or the inner selves, that does not testify more or less explicitly to the forgotten presence of the Self at the human individual’s center. This is what gives phenomena their attraction, since they recall the forgotten riches that are the aim of man’s quest—the love, the attraction of the beautiful, that lies hidden in all that points to the Reality: “God is Beautiful and He loves beauty.”²² Accordingly, faith is the discovery of what lies beyond language, beyond the bounds of the world and all its phenomena. These phenomena were given names with man as part of creation, by the perfect will of God; and this was done in order to

²¹ This well-known tradition cannot be found in the primary scriptures. It is accepted as a revelation that is not in conflict with the Recitation and the sayings of the Prophet, however. Ibn al-Arabi often uses such traditions in his interpretations, for example. See William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, pp. 344-46.

²² Sahih Muslim, I, p. 53.

indicate the potential to reach God via phenomena, through intelligence. Eternity and Life are thus in every phenomenon, and every phenomenon simultaneously reveals and conceals them: the Face of God is omnipresent, yet always behind a veil.²³ The long and the short are given meaning by being encompassed and centered in Eternity and Life: the world is created in harmony and proportion, and contains no gaps or voids. There may be deficiencies or imperfections, however, in human awareness, which has accepted the unreal, and become blinkered by forgetfulness into the belief that actions and their effects are the shapers of human destiny. And the utter otherness of God—as witnessed by the verses “like Him there is naught,” (42:11) “equal to Him is not any one” (112:4) and “Whithersoever you turn, there is the Face of God”—enables His signs to be recognized in every phenomenon, for there is nothing in the outer worlds or the inner selves that does not manifest the Truth.²⁴ To deny this is to distort humankind’s original nature, and is an act of arrogance towards the signs of God.

But the recognition of these signs, which testifies to one’s submission to and acceptance of humankind’s original nakedness and poverty, manifests itself as care for and clemency towards all that fills the outer worlds and the inner selves with both freedom and determinacy.

But there is more: the feminine character that one can discern in Wisdom results moreover from the fact that the concrete knowledge of God coincides with the love of God: this love, which to the extent that it is sincere implies the virtues, is like the criterion of real knowledge.²⁵

Here it would be worth recalling the Messenger’s words: “‘Of this world of yours, women, perfume and prayer have been made lovable to me.’ Women are thereby confirmed as the center of the manifestation of beauty. Perfume is the sign of what lies behind phenomena as their higher reality and inter-connectedness. And prayer directs, translates and connects to this source and end purpose, to God, the Supreme Good, in whom phenomena have meaning.”²⁶ And love

²³ The verses “Whithersoever you turn, there is the Face of God” (2:115) and “It belongs not to any mortal that God should speak to him, except by revelation, or from behind a veil” (42:51) also refer to this simultaneous presence and concealment.

²⁴ See 4:53.

²⁵ Frithjof Schuon, *Roots of the Human Condition* (Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1991), pp. 41-42.

²⁶ See Ibn al-Arabi, *Fusus al-Hikam*, chapter “Muhammad.”

among people for the sake of the glory of God means accepting God's ultimate proximity: "Truly will God say on the Day of Resurrection: Where are those who loved for the sake of My glory? Today shall I shelter them in My shadow when there is no shadow other than Mine."²⁷ Conversely, God's love for someone means that the whole of existence loves that same person: "When God loves one of His slaves, He calls Jibreel and says: 'Truly I love this and that one; and you too should love him.' And Jibreel loves him. Then he appears in the heavens, saying: 'God loves this and that one, so you love him too.' And the heavenly hosts love him, and that honor is conveyed to him on earth."²⁸ Love is the guide of the self: "Man will be with him who loves him," said the Messenger.²⁹

The Sacred: Beauty and Goodness

The fact that God has ordained for everyone a Law and a way of life³⁰ necessarily entails the conclusion that the multiplicity of paths leading from the human individual and collectivity towards the truth is part of the Divine will. None of these paths is without deficiencies, for otherwise this would deny the fact of Unicity; yet there can be no error with God, for error is the expression of freedom and determinacy in human actions. But remembering is possible for every individual; it is the prerequisite for finding the path, and its starting-point: "Recite what has been revealed to thee of the Book, and perform the prayer; prayer forbids indecency and dishonor. God's remembrance is greater" (29:45). The potential to remember is testimony to the inexhaustible depths at the center of the human self. And the debt to the Creator—the preservation of that which has been bestowed, for which consciousness of poverty and its inseparable companion, humility, are the sole guarantee—may be repaid through the connection between the rememberer and the Remembered, a connection that is direct and eternally renewable. The beginning and end of that connection is the Sacred, that which is both infinitely near and utterly remote. And both its beginning and end may be retained in memory or lost in forgetting: this is what renders the self open or closed respectively. Without the sacred, it cannot be open, which means it cannot have the ability to

²⁷ Sahih Muslim, IV, p. 1362.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 1386.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 1387.

³⁰ See 5:48.

translate every sign in the outer worlds and within itself from one language to another, via the Truth.

And if it can be said that virtue is a moral beauty, it can also be said that beauty is a physical virtue. The merit of this virtue devolves upon its Creator and, by participation, to the creature as well if she is morally and spiritually up to this gift; this is to say that beauty and virtue on the one hand pertain *a priori* to God, and on the other hand, for that very reason, demand that their spiritual implications be brought out by the creature.³¹

“The kingdom of God is within you,” that is, in the spiritual, hence transpersonal, subjectivity; if such is the case, what can be the meaning of our outer life, of our contacts with beings and things? It is that positive phenomena manifest the heavenly treasures we bear within ourselves, and that they help us to uncover and realize them; we are fundamentally what we love, and that is why we love it; the deepest subject rejoins the happiest shores. It is necessary to have the sense of beauty and the sense of the sacred, and also—on a much more modest plane—the sense of the divine perfume in the natural pleasures that life here below offers us, which implies that we partake of them with nobleness.³²

To think of the Sacred means to try both to allot to It the quality of being all-encompassing and to define Its boundaries. But this distorts human vision and prevents it from seeing the unlimited and creative Self in the mutability, the incessant and unlimited flux at the center of the self. Yet this unlimited potential for change at the center of one’s being is the source of living mercy and knowledge, the means whereby that center approaches and desires the Mercy that embraces all things, including knowledge. What it desires is neither limited nor limitable, neither created nor creatable. Limitedness and createdness belong to the self that has not been transformed and emptied for the fullness of the self. But once this has been accomplished, knowledge will demand directness, non-mediation. In fact, the Truth in its perfection cannot be distanced from nor contingent upon phenomena; it is in them and with them, and it only becomes distanced insofar as the observer sees anything in phenomena other than the Truth.

³¹ Frithjof Schuon, *Roots of the Human Condition*, pp. 44-45.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 49.

It is the presence of Truth in phenomena which gives the self its constant potential for remembrance, for the manifestation of verticality at one's center that gathers the entirety of existence to a single level of being. This potential for contact between levels of being is the manifestation of the Infinite in Space and Eternity in Time. It is what makes possible the return of every phenomenon to the "unmediated" world as higher ideal, during the process of descent and ascent by which the Treasury of all phenomena remains in the fullness of Peace.

The human encounter with the external world—an encounter in which the self is affirmed—calls for a resolution of the duality between self and Self, which can be attained by starting either from the self or from the world. At the same time, it also calls for a response to the question of the duality between the apparent world and God. That which appears proximate at one level of being is distant by comparison with its ideal at a higher level, because every phenomenon is "sent down" by comparison with its principle. This is linked to the meaning of symbols, which elevate themselves above what appear close, thus demonstrating that the latter are lower than what they signify. Indeed, the closer one gets to a phenomenon in appearance, the further one distances oneself from the first principle. But notwithstanding the actual distance which this apparent proximity conceals, the individual is always able to recognize and renew the covenant with the First Principle, for neither the individual nor any of the world's phenomena can ever break that original covenant, whatever situation or condition the individual may be in. Despite the fall from original purity, the First Principle remains safeguarded within the individual. The created world has not lost all its transparency; and even in the densest darkness there remains a ray of light, for the light is First Principle, which the darkness is not. And though any image of the world which rejects the principled nature of the Truth is ephemerality itself, no conjecture is insoluble when faced with the final arbitration of the Truth.

No state of self is sustainable if the way it acts towards the Principle, towards the light, is based on the denial of alterity—an act of human misconception which attempts to sever phenomena from their principle. But this illusion of separation may be dispelled by remembrance, which is humankind's perpetual potential. The individual's presence in and encounter with the world give rise to opposition between what the individual wishes for himself and for others. But any endeavor to realize his desires by dominating or depriving the other is futile, for the world that he experiences inevitably reflects the relationship

between the contingent and the absolute, the finite and the infinite, the temporal and the eternal. If he denies the contingent, finite and temporal through which every phenomenon external to the individual manifests itself, he risks dominating or depriving others as a means of fulfilling his desires.

Alternatively, the individual may turn away from the contingent, finite and temporal towards the absolute, infinite and eternal. Central to this are two maxims: “Do as you would be done by,” and “Do not do as you would not have others do to you.” What the self desires is linked, in its profoundest essence, with the ray of the first principle that no self is ever entirely without. The connection between that ray (which is utter alterity) and every phenomenon calls for the self to “take refuge with the Lord of the Daybreak from the evil of what He has created, from the evil of darkness when it gathers, from the evil of those who blow on knots, from the evil of an envier when he envies” (113:1-5). This turning away and seeking refuge from evil creates a balance in the desire for one’s own well-being by turning it into the desire for the well-being of the other—that is, by accepting the principle that it is better to suffer evil than to commit it and the injunction to return good for evil. Inherent in the act of seeking refuge with the “Lord of the Daybreak,” if it is viewed as an expression of the relationship between the self and the Self, is the testimony that “there is no god but God, no reality but the Reality.” In this way, in the outer world the unreal is discerned from the real, and the inner self is simultaneously given direction. Conversely, since everything in the outer world points towards Reality, this discernment cannot be reflected within the self if any of its states are taken to be Reality itself. Human desire can be resolved only in the Absolute; and whenever any of its states are taken to be Reality, this is tantamount to proclaiming it to be a god without God.³³ Yet the self must always confront the Self, for “All things perish, except His Face” (28:88). It is only in the testimony that “there is no self but the Self” that the self is liberated from delusion and draws closer to Reality. Perfect alterity, then, is the reality of every phenomenon, and the reality of every phenomenon is perfect alterity. The immediacy so demanded can be satisfied only by rejecting the notion that there is a duality between self and Self, and recognizing that the only Sacred is that to which the self draws near

³³ The Recitation says of this (25:43), “Hast thou seen him who has taken his desire to be his god?”

With the Other

in constant change and transformation, denying its contingency and opening itself to the revelation of the Self.

Only from the truth of Being can the essence of the holy be thought. Only from the essence of the holy is the essence of divinity to be thought. Only in the light of the essence of divinity can it be thought or said what the word “God” is to signify. Or should we not first be able to hear and understand all these words carefully if we are to be permitted as men, that is, as existent creatures, to experience a relation of God to man? How can man at the present stage of world history ask at all seriously and rigorously whether the god nears or withdraws, when he has above all neglected to think into the dimension in which alone that question can be asked? But this is the dimension of the holy, which indeed remains closed as a dimension if the open region of Being is not lighted and in its lighting is near man. Perhaps what is distinctive about this world-epoch consists in the closure of the dimension of the hale [*des Heilen*]. Perhaps that is the sole malignancy [*Unheil*].³⁴

The fallen state of humanity is none other than the state of the self that has become dazzled with the multiplicity of the world and forgotten the sacred as its unalterable center. The consequence of this forgetting is the inability to see the sacred as a presence both in oneself and in the other. In face of Europe’s inability to live both with a clear sense of boundary towards the different, and to accept the different as the prerequisite for self-knowledge, Muslim and Jewish otherness remain as a permanent testimony to a sameness that is not and cannot be identical. What no European concept of encounter with the other—be it the notion of the “lost savior” or that of the self-sufficient individual within the nation—has resolved is the issue of acknowledging the other as testimony to one’s debt towards the Other; and this is as salient today as it ever has been, especially as regards the question of European Islam. Moreover, every issue that once coded into the “Jewish question” remains present in the “Muslim question,”³⁵ and there can be no resolution of this underlying danger without revealing the self-same goodness in every language. Only with a clear insight into that transcendent unity is it possible to discern

³⁴ Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 230.

³⁵ On Muslims as the European others see Rusmir Mahmutćehajić, *Sarajevo Essays: Politics, Ideology and Tradition* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003), pp. 83-98.

and recognize the meaning of difference, and only with a tolerance of diversity is the link with unicity in the form of the individual and collective covenant sustainable.

The Hour: Distancing and Drawing Near

The Divine image is a bridge between earth and Heaven. This enables humankind to understand the reason for being, but also enables God to see Himself from the viewpoint of the other outside Himself (although that other, in the final analysis, can only be He, for God can be known only through Himself). God's manifestation is the presence of the Absolute in the contingent, of the Uncreated in the created; thus the duality between contingency and creation, between "this world"³⁶ and the "other world,"³⁷ is but an illusion. Indeed, the duality between these two worlds affirms unicity, for both their comparability and their non-comparability point to the incomparability and unquantifiability of unicity. This world springs from the other world, and this world has no meaning or purpose outside that fact. The individual can thus have no orientation towards meaning and purpose without a recognition of the submission of earth to heaven and of matter to spirit—a submission that is laid down by the order of things, which decrees that everything in the heavens and on the earth prostrate itself to God. The heavens are the immeasurably transcendent alterity of the earth; and without that alterity, earthly purpose can have no direction. But this is merely a sign that the purpose of all worldly existence, which tells us all that is like and comparable, lies in absolute Alterity, which is omnipresent and eternal but comparable with nothing.

The human quest is based on the realization, in the uttermost depths of the self, that Mercy and Knowledge, as perfect cause and consequence, are the only meanings in which contingency may be resolved. As already noted, God offers *trust* to humankind, which means that He shows His Face as the All-faithful to His creation. His fidelity is absolute, while that of humankind is contingent, though the latter becomes the more real the closer the individual draws to the All-faithful. Human fidelity, or being a believer, is therefore nothing other

³⁶ Ar. *dunya* (closer, closest), in the Recitation, designates "this world." The individual is interrelated both to this world and the other world, as the Recitation says (87:16-17): "Nay, but you prefer the present life; and the world to come is better, and more enduring."

³⁷ Ar. *akhirah* (the last) is the term used in the Recitation to designate the future life or "final place of abode" that lies beyond "this world."

than proximity to the All-faithful, and every move of the individual towards the All-faithful is met by His incomparably more rapid and greater move towards the individual. Part of the covenant between them is that mutual trust. Both parties to the covenant, however, have the potential, based on the trust conferred out of full freedom, to reject or accept what is offered. Often it seems that the individual is in a hopeless position in this open relationship between the faithful and the All-faithful; but the manifest human predilection for Mercy (grace) and knowledge, and humankind's constant refusal to accept disgrace and ignorance, are evidence that at the very center of the individual, in the uncreated principle of createdness, lie that mercy and knowledge which encompass all things. The covenant between humankind and God is therefore the transmission, in the form of restored memory, of that mercy and knowledge: human faith starts out as love and knowledge, but becomes transformed, through trust in the covenant, into a vehicle for divine Mercy and Knowledge.

And this act of transmission is the essence of language. Aristotle says that every language is a soul, and the Recitation states that the life of a single individual is as the life of all humankind (5:35). The concomitant of this is that every individual bears within himself the reality of every soul and, consequently, of every language. Conversely, human diversity is the expression of the boundless potential of the soul, of the Unicity that is its uncreated and uncreatable essence. As all souls are created from one, multiplicity merely manifests and corroborates Unicity; and the raising of the dead, the resurrection, is merely multiplicity returning to Unicity: "Your creation and your upraising are as but as a single soul" (31:28). All of existence manifests Unicity, and all its differentiation is permeated with the authentic speech of Unicity, by Unicity manifested as the Word.

Since the Creator is Absolute, there is also nothing lacking in His creation: it is perfection, the one and only. Manifestation means being in space and time; but the inner essence of perfection is always one and the same, always unrepeatable. Nevertheless, when perfection becomes manifest in finitude, it becomes multiplicity, which means that the unity and unicity of perfection are reflected in every cosmic phenomenon, both individually and together; thus Unicity lies at the heart of all differences in the cosmos. And there is no repetition in creation: every manifestation is new, unique and original, but each testifies to the unity and unicity of the Creator. Since the Creator is infinite and eternal, He is manifested by infinite diversity, and this diversity manifests His unity and unicity: the One is revealed in multiplicity,

and multiplicity manifests and praises the One. Likewise, the Self manifests Itself in individual selves, and individual languages manifest the boundless potential of the self to receive the speech of the Self.

Language is man, and it is therefore our deiformity; to speak is to be “made in the image of God,” and “*noblesse oblige*.” Man’s first word was a prayer, and could not but be one; the creature is a mirror of the Creator. We could also say that the first word uttered by man was the Name of the Eternal, in answer to the creative Word that projected a divine image into the world.³⁸

The unicity and perfection of the Creation are not denied by His manifestation in creation: the ineffable is confirmed by unicity. The totality of this manifestation is multiplicity and motion, which in turn confirms the unicity of the One Who manifests Himself, just as this unicity confirms the ineffable.

All that is in the heavens and on earth, which means the entirety of the cosmos and man as its sum, perform the *sajda*, the prostration.³⁹ Together they are the universal *masjid*, the place of prostration, in which submission to God is shown by all that is created.⁴⁰ If all that is in existence, no matter how far-flung or dispersed, is summed up in man, the cosmos and man are thus two faces of one and the same confirmation and manifestation of the Self. And since the Self is Absolute, Its revelation in the contingent remains close to the Absolute, though to the created It may appear infinitely remote. Every illusion of distance thus is a manifestation of Unicity in multiplicity, and the absolute and certain can never be removed from the contingent.

The Hour and death form an ever-present certainty, as does the present moment. Indeed, in contrast to the measurability and contingency of everything that is sent down, only the Hour and death are certain. The Recitation describes both, and emphasizes their proximity, no matter how far apart they may seem: “The Hour is coming, no doubt of it, and God shall raise up whosoever is within the tombs” (22:7). If, as the only total certainty, the present moment is inseparable from death, the present moment is thus identical with Eternity,

³⁸ Frithjof Schuon, *To Have a Center* (Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1990), p. 158.

³⁹ See 22:18.

⁴⁰ See 3:83.

and death with Life. Focusing on the present moment, then, as what is certain in life and what bears the imperative for freedom and salvation, means also being aware of death and understanding it to be the other face of contingency, a contingency which is the manifestation of the Absolute. Hence focusing on the present moment means looking at the light of the Absolute.

If Eternity (and thus God) is revealed in cosmic and human finitude, which was sent down from the Treasure house with its measure, it means that Eternity and finitude stand in a relationship of infinite and reciprocal similarity and comparability. But since God is comparable to none, He may seem remote, although he is not so in reality (indeed, only the created world can actually be remote). The Hour (which, as we have seen, is the same as the present moment) is the constant judge of that and every other illusion: it is only without its judgment that the cosmos and man appear self-sufficient and detached from Eternity. Conversely, Eternity and Infinity may seem unreal in contrast to space and time, as they cannot be encompassed by space and time; but if we acknowledge that space and time are actually encompassed by Eternity and Infinity, then the crucial nature of the Hour and death may be grasped.

The Hour thus proves to be the judge of the entire contingency of space and time. To deny one's proximity to God means denying the proximity of the Hour, whereas focusing on the Hour as the presence of Eternity in time and of Infinity in space reveals God's proximity to man, which is absolute: "And We are nearer to him than the jugular vein" (50:16). Turning to and focusing on the Hour entails moving away from seeing phenomena as autonomous and self-sufficient, and towards seeing their true nature as signs that testify to Unicity.⁴¹ Just as all that is temporal or spatial is merely the confirmation of Eternity and Infinity, so the same can be said of the Hour. All that lies within the outer and inner worlds demonstrates and confirms the Hour, and its closeness to the cosmos and man: "Are they looking for aught but the Hour, that it shall come upon them suddenly? Already its tokens have come; so, when it has come to them, how shall they have their Reminder?" (47:18) "And the matter of the Hour is as a twinkling of the eye, or nearer. Surely God is powerful over everything" (16:77). Given that Divine Knowledge is absolute, and that the knowledge possessed by man, as the image of God, is contingent, it is only in the

⁴¹ See 30:12-14.

drawing near of human knowledge to the Hour that one may speak of man's drawing closer to Reality or his being open to Its revelation. In focusing on the Hour, therefore, one is striving to attain knowledge of the Sacred, which once again means accepting the interdiction that is the very source of human presence in the Manifest: "The people will question thee concerning the Hour. Say: 'The knowledge of it is only with God'" (33:63). "With Him is the knowledge of the Hour, and to Him you shall be returned" (43:85).

Turning one's gaze towards the perfection of creation means turning towards one's own perfection, which is neither of the past nor of the future. Humankind's primal perfection lies in the perfect certainty of the Hour, and encompasses everything. Man may forget it, but he may also rediscover it, for it underlies all of existence as the indicator of the total presence of the Other. Conversely, forgetting this, and distancing oneself from the Hour, entails detaching oneself from all of existence and being in opposition to it. This gives rise to a rift in the self, which manifests itself as the seeming absence and non-necessity of the Other. Yet it is only with God as the Creator of all things that neither excess nor deficiency is possible: excess and deficiency are possible only in human concepts and action.

The Praiser, Praise and the Praised

The totality of existence means all that is sent down or derives from the Absolute. Every phenomenon in this process has its double: there is no individuality without something similar or comparable to it. Everything that is accessible to the senses and reason—whether by a process of differentiation or by synthesis—has its quantifiable measure, which implies that it is comparable to something else in space and time. Yet existence cannot be confined within the boundaries of quantifiability, nor can it be known exclusively through comparison and reason, for Unicity, which is similar or comparable to nothing, underlies the duality of all things. Thus comparing the duality of all things with their underlying Unicity entails the conclusion that what is manifest, all that is multiple and comparable, confirms the non-comparable and non-similar, i.e., Unicity, in a relationship as close as that between odd and even.⁴²

The testimony that there is no god but God and that the Praiser is His slave and His messenger is the non-negotiable condition in the

⁴² See 89:3.

honoring of humankind's debt towards God. All other demands are lesser, or more contingent. The first element of the testimony is the metaphysical principle, and speaks of the relation between the Creator and the created, the Absolute and the contingent; it describes the infinite insignificance of all that is manifest by comparison with God. But this insignificance or utter poverty is the prerequisite for wisdom, for the praise of God. And the confirmation of wisdom lies in virtue, for the former without the latter is no more than fraud and hypocrisy, regardless of how far its essence may be disguised. Furthermore, knowledge of the Real conditions being in accordance with it. The Real is entirely good, and he who knows it must adapt to it: thus acknowledging the magnitude of the Known, which leads it to be praised, demands that one accepts the insignificance of the praiser. Thus the insignificant becomes affirmed not as Reality, but as a sign of the emptiness that is impotence before the Absolute. Nevertheless, the Praiser manifests, in the fullness of his act of praise, the presence of the Absolute in the contingent. But this is also an act of submission and humility, in which to know is to be, for anything else introduces into the self the illusion of greatness, which is nothing other than a denial of and arrogance towards the Absolute. Indeed, turning towards Reality demands harmony of knowledge and being, which lies in the totality of the self that speaks with the Absolute Good in prayer, renouncing the contingencies which the self possesses and striving to orient itself towards the First Principle, which is both beginning and end. This is the striving to confirm and discover, within the self and behind all the veils of contingency, the presence of the uncreated and uncreatable Spirit of God.

The totality of existence, as we have seen, is sent down from Eternity and Infinity; in this process it is given form and boundaries. Its derived yet bounded nature means that in it, the manifest has taken on form and substance—and this is the “odd” that confirms the “even” or the one and only. “Glory be to Him, who created all the pairs of what the earth produces, and of themselves, and of what they know not” (36:36). When form and substance are seen as equal, the sending down and the measure disappear from view. But as long as phenomena remain bounded in space and time, they have the potential to praise the Treasury from which they have been sent down—the Unicity that is comparable with nothing, although it manifests itself in the uncountable multiplicity of forms and substances. Thus the cosmos as a whole is the Praiser of the Treasury, and its derived nature is inseparable from the Treasury as its First Principle. The cosmos is not

exhausted in any single one of its manifestations: space and time are its mode of being, but the metaphysical comprises its higher reality, because the cosmic is derived or sent down from the metacosmic. Thus the truth of physical phenomena is unattainable without considering the metaphysical. In this way, all the worlds praise their highest principle. In their totality, they are the Praiser, and Praise is their link to the First Principle or the Praised.

Since man also comprises the totality of creation, he is the image of the First Principle. The fact that he speaks, sees, hears, wills, loves, knows and so on means that he has received and has within him an uncountable multiplicity of attributes which originally belong to the First Principle. In their totality, these make up Praise, and thus in relation to the First Principle he is Its Praiser. Praise is his attitude towards the perfect connection between his quality of being sent down and the Treasury; and through the act of praise, the Praised manifests Himself. The testimony that there is no principle other than the Principle, then, is inseparable from the testimony that the Praiser is His Messenger, for the Principle manifests itself in man as the capacity for the Praiser to be in the closest possible proximity to the Praised through his Praising. The Praised, as the totality of the purpose and perfection of creation, is thus also He who reveals the Praised. Since there is no deficiency in the total of creation, so man as the Praiser, or the perfect image of creation, is also the Messenger of the Praised in whom He is known. This is the meaning of the words of the Recitation: "Thou seest not in the creation of the All-merciful any imperfection. Return thy gaze; seest thou any fissure?" (67:3-4) The perfection of all that is created is made known in the Praiser, who is "a light-giving lamp" (33:46), "a good example" (33:21). In this way all the phenomena in the outer and inner worlds manifest themselves as signs that reveal the Truth, for there is nothing in creation without a purpose.

The perfection of the Praiser, as the messenger of the Praised One, is testified to by his quest for the meaning of boundaries, a quest which lies at the heart of attitudes towards all others who exist. For refusing to accept that all phenomena in the outer and inner worlds express the perfection of creation by the All-merciful means denying that all the Treasuries have their base in Unicity. Every such denial means seeing something else as total alterity; but such a view would imply that the creation of the All-merciful is not perfect, and thus that man cannot attain perfect inner peace.

This is a profane image of the world; but neither the World nor man can be profane. They can exist as such only in an image of man

that derives from a closed self, a coarsened, insensitive heart, and the detachment of phenomena from the Principle. And this Principle is Sacred. That which derives from human freedom (which in turn stems ultimately from the offer and acceptance of confidence) may be profane, but is then in opposition to the Principle. Knowledge founded on this becomes detached from the Sacred as manifested in being and knowledge. But if man wishes to regain his original and perfect nature, it can only be by respecting the sanctity of knowledge and being; and without knowledge of the Sacred, there can be no sacred being.⁴³

By drawing closer to the Praiser, the individual can rediscover this knowledge of the Sacred, of how human nature is differentiated into an uncreated center and its manifestation. The testimony that there is no god but God and that the Praiser (*Muhammad*) is His servant and messenger is an affirmation that only God is All-sufficient; from which it follows that only He is the Praised (*al-hamid*). Praising the Praised testifies that the worlds are dependent on God, wholly and unconditionally, that the world as the Praiser has nothing that is not dependent on the All-sufficient. This dependence is concentrated in the individual, with Praise (*al-hamd*) as its innermost, uncreated and uncreatable essence; and through this essence, the individual is the *Praiser*. Thus his supreme potential is to be the messenger of the Praised, of Him who receives and manifests Praise.

Poverty, too, lies at the core of human nature, for humankind has nothing that has not been bestowed upon it. It is thus only in the purity of poverty that the individual can be both Praiser and manifestation of the Praised: "O men, you are the ones that have need of God; he is the All-sufficient, the All-laudable" (35:15). The individual who is wholly open, in his need of God, to the manifestation of the Praised within him is the Praiser, the servant and messenger of God; and as such, he is a good example: "You have a good example in God's Messenger for whosoever hopes for God and the Last Day, and remembers God oft" (33:21). Muhammad is thus the Logos, for it is through him that the First reveals itself as the Last and the Inward as the Outward, that the Divine latency discloses Itself to Itself. This act of disclosure is what we see as manifestation in space and time, the revelation of all the degrees of Being. When some of these degrees of Being reveal

⁴³ On the relationship between the secular and the sacred in knowledge see, for example, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989).

themselves in the individual through his connection with the Praised, so that self and externality, the inner and the outer worlds, manifest themselves as a single act of Praise, this act raises the individual from darkness to a place of praise: "And as for the night, keep vigil a part of it, as a work of supererogation for thee; it may be that thy Lord will raise thee up to a laudable station."⁴⁴ This means that all phenomena in the inner and outer worlds are oriented towards and connected with the Praised, for the self seeks Praise in all things as the presence of the Praised, since there is no flaw or lack in the creation of the heavens and the earth.

Yet misunderstanding can take place: "The seven heavens and the earth, and whosoever in them is, extol Him; nothing is, that does not proclaim His praise, but you do not understand their extolling" (17:44). This lack of understanding is then seen as an innate, universal law of history, which manifests itself as the seemingly independent course of events in space and time. This law and its manifestation in phenomena remain undifferentiated, for they are not related through the first principle and its revelation, and history becomes a sine wave of events from lower to higher and lesser to greater, a constantly repeating cycle of distancing from and drawing near to the first Principle, of forgetting and remembering It.

Yet history, too, may be seen in the light of the mutuality between Praiser, Praise and Praised. Events that have become history may be arrayed in order from the most ancient to the present moment of the observer. But in this process, diverse orders, conclusions and philosophies of history may be derived, for as every event passes from its actual manifestation in space and time into history or narrative, it loses the perfection of the original, unrepeatable presence. From the perspective of the sacred traditions, the truth is omnipresent; but the periphery, where human potential manifests itself, offers only constant change and an innumerable multiplicity of forms. At this periphery, rituals and virtues may manifest themselves in a diversity of ways; but proximity to or distance from the Truth, remembrance of or forgetting the Truth, still underlie every event in history. As a result, events are both original and quantifiable by the same scales, and history may be seen as the manifestation of humankind's drawing

⁴⁴ 17:79. The notion of the "place of praise" or "laudable station" (*mahmuda*) in Arabic derives from the trilateral verbal root *h-m-d* (to praise). This is the root from which the names *Muhammad* (the one who is taught to praise, the Praiser) and *Ahmad* (the most praised, the Supreme Praiser) are derived.

closer to or moving further from the “laudable station” (that which measures the presence of Praise in the self, and thereby its proximity to the Praiser as absolute submission to the Praised). But, as the narrative of human suffering, history may also highlight the weakness inherent in the desire to oppose the Absolute with acts of contingent will: “What, have they not journeyed in the land and beheld how was the end of those before them? They were stronger than themselves in might; but God—there is naught in the heavens or the earth that can frustrate Him” (35:44).

Tradition and Modernity

In every tradition—or more precisely, in every manifestation of the immutable Tradition—three degrees may be distinguished: the truth and its concomitant the doctrine; the way and its concomitant the rite; and virtue and its concomitant the potential sanctity of the individual. The truth is independent of the way which confirms it; thus, since only the truth is one, there is a multitude of ways. The truth is not contingent on any of them, but all the ways that manifest the truth are contingent upon it as the supreme principle. The truth manifests the way, and ordains it for every individual and for all people together. Virtue is that which confirms one’s accepting and following the way; and it is expressed as humility and generosity. That which is established in descending order, from truth to way to virtue, is transformed by humility and generosity into ascent.

The individual has received all that there is, and has thereby become indebted to the truth, and thus strives to repay the debt, which means that he himself returns to the Truth and thereby becomes oriented towards it. Reception thus becomes transformed into repayment, because the self comprises the totality of being, for God has summed up in him all the names scattered through the cosmos. His submission comprises all the submission of all the worlds, but is founded on freedom, for there is no compulsion in the receipt or repayment of the debt. The individual is expected to remember his original covenant with God and to submit to Him as an act of confidence. This is submission out of free will, not imposed by the will of the Truth. It is offered and accepted as a choice between two options, and is different from the response of all other phenomena in the worlds: “We offered the confidence to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to carry it and were afraid of it; and man carried it” (33:72). As this is an offer, if it is rejected there is no debt to the Other. If it is taken up, there is a debt which has arisen from freedom of choice and confidence in the

Other, and has been offered with trust. Trusting in it is thus the free choice of both God and the individual. The individual may forget it, or break the oath of fidelity; but God will not do so. This is the meaning of his Self-manifestation as the Merciful, the All-compassionate: even the fact that the individual may forget or break his oath of fidelity to God cannot lead to His wrath surpassing His mercy.

The acceptance of this trust, as we have seen, defines man as different from all else in the totality of existence—an acceptance which, arising out of free will, manifests itself as humility: “Hast thou not seen how to God prostrate themselves all who are in the heavens and all who are in the earth, the sun and the moon, the stars and the mountains, the trees and the beasts, and many of mankind?” (22:18). Though the submission of the worlds incurs no debt to God, the submission of man incurs a debt to Him. Thus humility derives from will, and through it are attained knowledge and faith, and with it beauty and love. If a being is submissive out of free will, it gains both essence and knowledge—two modes by which unicity manifests itself. In Truth, being and knowledge are one; and thus being and knowledge reflect the Truth:

The animal cannot leave his state, whereas man can; strictly speaking, only he who is fully man can leave the closed system of individuality, through participation in the one and universal Selfhood. There lies the mystery of the human vocation: what man “can,” he “must”; on this plane, to be able to is to have to, given that the capacity pertains to a positive substance. Or again, which fundamentally amounts to the same thing: to know is to be; to know That which is, and That which alone is.⁴⁵

Society is illuminated by the openness of the self to the Absolute. But if the social context of the individual self becomes more decisive than the openness of the individual to the Absolute, society becomes the magnitude and measure that determines the individual. Then the “slave gives birth to her mistress”: the magnitude and perfection of creation lose their clarity, and the fantasy of power demands that humans strive to confirm the delusion of detachment from the transcendental truth by constructing “tall buildings” and altering the original forms of the created world. This is an inversion of values, by which the individual proclaims himself greater than all else, and the external world as lesser and weaker than him. In so doing, humankind’s attitude towards

⁴⁵ Frithjof Schuon, *Roots of the Human Condition*, p. 96.

the external world shows that it sees individual selfhood as subject and the cosmos as object, as the expression of relationships between greater and lesser, between the powerful and the weak. If this duality between self and cosmos remains enclosed in quantifiability, it can have no infinite Principle, either in the external world or in the self. This means excluding the Absolute from the relationship, eternal and omnipresent though it may be, simultaneously wholly proximate to phenomena and wholly distant from them—in philosophical terms, both immanent and transcendent.

The consequence of this is that knowledge and being cannot be identical, the small be transformed into the great and vice versa. The external and vast then appear to be incomplete, and hence open to rectification. Thus the rift between the self and the cosmos becomes the determinant of human potential. Knowledge of the rift increases, but with that knowledge the rift itself also widens. The illusion of human magnitude and power increasingly fills the self with a sense of sufficiency and the expectation that the world will accommodate itself to the individual and be subordinated through action, not mercy. This loses the connection with the Principle and, in consequence, reduces the individual to a set of phenomena in the world and in the self with which one becomes entangled.

But every sacred tradition leads to the opposite end: to make the individual aware of his original nature, to provide him with a perfect exemplar and to return him to the unicity of the first principle. To the sacred tradition, everything that is not this is “association with God”—that is, paganism. Everything that is not the truth is falsehood: if the phenomena in the outer worlds and the inner selves are not signs of God, they appear to us as idols that demand our submission and service (whereas wisdom lies in the very recognition of causes in phenomena and vice versa). This separation from the Principle shifts man’s attitudes towards the future and prevents him from seeing the Hour as utter certainty. Man is thereby deprived of the intelligence through which the principle of the supernatural determines his own humanity. Without the supernatural, the presence of the uncreated at the center of man, he loses his original potential and becomes subject to the uncertainty of mere expectation. Phenomena in the world and in the individual become gods demanding the deformation and denial of the original, the created; and the individual seeks his affirmation in arrogance instead of humility.

But the Hour is still the supreme human potential, the manifestation of eternity. There can be neither thought nor enlightenment without

the Hour. Even the illusion of magnitude in the world around the self is the reality of doctrine, rite and virtue relative to the Hour. Remembering the Hour means renewing the connection with God, for the Hour contains the covenant with Him—it means turning towards the presence of the Self and Its manifestation in contingency, whereby Its presence in the world is transformed into the recognition of Beauty as Divine revelation. The concomitant of Beauty is Love, the desire for union. And love is the path to God, for He is beautiful.

Tradition restores or raises the individual to his original fairest stature, through purification, perfecting and unification. In the process of purification, the individual recognizes and renews his indebtedness to the first principle that is the very center of his being—uncreated and uncreatable, and as such incorrupt and incorruptible. He thereby discerns the unreal from the real, and accepts the Real as his uncreated nature. This acceptance is linked with drawing closer to the “good example” and to unicity—which means to the one and only God, for there is no god but God.

Whenever any human notions, plans or deeds are adopted without that testimony to unicity, human existence is transformed into paganism or association with God. It is this that is the root cause of violence. Paganism demands violence, is impossible without it, and is confirmed only by it. The upsurge of violence in the modern world has never offered any alternative to ideology, as a justification for denigration, persecution and killing of others. Force is met with force; both sides see themselves as good and just, and the other as evil and blameworthy.

Whatever can be said of Christianity here is valid for both Judaism and Islam. Christianity is a religion of love, which instructs its members in supreme moral principles for the sake of doing good: love thy neighbor, do unto others as you would have them do unto you. But despite these moral principles, the very heart of the Gospel and foundation of human affirmation of the Divine unicity, throughout the history of Christianity and throughout the world, wherever Christians have lived, hatred for non-Christians has smouldered and flared up, often giving rise to the denigration, persecution and killing of those who were other and different. The best-known outburst of this hatred and killing is the *Shoah*, of which the Catholic Church says: “The *Shoah* was the work of a thoroughly modern neopagan regime. Its anti-Semitism had its roots outside of Christianity . . .”⁴⁶ Yet, trying

⁴⁶ Holy See’s Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, “We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah,” March 1998.

to trace the roots of Christian attitudes to the Holocaust, the United States Catholic Conference concluded: "Christian anti-Judaism did lay the groundwork for racial, genocidal anti-Semitism by stigmatizing not only Judaism but Jews themselves for opprobrium and contempt. So the Nazi theories tragically found fertile soil in which to plant the horror of an unprecedented attempt at genocide."⁴⁷

If the mass denigration, persecution and killings of recent centuries are the work of "a modern neopagan regime," and as such essentially contrary to Christianity—and Muslims and Jews will say that similar events for which they bear the responsibility are also neopagan—there remains the question of how the prevailing world-view, attitudes and conduct of Christians, Muslims and Jews could have internalized neopaganism or become complicit in it. If the atrocities of the modern era are really rooted in paganism, knowledge of them becomes contingent on the issue of God and associationism with God. And it is impossible to respond to the question of the other and the different without clarifying the relationship between paganism and transcendent unicity.

Fear and Power

There is no compulsion in the debt, because man has the choice to submit to or contest the covenant. Submission means that man recognizes and acknowledges the illusory nature of his power. He thus sees power in its reality: *wa lā hawla wa lā quwwata illā bi'Llāhi*.⁴⁸ Will is confronted with the request for submission (*islam*), which is freely given; for the one who chooses may decide freely.

Voluntary submission means the recognition of a power superior to the self.⁴⁹ In such a relationship, the self places itself in a free rela-

⁴⁷ United States Catholic Conference, *Catholic Teaching on the Shoah: Implementing the Holy See's We Remember*, 2001.

⁴⁸ "And there is no power and no strength except by God." [Ed.]

⁴⁹ The issue of freedom is inseparable from the conundrum of slavery. To be free means to be enslaved to Freedom; any other form of slavery annuls human freedom. Jesus says (Jn 8:31-32): "If ye continue in my word, then are you my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." The principle of this teaching is that there is no god but God. Everything to which man is enslaved, other than God, becomes a god and deprives him of Freedom. The Recitation says, in regard to the unfree (31:30): "He is the Truth; and that they call apart from Him—that is the false." Enslavement to anything but Him is tantamount to a denial of human purpose. "Hast thou seen him who has taken his desire to be his god?" (45:23). Jesus adds (Jn 8:34): "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin." The central question of freedom, therefore, is one of discerning between enslavement

tionship with power. This first stage opens up the possibility that its five elements—attestation, prayer, fasting, alms, and pilgrimage—may be transformed from their specific exterior form to an inward fullness, gaining thereby an aura not of knowledge enclosed within the quantifiable world, but of something far greater. And knowledge that includes what is rationally attainable through knowledge, and also what is greater than knowledge, is another word for faith. The acknowledgment that the self is contingent signifies its comparison with the Praiser; and through Praise, the Praiser becomes identical with, as one with, the Praised. Thus drawing closer to and becoming one with the Praised means utter submission, by which the Self is revealed to Itself.

The rejection of submission may be termed denial—which means the displacement of faith from the Absolute towards one of its finite and contingent manifestations. But power without Power is nothing more than an illusion by which man defines himself in terms of partial freedom in relation to that same Power, as no more than what manifests itself in him as comparable and quantifiable. In this view, there is no human openness to the Absolute nor, as the Tradition teaches, is the Holy Spirit present in the individual's uncreated center. But the prerequisite for the rightness of a sacred tradition is that it be connected to the Absolute. For the debt, as the relationship between the individual as debtor and God as Creator, to be properly oriented, for it to be religion in the original meaning of the term, it must be grounded in the doctrine of the Absolute. Nor is this all. The debt, as the relationship between the individual and God, must comprise a spirituality that is wholly consistent with that doctrine. The latter must therefore be a doctrine that is from God; inherent in it must be communion and mystery, and the doctrine must manifest itself in these and in sacred art. When these conditions are not met, we are dealing with a philosophical doctrine or ideology, in which neither sign nor way derive from God.

The consequences of an interpretation in which there is no lasting connection with the Truth are clear to see wherever there is the imprint of human will and action based upon it. The one and only God can never be form; but no form in existence is without His presence. To look at and know the forms means uncovering the mystery of every veil—that

and Enslavement (109:1-6): "Say: 'O unbelievers, I serve not what you serve and you are not serving what I serve, nor am I serving what you have served, neither are you serving what I serve. To you your debt, and to me my debt!'"

its nature is identical with the Veiled, who is also the Revealed. But humankind's inability to transcend every form manifests itself in all the modes of "association with God," and in adopting the discourse of God into the various doctrines, ways and rituals that derive from Him, as though they were God Himself. It is these that are the prevailing features of this age, and it is a rare individual, in these circumstances, who is able to transcend such forms. For these doctrines, the world is a closed system, whose elements are also closed and isolated.

Seen in such a light, society too becomes a collection of isolated individuals, and is given ultimate value. This means that the prevailing social order and self-image determine the individual, rather than the individual determining society and its interpretation. The traditional postulate of the individual as openness to the Self, inherent in which is the view that society can be illuminated solely through the open individual, is transformed into the conviction that society can be shaped solely by rational comparisons, quantifications and forecasts.

And yet Absolute Power implies absolute freedom to submit to it. It is only when the will submits itself to the Absolute in conformity with its commandment, whether in the command to do or to abstain from doing, that the encounter with phenomena in the world reveals them to be greater than he who perceives their form. But in this process, whatever has its own image, i.e., the limited, bears limitless witness to Him Who is like nothing else, and thus has the power to manifest Himself in all things. As such He is the fundamental Other, the ever-present alterity. But humans are also able to forget the presence of that Absolute Alterity; then the contemplation of the totality of existence and all its elements is reduced to their disassembly and assembly through rational calculations, which are mere approximations and assumptions. Then everything in the external world seems non-existent or uncertain, and the self is forcibly surrounded and enclosed. This reverses the entire scheme of things. Beauty, meaning and purpose become second-order attributes, subordinate to matter, space and time as tangible, calculable and, in consequence, rationally knowable specificities. In such a scheme, the greater is seen as deriving from the lesser and the higher from the lower. Reason then becomes the supreme human potential and recognizes nothing superior to itself. The confidence that derives from an eternally omnipresent Alterity, from Infinity, becomes mere trust, a set of direct or mediated relations between measurable and comparable quantities, enacted by rational calculations in which submission, faith/love/knowledge and the sacred become reduced to redundant shadows.

But man is never without God, Who is man's Alterity: He creates him, and to Him he returns. God is firstness, which means that there is no nothingness. The nothingness that is not is the confirmation of the Oneness of Being or the Logos; the nothingness that is not is the Mystery. Thus the individual, whatever condition he may be in, resolves this duality by turning away from himself, by recognizing that his self is never other than contingency—even though the latter may tempt him to see it as absolute. At the heart of the self, therefore, the individual incessantly seeks *absolution* and a turning away from the self to the Self. In this, he strives towards perfect praise of the Truth, in which there is no longer any distinction between Praiser and Praised. The self orients the seeker of absolution, the one who turns away from illusion, towards the Logos—the light of Praise, the root of all that is, in which existence as a whole and all its phenomena bear witness to the Praised by their praise. Tying himself and drawing closer to the Praiser enables the individual himself to become the Logos, the creative “Let it be!” which manifests its presence. Out of this process of drawing closer, which is identical with perfect submission, the willingness to receive the Self in one's very center, derives the eternal testimony that there is no god but God.

Given that every society is composed of the individuals within it—and that each of them is conscious and has the potential to understand his consciousness—the organization of society as a whole and of its constituent individuals means the recognition of differences between one person and the next. These differences divide society into the poor and the wealthy, with the wealthy representing themselves as the model that others should emulate. Maintaining the wealthy in that position is thus presented as the supreme purpose of politics. It is hard to deny the fact that politics, whatever form it may take, is the establishment, interpretation and justification of the presence of a small number of wealthy as the rulers and managers of power. But every power that is not that of the Absolute can be justified only by fear of the other. The greater the will to power, the deeper the fear of the other. Since political power is derived from the stability and magnitude of the state, the other as a source of fear is represented as a threat, as an enemy that is wholly without and yet endangers the very heart of the social order. The local collective, the “us,” thus calls for greater power than that of the foreign or alien, the “them.” “We” are afraid of the other as of one who strikes fear into us, as of a terrorist. In his identity and culture, this other is wholly alien to “us,” and not just foreign but also unknowable, for in the eyes of the terrified, there can

be nothing that “we” have in common with him, no accountability to a Truth that is equally close to everyone and judges everyone equally. The other is perceived as a chaotic nebulousness, a blind and unpredictable force that can be countered only by a structured and “absolute” power. This demands the assent even of all those who are afraid to extend full support to the political authorities (who themselves form part of the rich and ruling minority) in their battle against this barely visible enemy. The rule here is: Whoever is not with us is with them. The use of force is born out of darkness and chaos: the denser the darkness, the greater the chaos, the more justifiable the use of force. A *terrorist*, after all, does not need to be defined and specified, or to be judged by general, universally valid principles. This means that errors in the war against terrorism, mistakes that might endanger even the essence of humanity, must always be tolerated. Acting out of fear demands an affirmation of superiority. As long as fear is the motive force of the “powerful,” however, not even the total annihilation of the other who is represented as a terrorist will liberate the “powerful” from a fear that has its origins in ignorance. Fear of the other and the will to dominate him by force transforms the powerful but fearful into a god, into someone who sees himself as a god in the nebulous darkness of alterity. So fear of the other, who is no longer “somewhere else,” but is now everywhere and is part of the constituted social order, calls for power as the prerequisite for maintaining the world order. This in turn needs the authority of a political elite, and the planning, maintenance and development of a system of production and power.

Host and Guest

Differentiating between individual human potentials means recognizing and accepting the constant manifestation of the Absolute in the contingent, and of the Cause in the effect. The fact that the supernatural is at the center of human nature is expressed in man’s potential to distinguish the unreal from the Real, and in his voluntary acceptance of the Real. When this is the starting-point, voluntary acceptance does not exhaust human potential, but merely orients it towards the higher levels of being, i.e., of the self. The will guides one towards beauty and goodness, but the appeal of the latter transcends the will: love is linked with but more exalted than the will. The individual’s love transforms his being into knowledge; and the aspiration to perfection transforms being into all-encompassing knowledge.

Humans also have the potential to deny. But denial cannot annul the supernatural center of the human self: the center may be masked,

but not extinguished. Moreover, every human “I” needs a “you” so that He of Whom both are the image may be attested to, and to fulfil the requirement that the self discover and come to know itself, given that it can see itself only in the other. The one who accepts the Real cannot be a judge, for the debt to God derives from the voluntary acceptance of His offer. Virtue as the confirmation of wisdom does not even exclude the denier, as the Recitation explicitly says:

And if any of the idolaters seeks of thee protection, grant him protection till he hears the words of God; then do thou convey him to his place of security—that, because they are a people who do not know.⁵⁰

The love of God for the manifest does not deny His infinite perfection, nor His all-sufficiency. To all the diversity of the manifest, God is utter alterity, for God is Unity and Unicity. He is the Witness to all that reveals Him, and all that which exists bears witness to Him. The whole of existence is thus encompassed in His Unicity: “Suffices it not as to thy Lord, that He is witness over everything? Are they not in doubt touching the encounter with their Lord. Does He not encompass everything?” (41:53-54), Unicity comprises both the One Who encompasses everything and that which He encompasses. To all that is manifest, He is perfect alterity and sanctuary, and the true abode of all being is in Him. Understanding this fact implies seeing this world as the sign of the Supreme, as the abode of stability.⁵¹ Coming towards the Lord means no less than the discovery and perception of unicity in multiplicity and multiplicity in unicity. Only the Self testifies

⁵⁰ 9:6. The demand for hospitality and protection even towards those who associate others [with God] (*mushrikun*) may appear incomprehensible. The Recitation firmly states, however, that “confidence” (*amana*) is the principle of humanity, the original and unalterable center of the self, the covenant between God and man. “Association” (*shirk*), then, has no foundation in principle. In *shirk* the unreal is taken for the Real or associated with It. Regardless of the state a man may be in, perfection is his cause and purpose. The resolute condemnation of “associationism” does not exclude the original and final salvation of every individual, for God’s mercy is all-encompassing.

⁵¹ Thus the Recitation says (40:39): “O my people, surely this present life is but a passing enjoyment; surely the world to come is the abode of stability”; and (6:126-27): “We have distinguished the signs to a people who remember. Theirs is the abode of peace with their Lord, and He is their Protector for that they were doing.” Jesus says of this (Jn 14:1-2): “Ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.” It should be noted that the Arabic term *rabb* (Hebrew and Aramaic *rab*) covers a wide range of meanings, including the right to something, authority over it, the upbringing, education and nurture of something from its conception to its fulfilment.

to the Self, only Unicity testifies to Unicity, and only all testifies to everything: “Whithersoever you turn, there is the Face of God” (2:115). The encounter with Him, therefore, is the full manifestation of unicity: everything vanishes, save His Face.

Acknowledging God’s words is impossible except in a state of voluntary openness to their expression in speech or writing. Their presence takes the listener or reader into their confidence; but he may accept or reject them. The Recitation is a guest among people, a guest who speaks of God. It is from the acceptance of that which is heard and read that there follows the right of speech. And there is no individual who does not deserve, if he so wishes, to have conveyed to him what his host has acquired by listening and reading—which begins as submission and humility, and then becomes love and knowledge, which are confirmed by openness and generosity. In the end, the central question for everyone faced with the diversity of sacred doctrines, ways and rituals is whether their God is one and the same. Everything that constitutes the differences between them depends on the answer to that question. Nor should it be forgotten, however, that doctrines, ways and rituals, and even forms of virtue, may be taken as gods that are not God. Associating with God may be plain to see and easy to recognize, but it may also be hidden and hard to discern.

All existence is determined by space and time—homeland and history, parents and descendants—in the ontotopological sense: man has invariably come to where he is from somewhere, and will go somewhere from there. He is at home in the space and time that determine his language and customs. These become invisible through habit, but become visible again in the need for translation. When a stranger crosses a border to enter another’s space, both of them—host and stranger—are faced with the unknown: the former is confronted by someone whose language and customs are incomprehensible to him, and the latter is impotent without the will of the host. Ignorance on both sides provokes fear, which is all too often resolved by the subjugation, persecution or annihilation of the stranger. The sacred traditions speak of the obligation to welcome the stranger and to acknowledge that, though he is unknown to the host, he is wholly known to God. It is therefore the duty of the one who is in his own space and language to convey to the incomer everything that will enable him to get to know the host’s customs, the host’s own otherness, and to receive from the

The head of the household is thus *rabb al-dar*, for he has authority over the house and is responsible for its maintenance.

incomer in full openness everything that the incomer offers him, since no force lies behind it. The foreigner is thus a guest before God, just as is the host, but his powerlessness in regard to the host gives him the right to be served: the host has a debt to him that is no less than the testimony that the Face of God is omnipresent:

It is not piety, that you turn your faces
to the East and to the West.
True piety is this:
to believe in God, and the Last Day,
the angels, the Book, and the Prophets,
to give of one's substance, however cherished,
to kinsmen, and orphans,
the needy, the traveler, beggars,
and to ransom the slave,
to perform the prayer, to pay the alms (2:177).

Belief in God is inseparable from the awareness of the debt towards Him. Since He is the only absolute subject, Who manifests Himself in multiplicity, one's attitude towards the neighbor and guest shows one's faith in God and one's acceptance of responsibility for the debt to Him. Thus belief in God and the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and the Prophets, presupposes a consciousness of this debt, which is not imposed by force. "He who believes in God and the Last Day does not threaten his neighbor, and he who believes in God and the Last Day shows courtesy to his guest, and he who believes in God and the Last Day speaks fair words or remains silent," said the Prophet.⁵² One's attitude towards the other is defined, in the Prophet's terms, as the consequence and measure of one's faith in God and the Day of the Debt. And thus the sincerity of this belief will be testified to by giving precedence to the other.

And those who made their dwelling in
the abode, and in belief, before them,
love whosoever has emigrated to them,
not finding in their breasts any need
for what they have been given, and
preferring others above themselves, even
though poverty be their portion. And
whoso is guarded against the avarice
of his own soul, those—they are
the prosperers (59:9).

⁵² Sahih Muslim, I, p. 32.

To love God and follow the Prophet means to gain His love: “He who cares for the orphan, whether or not he be related, he and I shall be together in Paradise.”⁵³

The stranger and the outcast, the orphan and the needy are thus a gift to the host. The opportunity to speak and to give of his property, and to be silent and to listen to what these outsiders are saying to him, offers him the chance to verify his own testimony, his own turning towards God. The host can establish his “I” in relation to the “you” of the guest, with both the “I” and the “you” returning to His presence. God is thus the source and confluence of the confidence that both have received. The presence of the guest extricates the host from the failures of the past and liberates him from the uncertainty of awaiting the future:

The man who is conscious of the nature of pure Being willingly remains in the moment that Heaven has assigned him; he is not feverishly straining towards the future nor lovingly or sadly bent over the past. The pure present is the moment of the Absolute: it is now—neither yesterday nor tomorrow—that we stand before God.⁵⁴

⁵³ Sahih Muslim, IV, p. 1537.

⁵⁴ Frithjof Schuon, *Roots of the Human Condition*, p. 111.

CHAPTER 2

Withdrawal, Extinction, and Creation Christ's *kenosis* in light of the Judaic doctrine of *tsimtsum* and the Islamic doctrine of *fanā*

Timothy Scott

Empty yourself, so that you may be filled. Learn not to love so that you may learn how to love. Draw back, so that you may be approached.

St. Augustine,
Enarration on Psalm 30:3

I was a hidden treasure; I wished to be known and I created the world.

Hadīth qudsī

I could pray that I myself might be accursed and cut off from Christ, if this could benefit the brothers who are my own flesh and blood.

St. Paul, Romans 9:3

Blessed are the poor in spirit.

Gospel of Matthew 5:3

The Christian doctrine of *kenosis* refers to Christ's "emptying" himself to become human. It derives from *Philippians* 2:1-11, in particular, v. 7: "But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are." Popular interpretation suggest this refers to Jesus' voluntary self-deprivation of the divine glory, during his earthly life. It has also been seen as a Pauline teaching on the virtue of humility.¹ Given the multivalent nature of scripture—which is never exhausted by any of its interpretations—various readings of the pericope are not only plausible but inevitable. Our current intention is not, however, to debate points of interpretation but to present a cosmogonic reading of the *kenosis*. In this passage Christianity offers a cosmogonic teaching that satisfies, for those that have "ears to hear," the difficulties associated with the idea of *creatio ex nihilo* that have long haunted scholastic Christianity. To aid in this examination recourse is made to both the Judaic doctrine of

¹ *New Jerusalem Bible* (Commentary) (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1994).

tsimtsum and the Islamic doctrine of *fanā*, demonstrating the integrity of the three Abrahamic religions; further, recourse is also made to the Hindu and Buddhist notion of *nirvāna*, demonstrating the essential unity of East and West wherever Truth is at issue.

The *Tsimtsum*

The doctrine of *tsimtsum*, as expounded in the Lurianic School of Kabbalism founded by Isaac Luria (1534-72), teaches of the “concentration” of *En-Sof* (the “Limitless” or Divine Infinitude) at the principal point of Universal Existence. The word *tsimtsum* means literally “concentration” or “contraction”; however, used in kabbalistic parlance it is best translated as “withdrawal” or “retreat.” According to Luria, *tsimtsum* does not mean the concentration of God at a point, but His retreat *away* from a point, a theory he derived from the inversion of midrash referring to God having concentrated His *Shekhinah* (“indwelling”; the Divine Immanence) in the Holiest of Holies, “as though His whole power were concentrated and contracted in a single point.”²

The doctrine of *tsimtsum* teaches that God withdraws Himself into Himself thereby allowing an empty “primordial space” into which “that which is not God” can come into being. Gershom Scholem observes how this doctrine demonstrated a shift in appreciation from the God who revealed himself in firm contours to the God who descended deeper into the recesses of His own Being, who concentrated Himself into Himself, and had done so from the very beginning of creation.³ In the three Semitic religions the term “God” is used, in the exoteric domain, to express the ontological Principle or, even more simply, the active Demiurge.⁴ However, with the *tsimtsum* we are considering God in respect of Non-Being or Beyond-Being.

The phrase “that which is not God” is as if to say “that which is not of itself the Absolute” *ipso facto* the Relative. This is not to say that the Relative is not of the Absolute or, to put this another way, that the Relative is not contained within the Absolute, but simply that the Relative does not exhaust the Absolute. The Relative, inasmuch as it is “not God,” is the tendency towards “non-existence.” As Frithjof

² *Exodus Rabba* 25.10; *Leviticus Rabba* 23.24.

³ Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (NY: Schocken Books, 1995), p. 261.

⁴ In Islam the ontological Principle inasmuch as it is recognized in the exoteric domain is expressed by *al-nafs al-ilāhiyah* (the Divine Person); the active Demiurge or the Creator is *al-bāri*.

Schuon says, the illusion of the Relative (the Hindu *Māyā*) represents the possibility for Being of not being: “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 myriad flecks of foam.”⁵

Non-existence must not be confused with the “Divine Nothingness,” a term that alludes to the unknowable transcendence of the Divine Infinitude.⁶ The Divine Nothingness is not non-existence; it is the All-Possibility of Beyond-Being, in which Existence is virtually prefigured and from which Existence is potentially born.⁷ As Plotinus says, “It is precisely because there is nothing within the One that all things are from it.”⁸ All-Possibility includes, by definition, the paradoxical possibilities of both Being and Its contrary Non-Being.⁹ According to

⁵ Schuon, *Language of the Self* (Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1999), p. 27.

⁶ On this idea of the “Divine Nothingness” see Schuon, *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism* (Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 2000), p. 53. See also Coomaraswamy’s essay, “*Kha* and Other Words Denoting ‘Zero,’ in Connection with the Indian Metaphysics of Space” in *Selected Papers Vol.2: Metaphysics*, (ed.) R. Lipsey (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977).

⁷ Schuon says of the Infinite that “it is in the first place Potentiality or Possibility as such, and *ipso facto* the Possibility of things, hence Virtuality” (*Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*, p. 15). Schuon’s use of the term Potentiality is unfortunate if viewed in a strictly Aristotelian sense where the transference from potentiality to actuality is predicated upon the prior reality of an ever actual principle. Thus it would seem more satisfactory to refer to the Infinite as Actuality, in the sense of *the Actual* or the Real. For the sake of precision, one can, as Guénon does, distinguish between the terms “possibility,” “virtuality” and “potentiality.” Thus, possibility primarily refers to the Infinite; virtuality refers to principial Being; potentiality refers to the aptitude of virtual existence to manifest *in actu*, and thus properly to the indefinite. Possibility can be referred to at each level by transposition. However, this does not work in reverse, for it cannot be said of the divine order that it is potential. As Guénon says, “there can be nothing potential in the divine order. It is only from the side of the individual being and in relation to it that potentiality can be spoken of in this context. Pure potentiality is the absolute indifferentiation of *materia prima* in the Aristotelian sense, identical to the indistinction of the primordial chaos” (*Fundamental Symbols* [Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1995], p. 300, n. 37). Potentiality refers to a change in state and thus to a lack: God lacks nothing.

⁸ *Enneads* 5.2.1. Again, the *Tao Te Ching* (Ch. 11) says, “The clay is molded to make a pot; And the clay fits round ‘nothing’: Herein lies the usefulness of the pot.”

⁹ Two difficulties arise with the use of the term “Being.” Firstly, there can be a confusion between two distinct usages of this term. On the one hand Being corresponds to the Supreme Principle and is identical in this usage with the Absolute, and is therefore, somewhat paradoxically, Beyond-Being or Transcendence. On the other hand Being is sometimes taken as referring especially, if not exclusively, to the level of Manifestation or to Immanence. The second difficulty arises inasmuch as the term “Being” is used to refer to an exclusive category of the onto-cosmological chain.

Withdrawal, Extinction, and Creation

Parmenides “being is and nothing is not.”¹⁰ The *Chāndogya Upanishad* examines the question of non-existence, *asat*, in detail with the sage Aruni maintaining the absurdity of the “existence” of non-existence.¹¹ However, the conclusions of both Parmenides and Aruni are more complex than they might first appear. Plato speaks of the “irrationality” of “not-being”: “You understand then that it is really impossible to speak of not-being or to say anything about it or to conceive it by itself, but it is inconceivable, not to be spoken of or mentioned, and irrational.”¹² Non-being is not. This is a logical truth. Nevertheless, as Ibn al-‘Arabī says, “It is part of the perfection of Being that there is imperfection in it.”¹³ Schuon: “The All-Possibility must by definition and on pain of contradiction include its own impossibility.”¹⁴ This is also a logical truth and at the same time a paradox.

The distinction between Beyond-Being and Being is that which exists in the Hindu tradition between *nirguna Brahman* (unqualified *Brahman*) and *saguna Brahman* (qualified *Brahman*). Kenneth Oldmeadow sees here “a principle analogous to Meister Eckhart’s distinction between God (the ontological, Being dimension of the Absolute; *Īśvara*) and the Godhead (the Absolute, Beyond-Being, unqualified; *Brahman*).”¹⁵ In Islam the parallel ideas of Beyond-Being and Non-Being are found in the term *al-‘udum*. Titus Burckhardt observes that in Sufism this expression includes “on the one hand the positive sense of non-manifestation, of a principial state beyond existence or even beyond Being, and on the other hand a negative sense of privation, of relative nothingness.”¹⁶ Meister Eckhart: “If I say: ‘God is a being,’ it is not true; he is a being

¹⁰ Parmenides *Frag.* 6.

¹¹ *Chāndogya Upanishad* 6.2.1-2.

¹² *Sophist* 238 c.

¹³ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Al-Futuhat al-makkiyyah (Meccan Revelations)*, cited in Austin’s introduction to his translation of *Fusūs al-hikam* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 40.

¹⁴ Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* (London: Perennial Books, 1987), p. 102. Schuon again: “Nothing is external to absolute Reality; the world is therefore a kind of internal dimension of *Brahman*. But *Brahman* is without relativity; thus the world is a necessary aspect of the absolute necessity of *Brahman*. Put in another way, relativity is an aspect of the Absolute. Relativity, *Māyā*, is the *Shakti* of the Absolute, *Brahman*. If the relative did not exist, the Absolute would not be the Absolute” (*Language of the Self*, p. 28).

¹⁵ Oldmeadow, “Sankara’s Doctrine of *Māyā*,” *Asian Philosophy*, Vol.2, No.2, 1992, p. 140.

¹⁶ Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine* (Wellingborough: The Aquarian Press, 1976), p. 126.

transcending being and a transcending nothingness.”¹⁷ To say “Non-Being” is to qualify this with reference to Being; it may be better to say “Beyond-Being” in an attempt to indicate the principal nature of this. In Kabbalah, Beyond-Being is explained metaphorically as Negative Existence. It is said that there are three veils of “negative existence” that serve as the negative background to the positive universe.¹⁸ This schema is a symbolic attempt to explain the ineffable, and it carries the recognition of its own limitation. Z’ev ben Shimon Halevi, a contemporary exponent of Kabbalah, expresses the development of manifest Existence thus,

God generates, out of the Void of Non-Existence, beyond which is All and Nothing, the first state of Unmanifest Existence. From this World without End, crystallizes a realm of Limitless light, in the midst of which, there emerges a point of no dimensions, called the First Crown. These three states of Unmanifest Existence become the negative background to the positive universe that streams through the primal point of the First Crown to evolve into the archetypal world of Emanations.¹⁹

We find ourselves here at the limit of rational language as Kabbalah attempts to express “the mysterious genesis of the finite in the midst of the infinite.”²⁰

God withdraws Himself into Himself thereby allowing an empty “primordial space” into which “that which is not God” can come into being. The notion of an “empty primordial space” refers to the Divine Void which, from another perspective, is the Divine Plenum. According to the *Mahā-Prajñāpāramitā-Hrdaya*: “Form (*rūpa*) is emptiness (*sūnyatā*), and emptiness is not different from form, nor is form different from emptiness: indeed emptiness is form.”²¹ Again, Nāgārjuna observes that “There is nothing that distinguishes *samsāra* from *nirvāna*.”²² Schuon: “The Bodhisattva, since he realizes

¹⁷ Meister Eckhart, Sermon 83, in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, (tr.) E. Colledge, O.S.A. and B. McGinn (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1981), p. 270.

¹⁸ See MacGregor Mathers (tr.), *The Kabbalah Unveiled* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 20; Halevi, *Adam and the Kabbalistic Tree* (NY: Samuel Weiser, 1991), p. 15.

¹⁹ Halevi, *Adam and the Kabbalistic Tree*, p. 15.

²⁰ Schaya, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, (tr.) N. Pearson (New Jersey: Allen & Unwin 1971), p. 64.

²¹ Cited in Govinda, *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism* (NY: Samuel Weiser, 1969), p. 84.

the 'emptiness' of things, thereby also realizes the 'emptiness' of the *samsāra* as such and at the same time its *nirvānic* quality. If on the one hand all is 'emptiness,' on the other hand all is *nirvāna*, the Buddhist notion of vacuity being at one and the same time negative and positive."²³ In the words of the sixth Chinese patriarch, Hui-neng: "When you hear me speak about void, do not fall into the idea that I mean vacuity.... The illimitable void of the universe is capable of holding myriads of things of various shapes and forms."²⁴

The Divine Nothingness becomes "pregnant with Nothing." This phrase comes from Meister Eckhart who spoke of a "waking dream" that appeared to a man in which "he became pregnant with Nothing like a woman with child, and in that Nothing God was born, He was the fruit of nothing. God was born in Nothing."²⁵ A pertinent reading might say that the "man" is the creative God (the Demiurge) and the waking dream the illusion of the Relative (*Māyā*). The birth of God as Nothing within Nothing echoes the *tsimsum*. From the transcendent Nothingness of God is born the nothing or "non-existence" of *Māyā*. Thus Meister Eckhart refers to all creatures as "nothing,"²⁶ a point that carries two meanings, equally suggestive. On the one hand creatures are "nothing" in that they have no reality in comparison with the ultimate Reality of the Absolute. On the other hand, in the final analysis, creatures have as their substance "Nothingness," creative potentiality, analogous, at the appropriate level, to the Waters of *Genesis*. In turn, the nothingness of *Māyā a priori* manifests the potentiality for God to be born through the extinction of cosmic illusion (the Islamic *fanā*) and the realization of union with the Godhead.²⁷ In the words of the Fathers, "God became man so that man could become God."

²² *Madhyamakakarika*, 25.19-20. As Mircea Eliade remarks, "This does not mean that the world (*samsāra*) and deliverance (*nirvāna*) are 'the same thing'; it means only that they are undifferentiated" (*A History of Religious Ideas Vol.2: From Gautama Buddha to the Triumph of Christianity* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984], p. 225, see §189).

²³ Schuon, *Treasures of Buddhism* (Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1993), p. 139.

²⁴ Goddard, *A Buddhist Bible*, cited in Govinda, *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*, pp. 117-18.

²⁵ Meister Eckhart, Sermon 19, in *Meister Eckhart Sermons & Treatises*, 3 vols., (tr.) Walshe (Dorset: Element Books, 1987, vol. 1), pp. 157-58.

²⁶ Meister Eckhart, Sermon 4, in Walshe, vol. 1, p. 43.

²⁷ In the end, as Ibn al-'Arabī says, "it is not a question of 'becoming one' with God or the Godhead, but rather becoming conscious of the Divine Unity which is" (uncited reference in Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, p. 170).

The kabbalistic doctrine of the Sefirot also employs the language of pregnancy and maternity to describe the *tsimtsum*. Leo Schaya observes that through the effect of *tsimtsum* “the divine fullness withdraws to a certain extent from the ‘lower mother’ [*Malkhut*, the ‘plastic cause’], and awakens creative receptivity in her; the latter, when actualized, takes on the aspect of the void or ‘place of the world,’ ready to receive cosmic manifestation.”²⁸ The withdrawal of the *tsimtsum* awakens receptivity in *Malkhut*; she is here likened to a womb awaiting the seed. Here, Schaya remarks that “all created possibilities spring up from the existential seed which is left behind by divine fullness on its withdrawal—as a luminous ‘residue’ (*reshimu*) in the midst of immanent emptiness.”²⁹ The *reshimu* is a residue of the *En-Sof*, which, as infinite, can never really not penetrate the void except in terms of the “illusion” of the distinction between the Relative and the Absolute. “You should know,” says Meister Eckhart, “God cannot endure that anything should be void or unfilled. And so, even if you think you can’t feel Him and are wholly empty of Him, that is not the case. For if there were anything empty under heaven, whatever it might be, great or small, the heavens would either draw it up to themselves or else, bending down, would fill it themselves.”³⁰

Scholem also recognizes the use of parental symbolism when he sees a parallel between the *reshimu* and the “Sonship” of the Gnostic Basilides (c.124 A.D.).³¹ The *reshimu* is the “child” or “seed” of the Infinite. In the *Zohar* this seed or “first point” is variously expressed by the symbols of a “spark, a drop, a stone.”³² In the Vedantic tradition this is the *bindu*.³³ Lama Anagarika Govinda observes the word “*bindu*” as having many meanings, like “point, dot, zero, drop, germ, seed, semen,” etc..³⁴ Alain Daniélou observes the *bindu* or “Point-Limit” as identical with the Self (*Ātman*).³⁵ The *bindu* is the “determinant of space”

²⁸ Schaya, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, p. 65.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Meister Eckhart, Sermon 4, in Walshe, vol. 1, p. 44.

³¹ Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 261.

³² See for example, *Zohar* I, 86b-87a; I, 231a-231b; II, 222a-222b.

³³ On the *bindu* see Daniélou, *The Gods of India* (New York: Inner Traditions, 1985); in the Tibetan tradition see Lama Govinda, *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*.

³⁴ Lama Govinda, *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*, p. 116.

³⁵ Daniélou, *The Gods of India*, p. 50.

from which manifestation begins.³⁶ This seed is simultaneously the first Point, the Center and the “container” of ontological Existence. The entirety of Universal Existence resides in this seed germ: “Just as the whole nature of the large banyan tree is contained in its tiny seed, so also the whole universe, moving and unmoving, is contained in the word-seed ‘*Rāma*’.”³⁷ Similarly, Sri Ramana Maharshi says: “The entire Universe is condensed in the body, and the entire body in the Heart. Thus the heart is the nucleus of the whole Universe.”³⁸ Again, according to the famous *hadīth qudsī*: “My earth and My heaven contain Me not, but the heart of My faithful servant containeth Me.”³⁹ This idea is expressed beautifully by the third patriarch of the Dhyana school of Chinese Buddhism, Seng-tsan, who says: “The very small is as the very large when boundaries are forgotten; / The very large is as the very small when its outlines are not seen.”⁴⁰ Pseudo-Dionysius quotes Bartholomew in saying that “the Word of God is vast and minuscule.”⁴¹ “He that is the least among you all, he is the greatest.”⁴² To use Pascal’s terminology, this seed or point is both the “infinitely small” and the “infinitely big.”

The seed as “container of the Universe” is found with the Christian symbolism of the “mustard seed.” “The kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the biggest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air can come and shelter in its branches.”⁴³ In Chinese mythology, *Sumeru*, the Cosmic Mountain (*imago mundi*) is also found contained within a mustard seed.⁴⁴ The

³⁶ Daniélou, *The Gods of India*, p. 203.

³⁷ *Rāma-pūrva-tāpinī Upanishad* 2.2-3 [298].

³⁸ Ramana Maharshi, *Talks With Sri Ramana Maharshi Vol.3*, p. 247, cited in Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2000), p. 826.

³⁹ Cited in Ibn al-‘Arabi, *Lubbu-l-Lubb (Kernel of the Kernel)*, (tr.) I. H. Bursevi (Roxburgh: Beshara Publications, 1981), pp. 16, 42; also Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, p. 822.

⁴⁰ Cited in Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, p. 826.

⁴¹ Pseudo-Dionysius, *Mystical Theology* 1000B-C, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1987), p. 13.

⁴² Mt. 18:14, 20:16; Mk. 9:48, 10:31; Lk. 9:48, 18:14.

⁴³ Mt. 13:31-32; Mk. 4:30-32; Lk. 13:18-19. See Guénon, *Man and his Becoming According to the Vedānta* (New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint, 1981), p. 41, n.1; “The Mustard Seed,” *Fundamental Symbols*, Ch. 74.

⁴⁴ *Hsi-yu Chi*, see Yu, *The Journey West* (4 vols.) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), vol. 1, p. 180, & n. 3.

Chāndogya Upanishad describes the *Ātman* in terms familiar to the Christian mustard seed: “This *Ātman*, which dwells in the heart, is smaller than a grain of rice, smaller than a grain of barley, smaller than a grain of mustard, smaller than a grain of millet, smaller than the germ which is in the grain of millet; this *Ātman*, which dwells in the heart, is also greater than the earth [the sphere of gross manifestation], greater than the atmosphere [the sphere of subtle manifestation], greater than the sky [the sphere of formless manifestation], greater than all the worlds together [that is, beyond all manifestation, being the unconditioned].”⁴⁵ René Guénon remarks that the “Divine Principle which resides at the center of the being is represented in the Hindu doctrine as a grain or seed (*dhātu*), as a germ (*bija*), because in a way it is in this being only virtually so long as ‘Union’⁴⁶ has not actually been realized.”⁴⁷

The *tsimtsum* is the “unveiling of God in Himself and by Himself.”⁴⁸ Schuon recognizes several expressions of this kind. Ibn al-‘Arabī: “According to *Risālat al-Ahadiyah*, ‘He [the Absolute; *Brahman*] sent His ipseity [the Self; *Ātman*] by Himself from Himself to Himself’.”⁴⁹ The *tsimtsum* is the withdrawal of Divine Being (*Ousia* or *hyperousia*), the Substance of God, which, by inverse analogy, is the Infinite Essence of Being or Universal Existence.⁵⁰ This withdrawal allows the night of Divine Nothingness in which Cosmic Existence is concentrated at the *reshimu* (which is itself the Infinite Essence of Being) and born,

⁴⁵ *Chāndogya Upanishad* 3.14.3. (The inserted comments are Guénon’s, *Man and his Becoming*, p. 41.)

⁴⁶ Schuon writes: “‘Union’ (*yoga*): the Subject (*Atmā*) becomes object (the Veda, the *Dharma*) in order that the object (the objectivized subject, man) may be able to become the (absolute) Subject” (*Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, p. 109).

⁴⁷ Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, p. 300. Guénon adds this note: “We say ‘virtually’ rather than ‘potentially,’ because there can be nothing potential in the divine order. It is only from the side of the individual being and in relation to it that potentiality can be spoken of in this context. Pure potentiality is the absolute indifferentiation of *materia prima* in the Aristotelian sense, identical to the indistinction of the primordial chaos.”

⁴⁸ Schuon referring to “the great theophany,” *Māyā (Light on the Ancient Worlds)* [London: Perennial Books, 1965], p. 89).

⁴⁹ Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, p. 97, n. 2. The insertions are mine. The *Risālat al-Ahadiyah* or “The Epistle of the Unity” is a treatise probably by Muhyī al-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī.

⁵⁰ The Greek word *ousia*, as with the symbolism of the Aramaic letter *ayn*, connotes the ideas of both “substance” and “essence.” On *ousia* see Burckhardt, *Alchemy* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1974), p. 36, n. 3; on *ayn* see again Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, p. 62, n. 1.

“outside God.” In this manner the *tsimtsum* does, with the midrash it derives from, express the “concentration” of *En-Sof* (the Infinite) at the principal point. Schaya says that “thanks to the divine ‘contraction’ and to the void it brings about in the *Shekhinah*, the expansion of the world takes place.” He continues, “everything living in the immanence of God is a small world created in the image of the macrocosm.⁵¹ it is a void to which life is given by a luminous ‘residue’ [*reshimu*] of the only reality, by a central and divine ‘spark’ that projects onto it the reflection of some eternal archetype.”⁵²

The *reshimu* is the mysterious interface between Transcendence and Immanence, where the term “mysterious” is used according to its root meaning of “silence,” for this is precisely beyond rational language.⁵³ In Kabbalah this “mystery” is also expressed through the Holy of Holies. Again, the *reshimu* is the “spark” (*vünkein*) that lights existence, a symbol favored by Meister Eckhart; it is the “something in the soul” that Meister Eckhart spoke of as being “uncreated” and “not capable of creation,” which is nevertheless the principle of creation.⁵⁴ In Islam this mysterious interface is expressed by *al-barzakh*, the isthmus or mediating principle mentioned in Surah *al-Rahmān* (The Merciful).⁵⁵ Schuon observes of the *barzakh* that it is “a dividing line between two domains [which] line appears, from the standpoint of each side, to belong to the other side.”⁵⁶

The cosmogonic act of *tsimtsum* entails the “retraction” of the Divine Infinity so as to allow creation of “one that is another” or, in other words, the Relative. According to the symbolism of Kabbalah, the Divine Infinity is the Infinite Mercy of God, in Islam, *al-Rahmān*. The *tsimtsum* is the limiting action of Divine Judgment or Severity upon this infinite Mercy. According to the symbolism of the Sefirot, the “lightning strike” of creation passes from *Binah* (the Upper Mother) through *Hesed* (Abraham; Mercy) before progressing

⁵¹ As the Sufis say: “*Al-kawmu insanun kabirun wa-l-insanu kawmun saghir*” (The universe is a big man and man is a little universe).

⁵² Schaya, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, p. 65.

⁵³ Pseudo-Dionysius says: “The best that one can say about God is for one to keep silent out of the wisdom of one’s inward riches” (*Mystical Theology* 1.1).

⁵⁴ See Sermons 13, 48, among others.

⁵⁵ On the *barzakh* see Burckhardt, *Mirror of the Intellect* (Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1987), Ch. 19.

⁵⁶ Schuon, *In the Face of the Absolute* (Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1989), p. 187.

through *Din* (Isaac; Judgment). Mercy and Judgment are balanced in the creative heart of *Tiferet* (Jacob; Beauty). In the Talmud the Creator explains, “If I create the world only with the attribute of mercy, sins will multiply beyond all bounds; if I create it only with the attribute of justice, how can the world last? Behold, I will create it with both attributes; would that it might endure!”⁵⁷

When seen from “above,” that is to say, from the divine perspective, *En-Sof* is concentrated at *Keter*. *Keter*, or the “Crown,” is the transcendent aspect of the Point Limit containing Universal Existence in both its supra-formal (Formless Manifestation) and formal modes. Seen from “below,” the human perspective, this first point is *Tiferet*, the central “Heart” of the Sefirot: the effective and immanent aspect of the Point-Limit. It is through *Tiferet* that all the other sefirot are synthesized to produce onto-cosmological Existence, individual or formal manifestation.

Corresponding to and simultaneous with the withdrawal of the *tsimsum*, the Infinite Essence acts upon virtual Substance actualizing the potentiality of onto-cosmological Existence.⁵⁸ The cosmological emanation into the “night of Nothingness” is the realization or actualization of virtual Substance within the infinitude of Divine Substance. The act of Manifestation is a “limitation,” to speak paradoxically, on the Divine Infinitude. “To say manifestation,” remarks Schuon, “is to say limitation.”⁵⁹ In the final analysis, this “limitation” is merely the illusion of limitation as viewed from the perspective, illusory of itself, of the Relative.

At the ontological level the retraction of the Divine Infinitude and the complementary expansion of the ontological infinitude can be recognized in the principles of the cosmic forces. Schuon refers to “Radiation” and “Contraction”; again, these forces are centrifugal and centripetal movement; evolution⁶⁰ (de-velopment, “unfolding”) and involution (en-velopment, “winding up”); *catabasis* or “going down” and *anabasis* or “going up”; departure into the manifest and return to the non-manifest; the expiration and inspiration (or exhalation and inhalation) of the Divine Breath. In accord with inverse analogy this

⁵⁷ *Genesis Rabba* 22.15.

⁵⁸ This “action” is an “actionless action” as with the *Wu Wei* of the Taoist tradition.

⁵⁹ Schuon, *In the Face of the Absolute*, p. 35.

⁶⁰ The term “evolution” is here used in its strict etymological sense. This has nothing in common with the way the term is employed in modern “progressive” theories.

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is reversed with human breath, for the expansion of the lungs here corresponds to inspiration and the contraction to expiration; likewise the systole and diastole of the heart.

Catabasis and *anabasis* produce, in the language of Taoism, condensations and dissipations. These correspond to Hermetic coagulation and solution (*solve et coagula*).⁶¹ This is the same with the symbolism of “the power to bind” and “the power to loose.”⁶² For individual beings these powers are births and deaths—what Aristotle calls *genesis* and *phthora*, generation and corruption. For worlds, they are what Hindu tradition calls the days of *Brahma: Kalpa* (Day of *Brahmā*) and *Pralaya* (Night of *Brahmā*). As Guénon observes, “at all levels of reality, on the ‘macrocosmic’ as well as ‘microcosmic’ scale, corresponding phases occur in every cycle of existence, for they are the very expression itself of the law that governs the sum total of universal manifestation.”⁶³

Divine Mercy is the eternal flowing forth of the Infinitude of God from God to God. It is this that gives birth to creation and returns creation back to God. This birth and return (Meister Eckhart’s *durchbrechen* and *reditus*) is expressed by the Islamic Divine Names: *al-Rahmān* (The Compassionate, He whose Mercy envelops all things) and *al-Rahīm* (The Merciful, He who saves by His grace).⁶⁴ Ibn al-‘Arabi also describes these as “the mercy of unobligating giving” and “the mercy of binding obligation.”⁶⁵

To return to the analogy of breathe. When one breathes in the lungs expand or “withdraw” as does the air contained within, so to speak. This corresponds in a complementary manner with the influx of “outside” air that expands in filling the lungs. At no time is there an “emptiness” of the lungs. The withdrawal of the “old” air and the expansion of the

⁶¹ The expression *solve et coagula* mentions solution first inasmuch as the Great Work proceeds from manifestation.

⁶² Guénon, *The Great Triad* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1994), p. 47. Guénon observes these “powers” as the properties of the “two keys” common in various traditions. Of these keys one is gold, referring to spiritual authority, and one silver, referring to temporal authority. These are the two authorities united in the figure of Melchizedek in Hebraic tradition. In the Roman tradition these two keys are the attributes of Janus. See Guénon, *ibid.* pp. 47-48; *Fundamental Symbols*, Chapters 20, 39, 60, 70 (“Bonds and Knots”); Coomaraswamy, “*Svayāmatmna: Janua Coeli*”: *Selected Papers Vol. 1, Traditional Art and Symbolism*, (ed.) Roger Lipsey (Princeton University Press, 1989).

⁶³ Guénon, *The Great Triad*, pp. 41-42.

⁶⁴ See Ibn al-‘Arabi, *Fusūs* p. 190.

⁶⁵ Ibn al-‘Arabi, *Fusūs*, p. 189.

“new” air are complementary. In fact there is no substantial difference between these two, both are air; neither is there ever a quantitative difference, there is always the same amount of air in the closed system comprising both the “inside” and the “outside.” This analogy works similarly if we are to talk of the out-breath. When one breathes out the lungs contract like the Infinite contracting on the Point Limit. This corresponds to the “withdrawal” of the lungs from the space they occupy within the cavity of the chest; again, this simultaneously corresponds to the expansion of the outflowing breath. When we speak of the Divine Breath the distinction of “inner” and “outer” is somewhat removed so that we must say that the Infinite Breath withdraws Itself of Itself so that the indefinite Breath can expand within It.

The “indefinite Breath” is the Relative in comparison to the “infinite Breath,” which we may here liken to the Absolute. The Absolute must by definition and on pain of contradiction include the Relative. However this distinction between Absolute and Relative is only legitimate from the perspective of the Relative and then only as an “illusion.” As this is a “distinction” it is necessarily prefigured *in divinis* by the differentiation between the “Absolute as such and the Absolute relativized in view of a dimension of its Infinitude.”⁶⁶ In reality the Absolute is “without a second.” All dualities are complementarities expressing the vicissitudes of a multivalent singularity. In the final analysis the illusory duality of all complementarities dissolves in the Unity of the Absolute.

Christ's *Kenosis*

Let us precede to consider the doctrine of Christ's *kenosis* in light of the doctrine of the *tsimtsum*. As a point of distinction, Philippians 2:6-11 presents a meaning that is both cosmogonic and eschatological. Inasmuch as it is explicit, the doctrine of *tsimtsum* is strictly cosmogonic, although this implies an eschatology given that cosmogony and eschatology are a complementarity of the like discussed above. At the point where the doctrine of *kenosis* reveals its eschatological aspect we will turn briefly to the Islamic doctrine of *fanā* and the Buddhist notion of *nirvāna* as apposite to aiding our understanding

Philippians 2:6-11 is a hymn describing the divine mind of Jesus Christ and telling of Christ's *kenosis*. The end of v.5 asks us to “make our own the mind of Christ Jesus.” Verse 6 continues,

⁶⁶ Schuon, *In the Face of the Absolute*, p. 73.

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Who [Jesus Christ], being in the form of God,
Did not count equality with God
something to be grasped.

“Who, being in the form of God”: this is to say, being as One in the Godhead, the Divine “Form” in the Platonic sense of this term. The New Jerusalem Bible considers that Jesus is here being contrasted with Adam, who was created in the “image” of God. “Form” and “image” are not equivalent for the image is such exactly of the form. Adam is created in the “image” of God; that is the image of the Divine Form, the Godhead, in which Christ, the Son, is One with the Father and the Holy Spirit, as St. John tells us.⁶⁷

The Godhead (*Gottheit*), as Meister Eckhart teaches, is the Absolute, in relation to God (*Gott*), the principle of Universal Existence and, hence, strictly the Relative. The Godhead expresses the Absolute in Its three essential natures as Absolute (Father), Infinite (Son) and Good (the Holy Spirit). The Absolute is by definition Infinite, comprising the Infinite Substance or All-Possibility, which is the Divine Perfection or the Good. The Son is here recognized as the Infinite, inasmuch as Christ is the Word, the Divine Substance. The Holy Spirit is the Good inasmuch as it is the projection of the Absolute into Relativity which achieves the perfection of the Infinite. However, we could equally say that the Son is the Good inasmuch as it is in Him that Relativity is actualized, or “made flesh.” Likewise, the Holy Spirit can be recognized as the Infinite inasmuch as it is the infinite projection of the Absolute. There is no contradiction here: “these three are One.”

When we read that Christ “did not count equality with God something to be grasped,” we should understand “equality” as the state of Absolute Unity, *al-ahadiyah* in Sufism, which is not effected by the Relative, not even as “illusion.” Neither is the Absolute “graspable,” implying as this does a measure or limitation. Yet the Absolute contains the Relative by definition so that the Divine Perfection may be realized. It is in the possibility of the Relative that the Absolute satisfies the possibility of knowing or “grasping” Itself. As Schuon remarks, “God unfolds His possibilities in differentiated mode and He creates man in order to have a witness to this unfolding; in other words, He projects Himself into relativity in order to perceive Himself in relative mode.”⁶⁸

⁶⁷ 1 Jn. 5:7.

⁶⁸ Schuon, *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy* (London: World of Islam Festival Trust, 1976), p. 185.

Verse 7 reads,

But he emptied himself,
Taking the form of a slave,
Becoming as human beings are;
And being in everyway like a human being,

Christ's *kenosis*, his "emptying himself," is the same as the "withdrawal" of the *tsimtsum*. As with the *tsimtsum*, the *kenosis* corresponds to "limitation"—"taking the form of a slave." In Islam the phrase *al-'abd* means "the slave or servant." At its deepest level this designates the creature as dependent on his Lord (*rabb*), where the term "creature" is understood, with Meister Eckhart, as "creaturely existence" or Creation as such.⁶⁹ In Islam this distinction can be seen in that between *al-khalq* (the creature) and *al-haqq* (God).

"Becoming as human beings are" is to say becoming Manifestation or Universal Existence, which has as its prototype Universal Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*), to borrow this term from the language of Ibn al-'Arabi and al-Jīlī; this is also *Adam Kadmon* of the Kabbalah. Being in "everyway like a human being" is to say that Christ satisfies all Formal possibilities, as Supra-Formal Prototype, through to formal manifestation or individual existence, which, at its lowest level, is gross existence or the corporeal body.

Verse 8 reads,

he was humbler yet
even to accepting death, death on the cross.

This is a most remarkable section of this hymn. That Christ "was humbler yet" speaks of a "first" humbling. This "first humbling" is none other than His taking "the form of a slave," for Manifestation is "humble" in comparison with the Great and Infinite Unmanifest that embraces it. In a sense this first "humbling" is itself a "death," a change of state from Unmanifest to Manifestation. But Christ "was humbler yet, even to accepting death"; this is to say that Christ satisfies every

⁶⁹ In the final analysis servant and Lord are one and the same. According to al-Jīlī, "if the servant (*al-'abd*) is elevated by cosmic degrees towards the degrees of the Eternal Reality and he discovers himself, he recognises that the Divine essence is his own essence, so that he really attains the Essence and knows It, as the Prophet expresses it thus: 'He who knows himself (*nafsah*), knows his Lord' (*man 'arafa nafsahu faqad 'arafa rabbahu*)" ('Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī, *al-insān al-kāmil* [Universal Man], [tr.] T. Burckhardt [Gloucester: Beshara Publications, 1983], p. 13).

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possibility of Universal Existence even the possibility of the individual death but more importantly the possibility of Deliverance from this state, which is “death on the cross,” or the reintegration of Universal Existence along the vertical and horizontal *axes* that measure its expansion. Hence Christ is “humbler yet” than the human can possibly and by definition be because He here passes beyond the state that can properly be called “human,” which is to say that He has accepted death to ontological Existence and returned to the Infinite Unmanifest, the Beyond Being.

Verse 9 reads,

And for this God raised him high,
and gave him the name
which is above all other names;

“And for this God raised him high”: literally, “super-raised him.” The New Jerusalem Bible says that this term—“super-raised”—refers to a two-part action, to be raised and then to be super-raised: the resurrection and the ascension respectively. These correspond to the two “deaths” which like all “deaths” are simultaneously “births” to a new state of existence. Considered in this way it can be said that Christ “overcomes” each death because he recognizes it as it is a “birth.” Thus the resurrection corresponds to the overcoming of the death of individual existence; this is the full achievement by man in all his potentialities, the Taoist’s “True Man” (*chen jen*). The ascension corresponds to the overcoming of the death of Universal Existence as such; the achievement by man of all his possibilities, the Taoist’s “Transcendent Man” (*chün jen*). The “True Man” is someone who has attained to the fullness of the human state, who is raised to the highest level of this state. But man also contains the possibility of transcending this state and strictly speaking ceasing to be human as such, this is “Transcendent Man,” who is super-raised, or even better, supra-raised, beyond the human state. This distinction might be helpfully likened to that in the Islamic tradition between *al-wāhidīyah*, Unicity, and *al-ahadiyah*, the Supreme Unity. The attainment of “True Man” corresponds to Christ’s realization of his being God. This distinction of True Man and Transcendent Man, who might equally here be called “True God,” is resolved, in a certain sense, in the mystery of the *bar-zakh* which, as Schuon remarks, has its archetype in this “half-divine, half-cosmic frontier separating, and in another sense uniting, Manifestation and the Principle”; he continues: “it is the ‘Divine Spirit’ (*Rūh*) which, seen ‘from above’ is manifestation, and seen ‘from below’ is

Principle. Consequently, it is *Māyā* in both its aspects; the same thing appears, in a certain manner, in the Christian expression 'true man and true God'.⁷⁰

Christ's "acceptance of death" corresponds with the Islamic doctrine of *al-fanā* (extinction or evanescence). In the language of the Sufis *al-fanā* designates, "the extinction of individual limitation in the state of Union with God."⁷¹ The doctrine of *al-fanā* is surpassed, so to speak, by *fanā ul-fanā*, the "extinction of extinction," and here we have the two levels of "acceptance of death" that correspond to True Man and Transcendent Man, to Christ's Resurrection and Ascension. Meister Eckhart talks of the "negation of negation": "Unity is the negation of negation. All creatures carry a negation in themselves; one denies that it is the other. . . . But God has negation of negation; he is one and denies every other, for outside God there is nothing."⁷²

This distinction is again that which exists in the Buddhist tradition between *nirvāna* and *parinirvāna*. Schuon says of this: "*Nirvāna* is extinction in relation to the cosmos, and *parinirvāna* in relation to Being; *nirvāna* is thus identified with Being, according to a conception that is more initiatory than properly metaphysical, since a 'principle' is here represented as a 'state'; and *parinirvāna* is identified with Non-Being, that is to say with the divine 'Quiddity' which, according to Greek theology, 'envelops' Being, and which according to Sufism, 'erases all predicates' (*munqat al-isharat*)."⁷³ It is in this identification between *nirvāna* and Being, where this term is equally the "Nothingness" that Meister Eckhart spoke of in the positive sense, that we find again the identification of *nirvāna* and *samsāra*.

This notion of the "extinction of extinction" giving rise to the affirmation of Reality finds its expression in the Islamic tradition in the doctrine of *baqa* or subsistence. Burckhardt observes this as designating in Sufism the "spiritual state of the subsistence outside all form, that is to say the reintegration in the Spirit or even in the pure Being."⁷⁴ He further comments that *baqa* is the "opposite" to *fanā*. Like all opposites these are complementary, which is to see that the

⁷⁰ Schuon, *In the Face of the Absolute*, p. 187, n. 1.

⁷¹ Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, p. 116.

⁷² Cited in Fox, *Breakthrough: Meister Eckhart's Creation Spirituality in New Translation* (NY: Image Books, 1980), p. 190.

⁷³ Schuon, *Treasures of Buddhism*, p. 85, n. 5.

⁷⁴ Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, p. 116.

extinction of the individual or *al-fanā* corresponds correlatively with the “birth” of pure Being. In his *Mathnawi*, Jalal al-Dīn Rūmī writes: “Such a nonexistent as has gone out of his own ‘self’ is verily existent *par excellence*, he is exalted and weighty. He is extinct in relation to his attributes, which are merged into the divine attributes; but in this self annihilation (*fanā*), he has attained eternity (*baqa*).”⁷⁵ Again, Schuon: “After ‘extinction,’ or rather correlatively with it, comes ‘permanence’ (*baqa*): this is the reintegration of the saint into his eternal Prototype, a given divine Name, and thereby into God; the term ‘permanence’ shows that the state of a being reintegrated into God is as positive as possible.”⁷⁶ Here the doctrine of *tsimtsum*, Christ’s *kenosis*, and the complementary doctrines of *al-fanā* and *baqa* meet in a perfect harmony. Of course, in speaking of the “birth” of pure Being we are not talking of a “creation” of pure Being for pure Being is none other than the principle of Creation; it is the transcendent and uncreated Essence.

In His “return” to the uncreated Essence Christ achieves the entelechy of Universal Existence, which is that it must *be* in its fullness to satisfy the All-Possibility. In His “re-union” with the Godhead Christ “returns” to the Divine Form, the Archetypal Name. Of course this is strictly speaking not a “re-union” or a “return” but rather simply Union, for Christ has never left the Godhead, which is Absolute and Transcendent and beyond all concept of change as such. In this Union Christ is the Divine Name “which is the Name above all other names,” the Form of the forms, or what Islam refers to as the Mother of the Book (*umm al-kitāb*).⁷⁷ In the Platonic language this is “the Good,” which is to recognize Christ the Son as considered above.

Verse 10 reads,

⁷⁵ Jalal-ud-din Rumi, *Mathnawi* 3.427-31 (tr.) Gupta (Agra: M.G. Publishers), Vol.3, 1995. Professor Gupta’s translation offers an insight into Rumi with some comparison to Hindu mystical literature. Unfortunately Gupta’s referencing differs from Nicholson’s 1935-1940 edition (most often referenced in English). I am unable to cross reference these translations but will add by way of an aid that this section comes from the story of the mosque of Aqsa and the growth of the algarroba herb there.

⁷⁶ Schuon, *Treasures of Buddhism*, pp. 88-89.

⁷⁷ “Symbolized by the ink well which contains in a state of indifferentiation the letters (*al-huruf*) of existence, or the Letters of the sacred Book. ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī establishes an analogy between the ‘Mother of the Book’ and the Christian symbolism of the Virgin, mother of Christ, He who is ‘Word of Allah’” (‘Abd al-Karīm al-al-Jīlī, *al-insān al-kāmil*, p. 16, n. 44).

so that all beings
in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld,
should bend the knee in the name of Jesus.

This verse echoes Is. 45:23: "All shall bend the knee to me." In Is. 45:21 Yahweh declares His absolute Unity: "There is no other god, except me, no saving God, no Savior except me!" Christ is the Form and reintegration, the "Alpha and Omega," of Universal Existence; all beings in the three cosmic realms (cf. Rv. 5): heaven, earth, and underworld. These are the three cosmic reflections of the Trinitarian Godhead that is itself One. In the Name "which is above all names" Universal Existence mirrors its transcendent prototype in Unity, "all beings" or Being as such, which is three, heaven, earth and underworld, without distinction. Yet from the perspective of Manifestation distinction exists necessarily, thus Manifestation recognizes its contingency in the "bending of the knee." At a deeper level this phrase, echoing Is. 45:23 and in turn Gn. 41:43, derives from the word *bārak* ("knee") which carries the implication of "to bless";⁷⁸ thus Universal Existence is blessed "in the name of Jesus," which is to say that its essential being is consecrated, in the sense of being "set apart as sacred," in the Name of Jesus. Again, this is to say that Universal Existence is "set apart" as Relative.

Verse 11 reads,

and that every tongue should acknowledge
Jesus Christ as Lord
to the glory of God the Father.

"Every tongue" is as if to say each and every individual being inasmuch as each being is a reflection of the Prototypal Word, thus each act of creation, analogous to the act of speaking, at any level imitates the Cosmogony through Christ the Word. Universal Existence "acknowledges" Christ as Lord in that it expresses the fullness, the "glory" of the Infinitude of God the Father. Again, the "glory of God" is a cognomen of the *Shekhinah*, the Divine Immanence, so as to say that Christ as the Form and Principle is both identical with and expressed

⁷⁸ We note the Islamic term *al-barakah*, the blessing or spiritual influence, and mention by way of passing the similarity here to the word *barzakh*, inasmuch as it is precisely in the mystery of the isthmus that Existence is "blessed" with its very being.

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through the *Shekhinah*. This sense is given to the text in the Vulgate that reads, “in the glory of God the Father.” In the last analysis the “glory” of the Father is the Infinitude of the Absolute achieved, so to speak, in the “mystery” of the Relative, through the *kenosis* of Christ.

CHAPTER 3

The Incantation of the Griffin (Simurgh) and the Cry of the Eagle Islam and the Native American tradition¹

Seyyed Hossein Nasr

The incantation of the Simurgh awakens those who are asleep and its abode is on the cosmic mountain (Qāf). Its incantation reaches everyone but few listen to it. Everyone is with it and yet the majority are without it. . . . This Simurgh flies without moving and takes to the air without wings, and approaches without traversing distances. All forms issue from it but it itself is formless. Its nest is in the East but the West is not deprived of it.²

Dancers wear and use whistles made of the wingbone of the eagle to which eagle plumes are attached. In recreating the cry of the eagle to the powerful rhythm of song, dance and drum, the Eagle is present in voice and being, man's vital breath is united with the essence of sun and life. Through such ritual use of the sacred form man becomes Eagle, and the eagle in his plumes is the Sun.³

When one journeys through the Western lands of America from Arizona and New Mexico to Montana, one encounters natural scenery very much reminiscent of certain areas of the Islamic world, especially Morocco in the West and the area stretching from Persia and Afghanistan to Central Asia in the East. And when one beholds the cultural heritage and practices of the Northern Plains Indians who were nomads with corresponding nomadic groups in the Islamic world, similarities become even more striking. One need only think of the magic of a galloping "warrior" on horseback in the two worlds in question and the qualities of valor, heroism and resignation to the

¹ This essay is dedicated to Joseph Epes Brown.

² Suhrawardī, *Risāla-yi safr-i Simurgh* in his *Oeuvres philosophiques et mystiques*, Vol. II, ed. S.H. Nasr (Tehran, 1977), p. 315 of the Persian text. Trans. S.H. Nasr.

³ Joseph E. Brown, "Sun Dance" in D.M. Dooling and P. Jordan Smith (eds.), *I Became a Part of It: Sacred Dimensions of Native American Life* (San Francisco, Harper, 1989, p. 244).

Divine Will which characterizes both types. What is at issue here is not only similar geographical and anthropological conditions, but spiritual principles belonging to two different universes of meaning which nevertheless manifest remarkable points of congruence and confluence. Those two worlds, that of Islam and the Native American tradition, especially of the Plains, were to meet in the thought, life and the very being of the noble scholar, Joseph Epes Brown. Our very first impression of him in Sedona, Arizona in the 1950s could have had as easily for its background the Atlas Mountains as the hills of northern Arizona. And through forty years of close association and friendship we have been witness to the meeting of these two worlds, so rarely studied in a comparative way, in the writings and lifestyle of Joseph Brown who has made these worlds his spiritual home. Therefore, as a humble tribute to him the following brief treatment of some of the remarkable similarities and correspondences between Islam and the American Indian tradition are set forth.

The first essential attribute shared by the two worlds in question, and being the cause of many similarities between them, is primordiality. The Native American tradition, a branch of Shamanism, possesses an undeniable primordial character and revives in the soul of many who have become familiar with it the deep nostalgia for the primordial nature we all carry within ourselves but which has become covered by layers of the historical existence of humanity during later periods of the cosmic cycle. Islam likewise claims for itself not only finality in the cycles of revelation but also primordiality. It is an assertion of the Truth that was at the beginning and shall always be. It returns man to the condition of primordiality (*al-fitrah*) and appeals to the primordial nature within us. It is this perspective that makes each man a priest in both traditions and allows him to stand in ritual prayer directly before God without any priestly intermediary. It is also this attribute which, in both traditions, bestows upon nature its primordial function of both theophany and sanctuary as we see in the use of virgin nature as a temple by Native Americans and as a mosque in Islam.

The attribute of primordiality which rests upon the oneness of the Principle (*tawhīd* in Islam) and its ineffable nature, hence its transcendence beyond any earthly form which would “incorporate” or “incarnate” it, is also the origin of the aniconic nature of the sacred art of Islam and that of the Plains Indians. In both cases there is an abhorrence of imprisoning the Spirit in any earthly “embodiment” and hence the development of an art form in which the Spirit is “represented” indirectly through indication and allusion rather than as an

icon. Here the nomadic spirit of the Plains Indians and the “spiritual nomadism” which characterizes the Islamic perspective as such and manifests itself so directly in Islamic art also come into play and possess a central role, for while aniconism characterizes all Islamic art, in the Native American world, it is only among the nomadic elements that the aniconic nature of their sacred art is central and so clearly visible.

There are also remarkable similarities in certain aspects of the cosmology of the two traditions concerning space and geometry. The six cardinal points of space play a major role in many Native American cosmologies and also sacred rites as is well known. But not everyone is aware of the esoteric Islamic doctrines concerning the Universal Man whose full manifestation in the Islamic world is the Prophet of Islam whose being embraces the breadth (*'ard*) and length (*tūl*) as well as depth (*'umq*) of space which symbolizes and corresponds to all the degrees of being. This “fullness” of the “dimensions of space” possessed in a pre-eminent fashion within the inner reality of the Prophet presents striking parallels to the significance of the dimensions of space and the cardinal points in the Native American tradition. There are profound correspondences between the two understandings of space as the sacred locus for the presence of the Spirit, correspondences which, however, are very subtle and cannot be easily detected by an outward study of the subject.

This similarity in the understanding of the nature of space underlies the remarkable parallels in the use of geometry, the science of space par excellence, in the two traditions. Although sacred geometry is foundational to all sacred art and architecture, its visible use is most evident in the two traditions in question. Geometric patterns are manifest wherever there is authentic Islamic art. The same can also be said of the art of the Plains Indians. Furthermore, there are certain geometric patterns, some quite complicated, which are common to the two worlds without there being any possibility of historical borrowing despite the presence of Islamic patterns in Spanish art and architecture in the Americas since the 16th century. The similarities emanate in fact from the emulation and manifestation of common archetypes rather than historical borrowing and point to visions of reality which share certain basic features.

A case of special interest is the circle whose significance among followers of the Native American tradition has been recorded by Joseph Brown as well as many other scholars. The “Indians” were known to sit in a circle especially during rituals and continue to do so to this

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day while circles adorn their art. How remarkable it is that the same situation is to be found in the Islamic world. Not only is the circle or sphere, symbol of Heaven, so evident in the domes of mosques, but the Sufis also always sit in a circle (*halqah*) when they assemble to perform their prayers and invocations in gathering (*majlis*). In fact the ensemble of Sufis and the gathering in which invocation is performed is often called *halqat al-dhikr* (literally, the circle of invocation) and those who become Sufis are often said to have joined the *halqah* of the Sufis. This is also true of traditional Islamic education in general where students assemble in a circle at the feet of the master who usually sits on a pedestal (*kursi*). Many other parallels and correspondences exist to which one could point, but this primary use of the circle in both ritual and art as well as education suffices to indicate the primary significance of geometry and also sometimes the remarkably similar use of specific geometric forms in the two traditions in question.

To go back to cosmology, it needs to be mentioned that not only are there cosmological resemblances as far as the structure of space is concerned, but that also the view of the cosmos or the world of nature in Islam and the Native American tradition presents striking similarities. As already stated above, in both religions virgin nature is itself the place of worship, the cathedral in which the numinous and the sacred are experienced. Despite differences arising from the metaphysics underlying Islam, in both cases the sense of seeing in phenomena the “signs” of the Spirit or of God are very much present. The Native Americans see in each animal or plant the manifestation of a Divine Power while according to the Quran the phenomena of nature are the “signs of God” (*āyat Allāh*). Both traditions see in nature a reality to be deciphered and related to a meaning which outward forms at once veil and reveal or to use an Islamic image, a book to be “read” and interpreted. It is not accidental that both Islam, especially Sufism, and the Native American tradition have been accused of following “nature mysticism” by a number of Orientalists on the one hand and anthropologists as well as Christian missionaries on the other. Proximity to nature and love for nature in a religious and theological sense bind traditional Islam and the Native American tradition in a unifying vision of the world of nature within whose bosom they both lived in harmony for so many centuries and for the Native Americans even millennia.

Also, despite certain differences in perspective, both traditions see in natural forms, as well as sacred art created by man, not the embodiment of the Spirit but the loci of its presence. They both oppose

incorporating the Spirit and imprisoning it in forms while being aware of Its ubiquitous presence in the world of nature as well as the traditional and sacred arts created by man, whether it be the geometric patterns of a mosque or of a sand painting. Both the attitude towards nature and the aniconic character of the Islamic tradition as well as that of Plains Indians, to which reference has been already made, emanate from this basic religious and theological attitude toward the relation between the Spirit and any earthly form which would seek to incorporate it.

Strangely enough, despite this basic similarity, this principle manifested itself in very different ways in the two traditions in question. In Islam the Truth became revealed in a book, the Noble Quran, and writing became a basic element of Islamic civilization which produced probably more books than any other civilization before the invention of modern printing. In contrast, the Plains Indians and most other tribes of North America produced no written words. The truth remained oral and the power of the spoken word supreme.

This contrast is ameliorated, however, if one turns one's attention to the oral aspect of the Islamic heritage. First of all, among the nomads in the Islamic world, what remained central was the spoken rather than the written word. And in this context one must not forget that the Noble Quran itself was first of all a sonoral revelation before it was written in book form and that still today it is experienced by the great majority of Muslims through the ear rather than the eye. Secondly, all Muslims know parts of the Quran by heart and many who are called *huffāz* (plural of *hāfīz* meaning literally, memorizer) know the whole of it. This is also true of much of the *Hadīth* or traditions of the Prophet as well as didactic, epic and mystical poetry, stories, etc. In the actual practice of the religion, therefore, there is a great deal of reliance upon the spoken word which is very reminiscent of the Native American world. Thirdly, in both traditions the most essential and esoteric teachings remain always orally transmitted from master to student, or from breast to breast as Muslims say.

This is certainly well documented in the Native American case and the *Sacred Pipe* recorded by Joseph Brown is itself proof of this truth. As for Islam, despite the disregard of most Orientalists for the spoken word, the oral tradition continues very strongly to this day not only in Sufism but also in Islamic metaphysics and philosophy. Despite all that Muslims have written, there remains much that continues to be unwritten and is transmitted only orally, especially what concerns the spiritual life, Sufi practices, esoteric doctrines and certain principles

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and techniques of the traditional arts. Despite the “bookish” nature of Islamic civilization, therefore, one sees here again remarkable similarities in respect for the word, the use of memory and oral means of transmission of what is most central and essential in the two traditions in question.

Despite the likely encounter of the followers of North and Central American Native religions and Muslims in the form of *moriscos* in the 16th and 17th centuries, it was only in the later part of the 20th century that the two traditions met fully for the first time. A number of significant Native American leaders have become aware of Islam and its civilizations, while within the Islamic world there is some interest for the religion and art of the Native Americans. There are now pow-wows in Dar al-islām in Abiquiu, New Mexico and shops in Santa Fe sell objects of Islamic art alongside Native American ones while some of the profoundest expositions of Native American metaphysics, cosmology and art have come from the pen of Frithjof Schuon, so well known for his peerless expositions of Islam in general and Sufism in particular.

But it was perhaps first of all in the mind and soul of Joseph Brown where these two worlds actually met on the experiential level. His whole life has been immersed in studying and teaching about the Native American tradition while his spiritual home was and remains Islam and he spent in fact some time living in Morocco. Something of the very life of North African Islam and that of the Plains Indians became fused and wed together in his soul as well as thought. Even his love and one might say his passion for horses have united the two worlds together for him, for while teaching at the University of Montana and living in the center of the natural world of the Plains Indians he has remained devoted to horses. But he has not raised just any horses that have come along. Rather, his love has been for Arabian horses for which he has become known in the area. To raise Arabian horses in the middle of an idyllic landscape still reverberating with the spiritual presence of the Native Americans characterizes on the external and practical plane this wedding between the two worlds of Islam and the Native American tradition in the mind and soul of Joseph Brown.

As for the intellectual plane, here again it can be stated that the penetrating and spiritually fecund studies that he has made during the past four decades of the traditional life, thought, and art of the Native Americans has owed more than one can say to traditional doctrines in general and Islamic spirituality and intellectuality in particular. In

his books and essays the perceptive reader will be able to observe a harmonious marriage between the spiritual visions of the two worlds in question. For these very reasons one must consider Joseph Brown as pioneer in not only making available the spiritual heritage of the Native American world, but also in bringing the Islamic and the Native American traditions together in a harmony which he has sought to cultivate all his life both within himself and in the immediate world around him. Both future students of the Native American tradition and all those interested in the encounter between Islam and that tradition must always remain grateful to the pioneering work of Joseph Brown, that gentle and perspicacious scholar in quest of the Spirit since his youth, a scholar in whose being the two traditions have met in such a remarkably meaningful and fruitful manner.

CHAPTER 4

What They Have That We Lack A tribute to the Native Americans via Joseph Epes Brown

Huston Smith

My title derives from the justly famous tribute to the Native Americans by John Collier, one time United States Commissioner of Indian Affairs, which begins, "They had what the world has lost. . . ." The losses that Collier mentions are "reverence and passion for human personality, and for the earth and its web of life." Accepting them as genuine losses, I shall build on them to target three other losses our civilization has suffered. We are less clear in our values, which is to say less sure as to what is important in life. We are less able to see the infinite in the finite, the transcendent in the immanent. And we have lost our way metaphysically. Because my meditation on these three impoverishments is offered as a tribute to Joseph Brown, I shall begin with the story of how we met, for the circumstances were so bizarre as to suggest that more than chance was at work.

The year was 1970 and my wife and I were passing through Stockholm where the first bean-bag chair we had seen caught our eyes and we bought it. On our way back to our hotel, swaying from a strap in a crowded subway, I felt foolish carrying our shapeless purchase over my shoulder like Santa's pack, and was remarking to my wife that I was glad we were abroad and incognito when a face emerged from the crowd and ventured, softly, "Would you be Huston Smith?" It was Joseph Brown who had recognized me from my filmed lectures on "The Religions of Man" which he had showed to his classes. Things moved rapidly, and before we parted we had accepted Joseph and his wife Eleanita's invitation to have supper with them the following day, the last before our flight left Sweden.

It was an unforgettable evening. The Browns were in Stockholm for Joseph to complete his doctoral dissertation under Ake Hulthkrantz, the world's foremost authority on the Native Americans, and their apartment walls were covered with larger-than-life photographs of archetypal Indian faces. What was remarkable, though, was how rapidly our conversation plunged to things that matter most. When they

learned that our next stop was to be London, Joseph directed me to Martin Lings of the British Museum who proved to be an important link to the Traditionalist outlook of René Guénon, A. K. Coomaraswamy, and Frithjof Schuon that was beginning to impress me as true. And on the strength of the friendship that was forged that evening, Joseph became my teacher in showing me the enduring importance of the Native Americans and other primal peoples in the religious odyssey of humankind.

From the many things I have learned from those people, I turn now to the first of the three virtues I see them as having retained, and we let partially slip. I say partially because I do not want to romanticize or traffic in disjunctions. Trade-offs are involved at every point.

1. Knowing What is Important

I am not an anthropologist, and as my professional schooling occurred before mid-century, I was taught to think that myths are childish in comparison with systematically articulated metaphysics, and that “primitive” religions—the adjective explicitly intended to be pejorative—were and remain inferior to the historical ones that command written texts and a cumulative tradition. Meeting Joseph Brown rescued me from those prejudices. That shortly after meeting him I moved from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to Syracuse University solidified the change in my thinking, for I then found myself within five miles of the Iroquois Long House. It was not without amazement that I came to know the residents of the Onondaga Reservation—Chief Shenandoah, Audrey Shenandoah and Oren Lyons among them. Reading Joseph Brown’s writings paralleled my visits to their reservation, and together the two shattered mental stockades, permitting new insights to erupt.

The insight that concerns me in this first section of my remarks is the loss that writing inflicts. Before I met Joseph, A. K. Coomaraswamy’s *The Bugbear of Literacy* had already shown me that education cannot be equated with book-learning;¹ the great civilizations of the past were not dependent on the ability to read and write. Craftsmen—the builders of temples, mosques and churches; the sculptors of Konorak and of Chartres—were not literate, and oral tradition carried poetry and sacred knowledge for millennia before books appeared. Coomaraswamy also brought out the toll writing takes on our memories.

¹ Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *The Bugbear of Literacy* (Pates Manor, Bedford, Middlesex, England: Perennial Books Ltd., 1949/1979).

Literate peoples grow lax in recall; they do not require much from their memories, for books and manuals are at hand to fill in the blanks. Lacking those resources, unlettered peoples make libraries of their minds. Their memories are legendary.

As I say, those two validations of orality—both memory and learning flourish in its precincts—were in place before I met Joseph Brown; but it was not until I came to the Native Americans through him that I realized that I needed to add a chapter on the primal religions to *The Religions of Man*, now titled *The World's Religions*.² It was while writing that chapter that it dawned on me that orality (which I shall use here to mean exclusive orality; speech which is not supplemented by writing) carries with it another blessing that is, if anything, more important than having a rich memory. Functioning something like a gyroscope, orality keeps life on keel by insuring that priorities and proportionalities are not lost sight of. Somewhere in his writings Frithjof Schuon defines intelligence exactly this way, as the sense of priorities and proportionalities. By this definition, primal peoples can be ignorant of many things, but they are rarely stupid.

Imagine a tribe, gathered around its campfire at the close of the day. Everything that its ancestors learned arduously through trial and error, from which herbs heal to stirring legends that give meaning and orientation to their lives, is preserved in their collective memory, and there only. It stands to reason that trivia would not long survive in that confine, for it would preempt space that was needed for the things that needed to be remembered.

Libraries lack this winnowing device. Natural selection, the survival of the fittest, doesn't enter its workings, for space permits virtually everything to survive, important or not. Where a page is a page, a book a book, the issue of quality scarcely arises.

To personalize this point: I happen to enjoy the services of one of the great library systems in the world, that of the University of California. Thinking back to the guided tour that brought me into its orbit, I find that I still remember the statement with which the leader of the tour welcomed us. "When you enter this library looking for a book," she said, "think: it's here. It may take us a while to locate it, but it's here." As I learned how the immense holdings of the local library locked into comparable libraries around the world through Internet and inter-library loan, I found myself believing her.

² Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (Harper San Francisco, 1991).

I do not discount the help and pleasure that accrued from having recorded human history at one's fingertips. It is the trade-off it entails that the Native Americans have taught me. When I step out of the elevator onto a floor of my university's library, I am greeted in effect by arrows directing me to its numerous corridors: history here, chemistry there, a bewildering array. There is no arrow that reads "importance," much less "wisdom." It's more like, "Good luck, folks. From here on out you're on your own."

The burden this places on individuals is enormous; whether it is supportable remains to be seen. T. S. Eliot put my point simply.

Where is the knowledge that is lost in information?

Where is the wisdom that is lost in knowledge?

We are inundated by information today, to the point of drowning in it. When the British Broadcasting Company first went on the air, the newsroom policy on a no-news day was simply to say there was no news and play classical music. Is there a newsroom in the world that has the restraint to honor such a policy today? Alvin Toffler warned us in *Future Shock* a quarter century ago that information overload was already "pressing the limits of human adaptability," but all he offered by way of counsel was that we develop a consciousness that is capable of adapting to changes that look like they are going to keep on accelerating.³

That advice is no match for the problem we face, and it may take a breakdown of sorts to drive that fact home. More than any other breakthrough, it is the computer that has increased the quantity of information that can be saved, retrieved, and transferred. It was assumed that this increase would raise our industrial efficiency, but the country is still waiting for the big payoff that electronic boosters keep promising. Many experts are now concluding that for all their power, computers may be costing U. S. companies tens of billions of dollars a year in downtime, maintenance and training costs, useless game playing, and—the relevant point here—information overload. As Yale economist and Nobel laureate Robert Solow has noted, "You can see the computer age everywhere but in the productivity statistics."⁴ From 1950 to 1973, when computers were still a novelty, the

³ Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Random House, 1970).

⁴ The San Francisco Chronicle, July 1995, p. 1.

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U. S. economy enjoyed one of the greatest economic booms in its history. Since then, as computers have taken over nearly every desk in the land, the rate of productivity growth has mysteriously plummeted. Many experts believe that computers may be more the cause of the problem than the key to its solution.

If information overload can impair industrial efficiency, what about life efficiency; which is to say, the ability to avoid squandering life on frivolous ends? The great orienting myths that primal peoples rehearse endlessly, and carry constantly in their hearts and heads, protect them from this danger.

Something that Claude Levi-Strauss observed relates to this. For an anthropologist, he took surprisingly little interest in what myths meant to the peoples who lived by them. Deeming science the noblest human pursuit, he wanted to parallel what Noam Chomsky was doing in linguistics and put anthropology, too, in the service of science's efforts to discover how the mind works. Artificial intelligence, he believed, was on the right track in assuming that the mind works like a computer—through binary, on-off flip-flops—and Levi-Strauss saw himself as corroborating that hypothesis by showing (as in *The Raw and the Cooked*) that myths proceed binarily, from a forked starting point. In the course of his investigations, though, he picked up something that is important. The primitive mind, he reported, assumes that you do not understand anything unless you understand everything, whereas science proceeds in the opposite manner, from part to whole.⁵ Levi-Strauss considered the scientific approach superior to the mythic,⁶ whereas I find them complementary and equally important.

⁵ With holists ranged against atomists, current epistemologists are vigorously disputing which of these assumptions best captures the way meaning works. The most uncompromising advocate of atomism is M. I. T.'s Jerry Fodor, for whom holism has become what Carthage must have been to Cato, as a reviewer of his two books attacking the position remarks (see *The Journal of Philosophy*, X/1995, pp. 330-44). When we couple to this the fact that Fodor is uncompromising in insisting that psychology is an empirical science, we find this thus illustrating Levi-Strauss' point that science (which progresses through discrete factual discoveries) is the principal sponsor of the atomistic approach to knowledge.

⁶ "The totalitarian ambition of the savage mind . . . does not succeed. We are able, through scientific thinking, to achieve mastery over nature . . . while myth is unsuccessful in giving man more material power over the environment. It gives man the illusion that he can understand the universe, [but] it is, of course, only an illusion" (Claude Levi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning*, p. 17). That the foremost anthropologist of recent times acknowledges that "mastery over nature" and "material power over the environment" are his highest values, confirms the claim of this first section of this essay. We are confused as to what is important.

2. Symbolic Minds

The item I wrote just before turning to this tribute to Joseph chanced to be the Foreword to a collection of excerpts from Emanuel Swedenborg's writings,⁷ and as I was already thinking ahead to the present piece when I came upon this passage, I was struck by its relevance to this second point I shall be making.

I have learned from heaven [Swedenborg wrote] that the earliest people had direct revelation, because their more inward reaches were turned toward heaven; and that, as a result, there was a union of the Lord with the human race then. But as time passed, there was not this kind of direct revelation but an indirect one through correspondences. All their divine worship consisted of correspondences, so we call the churches of that era representative churches. They knew what correspondence was and what representation was, and they knew that everything on earth was responsive to spiritual things in heaven and portrayed them. So natural things served as means of thinking spiritually. . . . The earliest people saw some image of and reference to the Lord's kingdom in absolutely everything—in mountains, hills, plains, and valleys, in gardens, groves, and forests, in rivers and lakes, in fields, and crops, in all kinds of trees, in all kinds of animals as well, in the luminaries of the sky.

Swedenborg proceeds to confirm this way of seeing the world by citing his own visionary experience.

I have been taught by an abundance of experience that there is not the slightest thing in the natural world, in its three kingdoms, that does not portray something in the spiritual world or that does not have something there to which it is responsive.

From there he continues:

After knowledge of correspondences and representations had been forgotten, the Word was written, in which all the words and their meanings were correspondences, containing in this way a spiritual or inner meaning.⁸

⁷ George F. Dole, *A Thoughtful Soul* (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 1995).

⁸ Emanuel Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell*, p. 306; *Arcana Coelestia* 1 2722:5.

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Paraphrasing these three stages into which Swedenborg divides religion: In the first stage, nature is transparent to the divine and is seen as divine without remainder, so no divinity apart from it is sought. Presumably this first stage is something like the natural religion of early childhood, when (as a poet has said) “heaven and a splendorous earth were one,” before the child’s clear eye is clouded over by ideas and opinions, preconceptions and abstractions. In the second stage, nature loses this transparency, but remains (we might say) translucent. Divinity continues to shine through mountains, groves, and springs, but those objects now *ex-ist*—“stand out apart from” their source—in having acquired a certain objectivity of their own. This distancing obscures their connectedness with their divine source, and that connectedness needs to be recovered through symbolism: Swedenborg’s representations and correspondences. If we take light as our example, at some level of their awareness, people in this second stage recognize that its power to enable us to discern things by seeing them is a prolongation of the divine intelligence. Water tokens the divine purity and nurturance, flowers its beauty, etc., etc., world without end.

The first stage requires no mental processing. In the second, some mediation is needed, but correspondences (which serve that function) are so obvious that little articulation is called for. In Swedenborg’s third stage, this ceases to be the case. Opaqueness—the fall into matter—has proceeded to the point where language and thought are needed to state explicitly what earlier intelligence took for granted: that rocks and trees are not self-subsistent in the way optics by itself presents them. It now needs to be said that nature carries the signature of the divine—not only nature as a whole, but its parts, each of which betokens one of the ninety-nine beautiful names of Allah, as Muslims put the matter.

Generalizing from this threefold division, it seems appropriate to credit primal peoples with prolonging the second period into our own more materialistic age. To invoke Coomaraswamy again, when he came to the United States to become director of the Oriental Section of Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts, the traditional lore of the American Indians deeply moved him, for he saw in these much persecuted remnants of the indigenous population of the continent an organic intelligence that was still able to read the open book of nature as others read their written scriptures. His South Asian heritage led him to associate the Native Americans’ metaphysical insight—their capacity to see the world and everything within it as a living revelation of the Great Spirit—with Vedic times in his own heritage. Without exag-

generation, he felt, he could speak of their wisdom as belonging to an earlier *yuga* which somehow had persisted into these later times, an extension that carried a message of hope to a forgetful and much tormented world. The recognition that every plant, every insect, stones even, participate in the *dharma* and need to be treated, not as spoils for human appetites, but as companions in terms both of origin and ultimate destiny, conditioned all the Native Americans' ideas of what is right and wrong. What a happier world this would be, Coomaraswamy concluded, if such ideas had not been marginalized.⁹

3. Metaphysical Accuracy

"Strictly speaking," Frithjof Schuon has written, "there is but one sole philosophy, the *Sophia Perennis*; it is also—envisaged in its integrality—the only religion."¹⁰ Philosophy here refers to descriptions of reality's deep structure, among which (Truth being one) there can be only one accurate account, which other accounts (insofar as they are accurate) embellish but do not contradict. As for religion, it refers to the methods for conforming one's life to reality's structure. Ken Wilber has recently said that belief in the *Sophia Perennis* (or Great Chain of Being as he calls it) has been "so overwhelmingly widespread that it is either the single greatest intellectual error ever to appear in human history, or it is the most accurate reflection of reality yet to appear."¹¹

Modernity has departed from this sole true philosophy, and the difference between it and the science-oriented alternative with which modernity replaced it can be stated simply. Whereas traditional philosophy proceeds from the premise that the less derives from the more—from what is greater than itself in every respect, primacy, power, and worth being foremost—modernity sees the more (as it climaxes qualitatively in the human species) as deriving from the less.

I have already credited Joseph Brown for introducing me to the Native Americans and the distinctive outlook of primal peoples generally, and here (in this closing section of my tribute to him) I can credit

⁹ A more complete account of Coomaraswamy's thoughts on this matter is given in Marco Pallis, "A Fateful Meeting of Minds: A. K. Coomaraswamy and René Guénon," *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Summer-Autumn, 1978.

¹⁰ Frithjof Schuon, *The Transfiguration of Man* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books, 1995), p. 10.

¹¹ Ken Wilber, "The Great Chain of Being," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (Summer 1993), p. 53.

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him more pointedly. In one way or another many anthropologists have dealt with the two preceding resources of primal peoples, but Brown stands alone in detailing, in his important study, *The Sacred Pipe*, the way in which Native American religion embodies the *Sophia Perennis* in its own distinctive idiom.¹²

In briefest capsule: The Native American outlook conforms to the Great Chain of Being in seeing the whole of things as an ontological hierarchy in which lesser things derive in graded sequence from the Great Spirit, which is its version of the *ens perfectissimum*. In *Creek Mary's Blood*, the sequel to her *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, Dee Brown gives us a glimpse of the initial cut that the Native Americans enter—that between the sacred and the profane—when she writes:

In those days there were always two levels in the world of the Cheyennes. We did not consider the world of hunting or hide curing or arrow or moccasin making, or any of those things as the real world. The real world was a place of magic, of dreams wherein we became spirits.¹³

Subsequent divisions in the real and sacred world vary according to which tribe we are speaking of. The Tewa, for instance, have five sacred realms, whereas the Plains Indians that Brown worked with most will content themselves with three. When we add the everyday world to these three, we come up with the minimum number of “links” in the Great Chain of Being that peoples have found it necessary to posit. In *Forgotten Truth*, I call them the terrestrial, the intermediate, the celestial, and the infinite;¹⁴ and in *The Sacred Pipe*, Brown tells us how the Oglala Sioux describe them.¹⁵ Mounting from the mundane into the sacred world, the Oglala find its lowest echelon populated by myriad spirits, some good, some bad. Human beings can access this realm from time to time, as Dee Brown points out, but its natural population consists of discarnates of various stripes. Shamans enter into working relationships with those spirits, enlisting good ones as allies to do battle with those of evil intent.

Above this spirit world, which is something of a melange, stands the Great Spirit, *Wakan-Tanka*, who can be apprehended in two modes:

¹² Joseph Epes Brown, *The Sacred Pipe* (New York: Penguin Books, 1953/1977).

¹³ Dee Brown, *Creek Mary's Blood* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1980).

¹⁴ Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth* (Harper San Francisco, 1976/1992).

¹⁵ Joseph Epes Brown, *The Sacred Pipe*.

as Father and as Grandfather. In the context of world religions generally, this division corresponds to the division between, on the one hand, God who has personal attributes and can therefore be known, and on the other hand, God in his absolute, infinite nature which the human mind cannot concretely grasp. Definitively, Brown describes the difference between the two as follows:

Wakan-Tanka as grandfather is the Great Spirit independent of manifestation, unqualified, unlimited, identical to the Christian Godhead, or to the Hindu *Brahma-Nirguna*. *Wakan-Tanka* as father is the Great Spirit considered in relation to His manifestation, either as Creator, Preserver, or Destroyer, identical to the Christian God, or to the Hindu *Brahma-Saguna*.¹⁶

Going back to Mary Dee's report, the mundane hunting and hide curing that she cites are those activities after the symbolic mind has dimmed, for when that mind is in full force, all activities are (to continue with the vocabulary of the Oglala Sioux) *wakan* (holy, sacred). They are sacred in "corresponding"—Swedenborg's word—with the other world and thereby perforating the line between the two. "This world" acquires its own reality only to the degree that its ties to the other world are forgotten. Joseph Brown quotes Black Elk as saying, "Any man who is attached to the senses and to the things of this world lives in ignorance."¹⁷

Coda

Having begun with an anecdote, I shall conclude with one as well, my favorite in my well stocked repertoire relating to Joseph Brown. Joseph was accompanying Black Elk on a mission to Denver and a long winter's bus ride landed them there well around midnight. Hotels were filled, and the only available shelter from the bitter cold was little more than a flophouse. Entering their room, Black Elk glanced at its dingy furnishings, took one breath of its foul air, and announced: "This requires a sweat!" Chairs were upturned, blankets stripped from the beds to cover them, and the electric heater impressed for the sacred fire. The men peeled down to their breech cloths, and the purging bath began.

It is an allegory, this midnight scene. In dismal, uninviting circumstances, two men, ethnically diverse, saw what needed to be done, and

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁷ Joseph Epes Brown, *The Sacred Pipe*, p. 4.

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instantly did it. If our improvisations in our respective circumstances could be equally inventive, emphatic, and right-minded, no better tributes could be offered to the life and work of Joseph Epes Brown.

CHAPTER 5

Ut sint unam Meaning and goal of the Christian vocation

Alvin Moore, Jr.

He who cannot escape from the standpoint of temporal succession so as to see all things in their absolute simultaneity is incapable of the least conception in metaphysic.

René Guénon

Blessed is he who has won through to the Heart of the Universe; he is beyond good and evil. But that is too much for average humanity to attain; it is a very good second best to know the gods of the country, to live the life of the country.

Virgil

The man who finds his own country sweet is only a raw beginner; the man for whom every country is as his own is already strong; but only the man for whom the whole world is as a foreign country is perfect.

Hugh of St. Victor

Some years before his death Marco Pallis remarked that he believed he could practice any religion, an orthodox traditional form of course being understood. A generation younger than Marco at the time and certainly his inferior in experience in the Way, we respectfully agreed, only adding the mental reservation “to which called”—undoubtedly an unspoken assumption in Marco’s own mind. He was then living in the Knightsbridge area of London and from time to time would attend Mass at the nearby Brompton Oratory. It was not that he wished to become Catholic for he was a committed Buddhist of the Vajrayana persuasion, but because in the words of the Psalmist: “I have loved, O Lord, the beauty of Thy house and the place where Thy glory dwelleth” (Ps 26:8). When Marco made this remark he was probably gently urging what he rightly considered a proper orientation towards loyalties to traditional forms. Now, three decades later and still a practicing Christian, we believe more than ever that without any disloyalty to our own tradition (which has chosen us, not we it) that we could indeed practice any religion to which called. Further, we believe that in practicing

one orthodox form of religion we are, in effect, practicing all of them. For ultimately there is but one religion which is manifested in various forms. These forms are so many *upayas* (appropriate methods or skillful means) providentially differentiated by that aspect, “face,” or “voice” of the Word which is directed towards a particular sector of humanity, as well as by “qualitative determinations of time and place” which include all the circumstances of the human receptacle to which a particular Revelation is addressed. *Una veritas in variis signis, variae resplendet ad majorem gloriam Dei*— “one truth variously shining forth in various forms, to the greater glory of God,” Ananda Coomaraswamy liked to say. And as Nicolas of Cusa, Cardinal Bishop of Brixen, observed, one cannot imagine anything better redounding to the Divine glory than the chorus of the faithful of every religion united in worship of the one God according to their respective rites.

The recognition of the variety of forms implies the dichotomy of esoterism and exoterism which is present in one way or another in all religions, and which necessarily figures in remarks that follow. But the “unity of religions” may be approached in two radically different ways: in a humanist and latitudinarian manner which blurs essential distinctions and focuses on the externalities of things; or from a metaphysical intuition of the Unity of the Divine Nature perceived through the different forms in which the Divine has revealed Itself. We may in passing mention a third viewpoint which dismisses any such intuitions of Unity as mere “indifferentism” and an apathy towards truth; but this is a self-defeating ideological stance which shuts the door on any deeper understanding of the religions, for the properly spiritual aspects of religion are precisely those which transcend form.

It is fitting, then, to begin this essay with some observations about the metaphysical unity of religions, for the Christian religion is but one Heaven-given form among the orthodox traditions. In explicit metaphysical doctrine Christianity is the weakest of all, but this is a matter of expression and not of intrinsic content. The historical accidents of the Christian tradition have favored a largely non-metaphysical outlook; but by definition a religion offers a particular image of the Divine and necessarily refers to That of which it is the image. As Christianity has been relatively inactive in its metaphysical orientation, especially since Trent, there is a certain paucity in its vocabulary and concepts. Thus we shall occasionally borrow from other traditions but solely for convenience of expression and not—repeat: not—from motives of syncretism. From a traditionalist perspective syncretism is an odious mockery; it is inherently ineffective and ephemeral because it hitches

together disparate elements with no sanction from Heaven, no regard for the intrinsic affinity of its borrowings, and with no guiding idea or worthy purpose.

Much of the comment that follows is applicable to all traditions, but it is offered primarily for those Christians who wish to reflect on the more profound aspects of their own tradition. "All men on whom the Higher Nature has stamped the love of truth must take deep concern that like as they have been enriched by the toil of those who have gone before, so they in like manner may themselves toil for those that shall be hereafter—that posterity may have of them whereby to be enriched."¹ These words of Dante state our own motivation.

God is One, though we make entirely legitimate distinctions in Pure Being, preeminently the "level" of the Divine Unity, as also of God-as-Person, and that of the Divine Energies. The Divine Essence, however, is beyond all distinction and all relationship, apophatic. In Christianity, the Essence has received relatively little attention save by a blessed few who generally have not fared well with the exoteric authority (St. Gregory Palamas is an exception). Light offers an analogy; we must logically think of it as having an origin, but it is one in its nature though endlessly fragmented in manifestation. Similarly, human origins, human nature, and the human entelechy are unitary, all diversities and fissiparous tendencies notwithstanding. Originally there was a Heaven-given Primordial Tradition intrinsic to humanity (to which Genesis 10:10 indirectly alludes), but manifestation or creation (ultimately, equivalent terms) necessarily moves away from its Principle as the possibilities constituting a given world are existentially differentiated. Without remotion there can be no manifestation, no development. Heaven's primal Revelation, coeval with mankind, likewise moves outwards from its point of origin, separating into discrete streams which diverge as the spokes of a wheel diverge between nave and rim. The more distant from the Center, the greater the diversities; conversely, moving from rim to nave, all spokes converge towards the Center becoming less and less differentiated until their differences are completely lost in the "emptiness," the No-thing-ness, of the nave. Representatives of a given tradition not infrequently stress obvious differences the better to convince their followers, perhaps themselves, of the superiority of their own tradition. All this is understandable and even necessary to a degree; one cannot follow more than one path at the same time, and one must

¹ Dante, opening lines of *De monarchia*.

believe in the truth and efficacy of one's own tradition before one can take seriously its claims and accept its demands. Nevertheless, each of the discrete forms of religion is the work of Heaven and no one has a right to despise any one of them. Much less can anyone be absolved from indifference towards his own tradition, *including those possibilities of penetration* which, in one way or another, may present themselves to the believer. Loyalty towards one's own tradition cannot mean that one must be passive towards or deny its insufficiencies (though there will always be questions of vocation and opportunity). In times of accelerating decadence such as our own (which no one and no group altogether escapes), one has both the right and the duty to choose the "nobler hypothesis" insofar as such choices may actually arise. Heaven does indeed offer multiple Revelations of Itself to mankind, though this cannot mean the individual is free to pick and choose. Once more, it is the tradition that chooses the man, not man the tradition. Appearances notwithstanding. "You have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you" (Jn 15:16). Christians are such because they are chosen for the Christian tradition; this is Heaven's doing and, like the five and the two-talent servants of the parable (Matt 25:15ff), it is our responsibility to make the best possible use of what we have received.

In an autobiographical passage al-Ghazali² tells how after a spiritual crisis, "the glass of conventional belief was shattered." It could not be restored to its prior form and it was necessary to melt it down and recast it into a new and nobler vessel. So it is with some souls in these last times. Thanks to the approaching end of the cycle (the end of *this* world) when everything is intermingled, juxtaposed, and recapitulated; thanks to abundant and more reliable data about the actual content of other forms of religion; thanks to widespread travel and meetings with practitioners of these different traditions; thanks to the labors of good men who have gone before us; thanks perhaps to the realization that one teeters on the edge of an abyss and can no longer afford the luxury of indecision—thanks to all these factors a new situation has arisen. All these motives, singly and in combination, present the Church with something of a crisis in which the earlier Christian apologetics (never entirely adequate) often seem almost irrelevant to some who nevertheless are attracted to the highest thing within them *through* the Christian tradition. The Christian *myth* does, indeed, retain its attractive power,

² Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali (450-505 AH), Persian jurist, theologian, philosopher, and Sufi, with a worldwide reputation both within Islam and in the world at large.

its power to compel belief and invite participation. The word *myth* used here may be offensive to some, but we are aware of no other which can serve as well within the present terms of reference. In his *Freedom and the Spirit*, Nicolas Berdyaev wrote: "Behind the myth are concealed the greatest realities, the original phenomena of the spiritual life. . . . Christianity is entirely mythological, as indeed all religion is." This is the sense in which we use the word, and to characterize the Christian story as *myth* does not mean that it has not been historically eventuated. In fact, the very insistence on the historicity of the Christian story is itself an ingredient in one affabulation of the *myth*, and not the strongest one. Our intended meaning can be illustrated by reference to a properly executed Orthodox icon; no one could possibly think that photographic realism was intended in its production, the aim being something much deeper and more far-reaching. In any case, the Christian *myth* needs a conceptual setting adequate to the realities to which it alludes. It needs a conceptual context that permits the profundities of Christian doctrine, fully implicit in the Christian Good News, to be articulated as clearly as possible. It may be argued that, having endured for two millennia, the Christian tradition does not need to change at this late date. We do not advocate any outward change in Christian teaching; what we do advocate is an internal opening towards the highest realities that can be conceived within a Christian ambience and a willingness on the part of the exoteric Christian authorities to transcend their largely self-imposed limits. *Mutatas mutandis*, these realities are integral to all the other major traditions: Judaism with its Kabbala, Islam and its Sufism, Hinduism and the Vedanta, Buddhism which only reluctantly descends into the exoteric realm, and the higher Taoism. As the end of the Christian dispensation rapidly approaches, we believe that the most profound understanding possible of all Christian doctrine must again find its voice for the good of the Christian tradition, for the good of souls, and for the good of the Christian community, and in order that possibilities of spiritual realization may again find their proper place within the Christian tradition. Note however, that given the times, this spiritual realization may be actually realized only postmortem, though already the theoretical means are at hand.

A certain Providential symmetry demands a reawakening of esotericism within the Christian tradition. Aristotle, though commonly considered an exteriorizing influence, wrote that "there is a life that is higher than the measure of humanity. Men will live it not in virtue of their humanity but in virtue of something in them that is divine. We ought not to live according to those who counsel us to keep to a man's

thoughts, but rather to live according to the highest thing that is in us; for small though it be, in power and worth it is far above the rest.”³ Eckhart reminds us that “the higher we soar in our understanding the more we are in Him. In eternity, the Father is speaking his Son all the time and pouring forth all creatures in him. They all have a call to return whence they came forth. Their whole life and nature is a vocation, a flight back to what they came out of.”⁴ This in its fullest possible sense is the human entelechy. But apart from instances isolated in both time and locale, Christianity has offered this *theoria*, this vision, to believers only in an obscured form, truncated so as to be acceptable to the reigning exoteric perspective. Christianity is *bhaktic* by nature, need, and Providential intent; nevertheless, the exoteric view of man’s last end is a partial view, as if cut off in mid-passage by a “glass ceiling” that limits man’s concepts basically to an extension of *this* life considered as norm and finality. “Woe unto you, lawyers! for ye have taken away the key of knowledge; ye entered not in yourselves, and them that were entering in ye hindered” (Lk 11:52). These words of Christ clearly indicate that the “glass ceiling” is, nevertheless, not a limit imposed by the nature of things but rather a *de facto* collective norm. Among the several extant traditions Heaven has given to men, it is unthinkable that Christianity alone should be incomplete, that Christianity alone should offer her people less than the inheritance that is rightfully theirs by virtue of being human and children of God.

Let us endeavor then, *Deo juvante*, to see in Christian doctrine its unwonted depths and plenitude; no one has a right to circumscribe the Word of God. What we urge is not alien to the Christian tradition, simply the overt statement of what has all along been fully implicit. That the matter has reached this point of need is due to the habits of mind of Christians and to an overweening exoteric authority which focuses more on container than on content. But we condemn no one; the derogation of gnosis and esoterism in Christianity derives from many factors, including the primarily exoteric mission of the Church herself, all reinforced by circumstances leading up to the end of the present cycle, and all contributing to a situation of fact. Facts, however, engender intentions and intentions entail responsibilities. There are risks for those who ignore the lesson of the parable of the unjust vinedressers (Mark 12:1 ff and Lk 20:9 ff). Christian leaders have a responsibility to

³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* X, 7.

⁴ This and all other citations of Eckhart are from Franz Pfeiffer’s *Meister Eckhart* as translated by C. de B. Evans, 2 vols. (London, John M. Watkins, 1947), except for the Latin quote, the source of which we have not identified.

foster the highest and the best in their charges as also in themselves. We do not say that the occultation of Christian metaphysic and esoterism represents a conspiracy, though in the "human margin" of the Church conspiracies are certainly not unknown. And it is easy to transpose into a Christian context this passage from the Quran: "They plotted and Allah plotted, and lo! Allah is the best of plotters."

. . .

It is necessary to know man's provenance and man's nature in order to receive the Christian message in its fullness, to know the meaning of the Christian vocation. To know man's provenance means to know man's Procession from his First Principle. To know man's nature is to know the necessity of the Return. These two movements, Procession and Return, are fundamental in the cosmos and particularly so as regards man. If we are awake to our present situation we *ipso facto* know that the Procession is behind us and that the Return must be our major concern in this life. The Church, however, is in the position of Nicodemus the Pharisee in whose regard Jesus expressed amazement, asking: "Art thou a master in Israel and knowest not these things?" (Jn 3:l ff). The Church no longer teaches a sacred anthropology, relying instead on her long day-to-day experience in dealing with souls, an experience certainly not without its practical value but which nevertheless is a lowest common denominator. If faced with more theoretical needs, too often she looks to contemporary psychological and sociological theories which almost without exception are anything but traditional. On the other hand, the reflective Christian needs an approximately adequate conception of human nature, one that at least points in the right direction and opens onto larger concepts as the starting point for any serious spiritual journey. As an illustration of this, we may note that both doctrinal understanding and efforts at serious prayer by the somewhat sophisticated man or woman (who also merit salvation as much as the naive) will obviously benefit from adequate theory and the basics of self-knowledge. Man needs to know what and who he is; and of this two part question, "who am I?" is the more important because everything revolves about the issue of personal identity.

There can be no discussion of Christian conceptions of personality without brief reference to the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead which is rightly so prominent in the presentation of Christianity to the faithful. From St. Paul, who spoke of the "resurrection of the dead,"

to the time of St. Thomas Aquinas who spoke of the “resurrection of the body,” this *identical body*, there is a notable shift of emphasis. In the high Middle Ages, immortality was popularly conceived as the restored life of one’s present body. On the part of someone as wise as St. Thomas, it is hard not to think that this was primarily a pedagogic device, an *upaya*; for there would be enormous difficulties in explaining to the people that the resurrected body is the same yet changed, that the first stage of the Resurrection is withdrawal into the animic realm, and that this withdrawal means an enhanced personal identity rather than its diminution. Yet the conception of the resurrection of this very body implies a psychosomatic notion of man’s personal identity,⁵ and this is a simplification. Man’s true personal identity is superior to and overrides the dissolution of the body. “In My Father’s house there are many abiding places” (Jn 14:2), many degrees. According to René Guénon, there are elements of the human psyche which have no purpose but to support the life of the body. When the body is dissolved these psychic elements are dispersed into the intermediate realm, and the purpose of funeral rites is precisely this dispersal—for the peace of mind of those still living, among other reasons.⁶ The elements of the human individual, whether gross or subtle, are forever in flux. The continuity of the individual is necessarily from above, superior to all flux. Guénon wrote that,

. . . the different objects of manifestation, including those of individual manifestation, external as well as internal, are not destroyed but subsist in principial mode, being unified by the very fact that they are no longer conceived under the secondary or contingent aspect of distinction; of necessity they are found among the possibilities of the Self and the latter remains conscious of Itself in all these possibilities as “nondistinctively” beheld in integral Knowledge, from the very fact of being conscious of its own permanence in the “eternal present.” It is this which allows the transposition in a metaphysical sense of the theological doctrine of the “resurrection of the dead,” as well as the conception of the “glorious body”; the latter, moreover, is not a body in the proper sense of the word but its “transformation,” that is to say its transposition outside form and other conditions of individual existence; in other words it is the “realiza-

⁵ A good historical survey of this topic is provided in *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336*, by Caroline Walker Bynum (Columbia University Press).

⁶ See *The Spiritist Fallacy*, by René Guénon (Sophia Perennis, Ghent, New York, 2003).

tion” of the permanent and immutable possibility of which the body is but a transient expression in manifested mode.⁷

For St. Thomas Aquinas, the nature of the person, “who am I?”, is clearly something within the formal order. He cites Boethius’ characterization of person⁸ as “an individual substance of a rational nature,” and this denomination became the standard definition of the Schoolmen, and it serves St. Thomas’ exoteric perspective. But in *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius speaks to these questions with some important changes, opening the way to greatly enlarged conceptions. The *Consolation . . .* is actually a soliloquy though in the form of a dialogue in which Boethius’ interlocutor is a personified Dame Philosophy. Boethius is in prison awaiting execution; naturally depressed, he seeks insight into the nature of happiness and his lost serenity. Philosophy asks: “Do you remember that you are a man?” “How could I forget it?” Boethius answers somewhat acerbically, as if recalling the definition he had given earlier. “Do you know nothing more about what you are?” Philosophy asks. “No, nothing,” he responds. “Now I know another cause of your sickness,” Philosophy says, “and the greatest; *you have forgotten what you are.*”

Like Boethius we, too, have forgotten our true nature and identity, what and who we are. In Genesis 2:7 we read: “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.” Thus there are four elements entering into the composition of man: body, soul, and Spirit, corresponding to the traditional “three worlds” or three fundamental categories of manifestation: gross, subtle, and formless (for man is *microcosm*). And there is a fourth, *the creative act of God*, which is not other than God himself. What God did with the first man Adam, He does timelessly with every man, for this enters into the very definition of man (insofar as definition is possible). The Divine Presence, the Divine Word or Logos, is necessarily and unimaginably immediate “. . . piercing even to the dividing of soul and spirit” (Heb 4:12), “more truly my Self than I am myself.” This essential Presence of the Word or Logos prompted the late Philip Sherrard to write:⁹ “according to Herakleitos,

⁷ *Man and His Becoming According to the Vedanta*, by René Guénon, translated by Richard C. Nicholson (London, Luzac, 1945), p. 105.

⁸ *Summa Theologica* III, 2.2 and 4.2, citing Boethius.

⁹ In his *Christianity: Lineaments of a Sacred Tradition* (Brookline, Massachusetts: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1998), p. 4.

although we possess a common Logos—a common principle of divine and creative wisdom—yet most people live as if they had a private understanding of things. . . . [This is] a knowledge or wisdom that is supraindividual, which all people in their right mind possess; and there is also a purely individual notion of things according to which people live when they are not in their right mind.” Further on in his book (p. 60) Sherrard says that “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.” Man’s causal reality, his exemplar *in divinis*, infinitely surpasses his manifested or created reality. It is said that some early Greek Fathers taught that man’s final entelechy is to know himself as he is in his divine archetype. And even today better informed hesychast monks speak of their realization as passing beyond form, though not beyond personality. Our realization, then, means reintegration (“fused but not confused” in Eckhart’s phrase) in the Logos, the *locum possibilium* or “place of [all] possibilities” of manifestation. An image in a mirror has no reality apart from the Object of which it is the image; “made in the image of God” means essential (but not substantial) identity with the Word.

It must not be thought, however, that man becomes the Divine Person, the Son. “It was in the eternal procession of the Son that things as a whole emanated from the Father, and not from themselves,” said Eckhart. We come forth from the Father in the eternal birth of the Son, but the “servant remains the servant and the Lord remains the Lord.”¹⁰ Son of God and creature are eternally distinct, even though the essential reality of the creature is in the Logos, the Son. Image must return to its divine archetype, going back the way it came forth. Our essential being is in Christ; we are entirely dependent upon Him who is Alpha and Omega, Beginning and End of all things. In Him beginning and end, and all else besides, are identical; yet there is an abyss separating creature from Creator, and this abyss is *in principio*, from the beginning. In the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, once we manage to see beneath surfaces, it is abundantly clear—in the Scriptures, the Liturgy, the Sacraments—that as we assimilate Christ we must no less be assimilated to Christ. Indeed, we *become Christ* by grace, though not by nature, as the Orthodox commonly phrase it. Eckhart com-

¹⁰ This well known dictum of Muhyiddin Ibn al-‘Arabi can be understood on several levels, but it is quoted here to indicate the unbridgeable separation between Creator and creature.

compares this entelechy with the change of the Eucharistic bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. We become fully identified with Christ but we do not become the Divine Person, we do not become the Second Person of the Trinity.

We must return to the notion of *person*. What do we mean by the word *person*? The several etymologies of the word have this in common: they suggest that *person* is in some way a projection of or a standing forth from a greater underlying reality. We can only mention briefly that in the classical world *persona* designated the mask worn by actors in dramatic performances, that the Latin verb *persono* means to “sound through.” It is even said that ancient dramatic masks often had a megaphonic construction amplifying actors’ voices so they could be heard at greater than normal distances.¹¹ In any event, there is ambiguity surrounding the notion of *person*, a notion seldom if ever adequately developed in Western sources (at least so far as we know); almost as if in tacit agreement that the notion of *person*, like the Pillars of Hercules, constitutes a limit beyond which one shall not pass. The case in the traditional Orient, however, is different. In Hinduism, for example, the notion of *person* is applied at several levels, including the very highest. The notion of Purusha, which corresponds to that of the Logos in certain interesting respects—the concept of Purusha is transposed to Purushottama or “. . . Atma, considered as the Personality, permanent principle of the being through all its states of manifestation.”¹² We cannot develop this line of exploration further, but will only suggest to those who may be scandalized by the thought that Christianity could borrow anything of worth from Hinduism, that Christian history demonstrates the adoption of compatible ideas from many diverse sources. Indeed, given the assumptions stated at the outset of this essay, the probative value of parallel truths is something for which we can be very grateful. We may also add that if certain formulations appear contradictory, it would be prudent to provisionally grant that certain truths may have to be expressed (if at all) antinomically. *Person*, then, at least in its ordinary acceptance, does not mark the summit of man’s spiritual journey nor of Christian realization. Soon after announcing His betrayal by Judas and His imminent crucifixion, His Apostles questioned Jesus; Thomas asked: “Lord, we do not know where you are going, and how can we know the way? Jesus said to him, I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.” Philip asked: “Lord, show us the Father

¹¹ *Dictionary of Word Origins*, by Joseph T. Shipley.

¹² *Man and His Becoming*, p. 53.

and it is sufficient for us" (Jn 14:5 ff). In this request Philip asked for the ultimate consummation of the Christian (and human) vocation: to know God in that degree of gnosis which is coincident with Being and even Beyond-Being. To cite Eckhart again: "Knowledge is the basis, the foundation of all being. Love has no hold except in knowledge." "This is eternal life, to KNOW Thee who alone art truly God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent" (Jn 17:3). It is inconceivable, however, that an infinitesimal human creature could know the Infinite, or that there could be any symmetry between man as infinitesimal object and God as Infinite Subject. Only God can know God. Man *qua* individual can know God only through an epiphany or theophany, under a veil. Nevertheless, all the knowledge, all the consciousness in the Universe, even down to the tropisms of microorganisms, is participation in the Infinite Knowledge of the "One Intelligent in all intelligence, the one Conscious in all consciousness," in the language of the Upanishads. And Eckhart again: "God is in all things as intelligence or mind and is more instinct in things than they are in themselves and more natural." Eternal life is the ultimate entelechy of mankind. Having come forth from the Divine, we must return to It. This entails knowledge of Jesus Christ, as St. John tells us. But this is more than a quasi-historical acquaintance with a 1st century itinerant preacher in Palestine. The entire manifested Universe is the passible body of Christ, and it is thus that knowledge of Jesus Christ involves the knower's necessary universalization. The soul is all that she knows. In Eckhart's words: "Not until the soul knows all there is to be known can she step over into the Unknown Good." Knowledge of God beyond theophany is God's Self-knowledge in us, knowledge which universalizes and deifies. Divine gnosis entails passage beyond form, beyond the created order. It involves man's utter self-denial which is the guarantee of identity with Him who is Way, Truth, and Life. This utter renunciation, incidentally, is the strength of the genuine hesychast. *Ego sum ostium*. . . , "I am the Door," says Christ (Jn 10:7).

In a remarkable essay, "The Servant and Union,"¹³ Frithjof Schuon wrote that man can (and indeed must) have a relationship with God as Person but cannot realize Him. On the other hand, man cannot have a relationship with the Godhead (Self or Essence) but can realize It—with the Lord's aid, to be sure. The Essence, Self, or Godhead is Ultimate Subject, the Self, the Person beyond personality, the ultimate

¹³ This essay appeared in English translation as chapter 3 of *Dimensions of Islam*, 1970, and as chapter 14 in *Logic and Transcendence*, 1975.

but imparticipable identity of all creatures (which in no way implies pantheism). The Upanishads rhetorically ask, “by what knowledge would one know the Ultimate Knower?” It cannot be emphasized too strongly that it is not as individuals that we can come to the knowledge of God. “No *man* hath seen God at any time: the only begotten Son which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared Him. . . . No *man* hath ascended up to Heaven, but he that came down from Heaven, even the Son of man which is in Heaven (Jn 1:18; 3:13). The word *Father* must not be taken here in the usual sense of denoting only the First Person of the Trinity; it can be understood as well as denoting the Godhead or Divine Essence. Nothing hinders the same word from bearing more than one meaning or degree of meaning, as often occurs in sacred texts. Schuon says further that the individual has every reason to seek Paradise; but *qua* individual the Godhead or Essence cannot concern him. There are, as it were, two subjectivities in man (though they are not equally in act in all men); one is the individual soul which has every reason to desire and actively seek the beatitude of Paradise. The other is a more or less direct breath of the Divine. As Eckhart said: *aliquid est in anima quod increatus et increabile et hoc est intellectus*, “there is something in the soul that is uncreated and uncreatable, and this is the Intellect”—the Divine Intellect. It is in virtue of the “desire” of the Intellect to return to its own Essence that man can conceive of a realization passing beyond the level of Unity, of Pure Being, but it is not something that can concern man as individual.¹⁴

A Muslim shaikh, Abu Bakr Siraj al-Din, has reminded us that “he who has Christ has ALL.” “I and My Father are One” (Jn 10:30); one in Essence. If we are identified with Christ, we share Christ’s essentiality with the Father. This realization of the All is implicit in the consummation of Dante’s initiatic journey, and we cite this as an illustration of the exo-esoteric character of the Christian tradition. At the very end of the great *Commedia* he writes:

but my own were not the wings for such a flight.
Yet, as I wished, the Truth I wished for came
cleaving my mind in a great flash of Light.

Here my powers rest from their high fantasy,
but already I could feel my being turned—
instinct and intellect balanced equally

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 53.

as in a wheel whose motion nothing jars—
the Love that moves the Sun and the other stars.

That the opening of the All into the Supreme Identity was consummated in Dante is not explicitly stated, but it is implicit, not least in the reverberations of his life: the effective founding of a language and hence of a people, and the writing of the *Divine Comedy*, the very summit of Western letters.

* * *

Guénon, Schuon, and Coomaraswamy, all agreed that a fundamental rule for any valid spiritual Way involves a radical self-denial. A conceptual metanoia is implied more than great feats of asceticism, though there can be no spiritual path that does not involve some judicious asceticism. *Denegat seipsum*, let him deny himself; or better, *renounce* himself. “All Scripture cries aloud for freedom from self,” said Eckhart. There are two in man, *duo sunt in homine*: flesh (the word flesh, only implicit here, includes both body and soul) and Spirit—the Spirit of God that is also the Spirit of man. It is our manifest responsibility to live according to the highest thing in us. For the Christian, the Person and Life of Christ supremely exemplify this, especially in the virtues and none more so than in self-denial. Christ is head of the Mystical Body and we must follow our Head in our own appropriate ways.

On the Cross, Christ’s penultimate words were *Eli, Eli, lamma sabac-thani*, My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?—the opening words of Ps 22. Humanly speaking, this is a cry of dereliction and the measure of Christ’s sacrifice. It is also the criterion for our own renunciation of self and of our self-transcendence. Christ’s death on the Cross is not only the death of the man Jesus of Nazareth, it is also his death to the manifested Universe and the rebirth of his humanity into the Divine where humanity is an eternal idea in the Divine Intellect. It is thereby the guarantee of the reintegration of the Universe into its Divine Principle. But these last words provide yet more profound insight into this Drama in which each Christian must participate, each in his or her own way. This has been eloquently articulated by an anonymous Cistercian monk in a modest book, *Doctrine de la Non-Dualité et Christianisme*.¹⁵ In it Un Moine d’Occident (his pseudonym) writes: “. . . ‘When the

¹⁵ *Doctrine de la non-Dualité et Christianisme*, by Un Moine d’Occident (Dervy-Livres, Paris, 1982), pp. 58-59.

Sun of [Supreme] Knowledge arises in the heaven of the heart,' then the soul appears as 'illusory,' and at the same time, God who produced it (*Ishvara* or *Brahma* [that is, God as Creator]). Then all duality ends (and even all unity insofar as this is coextensive with Pure Being, the principle of all manifestation and all multiplicity) and there remains only the immense and incomprehensible Reality of Non-Being (*Para-brahma*) which I have always been. . . . *I am Brahma*. This is why the 'withdrawal of God' is regarded in India as a (possible) indication of deliverance, and many interpret the *lamna sabacthani* of Christ on the Cross in this way."

I and My Father are One (Jn 10:30). The realization of the Supreme Identity is not the achievement of a "non-preexisting result," to borrow an expression from Shankara. Or as Plotinus put it: "It is not a vision encompassed but a Unity apprehended." In the Mystical Body, what our Head has done is a type of what each member must accomplish. Truly, *mors janua vitae*. In Christ's High Priestly prayer uttered shortly before His passion, Jesus asks: "Father, may they be One in us, as Thou art in Me and I in Thee." *Ut sint unam* (Jn 17:11 ff).

Epilogue

It is inevitable in these last times that certain ossified structures should be shattered. Nevertheless, we do have the Divine promise that "the gates of Hell shall not prevail" against the Church, though there are no promises as to her magnitude, numbers, or formal structure as she nears the term of her dispensation. The Church has been aptly characterized as "the first of the Sacraments"; it is through her that we learn of Jesus Christ, true God, true man, and universal man. It is through the Church that we have all the Sacraments or Mysteries; through her we have the Scriptures, sacred art, and the Christian *sangha*. In the Church's more orthodox forms, at least, her *formal* integrity assures the possibility of a renewal of her integral character; other orthodox traditions, less debilitated in certain respects, could serve as reference points in such an effort. One may question why anyone might wish to refer to non-Christian traditions, but it should be obvious that if modern Christianity offered all that every man might need intellectually and spiritually, there would be no motive for looking towards other pastures. Let the authorities not be too swift to judge such *possibilities* as impossible, for *Spiritus ubi vult spirat*. A growing interest in the metaphysical, cosmological, and contemplative aspects of major non-Christian traditions is a fact of these last times which Church leaders would do well to heed. Intrinsically, this interest is by no means mere exoticism or dilet-

tantism. There are gifted people, men and women of good will, who devote their lives to spiritual paths offered by other traditions and who in happier circumstances would be Christian—and who represent a loss to the Christian community. The Church has not always been blind to her esoteric dimension. Church authorities scolded Meister Eckhart for “speaking to the people of holy mysteries,” and even in those times the Church doubtless sought to control access to esoterism; but they did not purely and simply deny it as is the fashion today.

There is also the fact that the Church has an ongoing problem with religious vocations. Again, Church authorities would do well to note that the piety accessible even to professed religious is all too often a regimen of sentimentality; but humans cannot maintain a sentimental mind-set indefinitely, at least without an intellectual background which in effect thinks for them. Where there is a strong intellectual element and the presence of an ongoing spiritual/intellectual challenge, perseverance is another matter.

We respectfully submit that these considerations merit the attention of Christian leaders. We certainly do not believe that what has been said here is definitive as regards any of these issues, but we believe our leaders would be derelict in their duty if they continue to neglect them (cf. Lk 11:5).

CHAPTER 6

The Torn Veil

Jean Borella

If one holds fast to maintaining the alternative “either esoterism or exoterism,” the only solution would be to suppose that, *from the beginning*, a duality of initiatic rites and “religious” (in the sense that this term has for Guénon) rites has existed in Christianity; that baptism spoken about in Acts 2:37-41 being “evidently” of an exoteric nature, it would then be necessary to frame the hypothesis of another baptism, this one initiatic, to which will be eventually given the name “baptism in the Spirit,” exoteric baptism being only “in water.” Certain scriptural indications might seem to go in this direction (and yet there is nothing to this). But, however that might be, if this duality is admitted, the thesis of exteriorization which thereby becomes useless has to be abandoned. Besides, two renowned Guénonians have indeed favored such a “solution,” perceiving that the thesis of their master was in reality insupportable. Of these two, Jean Reyor and Michel Vâlsan, I will now speak.

Of Jean Reyor I will say nothing except that he himself has informed me of his divergence, on this point, from Guénon’s position during an interview. As for Michel Vâlsan, he has expounded at length on all aspects of the question in his answers to the study of Marco Pallis published in *Études Traditionnelles*, under the title “*Le voile du Temple*,” a study in which he interprets the tearing of the Temple veil at the death of Christ as signifying the abolition of the separation, in Christianity, between esoterism and exoterism.¹ Michel Vâlsan rejects

¹ *Études Traditionnelles*, No. 384-385 (pp. 155-176), 386 (pp. 55-66); July-Dec. 1964 and March-April 1965. Michel Vâlsan, “L’initiation chrétienne,” *Réponse à Marco Pallis*, *Études Traditionnelles*, No. 389-390 (pp. 148-184), May-Aug. 1965. The triple number 406-407-408, March-Aug. 1968 contains moreover a dossier entitled: *La question de l’Initiation chrétienne*, including “Notes supplémentaires sur l’initiation chrétienne” by Marco Pallis (pp. 116-141), and “Mise au point” by Michel Vâlsan (pp. 142-152), as well as “Études et documents d’hésychasme” (pp. 153-179). [Translator’s note: For English translations of the Pallis articles, cf. “The Veil of the Temple: A Study of Christian Initiation,” *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1, Summer 1999, pp. 113-145 (reprinted from *The Sword of Gnosis*, Jacob Needleman [ed.], Boston: Arkana, 1986), and “Supplementary Notes on Christian Initiation,” *Sophia*, Vol. 6, No. 2, Summer 2000, pp. 37-70.]

this interpretation and thinks that “there are two lines of transmission of spiritual influences, one purely initiatic, the other simply religious, which go back to the same source, and that the ordinary sacraments, in their sacred institution, have been somehow modeled on the form of the original rites which were purely initiatic by nature and which have remained such, but in a strictly esoteric order.”² What should we think about this?

First we have to recognize that, distinct from every other consideration, the significance attributed by Marco Pallis to the tearing of the Temple veil is self-evident, or else nothing means anything. By definition, the tearing of a veil separating two realms symbolizes the end of this separation and the revelation of the mystery hidden by this veil; this is why Marco Pallis was completely justified in making an emblematic argument in his remarks.³ To the extent that the distinction between esoterism and exoterism can be identified with those between the spirit and the letter, reality and appearance, there is no Christian authority who has not seen in this event the passage from an exterior to an interior worship, from the shadow of mystery to the light of revelation, from a prophetic figurative heralding to the saving accomplishment in truth; the earlier worship no longer has any place, the earlier sacrifice has lapsed as to its own form, since what it represented in image has arrived in its perfect form: the priest and the sacrificial victim are only one.

² *Études Traditionnelles*, No. 389-390, p. 175. As we see, here there is no longer any exoterization; the initiatic's rites remain initiatic “in the strictly initiatic order,” while the Church proceeds with the (early or late?) making of exoteric rites (the “ordinary” sacraments) modeled on the first which accounts for the formal similarity of the (supposed) two kinds of rite. This hypothesis, fabricated for the needs of the case, obviously has nothing to do with that of Guénon, which Michel Vâlsan, by a strange blindness, refused to admit (“Mise au point,” 406-408, p. 150) when Marco Pallis pointed out this incontestable divergence (*ibid.*, p. 120). Vâlsan's thesis is, in certain respects, more plausible than that of Guénon, but yet it does not escape every contradiction: if original Christianity had known two kinds of rite, how can it be seen as a “Jewish esoterism”? —which Vâlsan maintains contrary to all logic: “when the Christic way occupied in Judaism the *normal position* of an initiatic way within a general traditional framework . . .” (p. 149). What would then be the use of exoteric Christian rites? And if Christianity were only an initiatic Jewish way, how could it have experienced such a universal diffusion originally? One always comes up against the same insurmountable difficulties.

³ Pallis has let it be understood that he was inspired by a critique elaborated by Frithjof Schuon, a critique published twenty years later in the *Dossier H* dedicated to Guénon (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1984).

Contrary to this, however, Michel Vâlsan asserts that there were two veils in the Temple, and that it was the more exterior one that had been torn; the other, more interior veil continues to mark the separation, then, between the two “religious” and initiatic realms.

On this contested question, I will say this:

In the Temple, there was in fact an exterior veil called *masak* in Hebrew, separating the court from the Holy Place (where the ordinary liturgies took place), and an interior veil called *paroketh* in Hebrew, separating the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place (where, it seems, the high priest penetrated only once a year). The Greek biblical version called the “Septuagint” does not terminologically distinguish between these two veils, making use of the same word *kataphétasma* to distinguish them. Flavius Josephus, who has left us an admiring description of the first veil, the only one visible from without, does the same.⁴ None of the evangelists specify which veil was torn at Christ’s death: they speak only of “the veil.” From this mention of the veil in the singular doctors and commentators have drawn different conclusions: some, like St. Jerome,⁵ followed by St. Thomas Aquinas,⁶ deem it could only be the exterior veil, the tearing of which alone was visible and had therefore the value of a sign for all; the others think that the mention of the veil without any other detail proves that it could only be the interior veil, the most important from the spiritual point of view.⁷ This opinion is shared by some recent exegetes: “according to all likelihood the evangelists are thinking of the curtain to be found before the Holy of Holies, for the exterior curtain would have had too little significance.” But, by strictly adhering to the positive data of the Gospel text, it is impossible to give a verdict.⁸

⁴ *The Jewish Wars*, V, v, 4 and 5: “Before it was a Babylonian curtain . . . where blue, purple, scarlet and fine flax were mixed with such art that it could not be seen without admiration, and it represented the four elements” (scarlet = fire, fine flax = earth, blue = air, purple = the sea). Also to be seen there was “the whole order of the heavens.”

⁵ *Epist. CXX, ad Hedibiam*, P. L., t. XII, col. 992.

⁶ *Summa theologiae*, Ia IIae, q. 102, a 4.

⁷ For example: Cornelius a Lapide, in his monumental *Commentaria in Scripturam Sacram*, the edition procured by Auguste Crampon, Vivès, 1863, t. XV, *Commentaria in Matthaem*, cap. XXVIII, 51, p. 633, which provides a brief patristic dossier. Jean Maldonnat, in his *Commentarii in quatuor Evangelistas*, edition procured by Conrad Martin, Moguntiae (= Mayence), 1853, t. 1, pp. 477-478, distinguishes several interpretations among the Fathers and Doctors (a sign of “desecration,” announcement of the dispersal of the Jews, etc.). To him these various interpretations do not appear to be contradictory: “the tearing of the veil is the sign of some great mysteries.”

⁸ *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum neuen Testament*, von G. Kittel, Kohlhammer,

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However, it is important to consider the Epistle to the Hebrews. Whether it is from St. Paul or one of his disciples, its canonicity is incontestable: it forms a part of Holy Scripture. This epistle mentions the veil of the Temple in three places: 6:19, 9:3 and 10:20. The first mention: this hope “which we have as an anchor of the soul, sure and firm, and which entereth in even within the veil (*eis to esoterion tou katapesmatos*); where the forerunner Jesus is entered for us, made a high priest for ever according to the order of Melchisedech.” The second veil is obviously the one being dealt with here, which the second mention, that describes the interior layout of the earthly Temple—a description of archetypal rather than historical value—specifies in the following way: “After the second veil [but the first veil is not mentioned!] comes the tabernacle [= the tent] which is called the holy of holies” where “the high priest enters once a year” (Heb. 9:3, 7). “But Christ, being come an high priest of the good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hand . . . entered once for all into the Holies, having obtained eternal redemption” (Heb. 9:11-12). “The mediator of the *new testament*” (Heb. 9:15), “Jesus is not entered into the holies made with hands, the patterns of the true: but into heaven itself” (Heb. 9:24). According to the express will of the crucified Son, we have been “sanctified by the oblation of the body of Jesus Christ once” (Heb. 10:10). “Having therefore, brethren, a *confidence in the entering into the Holies* by the blood of Christ; a *new* and living way which he hath dedicated for us *through the veil* [third mention], that is to say, his flesh” (Heb. 10:19-20). As may be seen, these texts do not speak of a tearing of the veil expressly. However, in reading them, it is nearly impossible not to think of it, even if the last citation is hard to interpret. Anyhow, there is certainly signified, in the clearing of the second veil, a free access to the loftiest mysteries, which confirms—at the very least for a reader of Guénon—the mention of Melchisedek placed in direct rapport with the clearing of the veil, Melchisedek whose name characterizes the Christic priesthood: by the sacrifice of his blood, Christ, the eternal high priest, has opened to us the Holy of Holies. But the traversing of the interior veil does not only refer to the curtain of the sanctuary; it more generally signifies the traversing of corporeal appearances, the veil of the flesh, and entry into the heavenly liturgy. The relationship between the traversing of the veil and the traversing of the flesh could, it is true, lead us back to the first veil, since Flavius Josephus has informed us that it was decorated with a

representation of the entire corporeal world, and, in particular, with a representation of the four elements inherent to all flesh. However, it is not excluded that the second veil had likewise borne such a symbolic decoration, or had an analogous symbolism, since Flavius Josephus tells us that it was “made of the same material.” However that may be, what remains is that, by linking membership in the priesthood of Melchisedek with the clearing of the second veil, the epistle designates Christ’s priesthood as the supreme priesthood, thereby identifying it with the highest “initiatic hierarchy.”

Hence, whether the tearing affected the first or the second veil, the meaning remains the same: it is the abolishing of a separation between two orders, one exterior and the other interior. Basing himself on Origen, for whom it was, probably, the first veil that had been torn so that the second veil became visible, Michel Vâlsan concluded from this that, according to the great Alexandrian himself, the distinction between exoterism and esoterism has been preserved.⁹ But the text of Origen cited by Vâlsan does not have the “Guénonian” significance attributed to it. For Origen, what remains veiled and hidden in the Holy of Holies is the perfect and definitive knowledge of the divine mystery, that which can be granted only at the end of the spiritual way when “I will know even as I am known,” according to St. Paul’s formula (1 Cor. 13:12), whereas “at present I know in part.” It is precisely to this text of St. Paul that Origen alludes in the passage cited: “if we ‘knew’ not ‘in part only,’ if, from this flesh, Christ had revealed all to his beloved disciples, both curtains would have had to be torn, both exterior and interior. But since we still have to ceaselessly progress in knowledge, only the exterior veil was torn ‘from top to bottom’; thus ‘when perfect knowledge shall come,’ and when all mysteries shall be unveiled, the second curtain likewise will be raised, and we will be able to see what is hidden behind, namely, the true ark of the covenant and its veritable aspect; and the true cherubim, and the veritable propitiatory, and the manna collected in golden vessels.”¹⁰

⁹ *Études Traditionnelles*, No. 389-390, May-Aug. 1965, pp. 154-155.

¹⁰ *Commentarium in Mattaeum, Sermo 138*, Klostermann et Benz, Griechischen Christlichen Schrifsteller, t. 11, pp. 284-286. In this text, the passages in single quotes are from St. Paul. Let us recall that at the time of Christ the Holy of Holies was empty: the second veil did not, then, hide the ark of the covenant (which, according to one tradition, was taken away at the burning of the Temple, in 586, by Jeremiah, who buried it in a secret grotto of Mount Nebo), nor the propitiatory, the cherubim or the manna. Origen was not ignorant of the disappearance of these supports for the *Shekhina*; but he accommodates himself to the description of the Holy of Holies,

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In reading this text, we clearly see that the preservation of the second veil by no means signifies, for Origen, the preservation of a formal esoterism, that is to say the preservation of a certain order of knowledge reserved for a few. It only signifies the imperfect character of every knowledge, including esoteric knowledge, when the supreme of "face to face" (1 Cor. 13:12) gnosis has not been attained. Vâlsan's argument would make sense only if access to esoterism would necessarily imply access to such a knowledge; whereas, in fact, since, according to Origen, the second veil signifies the veiling, here below, of the supreme degree of gnosis, of entry into the beatific vision, of union with Absolute Reality ("the *true* ark of the covenant," that is to say not the historical ark, but the Reality of which it was the sacred manifestation), the tearing of this veil would signify that the Parousia, the total Presence (this is the meaning in Greek of the word *parousia*) of God within all people, would be realized. But what esoterist, including Guénon and Vâlsan, has ever claimed that initiation and esoterism would give access effectively and *ipso facto* to the ultimate gnosis? For the great majority of initiates, whatever their traditional affiliation, the ultimate mysteries remain equally veiled; they also dwell on this side of the ultimate veil, they also know "in a mirror" (1 Cor. 13:12). Nor has esoterism drawn aside the second veil; to the contrary, *it shows it*, it causes it to be seen, it reveals that all is symbol and prophecy, and not letter only, that all is anagogy, which especially the exoterist has a tendency to ignore. Besides, has not Guénon often stressed that the term *yogi* or *sufi* could be applied, in all rigor, only to someone who has arrived at the supreme realization?

The fact, then, that the second veil may not have been torn (if one opts, along with Origen, for this solution and accepts his interpretation) should not militate against the thesis of Marco Pallis. To the contrary, this thesis is found to be confirmed, since the tearing of the first veil makes the second veil visible, which means that esoterism is henceforth revealed *as such* to the crowds. Here we discover that the exoteric point of view is produced from an ignorance, or a misunderstanding of revelation's esoteric dimension. This ignorance is, henceforth, no longer possible. True, someone could object that, formally speaking, this revelation of the mystery by its very veiling was already realized by the exterior veil which showed to all, by its very existence, that there was

likewise ideal, given us by the Epistle to the Hebrews (Heb. 9:3-5), except on one point: he does not speak of "the golden altar for perfumes" which the Epistle places strangely in the Holy of Holies, whereas it was situated, it seems, in the Holies.

something of the hidden in the Temple. This is incontestable. But, as I have stressed, there is no pure exoterism; every revelation is already a process of interiorization, which the first veil marking the separation of the profane from the sacred symbolizes; then again, the existence of a second veil refutes beforehand an “exoteric” conception of esoterism, according to which the esoteric is identified with the *occulted visible*, the “mysterious” in the common sense of the term. The existence of the two veils is thus in harmony with the theses that I have developed on the nature of the esoteric and the exoteric, which are processes of interiorization or exteriorization, not statically defined regions. To enter into the esoteric is not to *see* what the exoteric has hidden away, it is to understand that we must plunge into the mystery of God. It is precisely this exoteric conception of the esoteric that Christianity has come to put an end to. By revealing the mysteries, it makes it obvious that the esoteric knowledge of revelation demands a complete conversion of the spiritual gaze; were everything open and betrayed to the curiosity of all, the essential would still be misunderstood. So it is with the body of Christ, abandoned to the stares of all, stretched out before the world, transpierced right to the heart, and yet who retains, invisible, the secret of his divine Resurrection.

This is not, for all that, to say that Origen denies any idea of a reserved teaching, very far from it; he even quite clearly affirms its existence, but by no means identifies it with the mysteries of the Holy of Holies. Thus, following a text whose beginning I have cited already, there is, in Scripture, “ineffable mysteries, too great to find human expression or to be heard by mortal ear. To set them forth in their integrity is impossible. . . . I do not even know if these mysteries are fully and entirely divulged by the holy apostles; I am not saying that they may not be fully known, but that they are not entirely divulged. It is in fact certain that these mysteries have been known and entirely grasped by the one who was raised ‘up to the third heaven’ . . . St. Paul knows all and comprehends all in spirit, but he has not been permitted to divulge these secrets to men. . . . But without doubt he revealed them to whoever did not walk according to man (1 Cor. 15:9); he told them to Timothy, he told them to Luke, and to all the disciples he knew to be capable of receiving the ineffable mysteries.”¹¹

The ineffable mysteries as the object of a teaching, even if reserved, should not then be identified with those mysteries that remain under

¹¹ *Homilies on Joshua*, XXIII, 4; Latin text, introduction, translation and notes by Annie Jaubert, S.C. No. 71, 1960, p. 467.

the “second veil,” and that cannot be the *object* of a teaching in the ordinary sense of the term, that is to say of a theoretical statement, since it is exclusively then a question of their perfect realization. If Christ had not revealed them “in the flesh,” this is because they do not belong to the order of formulation, and not because they involve a reserved teaching. As for mysteries that do involve a reserved teaching, their formally esoteric character is quite relative—for all authentic esoterism, as I have maintained—since Origen’s just cited text ends with a prayer in which he begs God to grant, to him and to all Christians who hear his sermon, the grace of a plenary gnosis of the scriptural mysteries. Remember that this text where, for a Guénonian, the distinction of esoteric from exoteric is formally attested to, this text is a sermon preached to an audience of “all-comers,”¹² which renders somewhat “surreal” the remark of Michel Vâlsan on the prudence that Origen had to observe in his declarations on esoterism, mindful of “ecclesiastic censure,”¹³ which refers to a much later time. In reality, as Marguerite Harl¹⁴ has recalled, Origen does not formally distinguish two categories of Christian, but degrees of knowledge that everyone is called to traverse, even if everyone does not do so. The terms designating these degrees have a symbolic or, if preferred, an emblematic rather than a technical significance: the same person can belong, under different rapports, to several “spiritual types” at once, and no one is excluded, *by nature*, from supreme gnosis.¹⁵

Nevertheless, for Origen, “to be ‘incapable’ (Mt. 3:11, in connection with John the Baptist) or to be ‘unworthy’ (of untying the strap of Christ’s sandal) is not the same thing. For it is possible to become

¹² Henri Crouzel, *Origène*, Lethielleux, Collection “Le Sycamore,” 1985, p. 158.

¹³ Michel Vâlsan, “L’initiation chrétienne,” *Études Traditionnelles*, No. 389-390, p. 165. To affirm the existence, for Origen, of two classes of Christian, Vâlsan is basing himself on a study by Jules Lebreton.

¹⁴ *Origène et la fonction révélatrice du Verbe incarné* (Paris: Seuil, 1958), pp. 264-266.

¹⁵ Origen dedicates one of the longest chapters of the *Treatise on First Principles* (III, 1), to refuting the doctrine of Valentinus’ disciples, according to whom the spiritual destiny of a soul is determined by its “hylic” (or “choïc” = earthy), “psychic” or “pneumatic” nature. According to Origen, beyond individual differences, human nature is one and each person who, being free, is responsible for either his salvation or his loss, as well as for the degree of knowledge to which his love of God gives access. Origen, moreover, distinguishes (according to 1 Cor. 12:8-9) not two but three degrees of knowledge: faith, gnosis (the perfection of faith) and wisdom which knows in the Son, Wisdom of the Father. However, with respect to the beatific vision, these three degrees are almost nothing (*Homilies on Exodus*, III, 1). Likewise see Crouzel, *Origène*, pp. 112-116, the best current synthesis on Origen.

capable without being worthy of it; it is also possible to be worthy, yet without being capable. If graces have been bestowed according to our interest and not only 'in proportion to faith' (Rom. 12:6), this would be a manner of acting for a God who loves men, as in sometimes denying someone an aptitude he would be worthy of, because he foresaw the harm that presumption and the ensuing haughtiness would cause." And Origen concludes: "However we might arrive at understanding, there remains something which we have still not grasped, since 'when a man has finished, he is just beginning, and when he stops, he will be at a loss' (Eccles. 18:7)." ¹⁶

For Origen, the profound opposition is not then between categories of believers, the simple and the perfect, but between those who hear and do nothing and those capable of passing from power to act: "All have the possibility of becoming children of God; only some of them change this possibility into reality."¹⁷ And this is precisely what—eschatologically—the preservation of the veil before the Holy of Holies signifies, that veil which will only disappear on the day of the apocatastasis, when Christ will be all in all.

This whole doctrine is summarized by St. Thomas, with his customary clarity, not in the oft-quoted text of the *Summa Theologiae*,¹⁸ but in his *Commentary on the Gospel of St. Matthew*, where we read the following text: "These two veils would signify a double veiling: the most interior veil would signify the veiling of the heavenly mysteries, when his glory will have appeared. The other, more exterior veil would signify the veiling of the mysteries relative to the Church. Hence the more exterior was torn and the other not so to signify that, in the death of Christ, the mysteries relative to the Church became manifest; but the other veil was not torn because the celestial arcana remain as yet veiled." This veil, St. Thomas explains citing St. Paul (2 Cor. 3:16), will only be raised at the end of time, at the moment of the conversion of the Jews.¹⁹

To close this debate, perhaps it would be appropriate to meditate not only on the tearing of the Temple veil, but also and above all on the death of Christ which is its cause. What, then, might this death signify

¹⁶ Origen, *Commentary on John*, VI, 36, §§ 180-181, 183; S.C. No. 157, introduction, translation and notes by Sister Cécile Blanc, pp. 265-267.

¹⁷ Marguerite Harl, *Origène et la fonction révélatrice du Verbe incarné*, p. 264.

¹⁸ I-II, q. 102, a. 4, ad. 4^o.

¹⁹ *S. Thomae Aquinatis in evangelia S. Matthaei et S. Joannis commentaria*, t. I, ed. II, Taurinensis, Eq. Petri Marietti, Roma, 1912, c. XXVII, p. 391.

as to the question that preoccupies us? The answer is given by Christ himself who teaches us that, in death, his body is "*the body given for all*" (*to soma mou to hyper hymon didomenon*, literally: the body of me for you being given—Luke 22:19). Now what is the body of Christ, if not first the very body of revelation, revelation made body: "Who has seen me has seen the Father." A synthesis of all revelation, the body of Christ becomes, in the Passion, the body given, the body abandoned: everything which can be revealed, everything, of the mystery of God, which is teachable to some degree, communicable, everything is delivered up, abandoned "for us," into our hands like the corpse of Jesus into the hands of his Mother. Even more: this body has been "bled to death"; the true immolated lamb, he has given all of his blood, right down to his transpierced heart: *he has kept nothing for himself*. Thus, it is not only the exterior form of the body of revelation, it is also its most intimate secret by the blood shed "for you and for many," which is revealed, uncovered; and not only uncovered and transpierced, but even exposed and stretched out in its nakedness, and raised aloft on the cross in the sight of all until the end of the world. Now who will deny that the blood symbolizes the initiatic mysteries? The death of Christ constitutes, then, a unique and decisive event *completely* changing the "economy" of tradition. Clearly, it has the significance of a rupture with the ancient and universal economy which divided the degrees of sacred knowledge and participation in divine grace according to the distinction of exoteric and esoteric orders. To tell the truth, and this remark is important, this rupture is an anticipated realization of what will be perfectly accomplished only at the end of time, when the distinction of interior and exterior will definitively cease. This is why Origen or Thomas refer the tearing of the second veil to humanity's eschatological horizon. This is, as I will perhaps explain on another occasion, in conformity with the function of Christianity, the prophetic anticipated and therefore *imperfect* realization, "in image," of the religion of the new "Aeon," or "future Age," since that is, from the "cyclical" point of view, the *raison d'être* of Christianity in the sum of religious forms. This complete change in the economy of tradition is *signified* explicitly by the tearing of the veil and *realized* by the death of Christ. It is inscribed in the very nature of the New Covenant. With respect to the Parousia, or total and universal Presence of the divine Word in every creature and every creature in the divine Word, the distinction between esoterism and exoterism no longer makes any sense. And so this New Covenant is,

as I have stated, eschatological in its very substance; it is formed by the echo of the future Age prophetically reverberating in the today of post-Pascal time.

Thus, it is by very virtue of the privilege of its cyclic function that the Christian religion “ignores” the formal separation between esoterism and exoterism. This “ignorance” flows from its very essence, insofar as it realizes, during the eschatological wait, the anticipatory image of the religion of the second coming. But it is only an image of it, which means that, although in its very form it has to reflect beforehand the parousial disappearance of the two realms of every traditional economy, it also has to continue to distinguish them, no longer as formal structures of its charismatic economy, but as the ever pregnant effect of the nature of things. This is not then, as has sometimes been said, because as a way of love Christianity feels repugnance for such an institutional distinction, but because Christianity is set between the first Testament, of which it is the unveiling, and the last Testament, of which it is the veiling and the prophetic figure.

CHAPTER 7

Christian Gnosis

Frithjof Schuon

Christianity is that “God made Himself what we are, in order to make us what He is” (St. Irenaeus); it is that Heaven became earth, so that earth might become Heaven.

Christ retraces in the outward and historical world what has taken place, from the beginning of time, in the inward world of the soul. In man, the Pure Spirit becomes *ego*, in order that the *ego* may become Pure Spirit; the Spirit or Intellect (*Intellectus*, not *mens* or *ratio*) becomes *ego* by incarnating Itself in the mind in the form of intellection, or truth, and the *ego* becomes Spirit or Intellect by uniting with it.

Christianity is thus a doctrine of union, or the doctrine of union: the Principle unites with manifestation, so that manifestation can unite with the Principle; whence the symbolism of love and the predominance of the “bhaktic” way. God became man “because of His immense love” (St. Irenaeus), and man must unite with God also by “love,” whatever be the meaning—volitive, emotive, or intellective—that one may give to this term. “God is Love”: God—as Trinity—is Union, and desires Union.

Now, what is the content of the Spirit, or in other words, what is the message of Christ? For that which is the message of Christ is also, in our microcosm, the eternal content of the Intellect. This message or content is: love God with all thy faculties and, in function of this love, love thy neighbor as thyself; that is: unite—because “to love” means essentially “to unite”—with the Intellect and, in function of (and as a condition of) this union, abandon all egocentrism and discern the Intellect, the Spirit, the Divine Self, in all things. “Whatsoever ye have done unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto Me.”

This message—or this innate truth—of the Spirit prefigures the cross, because here there are two dimensions, one “vertical” and the other “horizontal,” namely love of God and love of one’s neighbor, or Union with the Spirit and union with one’s ambience, envisaged as a manifestation of the Spirit. From a somewhat different point of view, these two dimensions are represented respectively by Knowledge and

Love: one “knows” God and one “loves” one’s neighbor, or again: one loves God by knowing Him, and one knows one’s neighbor by loving him.

But the deepest meaning of Christ’s message, or of the truth con-natural with the Intellect, is that manifestation is not other than the Principle; this is the message of the Principle to manifestation.

In practice, the whole question is to know how to unite with the *Logos* or the Intellect. The central means is “prayer,” the quintessence of which is objectively the Name of God and subjectively concentration, whence the obligation to invoke God with fervor. But this “prayer,” this union of our whole being with its principle or divine source, would remain illusory without a certain union with our totality, our universal “neighbor,” of which we are, as it were, a fragment; the scission between man and God cannot be abolished without the scission between “me” and “the other” being abolished also; we cannot recognize that God is within us, without seeing that He is in others, and in what manner He is in them. Manifestation must unite with the Principle, and—on the plane of manifestation and in function of this “vertical” union—the part must unite with the whole.

Inwardly, if we wish to understand that the intelligent soul is “essentially”—not in its accidentality—Intellect or Spirit, we must also understand that the *ego*, including the body, is “essentially” a manifestation of the Intellect or the Self. If we wish to understand that “the world is false, *Brahma* is true,” we must also understand that “all things are *Ātmā*.” This is the deepest meaning of love of one’s neighbor.

The sufferings of Christ are the sufferings of the Intellect in the midst of passions. The crown of thorns is individualism, or “pride”; the cross is the forgetting or rejection of the Spirit and, along with it, Truth. The Virgin is the soul in submission to the Spirit and united with it.

The very form of Christ’s teaching is explained by the fact that Christ addressed his message to all men, from the first to the last; he therefore could not give his message a mode of expression which would be unintelligible to some intelligences, and ineffective or even harmful for them. Shankara could teach pure gnosis because he did not address all, and he could refrain from addressing all because the Hindu tradition already existed and included *a priori* spiritual ways adapted to modest intelligences and passionate temperaments. But Christ, as the founder of a spiritual and social universe, had of necessity to address all.

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If it is wrong to reproach Christ for not having explicitly taught pure gnosis—which in fact he did teach by his very coming, and by his person, his gestures and his miracles—it is equally wrong to deny the gnostic meaning of his message, and thus to deny to intellectual contemplatives—who are centered on metaphysical truth and pure contemplation, or on pure and direct Intelligence—any right to existence, and to offer them no spiritual way in conformity with their nature and vocation. This is contrary to the parable of the talents, and to the saying that “in my Father’s house are many mansions.”

The whole of Christianity is expressed in the Trinitarian doctrine, and this essentially represents a perspective of union; it already envisages union *in divinis*. God prefigures in His very nature the relationships between Himself and the world, relationships which are “external” only in illusory mode.

“The Light shineth in the darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not”: the truth of these words has been manifested—and is still manifested—within Christianity, by the misunderstanding and rejection of gnosis. And this explains in part the destiny of the Western world.

CHAPTER 8

Ibn 'Arabī on the Benefit of Knowledge

William C. Chittick

Ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240) is arguably the most influential Muslim intellectual of the past seven hundred years. Although he founded no formal school, a series of important authors considered themselves his followers, and many more were inspired by him or felt compelled to deal with the issues that he and his followers raised in their writings. The most famous of these issues is "The Oneness of Being" (*wahdat al-wujūd*) though many others could be cited, such as the Perfect Human Being and the Five Divine Presences.¹ At the heart of each lies the question of the nature and significance of knowledge, a question to which Ibn 'Arabī constantly returns.²

In his discussions of knowledge, Ibn 'Arabī typically uses the term *'ilm*, not its near synonym *ma'rifa*, which in the context of Sufi writings is often translated as "gnosis." In general, he considers *'ilm* the broader and higher term, not least because the Quran attributes *'ilm*, but not *ma'rifa*, to God. Nonetheless, he usually follows the general usage of the Sufis in employing the term *'arif* (the "gnostic," the one who possesses *ma'rifa*) to designate the highest ranking knowers. The gnostics are those who have achieved the knowledge designated by the famous *hadīth*, "He who knows [*'arafa*] himself knows [*'arafa*] his Lord."³ According to Ibn 'Arabī, there is no goal beyond knowledge:

¹ See Chittick, "Ibn 'Arabī and his School," in *Islamic Spirituality: Manifestations*, edited by S. H. Nasr (New York: Crossroad, 1990), pp. 49-79; idem, "Ibn 'Arabī," in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, edited by S. H. Nasr and O. Leaman (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 497-509; idem, "The School of Ibn 'Arabī," in *ibid.*, pp. 510-23.

² Ibn 'Arabī's focus on knowledge is not unrelated to the fact that his writings are essentially commentaries on the Quran, which constantly stresses its importance. See Michel Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean Without Shore: Ibn Arabi, the Book, and the Law* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993).

³ On occasion Ibn 'Arabī contrasts *'ilm* and *ma'rifa*, but the distinction between the two terms plays no major role in his writings. See Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabī's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), pp. 147-49. For a detailed discussion of some of Ibn 'Arabī's views on various aspects of knowledge, see *ibid.*, especially Chapters 9-14.

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There is no level more eminent [*ashraf*] than the level of knowledge (III 448.7).⁴

There is no eminence higher than the eminence of knowledge, and there is no state above the state of understanding [*fahm*] from God (IV 129.14).

There is no blessing [*ni'ma*] greater than the blessing of knowledge, even though God's blessings cannot be counted (II 620.9).

The most excellent [*afdal*] thing through which God has shown munificence to His servants is knowledge. When God bestows knowledge on someone, He has granted him the most eminent of attributes and the greatest of gifts (III 361.16).

God said, commanding His Prophet—upon him be blessings and peace—“Say: ‘My Lord, increase me in knowledge’,” [Quran 20:114] for it is the most eminent attribute and the most surpassing [*anzah*] quality (II 117.13).

Knowledge is the cause of deliverance. . . . How eminent is the rank of knowledge! This is why God did not command His Prophet to seek increase in anything except knowledge (II 612.9).

Given the extraordinary importance that Ibn 'Arabī accords to knowledge and the vast extent of his literary corpus, it is beyond the scope of this article even to begin a survey of his views on its nature and significance. Instead I will try to suggest his understanding of knowledge's “benefit” (*naʿf*). I have in mind the famous *hadīth*, “I seek refuge in God from a knowledge that has no benefit.” According to another well known *hadīth*, “Seeking knowledge is incumbent on every Muslim.” What then is the benefit to be gained by seeking it, and what sorts of knowledge have no benefit and should be avoided?

Ibn 'Arabī agrees with the standard view that there is nothing clearer or more self-evident than knowledge, so it cannot be defined in the technical sense of the term “definition” (*hadd*). Nonetheless, he sometimes offers brief, descriptive definitions, often with a view to those offered by other scholars. Thus, he says, “Knowledge is simply the perception [*idrāk*] of the essence [*dhāt*] of the sought object [*matlūb*] as it is in itself, whether it be an existence or a nonex-

⁴ Citations in the text are to the volume number, page, and line of the 1911 Cairo edition of Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futūhāt at-makkiyya*.

istence; a negation or an affirmation; an impossibility, a permissibility, or a necessity” (IV 315.11). In a similar way, he says, “Knowledge is not knowledge until it is attached to what the object of knowledge [*ma‘lūm*] is in itself” (IV 119.21).

It would not be unfair to say that Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings are an attempt to expose the full range of the “objects of knowledge” available to human beings—not exhaustively, of course, but inasmuch as these may be “beneficial.” After all, as Ibn ‘Arabī says, “The knowledges⁵ are not sought for themselves; they are sought only for the sake of that to which they attach,”⁶ that is, for the sake of their object. Thus we must ask which object or objects of knowledge, once known, are useful and profitable for human beings. In Islamic terms, benefit must be defined by ultimate issues, not by the passing phenomena of this world. Beneficial knowledge can only be that which profits man at his final homecoming, which is the return to God. Any knowledge that does not yield benefit in these terms—whether directly or indirectly—is not Quranic knowledge, so it is not Islamic knowledge, and, one might argue, it is beneath human dignity to devote oneself to it. Although acquiring various sorts of knowledge may be unavoidable on the social and individual levels, one should actively strive to avoid searching after any knowledge that does not prepare oneself for the greater knowledge. As the well known formula puts it, secondary knowledge should only be sought *bi-qadr al-hāja*, “in the measure of need.” To devote oneself exclusively or even mainly to the secondary knowledges would be blatant ingratitude toward God (*kufṛ*), because it would be to ignore the evidence of human nature and God’s explicit instructions through the prophets. As Ibn ‘Arabī expresses it,

Human beings have no eminence save in their knowledge of God. As for their knowledge of other than God, this is a diversion [*‘ulāla*] through which veiled human beings divert themselves. The right thinking man [*al-munsif*] has no aspiration save toward knowledge of Him (IV 129-5).

In a letter addressed to the famous theologian and Quranic commentator, Fakhr al-Din Rāzī, Ibn ‘Arabī suggests in somewhat more detail the benefit of knowledge, and he distinguishes knowledge that is

⁵ Although the word “knowledges” is awkward in English, it is perhaps preferable to “sciences,” which would suggest that Arabic, like English, makes a distinction between knowledge and science.

⁶ *Dhakhā‘ir al-a‘lāq*, edited by M. Abd al-Rahmin al-Kurdi (Cairo, 1968), p. 191.

truly important and imperative from the various types of knowledge with which the ignorant and the veiled (and most theologians) divert themselves. By asserting that genuinely worthwhile knowledge comes only by way of “bestowal” (*wahb*) and “witnessing” (*mushāhada*), he wants to say that genuine knowledge is not of the sort that can be gained by reading books. It cannot be acquired merely by human efforts (*iktisābi*). Rather, it must be bestowed by divine specification (*ikhtisāsi*). Or, to use a pair of terms that becomes common in later texts, true knowledge of things is not *husūli* (“acquired,” or gained by learning), but rather *hudūri* (“presential,” or gained by presence with God). Ibn 'Arabī often cites Quranic verses that encourage people to prepare themselves to receive the God-given knowledge, such as 2:282, which stresses the importance of *taqwā*, “godwariness” or “piety”: “Be wary of God, and God will teach you.” He writes to Rāzī,

The intelligent person should not seek any knowledge save that through which his essence is perfected and which is carried along with him wherever he may be taken. This is nothing but knowledge of God in respect of bestowal and witnessing. After all, you need your knowledge of medicine, for example, only in the world of diseases and illnesses. When you are taken to a world in which there is no illness or sickness, whom will you treat with this knowledge? . . . So also is knowledge of geometry. You need it in the world of spatial area. When you are taken elsewhere, you will leave it behind in its world, for the soul goes forward untrammelled, without taking anything along with it.

Such is occupation with every knowledge that the soul leaves behind when it is taken to the afterworld. Hence, the intelligent person should not partake of knowledge except that of it which is touched by imperative need [*al-hājat al-darūriyya*]. He should struggle to acquire what is taken along with him when he is taken. This is none other than two knowledges specifically—knowledge of God, and knowledge of the homesteads of the afterworld [*mawātin al-ākhirā*] and what is required by its stations, so that he may walk there as he walks in his own home and not deny anything whatsoever.⁷

⁷ *Risālat al-Shaykh ila'l-imām al-Rāzī*, pp. 6-7, in *Rasā'il Ibn 'Arabī* (Hyderabad-Deccan: The Dāiratul-Ma'ārifil-Osmania, 1948). Ibn 'Arabī is alluding here to a long *hadīth* found in the *Sahīh* of Muslim that describes, among other things, how people will deny God when He appears to them on the Day of Resurrection. They will continue to deny Him until He appears to them in a form that they recognize as coinciding with their own beliefs. Ibn 'Arabī cites from this *hadīth* in the continuation of the passage from his letter to Rāzī: “After all, he should be one of the folk of recognition [*'irfān*], not one of the folk of denial [*nukrān*]. Those homesteads [in

One may ask here about knowledge of the statutes or rulings (*ahkām*) of the *Sharī'ah*. Is such knowledge imperative? The answer is, "In the measure of need." Like most other knowledges, knowledge of the *Sharī'ah* has no benefit once a person reaches the next world. Ibn 'Arabī often reminds us that *taklīf*—God's "burdening" the soul by prescribing for it the *Sharī'ah*—is cut off at death. In the posthumous realms, everyone will worship God with an essential worship, not with the secondary and accidental worship that is characteristic of believers in this world and which depends on knowledge of the *Sharī'ah*. Hence *Sharī'ite* knowledge is important to the extent that it is useful in guiding the individual in his worship and service of God in this world, but it has no use in the next world. One should learn it here only to the degree of imperative need. Ibn 'Arabī explains this point as follows, concluding once again by insisting on the priority that must be given to knowledge of God and the afterworld.

The need of the soul for knowledge is greater than the constitution's need for the food that keeps it wholesome. Knowledge is of two sorts: The first knowledge is needed in the same way that food is needed. Hence it is necessary to exercise moderation, to limit oneself to the measure of need. This is knowledge of the *Sharī'ah*'s rulings. One should not consider these rulings except in the measure that one's need touches on them at the moment, for their ruling property pertains only to acts that occur in this world. So take from this knowledge only in the measure of your activity!

The second knowledge, which has no limit at which one can come to a halt, is knowledge that pertains to God and the homesteads of the resurrection. Knowledge of the resurrection's homesteads will lead its knower to be prepared for what is proper to each homestead. This is because on that day the Real Himself will make demands through lifting the veils. That is "the Day of Differentiation" [Quran 37:21]. It is necessary for intelligent human beings to be "upon insight" [12:108] in their affairs and to be prepared to answer for themselves and for others in the

the afterworld] are homesteads for making distinct, not homesteads of commingling that would give rise to error. When he gains this station of making distinct, he will be delivered from the party of that group who say, when their Lord discloses Himself to them, 'We seek refuge in God from you. You are not our Lord. We will wait until our Lord comes.' Then, when He comes to them in the form in which they recognize Him, they will acknowledge Him. So how great is their bewilderment." For other examples of his explanation of this *hadīth*'s significance see Chittick, *Sufi Path*, index of *hadīths* under "He transmutes," as well as idem, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-'Arabī's Cosmology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), index of *hadīths* under "Is there between you."

homesteads within which they know that answers will be demanded from them (I 581.29).

Ibn 'Arabī offers many arguments to support his position on the priority that must be given to knowledge of God and the afterworld. These arguments are rooted in ontology, theology, anthropology, and psychology—taking all of these in the senses demanded by the traditional Islamic sciences.

Ibn 'Arabī's most basic argument can perhaps be called “anthropological,” in that it is rooted in an understanding of what it means to be human. The axiom here is that “God created Adam in His own form,” or, to cite the Quran, that “He taught Adam the names, all of them” (2:30). Given that human beings represent the “form” (*sūra*) of a “meaning” (*ma'nā*) that is God, or that they have been given knowledge of *all* things, the human soul is in principle infinite, which is to say that, although it has a beginning, it has no end (*la nihāyah lah*). Only this can explain its everlastingness in the world to come. God—who is the meaning made manifest by the human form—creates a cosmos, which is typically defined as “everything other than God” (*mā siwā Allāh*). Understood in this sense, the cosmos can have no final boundaries, for God is eternally the Creator. It follows that man's knowledge of the cosmos, like his knowledge of its Creator, can have no final limit. Moreover, knowledge of the universe is itself knowledge of God, a point that Ibn 'Arabī sees already implicit in the Arabic language. Thus he writes, “We refer to the ‘cosmos,’ [*'ālam*] with this word to give ‘knowledge’ [*'ilm*] that by it we mean that He has made it a ‘mark’ [*'ālāma*]” (II 473.33).⁸

Knowledge of the cosmos, however, can also be the greatest veil on the path to God, because the more man focuses on signs and marks without recognizing what they signify, the more he is overcome by the darkness that prevents him from seeing things as they are. From this point of view, any knowledge of the universe that does not recognize the divine workings and acknowledge the signs of God for what they are does not deserve the name “knowledge.” Rather, it is a diversion, a veil, and an ignorance dressed as knowledge.

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⁸ On this point, see Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, Chapter 1.

The universe is the domain of “possibility” (*imkān*). As such, it is contrasted with the domain of Necessity, which is God Himself; and with impossibility, which is sheer nonexistence. With God, all things are possible. As the Quran says repeatedly, “God is powerful over everything,” so the realm of possibility has no end. Hence, as Ibn ‘Arabī puts it, “Knowledge of the possible realm is an all-embracing ocean of knowledge that has magnificent waves within which ships flounder. It is an ocean that has no shore save its two sides,” (III 275.15) which are Necessity and impossibility, or the Essence of God and absolute nothingness.

Trying to know things in terms of other things is like trying to pinpoint a wave in the ocean. Nor can Necessity be known in itself, for none knows God as God knows God save God. And absolute nothingness is also unknowable, for there is nothing there to be known. This helps explain Ibn ‘Arabī’s radically agnostic attitude toward true and final knowledge of anything. “It is impossible for anything other than God to gain knowledge of the cosmos, of the human being in himself, or of the self of anything in itself” (III 557.4). We know things not in themselves but in relation to other things or in relation to God, and we come to know God only relationally (which is why Ibn ‘Arabī calls the divine names and attributes “relations,” *nisab*). Only God has direct, unmediated knowledge of Himself and of things in themselves.

Given the impossibility of true knowledge without God’s help and without recognizing how the objects of knowledge relate to God, it should come as no surprise that one of Ibn ‘Arabī’s frequent themes is the inadequacy of human reason (*‘aql*) as an instrument with which to grasp the realities of things. Every knowledge gained through reason or any other created mode of knowing is defined and constricted by the limitations of everything other than God. Man can understand things only inasmuch as his native ability, circumstances, upbringing, and training allows him to. The theories and thoughts of those who try to know things without recognizing the manner in which things act as signs and marks of God illustrate little but human incapacity.

In effect, as Ibn ‘Arabī tells us repeatedly, man can know things only in the measure of himself, and this is especially true concerning knowledge of God, who lies infinitely beyond the range of created things. In the last analysis, we can only know ourselves.

The thing knows nothing but itself, and nothing knows anything except from itself (III 282-34).

God knows the created thing and He knows that to which it goes back. But the created thing knows nothing of its own states save what it has at the moment (IV 110.8).⁹



One of Ibn 'Arabī's many arguments to show the futility of independent human efforts to achieve real knowledge is based on the concept of *taqlīd*, "imitation" or "following authority," a term well-known in jurisprudence (*fiqh*). All knowledge comes from outside the soul's essence. We acquire knowledge from teachers, books, the media, scientists, and our own senses and faculties. All knowledge derives from other than our own intellective essence, and we have no choice but to follow the other's authority. The only rational course is to follow God, who alone knows, given that we can know nothing for certain without God's help. Ibn 'Arabī writes, for example,

Knowledge is not correct for anyone who does not know things through his own essence. Anyone who knows something through something added to his own essence is following the authority of that added thing in what it gives to him. But nothing in existence knows things through its own essence other than the One. As for anything other than the One, its knowledge of things and non-things is a following of authority. Since it has been affirmed that other than God cannot have knowledge of a thing without following authority, let us follow God's authority, especially in knowledge of Him (II 298.2).

God-given, reliable knowledge is provided by the prophets, but here we run up against the same difficulty, given that prophetic knowledge can only be understood in the measure of our own capacity. Of course, faith is a gift that can remove doubts, but faith is not the furthest limit of human possibility. Beyond faith is found the direct knowledge of "bestowal and witnessing." Ibn 'Arabī points to a Quranic verse that mentions God's questioning His messengers on the Day of Resurrec-

⁹ As Ibn 'Arabī often puts it, the God or gods that people worship—and everyone without exception is a worshipper of some god—is only the God that they understand, not God as He is in Himself. No one can truly understand God except God Himself. Hence everyone worships a God fabricated by his own belief, and from this standpoint—there are, of course, other standpoints—all human beings without exception are idol-worshippers. See Chittick, *Sufi Path*, Chapter 19, and idem, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-'Arabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), Chapter 9.

tion. They respond by saying that they have no knowledge. For Ibn ‘Arabī, this is a general rule that applies to all human beings.

The day God will gather the messengers and say, “What response did you receive?” They will say, “We have no knowledge; Thou art the Ever-knowing of the absent things” [5:109]. No one has any knowledge save those whom God has taught. Other than this divine path in teaching, there is nothing but the predominance of conjecture, coincidence with knowledge, or being convinced by fantasy. As for knowledge, all the paths that convey to knowledge are assailed by doubts. The pure soul that God acquaints with these doubts will never be confident of having certitude by gaining knowledge, save through the divine path, and that is His words, “If you are wary of God, He will assign you a discrimination,” [8:29] and His words, “He created the human being, He taught him the clarification” [55:3-4]—He clarifies what is in Himself (IV 80.33).

In short, only real knowledge, which is true knowledge of the Real, is beneficial. It alone is worthy of human aspiration. Every other sort of knowledge must be subservient to it. And this real knowledge cannot be acquired without following God’s authority. What then is Ibn ‘Arabī’s goal in his writing? In brief, it is to explain the truth and reality of each created thing as it stands in relation to its Creator on the basis of real knowledge, and to explain the benefit of knowing this. He is not concerned with explaining the way in which things are interrelated outside the divine context. That is the goal of other forms of knowledge, none of which has any real benefit apart from the service it can render to the primary knowledge, and each of which necessarily reads the book of the universe in terms of its own limited perspective.

In Ibn ‘Arabī’s view, no modality of knowing and no standpoint allows for transcending its own limitations save the one standpoint that recognizes the relative validity of each but does not become bound and restricted by any. He sometimes calls this standpoint “the standpoint of no standpoint” (*maqām lā maqām*). He also calls it *tahqīq* or “realization.” Although he has been called the great spokesman for *wahdat al-wujūd*, he himself never employs this expression, and few if any of the many understandings of this controversial term that appear in later Islamic history provide adequate presentations of what in fact he does say about *wahda*, *wujūd*, and the relation between the two.

If we want to use Ibn ‘Arabī’s own terminology to represent his own theoretical position, we can do no better than *tahqīq*. He often

calls the greatest of the Muslim sages *muhaqqiqūn*, those who practice *tahqīq*. His followers, such as Sadr al-Dīn Qūnawī, refer to their own activity as *tahqīq* and their position as *mashrah al-muhaqqiqīn* (“the viewpoint of the realizers”). For them, *tahqīq* is a methodology that is rooted in knowledge of things as they are, that is, knowledge of their very essences, which is knowledge of the things as they are known to God, a knowledge that can only be attained through God’s guidance and bestowal.

The word *tahqīq* is a verbal form deriving from the root *h.q.q*, from which we have two words of great importance for the Islamic sciences—*haqīqa* and *haqq*. *Haqīqa* means “reality” and “truth.” Although not employed in the Quran, it is used in the *hadīth* literature and comes to play a major role in the Islamic sciences in general as well as in Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings. The metaphysical, philosophical, and theological significance of the word is suggested by the English translation. As soon as we pose questions like “What is reality?”, “What is truth?”, “What is the reality of a thing?”, we fall into the most difficult of theoretical issues.

If we take the meaning of the word *haqīqa* into account in trying to understand the meaning of *tahqīq*, we can say that the word means “to search out reality,” or “to discover the truth.” This helps explain why in contemporary Persian *tahqīq* is used to mean “scientific research,” while in Egyptian Arabic it commonly means “interrogation.”

In order to grasp the sense of the word *tahqīq* as Ibn ‘Arabī and others use the term, it may be more useful to look at the word *haqq*, which is employed 250 times in the Quran. *Haqq* is a noun and an adjective that means truth and true, reality and real, propriety and proper, appropriateness and appropriate, rightness and right. When used as a name of God, it means the Real, the Truth, the Right. It is commonly employed as a virtual synonym for the name God (*Allāh*).

In a common usage of the term, *haqq*, or the “Real,” is juxtaposed with *khalq*, “creation.” These are the two basic realities (*haqīqa*). The status of *haqq*, the Real, is perfectly clear, because “There is no god but God,” which is to say that there is nothing real, true, right, proper, and appropriate in the full senses of these terms save God. The Necessary Being of God, which makes Itself known through everything that exists, is not simply “that which truly is,” but also that which is right, worthy, fitting, and appropriate.

This leaves us with the question of how to deal with *khalq*. If God alone is *haqq* in a strict sense, where exactly do creation and created things stand? The question is especially significant because of the

manner in which the Quran, in a dozen verses, juxtaposes a second term with *haqq*. This is *bātil* which means unreal, wrong, inappropriate, null, void, absurd. Although the later literature pairs both *khalq* and *bātil* with *haqq*, the distinction between these two terms is fundamental. *Bātil* is totally other than *haqq*—it is the negation of *haqq*. In contrast, although *khalq* is not the same as *haqq*, it is also not completely different, for it is certainly not unreal, wrong, vain, and null. “We did not create the heavens, the earth, and what is between the two as *bātil*” (Quran 38:27).

The exact status of *khalq* is the first question of Islamic philosophy and much of Islamic theology and Sufism. It is precisely the question of reality (*haqīqa*) or quiddity (*māhiyya*): “What is it?”¹⁰ In Ibn ‘Arabī’s view, no clear and categorical answer to this question can be given. Creation’s status is always ambiguous, because it always hangs between *haqq* and *bātil*, God and nothingness, real and unreal, right and wrong, proper and improper, appropriate and inappropriate. Nonetheless, creation needs to be investigated. We cannot avoid asking “What are we?” As creatures, we need to know our status in relation to our Creator. To the extent that we can answer the question of what we are, or where we stand in relation to God, we come to understand our purpose in being here.

In short, the basic questions that face us in our humanity can be reduced to two: “What (*mā*)?” and “Why (*limā*)?” What are we, and why are we here? What is our actual situation, and what do we need to do with it to achieve our purpose? The process of asking these questions, answering them, and then putting the answers into practice is called *tahqīq*, “realization.”

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As with most of Ibn ‘Arabī’s technical terminology, the meaning that he gives to *tahqīq* is rooted in the Quran and the *Hadīth*. One Quranic verse plays an especially important role: “He has given each thing its

¹⁰ Whether or not this question applies properly to God is an important theological and philosophical issue. According to Ibn ‘Arabī, to ask it concerning God is to be ignorant of Him and should not be allowed. See *Futūhāt*, Chapter 256 (translated in Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, pp. 213-14). That God has no “whatness” or quiddity (*māhiyya*) other than *wujūd* itself, and that *wujūd* is not a proper answer to the question of whatness (which demands a definition), is a well-known theological and philosophical position, and it is referred to in Sufi works as early as Hujwiri’s *Kashf al-mahjūb*. See my *Faith and Practice of Islam: Three Thirteenth Century Sufi Texts* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), pp. 202-3.

creation, then guided” (20:50). Here we have the beginnings of an answer to the questions, “What?” and “Why?”

What are we? Are we *haqq* or *bātil*, real or unreal, appropriate or inappropriate? The answer is given by the first clause of the verse, “He has given each thing its creation,” which is to say that the *haqq* has determined and bestowed the *khalq*, so the divine determination erases the unreality and falseness that dominate over created things when they are isolated from the Real. As the Quran puts it, “The *haqq* has come and the *bātil* has vanished” (17:41). The Absolute *Haqq* has defined, determined, and given existence to the creature.

Why are we here? The answer is provided by the second: “Then guided.” We are here to follow guidance and engage in right thought and appropriate activity. Right and worthy thought and activity is called “worship” (*ibāda*), that is, being a “servant” (*‘abd*) of the Lord who created us. As God says in the Quran, “I created jinn and mankind only to worship Me” (51:56). Worshiping and serving God—that is, putting oneself in harmony with the Absolute *Haqq* by observing the *haqq* that is present in all things—is the means whereby human beings achieve their purpose in creation.

Muslim theologians commonly say that God has two commands (*amr*). One is called the “creative” or “engendering” command (*al-amr al-takwīnī*). It is God’s saying to a thing, “Be” (*kun*), and everything in the universe without exception follows this command, because it is the very being that gives reality to the thing. In view of this command, every creature is *haqq*, which is to say that it is real, right, true, and appropriate. “We created the heavens and the earth and what is between them only through the *haqq*” (15:85). The second command is called the “prescriptive” or “burdening” command (*al-amr al-taklīfī*). It is the means whereby God says, “Do this and don’t do that.” It reveals right knowledge, right speech, and right activity.

In view of the first command, every creature is *haqq*. In view of the second command, which is addressed specifically to human beings, everyone must act in keeping with the *haqq* of things and strive to avoid the *bātil* in things. The engendering command tells us what we are, and the prescriptive tells us why we are here.

The relation of God’s guidance with the term *haqq* is suggested by a *hadīth* that also plays a basic role in Ibn ‘Arabī’s understanding of *tahqīq*. The *hadīth* has several versions, probably because the Prophet repeated the words in slightly different forms on a variety of occasions. Certainly it sets down an everyday guiding principle for people concerned with the truth and the right. In a typical version, it reads,

“Your soul has a *haqq* against you, your Lord has a *haqq* against you, your guest has a *haqq* against you, and your spouse has a *haqq* against you; so give to each that has a *haqq* its *haqq*.”

In terms of the first question, “What are we?”, this *hadith* explains that we are *haqq* and that we have *haqq*s pertaining to us, which is to say we and everything else has a proper situation, a correct mode of being, an appropriate manner of displaying the Real. All things do so because “God has given each thing its creation,” and thereby He has established not only the *khalq* of a thing, but also its *haqq*.

In terms of the second question, “Why are we here?”, the *hadith* tells us, “Give to each that has a *haqq* its *haqq*.” We are here to act correctly. This demands that everything we do, say, and think be right, true, appropriate, worthy, and real. Things have *haqq*s “against” (*‘alā*) us, so we will be asked about these *haqq*s and we will need to “respond.” Each *haqq* against us represents our “responsibility.” Our own *haqq* is our “right.”

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Given that only human beings were taught *all* the names by God, they alone have the capacity to recognize and realize the *haqq* of everything in existence. From Ibn ‘Arabī’s standpoint, man was created in the form of the Absolute *Haqq*, so he corresponds and correlates with all of *khalq*, that is, with “everything other than the Real,” the sum total of forms that are disclosed by the Meaning that is God. Man has the capacity to know the true names of all things, and knowing the true name of a thing is tantamount to knowing its *haqq*, which is not only its truth and reality, but also the rightful and appropriate claim that it has upon us and our responsibility toward it. All of creation makes demands upon man, because he is created in God’s form and has been appointed His vicegerent (*khalifa*). He has the God-given duty, woven into his original created nature (*fitra*), to recognize the *haqq* of things and to act accordingly. It is this *haqq* that must be known if his knowledge is to be true, right, worthy, and appropriate, for this *haqq* is identical with the *khalq* that God has established.

In short, beneficial knowledge is knowledge of the what and the why of ourselves and of things. In order to know a thing truly and benefit from the knowledge, we need to know what it is—its reality (*haqīqa*), which is nothing but its *khalq* and its *haqq*—and we need to know how we should respond to it. What exactly does it demand from us, rightly, truly, and appropriately? To put this into a formula,

tahqīq means knowing the *haqīqa* of God and things and acting according to their *haqq*. Realization is to know things as they truly are and act appropriately in every circumstance.

* * *

Given that all things manifest the Absolute *Haqq* and each possesses a relative *haqq*, and given that man will be held responsible for the *haqq*s that pertain to him, he needs a scale by which to judge the extent of his own responsibility and learn how to deal with the *haqq*s. He cannot possibly know the *haqq* of things by his own lights or his own rational investigation of the world and the soul, because the relative *haqq* of created things is determined and defined by the Absolute *Haqq*, and the Absolute *Haqq* is unknowable except in the measure in which God chooses to reveal Himself. Hence the scale can only come through the prophets, who are precisely the means by which the *Haqq* has chosen to make Himself known. The Quran is the means that clarifies the *haqq* for Muslims: “With the *haqq* We have sent it down, and with the *haqq* it has come down” (17:105).

One can conclude that for Ibn 'Arabī, the fundamental divine command—a command whereby the question, “What should we do?” is answered most directly—is expressed in the *hadīth* of the *haqq*s by the sentence, “Give to each that has a *haqq* its *haqq*.” Giving things their *haqq*s is the very definition of the human task in the cosmos, and it is precisely the meaning of *tahqīq*.

Once man recognizes that the Absolute *Haqq* is God and that the *haqq* of all things depends utterly on God, he has to employ the divine scale to recognize the realities and the *haqq*s of the things. The first thing in the domain of *khalq* whose reality and *haqq* must be understood is the human self or soul (*nafs*). Notice that the *hadīth* begins, “Your soul has a *haqq* against you, your Lord has a *haqq* against you,” and then goes on to mention others. The order is not irrelevant. Without knowing oneself, one cannot know one’s Lord. God and everything in the universe have *haqq*s against us, but in order to give each thing its *haqq*, we first must know who we are. Otherwise, we will not be able to discern which of the *haqq*s pertain to us.

On the *Shari‘ah* level, determining the *haqq*s is relatively straightforward, because it demands recognizing only that we are addressed by the Law, though observing the *haqq* of the relevant rulings may not be an easy task. But the *Shari‘ah* pertains only to a small portion of reality. What about the rest of existence? When God said, “I am

placing in the earth a vicegerent” (2:30), did He mean that His chosen vicegerents have only to obey a few commands and prohibitions, there being no need to know Him, or the universe, or themselves? When He said, “God burdens a soul only to its capacity” (2:286), did He mean that one is free to define one’s own capacity by one’s understanding of biology, psychology, history, and politics? How can one decide what this “burdening” entails unless one knows the capacity of one’s own soul? If Ibn ‘Arabī and many other Muslim sages are correct—and if we simply grasp the implications of everlasting life—a human soul is “an ocean without shore,” an endless unfolding. Dealing with the *haqq* of such a reality demands more than what is given in our philosophies, to say nothing of our sciences.

To put this discussion in a slightly different way, the issue of who we are pertains not only to anthropology, psychology, and ethics, but even more deeply to ontology and cosmology. To give ourselves our *haqq*, we must know who it is of whom we are the *khalq*. Here Ibn ‘Arabī displays his talents as a *muhaqqiq*, a “realizer,” because he plumbs the depths of the subtle mysteries of Being and Its relations with the human soul. It is from these contexts that his followers derived teachings that came to be called *wahdat al-wujūd*, and it is here that he speaks in great detail about the “perfect human being,” who is the fully realized form of God. *Tahqīq* becomes a term that designates the station of those who have achieved, by divine solicitude (*‘ināya*), the full possibilities of human knowledge and existence. The *muhaqqiqs* have recognized the *haqq* in exactly the manner in which God has established it. Through giving each thing that has a *haqq* its *haqq*, the *muhaqqiqs* also give God, who has given each thing its creation, His *haqq*, and thus achieve, to the extent humanly possible, the fullness of God-given knowledge and God-given reality.

* * *

In this exceedingly brief and inadequate presentation of some of Ibn ‘Arabī’s basic views on the benefit of knowledge, let me focus a bit more on what might be learned from him today. A point that he constantly highlights and that many people tend to forget is the question of putting limits on the pursuit of knowledge. Is it possible to maintain that certain forms of knowledge should be avoided? In the case of Muslims, for example, how should scholars who happen to be Muslims define the “Islamicity” of knowledge, which is presumably established in terms of standards set down by the Quran and the

Sunnah? Is it sufficient to be a Muslim for the pursuit of, let us say, medicine, engineering, or physics, to be an “Islamic” project? How does any person of religious faith justify engagement with a scientific or academic discipline that is effectively cut off from transcendent principles?

By the standards of *tahqīq*, the vast majority of disciplines in a modern university fail to address the *haqq* of the objects under study. In other words, the knowledge that is sought, rather than unveiling the nature of things, obscures it. Ibn 'Arabī calls such disciplines “diversions” and “pastimes” for the heedless. Naturally, many religious people who occupy themselves with contemporary fields of learning would like to think that they are indeed involved in a legitimate, divinely approved task. No doubt there is plenty of room for discussion, but without seeking help from the great sages of the past who have devoted their minds and hearts to meditation on these issues, we may go on deceiving ourselves. As the Quran puts it, “Shall We tell you who will be the greatest losers in their works? Those whose striving goes astray in this life, while they think that they are doing good deeds” (Quran 18:104).

Ibn 'Arabī's methodology of *tahqīq* is focused on the clarification of the basic modes of knowing the absolute and relative *haqq*s and on the delineation of the duties and responsibilities that these modes of knowing establish. From his standpoint, any knowledge that does not focus on the manner in which God knows, creates, and guides is not in fact knowledge, but ignorance masquerading as knowledge. Such knowledge does entail the cognitive activity called “knowing,” but it is not true knowledge, because it does not situate the known objects in reality—which is defined by the Real. Rather, it sets up artificial and illusory boundaries that allow people to feel happy that they are occupied with tasks that have no real and appropriate benefit.

The *haqq* and *haqīqa* of things can only be known through divine guidance, because the essence of things is known only to the Absolute *Haqq*. This knowledge may come indirectly, through the prophets, or directly, through “bestowal and witnessing.” Ibn 'Arabī and many others take the position that the direct witnessing will not be bestowed without the knowledge provided by the prophets, and prophetic knowledge cannot properly be understood without bestowal and witnessing. In the end, everything depends upon divine guidance.

The *muhaqqiq* puts all things in their proper places. He recognizes their *haqīqa* and their *haqq*. In one respect, his *tahqīq* is identical with the “standpoint of no standpoint.” Standing with the absolute and non-

delimited *Haqq*, he sees that “God has given everything its creation” and that the creation of each thing is its *haqq*. He accepts the legitimacy of all things exactly as they are, because they are nothing but *haqq*. Simultaneously, he gives the *Sharī‘ah* and reason their *haqq*s, which is to say that he acknowledges right and wrong ways of doing things and right and wrong ways of knowing things. In his human essence, made in God’s form, he is not tied down to any specific standpoint, but, in his theory and practice, he follows reason and the *Sharī‘ah*.¹¹

Without *tahqīq*, one is left with specific, defined, and limiting standpoints. These may be established on the basis of divine guidance (e.g., revealed religions, the *Sharī‘ah*), and they may be established by human efforts that take no heed of such guidance. In the latter case, Ibn ‘Arabī would claim, they do not deserve the name *‘ilm*, which, like everything else, has a *haqq*. Nonetheless, such “knowledge” is the warp and weft of the modern world, the backbone of science, technology, business, finance, government, the military, and the “information age” in general.

Taking help from Ibn ‘Arabī we might briefly analyze the contemporary scene among Muslims (and, *mutatis mutandis*, to followers of other religions) as follows: Generally speaking, the community leaders and scholars have continued to recognize the fundamental desirability of knowledge. However, they have lost touch with the Islamic criteria for judging its legitimacy. Their idea of *tahqīq* is to give everything its *haqq* as defined by the relevant field of modern science or political ideology. They have no idea of the traditional standards by which the various forms of knowledge need to be ranked in terms of usefulness and benefit. It would not occur to them that engineering and medicine—not to mention sociology and political science—meet none of the basic criteria of beneficialness. They have accepted uncritically the idols worshipped in today’s world—care, communication, consumption, identity, information, standard of living, management, resource—and have not a clue that these are empty categories that function to eradicate traditional contexts and manipulate individuals and society to various ill-defined ends.¹² They have no inkling that the great Muslim intellectuals of the past would have looked with con-

¹¹ See *Furūhāt*, II 605.13, translated in Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, p. 10; and, with more context, in *idem*, *Sufi Path*, p. 243.

¹² I have in mind here the cutting critique of the goals of modern society leveled by the linguist Uwe Poerksen, who has illustrated that the language used in discussing

tempt upon what passes for “scholarship” and “science” in the modern context, and if they do have such an inkling, they have no language with which to express it other than dogmatism and slogans.

In no way am I suggesting that the great Muslims of the past would have denied the limited and relative legitimacy of modern forms of knowledge. Light is always light. However, light may become so diffuse that nothing can be seen but darkness. Somewhere the line has to be drawn so that we can recognize that *bātil* has come, and *haqq* has vanished. In fact, once knowledge is cut off from its roots in God, it quickly turns into its opposite.

As soon as we take into account the fact that God created man in His own image, it becomes clear that the modern sciences and academic disciplines are of such limited benefit that encouraging people to study them is akin to *kufr* (ingratitude to God, unbelief). No doubt the argument will be made that such sciences, in today’s world, fit into the category of *fard al-kifāya* (incumbent upon the community). This, however, is a difficult argument to sustain once one has gained even a superficial awareness of the full scope of the divine *haqq* against human beings.

The benefit of studying Ibn ‘Arabī and others like him lies precisely in coming to understand something of the full scope of human possibility, which is explicated by the prophetic messages and demanded by our own God-given nature. Today religious believers of all sorts have been cut off from the deeper teachings of their traditions. Human possibility is now defined by modern disciplines, political ideology, and the most superficial readings of sacred texts. Most religious people have no criteria by which to judge the impoverishment of the human situation and the dead-ends that are held up today as worthy of aspiration. It is only through coming to see the great revelatory sources of the traditions through the eyes of the sages of the past that the true depths of modern losses can be judged. Then there will be hope that the search for knowledge can once again become the primary

these goals is nothing but a game of smoke and mirrors, concealing a much deeper and thoroughly sinister agenda. See his *Plastic Words: The Tyranny of a Modular Language* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1995). For a good survey of the contradictions and illusions hidden in modern, political discourse, see Wolfgang Sachs (ed.), *The Development Dictionary* (London: Zed Books, 1992).

II



THE MASTER-DISCIPLE RELATIONSHIP



CHAPTER 9

The Master-Disciple Relationship¹

Huston Smith

When I was invited to give this lecture to honor Victor Danner, I knew that nothing short of physical incapacitation could prevent me from accepting. For long before the 1976-77 academic year in which, together with our wives, Victor and I guided thirty students around the world studying religions on location, I had come to regard him with a blend of affection and esteem that very few academic colleagues have drawn from me: that trip vastly deepened our friendship. And when I was asked for the title for my remarks, that too came easily. It was clear to me that I wanted to address the master-disciple relationship, for two reasons. First, during that round-the-world trip I came to look up to Victor Danner as something like my master—not in the full-blown sense of that word that I will be describing here, but certainly as my mentor in matters far exceeding his expertise as an Islamicist. The other and confirming reason for choosing this title was that it brought to mind an essay concerning religious masters that I had read many years ago. It appeared in a volume of essays by Professor Joachim Wach titled *Essays in the History of Religions*, and it impressed me to the point that I promised myself that when I had time I would return to that essay, this time not just to read it, but to study it. We all know, though, what roads paved with good intentions lead to—I never got back to that essay and I saw this lecture as providing the prod to do that. I found Wach's essay quite different from what I wanted to say; still I happily credit him with sparking many of the ideas I will be trying to develop.

Let me begin by staking out my trajectory. I will not concern myself with the conceptual content of what spiritual masters teach, which obviously differs from master to master. Instead I shall try to describe the character of the master's vocation, the kind of person that fits this role. Second, I shall not concern myself with whether the masters I

¹ The following is the text of the Victor Danner Memorial Lecture in Islamic Studies sponsored by the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures of Indiana University and delivered in February 2003.

shall be mentioning by name perfectly exemplify the type or only approximate it. Disputes over degrees are notoriously indeterminable; as someone remarked, we could argue all night as to whether Julius Caesar was a great man or a very great man. Instead I shall be invoking Max Weber's notion of "ideal types." In the technical sense of that term, which Weber moved into the terminology of sociology, an ideal type resembles a platonic form; whether it is instantiated is secondary because its primary object is to keep our ideas in order. But regarding instantiation, I will say that the much publicized recent rash of fallen gurus who betrayed their vocation is no ground for deprecating the vocation as such, which, I believe, is the highest calling life affords. Religious masters have contributed immeasurably to civilizations, if indeed they did not launch every civilization we know about. As channels for the divine, the greatest pace-setting masters did set civilizations in motion, but nothing in what I say here turns on that opinion. To come back to and restate this second methodological point, it is the ideal type of the master that I will be trying to depict.

Third, I will range cross-culturally in my illustrations of the master's vocation. I found Professor Danner's descriptions of Sufi masters so mesmerizing that I started my preparations for this lecture thinking that I would concentrate on them, but as I got into the subject I realized that those waters are too vast to allow for wading, which is all that I, who am not an Islamicist, could manage. Any stab I might make trying to nuance the differences between the Prophet Muhammad, the proto-typical Islamic master (may peace be upon him), and the masters who followed him—the first four caliphs and their successors; the Imams in the Shi'ite tradition, and masters who are known as Sufis (of which Jalal al-Din al-Rumi is the best known in the West), to mention only obvious subdivisions—would be unworthy of a lecture mounted by the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures. So I will fall back on my professional enclave as a comparativist and draw my examples from a variety of religious traditions, while noting that I will be skipping over China. Lao Tzu is too obviously mythological to be brought to focus, and though the high regard of Confucius' disciples shines through every page of the *Analects*, the aphoristic character of their reports leads me to consider Confucius, as the Chinese themselves do, as their foremost teacher rather than a religious master. Nor will I cite Socrates, though Plato's portrait of him as master is as convincing as any on record. And while I am mentioning exclusions, let me say that I place prophets in a different category from masters, although some prophets were also masters—I have already mentioned

Muhammad. In Judaism it is the Hasidic *rebbe*, literally “master,” rather than biblical prophets or ordained rabbis (teachers) who come closest to the master as I am presenting him here.

My fourth and final guideline is of a different sort, for it is really no more than a didactic device. Contrasts help to sharpen the contours of topics, and so I shall profile the master mostly by contrasting him to teachers. It speaks well for the city of Bloomington to learn that there is a large community contingent in the audience this evening, but I assume that most of you who are here are either teachers or students, so I will etch the master-disciple relationship—in Sanskrit the *guru-chela* relationship and in Arabic the *sheikh-murid* relationship—by contrasting it with the relationship between teachers and students. To keep from rambling, I will itemize the contrasts, but as there is no logical sequence in the order in which I will be discussing them, I shall not number them but demarcate them by placing a bullet before each point.

Having now announced my trajectory, I am ready to set out.

I

■ What brings students to their teachers is a body of knowledge or a skill that the teacher has mastered and to which the student aspires. Feelings, positive and negative, naturally enter, but they are byproducts of this central objective that brings them together. It is not primarily the teacher as a person who is respected, but what he possesses and can deliver to the student. Comparably, it is not who the student is as a complete person that interests the teacher, but his willingness and ability to learn—other sides of his selfhood are beside the point. The entire relationship is born from, and lives by, shared interest in the object of study. This means that both parties in the relationship are replaceable. Students can shop around for teachers and drift from one to another, and teachers will welcome new generations of students.

The situation in the master-disciple relationship is otherwise. Here the personhood of both parties is central. (It would be less precise to say the personalities of both parties, for “personality” tends to suggest the public image that the party in question presents to the world.) The master does not enjoy the disciple’s esteem because he conveys something that is useful in any utilitarian respect. Nor is it a distinguishable attribute of his total self that he seeks to transfer to the disciple—to repeat, a specifiable skill or body of knowledge. What is significant for the disciple is the master’s total self, whose character and activity are unique and irreplaceable. In this crucial respect it is like love. More

accurately, it is love in the purest sense of that word, though it is risky to use that word which has been rendered almost useless through its preemption by commercialism (hot dogs “made with a little bit of love”), sex (“making love”), sentimentality (racks of Valentine cards), and innumerable other debasing inroads. Like the master/disciple relationship, authentic love is focused on a unique, irreplaceable person. With the exception of St. Paul in his classic description in First Corinthians, I know of no one who describes authentic love better than Thomas Aquinas, and as his description almost says *in nuncce* what I am using this lecture to spell out, I shall summarize it here.

Love is more unitive than knowledge in seeking the thing, not the thing's reason; its bent is toward a real union. Other effects of love are: a reciprocal abiding of lover and beloved together as one; a transport out of the self to the other; an ardent cherishing of another; a melting so the heart is unfrozen and open to be entered; a longing in absence, heat in pursuit and enjoyment in presence.

In delight, too, there is an all-at-once wholeness and timelessness that reflects the total simultaneity of eternity; an edge of sadness; an expansion of spirit; a complete fulfillment of activity without satiety, for “they that drink shall yet thirst.”

■ Students make up their minds and intend to study, whereas disciples are called to discipleship. One thinks immediately of the tax collector Zachaeus who, perched in a tree to get a glimpse of Jesus in the passing throng, heard Jesus tell him to come down, and when he obeyed found himself transformed into an entirely different being. Or again, we think of the beautiful story of the flower scavenger Sunita, who became a renowned member of the Buddha's *sangha* when the Buddha, “seeing the marks of *arhatship* shining in his heart like a lamp in a jar,” said to him, “Sunita, what to you is this wretched mode of living? Can you endure to leave the world?” Callings such as these bring disciples to their master because in some mysterious, not fully explicable way, they seem to emanate from the master's completeness. Through this completeness, the master enters and becomes an essential part of the disciple's existence.

■ Continuing with the contrasts, the teacher and student, united as they are through a bond of work on a common task, form a series of links in which the student in his own proper time will himself become a teacher with talents that might surpass those of his own teacher, but this is unlikely in the case of the disciple. I cannot think of a single

case in which a disciple who on becoming a master thought that his bond with his disciples fully equaled the master-disciple cosmos that his own master forged. The teacher heads a school which can gather strength through the work of his successors, whereas the master forms a circle around himself which authentic disciples do not dream of fully replicating. They can radiate some of the charisma they receive from their master, and may attract disciples of their own, becoming thereby masters in their own right. But it will not be the same universe they shared with their own master, and they see it as imitating, not rivaling, the original universe they inhabited.

■ In higher education here teaching typically goes hand in hand with research and publication, teachers can pursue that side of their careers without students, whereas disciples are indispensable for masters to be such. I break in to insert a parenthesis here. To prevent my thesis from suffering death by a thousand qualifications, I am trying to keep the line between master and teacher clear, but obviously there are overlaps—the two do not constitute watertight compartments. Even professors who are chiefly invested in research can find graduate seminars stimulating, and students sometimes cathect to their teachers as if they were masters, as I did in my undergraduate years when for several years one of my professors served as a father figure and role model for me. But having acknowledged such overlaps, I revert to the difference at issue here, which is that the master-disciple relationship centers in mutuality in principle, where the teacher-student relationship does not. The master only becomes a master in his relationship to his disciples, and only through perceptive and comprehending disciples does he become fully aware of his mastership. We think of Jesus at a turning point in his ministry asking his disciples who people were saying that he was. When they answer, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” Jesus persists and asks, “But who do you say that I am?” Whereupon Simon Peter answers, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Jesus then says, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven” (Matt. 16:18). In this sense, it is the disciple who ordains his master to mastership.

We find another example of this in the Bhagavad-Gita which revolves around the dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna on the eve of the battle on the Kurukshetra plains that was scheduled to begin the next morning. At the start of their discussion, Arjuna (the prince of the forces of righteousness) is in the superior position, and Krishna

is his charioteer. Their standings are reversed, however, when Arjuna, overcome by the thought of killing his kinfolk, is brought to a state of paralyzing existential bewilderment. When he asks Krishna what he should do, he begins his move toward discipleship, questioning being the first duty of discipleship in Hinduism. Given this opening, Krishna seizes the opportunity and immediately takes control of the situation. Not wasting a word, he tells Arjuna that he is a fool. His bewilderment is caused by false premises and phony arguments. Hearing these blunt words, Arjuna very quickly takes on Hinduism's second requirement of discipleship—submission—and acknowledges that he had been careless in regarding Krishna as no more than his friend and kinsman, oblivious of the fact that he was God incarnate. Here again we see the disciple ordaining the master to mastership. The master reads the confirmation of his calling in the eye of his disciple at the same time that the disciple hears destiny calling him through the master.

■ Pulling together much of what has been said thus far, we can say that the teacher gives of his knowledge and ability, whereas the master gives—not *of* himself as we are likely to say, as if his gift could be isolated from the wholeness of his being, but himself, period. What he is to the disciple he is through the presence of his total selfhood in his every word and deed, right down to what is seemingly trivial. (One thinks of the disciple of the Maggid of Mezeritch who traveled a great distance simply to observe how the *rebbe* tied his shoelaces.) The master has become who he is through his own efforts (as inseparably infused with God's grace) and the result, as I say, is always deployed in its completeness. Disciples never perceive that completeness; to do so would require *being* the master. Disciples are able to see, moment by moment, only a facet of the totality as vectored by their respective points of view. Nevertheless, at some level of their being, they sense the presence of the wholeness, as when Jesus' words are heard as being spoken by "one having authority."

■ The teacher as researcher and writer survives in his published work; it is this that constitutes his visible legacy. The master survives only in those who have experienced his impact and bear witness to it. Others can only surmise the full extent of that impact. The disciple testifies to what the master was to him; as he has seen the master, so he paints his portrait to imprint it on his memory and report it to others. But he alone knows the full force of what produced the portrait; others can only glean from it what they can. The other disciples do likewise,

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for the desire to share what they have known burns in them all and they are eager to tell others of their firsthand experiences. But, as I have noted, though the master's selfhood is single, it imprints itself on his disciples in dissimilar ways, thereby playing out of the adage that beauty is (in part) in the eye of the beholder. Perhaps the clearest example of the multiplicity of portraits that result is the four Gospel accounts of Jesus which have recently been supplemented by apocryphal accounts such as the Gospel of Thomas—Mark presenting Jesus as wonderworker, John as transparently divine from the start of his mission, Thomas as an Essene, and so on. Each story becomes a legend, and once in place takes on a life of its own which is progressively trimmed to the generic archetype of the master to make it more easily apprehended. In reaching out thus to future generations, the stories become traditions that weave their way into the fabric of history.

■ Continuing with the point that the two preceding paragraphs took up, that the incorrigible matrices of space and time require that the singleness of the masters' selfhood be fractionated by circumstances at hand—Jesus the reconciler is the same Jesus who drives money-changers out of the temple—the master must live in the constant awareness of time's ephemerality. Only this moment, these circumstances, can disclose this aspect of his total self. The Greek word *kairos*, which carries connotations of the fullness of time, is decisive here, for no eternity can bring back what was missed in the moment of transmittal. Only the sacred hour begets the sacred impact, and many hours will be needed to try to piece together retrospectively as much of it as possible.

This makes timing crucial in the work of the master. It does not require that he carefully calculate what he will do or say; in each moment, at his ease, he gives what the moment calls for. All of the sweetness of moment, with its contextual requirements that are set within horizons that include the apprehension of approaching death, loosen his heart and tongue, and it is as though nothing had been before and nothing will ever be again, and through the frailty of the moment there shines the light of the eternal. A mundane corollary of this is that teachers, when absorbed in their work, tend to resent interruptions, whereas the master's mission consists of nothing but interruptions. It is not hyperbolic to say that dedicated teachers are consumed by projects that they set for themselves, whereas masters consume themselves in simply doing what is at hand, and in so doing they fill the world with light.

■ Teachers and students have things in common on which they work together and which unite them. The master and disciple are either directly united or not at all, and they live with each other in this relationship day in and day out. The teacher praises the swift foot, the skilled hand, the sharp eye, and the keen intellect of the student, while in the master's eye there are no such distinctions. Body and soul (to cite but a single example) are not divided, as evinced by the master's demand that the disciple attend to beauty, inasmuch as those who attend to beauty themselves become beautiful, as Plotinus said. One thinks of the apocryphal story in which Jesus, accompanied by several of his disciples, pass a dead dog by the side of the road. His disciples give it wide berth, noting which Jesus remarks, "but are not its teeth like pearls?" (This anecdote also appears as a *hadith* of the Prophet, from which the apocryphal Christian version very likely derived.) With body and soul undivided, the disciple is asked always to live from the core of his being which too is single, but in a deeper, more hidden, way.

■ Being engaged in the same pursuit bonds students to one another. Jealousies, of course, can and do arise—who will get the scholarships? who is teacher's pet?—but typically belonging to the same school and engaging in a common pursuit bonds students to one another. Thank-God-its-Friday celebration revelries are standard, lifelong friendships are forged, and class reunions mounted.

Discipleship is different. Being one of a group of disciples is no basis for mutual love and rivalries flare at the slightest provocation—we think immediately of Jesus' disciples jockeying for who will sit at his right hand in the coming kingdom—for it seems impossible that someone else should have a part in the relationship that ties the disciple to his master, the lifeblood of which is incomparability and uniqueness on both sides. This leaves no path that leads from one disciple to another. The disciple's conviction that he is devoted and open to the master as no other disciple is leads the disciple to expect this singularity to be reciprocated. Such assumptions are foreign to scholarly activity, which (a point I keep returning to) centers in something that exists objectively outside both teacher and student, the knowledge or skill they are united in trying to convey, or master as the case may be. Related here is the issue of betrayal. The impersonality of the bonding subject matter makes the betrayal of a teacher virtually inconceivable, whereas Judas Iscariot stands as an enduring example of the fact that in the master-disciple relationship that shattering act

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not only does occur but is understandable. That Rumi's master, Shams of Tabriz, was murdered by disciples who were jealous of his special bond with Rumi is probably not the case (see below), but it is understandable that the rumor arose.

■ When students and disciples are deprived of their head, the issue of bonding is almost reversed. Students dispute, often bitterly, over what the teacher was driving at and rival schools arise. (One thinks of Mencius and Hsun Tzu as rival interpreters of what Confucius taught, which is another reason for classifying Confucius as a teacher rather than a master.) As for disciples, though they were rivals while their master was living, they now find themselves drawn together by the image of their master which is sacred to them all. Their personal distress, common loneliness, and concern for the future produce a great unity—one thinks of the disciples of Jesus gathering in the Upper Room where tongues of fire descended on them and the Christian Church was born. Such comings-together generate huge spiritual momentums, which time must inevitably erode to some extent. Where some of its original strength is recovered a new master has arisen who creates a distinctive order.

■ To conclude the differences I have itemized, one can have a succession of teachers, but in classic cases only one master. A beautiful poem by Emily Dickinson adapts perfectly to this point.

The soul selects her own society,
Then shuts the door;
On her divine majority
Obtrude no more.

Unmoved, she notes the chariots pausing
At her low gate;
Unmoved, an emperor is kneeling
Upon her mat.

I've known her from an ample nation
Choose one;
Then close the valves of her attention
Like stone.

II

As far as I can see, the traits that I have been ascribing to masters apply generically to them all, but of course each master is also unique—I know of no master other than Muhammad who had an angel, Gabriel, for his master. In between these logical extremes of sameness and difference there are groupings into which masters fall; the genus contains, admits of species, we might say. Jesus and Krishna were incarnations, while Moses and Muhammad were prophets, a category that is itself complex, for by Islamic reckoning, Moses and Muhammad were prophets (*anbiya'*, sing. *nabi*) who were also Messengers (*rusul*, sing. *rasul*), by virtue of launching new religions, which not all prophets do. Again, not all prophets prophesy the future, but Muhammad prophesied about the end of the world. Some masters possess supernatural powers as did Ramakrishna who complied with Vivekananda's request for a direct experience of God simply by touching his forehead, but Buddha and Muhammad foreswore miracles. Such categories and their subdivisions could be multiplied indefinitely—but rather than let this lecture degenerate into a catalogue I will devote my remaining space to a single difference that I find most rewarding.

It turns on the issue of tragedy which figures importantly in the mission of some masters, but not all—the missions of Jesus and the Buddha have tragic aspects, but those of Krishna and Muhammad show no trace of it. I will have to enter a gloss on Krishna before I am through, but the paradigmatic portrait of him in the Gita supports the conclusion of students of comparative literature who tell us that it is the Greeks and Shakespeare who dealt consummately with tragedy while in India it scarcely appears—perhaps because Brahman's creations are *lila*, his divine play. As for the Prophet Muhammad, if being orphaned and losing one's only son (to say nothing of wives and daughters) is not tragic the word has no meaning, but those tragedies do not seem to have played an integral part in his mission, as they did in the missions of Jesus and the Buddha. It goes without saying that the category of masters in whose mission tragedy does figure is not exhausted by those two figures, but they are the ones I will focus on.

Tragedy enters first in this class of masters in the requirement that they renounce the world and the best things in it for the sake of what that renunciation will bring to the world. We see this most clearly in the Buddha's realization at an early age that to fulfill his mission he had to abandon his wife and their newborn son, the tenderest ties worldly life affords; but we find it also in Jesus' renunciation, not only of the kingdoms of the earth in his temptation scene, but (as in the

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Buddha's case) all prospects of having a family and home of his own. "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Matt. 8:20, Luke 9:58).

Second, there is the tragedy that these masters realize that what they have to impart is so profoundly contrary to conventional wisdom that even their disciples will be able to comprehend it only partially. This comes out explicitly in Mara's final temptation to the Buddha, that he slip directly from his enlightenment into nirvana because what he discovered under a tree on that holy night was too profound for the world, steeped in *avidya*, ignorance, to grasp. (It wasn't necessary for Mara to go into explanations, but as I tried to show above, the deepest reason for the failure would be that to understand him fully would require that his hearers *become* him, an impossibility.) With the Buddha's retort that "there will be some who will understand"—it would have been more precise if he had said that his disciples would understand in part—this greatest temptation was averted and Mara was banished forever. As for Jesus, the synoptic Gospels, especially Matthew, show him time and again trying to get across to his disciples that that they aren't getting his point. This is the melancholy awareness of all masters in this class—that they will have no real heirs because the sweetest and best fruit that ripens in them can never be given away, inasmuch as whoever comes to himself comes to himself only, not to the master's self. This realization brings to the life of these masters a touch of gentle resignation, of understanding kindness, and of silent grief.

The third and most poignant way in which tragedy enters the life of these masters is in the realization that all his labors must all be pointed toward the moment when they push their disciples away to free them from dependency and force them to stand on their own feet. This is the most sacred moment in the master-disciple relationship, the moment in which the relationship is most intimate; and yet paradoxically it is the one in which the master appears to be disappearing, for above the vocation of these masters is written "farewell." They have done everything they can to attract disciples and draw them as close to themselves as possible, but now they must direct all their labors to severance and thrusting away. Buddhism, especially Zen Buddhism, is famous for putting things bluntly, and its famous formula here is, "if you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha." Jesus moves toward severance more gently when he forewarns his disciples that "the Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him" (Matt 17:2-1; see also Matt 20:18 and 26:2). What all this comes down to

is that throughout their ministries these masters can only love their disciples with a tinge of sadness. Their disciples do not understand this sadness. Their highest aspiration is to be intimately related to this master—have they not “followed after him”?—and then suddenly the hour comes, the boom is lowered, and the master pushes them away. In this decisive hour of parting, the disciple will despair either of the master or of himself. He must choose either himself and take leave of the master (who was dearer to him than all things and forever will remain thus in his memory) because he has comprehended that his own place is *here*, or he will deny himself and become an idolater, sentimentally and indulgently worshiping his memory of what his master said and did. So it is, that in the evening of these masters’ lives they must watch their faithful disciples move away from them into the twilight of the future. This is the mystery of their loneliness, a loneliness that no one’s love can relieve and no understanding can brighten. “Jesus walked that lonesome valley / He had to walk it by himself; / Nobody else could walk it for him / He had to walk it by himself” (an Afro-American spiritual).

In preparing this lecture I promised myself not to enter more than one anecdotal personal memory, and I have decided for this one. When the ten weeks of my *ko’an* training under a Zen master in Myoshinji Monastery in Kyoto began—no sabbatical was in sight and a summer vacation was all that I could manage—I was strictly rehearsed in how to approach the *roshi* in my initial 5 a.m. audience with him. Sliding open the *shoji* (door covered with rice-paper) to his audience chamber, I would bow with palms together (the classic *gassho* or symbol of respect) and step in. The *roshi* would be seated in formal garb on his meditation cushion catty-corner to the door I had entered and I would hug the walls and, on reaching the wall opposite me, make a right angle turn toward him. (No diagonals; you don’t cut corners in Zen.) On reaching him I would sink to my knees and, with my forehead on the tawny straw *tatami* mat, I would extend my arms toward him, lifting my cupped fingers upward, the classic gesture for lifting the dust off the feet of the Buddha.

Initially I found this grating. My Protestant upbringing had admonished me to bow down to neither priest nor king, and here I was kowtowing to a mere mortal. I was surprised, though, by how quickly that feeling dissolved. My esteem for my Zen master was rising so rapidly that by the third day all I wanted to do was to spend the whole day bowing to him.

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Having reported those first early morning encounters, I skip now to the reason for entering this anecdote—our final meeting. That meeting was the opposite of those first stern, formal ones. The *roshi* had invited me to his living quarters, a small pavilion close to the monastery, and the mood was comfortable and relaxed. After small talk about the weather which was beginning to cool after the oppressive humidity of the Kyoto summer, he said he was glad that I had come and wished me a safe journey home, adding a reminder that while in flight I should *gassho* inwardly to the innumerable people who would have cooperated to get me home.

He then offered to show me his living quarters. Exiting the back door of the small living room where we were seated, he introduced me in passing to Iksan, the tiny old woman “who takes care of my physical needs” and was preparing his evening meal. Then he led me into his bedroom where, beside his padded sleeping quilt on the floor, there was set an armchair that faced a television screen. “This is where I watch sumo wrestling in the evenings,” he said; “Do you watch sumo wrestling?” When I answered in the negative, he said, “Too bad. It’s wonderful.” He then ushered me out of the backdoor where a half-dozen crates of empty beer bottles were arranged along the wall. “These are the remains of the beer I drink while watching sumo wrestling.” And that was it; the cook’s tour was completed. We returned to his living room where, after a few more words, we bade each other goodbye.

As I made my way through the narrow lanes to where I was staying that last night, it became apparent to me that the purpose of this final exercise was to dismantle the pedestal onto which I had placed my *roshi* in the course of the summer. Its elevation had encouraged me to pour everything I had into my summer’s training, but the time had come to go my own way.

Anecdote completed, I come back to the main point of this second half of my lecture which is to bring out category differences in the master’s vocation. Having described the parting that figures importantly in the vocation of some masters, I will now turn to their opposite numbers, focusing on a single example in India.

Most aspects of the *guru-chela* relationship in Hinduism fit comfortably into the paradigm I presented in the first half of this lecture, as does the concept of the *acharya*, the perfected guru who teaches by example. Here, though, I am looking at differences, and Krishna is a master who does not leave his disciples. *Dvaitic*, dualistic, Hindus come down hard on this point, looking to *acharyas* like Ramanuja

and Chaitanya, founders, respectively of the Shri Vaishnava school and the Harikrishna movement which continues in full force today. Arguing that their rivals—the *advaitic*, non-dual, Shaivites whose chief spokesman is Sankara—were influenced by the Buddha's renunciation of a personal God, the dualists are passionately theistic and try to develop as personal a relationship with their personal deities as they can. Relationship being the lifeblood in theism, the Gods of India's theist always come in couples—Radha-Krishna, Sita-Ram, Lakshmi-Narayan—with the Goddess always named first, before the God. (In reporting this difference I seem to be violating one of the guidelines I set for myself at the start of this lecture where I said I would not be going into differences in what masters teach. I would stick to profiling their role, but I am allowing myself this one exception because in this instance a doctrinal difference leads directly to a difference in masters' understandings of their roles.) In the theistic lineage, disciples cannot conceive of their *gurus* ever working themselves out of their job and leaving them. They will keep reincarnating themselves for as long as it takes for their disciples to become enlightened, and even after their disciples have dropped the body permanently, their *guru* will be with them forever in paradise, for (as I say) there is no happiness for theists outside of relationship. (Pure Land Buddhism sides with the Vaishnavites here.) In this mode, *gurus*, as the ads for diamonds have it, "are forever."

As I come to the close of this lecture I want to say something that doubles back on everything I have said in it. Scientists have discovered that the deeper they probe into nature's foundations, the more they find that the divisions that carried them toward those foundations turn out to be provisional only, not final; and in much the same way I find that the divisions that I set out to explore and which have structured this lecture—differences between masters and teachers and between kinds of masters—likewise prove to be provisional. The division between *gurus* who take leave of their *chelas* and those that do not that I just presented as clear-cut turns out not to be clear-cut at all. Sri Krishna *does* take leave of his disciples. He abandons them, not (to be sure) in the Gita's story but as the *Puranas* fill in his biography.

Krishna's geographical locale was Vrindavan, but after he has won the hearts of the cowgirls and throngs of others, he abruptly disappears. Whether it was to kill evil kings or to tend to his aging parents some distance away or for some other reason we are not told, but the fact remains: summarily he leaves Vrindavan, leaving his disciples *guru-less* for the rest of their lives. We can only begin to imagine the

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sense of abandonment that they had to live with for the rest of their lives.

This does not upset the fact that theistic Hindus never doubt that the cosmic Krishna is forever at their side, but introducing the Puranic account of his life does blur the image of him as a non-leave-taking master with which I began and it prompts me to look back over my shoulder and take a second look at what I said about no leave-taking in Islam. Muhammad was separated from his followers only by his death at a mature age, but in Shi'ite Islam, his rightful successor, Ali, was murdered along with his two sons, and this has placed abandonment at the very heart of this branch of Islam. In the *majlis* in Tehran that I was allowed to attend, as the night deepened the *fugara*' worked themselves into a frenzy bewailing the slaughter of Ali and his sons. In other contexts this turns many Shi'ites into *Penitentes* as they lash their backs with ropes and even swords to maximize their identification with the injustice done to Ali. The parallel with Christian *Penitentes* who mutilate themselves to identify with Christ's crucifixion is so close to this as to require no comment. This raises the deep question of the role such suffering plays in a relationship. I can only venture that grief in abandonment may bond disciples to their masters more completely than any other emotion, which might be the truth in the adage that absence makes the heart grow fonder. Shams' abandonment of Rumi—the rumor that he was murdered by jealous disciples “arrives late, circulates in oral context, and is almost certainly groundless” (Franklin D. Lewis, *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West*, p. 193)—drew from Rumi some of his ecstatically grief-stricken poems. If this is on the right track, disciples in this camp actively cultivate the sorrow in separation to engender what they consider the highest and purest form of love. We might find them asking if the love between Jesus and his disciples was ever greater than in the poignant pathos of the Last Supper.

Have these last paragraphs deconstructed my entire lecture by admitting that the distinctions that I have used to format it are only provisional? I do not think so, for distinctions have their uses and are indispensable in dealing with life in this world—we continue to work with Newtonian physics even though we know that its laws are violated in the deeper level of nature. So I do not think that Victor Danner would reject on principle my modest effort to honor him with this lecture. On the contrary: I think he would welcome the fact that the distinctions I have worked with collapse in the end in *tawhid*, affirmation of the Divine Unity. And I am confident that he would

Huston Smith

deal gently with the infirmities that have preceded that affirmation in the course of this hour.

CHAPTER 10

On Gurus and Spiritual Direction

Rama P. Coomaraswamy

It is interesting to note that in almost every field or specialty, common sense tells us that we need guidance and such is sought from experts. But when it comes to spiritual matters the great majority do not hesitate to choose themselves as both expert and advisor. This happens despite the Muslim aphorism that he who uses himself as his own director has Satan for his guide. Yet this situation is understandable when one recognizes that religion has been reduced to the realm of private opinion and when one considers the innumerable providers of spirituality—it comes in every shape and form—placing one's trust in others with regard to this critical matter is almost impossible. And yet ironically we find many giving their trust to individuals with no traditional affiliations and who proclaim themselves through the media as guides to any and all—usually for a healthy fee.

It is legitimate to use the term “guru” with any preceptor of a professional nature. Thus a surgeon or a musician can refer to his preceptor as his “guru.” But in the present paper we are discussing gurus who are giving spiritual direction. Now in India, as in the West, there are a plethora of false gurus who are delighted to receive the financial support of those they dupe. They are, as one wise man explained, the “tinsel” that protects the real ones. It is virtually impossible—and there are of course exceptions to all that is said here—it is virtually impossible for Westerners with their “modernist” convictions and outlook (which includes many Indians brought up in the West) who go to the East to make contact with real gurus—though such of course exist.

Moreover such real gurus are highly unlikely to take on Westerners for the simple reason that they have not lived as Hindus for a long period of time. Living within a tradition forms and molds the soul and prepares the individual for the spiritual life. If one doubts this, one has but to ask such potential *chelas* (disciples) what caste they belong to. They immediately tell you that they don't believe in castes. Now like it or not, the caste system is intrinsic to Hinduism. It is a little like someone saying they are Catholic and claiming that they don't believe

in the Real Presence.¹ Living as a Hindu within the traditional culture is equivalent to what Tanqueray calls “external direction.” So stringent is this principle that when an orthodox Hindu (the term orthodox is defined as right faith and true doctrine) leaves India—which is greatly discouraged—he has on returning to go through a purification ceremony. Now it is true that a Westerner can take *sannyasa*, that is, become a monk, and then this stricture does not apply, for the *sannyasin* has no social role in society as such. The funeral rites are said over him and he is as it were “dead to the world.” Taking *sannyasa* is a fairly serious affair which means the cutting of all family, friends, possessions, and social ties. Such monks may be wanderers or may have a fixed abode. But no guru is likely to encourage this step—rare exceptions apart—in someone coming from the West who is almost certainly not prepared for all the commitments involved. Furthermore, again with exceptions, there is the problem, even for those brought up within the Hindu tradition, of what is called premature *vairagya*, that is taking such vows when too young, and for most such a step is only taken after he has fulfilled all his social duties and hence usually later in life. Now if these comments apply in India, they certainly also apply to those gurus who travel outside of India, who are almost without exception far from orthodox.²

Another dangerous tendency is to adopt spiritual exercises developed within one tradition to usages outside that tradition. I recently came across a Catholic retreat master who sent individuals up into the mountains on vision quests, a practice used by American Indians. Or again, the use of yoga, not for exercise, but as a spiritual method is rampant—one could give many other examples especially among “New Age gurus.” Usually such individuals have little if any real knowledge of the traditions from which they seemingly adopt such techniques, apart from what they read in books—and books convey but the externals.

In a previous age and time things were different. As with all the great religious traditions, Christianity also insisted upon the importance of spiritual directors, experts in helping one come to a knowledge, love, and consequent appropriate service of God. In general the

¹ Those wishing to understand the caste system are referred to “The Religious Basis of the Forms of Indian Society” by Ananda Coomaraswamy, in *Studies in Comparative Religion* 15, 1983.

² Examples of this are given in my paper on “The Desacralization of Hinduism for Western Consumption” in *Sophia*, Vol. 4, No. 2, Winter 1998.

principles of direction were divided into two categories. The first requirement was submission to the form of the Tradition in question. As Tanqueray, a Catholic authority, says in *The Spiritual Life*: “God, Who established His Church as a hierarchical society, willed that souls be sanctified through submission to this Church.” Thus when Saul (St. Paul) was converted, he was sent to Ananias in Damascus to learn what he was to do—teaching us, as St. Chrysostom says, “that we should be taught by God through men.” This submission to traditional forms protects individuals from the tendency in all of us to think we have achieved some high state of knowledge and grace on our own. Submission to traditional forms and doctrine provides a sort of fence that acts as a corrective and a defense against self-delusion. This has been called “external” direction. At the same time the “orthodoxy” of the director acts as a guarantee that he is not leading one on some pet way of his own, but in accord with traditional norms.³

Beyond this, those who are called to the spiritual life require a guide for what has been called “internal” direction. As Tanqueray points out, “Progress in holiness is a long and painful ascent over a steep path bordered by precipices. To venture thereon without an experienced guide is highly imprudent.” It is extremely easy to deceive oneself as regards one’s own condition. As St. Francis de Sales says: “We are unable to gaze eye to eye upon ourselves, we cannot be impartial judges in our own case, by reason of a certain complacency, so veiled, so unsuspected that the keenest insight alone can discover its existence; those who suffer from it are not aware of it unless someone points it out to them.”

The importance of spiritual direction has always been recognized in Christendom. Cassian, who spent long years among the monks in the East, speaks of this in both his *Book of Institutions* and in his *Conferences*. And what Cassian said with regard to the Eastern monks was repeated in the West by St. John Climacus in his *Ladder of Paradise*. It should not be thought that this need was limited to those in the religious life, for both Augustine and Jerome in their correspondence with those in the world repeat the same admonitions. Down through the ages the same principles are inculcated. St. Bernard speaks of this

³ More current terminology uses the terms “exoteric” and “esoteric.” It is virtually impossible for either to exist in isolation for any long period of time, for the outer form protects the inner content, and the inner content provides the strength and meaning to the outer form.

in both his letters and his sermons, and indeed he states that “whoever constitutes himself his own guide, becomes a disciple of a fool.”

St. Francis de Sales tells us that a spiritual director must have three principal qualities, charity, knowledge, and prudence. Charity is a supernatural and paternal affection which makes him see that those under his care are spiritual children confided to him by God Himself. As St. Paul said, “My little children of whom I am in labor again until Christ be formed in you.” This charity is not weakness, but a firmness coupled with frankness. Secondly knowledge is important, and St. Teresa of Avila teaches that this is more important than holiness. There are those who are indeed holy, but unsuitable to the task of direction. Without a knowledge of mystical and ascetical theology, how is it possible to direct a person who is traveling in such paths? Finally, prudence and sound judgment are needed in order to direct souls, not according to one’s own judgment, but according to the grace, the temperament and character of the penitents, and their supernatural attractions.

St. John of the Cross points out the great difficulty of finding a spiritual guide, for such a one should be at once wise, zealous, discreet, and experienced, or at least well versed in the science of the ways of the Lord. Otherwise, like one blind man leading another, they both fall into a ditch. Inexperienced and ignorant directors do more damage than good to souls. This difficulty in finding a director is particularly evident today—and this is true within every viable Tradition. However, God did not leave us orphans, and He will in one way or another lead us—often in rather unusual and surprising ways—to a director of souls for, after all, He is Himself the ultimate director of every soul. Hinduism speaks of an *upa-guru*, which is anyone who helps one on the spiritual path, as well as a “guru” who is nothing other than a spiritual director. If the Hindu worships his guru, this is not some false idolatry, but rather the recognition that the guru is functioning in the place of God. And this is of course true of all true spiritual directors. Thus it is that when one finds a good director, one should strive to follow him with all docility. By giving obedience to such a director, the soul sacrifices its judgment and will. What is involved in this is the giving up of self-will which, as St. Bernard tells us, fuels the fires of hell.

If the spiritual director is a blind man seeking to lead the blind, as unfortunately happens often, then it is better to seek another. But if one cannot find such, then as St. Teresa of Avila says, it is better to remain without one, to trust in God who has permitted such a thing,

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rather than be guided by a blind man. However, those who would follow a Christian path, prior to giving up their search for a director, would do well to acquaint themselves with the literature on spiritual direction—the writings of innumerable saints and theologians such as Tanqueray (*The Spiritual Life*) and Arintero (*Mystical Evolution*), St. Catherine of Genoa (*Spiritual Doctrine*), St. Catherine of Siena, St. Teresa of Avila, and St. John of the Cross. Such writings will constitute an intellectual preparation—using the word “intellect” in its full scholastic sense—and at the same time provide the seeker with the necessary guidelines to advance them in their search.

And finally, those who find themselves faced with the task of direction must realize that the very obligations that fall upon their penitents apply above all to themselves. If they do not sanctify their own lives, if they do not let Christ live in them as He did in St. Paul, (“I live not I but Christ liveth in me”) they will never be effective directors. It is not themselves that they give to those who seek their help, but the Divine Logos and nothing but that Logos. Spiritual direction is a serious business, both for the giver and the receiver. For the giver, he must face his Maker and answer for any deviation from Truth, and for the receiver, such deviations can terminate in disaster, both in this world and the next.

III



ART



CHAPTER 11

The Symbolism of Theatre

René Guénon

We have just compared the confusion of a being with its outward and profane manifestation¹ to the identification of an actor with the character he is playing; in order to demonstrate to what extent this comparison is exact, a few general considerations about the symbolism of theatre will not be out of order, although they do not pertain exclusively to the initiatic domain. Needless to say, this symbolism may be connected to the original character of the arts and crafts, all of which used to possess an initiatic significance by the fact that they were attached to a superior principle from which they were derived as contingent applications; they only became profane, as we have explained quite often, as a result of the spiritual degeneration of mankind during the descending course of its historical cycle.

One could say, generally speaking, that the theatre is a symbol of manifestation, the illusory character of which it expresses as perfectly as it is possible.² This symbolism can be envisaged either from the point of view of the actor or from that of the theatre itself. The actor is a symbol of the Self or the “inner person” manifesting himself in an indefinite series of states and modalities which may be considered as many different roles; and one must note the importance of the ancient use of the mask as an exact expression of this symbolism.³ For under the mask the actor remains himself throughout all of his roles. Likewise, the “inner person” remains “unaffected” by all of his manifestations; the disappearance of the use of the mask, on the contrary, forces the actor to change his own physiognomy. However, in all cases, the actor remains fundamentally other than what he seems to be, in the same way as the “inner person” is different from the multiplicity of his manifested states. They are but the outward and changing appearances

¹ In the chapter “Noms profanes et noms initiatiques” (“Profane and initiatic names”).

² We do not say unreal; for it is quite obvious that illusion must only be considered as a lesser reality.

³ It is relevant to note here that this mask is called in Latin *persona*; the “inner person” is, literally, he who hides himself under the mask of the individual.

which he puts on in order to realize, throughout the various modes which befit their nature, the indefinite possibilities which he contains within himself in the sempiternal moment of non-manifestation.

Moving to another point of view, we can say that the theatre is an image of the world: both the theatre and the world are properly “representations.” The world itself, because it exists only as a consequence and an expression of the Principle upon which it is essentially dependent in all its aspects, can be regarded as symbolizing the principal order in its own manner. It is this symbolic character which confers to the world a value superior to that which it possesses in itself, being the way in which it participates in a higher degree of reality.⁴ In Arabic, theatre has been designated by the word *tamthīl* which, like all the words which derive from the same root, *mthl*, denotes the meanings of resemblance, comparison, image or figure; and some Muslim theologians use the expression “*ālam tamthīl*,” which may be translated as the “figurative world” or the “world of representation,” to refer to all that which is described symbolically in the sacred Scriptures and therefore should not be taken literally. It is remarkable that some apply this expression specifically to the realm of angels and demons, which in truth represent the higher and lower levels of being, and which can only be described by symbolic terms borrowed from the sensible world. Moreover, by a coincidence which is at least noteworthy, one must mention the considerable role that these angels and devils played in the religious theatre of the medieval West.

It follows from what has just been said that theatre is not necessarily limited to the function of representing the human world, that is to say a single state of manifestation; it may also represent at the same time the higher and lower worlds. For this reason, in the mystery plays of the Middle Ages, the stage was divided into several levels corresponding to different worlds; these levels were generally assigned following the ternary division: heaven, earth and hell. Furthermore, since the play was performed simultaneously within these various divisions it was an accurate representation of the essential simultaneity of the states of being. For lack of understanding this symbolism, the moderns have come to consider as “naiveté,” not to say awkwardness, what is actually of the most profound significance. What is most surprising is how rapidly this incomprehension appeared, as is shown by

⁴ This is also the consideration of the world either as attached to the Principle or in its own being only, which distinguishes fundamentally the point of view of the traditional sciences from that of the profane sciences.

its striking manifestation among the writers of the seventeenth century; this radical schism between the mentality of the Middle Ages and the mentality of modern times is not one of the least enigmas of history.

Since we have just spoken of mystery plays, we do not believe it useless to point to the singularity of this denomination which has a double meaning: one should write, in all etymological strictness, "misteries," for this word was derived from the Latin word *ministerium*, meaning "office" or "function," which clearly indicates the extent to which theatrical representations of this kind were originally considered as an integrating part of the celebration of religious holidays.⁵ The strange thing is that this name has been contracted and abridged in a way as to become exactly homonymous of the "mysteries," and to be finally confused with this other word, which has a Greek origin and a totally different derivation; it is only through an allusion to the "mysteries" of religion, which were staged in the plays which have been thus designated, that this assimilation produced itself. This may no doubt be a plausible reason; but on the other hand, if one considers that analogous symbolic representations used to take place in the "mysteries" of Antiquity, as in Greece and probably also in Egypt,⁶ one may be tempted to see in this something which goes back much further in time and to interpret it as an indication of the continuity of an esoteric and initiatic tradition which affirmed itself outwardly, at more or less distant intervals of time, by similar manifestations, with the adaptation required by the diversity of circumstances of time and place.⁷ We have had rather frequent opportunities to point to the importance of phonetic assimilations between words which are philologically distinct, as a modality of symbolic language; there is nothing arbitrary in this, whatever most of our contemporaries may think of it, and this method is actually not without connections with the modes of interpretation pertaining to the Hindu *nirukta*; but the secrets of the intimate constitution of language are so completely lost today that it is hardly possible to allude to them without being suspected of indulging in "false etymologies" or even in mere "play on words."

⁵ It is from the same word, *ministerium*, in the sense of "function" that the French word *métier* is derived.

⁶ One may furthermore directly connect to these symbolic representations the ritual "staging" of initiatic "legends" which we mentioned earlier.

⁷ The "exteriorization" in religious mode which occurred in the Middle Ages may have been the consequence of such an adaptation. It does not therefore constitute an objection against the esoteric character of this tradition in itself.

Plato himself, who occasionally uses this kind of interpretation—as we have incidentally indicated in reference to “myths”—is no more favorably received by the pseudo-scientific “criticism” of minds which are limited by modern prejudices.

In order to conclude these few remarks, we will mention still another point of view on the symbolism of theatre: that of the playwright. From that point of view, the various characters, as mental productions, may be considered as representing secondary modifications and as if extensions of the author, in approximately the same way as the subtle forms which are produced in a state of dream.⁸ Furthermore, the same consideration would obviously be relevant with respect to the production of all works of imagination of any genre whatsoever; however, in the particular case of theatre, this production is specifically realized in a sensible mode which renders the very image of life, as it also happens in dreams. The author therefore fulfills a truly “demiurgic” function since he produces a world which is entirely drawn from himself. He may be considered for that reason as the very symbol of Being as producer of the universal manifestation. In this case as in the case of dreams, the essential unity of the producer of “illusory forms” remains unaffected by this multiplicity of accidental manifestations, as the unity of Being remains unaffected by the multiplicity of the manifestation. Therefore, from whatever standpoint one may look at it, one always finds in theatre this profound *raison d'être*—unknown as it may be by those who made of this form of art something purely profane; that of being by its very nature one of the most perfect symbols of the universal manifestation.

⁸ Cf. *The Multiple States of Being*, Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 12

Religious Art, Traditional Art, Sacred Art Some reflections and definitions

Seyyed Hossein Nasr

It must never be forgotten that the understanding of the spiritual significance of traditional and sacred art, Islamic or otherwise, is of the utmost significance for the existence of authentic religious life since such an art is ultimately a gift from Heaven and a channel of grace which brings about recollection of the world of the Spirit and leads us back to the Divine.

Were this article to be addressed only to readers in Seljuq Rayy, or for that matter in medieval Paris or Sienna, there would be no need to define such terms as religious, traditional and sacred art, for all aspects of the life of the two civilizations in question, namely the Islamic and the Christian Western, were governed by spiritual principles and there was not any domain of artistic or intellectual activity which lay outside those principles and their applications. And even art was seen in a different light in the sense that it was not confined to a particular type of activity carried out by a special kind of human being but embraced the whole of life. Or to quote the famous Indian authority on traditional art A. K. Coomaraswamy, in traditional societies, "the artist was not a special kind of man, but every man was a special kind of artist." In fact in many languages of traditional civilizations there does not even exist a word for art in the modern sense of the term because there is nothing present in such civilizations that is not art. That is to some extent the reason why during this century certain guardians of traditional teachings in various societies, especially the Islamic, have opposed "art" in its current sense, and even the category of religious art as if art were an import from the West. In reality, however, while the modern concept of art may have been imported from modern civilization, the reality of art lies at the heart of all traditional civilizations including the Islamic where the *hadith* "God is beautiful and loves beauty" defines the centrality of beauty as reflected in art in man's life within the Islamic perspective.

Be that as it may, we are not discussing these matters in Seljuq Iran or medieval France and Italy but at a time when the modern world,

which began during the Renaissance in Europe on the basis of the rebellion of man against Heaven and the existing traditional civilization of Europe, has now spread to much of the globe. Furthermore, what remains of the traditional civilizations must battle constantly to continue its life and not be completely marginalized or distorted in the name of modernism and now to some extent what is called post-modernism, and various slogans and ideologies which have guided and continue to guide the modern world. In such a context, it is necessary to define exactly the various salient concepts such as religious, traditional and sacred art in order to avoid confusion and seek to prevent the repetition of the errors which caused the traditional art of the West to become eclipsed to such an extent that what resulted became a major obstacle to the participation of many Westerners in their religion and deprived them of a means of grace, contributing directly to the secularization of the human environment in Europe.

Let us turn our attention more particularly to the domain of Persian art. In this domain to speak of religious art in the sense of *al-fann al-dīnī* or *hunar-i dīnī*, in Arabic and Persian respectively, is not to introduce an innovation in the domain of religion. It is true that the Persian term *hunar* began to be used more and more as corresponding to the Western term art since the last century, but the reality to which it corresponds lies imbedded in Islamic civilization in general and Persian culture in particular besides the fact that the word itself was used a thousand years ago by Firdawsi in the *Shāh-nāmāh*¹ in the sense of culture and refinement. As for religious art, if it is understood in the traditional sense of *al-fann al-dīnī* or *hunar-i dīnī* and not in the modern Western sense to which we shall turn soon, then as far as Islam is concerned, it was there with the first psalmody of the Noble Quran during the life of the Blessed Prophet. When Bilāl called the *adhān* in the mosque of Madinah, his chanting was something which would today be called "religious art" in the English language as ordinarily used while traditionalists like myself who distinguish religious art from traditional and sacred art would call Quranic psalmody and the chanting of the *adhān* sacred art.

Those in Islamic countries who simply identify art with Western imports that are usually, on the popular level, impregnated often with the most negative influences and characterized by chaotic disorder, oppose the very category of "religious art." But they must realize that

¹ We have in mind the well-known verse "*hunar nad-i irāniyān ast-u bas*" (art belongs to the Persians alone).

hunar or *fann* is not simply what Arabic, Turkish or Persian cabaret singers claim to be art but that these terms have an honorable use in traditional Islamic civilization. Rather, art as used in Western languages also refers to the highest level of creativity (corresponding to the traditional understanding of such terms as *sinā'ah* and *fann* in Arabic) and even in the secularized world of today includes the building of traditional cathedrals as well as mosques, Gregorian chants as well as Quranic psalmody. It is in fact impossible to understand Islamic civilization and the message of Islam itself in their totality without speaking of Islamic art which in the ordinary usage of English in an anti-traditional world is called by most people religious art. In any case putting aside for the moment the basic distinction between religious and traditional art, as these terms are understood in English, it can be stated for the Islamic public at large that such terms as *al-fann al-dīnī* or *hunar-i dīnī*, far from being Western imports alien to the Islamic worldview, are concepts as well as realities of the greatest importance at a time when the principles of Islam and the various facets of the civilization which it created over the ages are so threatened and need to be preserved, defended and explained with the utmost intellectual acumen, sensibility and perspicacity.

* * *

Let us then begin our definitions by distinguishing first of all between the traditional and the anti-traditional or modern point of view especially as it concerns art. Tradition, as used by those who are called traditionalists and beginning with René Guénon to whom we are all indebted for clarifying this fundamental concept, concerns principles of Divine Origin and their applications over time to various domains ranging from metaphysics to poetry and music to politics in those civilizations which by virtue of being based upon Divine principles are called traditional. In the historical period in fact it can be stated that all normal civilizations such as the Chinese, Indian, Islamic or medieval Western were traditional. It is the modern world, born during the Renaissance on the basis of the residues of Graeco-Roman civilizations mostly in their phase of decadence, that is anti-traditional and an anomaly if we consider human history on a global scale.²

² "Tradition is whatever joins all that is human to Divine Truth" (Frithjof Schuon, "René Guénon: Definitions," *Sophia*, vol. 1, no. 2, Winter 1995, p. 7); and S.H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989),

In a traditional civilization in which all activity is based on principles of an ultimately Divine Origin, the making of things or art in its vast sense is no exception. In such civilizations all art is traditional art related at once to the necessities of life and spiritual needs of the user of the art as well as the inner realization of the artist who is also an artisan. There is no distinction between the arts and the crafts or fine arts and industrial arts. Nor is there a tension or opposition between beauty and utility. Art is not for art's sake but for the sake of life itself. Art in fact is none other than life, integrated into the very rhythm of daily existence and not confined to the segregated space of museums or rare moments of the annual calendar.³ In a traditional civilization, not only is all art traditional art but also what is called religious art in modern parlance shares the same principles with the art of making pots for cooking or weaving cloth to make a dress. There is no distinction between the sacred and the profane both of which are embraced by the unifying principles and share the symbols of the tradition in question.

In traditional civilizations, therefore, the category of religious art is really misleading if this term is understood in its modern sense as being opposed to non-religious art devoid of religious truths and principles. Such an art does not even exist in a traditional civilization where every art has a symbolic and spiritual significance which is thereby religious in the general understanding of this term as well as its etymological one, derived from the Latin *religat*, meaning that which binds us to God. All traditional art as a result of its principles, symbolism, techniques, forms, meta-individual inspiration and many other factors binds the particular work of art in question to spiritual principles and aids the beholder of art to become aware of the Presence of the Divine. Hence it is religious in the deepest sense. But the term religious art, as it is used today, is nevertheless an inappropriate category in the context of traditional art.

chapter 2, pp. 65ff. As for the works of Guénon, nearly all of them discuss tradition in one context or another. See especially his *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines*, trans. Marco Pallis (London: Luzac & Co., 1945), Part II, chapter 3, "What is Meant by Tradition?" pp. 87-91. Many other works of Schuon also deal in the greatest depth with the meaning of tradition.

³ These principles have been fully elucidated in the numerous writings of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy such as *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art* (New York: Dover, 1956); idem, *The Transformation of Nature in Art* (New York: Dover, 1956); and *Coomaraswamy: Selected Papers I: Traditional Art and Symbolism*, ed. Roger Lipsey (Princeton University Press, 1977).

In traditional civilizations in fact what concerns the religion of the civilization in question directly should be called sacred art rather than religious art, again remembering the limitations imposed on the meaning of religious art as a result of its being associated with the modern world where the whole notion of traditional art, supra-human inspiration, symbolism and even the traditional understanding of form have been eclipsed and forgotten, if not completely at least to a large extent. Sacred art is the heart of the traditional art of a particular traditional civilization, dealing as it does with the rites and spiritual practices associated with the religion and the Divine Message governing the tradition in question.⁴ This art which should be called *hunar-i qudsī* in Persian to distinguish it from traditional art in general, is itself of course also traditional art but reflects the spiritual principles in question most directly and is the most accessible channel of grace (*barakah*) issuing from the source of revelation of the Truth. Sacred art is itself ultimately the result of divine inspiration. Not only is its subject religious but its forms, manner of execution and formal language have a sacred origin and issue from the source of the religion in question. It is not accidental that Christians consider the original icon, which is Christian sacred art *par excellence*, to be of angelic inspiration or the Hindus believe that their sacred music was brought from Heaven by Siva. In Islam, the supreme sacred art of psalmody of the Noble Quran is associated with the teachings of the Blessed Prophet and goes back ultimately to the chanting of the Psalms by the prophet David. Moreover, calligraphy, the complementary sacred art of Islam which makes manifest the Word of God as revealed in the Noble Quran, is believed by Muslims to have been originated by 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib whose spiritual eminence in not only Shi'ite Islam but the whole of the Islamic tradition is too well known to need elaboration here.

To make clear the distinction between traditional art and sacred art, let us turn again to the Islamic tradition and Persia in particular. In this traditional civilization before the invasion of modernism in the 12th/18th and 13th/19th centuries—and in miniature paintings even a century earlier—everything that was made, from carpets to cloth to brass work to domestic architecture and including poetry and music, were works of traditional art and to the extent they have survived are still products of traditional art. Such objects do not have to do with religion in the narrow sense of the term as far as their subject or

⁴ Concerning the principles of sacred art and how they have manifested themselves in various religious climates see the many works of Titus Burckhardt especially his *Sacred Art in East and West*, trans. Lord Northbourne (London: Perennial Books, 1967).

use are concerned. Yet, they all remind their users of the principles of Islam and in a most intimate manner were and remain wed to the inner meaning (*haqīqah*) of the Noble Quran. One can hardly forget God and the reality of Islam in walking through a street in the traditional quarters of a city such as Kashan or Fez any more than one could in a traditional mosque in those cities.

At the heart of this traditional art was to be found the sacred art of Islam as such, arts having to do with the Divine Word and rites which return man to his spiritual center. There was and continues to be the psalmody of the Noble Quran which in the deepest manner defines and fills the spaces of the traditional Islamic city and then calligraphy, that supreme ornament which beautifies things by imprinting upon them the letters and words of His final revelation. Then there is sacred architecture, especially that of the mosque, which is of course the center for the celebration of the Divine Word through the daily prayers, as well as that of *madrasahs*, *takiyahs*, *khānaqāhs*, *husayniyyahs* and other specifically religious edifices whose presence and *barakah* extend to the rest of the urban setting at large. It has been the genius of Islamic civilization to extend the presence of sacred architecture in such a manner that many a traditional palace, hostel or hospital looks just like a mosque and reminds those who have inhabited such edifices associated with ordinary functions of daily life of God's ubiquitous Presence.

In the context of Persia and the Persian language, it is necessary to add a note as far as the arts associated with mourning the death of Imam Husayn and Persian Sufi poetry are concerned. As for the arts associated with *ta'ziyah*, *rawdah-khānī*, *sīnah-zanī*, etc. all associated with the tragedy of Karbala and related events, they have been usually more of a "folkloric" art and although they certainly possessed and continue to possess the deepest religious significance must be considered more as traditional art verging upon sacred art than sacred art itself. This distinction is particularly important in light of the view of many traditional Shi'ite '*ulamā*' who have looked with certain suspicion on some of the arts associated with this very important manifestation of Shi'ite piety.

As for Sufi poetry, despite its almost miraculous qualities and incredible role it has played over the centuries in the spread of Islam in much of Asia, it cannot be strictly called sacred art although some of the poems of Hāfiz and Rūmī and certain sections of the *Mantiq al-tayr* of 'Attār as well as the *Gulshan-i rāz* of Shabistārī are of such celestial quality and inspiration that they could be almost qualified

as a special kind of sacred art as can a few Persian miniatures such as that of the *mi'rāj* of the Blessed Prophet from the *Khamsah* of Nizāmi now being kept at the British Museum. In this context we must also remember the special role played by the *Sawanih* of Ahmad Ghazzālī, who through this work breathed the spirit of Muhammadan poverty (*al-faqr al-muhammadi*) and the *barakah* of the Islamic revelation into Persian prose in such a manner as to make this language not only the language of Persian Muslims, but an Islamic language for those living far beyond the geographical boundaries of the Persian speaking world.

* * *

To understand fully the distinction between traditional, sacred and religious art, it is necessary also to say a few words about non-traditional art and the meaning of art dealing with religious subjects in the context of modern civilization, that is, a civilization no longer governed by immutable spiritual principles. The very term religious art or its equivalent in other European languages is in fact appropriate as a category only in the context of modernism and especially modern European civilization, which began in the 15th century with the advent of the Renaissance but whose origins especially in the domain of art can be detected even in the 14th century after Giotto. As for other civilizations, such a term is appropriate only after the spread of modernism to other parts of the world during the past two centuries and especially in the last hundred years.

In modern European civilization one observes first of all the appearance of an art which is no longer based on supra-individual inspiration but which expresses more the individual rather than the universal order, an art which is anthropocentric rather than theocentric. Once such a humanistic art, tending toward psychologization of the human subject and naturalism became prevalent, especially in painting, the language of Western art rapidly lost its traditional character first in the Renaissance art of Italy, then Germany, France and Holland and somewhat later in England.⁵ It is in the context of this non-traditional

⁵ For the gradual secularization, humanization and naturalization of Western art leading finally to the breakdown of naturalistic forms with surrealism and the creation of an "art without center" see T. Burckhardt, op. cit., chapter 7, "The Decadence and the Revival of Christian Art," pp. 143ff; F. Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (London: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1984), chapter 4, "Concerning Forms in Art," pp. 61ff; and Hans Sedlmayr, *Verlust der Mitte: die bildende Kunst des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts als Symptom und Symbol der Zeit* (Salzburg: O. Miller, 1953).

world of artistic expression that religious art gains the meaning that it currently holds in English. In this context, religious art is that type of non-traditional art devoted to religious themes and functions even if its method of execution and language are no longer traditional.

By way of illustration one can point to the paintings of the Virgin by Renaissance painters, even the greatest ones such as Raphael. These images possess a quality of sweetness but they are not in the same category as the icons of the Virgin painted according to strict canons preserved over the centuries by tradition. The Renaissance and later paintings of the Virgin or Christ, even if they appear in altars of churches, are religious art and not sacred art. Even the Vatican is a religious edifice and not sacred architecture in contrast to the earlier building of the Vatican destroyed before the present one was constructed or the great Romanesque churches such as that of Moissac and cathedrals such as Chartres and Rheims that survive to this day as supreme examples of Christian sacred art. Some later European painters such as the 20th century French religious painter Rouault have been aware of this tragic loss in the West of traditional art with sacred art at its center and have lamented the fact that those in the mainstream of European art do not have access to the language of timeless sacred art as did medieval painters of icons.

And yet, the loss of traditional art and even sacred art has not been complete in the West. On the one hand the traditional arts have survived on the margin of European art especially in the domain that is usually called folkloric. On the other hand the grand styles of sacred architecture such as the Gothic continue to show signs of life here and there although they no longer dominate the scene as they did in the medieval period. Even icons continue to be painted by a few people but certainly have a very marginal role in the Western art of painting today taken as a whole. By and large, however, in the West, religious art during the past five centuries has dealt with religious themes without being traditional art. Occasionally, some artists such as Fra Angelico in his "Annunciation" have shown a directly heavenly inspiration but such exceptional events have not prevented Western religious art from being nothing more than a humanistic and to an even greater extent even sub-human art dealing with religious themes and functions. Some of the architectural monstrosities built in the name of religious buildings during this century are evident proof of the radical difference of nature between sacred art, with its supra-human inspiration and timeless character, and religious art of a purely human

and often sub-human character always time bound, dated and soon outdated.

* * *

Lest one think that this situation is unique to the West, it must be added immediately that other civilizations, especially the Islamic, have not been completely spared from a similar plight during this century with the great difference that the traditional arts are much more alive in non-Western civilizations than in the West. Still, since the advent of the spread of modernism in other parts of the globe, there has gradually developed a "religious art" that is not sacred art in many non-Western religious climates. It is sufficient to travel to the bigger cities of India to see numerous paintings of Krishna, Rama and scenes from Hindu epics or Hindu temples which are religious but no longer traditional in character and have a character that is very distinct from the sacred arts of the Hindu world.

Coming to the Islamic world in general, and Persia in particular, one begins to detect the effect of the non-traditional art of the modern West first of all in miniature paintings and textile designs as early as the 17th century, especially in the Ottoman world and India and somewhat later in Persia itself. As far as the sacred arts of architecture and calligraphy are concerned, however, they resisted anti-traditional influences until the present century. During the past decades, however, a religious but not sacred architecture has swept over many Muslim cities in the form of mosques which have little to do with the principles and norms of Islamic architecture no matter how many pieces of tile are stuck upon their outer surfaces. These buildings range from fairly innocuous buildings to the ugliest structures which stand at the antipode of the spirit and form of the sacred art of Islam. The phenomenon of the spread of religious rather than sacred architecture is far from being uniform in all Islamic countries. In some places such as Egypt and Morocco, nearly all the new mosques are traditional in style and character. In Persia, wonderful traditional structures continue to be built along with buildings which are Islamic only in appearance but not in reality. In some Islamic countries east of Persia even national mosques are anything but sacred architecture and some of them match the ugliest churches in the West and are completely cut off from the traditional principles of the art of the civilizations in question. It must never be forgotten that the difference between the modern styled mosques in a city such as Tehran and traditional edifices such as the

Jāmi' Mosques of Isfahan and Yazd is not on the level of accidents of time and place but concerns the very essence of these two types of architecture. The first type is religious art and the second sacred art and one need only contemplate the difference between these two types of edifices to understand the fundamental distinction between religious art as used currently in English and sacred art as defined here.

As for calligraphy, the traditional styles have been well preserved and even revived in recent years in certain Islamic countries. But even in this domain, there are now painters who use not only ordinary calligraphy but Quranic verses written in traditional calligraphic style but fitted into larger patterns or forms which themselves are not traditional at all. Such use of calligraphy, which is becoming even more prevalent in many Islamic countries including Persia, Pakistan and the Arab East, must not be confused with sacred art. It is really religious art with elements of the sacred art of calligraphy contained therein.

In Persia specifically, there is of course the whole art associated with the tragedy of Karbala as already mentioned. There also, since the last century, a more naturalistic style of painting depicting the scenes of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn and his entourage and other episodes of Islam's religious history as well as the sacred history accounted in the Noble Quran has made its appearance. This type of art, so conspicuous during the month of Muharram on canvasses, tents, utensils and the like must also be called religious rather than traditional or sacred art, but a religious art that is protected to a large extent by the intensity of the piety that surrounds the events of Muharram and the types of uses made of it and thus prevented perhaps from having an extensive negative effect upon the religious life of the community as does the misuse of the sacred arts of calligraphy and architecture and their replacement by a religious art in the sense already defined parading as sacred art.⁶

* * *

Today in the Islamic world and especially in Persia which has always been one of the major centers of art in that world, one can observe still the survival of the traditional arts in general and sacred art in particular. But one also sees not only the spread of various types of modern art from architecture to painting, but also a religious art in

⁶ As for Quranic psalmody, fortunately it has been preserved from any major changes which would compromise its character as sacred art.

the sense already defined which deals with Islamic themes but uses techniques and methods borrowed from alien schools of art with worldviews diametrically opposed to the Islamic and with differing philosophies and conceptions of art, the artist, the goal of art and its purpose in human society.

At this juncture, it is therefore of the utmost importance to understand the basic distinctions between religious art as currently understood in the West on the one hand and sacred and traditional art on the other. It is also essential to comprehend why such terms as *al-fann al-dīnī* and *hunar-i dīnī* in Arabic and Persian do not have the same meaning as religious art in English. Traditional art is a channel of grace, and the sacred art which lies at its heart in a sense complements the social and legal norms promulgated by the revelation. It reflects the beauty which guides us to the Source of all beauty, to the One who alone is beautiful in the ultimate sense. May renewed interest in the principles of Islamic art be a means of better understanding the precious nature of traditional and sacred art in rapport with religion and man's final end and by token of this understanding the way to gain greater insight into the meaning of religious art in a world which has turned its back upon the very principles that govern all existence, principles which are revealed by religion in the form of sacred law on the plane of human action and in the forms of traditional and sacred art in the domain of artistic creativity.

I gaze upon forms with my optic eye,
Because the traces of spiritual meaning are to be found in forms.
This is the world of forms, and we reside in forms,
The spiritual meaning cannot but be seen in forms.⁷

⁷ Awhad al-Dīn Kirmānī, *Heart's Witness* (Tehran: Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, 1978), p. 166.

CHAPTER 13

On the Foundations and Norms of Poetry

Patrick Laude

The connection between poetry and contemplation has been highlighted on many accounts and in many ways, so much so that it has become a sort of truism. In common parlance, the poet is often considered as an intuitive and meditative soul who enjoys a rare ability to contemplate reality in a more profound and subtle way than most of his fellow humans do. Accordingly, one often deems poets to be endowed with a mediumistic ability that somehow allows them to gain access into the deepest layers of reality. By virtue of this ability, the poet was traditionally conceived as a mediator or a channel between the essence of things and the magic of words, crystallizing his perceptions into sounds and images that pierce through the veil of trivial usage and bring miracles out of language. However, the idea of poetic contemplation covers a wide spectrum of phenomena, and while all genuine poetry is in a sense “contemplative,” it does not follow that the discipline of contemplative practice necessarily enters into the alchemy of poetic creation; hence the need to specify the scope of our understanding of contemplation.

* * *

In the Christian spiritual tradition, contemplation has often been defined in contradistinction to the reading of Scriptures (*lectio divina*), meditation and the practice of vocal prayer. The latter is most often envisaged as a personal, volitional and sentimental motion of the soul directed toward God. In contrast, meditation involves the discursive process of reason, even though this discourse may be accompanied by the evocation of images and ultimately results in emotional affects, as in the practice of Ignatian meditation. In contemplation, as suggested by the prefix “con-,” motion and discourse are somehow superseded by a synthetic, immediate and inarticulate mode of being—not mere thinking—that entails both totality and centering. Contemplation engages our entire being while rooting it in the unshakable ground of

the Divine; it suggests union with God, and therefore Self-sufficiency and repose in Being.

* * *

In contrast with this self-contained and synthetic character of contemplation, poetry always implies, by definition, the idea of a production, poems or *poëmata*. Etymologically speaking, the Greek word *poiësis* literally means creation, and specifically refers to creation in the realm of the *logos*. Although the scope of the term *logos* has tended to become more and more limited to the plane of rationality, its original meaning remains far from being exhausted by its reference to the realm of the discursive mind. The etymology of the Greek word suggests the idea of a gathering or a collecting, thereby alluding to the distillation of a unity of understanding and discourse out of a multiplicity of perceptions.

In Christianity, the *Logos* was to be understood in the context of the Incarnation and therefore identified with Christ as the Divine and human manifestation of the redeeming Truth. In this context, the Word may be best defined as the perfection and prototype of Creation in God—the Model for all things so to speak—while being also—from another standpoint—the perfection and culmination of Creation in man; hence the central position of mankind in the universe, a position that is symbolized, in the Bible,¹ by the human privilege of naming creatures. The human ability to “name” beings clearly pertains to the Word as point of junction between the Divine and the human. The *Logos* is the nexus between these two realms, and thus the means of communication *par excellence* between the two; it is both divine Revelation and human Invocation. In the first case, God speaks in a human language as it were, while man’s prayer is most fundamentally a divine idiom.

From the standpoint of the “descent” into being, the “poetic” Act of God through His Word is Creation, whereas in the perspective of the “ascent” toward God, this Act is to be understood as the theomorphic and deifying Norm² and the Way back to God. As is most directly expressed by the prologue of the Gospel according to St. John, God creates through His Word:

¹ Genesis 2:19-20.

² Hence the Catholic idea of the “imitation of Christ,” *Imitatio Christi*.

*In principio erat Verbum,
Et Verbum erat apud Deum,
Et Deus erat Verbum.
Hoc erat in principio apud Deum.
Omnia per ipsum facta sunt:
Et sine ipso factum est nihil, quod factum est.*³

Mankind, in his universal aspect, therefore constitutes the Divine “Poem” *par excellence*, and as such the prototype of the whole Creation.

* * *

In India, the sacred syllable *Om* as a quintessence of Divine Revelation, constitutes the essence of all poetry. Similarly, in Islam, the Quran is the divine Revelation, and the divine Name *Allāh* is—for Sufis—the synthesis of the Book. Each in its way can be viewed as the quintessence of poetry. The point of view of Far Eastern traditions is somewhat different in that it does not stem from Revelation as a Book or as an Original Utterance. In the Chinese and Japanese traditions—by virtue of the Shamanistic roots of Taoism, Confucianism and Shintō, the word or the book is Nature, or it is synthesized by the fundamental “signatures” that are the combination of cosmic principles, *yin* and *yang*, as manifested first and foremost in the *I Ching*. It could be said that these traditions do not consider poetry as a prolongation of the verbal irruption of the Supreme in the world but that they rather envisage poetical creation as a mode of conformity to the immanent “traces” of the Divine in Nature.

* * *

Whether one considers the Divine Word as expressed through Revelation and Scriptures or as manifested in the Book of Nature, the human poet is but an imitator of the Divine Poet since his “logical”

³ As it is presented in St. John’s prologue, the relationship between *Deus* and *Verbum* is what Coomaraswamy proposed to define as a “distinction without difference.” This expression is Coomaraswamy’s translation for the Sanskrit *bhedabheda*. It is implied by the double function of *Verbum* as substantive “predicate” of *Deus* and as object of the preposition *apud* (“with” in the sense of abiding by). God is “no different” from His Word since the Word is, so to speak, the irradiation of God, but He is “distinct” from His Word in so far as the Word is the Prototype of Relativity.

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(stemming from the *logos*) utterance is simultaneously a “poetical” work (referring here to *poiêsis* as creation or “making”). In their original root, “poetry” and “logic” are one and the same.⁴ It is through a profound attention to this reality that Emerson associated the Son of the Christian Trinity with the Sayer and with Beauty (the Father corresponding to the Knower and the True and the Spirit to the Good and the Doer). On the basis of this association, one may understand the deepest meaning of his elliptical formula: “Beauty is the creator of the universe.” The Son is the Perfection of Creation and He is also its Door. Beauty is the Hidden Perfection of God from which all things are created. In its essence, or at its height, poetry is accordingly the echo of the Divine Logos. Poetry may thus be understood as the essence of language, or it could also be said that the very root of language was—or is—poetry, before the distinction between poetry and prose could be drawn. Every word, therefore, virtually partakes of poetry, even before being used in a line or a sentence, because every word is a symbolic treasury of virtually limitless implications. Whence flows Emerson’s reminder concerning the synthetic character of poetry: “It does not need that a poem should be long. Every word was once a poem.” And there is little doubt that when Mallarmé proposed to “give a purer meaning to the words of the tribe” (*donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu*), he had some intuition of this original poetic vibration of the word, particularly of its root. The primordial power of this radical vibration—in which the auditory and semantic dimensions are as it were fused together—explains why poets are in fact the keepers of the symbolic richness of words. They both “attend to” the integrity of language and “open” it by unveiling the limitless potentialities of its foundations. In all spiritual traditions, we find the idea that language was originally much richer and more synthetic than it is today. Language has tended to become reduced to its practical and communicative dimension, be it purely social or idiosyncratic, whereas its essence is actually symbolic. In other words, poetry is not only a means of communication with others and expression of oneself, it is also—and above all—a way for transcendent Reality to mani-

⁴ “According to traditional doctrines, logic and poetry have a common source, the Intellect, and far from being contradictory are essentially complementary. Logic becomes opposed to poetry only if respect for logic becomes transformed into rationalism, and poetry, rather than being a vehicle for the expression of a truly intellectual knowledge, becomes reduced to sentimentalism or a means of expressing individual idiosyncrasies and forms of subjectivism” (Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* [Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987], p. 91).

fest itself in and through words, images and music. By virtue of this symbolic power not only to represent and communicate but also to make present, it is fundamentally polysemic: it offers multiple strata of meaning and cannot be reduced to the single horizontal dimension of conceptual communication. This virtually unlimited multiplicity of meanings—unlimited in proportion to the depth of poetry—must not however be confused with the relativistic claim that reduces poetry to a matter of subjective readings in the name of hermeneutic freedom. The very partial merit of this relativistic claim lies in the emphasis it places upon the individual as a locus of actualization of meaning. However, the “making” sense of the poem is not only a matter of subjective actuation, it is also and first of all one of objective and essential potency. Metaphysically speaking, one must maintain the radical objectivity and ontological power of the word both as *shaktic* or “magic” reality and as pure potentiality. In this sense, the Word is the very act of Being.

* * *

As a way of access to the primordial richness of language, poetry is deeply connected to memory and anamnesis, memory being understood here in its profound and quasi-timeless connection with truth, and not simply as a psychic repository of ideas and images. Coomaraswamy has emphasized the fact that traditional literature—before the advent of modernity—was exclusively poetic:

Ours is a prose style, while the traditional lore of all peoples—even the substance of their practical sciences—has been everywhere poetical.

In contrast, the modern and contemporary disjunction between the intellectual dimension of “logic” and the domain of poetry testifies to a desacralization of knowledge on the one hand, and to a debasement of poetry on the other hand. It is one of the major symptoms of what Gilbert Durand has proposed to call the “schizomorphic” sickness of modern man, i.e the fragmentation of inner and outer reality that results in disintegration and irreconcilable oppositions.

In many cosmogonies, the process of creation is presented as an encounter between two complementary principles that are both necessary in order for the world to be. The Bible tells us that “the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters” whereas Hindu cosmology refers to *Punusha* and *Prakriti* as the two principles of manifestation. The first of these principles is active, determinative and “informing” while the

second is plastic and receptive. Analogously, the poetical work tends to be conceived as the outcome of the encounter between “form” (*idea* or *eidos*, intelligible principle) and “matter” (*hylê*, substantial or hypostatic principle), or a “meaning” and a “form” (taken this time in the ordinary sense of the word). We find the same complementary pair of creative principles—with different emphases and nuances—in all major poetics, and the harmonic coincidence of the two elements involved is always understood as being brought out by the clear subordination of the substratum in relation to the intellectual form.⁵ This “crystallization” of the coincidence between intellectual essence and linguistic substance is primarily effected through meter. As God “disposes everything according to measure, number, and weight” (*omnia in mensura, numero et pondere disposuisti* [Wisdom of Solomon, 11:20]), as He manifests the world through the qualitative measures of cosmic order, the poet analogously creates by manifesting the *eidos*, the spiritual meaning, within the domain of linguistic substance and through meter. In other words, the form is as if absorbed by the essence through the prosodic number. The latter is the very mode of poetic creation. It is not an arbitrary constraint but the very expression of quality and intelligibility within the realm of quantity.⁶ Number is the prototype of measure and it is therefore the manifesting and ordering principle of creation, the poem.⁷

In so far as number and measure are none other than expressions of unity, they also constitute the essence of rhythm as the “formal” pole of poetry. Rhythm, which plays such a central role in contemplative meditation and methods of invocation, must be understood as the expression of Unity within multiplicity; it is the very “vibration” of the One. In and through it the “other” participates in the “Same.” In this

⁵ As Ray Livingston articulates it: “The universe itself, properly viewed by the Intellect, or the ‘eye of the heart,’ as it is often called, is the result of the marriage of Harmony (*sāman*) and the Word (*rc*) or, in another idiom, the union of essence and substance. . . . When there is a true union of those principles, the result is ‘an effective harmony and the reproduction of the higher of the two principles involved’” (*The Traditional Theory of Literature* [Minneapolis, 1962]), p. 77).

⁶ In René Guénon’s words: “One may say that measure is in relation to number, in reverse analogy, what manifestation is in relation to its essential principle” [*On peut dire que la mesure est par rapport au nombre, en sens inversement analogique, ce qu’est la manifestation par rapport à son principe essentiel*] (*Le règne de la quantité et les signes des temps* [Paris, 1945], p. 41).

⁷ “Number, gentlemen, number! Or else order and symmetry; for order is nothing else than ordered number, and symmetry is nothing but perceived and compared order” (Joseph de Maistre, *Les soirées de Saint-Petersbourg* [Paris, 1821], 2:125).

connection, rhythm is closely associated with incantation as a spiritual method of return to the One. Through rhythm, the One makes itself present in multiplicity, the Formless inhabits form: rhythm is the *barzakh* (the intermediary zone) between the instant of eternity and temporal sequence. From an animic standpoint, the mobility and perpetual “otherness” of the soul may be integrated by means of the “sameness” of the reoccurring patterns brought out by rhythmic practice. As Ananda Coomaraswamy has pointed out, the “singsong” reading of sacred texts is none other than the “performing” aspect of this rhythmic law. Monotony and absence of psychic expressiveness is a direct manifestation of the spiritual grounding of sacred chant in the One. This principle is central in sacred and liturgical psalmody, as is testified to by authentic Gregorian chant and traditional Quranic recitation. It is important to keep in mind, in this connection, that poetry should be read aloud, preferably sung. Poetry is not only a manifestation into the realm of multiplicity, it is also an exteriorization, and singing is the very symbol and means of this exteriorization. In this context, it should be recalled that the sacred text—essence or epitome of all poetical works, and always eminently poetic itself, as is the Quran in the context of the Arabic language—proceeds by what has been characterized by Frithjof Schuon as a kind of ruse.⁸ It makes use of multiplicity and exteriorization in order to bring back the ten thousand things to the One. This is what could be called the alchemy of diversity. Accordingly, rhythm functions both as an expression of the One and as a necessity stemming from the spiritual and intellectual structure of our being. As a reflection of the *Logos*, it is the ebb and flow of Reality.

On the “substantial” plane of “words,” rhythm, or meter is like the imprint of the One. And it could be said, in this connection, that through rhythm, meter or prosody, form participates in the essence.

⁸ “Like the world, the Quran is both one and multiple. The world is a multiplicity which disperses and divides; the Quran is a multiplicity which gathers and leads to Unity. The multiplicity of the sacred Book—the diversity of words, sentences, images and narrations—fills the soul, and then absorbs it and transposes it, in an imperceptible manner, through a kind of ‘divine ruse,’ in a climate of serenity and immutability. The soul, which is accustomed to the flow of phenomena, gives herself to this flow without resistance, she lives in them and is divided and dispersed by them, and even more—she becomes what she thinks and what she does. Revealed Speech has the capacity of welcoming this same tendency while reverting its motion thanks to the celestial character of its content and its language, in such a way that the fishes of the soul enter without distrust, and at their customary pace, into the divine net” (English version of *Comprendre l’Islam* [Paris, 1976], pp. 54-55).

On the Foundations and Norms of Poetry

On the highest level, the essence is to be understood as the ineffable Principle—since God is the meaning of everything—the vibrant Silence that is the alpha and the omega of all poetry and all music, of all worlds. However, we must also consider the relationship between essence and form from the standpoint of “meaning” or “content.” The latter is always considered as more determinative or ultimately as more “real” than the formal structure.⁹

In Japanese poetry for example, the *haiku* must fulfill some “formal” requirements that pertain to rhythm, as well as to the lexicon, but it cannot be a *haiku* without integrating an “essential” element without which it is not a *haiku*, the *hai-i*, the *haiku* spirit.¹⁰ Similarly, Hindu poetics entirely revolves around the notion of *rasa* or “taste,” a notion that evokes the divine and beatific infinitude as it is experienced by and through the Self. It is a participation in the music of the Infinite.

Now such terms as *hai-i* or *rasa* refer to a somewhat “ineffable” and “indefinite” reality—although they may give rise to very specific descriptions and classifications in terms of their modalities—precisely because they pertain to Infinitude, as expressed in the Hindu concept of *ānanda* or, in a different way and in Japanese parlance, in the term *fueki*, the “metaphysical ground,” “non-articulated wholeness” (Izutsu), or Naught.¹¹ On whatever level and in whatever mode one may consider it, this infinite (opening onto the Boundless) and indefinite (that cannot be caught in the net of concepts and words) Reality is the end (in both senses of *telos* and limit) and the essence of poetry, but it is also transcendent in relation to the poem as a formal structure. Here, the analogy between the poem and the human subject allows for a clearer understanding of the relation between “essence” and “form”: in Hindu terms, just as *Ātman* is both transcendent and

⁹ As Livingston points out: “The letter or sound is the outward aspect which is of little importance compared to the spirit or meaning embodied in the words” (*The Traditional Theory of Literature*, p. 78).

¹⁰ “. . . *Haiku* as a 17 syllabled verse is formally similar to the upper strophe of *waka*, except that every *haiku* must have *kigo* (season-word). However, the mere fulfillment of this formal requirement does not necessarily produce a *haiku*, if it is devoid of *hai-i* (*haiku* spirit), as is often the case. A verse of 17 syllabled words with the inner division of 5/7/5 without *hai-i*, even if it is provided with *kigo* (season-word), would not make a *haiku*; it could at the very most make an imperfect *waka*. That which makes a *haiku* genuinely *haiku* is not its formal structure but rather the *hai-i*, the *haiku* spirit” (Toshihiko and Toyo Izutsu, *The Theory of Beauty in the Classical Aesthetics of Japan* [The Hague, 1981], pp. 64-65).

¹¹ *Fueki* refers to the intrinsic nature of the infinite Void whereas *ānanda* suggests the dynamic power of the infinite Self.

immanent in relation to the individual self, the “spirit of the poem” is both the very principle of the poem as well as being something situated beyond the poem as a formal entity. If poetry cannot be easily defined, it is not because it is vague or purely subjective, but because it is situated at the junction between form and essence, and opens onto the Infinite.

To put it in a paradoxical way, poetry “has something to say” which “cannot be said.” It “has something to say”: it may not be didactic in the negative sense of the word, but it is still, if genuine, the result of a kind of necessity, the outcome of a pressure or a need to crystallize a “meaning” into a “form.” A contemporary poet such as Rainer Maria Rilke was still very keenly aware of this urgent and necessary character of poetry—the best name for which is inspiration—when he wrote to a would-be poet:

This most of all: ask yourself in the most silent hour of the night: *must* I write? Dig into yourself for a deep answer. And if the answer rings out in assent, if you meet this solemn question with a strong, simple “I must,” then build your life in accordance with this necessity.¹²

Poetry is “given to” or rather “imparted upon” the poet, whether it has the crystalline brevity of *haiku* or the powerful grandeur and length of the epic.¹³ This is the inspiration from the “gods” or from the “muses” that the twentieth-century surrealists caricatured with their “automatic writing,” confusing the light of the super-conscious with the darkness and chaos of the sub-conscious. Being literally “inspired,” true poetry is therefore a rare occurrence, especially in times of spiritual scarcity such as ours.

“Which cannot be said”: poetry is akin to experience, or let us say to presence. Poetry is the articulation of a contemplative perception. It is the result of an encounter between a subject and an object, and

¹² *Letters to a Young Poet* (New York, 1987), p. 6.

¹³ As Seyyed Hossein Nasr comments upon one of the masterpieces of Sufi poetry: “Shaykh Mahmud Shabistārī, the author of the *Gulshan-i rāz* (*The Secret Rose Garden*), which is one of the greatest masterpieces of Persian Sufi poetry, writes: ‘Everyone knows that during all my life, I have never intended to compose poetry. Although my temperament was capable of it, rarely did I choose to write poems.’ Yet in spite of himself, Shabistārī, in a period of a few days, and through direct inspiration (*ilhām*) composed one of the most enduring and widely read poetical masterpieces of Oriental literature. Moreover, he composed in perfect rhyming couplets and the *mathnawī* meter while remaining oblivious to the canons of prosody as contained in the classical works on the subject” (*Islamic Art and Spirituality*, pp. 93-94).

ultimately the verbal crystallization of an identification between them. In the modern world, poetry is often conceived as “subjective” and purely “emotional” because of a misunderstanding or an abuse of this principle. Normatively, poetry is the crystallization of what Daumal quite suggestively calls “an objective emotion.” Objective in the sense that it is grounded in an archetype—the essence of a phenomenon or a perception—and emotional in the sense that the soul reacts to this archetype in which she recognizes, more or less clearly, her very substance. In this sense, sentiments can be quite objective, and certainly more so than ineffective reasoning severed from its intellectual and intuitive root.

Let us consider Japanese *haiku* as an example: in it, the subject participates in the very mode of nature’s operations. The poem is like a glimpse into the emergence of the Whole, of the Infinite, into a given form, a given ambience. In a sense, *haiku* constitutes a limit of poetry since, with it, language is reduced to its minimal manifestation, in order to suggest the full Reality of That from which the phenomenon emerges. In this regard, poetry must suggest the very ineffability of the object that it attempts to convey. It is a form of the Formless. Baudelaire had an intuition of this function of poetry when he defined it as a capacity to recover childhood and perceive a given phenomenon “in all its freshness, as the very symbol of reality.” One could say of the true *haiku* what Titus Burckhardt so suggestively wrote of Far Eastern landscape painting:

In paintings of landscapes of a Buddhist inspiration (*ch’an*), all the elements, mountains, trees and clouds, are present only to mark, in contrast, the void from which they seem to spring forth in this very instant and against which they detach themselves as ephemeral islands.

Of course, not all poetry must conform to this “minimalistic” pattern. However, even the most expanded plenitude of expression, if truly poetic, tends to resonate with contemplative Silence, this vibrant essence that is none other than the Heart as source of all songs.

IV



SCIENCE AND THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT



CHAPTER 14

In the Beginning was Consciousness

Seyyed Hossein Nasr

One alone is the Dawn beaming over all this.
It is the One that severally becomes all this.

Rg-Veda, VIII, 58:2

The nameless [Tao] is the beginning of Heaven and Earth,
The named [Tao] is the mother of ten thousand things.

Tao Te Ching, ch. 1

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.

Gospel of John, 1:1

But His command, when He intendeth a thing, is only that He saith
unto it: "Be!" and it is.

Quran, 36:81

When we turn to the sacred scriptures of various religions, we discover that in every case the origin of the cosmos and of man is identified as a Reality which is conscious and in fact constitutes consciousness understood on the highest level as absolute Consciousness, which is transcendent and yet the source of all consciousness in the cosmic realm including our own. Furthermore the "in the beginning" is understood not only as belonging to the past but also to the present moment which is the eternal now. That is why "in the beginning" must also be understood as "in principle" as the Latin translation of the opening verse of the Gospel of John asserts, "*in principia erat verbum.*" Whether we speak of Allah who commands things to be and they are, or the Tao, or the Word by which all things were made, or Brahman, we are speaking of Consciousness of an ever-living and present and this truth is made especially explicit in Hinduism where the principal Reality which is the source of all things is described as at once Being, Consciousness and Ecstasy. Nor is this unanimity of vision of the Origin of all things as identified with consciousness confined to sacred scriptures. Both Oriental and traditional Western philosophers speak of the same truth. The *tò Agathon* of Plato is not only the

Supreme Good but also supreme awareness of the Good, and *nous* or intellect, so central to Greek philosophy, is of course inseparable from consciousness. Islamic philosophers consider being to be inseparable from knowledge and therefore awareness, and consider cosmic levels of existence also to be levels of knowledge and awareness. As for Hinduism, in its worldview the existence of a thing, even a rock, is also a state of consciousness.

One can then assert safely that in the traditional world there was unanimity concerning the priority of consciousness in relation to what we call "matter" today. The Reality which is seen by all these traditional religions and philosophies to be the origin of things both temporally and in principle is also Supreme Consciousness and can only be reached when human beings are able to elevate their own level of consciousness. Even in Buddhism, which does not speak of an objective Supreme Reality and of cosmogenesis as understood in the Abrahamic and Iranian religions as well as Hinduism, *nirvana* is the supreme state of consciousness and Buddhahood is also inseparable from consciousness. The only exception to this unanimous traditional view in the old days was to be found in certain anti-metaphysical philosophies of the late Antiquity accompanying the death throes of Hellenistic and Roman civilizations and in certain marginal schools of ancient India which were thoroughly rejected by the mainstream orthodox schools of Hindu thought.

The privilege of denying the primacy of consciousness wholesale remained for the modern world, especially with the advent of the materialistic and scientific philosophies which came to the fore after the Scientific Revolution in the 17th century. Furthermore, this transformation did not take place until the modern idea of matter, not to be confused with its understanding in Greek philosophy and science, was developed with Descartes and Galileo. By taking away from corporeal existence all its qualitative aspects and reducing it to pure quantity, these men, followed by many others, created a worldview in which there was such a thing as pure inert matter divorced totally from life and consciousness but somehow mysteriously known by the knowing subject or the mind. Cartesian bifurcation created a dualism between mind and matter which has dominated Western thought since the 17th century, a dualism which has led many to choose the primacy of matter over mind and the establishment of the view that in the beginning was matter and not consciousness, even if some still hold to a deistic conception of a Creator God.

The prevalence of this supposedly scientific materialism, which, however, is not all borne out by science as science and not pseudo-theology or philosophy, gained momentum in the 19th century with

the evolutionary theory of Darwin which itself is an ideology in support of this so-called materialism and also based on it. The penetration of the view that all things begin with matter which then evolves into life and later consciousness into the worldview of the general public in the West has been such that despite the total rejection of the classical view of matter in modern quantum mechanics, there still lingers in the public arena reliance upon a materialistic perspective which reduces ultimately all things to "matter." This reductionism has become part and parcel of the modern and even post-modern mindset. People believe that it is possible to understand a thing only through analysis and the breaking up of that thing to its "fundamental" parts which are material. They are led to believe that the whole is nothing more than the sum of its parts and physicists continue to search for the ultimate particles or building blocks of the universe which the less sophisticated public envisages as minute billiard balls which are then accumulated together to create all the beings of the universe. In such a perspective based on materialistic reductionism both life and consciousness are seen as epiphenomena of material factors whether they be matter or energy. The whole rapport between consciousness and corporeal existence is thus reversed.

In traditional cosmologies Pure Consciousness, that is also Pure Being, descends, while remaining Itself transcendent vis-à-vis Its manifestations, through various levels of the cosmic hierarchy to reach the physical world whereas in the modern reductionist view things ascend from the primordial cosmic soup. Even if certain individual scientists believe that a conscious and intelligent Being brought about the Big Bang and originated the cosmos, consciousness plays no role in the so-called evolution of the cosmos from the early aggregate of molecules to the appearance of human beings on the planet. In the traditional world view, human beings have descended from a higher realm of being and consciousness, whereas according to the modernist perspective so prevalent in present day society, they have ascended from below. These are two diametrically opposed points of view, one based on the primacy of consciousness and the other on the primacy of unconscious and blind material agents, forces, and processes.

* * *

How we view the nature of reality has a direct bearing upon how we live as human beings. For millennia human beings lived in a universe dominated by the idea of the primacy of consciousness over all that is corporeal and material. They fought wars and there was disease but they lived in a world of meaning and beauty. They created traditional

arts of surpassing beauty and lived, to a large extent, in harmony and peace with their natural environment. They knew who they were, where they came from and where they were going. The denial of the supremacy and primacy of consciousness and the substitution of a materialistic reductionism in its place, has given human beings greater domination over nature and certain earthly comforts while, needless to say, creating new discomforts. It has cured many diseases while opening the door to diseases unknown before. And it has been defended as being a way to peace while making possible wars with a degree of violence and lethal effects not imagined in days of old. But most of all it has destroyed the harmonious relation not only between man and God and the spiritual world but also between man and nature by permitting the creation of a science based not on wisdom but on power and its applications as a new technology which has the capability of destroying the very order of life on earth. On the individual level, it has taken away from human beings the ultimate meaning of life and destroyed the home which they considered the universe to be, making human beings aliens within a world view constructed by human minds.

* * *

Let us examine further the consequences of substituting for the primacy of consciousness, the primal reality of matter or matter/energy according to the modern scientific perspective. By positing matter as the ground of all cosmic reality, and for many the only reality, a reductionism has developed which reduces the spirit to the psyche, the psyche to biological processes, life to the activity of chemical agents and chemical elements to the particles of physics. People continue to speak of finding the “fundamental” building blocks of the universe from which one could build up step by step to the greatest prophets, saints, sages, thinkers, and artists. The reality of higher levels of being is thereby seen as nothing more than phenomena resulting from purely material and quantitative entities and processes. Life is seen as an accident and consciousness an epiphenomenon of life. The universe is depicted as a “dead” one devoid of any life, meaning, soul or consciousness. Consequently human beings are made to feel like an island amidst a vast, threatening ocean of blind and dead matter. They have no home in the cosmos as did their ancestors and feel alienated from all that is not human. Furthermore, this alienation has nothing to do with the alienation of the spiritual human being from the world as understood religiously. Nor is it in any way related to the saying of Christ, “My kingdom is not of this world.” The new alienation from

the world resulting from scientific reductionism is of a very different order. Traditional men and women found their home ultimately in the Divine but they also saw in this world a domain dominated by God and full of souls and spirits which corresponded to different aspects of their nature. They never felt as if they were alone in a universe totally blind to their deepest hopes and aspirations. The modern forms of human alienation whether psychological or social, issue from the cosmic isolation created by a worldview which denies the primacy of consciousness.

Human beings are in need of meaning as much as they are in need of air to breathe and food to eat. Modern materialistic reductionism has not only resulted in chemically infested food and polluted air, but also the loss of meaning in its ultimate sense. There can in fact be no ultimate meaning without the acceptance of the Ultimate in the metaphysical sense. It is indeed a great paradox that human consciousness in modern times has produced a view of the cosmos which has no room for consciousness. And when human beings do seek to find consciousness in the objective world, or experience what they consider to be encounters with conscious beings outside of the human realm, they are marginalized and condemned to the category of hallucinating men and women in need of psychiatric care. When our ancestors could encounter angels and even lesser beings in nature, and when such encounters were acceptable within the *Weltanschauung* in which they lived, they did not encounter "aliens" in the modern sense nor did they feel the need to do so. Nor were they marginalized as abnormal in the societies in which they lived. And the conscious beings they did encounter were not alien to them.

The denial of the primacy of consciousness also resulted both directly and indirectly in the desacralization of nature and the reduction of nature to a pure "it," to a commodity to be used by human beings as they deemed necessary. The care for nature was turned into its rape as the prevalent view of nature became ever more impervious to its spiritual qualities, its mystery, its innate harmony and beauty. All those aspects of nature, celebrated over the centuries by sages, saints, poets and artists, became subjectivized and made to appear as being objectively unreal. Turned into a commodity to be used by the ever growing avaricious appetite of modern humanity as consumer, the natural environment soon began to suffer, leading to the environmental crisis which now threatens the web of life on earth. Even today few want to accept the direct relation between the materialistic view of nature and the destruction of nature on the unprecedented scale that we observe everywhere on the globe today.

The materialistic world view and the denying of the primacy of consciousness have also had a direct bearing on the weakening of ethical norms and practices. In all civilizations morality was related to religion and a philosophical world view in which good and evil, right and wrong had a cosmic as well as human dimension. We can see clear examples of this rapport not only in the Abrahamic religions, but also in Hinduism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Zoroastrianism. Ethics is always related in one way or another to metaphysics. In denying the primacy of consciousness in favor of the material, the modern paradigm has weakened the objective cadre for human ethics not only by marginalizing and weakening religion, but also by reducing the cosmos to a purely "material" reality in which good and evil have no meaning any more than does beauty. *À la* Galileo and Descartes all such categories are relegated to the subjective realm and banished from objective reality. Ethics is thereby weakened wherever this world view has flourished and secularized ethics based on such a truncated view of reality has never been able to gain widespread acceptance. Moreover, all this has occurred at a time when human beings are in the greatest need of an environmental ethics which would appeal to the vast majority of the human family, most of whom still closely identify ethics with God, with sacred laws and teachings of various religions. Nor is the need for ethics confined to the environment. It is also of the utmost importance to emphasize ethics in the dealing of human beings with each other when, thanks to modern technology, weapons of war and conflict have become lethal to a degree beyond imagination.

If in the beginning was only the soup of molecules, then our deepest yearnings and aspirations, our deepest feelings, our sense of love, beauty, justice and goodness are all ephemeral subjective states caused by blind evolutionary forces and truth has meaning only when operationally defined. What we call our humanity is only an illusion. What is real is what we experience of the outside world seen only as a domain of material entities and forces in various interactions and processes which are totally indifferent to our humanity. To deny the primacy of consciousness is in fact to confirm knowingly or unknowingly our own inhumanity and to admit that all that we consider to be the deepest elements of our thoughts, emotions, and even spiritual states are ultimately illusory and unreal, being reducible to material agents and forces. It is to surrender ourselves to the sub-human, which in fact we see manifesting itself, by no means accidentally, to an ever greater degree in the human order as it pulls humanity with ever greater speed downwards toward the abyss.

If consciousness in its highest sense is not the alpha of cosmic and human existence, it cannot, metaphysically speaking, be its omega

either. By denying the primacy of consciousness, modern materialism has also cast doubt on the reality of the immortality of the human soul and the afterlife. Today in the West even many religious people do not take eschatological realities seriously. Besides the most tragic consequences for the human soul who denies such realities, the weakening of belief in eternal life also has a direct consequence on how we live in this world and more particularly, upon the destruction of the natural environment. If life on this earth is the only life we have, then we should do everything possible to live a worldly life as fully as possible. For most people such a life means hedonism and consumerism to the extent possible. A few agnostics might be satisfied with "the life of the mind," but for most people loss of fear of the infernal states and hope for paradise results in giving full vent to their sensual passions and their gratification which result in ever greater expectation of material "benefits" from their environment with catastrophic consequences for the natural world as well as for the human agent within that world.

The consequences of the loss of the vision of the Sacred Origin of the cosmos and denial of the primacy of consciousness are so many and so multifarious that they cannot all be mentioned here. And yet, opposition to this view is so strong within the citadel of the modern scientific paradigm, that even scientific arguments for intelligent design of the universe, which implies of course the primacy of intelligence or consciousness, are brushed aside in dogmatic fashion by many high priests of the pseudo-religion of scientism. Despite this negative situation, the truth of the primacy of consciousness must be asserted whenever and wherever possible. And there are signs that more and more perspicacious people are awakening from their "dogmatic slumber" and realizing this truth.

If the truth of the primacy of consciousness cosmically and ontologically as well as microcosmically were to be reasserted and accepted on a wide scale again in the contemporary world, human life would become different qualitatively and many of the obstacles facing humanity today would be removed. Human life would have meaning beyond transient psychological states and evanescent sensuous experiences. Human life would also regain the aspect of ultimacy which all religions believe it possesses. The reason for the sacredness of human life would become clear and the quality of sacredness would have an ontological basis rather being mere sentimentality as it is today when seen in the context of a strictly scientific point of view. And the intimations of immortality would be seen as a blinding reality rather than sentimental wishful thinking combined often with doubt.

Were we to accept the truth that "in the beginning was consciousness" and that "it is now as it was at the beginning," we would no

longer feel as aliens in a dead and forbidding cosmos, as accidents in a lifeless universe. Far from being aliens, we would feel once again at home in the cosmos as did traditional men and women over the ages. Our rapport with animals, plants and even the inanimate world would change from one of strife and need for control and domination to one of harmony and equilibrium with a much greater possibility of intimacy with more human beings than the current mind-set makes possible.

Finally we would regain the cosmic dimension of our existence. Our deepest values, our attraction to and yearning for beauty, peace and justice, and the experience of love itself on all levels would not be seen as being simply subjective states devoid of any objective reality but on the contrary as corresponding to cosmic and ultimately metacosmic realities. And our ethical actions and norms, far from being simply based on standards set by merely human decisions and agreements, would be seen as having a divine origin and cosmic correspondences and as being much more real than simply convenient accommodations created by human societies for their survival or selfish interests.

If human beings were not to live below the human level, but were to realize the full possibility of being human, they would grasp intuitively the truth of the assertion of the primacy of consciousness. Their own consciousness would be raised to a level where they would know through direct intellection that the alpha and omega of cosmic reality cannot but be the Supreme Consciousness which is also Pure Being and that all beings in the universe possess a degree of consciousness in accord with their existential state. They would realize that as human beings we are given the intelligence to know the One Who is the Origin and End of all things, who is *Sat* (Being), *Chit* (Consciousness), and *Ānanda* (Bliss), and to realize that this knowledge itself is the ultimate goal of human life, the crown of human existence, and what ultimately makes us human beings who can discourse with the trees and the birds as well as with the angels and who are on the highest level the interlocutors of that Supreme Reality who has allowed us to say "I" but who is ultimately the I of all I's.

CHAPTER 15

Spirituality and Science Convergence or divergence?¹

Seyyed Hossein Nasr

In a world torn by contention and strife at every level, from the spiritual and intellectual to the physical, those in quest of the creation of peace and harmony have often turned to the task of seeking accord between spirituality and science. The contemporary landscape is in fact filled by such efforts many of which, although based on the best of intentions, only contribute to further chaos in the present-day world. Many such attempts substitute sentimental wishing for reality and ambiguous definitions and positions for the clarity and rigor which alone can disperse the fog of ignorance that blurs the vision of present-day humanity traveling on a road that becomes even more perilous thanks to a large extent to the lack of critical discernment in the relation between a knowledge derived from the senses and its consequences and the wisdom which descends from revelation, intellection or illumination. The “harmony” between science and spirituality, characteristic of much of the so-called New Age mentality in the West and also numerous westernized Orientals who speak without a clear definition of the concepts involved and modes of knowledge and consciousness at play within the boundaries of what is to be harmonized and unified, is itself one of the sources of discord and cacophony in a world in which intellectual discernment, so long a hallmark of all metaphysical traditions especially those of India, is too easily sacrificed for ambiguous and disruptive accords which cannot but lead to discord as long as one mistakes the rope for a snake.

The subject of the relation between religion and science, and for those embarrassed by the use of the term religion, then between spirituality and science, remains for other reasons of paramount importance in a world in which on the one hand a science of nature based upon

¹ The following is the text of an address given in New Delhi, India in July 1995 as part of a celebration on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the birth of His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

power and dominance over nature rather than the contemplation of its ontological and symbolic reality reigns supreme as the only legitimate form of knowledge and is almost deified and certainly absolutized, while its practitioners appear more and more to the masses at large as priests wielding ultimate authority over human life and even determining its meaning. And on the other hand, the demands of the Spirit and the quest for the spiritual still continue unabated for they are woven into the very texture of human existence, and if anything the very threat to human life on earth brought about by the applications of modern science have only increased this yearning of late as seen in the revival of religion throughout the world and the even greater flowering of "home-grown" and exotic forms of so-called spiritualities as well as aberrant mutations of Oriental teachings, in even the most secularized parts of Western society. In the light of this situation it is therefore necessary to ask before delving into the question of convergence or divergence exactly what we mean by science and spirituality in the context of the present discourse.

The definition of science might appear to be simple if one only uses the current understanding of the term in English, and not in fact French or German where the terms *science* and *Wissenschaft* have a more general connotation. In English the term science implies a particular way of knowing the natural world based upon empirical and rational methods and excluding by definition other modes of knowledge based upon other epistemological and ontological premises. Of course, even in English we do use such terms as Chinese, Indian, Islamic or Buddhist science because such a basic term as science, derived from *scientia*, cannot become completely limited to its positivistic, operational, empirical or rationalistic meaning. In the latter case, that is, if we were to think of let us say Chinese or Islamic science, then the relation of such a science to spirituality would be very different from what exists today when one limits the term science to its main current English usage. This difference is due to the fact that the traditional sciences are based on very different cosmological and epistemological principles from modern science. For the purpose of this discussion, however, we shall define science as that body of systematic knowledge of nature, combined with mathematics, which grew out of the Scientific Revolution of the 17th century on the basis of earlier Latin, Islamic and Greek sciences. This limitation is quite unfortunate, especially in a discourse given here in India, and because so little attention has been paid by Eastern as well as Western scholars to the relation between spirituality and the traditional sciences of

nature. And yet the crisis is not in that domain but is to be found in the confrontation between the modern Western scientific world view, now spread over much of the globe, and the spirituality which has flowered over the millennia within the gardens of various religions of the world.

As for the definition of spirituality, it is even more problematic because of the very ambiguous manner in which it has been used during the past few decades. The origin of the usage of this term in European languages is fairly recent, that is, within the past century or two, where it was first used in Catholic circles. Only recently has it become widely used, often as substitute for religion and for some in opposition to it. Words used in Oriental languages to denote spirituality usually reflect the etymology of the word as coming from *spiritus* or the Spirit. For example, in Arabic the term *rūhāniyyah* is a prevalent translation, the term coming from *al-rūh* which means precisely *spiritus*, without the meaning of the Arabic term having become in any way ambiguous. In the modern world, however, which is characterized by either the denial of the Spirit as an objective, ontological reality, or its confusion with the psyche, what can spirituality even mean? Most often it implies a vague yearning for meaning and the experience of the noumenal while settling for the psychological instead in forgetfulness of the truth that the Spirit manifests itself according to certain principles and only within the great traditions of celestial origin. And if the Bible asserts that “the spirit bloweth where it listeth,” this only points to the exception which proves the rule.

Once traditional criteria of the reality of the Spirit and laws of its manifestation as contained in various traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam are denied, then anything can be called spiritual and the term spirituality loses both its intellectual dimension and sacred quality. The vast labyrinth of the psychic world becomes confused with the luminous Heaven of the Spirit and the type of so-called spirituality resulting from this confusion can be made to converge with almost anything including science. In this present discussion, therefore, we shall define spirituality as the inner, spiritual dimension of traditional religions dealing with the noumenal and the formless that can be experienced directly and is beyond mental categories but is not anti-intellectual. On the contrary if intellect is understood in its original sense as *intellectus* or the *buddhi* and not simply reason, spirituality and intellectuality are inseparable from each other.

The task of studying whether there is convergence or divergence between science and spirituality is in fact worthy of pursuit only if spirituality is understood in this traditional sense and not in an ambiguous manner which can embrace almost anything including the psychic and even the demonic. Be that as it may, the discussion which follows confines itself to the traditional understanding of spirituality, one which is nevertheless vast beyond our imagination for it includes a Shankara as well as an Eckhart, a Rūmī as well as a Hōnen, a Milarepa as well as a Chuang-Tzu, not to speak of the great masters of spirituality of other traditions such as Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Confucianism and Shamanism.

Defined in this manner, one can at first ask what are the points of divergence between spirituality and science. Obviously there is first of all the question of the understanding of what constitutes reality. In traditional spirituality, reality is at once transcendent and immanent, beyond and here and now but in all cases above every categorization and conceptualization of the mind. It is beyond the psycho-physical realm and yet encompasses this domain. One cannot comprehend it in the sense of its being encompassed because nothing can encompass that which is infinite. Yet it can be known by the Intellect which is a divine noetic faculty at the center of our being. Ultimate reality is absolute and infinite, the supreme Good and the source of all good. It is Beyond-Being as well as constituting Being which is the origin of the cosmic hierarchy and levels of universal existence.

In contrast, for modern science, reality, to the extent one still speaks of such a category, is that which can be empirically verified. Everything that is beyond the empirically verifiable cannot be treated or known "scientifically"; nor strictly speaking can it even be of scientific significance. To all extents and purposes it is non-existent. To use the language of Hinduism, the Real is *Ātman* while all modern science is a science of *māyā* or more exactly of its lower reaches, or in Buddhist terms of *samsāric* existence even if extended to the galaxies. The Real is known through the twin sources of revelation and intellection with the aid of the *buddhi*, while both of these sources, and along with them metaphysical and cosmological truths, are denied by the world view of modern science, although not necessarily by individual scientists.

Authentic spirituality is always aware of the basic distinction between the Principle and Its manifestations, between *Ātman* and *māyā*, *nirvāna* and *samsāra*, the Divine Essence (*al-Dhat*) and the veils (*hijāb*) which hide and yet reveal the theophanies of the Divine

Names and Qualities from us and to us. The foundation of all traditional metaphysics is in fact the distinction between the Absolute and the relative and knowledge of the relative in the light of the Absolute. By denying the Absolute in the metaphysical sense, modern science cannot but absolutize the relative, mistaking the cosmic “illusion” or *māyā* for reality. Its grave sin is what Buddhism calls the error of false attribution. As a result, the scientific world view denies not only the Absolute in Itself but also the hierarchies and levels of being beyond the psycho-physical, the sensible and the measurable. Many of its exponents then set about to reveal the mysteries of existence through the microscope, telescope, or some computer model, and a world dazzled by the glitter of modern technology and having divinized modern science stands with full anticipation for the revelation of the next “mystery of the universe” which does not usually go beyond adding or subtracting some purely quantitative element to or from the universe seen in a purely quantitative manner.

There is of course a metaphysical significance to those discoveries of modern science which correspond to some aspect of physical reality and are not purely conjecture, for all that is real is real to the extent that it symbolizes a reality beyond itself and everything in the universe is ultimately symbolic except the Absolute Reality Itself. But this truth concerns precisely what lies beyond the confines of modern science and cannot be understood save by a metaphysician whether he be himself a scientist or not.

Before turning away from the question of divergence between spirituality and modern science, it is necessary to emphasize again that authentic spirituality depends ultimately upon a revelation from the Spirit on the basis of immutable principles. Modern science is also based on a set of premises but the latter have not descended from Heaven. Rather, they are the creations of those philosophers who have woven together the elements that constitute the paradigm within which modern science has functioned since the 17th century. Strangely enough it is only during the past few decades that the dependence of modern science upon a particular world view and paradigm of physical reality is becoming accepted at least in some circles while the majority of modern educated people continue to believe that religion or spirituality is based on faith, and that certain assumptions about the nature of reality and science on the contrary are based upon reason and observation. Both in fact base themselves upon faith in a body of knowledge which for religion is considered to be the truth and for science premises and foundational assumptions. The great difference

is that in one case the doctrines descend from the immutable Divine Order and in the other from rational and empirical philosophies of a purely human order whose consequences cannot of necessity transcend the purely human and because of their denial of the supra-human, place man in the danger of falling into the sub-human. It is because of the radically different epistemologies, views of reality and premises involved that science cannot confirm the Divine Origin of the world or its eschatological omega point, the reality of the spiritual worlds above the physical or the immortal nature of the soul of man, to use the terminology of the Abrahamic religions. Nor can it point to what constitutes the goal of human life here below.

Science is based in fact upon the idea that there is only one mode of perception and one level of external reality which that single level of consciousness studies. The world according to it is what we see if only we extend the word "see" to include what is shown by the microscope and the telescope which do not represent a new mode or level of seeing but simply the extension, horizontally, of what the human eye perceives. In contrast authentic spirituality is based upon the basic thesis that not only are there levels of reality but also levels of consciousness which can know those levels of reality. What we perceive of the external world depends upon our mode of consciousness, not in the sense that a geologist looking upon a mountain sees certain geological structures which the non-geologist does not perceive; rather in the sense that other non-physical levels of reality of what taken only physically becomes the mountain can be known if we possess higher levels of consciousness. And again this does not mean that this knowledge is based on some kind of subjectivism but means that when we possess a higher level of consciousness we have the preparation to "see" other dimensions and levels of the reality in question. In any case according to all traditional spiritual doctrines what we see depends upon our mode of consciousness and knowledge and our mode of consciousness in turn depends upon our mode of being. Hence the centrality of spiritual discipline which transforms our mode of being as well as consciousness. Seeing is believing only if we extend the meaning of seeing beyond what the physical eyes perceive.

This great contrast becomes more evident when we consider the fact that to become educated as a modern scientist, it is not necessary to undergo any spiritual training but only to develop certain mental faculties and keenness of observation in total contrast to the case of spirituality when it is practiced seriously and not simply talked about, for authentic spirituality demands the transformation of our whole

being and a change in how we think, perceive, evaluate and act. The result of this basic difference is that there are some scientists who are interested in spirituality and some not at all. Even in the realm of ethics, modern science qua science demonstrates a relation very different from what we find in traditional spirituality. Ethical values are inseparable from the acts and deeds of spiritually realized men and women and spirituality has always been the fountainhead, the inner spring and the life force of ethics in various religions. In contrast modern science as a system of knowledge is ethically neutral and in fact ethical questions are irrelevant to it. On the practical level there are many scientists who are very ethical and then of course there are many who are not, as the history of this century has amply demonstrated. In fact the whole idea of scientists being responsible for the consequences of the applications of their science within the societies in which they function has only recently become acceptable to a notable body of scientists, at a time when these applications threaten both the natural environment and the quality and possibly even continuity of human life on earth.

One could go on at length but the points mentioned should suffice to demonstrate that the facile convergence of science and spirituality championed in so many circles is based more on fervent desire than on reality. Also it is often based on the one hand on the confusion of science with the views of some of its practitioners and on the other on the dilution and distortion of authentic spiritual teachings. Nowhere is this more evident than in the question of evolution understood in its modern biological sense. All traditional doctrines which do deal with cosmogony, some like Taoism and Confucianism remaining silent about the genesis of the cosmos, speak of the descent of the world from the Divine Principle, the celestial archetypes, the Logos, etc. God said, "Let there be light and there was light," the Bible asserts and the Quran states that Allah has said, "Be!" and all things came into existence. There is the primordial sacrifice of Purusa in Hinduism and of Gayomarth in Zoroastrianism to which numerous examples could be added from other traditions. The beings of this world have descended from the Divine, from the world of the Spirit and the reality of all things in the cosmos resides in God, to speak in the language of Abrahamic faiths, or according to Hinduism is contained in the original cosmic egg which far from being material is a spiritual reality containing all the possibilities to be manifested in a particular cosmic cycle.

In evolutionary theory, on the contrary, everything has ascended from below, from the original “soup of molecules” which somehow mysteriously produces a consciousness that can stand outside the process and understand and study it. Nothing in the world is more opposed to the spiritual understanding of the origin of man and other beings than 19th century evolutionary theory which is a philosophy rather than science but which is presented as science because it is the main support for the whole structure of the modern scientific world view without which the whole secularist *Weltanschauung* would collapse. And nowhere is this sentimental attitude, so opposed to metaphysical discernment that has always characterized the intellectual life of the land of India, more evident than in the writings of an array of people, many from the Indian world, who would simply equate the traditional Hindu doctrines of descent and gradation of being with evolution and ascent of the higher from the lower through simple temporal processes of change and transformation.

To this century-old attempt at bringing about the convergence of totally divergent perspectives must now be added a recently written chapter by those who would reduce both science and religion or spirituality to a “story,” claiming that each has a story about reality which can be made to converge. Of course this is done not only through the introduction of a certain degree of ambiguity and cloud to cover the terrain which cannot be easily traversed intellectually, but also by a kind of subjectivism and psychologism which characterize much of the contemporary scene and especially what is called New Age spirituality. Moreover, to bring about convergence, it is usually the religious truths which are sacrificed because they are accused of being “dogmatic” and what is substituted for them is usually drawn from evolutionism itself with some modifying factors to placate those who are still searching for a reality which is not simply material and physical. That such a thinking has entered even into writings that are taken seriously in certain religions, such as the works of Teilhard de Chardin in Catholic circles, only points out how far away the current understanding of spirituality has moved from that of the worlds which produced the Hönens, Rāmānujas, St. Teresas and Rūmīs as well as the Shankaras, Nagārjunas, Eckharts and Ibn ‘Arabīs who, each in his or her own way and according to different modes and perspectives, have dominated the spiritual and intellectual lives of different human collectivities over the centuries.

Seeing how powerful science, or at least its image, is in modern society and also how persistent is man's need for spirituality, we must now ask what can be done to bring about a serious convergence and accord between science and spirituality, one which would not be apparent and only contribute further to the confusion and chaos that characterize so much of contemporary life. Needless to say there cannot be a convergence between the view which believes that we have descended from above and that which claims that we have ascended from below. But if one puts pseudo-science, or rather philosophical hypotheses parading as science aside on the one hand and pseudo-spirituality, now so rampant in the West, on the other, then there are certainly significant steps that can be taken in bringing about if not a convergence, at least an understanding between the principles of spirituality and the *dicta* of science as they exist today and might exist tomorrow, while being always mindful of the continuously changing nature of the latter at least in details if not always in *Weltanschauung*.

Let us begin by recalling the fact that today even the world view or paradigm of modern science is beginning to change for the first time since the 16th and 17th centuries. There are scientists, especially physicists, who are turning to a world view in which the reality of what is of concern to spirituality is not reduced to subjectivism or a secondary, derivative set of phenomena. It is as yet too early to foretell what will happen in this domain. At the present stage there are those who, groping for a new philosophy of nature, remain satisfied with superficial comparisons between the dance of Siva and that of electrons or electro-magnetic polarity and the Yin-Yang principles of Far Eastern cosmology. This may, however, be but the first halting step or series of steps in the direction of the discovery, or rather rediscovery of Reality in its vast amplitude and numerous dimensions beyond the truncated version of it which is the subject of modern physics and which is then taken to be reality as such by the scientific mind.

Since it is not possible to discover higher levels of reality simply by means of even further analysis of matter and energy in a quantitative sense, such a discovery, if it ever comes, must of necessity draw from the metaphysical teachings of various traditions and be the result of the navigation through higher levels of reality by those who have been able to make such a journey, thanks to intellection and authentic spiritual techniques. If the shift of paradigm, so often discussed in the current philosophy of science, is to be anything more than the substitution of one limited view of reality for another, then recourse must

be had to spiritual traditions especially those of the East where a great deal of such teachings have been better preserved than in the modern West. If the substitution represents simply a "horizontal" shift, then accord between the new paradigm of science and spirituality will be as problematic as what one observes today. But there is some hope that a positive transformation of paradigm will come about. There are in fact a number of scientists, particularly physicists, who speak in such terms and who express serious theological and spiritual concerns, more than many theologians, who in fear of the onslaught of modern science, continue to surrender theology to the discoveries of the microscope and the telescope to an even greater degree.

In this process of the formation of a new paradigm, spirituality itself carries a heavy burden. What is called spirituality in various religions must be clearly defined, its roots in revelation, divine descent or corresponding realities in other religions elucidated and its wedding to authentic metaphysics or *sophia* based upon the twin sources of intellection and revelation/illumination made manifest. It is for those knowledgeable in such metaphysics and molded by authentic spirituality to formulate a contemporary metaphysics of nature and cosmology in the traditionally honored sense of this term which could provide the intellectual background for the new paradigm being sought by modern science. Spirituality abdicates from its function and role when it simply repeats the current findings of modern science, which will not be current tomorrow, and then distorts its own millennial teachings to demonstrate that they are in accord with present-day scientific theories or findings. Spirituality is based on the primacy of the spirit, on the supreme reality of the One, the Tao, the Godhead, *Ātman*, *Allāh* and not on a reality discovered through the external senses alone. Spirituality envisages man as at once Spirit, soul and body, and not only the mind and body of Cartesian dualism, and the cosmos also as a reality possessing not only a "body" which we can observe and study but also other dimensions corresponding to the psyche and Spirit. The more the basic metaphysical and epistemological differences between authentic spirituality and the current understanding of science are brought out, the more is there the possibility of the forging of a paradigm for science which could live at peace with the spiritual and not endanger the very existence of man on earth through its even greater exertion of power over both the human psyche and the domain of nature. If representatives of authentic spirituality do not become aware of this grave responsibility, they will simply leave the field open to pseudo-spirituality and caricatures of

authentic teachings to which many a well-meaning scientist, himself not trained in such matters, will turn for inspiration or guidance. The consequences cannot but be more catastrophic than an out and out rejection of all the claims of spirituality by this or that materialistic or agnostic scientist.

One might say that the most immediate task at hand is the creation of a sacred science of the cosmos which would not necessarily negate what modern science has discovered but provide another type of knowledge of the cosmos rooted in its sacred reality. Such a science, which had existed in various traditional civilizations but is rarely spoken of by current representatives of spirituality, would be the meeting ground between spirituality and science. It would provide a sacred view of nature, now being so mercilessly desecrated and one might say even murdered in the act which is now being called ecocide. It would also provide a knowledge of the cosmos which could discern between the aspects of modern science that correspond to some aspect of physical reality and those that are merely conjecture parading as science. It could also provide a domain of discourse between spirituality and science without destroying or mutilating the corresponding realities involved. Of course such an endeavor would require humility not only on behalf of certain individual men and women practicing science, for there are to be sure many humble scientists, but on behalf of science as a discipline. There must come the admission on behalf of the guardians and propagators of science in general, that modern science is a possible science and not *the* only legitimate science of nature. As long as such a totalitarian and monopolistic view of science exists, all talk of the harmony of spirituality and science remains mere talk unless spirituality is diluted or transformed into something which has as little to do with the Spirit as do the discoveries in a physics laboratory. Once such a limitation is admitted, however, there is certainly the possibility of an *approchement* and even of the opening of the door to the metaphysical and symbolic significance of major modern scientific discoveries, a significance which lies beyond the realm and boundaries defined by science for itself and therefore meaningless "scientifically" speaking in the same way that the term sacred in "sacred science" is simply a meaningless word in the context of the way in which modern science defines and understands concepts and terms.

Let us hope that at this dangerous juncture of human history, when man's ever greater quantitative knowledge of nature, based on a definition of knowledge which excludes the numinous and the sacred, is threatening all human life and in fact the whole of the natural ambi-

ance, a deeper understanding will be attained of the infinitely profound and rich sources of authentic spirituality and the real nature and limitations of modern science. The *dharma* of those who know cannot but be to discern, to overcome the supreme sin of false attribution, to preserve a sense of proportion and to remain faithful to the hierarchy of existence and the true relation between the spiritual and the physical based upon these realities. Only in the quest, preservation and propagation of authentic spirituality and an honest and critical understanding of the premises, assumptions, findings and gropings of modern science can one hope to avert the tidal wave that threatens what remains of traditional civilizations, authentic religions and spiritual teachings and that direct manifestation of Divine Wisdom and Power that is virgin nature. Also, this pursuit provides the opportunity to exercise to the highest degree the virtue of compassion of which the Buddhist Bodhisattva is such a compelling embodiment and image. The task is daunting but the end cannot but be witness to the victory of the Truth.²

² We have discussed more extensively the issues brought forth in this essay in *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991); *The Need for a Sacred Science* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993); and *Religion and the Order of Nature* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

CHAPTER 16

Science and Myth The hidden connection¹

Wolfgang Smith

It is fitting in a Memorial Lecture honoring Ananda Coomaraswamy to reflect upon the significance of Myth; for indeed, it was the Sri Lankan savant who opened our eyes to what may be termed the primacy of myth. In one of his several masterpieces—a slender book entitled *Hinduism and Buddhism*—Coomaraswamy begins by recounting the mythical basis of the respective traditions before turning to their doctrinal formulations. He gives us to understand that myth exceeds doctrine, somewhat as a cause exceeds an effect or the original an artistic reproduction. It is not the function of doctrine to take us *out* of the founding myth: to “explain it away.” On the contrary, its function is to bring us *into* the myth; for indeed, the pearl of truth resides in myth as in a sanctuary. Authentic doctrine can take us to the threshold of that sanctuary; but like Moses before the Promised Land, it cannot enter there.²

Not all doctrine, however, is sacred, and it turns out that atheists and iconoclasts have myths of their own. Not only the wise, but fools also live ultimately by myth; it is only that the respective myths are by no means the same.

My first objective will be to exhibit the mythical basis of modern science. In particular, I shall discuss three major scientific myths (generally referred to as “paradigms”): the Newtonian, the Darwinian, and the Copernican. My second objective will be to contrast the myths of Science with the myths of Tradition. I will voice the conviction that

¹ The following is the text of the Third Ananda Coomaraswamy Memorial Lecture which was delivered in June 2001 and sponsored by the Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies.

² Theologians may contest the primacy of myth in the case of the so-called monotheistic religions, on the grounds that in these traditions historical fact has replaced myth. Yet nothing prevents historical fact from being also a myth. The “primacy of myth” attains actually its highest reading in the founding fact of Christianity, when “the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1: 14).

this discernment is of great moment, that indeed it vitally affects our destiny, here and hereafter.

. . .

There was a time when science was thought to be simply the discovery of fact. It is simply a fact, one thought, that the Earth rotates around the sun, that force equals mass times acceleration, or that an electron and a positron interact to produce a photon. It was as if facts “grew upon trees” and needed only to be “plucked” by the scientist. In the course of the 20th century, however, it was found that this customary view is not tenable. It turns out that facts and theory cannot be ultimately separated, that “facts are theory-laden,” as the postmodernists say. The old idea that first the scientist gathers facts, and then constructs theories to explain the facts, proves to be oversimplified. Behind every science there stands a paradigm—a “myth” one can say—which guides scientific inquiry and determines what is and what is not recognized as a fact. When Joseph Priestley, in 1774, heated red oxide of mercury and collected a gas known today as “oxygen,” did he actually discover oxygen? So far as Priestley himself was concerned, he had found “dephlogisticated air”! To discover oxygen, something else is needed besides a vial of gas: an appropriate theory, namely, in terms of which that gas can be interpreted. Not until Lavoisier had constructed such a theory a few years later did oxygen (or the existence of oxygen, if you prefer) become an established scientific fact.

Just as, in the words of Wittgenstein, thought never gets “outside language,” so too science never gets outside its own paradigm. It is true that paradigms are sometimes discarded and replaced; this happens, according to the historian and philosopher Thomas Kuhn, in the wake of crisis, when the presiding paradigm can no longer accommodate all the facts to which in a sense it has given rise. But though a science may indeed outgrow a particular paradigm, it never outgrows its dependence upon paradigms: the “mythical element” in science cannot be exorcised. And I might add that the moment science denies its “mythical” basis, it turns illusory.

The first of the three “presiding paradigms” I have singled out is the Newtonian, which defines the notion of a mechanical world or clockwork universe. What exists, supposedly, is “bare matter,” the parts of which interact through forces of attraction or repulsion, so that the movement of the whole is determined by the disposition of the parts. The concept of “bare matter”—the Cartesian notion of *res*

extensa—is of course philosophically problematic, and hinges indeed upon the Cartesian postulate of bifurcation: the idea, namely, that all qualities (such as color) are subjective, and that therefore the external object is not in fact perceived. Descartes himself, it will be recalled, was disturbed by this putative discovery, and felt obliged to convince himself, by means of a rather tortuous argument, that even though the external world proves thus to be imperceptible, it nonetheless exists. You may also recall that 20th century philosophy has veered away from the Cartesian position, and that “bare matter” has been downgraded to the status of an abstraction; to take *res extensa* for the real, says Alfred North Whitehead, is to commit what he terms “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness.” What presently concerns us, however, is not the philosophic validity of the Newtonian paradigm, but its scientific efficacy, which is quite another matter. History shows that even though the Newtonian worldview may be spurious—indeed a “myth” in the pejorative sense of this equivocal term—it has nonetheless functioned brilliantly as a scientific paradigm. It appears that error, too, has its use! Science in the modern sense would never have “gotten off the ground” without the benefit of a worldview which is drastically oversimplified.

The success of this dubious paradigm has been spectacular and unprecedented. From the publication of Newton’s *Principia* in 1687 to the beginning of the 20th century, it was regarded, not simply as a paradigm, but indeed as the master key which in principle unlocks all the secrets of Nature, from the motion of the stars and planets to the functioning of her minutest parts. I will not recount the triumphs of Newtonian physics which seemingly justified this grand expectation; the list is long and singularly impressive. Suffice it to say that the Newtonian scheme had extended its sway beyond the bounds of mechanics, as commonly understood, to include electromagnetism, which, as it turns out, cannot be pictured in grossly mechanical terms. Yet even here, in this “aetherial” domain, the notion of a whole rigorously reducible to its infinitesimal parts has proved once again to be the key: the famous Maxwell field equations testify to this fact. What is more, even the revolutionary proposals of Albert Einstein, which did break with some of the basic Newtonian conceptions, have left the foundational paradigm intact: here too, in this sophisticated post-Newtonian physics, we are left with a physical universe which can in principle be described with perfect accuracy in terms of a system of differential equations. In a vastly extended sense, the Einsteinian universe is still *mechanical*. It is mechanical, in fact, precisely because it conforms to

what we have termed the Newtonian paradigm, which captures the very essence of mechanism.

However, the luck of the Newtonian paradigm began to run out with the advent of quantum mechanics, which strictly speaking is not a mechanics at all. The whole, it now turns out, is no longer reducible to its infinitesimal parts. At the same time, and indeed as a consequence of this irreducibility, the new so-called mechanics proves not to be deterministic: the rather odd and philosophically difficult notion of probability has now entered the picture in a fundamental and irreplaceable way. It is no wonder that Albert Einstein—the greatest and loftiest among the advocates of mechanism—was profoundly dismayed, and staunchly refused to accept quantum theory as the fundamental physics. Yet everything we know today does point to that conclusion. This is not to say that our present ideas about physics will prove to be the last word; but whatever the future may bring, it is safe to conclude that a return to mechanism is not in the cards.

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Let us turn now to the Darwinian paradigm, which proves to be in a sense the opposite of the Newtonian: for it happens that Darwin's idea has been an unmitigated failure from the start. Darwinist biology is perhaps the only major scientific theory which has subsisted in an unbroken state of crisis since its inception. I contend, in fact, that the Darwinian model has proved worthless as a biological paradigm, which is to say that Darwinism is not truly a scientific theory, but indeed an ideological postulate masquerading in scientific garb. These claims are of course surprising, given the longstanding recognition and highbrow commendations lavished upon this doctrine by the academic and media establishments; but let us take a look at the facts of the case.

Darwin claims that existing species are derived from one or more primitive ancestors through chains of descent extending over millions of years. Never mind, for the moment, by what means the stipulated transformation from primitive to differentiated organisms may have come about; whatever the means, it is clear that Darwin conceived of this evolution as a gradual process involving countless intermediary forms, many if not most of which should by right appear in the fossil record. Yet apart from a handful of highly doubtful specimens, intermediary types are nowhere to be found. This is now generally admitted even by scientists who believe in some kind of evolution.

Steven Jay Gould, for instance, one of the foremost authorities, has felt compelled to abandon orthodox Darwinism for precisely this reason. "Most species exhibit no directional change during their tenure on earth," he writes. "They appear in the fossil record looking pretty much the same as when they disappear; morphological change is usually limited and directionless."³ One would think that this alone suffices to disqualify the transformist hypothesis; but to the disciples of the British naturalist, it merely implies that evolution must take place at such speed, and under such conditions, that the intermediary forms disappear without leaving a trace. As Phillip Johnson, the Berkeley law professor and author of *Darwin on Trial* has observed: "Darwinism apparently passed the fossil test, but only because it was not allowed to fail."

Darwin's great idea, it will be recalled, is that Nature produces small random mutations, which are then passed on to the genetic line in accordance with the phrase "survival of the fittest." It has been pointed out that this famous phrase, which supposedly provides the key to the riddle of evolution, is in fact a tautology, much as if to say "the rich have plenty of money." This is what the philosopher Karl Popper meant when he charged that Darwin's theory is "unfalsifiable," and therefore void of scientific content. Falsifiable or not, however, Darwin's doctrine does stake a claim. So far from being true by definition, it constitutes in fact one of the most astronomically improbable conjectures ever conceived by the mind of man. Take the case of an eye, for example: Darwin is telling us that this structure of almost unimaginable complexity was formed through a series of minute accidental mutations. Leaving aside the circumstance that a rudimentary eye which cannot yet see is of no use whatever in the struggle for survival, calculations carried out by the mathematician D. S. Ulam show that the number of mutations required to produce a structure of this kind is of a magnitude such that, even within a time frame measuring billions of years, the likelihood of that occurrence is vanishingly small. But this too does not seem to pose a problem for the committed Darwinist; as Ernest Mayr has said by way of response: "Somehow or other by adjusting these figures we will come out all right. We are comforted by the fact that evolution has occurred."⁴ And this is indeed the crucial point: for the dyed-in-the-wool Darwinist, evolution as Darwin conceived of it is itself the most indubitable fact.

³ Quoted by Phillip Johnson in *Darwin On Trial* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1993), p. 50.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

It has been claimed that recent advances in molecular biology have at last supplied hard evidence in support of evolution. It is true that these findings permit us to quantify the molecular distance, so to speak, between genomes, and thus between species. Moreover, given the fact that mutations occur at a more or less constant rate, it is possible to estimate the time required to effect a given genetic alteration, as measured by the aforesaid distance. If two species, therefore, have descended from a common ancestor, one can now estimate how long ago the stipulated separation must have occurred. On this basis one speaks nowadays of a so-called molecular clock, which is supposed to measure the rate at which evolution takes place. However, in the euphoria generated by this discovery, one forgets that not even a "molecular clock" can measure the rate of evolution, unless evolution has indeed occurred. But this hypothesis remains today as unconfirmed as it has been from the start. Meanwhile it turns out that the findings of molecular biology are not in fact propitious to the evolutionist cause. The very precision with which molecular structures and processes can now be understood spells trouble for the Darwinist. This is what the molecular biologist Michael Behe has demonstrated so forcefully in *Darwin's Black Box*, a book which has decisively affected the debate over evolution.

To cite at least one example of amazing facts adduced by Behe, I will mention the so-called bacterial flagellum,⁵ a kind of paddle used to propel the bacterium through water, driven by a molecular rotary engine, which is powered by an acid. The structure is exceedingly complex, and involves about two hundred and forty different kinds of proteins, which need all to be in place if the engine is to function and the flagellum is to do its job. We have here an example, on a molecular scale, of what Behe terms irreducible complexity. "By *irreducibly complex*," he explains, "I mean a single system composed of several well-matched, interacting parts that contribute to the basic function, wherein the removal of any one of the parts causes the system to effectively cease function."⁶ The notion proves to be crucial: it is not in fact possible to account for the genesis of irreducibly complex structures in Darwinist terms. This can now be demonstrated by means of design theory, a mathematical discipline which allows us to conclude that no process compounded of "chance" and "necessity" can give rise to irreducible complexity, or to something still more general termed

⁵ *Darwin's Black Box* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), pp. 70-73.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

complex specified information.⁷ The new mathematical theory, in conjunction with the sharp data of molecular biology, provides at last a rigorous refutation of Darwin's hypothesis. Of course, whether even this will convince the die-hard Darwinist remains to be seen.

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Our third paradigm pertains to contemporary cosmology. It happens that field equations plus astronomical data do not suffice to determine the global structure of the physical universe: an infinite number of "possible worlds" remain. One therefore requires an additional hypothesis. Following Einstein's lead, scientists have generally opted for a condition of spatial uniformity in the distribution of matter; one defines an average density of matter, which is then assumed to be constant throughout space. On a sufficiently large scale, the cosmos is thought to resemble a gas in which the individual molecules can be replaced by a constant density of so many grams per cubic centimeter. It was Hermann Bondi who first referred to this assumption as the Copernican principle, and not without reason; for even though Copernicus himself knew nothing about a supposedly constant density of stellar matter, the principle in question constitutes the ultimate repudiation of geocentrism, and thus consummates what has been termed the Copernican revolution. Henceforth space in the large is assumed to be void of structure or design, and subject only to local fluctuations from an average density, much like the molecular fluctuations in a gas, which remain imperceptible on a macroscopic scale. I would like however to impress upon you that this is not a positive finding or a proven fact, but an assumption which underlies the way most contemporary scientists look at the universe.

It was Einstein who initiated this train of thought by postulating an average density of matter which is constant, not only in space, but also in time. He discovered, however, that his field equations admit no such solution unless one adds an additional term involving the so-called cosmological constant. To prevent his static universe from collapsing under the influence of gravity, Einstein did add the term in question. Before long, however, a Russian mathematician named Alex-

⁷ The mathematics of design theory has been expounded in William A. Dembski's, *The Design Inference* (Cambridge University Press, 1998). For its implications regarding Darwinism, see Dembski's, *Intelligent Design* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1999).

ander Friedmann had shown that solutions to Einstein's field equations can be obtained without this ad hoc constant, simply by letting the stipulated density of matter vary with time. What Friedmann had obtained was an expanding universe, a cosmos of the big bang variety. Soon thereafter, Edwin Hubble, an American astronomer, arrived at substantially the same conclusion on the basis of astronomical findings, and eventually Einstein himself acceded to the notion of a time-dependent universe. Discarding the cosmological constant—"the biggest mistake of my life" he called it—Einstein now joined his colleagues in accepting the scenario of a universe which is said to have expanded out of an initial singularity some fifteen billion years ago.

It was not long, however, before big bang cosmology encountered difficulties, which have since led to a number of modifications in an ongoing effort to accommodate the data of astronomy. But even so the fit between theory and observation leaves much to be desired. As Halton Arp, a noted scientist now at the Max Planck Institute of Astrophysics, pointed out in 1991 with reference to those who claim otherwise: "they overlook observational facts that have been piling up for 25 years and that have now become overwhelming." For example, astronomers claim to have spotted galaxies separated by close to a billion light-years; given the low relative velocities observed between galaxies, it would take about 200 billion years to arrive at such a separation from an initially uniform state: a good ten times longer than the estimated age of the universe. Or to cite another difficulty: There seems not to be nearly enough matter in the universe to generate gravitational fields strong enough to account for the formation and persistence of galaxies. Such incongruities, however, are generally taken in stride by the experts. As Thomas Kuhn points out, the primary concern of "normal science" is to preserve the paradigm, to protect it, so to speak, against hostile data. What does one do, for instance, if there is not enough matter in the universe to account for galaxies? One strategy is to introduce something called dark matter, which supposedly does not interact with electromagnetic fields and is consequently invisible. Its only measurable property is gravitation, and its only discernible effect is to bring the gravitational field up to levels demanded by the big bang scenario. Never mind that not a single particle of dark matter has ever been detected: for advocates of big bang theory, it seems, the existence of galaxies is proof enough. According to some authorities, about 99% of all matter in the universe is dark. And if that were not sufficient, one needs apparently to postulate two kinds of dark matter: so-called "hot" and "cold," with very different

properties. Some scientists have proposed a mix of 1/3 hot and 2/3 cold dark matter as the required blend.

Apart from dark matter—both hot and cold—there are other parameters that can be enlisted in the defense of the reigning paradigm. The cosmological constant, for example, turns out to be of use after all, and has consequently been pressed into service once again. It has been claimed that the resurrected constant accounts for about 80% of the estimated energy density. It appears that the constant first introduced to explain why Einstein's universe did not collapse serves now to explicate why galaxies don't fly apart.

Yet despite an abundance of theoretical options for coping with troublesome data, it appears that big bang cosmology is approaching a state of crisis. A growing number of scientists agree with Halton Arp that adverse observational facts have been piling up, and that a point has been reached beyond which defense of the paradigm is no longer compatible with sound scientific practice. It remains to be seen whether the Copernican paradigm will weather the storm.

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The tenacity and fervor with which the presiding paradigms of science are defended even in the face of plainly hostile data suggest that here too an element of ideology may be at play. Science is not in reality the purely rational enterprise it pretends to be; it is after all the work, not of computers, but of men. There is reason to believe that the paradigms of science are more than cold, sober conjectures, postulated as pure hypotheses. It appears that the top paradigms are weightier than that, which partly justifies calling them "myths." But as I said at the start, not all myths are alike—no more than the men who embrace them. I contend in fact that the stature and dignity of a person depend largely upon the myth he has made his own; in a way we become what we believe. And I would add: no more telling reason has ever been proposed for treading cautiously.

Strictly speaking, we have debased the term "myth" by applying it to the paradigms of science. We have picked up on the pejorative sense which came into vogue during the aftermath of what historians call the Enlightenment, when men thought that science had at last delivered us from the childish dreams of a primitive age. In this optic, myth is perceived simply as the antithesis of fact: at best a pleasurable or consoling fiction. One might go so far as to admit that such fictions may be indispensable: that our life would be intolerably drab and void

of hope without some kind of mythical embellishment; but when it comes to the question of truth, it is to Science that we must look. Such was the prevailing view of myth during the age of modernism; but that age, as one knows, is now nearing its end, both philosophically and culturally. The new outlook, generally termed postmodernist, breaks with the old: the deconstructionist zeal, which in days gone by was directed mainly against established religious, cultural, and political norms—against everything, one could say, that smacked of tradition—has now been turned against the scientific enlightenment as well. The accusers are being relegated to the ranks of the accused. There is logic in this, and a certain justice too; but yet the harm inflicted upon society through the rooting out of tradition has not been thereby atoned or ameliorated. Readers of Ananda Coomaraswamy will understand what it is that we have lost; for indeed, despite the material advantages of modern life, we have become woefully impoverished. Worse than that: we stand at the point of losing what is truly “the one thing needful.” Cut off (as never before) from the source of our being, we have all but forgotten that life has meaning: a goal which is not ephemeral. But needless to say, neither modern science nor its postmodernist critics can enlighten us in that regard. For this one requires authentic myth: the kind that belongs inextricably to sacred tradition as the paramount expression of its truth. Such myth, says Ananda Coomaraswamy, “embodies the nearest approach to absolute truth that can be stated in words.”⁸ A far cry indeed from “myth” in the pejorative sense to which we have grown accustomed.

Myth alone, however, no matter how exalted it may be, will not save, liberate, or enlighten us. Traditionally speaking, the illuminating myth must be received under appropriate auspices, which include conditions upon the recipient or disciple, the chief of which is *śraddhā*, faith: there can be no spirituality, no true enlightenment, without faith. Now, it is at this point, I say, that modern science touches upon the spiritual domain: it enters the picture, I contend, not as an ally of true religion, but as an impediment to faith, and therefore as a spoiler, an antagonist. It is a case of opposing myths, of mythologies that clash: or if you wish, of myth and anti-myth.

Let us try to understand this more clearly. We must not be put off by the simplistic look of traditional myth, its crudely literal sense, remembering that such myth speaks, not to the analytic mind, but to the intuitive intellect, sometimes termed “the eye of the heart,”

⁸ *Hinduism and Buddhism* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1971), p. 33.

a faculty which, alas, modern civilization has been at pains to stifle. It is “myth” in this high sense that constitutes “the nearest approach to absolute truth.” What we have termed “myths” of science, on the other hand, deliver such content as they have to the rational mind; there is no mystery here, no reference to higher realms of truth. Quite to the contrary: these myths offer a substitute, a “quasi-truth” here below, a kind of idol of the mind, which impedes our spiritual vision. As a tool of science—as a paradigm in the strict sense—they have of course a legitimate use: think, for instance, of the now discredited Newtonian paradigm. The trouble with paradigms, however, is that they tend to become absolutized. And this is the point at which the idolatry sets in, the point where the paradigms of science turn into anti-myth.

I realize that in taking this stand I am offending against the political correctness of our day. We are told that the proverbial conflict between science and religion is based upon antiquated ideas. It has been said that in the age to come the two disciplines will be seen as complementary aspects of a single enterprise, each contributing to the good of man within its own appropriate sphere. All truth, we are assured, is ultimately consonant. But amidst this idyllic harmony, it is always religion in its traditional modes that is obliged, by the presiding authorities, to conform itself to the putative truths of science by “demythologizing” its beliefs. One forgets that science too has its mythology, and that the so-called truths at issue are also in a way mythical. The Darwinist account of man’s origin, for example, is every bit as mythical as any traditional cosmogony; it is only that the respective myths are not only different, but indeed opposed. The demythologizers of religion do have a point! My complaint is that they are demythologizing the wrong thing: they have jettisoned the sacred for the profane. In the name of this or that pseudo-myth, these blind guides have cast out “the nearest approach to absolute truth that can be stated in words.” The new irenic approach to the old problem proves to be deceptive: the kiss of science, I say, is the death of religion.⁹

One is reminded of the implacable antagonism between the Devas and the Asuras (“gods” and “demons,” good angels and bad) as depicted in Hindu lore; and I would add that the Darwinist doctrine,

⁹ Of authentic religion, that is. Drop that qualification, and my statement becomes patently false. We appear to be entering the so-called New Age, the era of pseudo-religions, many of which (if not all) are indeed the offspring of the aforesaid unholy union. For a case study pertaining to Christianity, I refer to my monograph on Teilhardism. See *Teilhardism and the New Religion* (Rockford, Illinois: TAN Books and Publishers, 1988).

in particular, can be classified as distinctly *asuric* in both its content and provenance. One could go so far as to characterize Darwinism as the quintessential *asuric* myth; it expresses to perfection the *asuric* credo as given in the Bhagavad Gita (chapter 16, verse 8):

They say: "The world is devoid of truth, without a moral basis, and without a God. It is brought about by the union of male and female, and lust alone is its cause: what else?"¹⁰

From a Christian vantage point, it can be said that Darwinism is indeed the pseudo-myth of Antichrist, the Father of Lies and ancient Antagonist of man's salvation.¹¹ We are dealing thus, not simply with beliefs or speculations of erring mortals, but with something far greater and more perilous. In the words of St. Paul: "We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of the world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (Eph. 6:12). It follows that the individual outside the pale of sacred tradition stands little chance of emerging from this contest unscathed. No matter how erudite or brilliant we may be, our position is then at best precarious. Far more hazardous, in fact, than we can normally imagine: it is no small thing to fall prey to *asuric* myth!

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The case of Darwinism is admittedly exceptional; as we have had occasion to observe, the Darwinian paradigm stands out even from a scientific point of view by its conspicuous failure. But what about the other paradigms of science: are they likewise opposed to the traditional worldview? There are of course a great number of paradigms in scientific use at the present time; the structure of contemporary science is highly complex, and there are literally "paradigms within paradigms." However, it is the top-level paradigms that matter most from a philosophical and cultural point of view; it is these that have

¹⁰ Having thus formulated the *asuric* credo, the Gita proceeds to describe the men who have made that creed their own: "Holding such a view, these lost souls of little understanding and fierce deeds rise up as the enemies of the world for its destruction." One cannot but think of the technocrats who will be "running the world" under the New World Order!

¹¹ This view has been forcefully propounded by the late Orthodox hieromonk Seraphim Rose. See his masterful monograph, *Genesis, Creation and Early Man* (Platina, California: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2000).

mainly shaped the prevailing scientific outlook. In particular, it can be argued that this *Weltanschauung* is in fact largely defined by the three paradigms which I have singled out for consideration: the Newtonian, the Darwinian, and the Copernican. And I contend that all three are irreconcilably opposed to the traditional worldview. Having already identified Darwinism as an *asuric* myth, it remains to consider the Newtonian and Copernican claims. I must of course be brief; but I shall try at least to touch upon the crux of the matter.

It is comparatively easy to see that there could be no such thing as spiritual life in a mechanical universe, because in such a universe there could in fact be no life at all: not even an amoeba could exist in a Newtonian world. And why not? For the simple reason that no living organism is reducible to the sum of its parts. This fact has been well understood by philosophers at least since the time of Aristotle, and is being rediscovered and reemphasized today by some leading biologists. Traditional cosmologies, on the other hand, refer to the authentic cosmos, the world which not only serves as a habitat to plants and animals, but houses artists and poets, mystics and saints. So far from constituting a mechanical system, the authentic universe is in truth a theophany: a manifestation of what the Vedas term *nāma*, Plato terms Ideas, and St. Paul “the invisible things of God”—not forgetting that to the pure in heart it mirrors “even His eternal power and Godhead” (Romans 1:20). There could in fact be no greater disparity between the cosmos, as traditionally perceived, and a Newtonian world: the two, it turns out, are not merely incompatible, but indeed antithetical. Whereas the former exceeds what we are able to grasp by virtue of its inexhaustible fullness, the latter eludes our grasp on account of its emptiness, an indigence which literally defies imagination. And let us not fail to note that the impact of a Newtonian cosmology upon human culture cannot but be stifling in the extreme; as Huston Smith has well said: “A meaningful life is not finally possible in a meaningless world.”

The insufficiency of the Copernican paradigm is perhaps harder to discern, because it pertains to things remote in space and time, and thus remote from the familiar world. One must however recall that the sun, moon, and stars play a major role in the traditional worldview; as we read in a famous psalm of David: “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork” (Ps. 19:1). According to the Copernican principle, however, the cosmos at large exhibits no global structure, no hierarchic architecture, no trace of exemplarism or design: only matter randomly distributed, like so

many raisins in a pot of oatmeal. Whereas the Darwinian paradigm denies God as the Creator of life, the Copernican denies Him as the Architect of the universe. The assumption of a constant average density of matter throughout space may be a useful device for obtaining solutions to the field equations, but is hardly compatible with the perennial wisdom of mankind.

Fortunately, however, science is self-corrective to a degree, which is to say that faulty paradigms are eventually replaced. The Newtonian has already been superseded, and both the Darwinian and the Copernican are now under attack. It may be true, as Thomas Kuhn maintains, that failed paradigms are invariably retained until a new one has been approved by the scientific community; but in the end this does take place—so long, at least, as the scientific establishment retains a modicum of integrity. Science is an ongoing process, and its paradigms are by no means sacrosanct.

The only things sacrosanct, in fact, are the core elements of sacred tradition. It is the distinctive characteristic of sacred tradition to have a more-than-human, more-than-merely-historical origin, implying that authentic tradition, in all its essential elements—from doctrine and ritual to moral codes—partakes somewhat of eternity. We may accept or reject sacred tradition: that is our inalienable option; but let us understand that outside of the sacred there can be no certainty, no absolute and abiding truth.

CHAPTER 17

The Earth's Complaint

Gai Eaton

When the earth is shaken by a mighty shaking, and the earth yields up her burdens, and man cries out "What ails her?"—On that Day she will tell her tales, as thy Lord will have inspired her. On that Day mankind will issue, separately, to be shown their deeds. Whosoever has done an atom's weight of good will see it then, and whosoever has done an atom's weight of ill will see it then.

Quran 99:1-8

Reinforcing the implications of this short Sūra, the Prophet is reported to have said that, when the Last Day dawns, the earth herself will bear witness to everything that man has done. It might be said that we leave our fingerprints upon all that we touch, and they remain in place long after we have gone on our way. We forget so much of the past, but the past is still there and cannot be wiped out, unless God—under His Name "The Effacer" (*al-'Afū*)—chooses to erase it from our record. But how can this earth, upon which we walk so carelessly, be said to bear witness against us? The Quranic answer is that God will inspire it to reveal its secrets, but still one asks: How could this be? There are several possible answers to the question, but I will suggest only one. Among the divine Names revealed in the Quran is *al-Hayy*, the "Ever-Living" or, quite simply, "Life." Since the Creator lends His attributes to everything that He creates, there can be nothing in existence that does not possess a kind of life, even if we do not understand in what sense to take this. Like all the other rigid distinctions which apply in this world, that between the animate and the inanimate is provisional, not absolute.

This brings me, once again, to the problem of terminology and the way in which words change their meaning. The word "psychic" has come to refer to fortune-tellers, spooks and things that go bump in the night. Yet, when it takes a suffix and becomes "psychology," we know at once that we are dealing, not with magic but with the science of the soul as practiced by scientists who do not believe in the soul. The realm of the psyche, the "subtle realm" as it is sometimes called, is not open to sense-perception but that does not mean that it

is supernatural. It is the unseen face of the natural world. For Muslims it is also the realm of the *jinn*, those mysterious beings who form communities, as we do, and are equally capable of virtue or vice. The whole of nature has an unseen face, a “subtle” aspect of which we are generally unaware, although we speak sometimes of the “spirit” of a place without realizing that this “spirit” is just as real as the place in its physical presence. It is upon this hidden side of the natural world that we leave our ineradicable imprint.

There are no hiding places. We are, as the Quran reminds us in many different ways, surrounded by a host of witnesses, ranging from God Himself and His angels to the earth we tread. We can have no secrets from them. I have wondered sometimes if this is why the Arabs tend to be so secretive. Knowing that they are observed from every side, from above and from below, they treasure the only privacy they have, placing a discrete veil between themselves and their fellow men and women. In contrast, people in the West today eagerly confess all, not only to their friends but also on television and in the press. Believing themselves alone, self-enclosed and unobserved, they feel the need for self-exposure as a way of escaping from their isolation.

The spoor which we leave behind us on the earth is, however, only one side of the relationship we have with everything around us, a relationship of reciprocity. We are not insulated but, as it were, porous. We soak up elements from whatever we see, hear or touch, absorbing them into our substance. When we treat the natural world as an object to be exploited and conquered, we are damaging ourselves. The environmentalists are, no doubt, correct when they predict that our abuse of the earth will have disastrous consequences for humanity as a whole, but that should be the least of our worries. The consequences are on many different levels; the higher the level, the more deadly they are likely to be. The Quran commands: “Work not confusion in the earth after the fair ordering thereof.” When it says also that the earth and everything in it is created for our use, this does not imply a transfer of ownership; it is a trust delegated to us, and we are answerable to the “Owner of all things” for our stewardship. The Muslim is reminded again and again, both in the Quran and in the recorded sayings of the Prophet, that greed and wastefulness are among the major sins. We may use what is made so readily available to us for our sustenance, but that is all, and even that little is no more than theft if we have abandoned our human function and opted out of the universal prayer which carries the whole of creation back towards its source.

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The Muslim is assured that the whole earth is a mosque for him. The walled buildings to which he is summoned for prayer are simply a convenience. The fields, the forests and the desert are equally fitting as places of prayer and therefore demand the same respect that is accorded to a conventional mosque. The link with heaven can be established anywhere and everywhere ("Wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of God"). One of the essential features of Islam is expressed in the Arabic word *adab*, which means "manners," "courtesy" or "correct behavior," and it goes hand-in-hand with the dignity which the Muslim is required to demonstrate under all circumstances. God's Viceregent on earth is, after all, no mean figure, whether he is in robes or in rags. To show good manners, not only to our fellows but also towards everything that God has created is a part of faith, for everything bears the imprint of His hand. The man or woman who stands, bows and prostrates in the midst of nature is a member of a universal congregation, joining in a universal prayer. "All that is in the heavens and the earth glorifies God," says the Quran.

This is such a constant theme in the Quranic revelation that one can only be astonished by the fact that so many Muslims—unless they are Sufis—ignore it.

Have you not seen that all who are in the heavens and the earth glorify God, and the birds in their flight? Indeed He knows the worship and the praise of each, and God is aware of what they do.

Moreover He "disdains not to coin the similitude even of a gnat." How much greater the similitude of a lion or a swan, a mountain or a tree. Again, "See! In the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the difference of night and day . . . and the water which God sends down from the sky, thereby reviving the earth after its death, and dispersing all kinds of animals therein, and the ordering of the winds, and the clouds obedient between heaven and earth: (in these) are signs for people who have sense." Whatsoever He has created in the earth "of different colors" conveys a message to us. So: "Look therefore upon the imprints of God's mercy." They are everywhere.

The earth's beauties—its "ornaments"—are, the Quran tells us, a "reminder to mankind," a reminder to those who are disposed to remember their origin and their end. For such as these, the natural world sparkles with light, but it would be dark if unperceived by man as the central being in creation, that is to say the link between what is above and what is below. Here again there is reciprocity. This world is not some chance agglomeration of material atoms, unrelated to

our innermost being. It gives and it receives. We receive and we give. There is intercourse and mutuality; the objective world and human subjectivity might be compared to two circles which intersect rather than float, separate and divided, quite independent of each other. This is already implicit also in the word "cosmos" (as opposed to universe a neutral term that implies nothing). The cosmos is, by definition, an ordered whole, organized and harmonious, in which the parts are inter-dependent. As such it has meaning and, as the English word "cosmetics" suggests, it is beautiful.

But to perceive, even dimly, the "signs of God" around us—those signs to which the Quran refers repeatedly—requires a child's eye preserved in maturity. The Prophet is said to have prayed: "Lord, increase me in marveling!" This is how a child sees the world, fresh from the hand of God and full of marvels but, with the passage of the years and the passing anxieties which time imposes, the vision fades; yet, in the words of the Quran, "It is not the eyes that grow blind, but the hearts within the breasts that grow blind." Imbued with faith, the heart may still regain its sight, its insight. After the Call to Prayer, when Muslims have assembled in tightly packed ranks behind their Imam, their prayer leader, they are required to spend a few moments divesting themselves of the day's cares and all those urgent matters which had seized their attention, turning to face their Creator and address Him. It sometimes happens that the Imam turns to advise them: "Pray as if this is your last prayer!" So it will be for those fated to die before the next prayer is called, but one might equally say: "Pray as if this is your first prayer!" Every time we turn to God is a new beginning, a rebirth, and so it should be when we look, with awakened hearts, upon the world around us.

In doing so we have to remember that nothing is what it seems, or rather nothing is only what it seems. As with the verses of the Quran (the same Arabic word is used both for these verses and for the "signs" in nature), there is a literal meaning and, at the same time, a deeper meaning. The verses are sacred, and so are the "signs." It is here that we come to one of the most dangerous symptoms of alienation; the loss of the sense of the sacred in the modern world, a loss—a deprivation—which affects the Muslim *Umma* as it does the West. The Quran condemns those who separate that which God has joined, and the fragmentation which we see today is an obvious example of this severing of connections. The French critic of our technological civilization, Jacques Ellul, has pointed out that, in the past, man's deepest experience of the sacred was his immediate contact with the natural

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world. It is almost impossible fully to comprehend religion as such—or the great myths that bore witness to the unity of the cosmos—when nature has become remote and wholly “other.” As Ellul says, the sense of the sacred withers when it is no longer rejuvenated by experience. The city dweller’s awareness dries up for lack of support in his new experience with the artificial world of urban technology.

The loss of harmony between man and his natural environment is but an aspect of the loss of harmony between man and his Creator. Those who turn their backs on their Creator and forget Him can no longer feel at home in creation. They assume the role of bacteria which ultimately destroy the body they have invaded. “God’s Viceregent on earth” is then no longer the custodian of nature and, having lost his function, he is a stranger who cannot recognize the landmarks or conform to the customs of this place; alienated—in the literal sense of “having become an alien”—he can see it only as raw material to be exploited. He may find riches and comfort in exploitation, but not happiness. He can never hope to sing with the Persian poet, Sa’di:

I am joyous with the cosmos,
For the cosmos receives its joy from Him:
I love the world,
For the world belongs to Him.

We are, according to the Quran, “the poor” in relation to God, needy from the moment of birth till the end of our lives, and another of His Quranic Names is *al-Kāfi*, “the Satisfier of all needs.” The Source of this hunger, inherent in our substance as human beings, is the need for Him, however it may be disguised or sidetracked by worldly desires. Since He is the only ultimate satisfier of desire it follows that, when we turn our backs and walk away, we will be perpetually unsatisfied and, still seeking to assuage our hungers, exceed all bounds. Until the development of technology this may have harmed only the perpetrator, but it did little harm to the earth. Our range has now been extended immeasurably, and we have become the great destroyers. One of the Buddhist hells is inhabited by huge creatures who were once men and women, ravaged by greed, but now their mouths are no bigger than a pin-head. Surrounded by a feast of nourishment, they can take in only the tiniest crumbs.

Today, whether we are Muslims or Christians, we seem to have lost the key to the language of “signs,” God’s language. It has become both incomprehensible and irrelevant. This is particularly dangerous for the Muslim for whom the Quran must eventually become a partially

closed book if the constant references to the natural world as a tissue of “signs” no longer coincide with his experience or touch his heart. That world, when seen through the window of a motor car or from a height of 30,000 feet, has nothing to say to us, even if it presents a pretty picture. Moreover, since everything has to be spelled out nowadays, it is typical of the modern mindset to ask: What exactly do these “signs” mean? If they could be expressed in words they would be redundant. They touch us at a deeper level than articulate speech, but this is already so with the Quran which, when it is recited to those who have no knowledge of Arabic, still moves their hearts though they understand nothing in terms of human language. So God has at His disposal two languages, the one composed of words and the other of “signs,” although it could also be said that, in practice, He has three means of communication, the third being our personal destinies. These too contain messages for us if we are prepared to understand, and even the most arid skeptic, when struck down by bitter misfortune, asks: “Why? Why me?” He is not supposed to believe that life has any meaning, but he believes none the less, or rather he knows in his heart what his mind denies.

To speak of the natural world is to speak of beauty. Since “God is beautiful,” beauty must in some sense be universally present since He is everywhere present. The common saying that “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder” is one of those half-truths which can either enlighten or deceive us according to our disposition. A particular individual or a particular culture will find the sacred in places where it is hidden from others who, in their turn, will discover it elsewhere. The same applies to the perception of what is beautiful. This does not make it any less real, any less objective. But the prophetic saying that “God is beautiful, He loves beauty” is a statement about the nature of Reality, and it indicates something very important. Just as good and evil are on different levels—the former closer to the Real than the latter—so beauty and ugliness belong to different orders. Ugliness is not one of a pair, like hot and cold, black and white. It represents the spoiling of beauty, the unmaking of what has been well made. It might be compared to a stain on the fabric and belongs to that class of things which, the Quran tells us, last for but a short while and are then extinguished. This is why the Muslim, when he encounters things that are ugly or unseemly, tends to look away, not because he wishes to deny their existence but because not everything that exists is worth his attention. There is a story of Jesus in the Islamic tradition which makes this point. He was walking with his disciples when they passed a dead

dog. "How it stinks!", said his companions. Jesus replied: "How white its teeth are!"

What is the beauty of nature if not an act of adoration, in that it reflects the divine Beauty? "Do you not see," asks the Quran, "that everything in the heavens and all that is in the earth pays adoration to God, as do the sun and the moon and the stars, the hills and the trees and the beasts . . . ?" There is a Turkish story of a spiritual teacher who sent his pupils to gather flowers for the house. All but one returned with the finest blooms they could find. One, however, was gone for a long time and, when he returned, held in his hand only a single, faded flower. "When I went out to pick the flowers," he said, "I found them all singing the praises of their Creator and I dared not interrupt them. Finally I saw one that had finished her song, and this is the one that I have brought you." It would be a mistake to regard this little story as a poetic fancy. The blood that courses through our bodies may lend itself to poetry and to myth, but the fact remains that it has a very important practical function. When the Quran speaks of this perpetual and universal adoration it is doing neither more nor less than telling us what happens, the down-to-earth reality of the situation. Our subjective awareness—or unawareness—cannot alter the facts.

If there is nothing in existence that is only and exclusively what it seems to be, then everything has its own particular significance. I can imagine someone saying: "This is too much! Women's rights, animal rights, even plant rights, and now you talk about the rights of sticks and stones! Where will it end?" It has no end. That is the only possible answer. We did not make the world, we do not own it. You cannot, the Quran reminds us, create even a fly. This vast picture-book, filled with the "signs" of God, is what it is. Appearances, as we are so often told, are deceptive and, if we float only on the surface of our world, then we are indeed deceived. There is always more to it than that, then more and then still more, until you have plumbed the depths and found—behind the "seventy-thousand veils of light and darkness"—the Face of God. The modern age is frequently condemned for its "materialism." Perhaps it is not materialistic enough, that is to say it no longer seeks, beyond the shifting surface of material objects—these clouds that constantly form and re-form—what it is that they both veil and reveal.

Two further Names by which God has defined Himself in the Quran are *al-Muhīt*, the "All-Embracing" or the "All-Surrounding" and *al-Zāhir*, which means "the Outward." It follows that, ultimately and behind all the appearances, He is our "environment" and there is no

other. But that is an intellectual statement which might seem to rob the things we see and touch of their due measure of reality. While we are in this life, situated amidst the “veils,” they are the only reality we know, reflecting after their fashion the greater realities which remain hidden, too bright for our perception. It is their meaning rather than their material structure that should be our prime concern. The mechanism of a clock may be of practical interest, but the purpose of the clock is to tell the time.

The very sounds of nature may add to this universe of meaning, this flood of communication between Creator and creation. I remember a certain Shaykh who was about to deliver his sermon when the thunder sounded, rolling on and on. He fell silent and kept silent even after the heavens had spoken. What could he have added? But we must be very patient and very attentive to catch, through hearing as through sight, that note of universal praise. When the Muslim is at prayer in the early hours of the day or in the act of remembering God, bird-song, the ocean’s roar or the drumming of rain do not disturb him, on the contrary they contribute to his remembrance. But the noise of cars or machinery introduces into the harmony of his worship a discord against which he is obliged to struggle.

Prayer and contemplation, supported by a cosmic environment which, in a sense, cries out to be seen, heard and understood are central to the religious life. But there is also involvement, but for which we are still situated at a distance from the natural world. There are children in Europe and America who are not even aware of the fact that the packaged meat on supermarket shelves is the flesh of living creatures or that the vegetables from which every grain of earth has been washed once grew in open fields and took their time to grow. The patience of the agriculturist is unimaginable to an increasingly impatient generation. Their needs are satisfied in relation to the moving hands of a clock, not by the seasons or by the discipline imposed by the weather. They are “out of touch,” and this phrase can have a profound significance. It represents remoteness, separation and—once again—alienation. In towns and cities the stars are blotted out by street lighting, their brightness hidden and their message dimmed. Here too it is not only contemplation but also involvement that has been lost. “He it is,” says the Quran, “who has set for you the stars that you may guide your course by them amidst the darkness of the land and the sea.” We no longer need them. They can be left to the specialists who talk in terms of light years and have nothing to

offer that would help us on our way through the darkness that has penetrated within our breasts and within our minds.

This, of course, is "progress," and it is certainly convenience, although one of the ironies of the situation is that our contemporaries in the West, freed from the labor once required of them in their encounter with the natural world and their dependence upon it, now have to work harder than ever as ciphers in the industrial or bureaucratic machine to afford the lifestyle to which they have a "right." This work offers no spiritual nourishment. It is not expected to do so. It provides no contact with reality on any level and no involvement with the "signs" that point our way and remind us of who we are. An almost superhuman effort would be required for us to remember that we are God's "Viceregents," responsible for our province just as the farmer is responsible for his stock and his crops. We keep the wheels turning, but they turn to no purpose except to keep the speeding train on tracks which lead nowhere. Eventually it will hit the buffers, the invisible limits which frame our worldly existence.

The Muslim tries to live within the limits of the *Shari'ah*, the road or path which leads safely to the watering place and so, beyond all limits, to Paradise and the ultimate satisfaction of all needs. Being human, we are free to wander from the road. The rest of creation does not have this freedom. In terms of the Islamic perspective, the animals and the plants, the mountains and the oceans have, each of them, their own *Shari'ah*. They are bound inescapably to the function decreed for them. They cannot be other than they are meant to be and there is, in this, a lesson for mankind. Our environment obeys God and encourages us to do the same. The rocks and the rivers are subject to the "laws of nature," the animals follow their "instincts"; this is but one way of describing the divine Decree which governs their existence. They cannot sin, they cannot break bounds, and this exposes the absurdity of the remark frequently addressed to vicious criminals by a learned Judge: "You are no better than an animal!" As human creatures we can be better than the animals or worse than them; we cannot, however, exist on their level since we are not subject to the laws which direct and enclose their lives. "There is not an animal on earth," says the Quran, "nor a bird flying on two wings but they are communities like you" (or "in your likeness"), and the verse ends: "And unto their Lord they will be gathered." It is not open to us to join one or other of their communities but we can, if we depart from the *Shari'ah* laid down for us, become not only subhuman but sub-animal. There is great confusion in the Western mind concerning the

animal species. Hardly a day passes that one does not hear someone say: "After all, we're only animals." This is not an opinion but an ideological statement regarding the origin and status of the human being. It proclaims an unquestioning adherence to the Darwinian theory and often sounds like a political slogan. The curious thing is that its implications are ignored. At least for the time being—although this may change—men and women are treated quite differently from animals. It does not occur to us to bring a pig to Court, as sometimes happened in the Middle Ages, and charge it with a crime. The owner of an animal that is mortally sick is blamed for not having it "put down"; the same person will be tried for murder if he or she "puts down" a terminally ill patient. Most people believe that we are neither more nor less than clever primates (or so they are told), but they are horrified if human beings are treated as if they were apes.

It seems to me that there is also confusion, although of a different kind, in the Muslim mind. No religion lays greater stress on the good treatment of animals than does Islam, yet Muslims have in general a bad reputation in this regard (as did Christians until very recently). If we represent a religion—any traditional religion—as a circle or a sphere, then it is likely that its adherents will absorb and practice only a segment of the whole. They will also emphasize this segment, as though to fill the empty space, so that they are blinded to all that they have ignored. Their religion, one might say, is too big for them. You cannot pour the ocean into a pint pot. The fact that people of the same Faith may choose different segments for their exclusive attention is one of the reasons for conflicts within the religion, not least within the Islamic *Umma*.

The good Muslim's life is lived in imitation of the Prophet's example, followed as faithfully as circumstances permit. It is in this example, the acts and the sayings of God's Messenger, that we find the most uncompromising references to animal welfare. If they are taken seriously—and how can the Muslim not take them seriously?—they have very grave implications for all who fall short in their care for the animals in their charge. Not only are there the famous stories of the woman sent to hell for shutting up a cat till it died of hunger and of the prostitute forgiven all her sins because she gave water to a dog that was dying of thirst, but there are also a number of small incidents in the record which emphasize the same principle. When the Prophet saw a donkey that had been branded on the face he cried out: "God curse the one who branded it." A man who was about to slaughter a goat for food was severely reproached for allowing the animal to

see him sharpening his knife. A prophet of earlier times was scolded by God Himself for burning an ant's nest because an ant had stung him—"You have destroyed a community that glorified Me"—and there is, according to another saying, a reward in Paradise for whoever shows kindness to a creature possessed of "a living heart." The law books instruct us as to what to do if we find a poisonous snake in our garden. It is to be warned to leave. If it returns a second time, it is to be warned again, but if it makes a third visit it may be killed.

The Quran tells us: "Your Lord inspired the bee, saying: Choose dwellings in the hills and in the trees and in what is built; then eat all manner of fruit and follow humbly the ways of your Lord made smooth"; in other words, follow your *Sharī'ah*, for that is your path and your destiny. This again brings out the Islamic view that each of the diverse non-human "communities" has a particular relationship with its Lord, but the Lord is one; ours as well as theirs. The relationships differ and so the paths differ, but the goal is the same. It is the harmonious interaction of all the components of the cosmos, both animate and inanimate, which reflects in countless different ways the unity of the Real. The killing of an animal except for food, and then only the permitted minimum, and even the unnecessary cutting down of a tree or uprooting of a plant goes, as it were, against the grain. It exceeds, from motives of greed, the bounds laid down for humankind. There is no place here, no excuse, for the luxuries of modern civilization.

Were it not for the divine Mercy, scattered like rain throughout creation, and God's readiness to forgive all sins if they are followed by sincere repentance, we would be in a bad way, but what matters most is to keep these principles always in mind, and that is possible only if we observe what might aptly be called the Prime Directive of Islam: the constant "remembrance of God." All that we need to know and all that we are required to do is encompassed in this remembrance; it is the shield against temptation and the spur to keep us on the "straight path" made smooth for us. In choosing to follow it, we are in step with the animals, the plants and the earth itself which, then and only then, has no cause for complaint.



TRADITIONALISTS



V

CHAPTER 18

René Guénon¹

Martin Lings

As regards the early part of the life of René Guénon our knowledge is very limited because of his extreme reticence. His objectivity, which is one aspect of his greatness, made him realize the evils of subjectivism and individualism in the modern world, and impelled him perhaps too far in the opposite direction; he shrank at any rate from speaking about himself. Since his death book after book has been written about him and the authors have no doubt felt often extremely frustrated at being unable to find out various things and as a result, book after book contains factual errors.

What we do know is that he was born at Blois in France in 1886, that he was the son of an architect; he had a traditional Catholic upbringing and at school he excelled in philosophy and mathematics. But at the age of 21 he was already in Paris, in the world of occultism, which was in full ferment at that time, about 1906-08. And the dangers of that world were perhaps counteracted for him by the fact that it was more open to wider perspectives. It seems to be about this time, in Paris, that he came in contact with some Hindus of the Advaita Vedanta school, one of whom initiated him into their own Shivaite line of spirituality. We have no details of time or place and he seems never to have spoken about these Hindus nor does he seem to have had further contact with them after one or two years. But what he learned from them is in his books and his meeting with them was clearly providential. His contact with them must have been extremely intense while it lasted. His books are just what was and is needed as antidote to the crisis of the modern world.

By the time he was nearly 30, his phenomenal intelligence had enabled him to see exactly what was wrong with the modern West, and that same intelligence had dug him out of it altogether. I myself remember that world in which and for which Guénon wrote his earliest books, in the first decade after the First World War, a monstrous world

¹ The following is a transcript of a lecture given in the autumn of 1994 at the Prince of Wales Institute in London and sponsored by the Temenos Academy.

made impenetrable by euphoria: the First World War had been the war to end war. Now there would never be another war; and science had proved that man was descended from the ape, that is, he had progressed from apehood, and now this progress would continue with nothing to impede it; everything would get better and better and better. I was at school at that time and I remember being taught these things with just one hour a week being taught the opposite in religious lessons. But religion in the modern world had long before then been pushed into a corner. From its corner it protested against this euphoria, but to no avail.

Today the situation is considerably worse and considerably better. It is worse because human beings have degenerated still further. One sees far more bad faces than one did in the 20s, if I may say so, at least, that is my impression. It is better because there is no euphoria at all. The edifice of the modern world is falling into ruin. Great cracks are appearing everywhere through which it can be penetrated as it could not be before. But it is again worse because the Church, anxious not to be behind the times, has become the accomplice of modernity.

But to return to the world of the 20s, I remember a politician proclaiming, as who would dare to do today, "We are now in the glorious morning of the world." And at this same time, Guénon wrote of this wonderful world, "It is as if an organism with its head cut off were to go on living a life which was both intense and disordered" (from *East and West* first published in 1924).

Guénon seems to have had no further contact with the Hindus and no doubt they had returned to India. Meantime, he had been initiated into a Sufi order which was to be his spiritual home for the rest of his life. Among the ills which he saw all around him he was very much preoccupied with the general anti-religious prejudice which was particularly rife among the French so-called intelligentsia. He was sure that some of these people were nonetheless virtually intelligent and would be capable of responding to the truth if it were clearly set before them. This anti-religious prejudice arose because the representatives of religion had gradually become less and less intelligent and more and more centered on sentimental considerations. In the Catholic Church especially, where the division of the community into clergy and laity was always stressed, a lay figure had to rely on the Church, it was not his business to think about spiritual things. Intelligent laymen would ask questions of priests who would not be able to answer these questions and who would take refuge in the idea that intelligence and pride were very closely connected. And so it is not difficult to see how this very anti-religious prejudice came into being especially in France.

Now Guénon put himself the question: Since these people have rejected Christianity would they be able to accept the truth when expressed in the Islamic terms of Sufism, which are closely related to Christian terms in many respects? He decided that they would not, that they would say that this is another religion; we have had enough of religion. However Hinduism, the oldest living religion, is on the surface very different from both Christianity and Islam, and so he decided to confront the Western world with the truth on the basis of Hinduism. It was to this end that he wrote his general *Introduction to the Study of Hindu Doctrines*. The French was published in 1921 to be followed in 1925 by what is perhaps the greatest of all of Guénon's books, *Man and His Becoming according to the Vedanta*.

He could not have chosen a better setting for his message of truth to the West because Hinduism has a directness which results from its having been revealed to man in a remote age when there was not yet a need to make a distinction between esoterism and exoterism, and that directness means that the truth did not have to be veiled. Already in Classical Antiquity the Mysteries, that is esoterism, were for the few. In Hinduism however they were the norm and the highest truths could be spoken of directly. There was no question of "Cast not your pearls before swine" and "Give not holy things to dogs." The sister religions of Hinduism, for example, the religions of Greece and Rome, have long since perished. But thanks to the caste system with the Brahmins as safeguarders of religion we have today a Hinduism which is still living and which down to this century has produced flowers of sanctity.

One of the points to be mentioned first is the question of the distinction which has to be made at the divine level and which is made in all esoterisms but cannot be made exoterically, that is, in religions as given to the masses today—the distinction between the Absolute and the beginnings therein of relativity. The Absolute which is One, Infinite, Eternal, Immutable, Undetermined, Unconditioned, is represented in Hinduism by the sacred monosyllable *Aum*, and it is termed *Ātmā*, which means Self, and *Brahma* which is a neuter word that serves to emphasize that it is beyond all duality such as male and female. And it is also termed *Tat* (That), just as in Sufism, the Absolute is sometimes termed *Huwa* (He). Then we have what corresponds in other religions to the personal God, *Ishvara*, which is the beginning already of relativity, because it is concerned with manifestation, the term that Hindus use for creation, and creation is clearly the beginning of a duality—Creator and created. *Ishvara* is at the divine level, yet it is the beginning of relativity.

In all esoterism one finds the same doctrine. Meister Eckhart came into difficulties with the Church because he insisted on making a distinction between God and Godhead—*Gott und Gottheit*. He used the second term for the Absolute, that is for the absolute Absolute, and he used God for the relative Absolute. It could have been the other way around, it was just that he needed to make some difference. In Sufism one speaks of the Divine Essence and the Essential Names of God such as the One, the Truth, the All-Holy, the Living, and the Infinitely Good, *al-Rahmān*, which contains the roots of all goodness and which is also a name of the Divine Essence. Below that there are the Names of Qualities, like Creator, the Merciful, in the sense of one who has Mercy on others, and that is clearly the beginning of a duality. In every esoterism this distinction is made even at the level of the Divinity. It cannot exist below esoterism because it would result in the idea of two Gods; a division in the Divinity would be exceedingly dangerous in the hands of the mass of believers. The Divine Unity has to be maintained at all costs.

Now Guénon, in this book, traces with all clarity the hierarchy of the universe from the Absolute, from the personal God, down to the created logos, that is *buddhi*, which is the word which means intellect and which has three aspects—*Brahmā* (this time the word is masculine), Vishnu and Shiva. Strictly speaking in the hierarchy of the universes these *devas* (this is the same word linguistically as the Latin *deus*), have the rank of what we would call archangels. Hinduism is so subtle however that though they are created they can be invoked as Names of the Absolute because they descend from the Absolute and they return to the Absolute. They can be invoked in the sense of the Absolute *Brahma*, in the sense of *Ātmā*, in the sense of *Aum*.

The Hindu doctrine, like Genesis, speaks of the two waters. The Quran speaks of the two seas, the upper waters and the lower waters. The upper waters represent the higher aspect of the created world, that is, of the manifested world, corresponding to the different heavens in which are the different paradises. It is all part of the next world from the point of view of this world. The lower waters represent the world of body and soul, and all is a manifestation of the Absolute.

In *Man and His Becoming according to the Vedānta*, Guénon, having traced the manifestation of man and having shown what is the nature of man in all its details, then proceeds to show how, according to Hindu doctrine, man can return to his absolute source. It ends with the supreme spiritual possibility of oneness with the Absolute, a oneness which is already there. A Brahmin boy at the age of eight is initiated

by his father and the words are spoken into his ear, "Thou art That," meaning thou art the Absolute, *tat vam asi*. This shows how far we are from religion as understood in the modern world. But that truth which is called in Sufism the secret, *al-sirr*, is necessary in all esoterism in the present day, otherwise it would not deserve the name esoterism.

Another aspect of Hinduism which made it the perfect vehicle for Guénon's message is the breadth of its structure. In the later religions it is as if Providence had shepherded mankind into a narrower and narrower valley: the opening is still the same to heaven but the horizontal outlook is narrower and narrower because man is no longer capable of taking in more than a certain amount. The Hindu doctrine of the *samsāra*, that is, of the endless chain of innumerable worlds which have been manifested, and of which the universe consists, would lead to all sorts of distractions. Nonetheless, when one is speaking of an Absolute, Eternal Divinity, the idea that that Infinitude produced only one single world in manifesting itself does not satisfy the intelligence. The doctrine of the *samsāra* does, on the other hand, satisfy, but the worlds are innumerable that have been manifested.

Another point in this respect is that Hinduism has an amazing versatility. It depends first of all on Divine Revelation. The Vedas and the Upanishads are revealed; the Bhagavad Gita is generally considered as revealed but not the *Mahābhārata* as a whole, this "inspired" epic to which the Gita belongs. In Hinduism this distinction between revelation, *sruti*, and inspiration, *smṛiti*, is very clearly made, as it also is in Judaism and in Islam: The Pentateuch, that is, the first five books of the Old Testament, were revealed to Moses, the Psalms to David, the Quran to Muhammad. That is something which Christians as a rule do not understand. They have difficulty in realizing, in the Old Testament for example, the difference between the Pentateuch and the Books of Kings and Chronicles which are simply sacred history, inspired no doubt, but in no sense revealed. For Christians the revelation is Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh; the concept of "the Word made book," which is a parallel revelation, does not enter into their perspective.

Hinduism also has the *avatāras*, and that a Christian can well understand, that is, the manifestations, the descents, of the Divinity. Of course a Christian would not recognize the descents of the Hindu *avatāras* because for the average Christian there has only ever been one descent and that is Christ Himself, but Hinduism recognizes the descent as an inexhaustible possibility and it names ten *avatāras* who have helped maintain the vitality of the religion down to the present day. The ninth *avatāra* which is called the foreign *avatāra* is the Buddha

himself because, although he appeared in India, he was not for Hindus but clearly for the Eastern world. The breadth of Hinduism is seen also in its prefiguration of exoterism which is the recognition of the Three Ways. These are still Ways back to God—the three *mārgas*—the way of knowledge, the way of love, and the way of action—three ways which correspond to the inclinations and affinities of different human beings.

Another point which makes the terms of Hinduism so right for giving Europeans the message is that they have as Aryans an affinity with Hinduism because they are rooted in the religions of Classical Antiquity which are sister religions to Hinduism; their structure was clearly the same as the structure of Hinduism. Of course they degenerated into complete decadence and have now disappeared. Nonetheless our heritage lies in them and Guénon gives us, one might say, the possibility of a mysterious renascence in a purely positive sense by his message of the truth in Hindu terms. This affinity must not be exaggerated however, and Guénon never advised anybody who was not a Hindu, as far as I know, to become a Hindu.

His message was always one of strict orthodoxy in one esoterism, but at the same time of equal recognition of all other orthodoxies, but his purpose was in no sense academic. His motto was *vincit omnia veritas*, Truth conquers all, but implicitly his motto was “Seek and ye shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you.” Implicit in his writings is the certainty that they will come providentially to those who are qualified to receive his message and they will impel them to seek and therefore to find a way.

Guénon was conscious of having a function and he knew what belonged to this function and what did not belong to it. He knew that it was not his function to have disciples; he never had any. It was his function to teach in preparation for a way that people would find for themselves, and this preparation meant filling in gaps which are left by modern education. The first of these gaps is the failure to understand the meaning of the transcendent and the meaning of the word intellect in consequence, a word which always continues to be used, but the intellect in the traditional sense of the word, corresponding to the Sansrit *buddhi*, had simply been forgotten in the Western world. Guénon insisted in his writings on giving this word its true meaning which is perception of transcendent realities, the faculty which can perceive the things of the next world, and its prolongations in the soul are what might be called intellectual intuitions which are

the preliminary glimmerings before intellection in the full sense takes place.

One has the impression that Guénon must have himself had an intellectual illumination at quite an early age. He must have perceived directly spiritual truths with the intellect in the true sense. He fills in gaps by explaining the meaning of rites, the meaning of symbols, the hierarchy of the worlds. In modern education the next world is left out altogether whereas in the Middle Ages students were taught about the hierarchy of the faculties and correspondingly the hierarchy of the universe.

Now I must for the moment speak on a rather personal level, but perhaps it may not be without interest. When I read the books of Guénon in the early thirties it was as if I had been struck by lightning and realized that this was the truth. I had never seen the truth before set down as in this message of Guénon's that there were many religions and that they must all be treated with reverence; they were different because they were for different people. It made sense and it also was at the same time to the glory of God because a person with even a reasonable intelligence when taught what we were taught at school would inevitably ask, well what about the rest of the world? Why were things managed in this way? Why was the truth given first of all to only the Jews, one people only? And then Christianity was ordered to spread over the world, but why so late? What about previous ages? These questions were never answered, but when I read Guénon I knew that what he said was the truth and I knew that I must do something about it.

I wrote to Guénon. I translated one of his first books, *East and West*, into English and I was in correspondence with him in connection with that. In 1930 Guénon left Paris, after the death of his first wife, and went to Cairo where he lived for twenty years until his death in 1951. One of my first ideas upon reading Guénon's books was to send copies to my greatest friend who had been a student with me at Oxford, because I knew he would have just the same reaction as I had. He came back to the West and took the same way that I had already found, a way of the kind that Guénon speaks of in his books. Then being in need of work he was given a lectureship at Cairo University, and I sent him Guénon's *poste restante* number. Guénon was extremely secretive and would not give his actual address to anybody; he wanted to disappear. He had enemies in France and he suspected that they wished to attack him by magic. I do not know this for certain but I know that Guénon was very much afraid of being attacked by certain

people and he wished to remain unknown, to sink himself into the Egyptian world where he was, the world of Islam. And so my friend had to wait a long time before Guénon agreed to see him. But when the meeting finally took place Guénon became immediately attached to him, and told him that he could always come to his house whenever he liked.

In the summer of 1939 I went to visit my friend in Cairo and when I was there the war broke out. I had a lectureship in Lithuania at that time and, being unable to return there, I was forced to stay in Egypt. My friend, who had become like a member of Guénon's household, collecting his mail from *poste restante* and doing many other things for him, took me to see Guénon. A year later I was out riding in the desert with my friend when his horse ran away with him and he was killed as the result of an accident. I shall never forget having to go to tell Guénon of his death. When I did he just wept for an hour. I had no option but to take my friend's place. I had already been given the freedom of the household and very quickly I became like one of the family. It was a tremendous privilege of course. Guénon's wife could not read and she spoke only Arabic. I quickly learned Arabic so I was able to talk to her. It was a very happy marriage. They had been married for seven years without children and Guénon, who was getting fairly old—he was much older than she was—had had no children with his first wife, so it was unexpected when they began to have children. They had four children altogether. I went to see Guénon nearly every day. I was the first person to read *The Reign of Quantity*, the only book he wrote while I knew him since the other books had all been written earlier. He gave it to me chapter by chapter. And I was able also to give him my own first book when I wrote it, *The Book of Certainty*, which I gave him also chapter by chapter. It was a very great privilege to have known such a person.

During this time a rather important question was resolved. The Hindus with whom Guénon had made contact in Paris had given him a wrong idea, not a strictly Hindu idea, about Buddhism. Hinduism recognizes the Buddha as the ninth *avatāra* of Vishnu but some Hindus maintain that he was not an *avatāra*, that he was just a revolted *kshatriya*, that is a member of the royal caste, against the Brahmins and it was this latter view which Guénon had accepted. Consequently he wrote about Buddhism as though it was not one of the great religions of the world. Now Ananda Coomaraswamy, Frithjof Schuon and Marco Pallis altogether decided that they would remonstrate with Guénon about this point. Guénon was very open to being persuaded and in

1946 I took Marco Pallis to see him with the result that he agreed that he had been mistaken and that the mistakes must be rectified in his books. Marco Pallis started sending him lists of many pages that needed correction.

Guénon almost never went out except when he came to visit us. I would send a car to fetch him and he would come with his family to our house about twice a year. We lived at that time just near the pyramids outside of Cairo. I went out with him only once and we went to visit the mosque of Sayyidnā Husayn near al-Azhar. He had a remarkable presence; it was striking to see the respect with which he was treated. As he entered the mosque you could hear people on all sides saying, “*Allāhumma salli ‘alā Sayyidnā Muhammad,*” that is, “May God rain blessings on the Prophet Muhammad,” which is a way of expressing great reverence for someone. He had a luminous presence and his very beautiful eyes, one of his most striking features, retained their lustre into early old age.

With his book on the Vedānta ranks his book on symbols, entitled *Fundamental Symbols: The Universal Language of Sacred Science*, which was published after his death from all the articles which were written about symbols in his journal, *Études Traditionnelles*. It was marvelous to read these articles when they came out month after month, but this book takes us back almost to prehistoric times as does *Man and His Becoming according to the Vedānta* but in a wider sense. Everything is a symbol of course, it could not exist if it were not a symbol, but the fundamental symbols are those which express eloquently aspects of the Supreme Truth and the Supreme Way. For example, one of these aspects of both the Way and the Truth is what is called the “axis of the world,” the axis which runs through all the higher states from the center of this state. That is the meaning of what is called the Tree of Life. The Tree of Life is symbolized by many particular trees: the oak, the ash, the fig and others throughout the world. The axis is the Way itself, the way of return to the Absolute. It is also symbolized by man-made things: the ladder, the mast, weapons like the lance, and the central pillar of edifices. As architects know, many buildings are built round a central axis which is not in fact there, which is not materialized. Very often in traditional houses the hearth is the center of the house and the chimney through which the smoke rises is another figure of the axis. And things which are normally horizontal are symbols of the axis: a bridge is also a symbol of the world axis. Witness the title Pontifex, the maker of the bridge, which is given to the highest spiritual authority of the Church—the bridge, which is the bridge between Heaven and earth.

Another fundamental symbol is the river. There are three aspects to the river: the crossing of the river symbolizes the passage from this world to a higher world, always, but then there is the river itself. There is the difficulty of moving upstream which symbolizes the difficulties of the spiritual path, of returning to one's source against the current. There is also the symbolism of moving in the other direction to the ocean, of returning finally to the ocean; that is another symbol of the Way. In this book amongst many other symbols, Guénon also treats of the symbolism of the mountain, the cave, the temporal cycle. In the temporal cycle the solstices of summer and winter are the gates of the gods according to Hinduism. The gate of the gods is the winter solstice, in the sign of Capricorn; the gate of the ancestors is the summer solstice, in the sign of Cancer.

As I have said, Guénon did not like to talk about himself and I respected his reticence, I did not ask him questions and I think he was pleased with that. To sum up what his function was, one might say that it was his function, in a world increasingly rife with heresy and pseudo-religion, to remind twentieth century man of the need for orthodoxy which itself presupposes firstly a divine intervention, and secondly a tradition which hands down with fidelity from generation to generation what Heaven has revealed. In this connection we are deeply indebted to him for having restored to the world the word orthodoxy in the full rigor of its original meaning, that is, rectitude of opinion, a rectitude which compels the intelligent man not merely to reject heresy, but also to recognize the validity of all those faiths which conform to those criteria on which his own faith depends for its orthodoxy.

On the basis of this universality, which is often known as *religio perennis*, it was also Guénon's function to remind us that the great religions of the world are not only the means of man's salvation, but that they offer him beyond that, even in this life, two esoteric possibilities which correspond to what were known in Graeco-Roman Antiquity as *mysteria pava* and *mysteria magna*, the "Greater Mysteries" and the "Lesser Mysteries." The first of these is the way of return to the primordial perfection which was lost in the fall. The second, which presupposes the first, is the way to gnosis, the fulfillment of the precept, "know thyself." This one ultimate end is termed in Christianity *deificatio*, in Hinduism, *yoga*, union, and *moksha*, deliverance, in Buddhism, *nirvāna*, that is, extinction of all that is illusory. And in Islamic mysticism, that is Sufism, *tahaqquq*, which means realization and which was glossed by a Sufi shaykh as self-

realization in God. The Mysteries and especially the Greater Mysteries are explicitly or implicitly the main theme of Guénon's writing, even in *The Crisis of the Modern World* and *The Reign of Quantity*. The troubles in question are shown to have sprung ultimately from loss of the mysterial dimension, that is, the dimension of the mysteries of esoterism. He traces all the troubles in the modern world to the forgetting of the higher aspects of religion. He was conscious of being a pioneer, and I will end simply by quoting something he wrote of himself, "All that we shall do or say will amount to giving those who come afterwards facilities which we ourselves were not given. Here as everywhere else it is the beginning of the work that is hardest."

CHAPTER 19

Frithjof Schuon and the Islamic Tradition

Seyyed Hossein Nasr

Now that Frithjof Schuon has left this earthly plane and it has become public knowledge that his initiatic name was Shaykh 'Īsā Nūr al-Dīn Ahmad al-Shādhilī al-'Alawī al-Maryamī, it is important to bring out into the open his relation to the Islamic tradition within which he functioned as the spiritual teacher of a branch of one of the most important orders (*turuq*) into which Sufism crystallized after the early centuries of Islamic history. It is particularly important to deal with this subject because a misunderstanding can be created in the minds of certain people who have read of his constant reference to the *religio perennis* and the primordial tradition and who might therefore be unaware of his essential relation with Islam, a relation about which he did not write publicly. Schuon was of course the great expositor of esoterism and the *sophia perennis* of his day and always spoke publicly in the name of that universal and perennial wisdom which he also called *religio cordis*. If asked what was his religion by an outsider, he would say the perennial religion or the religion of the heart which is in fact the same answer that was given to this question by Ibn 'Arabī and Rūmī as well as many other classical Sufi figures.

Without doubt Schuon was deeply interested in pure esoterism and gnosis whose veritable nature he unveiled in so many of his works. He also spoke of the subtle differences between Islamic esoterism and esoteric Islam and his greater interest in the first over the second. But he also knew fully well that there was a place where the two met. Moreover, he wrote clearly that whereas esoterism issues from the Truth which is the source of both esoterism and exoterism and not from exoterism, to practice an authentic spiritual path implies the acceptance of the exoteric dimension and its practice which lays the foundation for embarkation upon the esoteric path. In other words, in Islamic terminology both the *Tarīqah* or spiritual path and the *Sharī'ah* or Divine Law issue from the *Haqīqah* or Truth which is the source of both and not from each other, but to enter the *Tarīqah* one must first accept and practice the *Sharī'ah*. This is exactly what Schuon required of his disciples while like certain Sufis of old, but in a wider context,

he spoke of the religion of the heart and pure esoterism. His function to speak of pure esoterism should not, however, detract anyone for one moment from thinking that he was anything other than a Muslim in the deepest sense of the term and that he practiced the tenets of the Islamic tradition on both the levels of the Law and the Way while emphasizing always the inner or esoteric meaning of the exoteric rites and practices again in conformity with classical Sufism especially of figures such as Rūmī.

Besides speaking of the *religio cordis*, Schuon often expressed his attraction to the metaphysical formulations of the school of Shankara and the primordial ambience of the North American Native Traditions. These influences encouraged some interpreters—who lack either goodwill or in-depth understanding of what was involved—to doubt the Islamic character of Schuon's teachings, especially at the end of his life. Although the external forms may vary, the essential content of these intellectual, aesthetic, and moral influences is in no way incompatible with Islamic principles. Even so, he told us often that his love for such matters as Native American culture, art, and religion was a personal inclination having nothing to do with the tariqah which he had founded and which was based on pure Islamic orthodoxy and orthopraxy. As a matter of fact, to his last days he remained deeply attached to the Islamic tradition, performed the Islamic rites and read the Quran. The invocation of God's Name as revealed in the Quran did not leave his lips until the very moment of death.

Schuon became attracted to Islam after beginning his studies of Arabic which led to his formal entry into the religion in 1932 in Paris where he was working at the time. He recounted the story that one day while pondering what to do, he prayed to God and made the vow that if he were to receive a sign from Heaven on a particular day before noon he would embrace whatever religion that sign indicated. On that day he left his apartment a quarter before twelve and walked toward a main thoroughfare. At five minutes before noon suddenly a whole group of North African soldiers on horseback in complete Islamic dress appeared in the street and marched by. The meaning of this unlikely sign in the middle of Paris was obvious and Schuon decided to fulfill his vow to God, and embraced Islam immediately. Thereafter, he attended the Paris mosque often but he told us that he learned the *Sūrat al-fātihah* (the opening chapter of the Quran), which is recited during the daily prayers, in Switzerland from the Persian scholar Sayyid Hasan Imāmī, who was later to become the Imam-jum'ah of Tehran. From that period of his life onward, Schuon adopted Islamic dress

while at home. He wore that dress especially in its *maghribī* form¹ throughout his life, learned the *maghribī* style of calligraphy which he wrote beautifully, being a gifted artist even at that young age, and spoke Arabic to those who knew the tongue. His journey to Algeria in 1932 where he spent several months and most important of all where he met Shaykh Ahmad al-'Alawī, who initiated the young Schuon into Sufism, only strengthened his bond to the Islamic tradition in general and the traditional ambience of the Maghrib in particular.² He was to journey to Algeria and Morocco again in 1934, and to Egypt in 1938

¹ In 1957 when we first met Schuon in his house near Lausanne, he was as usual in completely traditional *maghribī* dress. He told us that many wonder why we insist in wearing traditional Islamic dress here in the middle of Europe. He added that it was because the *barakah* of the Prophet of Islam flows through such a dress and can be experienced concretely in it. It therefore brings this *barakah* to one's being and facilitates prayers and invocation while helping greatly in the creation of a traditional Islamic ambience in which Schuon lived and which he insisted to his disciples to create to the extent possible in the intimate spaces of their lives and of course most of all in their homes and particularly prayer rooms.

² Schuon later recounted how he thirsted to find a spiritual master and how he had decided that if he were not to find such a person, he would retire into the desert to pass the rest of his life in solitude and seclusion. But the hands of destiny led him to the great Algerian Sufi master, Shaykh al-'Alawī. In recent years certain detractors have sought to cast doubt upon Schuon's attachment to the Shādhiliyyah-'Alawiyyah Order and the possibility of Schuon possessing a regular initiatic chain (*silsilah*) which alone guarantees traditional continuity in Sufism. Let it be said first of all that there is no proof whatsoever that Schuon was not initiated into Sufism by Shaykh al-'Alawī. On the contrary, over the years numerous Algerian and Moroccan *fuqarā'* have attested to his having received the initiation in the hands of the great Algerian shaykh. In the 1960s we met a number of members of the Syrian branch of the 'Alawiyyah Order who asked us about how Shaykh 'Īsā was faring and told us stories heard by older *fuqarā'* about his coming to Mostaghanem in 1932 and having been received into the *ṭarīqah* by Shaykh al-'Alawī who put him in his first *khalwah*, or spiritual retreat. Only three years ago in Morocco we again heard similar stories from older Shādhilis who asked about him.

As for his being chosen a *muqaddam*, even if this were to be cast in doubt by his detractors against the facts, this denial would not in itself destroy initiatic continuity. Many *faqirs* in various Sufi orders who were not designated as *muqaddams* or *khali-fahs* later became shaykhs through the Will of Heaven. The history of classical Sufism is replete with such cases, especially in the earlier centuries when various functions prevalent in later Sufism did not as yet exist. In any case the veritable nature of any *shaykh* or *murshid* can only be gauged by the quality of his disciples. A tree is judged by its fruits.

In this context it might also be added here that in 1938 when he was in Cairo, Schuon was also initiated into the Qādiriyyah Order and like certain other Sufi masters, of whom Ibn 'Arabī is a well known example, possessed more than one initiation. Schuon had also told us that early in his life after entering the 'Alawiyyah Order he had had an encounter with Khadir, the "Green Prophet," who corresponds to Elias

to meet René Guénon. He was to visit Morocco again several times later in the 1960s while he also journeyed to Turkey twice to visit the House of the Virgin, the Maryamana, in Kuçadasi in the same period. He never made the pilgrimage to Mecca but was always joyous when his disciples made that sacred journey and would sometimes say that he participated in such pilgrimages inwardly. He therefore had also experienced much of the Islamic world, especially the Maghrib, personally and had a first hand knowledge of it.

The private life of Schuon was in fact carried out in an atmosphere which recreated the traditional Islamic ambience in the heart of the West. The interior of his house was like the most beautiful traditional *maghribi* home and in it one hardly felt separated from the traditional atmosphere of the Islamic world. But it was not only his immediate ambience that was filled with objects of Islamic art. His days were punctuated with the daily prayers and when he was younger he fasted not only during Ramadan, but also many other days of the year following the *Sunnah* of the Prophet. Almost every day he recited the Quran. We remember when in the 60s he began to travel more extensively, he asked us to send him the thirty parts (*juz*ʻ) of the Quran in separate bindings so that he could take one or two along without having to carry the whole book which in its larger printings is of course heavy. From the time of his conversion to Islam, he lived as a Muslim although hidden from the public, practicing the tradition from its exoteric to the most esoteric level. As already mentioned, his being the great spokesman for esoterism and universal metaphysics did not affect his being a Muslim on the plane of forms. Although he wrote eloquently of Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Shamanism and other religions, his name for his followers remained Shaykh ʻĪsā Nūr al-Dīn Ahmad and not something else. And when he died he was buried according to Islamic rites carried out strictly on the basis of traditional practices.

Those who were born in the Islamic world and who had had concrete experience of what the Sufis call “Muhammadan grace” or *al-barakat al-muhammadiyah*, spoke unanimously of the fact that

and who represents an ever-living initiatic function in the Islamic universe. This encounter could only have been related to the “Eliatic function” of Schuon himself. See Leo Schaya, “La mission d’Elie,” *Sophia Perennis*, Vol. 3, no. 1, Spring 1977, pp. 16-28; also as “The Mission of Elias,” *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Summer/Autumn 1980, pp. 159-167.

when they came to meet Schuon in his house, they immediately felt the presence of that *barakah* and smelled its unmistakable perfume. Such was also our own experience when we first met him in Lausanne after a period of correspondence. Having met many saintly people in Persia including several Sufi masters and having visited many Islamic holy places, we were utterly astounded by the powerful presence of the Muhammadan *barakah* emanating from him when we first met him in his house in a narrow street overlooking Lake Lemman in Pully outside of Lausanne. Clearly, despite his universal function to express the truth at the heart of all religions globally, Schuon himself was rooted in the Islamic tradition and more particularly in the soil of Sufism. Without this root he could have never established a *tarīqah* within which it was possible to practice and to realize the truths about which he wrote so eloquently in his books and articles.

What Schuon loved most in Islam was the assertion of the Doctrine of the Unity of the reality of the Divine Principle as Absolute, Infinite and Perfection which he equated with the supreme Goodness of Plato. Schuon basked in the shining rays of the *Shahādah* and considered the first *Shahādah*, *Lā ilāha illa 'llāh*, as the most perfect formulation of integral metaphysics. He in fact composed some of the most profound commentaries ever written upon the two *Shahādahs* relating the second *Shahādah*, *Muhammad rasūl Allāh* to the *illā* of the first *Shahādah* and showing its deepest meaning as formulation of the truth of the coming forth of all things from the Divine Principle. Schuon's practice of Sufism revolved around the *Shahādah* and the Supreme Name which absorb and integrate all other Names and litanies into their principle and origin while his theoretical exposition of Sufi metaphysics always came back to the central truth contained in the *Shahādah*. He also lived and breathed in its truth and the Supreme Name with which it terminates. Nevertheless, Schuon had also journeyed both "existentially" and metaphysically through the world of the Divine Names which play such a major role in the Islamic universe. He wrote of the meaning and power of many of them and also dealt with some of the difficult metaphysical and theological issues which arise from what appears to be the contradictory sense of some of the Divine Names when they are viewed in relation to each other and outwardly. His masterly essay "Dimensions of the Universe in the Quranic Doctrine of the Divine Names" in which he deals with the deepest meaning of the quaternary of Names *al-Awwal*, the First, *al-Ākhir*, the Last, *al-Zāhir*, the Outward, and *al-Bātin*, the Inward,

bear testimony to the level of knowledge that he possessed of the “science of Divine Names.”³

Schuon knew the Quran well and read it regularly in the original Arabic which he knew and loved. He was particularly attracted to the last *sūrahs* or chapters as well as the middle ones especially *Sūrat al-wāqī‘ah*, the first that he memorized after the *Fātihah*. In his daily discourse he often used certain well-known Quranic verses and spent much time in the study of the inner meaning of the Sacred Text much of which would come to him through inner intuition rather than the reading of earlier inspired esoteric commentaries which he, however, knew well especially the one attributed to Ibn ‘Arabī but actually by ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī as well as the commentaries of al-Ghazzālī not to speak of more general commentaries such as that of al-Baydāwī. Schuon’s chapter on the Quran in his *Understanding Islam* is itself a major esoteric commentary on the Sacred Text in the line of the greatest traditional Sufi commentaries.

As for the Prophet of Islam, Schuon knew well the traditional accounts of his life and the descriptions of his character as found in classical sources. But his knowledge of the inner reality of the Prophet was also direct and “existential” for he had “encountered” the trans-historical “Muhammadan Reality” (*al-haqīqat al-muhammadiyah*). He never wrote a book on the Prophet bringing out the esoteric significance of the episodes of his life, but he did write a number of works of the greatest importance on the inner reality of the Prophet and the significance of his virtues. More than anyone else in the West, he explained to a non-Muslim audience what the Prophet means to Muslims and why he is loved so greatly by them. Schuon’s several studies of the Prophet culminated in his “The Mystery of the Prophetic Substance”⁴ which reveals a very rare intimacy with *al-haqīqat al-muhammadiyah*. He had read the traditional prayers to receive a vision of the Prophet and his prayers were answered several times. The essay in question is in fact one of the most important works ever written on the inner reality of the Prophet. Schuon of course also knew well the *Sunnah* of the Prophet, quoting often *hadīths* and

³ See F. Schuon, *Dimensions of Islam*, trans. P. Townsend (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1970), Chapter 2, pp. 30-45.

⁴ See Schuon, *In the Face of the Absolute* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books, 1989), pp. 209-234. This work was originally written upon our request and published in *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations* (ed. S. H. Nasr) (New York: Crossroads, 1989), Chapter 4, pp. 48-63, under the title “The Spiritual Significance of the Substance of the Prophet.”

writing on the meaning of the *Sunnah* in the life of Islam in general and Sufism in particular.

Furthermore, Schuon was well acquainted with Islam's sacred and religious history. Besides the rightly guided caliphs, among whom he especially loved 'Alī as had Shaykh al-'Alawī, Schuon also had studied and admired many of the great masters of *tasawwuf* including Junayd, the Arab Sufi poet Niffarī, Shaykh Abu'l-Hasan al-Shādhilī and many other *maghribī* masters including Ibn Mashīsh, Abū Madyan, Ibn 'Arabī and of course his own spiritual master, Shaykh al-'Alawī, to whom he would refer as a "*surhomme*," and whose works he continued to quote until the end of his own life. Schuon loved Ibn 'Arabī and translated some of his poems into French when he was young but he refused to identify Ibn 'Arabī with the whole of Islamic esoterism and rejected the view of certain French Guénonians who did so. When from the late 50s onward we introduced him to the works of Persian Sufi masters, he became especially attracted to Rūmī, Shabistarī and Jāmī and finally came to consider Rūmī as the most universal saint of Islam.

There are few domains of the Islamic intellectual and spiritual tradition with which Schuon was not familiar. He knew the different formulations of Islamic metaphysics to which he himself made a great contribution.⁵ He also wrote of angelology and cosmology in a manner that reveals his intimate knowledge of traditional sources as can be seen in his extensive essay "*An-Nūr*."⁶ He furthermore dealt in many instances with Islamic eschatology often comparing it to eschatological views of other religions while at other times seeking to clarify some of the more difficult Islamic doctrines concerning the multiplicity of posthumous states.⁷

Schuon was also well aware of the distinctions between Sunnism and Shi'ism within Islam and in contrast to Guénon, who showed no

⁵ A case in point is his essay "The Five Divine Presences," in *Dimensions of Islam*, Chapter 11, pp. 142-158, which is a most profound discussion of the doctrine of *al-hadarāt al-ilāhiyyah al-khams*, a doctrine which has been discussed over the past seven centuries by many eminent metaphysicians going back to Ibn 'Arabī and Sadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī.

⁶ See his *L'Oeil du Coeur* (Paris: L'Âge d'Homme, 1995). The essay "*An-Nūr*" was also published in English in *Dimensions of Islam*, pp. 102-120.

⁷ See for example his "Some Observations on a Problem of the Afterlife" in *Dimensions of Islam*, Chapter 10, pp. 136-141; "The Two Paradises," in *In the Face of the Absolute*, pp. 235-249 which also contains references to classical Quranic commentaries; and "The Sufi Paradise," in *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, trans. J. Peter Hobson (London: World of Islam Festival Trust, 1976), Chapter 10, pp. 181-187.

interest in Shi'ism, was attracted to the study of Shi'ism and especially its esoteric doctrines. The personality of 'Alī and Fātimah were also of great interest to him and he was in fact planning to write a book or long article on them in the 60s and asked us to send him whatever references were available. It was because of the unavailability of easy to use sources that he finally abandoned the idea and settled for writing the very significant and critical essay, "Seeds of a Divergence,"⁸ which contains some of the most profound statements on the relationship of Sunnism and Shi'ism, their issuing from two dimensions within the being of the Prophet and their both belonging to Islamic orthodoxy. In our private discussions over the years he would often bring up certain Shi'ite beliefs or practices and discuss their significance with us.

It is remarkable that being the metaphysician and esoterist that he was, Schuon should be so knowledgeable in the problems and discussions of *Kalām*, usually rendered as Islamic theology. Like many North African Sufi shaykhs, his interest in *Kalām* was mainly in the Ash'arite school whose "voluntarism" he discussed often,⁹ bringing out both the strengths and weaknesses of the theses of the Ash'arites and their struggles with the Islamic philosophers. He showed that the problems discussed between the two schools such as free will and determinism or "createdness" or "eternity of the world" are not soluble on the theological level itself but can only be solved on the level of pure metaphysics. He also knew Islamic philosophy well and often sided with the philosophers against the Ash'arites saying that ultimately the Islamic philosophers belonged to the same family as the 'urafā' or gnostics. He certainly was not an anti-philosophical Sufi but on the contrary was in many ways more sympathetic to someone like Suhrawardi than to the "anti-intellectual" Sufis of the 11th and 12th centuries (A.D.).¹⁰

Schuon also had the deepest knowledge of Islamic art in its various forms and wrote some of the most perceptive pages on its meaning. He was especially attracted to the art of the Maghrib with its purity reflecting the ethos of the early centuries of Arab society in North Africa. But he also admired greatly Persian art as well as some of the

⁸ Printed in Schuon, *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, Chapter 5, pp. 91-110.

⁹ A good example is "Dilemmas within Ash'arite Theology," in *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, Chapter 7, pp. 118-151.

¹⁰ A seminal essay dealing with this subject is his "Tracing the Notion of Philosophy," in *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence*, trans. W. Stoddart (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books, 1981), Chapter 5, pp. 115-128.

outstanding architectural monuments of Muslim India. He loved both Arabic calligraphy, which as already mentioned he wrote in a beautiful hand, and Arabic poetry. Being a poet in not only his mother tongue, German, but also in English, he furthermore composed Arabic poetry himself dealing always with spiritual themes in the tradition of the Arabic Sufi poetry of old. He also enjoyed music of the Islamic peoples, first and foremost the chanting of the Quran and the *adhān* (which are supreme forms of music although never called “music” in Arabic) and then classical Arabic, Persian and Turkish music especially what was connected to the Mawlawī tradition.

As already mentioned, Schuon had traveled extensively in the Western lands of Islam and especially the Arab world. Being the extremely perceptible person that he was, he was able to pierce into and gain in-depth knowledge of the structure of Islamic society and the various classes of people who comprised traditional society especially in the Maghrib. He would often tell us that in the Islamic world he liked most of all the Sufis, then the class of ‘*ulamā*’ and then the pious artisans and merchants in the bazaars. He also had great love for the nomads wherever they might be and appreciated fully their great spiritual significance within Islamic civilization. Altogether there was little within Islam and Islamic civilization that Schuon had not come to know, study and penetrate into its inner meaning. His being, even more than his works, demonstrated his immersion in the universe of the Islamic tradition while his heart dwelt in the Formless and his intellect spoke of the pure metaphysics and esoterism that lie at the heart of sacred revelations and yet transcend all that belongs to the formal plane.

* * *

If we consider all of the writings of Schuon, including his published books and articles as well as unpublished texts, we will discover that he wrote more about the Islamic tradition than any other religion although his perspective was always that of universal esoterism and the *sophia perennis*. In fact the body of his writings contain not only an unparalleled exposition of traditional metaphysics and the inner study of religions, but also a peerless account of the various facets and aspects of Islam and its main spiritual and intellectual currents seen from the most profound inward perspective. Already Schuon’s first essay published in *Le Voile d’Isis* in 1933 concerned Islam and was entitled, “L’aspect ternaire de la Tradition monothéiste.” His first short book which appeared two years later in 1935 in Paris was also

concerned with Islamic themes and bore the title *De quelques aspects de l'Islam*. The fourth "book" of his profound meditations which appeared in German as *Leitgedanken zur Urbesinnung* also in 1935¹¹ was written in Mostaghanem and dedicated to Shaykh al-'Alawī while his collection of German poems *Tage und Nachtebuch* contains several poems with Arabic titles and dealing with Sufi themes.

This concern with Islamic themes was to continue in Schuon's major works which began to see the light of day after the Second World War starting with his first major doctrinal book, the *Transcendent Unity of Religions*, in which Islam figures in a central fashion. His two next books, *The Eye of the Heart* and *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, were likewise to deal largely with Islamic themes and in fact sections were devoted specifically to Islam and Sufism. Putting aside works dealing directly with Islam, such was to be the case in nearly all of Schuon's later books such as the work that summarizes his teachings, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, which ends with a section entitled "Sufism," and *Approches du phénomène religieux* whose longest section is devoted to Islam.¹²

Turning to works whose very title includes Islam or Sufism, the most noteworthy is *Understanding Islam* which, along with the *Transcendent Unity of Religions*, is the best known work of the author. No book of Schuon has sold as many copies nor become as widely disseminated globally as this remarkable book on Islam. No work in a Western language has done as much as this book to explain Islam to the Western audience and to create a better bridge for an in-depth understanding between Islam and Christianity. Furthermore, the influence of this work in the Islamic world itself from Senegal to Malaysia has been great especially among Western educated Muslims who have come to learn so much about their own religion and have the doubt created in their minds by Western attacks against Islam removed through this work. *Understanding Islam* has been translated into Arabic, Persian, Turkish and some of the other major Islamic languages,¹³ while its French and English versions have also been very widely read in the

¹¹ This work was reprinted later as *Urbesinnung-Das Denken des Eigentlichen* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Aurum Verlag, 1989).

¹² This work to which a number of other sections were added appeared in English as *In the Face of the Absolute*. The English work therefore contains *Approches du phénomène religieux* but is not simply its translation.

¹³ Nothing is more difficult than translating the sentences of Schuon into a Semitic language such as Arabic. It is a more daunting task than rendering them into Persian

Islamic world. It is hard to overestimate the spiritual and intellectual impact of this book in bringing about the comprehension of Islam in both East and West, the East including not only the Islamic world itself but also Hindu India, Japan and other Asian countries.

Other works of Schuon with specifically Islamic titles include his *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence*, which discusses the heart of Sufism and its teachings, and *Christianity/Islam: Essays on Esoteric Ecumenicism* which is the most masterly treatment of the subject by Schuon, a subject to which Schuon was to return in a schematic fashion in his *Roots of the Human Condition*. There are also two collections of his essays in English dealing with Islam, namely, *Dimensions of Islam* and *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, which have no French original but which have also been translated in some Islamic languages. When one considers all these works and the numerous passages concerning Islamic themes in other books and essays, one becomes more aware of the enormous amount of writing which Schuon devoted to the subject of Islam while presenting the *sophia perennis* and traditional doctrines in general.

* * *

The influence of these works in both the West and the Islamic world is much greater than what a cursory glance would reveal and in fact only in-depth studies can make known the profundity and extent of his influence. Nevertheless, something can be said even now about his influence. If one considers not only Schuon's own writings but also works of such figures as Titus Burckhardt, Martin Lings, Gai Eaton, Victor Danner, Leo Schaya, Jean-Louis Michon, Roger Dupasquier, William Chittick, Sachiko Murata, Vincent Cornell, and many others writing in Western languages on Islam, all of whom were deeply influenced by Schuon's works, it becomes clear how extensive the impact

into which we have translated a number of essays of Schuon, not that the translation of his works into Persian is in any sense easy. As for Arabic, we spent three years with a leading Egyptian scholar, the late Salāh al-Sāwī, to translate *Understanding Islam*, into an Arabic which would be classical and at the same time contemporary. The translation under the title *Hatta nafham al-Islam* was published by Dar al-mutahhidah li'l-Nashr in Beirut in 1980, and is known in the Arab world by scholars of the field as are the Turkish and Persian translation of this seminal work.

of his work has been on various aspects of Islam as studied in Western languages.¹⁴

In the Islamic world itself, although Schuon had been more closely associated with North Africa than any other part of the Islamic world, it was in Persia where he first became well known starting in the late 50s and early 60s as a result of translations made by ourselves into Persian of some of his essays as well as extensive discussion of his writings in our own works. Gradually his writings as well as those of Guénon, Burckhardt and Lings began to attract the attention of a number of perspicacious scholars among both Western educated Persians and those trained in traditional *madrasahs*. This trend has continued to this day with the result that his ideas, along with those of the figures already mentioned, are part of the current intellectual discourse in Persia as the present day public discussion in that land of “religious pluralism” reveals so clearly. There is a whole generation of younger Persian scholars who speak of *sunnat*, a word we used some forty years ago as translation for “tradition” as understood by Guénon and Schuon, precisely in the sense of *tradition*, and who consider their perspective as *sunnati* or traditional they are dealing with philosophy, religion, or art. This is due most of all to the impact upon such scholars of the thought of Guénon and Schuon encountered directly or through our writings and those of some of our students and colleagues writing in Persian.¹⁵

In Turkey likewise Schuon’s writings, along with those of authors closely associated with him, began to become known in the late 70s and by now there is a whole library of traditional works in Turkish including several books by Schuon. Moreover, in Turkey as in Persia the Islamic identity of Schuon was well known even in his lifetime and people often spoke of him as a “gnostic” or *al-‘ārif bi’Llāh* who was a disciple of Shaykh al-‘Alawī but who lived in the West. An “intellectual elite” in the Guénonian sense has formed in Turkey as well as Persia, Pakistan, Malaysia, and certain other Islamic countries which is deeply rooted in the Islamic tradition, universalist in perspective and fully aware of the nature of the modern world, an “elite” whose

¹⁴ One would also need to add to this list the works of Michel Vālsan, who was Shaykh ‘Īsā’s *muqaddam* in Paris, and indirectly his disciples some of whom like Michel Chodkiewicz are outstanding scholars of Sufism.

¹⁵ It is also important to mention the journal of the Iranian Academy of Philosophy *Sophia Perennis* in which several of Schuon’s articles were published.

formation owes a very great deal to the writings of the traditionalist school especially those of Guénon and Schuon.

In Pakistan interest in the writings of Schuon and those closely associated with him began in the early 60s through a number of lectures given and essays published by us in that country. Soon a number of important Pakistani intellectual figures such as the late A.K. Brohi and the late Muhammad Ajmal became followers of the traditional perspective and in Pakistan as in Persia, the traditional perspective began to enter into mainstream intellectual discourse. The publication of many traditionalist works including those of Schuon in local Pakistani editions by the Suhayl Academy played a major role in the spread of the influence of his works and those of his "school." For some time even a traditionalist journal was published in Urdu in Lahore under the name of *Riwāyat* in which Schuon was openly introduced as Shaykh 'Īsā Nūr al-Dīn Ahmad, and he is known as such by most well known Pakistani scholars. For a while a traditionalist journal was also published in English in that country under the title *Studies in Tradition* in which his works were published.

A similar situation is to be found in the Malay world although perhaps not with the same degree of amplitude and breadth. A number of scholars in Indonesia and especially Malaysia have been trained in the traditional perspective and this point of view is well known in that part of the world. Moreover, a number of the works of the traditionalist school including those of Schuon have been translated into both Bahasa Malaysia and Bahasa Indonesia. In the debate between tradition and modernism as well as the dialogue of civilizations going on in those countries today, the voice of Schuon can usually be heard in the background determining often what is being formulated in louder voice.

It is strange that despite the centrality of the Arab world to the Islamic world and the fact that Schuon was more acquainted with that part of the Islamic world than any other, his influence is less perceptible in Arab countries than in the other parts of *Dār al-Islām* already cited. Although, as already mentioned, the Arabic translation of *Understanding Islam* was well received in the Arab world, Schuon has not found until now a group of competent translators who could render his works successfully into Arabic, both in the sense of translating those works and in writing in Arabic about the ideas and doctrines expounded by him. In a country like Egypt, which is the intellectual center of the Arab world, this lacuna is quite evident. As

for North Africa, it is mostly through Schuon's French works that a number among the younger generation have come under the sway of his teachings. Meanwhile, in Morocco and Algeria and also Syria he continues to be remembered among older members of the Sufi orders as the Sidi 'Īsā who became the disciple of Shaykh al-'Alawī and later a shaykh of the Shādhiliyyah 'Alawiyyah Order.

Altogether the influence of the works of Schuon and his followers in the Islamic world is more in the realm of presence than external action. The doctrines and expositions in question are like a light which illuminates by its presence without being the direct source of action. One should not in fact be fooled into belittling his universal influence by relying on the study of external actions and reactions, which can be studied from the outside in a cursory fashion. The influence in question is there to be sure, powerful and immutable yet transforming in ways which touch the deeper layers of the intellectual and spiritual life of many who themselves have great qualitative impact upon society.

Schuon's message has of course had an impact upon a number of Christians and Jews, Buddhists and Hindus and even those without a definite spiritual orientation but who are in quest of the truth. But it would not be an exaggeration to state that although he lived in the West and wrote in European languages, his greatest influence was in the Islamic world as a comparison of intellectual concern for his ideas in America and Britain on the one hand and Turkey and Persia on the other reveals. The reason for this phenomenon is to be sought in the inner reality of the man himself and the fact that he was nurtured by the Muhammadan *barakah* which emanated from his being as it does from his writings.

Without doubt Frithjof Schuon was an exceptional person from his childhood and had already had profound metaphysical intuitions even in the age of adolescence before embracing Islam. God had given him a pneumatic nature and an intellect which could perceive metaphysical truths from an early age. But as he himself wrote in reference to German Romanticism, a correct intellectual intuition remains inoperative unless it is nurtured within the *cadre* of a living tradition. In the case of Schuon, God chose Islam as the tradition in which he and what he received from Heaven were to be nurtured and brought to fruition. It was Islam and the Muhammadan *barakah* that allowed him to become a spiritual teacher and a shaykh of the Shādhiliyyah Order, to found a *tariqah*, the Shādhiliyyah 'Alawiyyah Maryamiyyah, and to

reach spiritual states and stations from whose perspective he was to write his remarkable and incomparable works. To be sure he had a function beyond the specifically Islamic universe in revealing the inner truths of other religions and their inner unity which, lest we forget, is a major theme of the Quran itself,¹⁶ in bringing out the true significance of esoterism and the *sophia perennis* in relation not only to theory but also spiritual practice, in speaking with the greatest profundity of the nature of the soul and the elements of an authentic spiritual life, in providing an in-depth criticism of the modern world, in reestablishing the correct mode of serious thinking and intellection, and in accepting non-Muslim disciples.¹⁷ Yet, there is no doubt that he was a Sufi shaykh, with however an exceptional metaphysical vision and breadth of principial knowledge, who was a product of the Islamic esoteric tradition. Even his non-Islamic dimensions can be understood in light of the fact that Sufism is the esoterism of the last major revelation of humanity, and that, like Islam whose function it was to integrate all the revealed truths that came before it, Sufism contains within itself all the possibilities of esoterism.

No matter how much some might seek to aggrandize some of the deviant currents and eddies and aberrations that surrounded him in his very old age and try to present him as a figure that had gone "beyond" the Islamic form, Schuon was and remained rooted in the Islamic tradition to the moment of his death and knew more than anyone else that one cannot live beyond the world of forms or the level of forms while living in the world of forms, and that even the "beyond" is determined by the tradition within which one has lived in this world. Only the Ultimate Beyond, beyond the beyond, is above all forms in the Supreme Unity which lies beyond all distinctions. Schuon was the great expositor of the doctrine of Unity and a spiritual teacher who led those qualified to reach that Unity, which manifests itself in all authentic religions. In his case the One (*al-Ahad*), who manifested himself in His fullness in Islam with its emphasis upon Unity (*al-tawhīd*), chose him as the vehicle for the expression of the truth which leads to the One, nurtured him to become a spiritual master,

¹⁶ The Quran presents a universalist doctrine of religion and revelation which was not developed fully in Islamic history except in a few cases such as those of Ibn 'Arabī and Rūmī. It was providential that this dimension of the Quranic revelation should receive its full elaboration in our times in the hands of the traditionalist writers, foremost among them Schuon.

¹⁷ It should not be forgotten that certain classical Sufi masters such as Rūmī had Christian and Jewish disciples and that in India many Sufis accepted Hindu disciples.

familiarized him with the “breath of intimacy,” revealed to him the spiritual reality of the Prophet and made the Muhammadan *barakah* to flow through his being. That is why those who knew Schuon well as Shaykh ‘Īsā Nūr al-Dīn Ahmad repeat for him, now that he has died, the Arabic prayer that is recited only after the death of the friends of God, namely “May God be pleased with him and through him with us.” *Radī Allāh ‘anhu wa annā bihi.*

CHAPTER 20

Ananda K. Coomaraswamy Scholar of the Spirit¹

Brian Keeble

So as not to present Coomaraswamy in a sort of existential vacuum a very brief outline of his life and work is necessary. But a word of caution must be sounded immediately. We are not dealing here with a writer who saw it as his life's task to present his own beliefs and thoughts. He once said that perhaps the most important thing he had learned was not to think for himself. And he regarded any interest on the part of others in his personal life with the highest degree of disdain. He wrote:

I consider the modern practice of publishing details about the lives and personalities of well known men as nothing but a vulgar catering to illegitimate curiosity. . . . This is not a matter of "modesty" but one of principle.

We shall see rather more of what is meant by this word principle in a moment.

Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy was born on August 22, 1877 in Ceylon. His father, Sir Mutu Coomaraswamy, was descended from a distinguished Ceylonese family. He was the first Asian to be knighted by the English monarchy and the first Hindu to be called to the bar in England. Sir Mutu married the English woman Elizabeth Clay Beeby in 1876. Ananda was their only child. Sir Mutu died in 1879 shortly before he was due to leave for England to join his wife and son who had left for England the previous year.

Ananda was raised by his mother in England. At the age of twelve he went to Wycliffe College at Stonehouse in Gloucester where he remained for more than six years. He went on to attend the University of London from which he received the degree of Bachelor of Science with first class honors in Geology and Botany. He spent the years

¹ This essay was originally delivered as an introductory lecture on the work of Coomaraswamy at the Temenos Academy, London, May 1994.

1903 and 1906 in Ceylon directing the first mineralogical survey of the country. During this survey he discovered a new mineral which he named Thorianite. It was during this trip, as a result of witnessing firsthand the effects of Western industrialism on the native arts and crafts—and therefore the life of the people—that an interest in the interrelation between religion, philosophy, work, the arts and the crafts was awakened.

So far as is known the years 1906 to 1916 were spent largely in India and England. His activities in India were partly political and in the cause of nationalism. In 1910 he undertook an extended tour of Northern India collecting a large quantity of paintings and drawings which later became the basis of the collection of Asian art at the Boston Museum. During these years—1906 to 1916—in England, he had among his friends and acquaintances many of the leading figures of the day—among them W. B. Yeats, Eric Gill, William Rothenstein, A. J. Penty, and C. R. Ashbee from whom he bought the press on which William Morris had printed his Kelmscott Press books. On this press Coomaraswamy personally supervised the design and printing of his first major work, *Medieval Sinhalese Art*, in 1908.

In 1917 Coomaraswamy went to America to take up the appointment of Keeper of Indian Art at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. He remained for the final thirty years of his life at Boston leading the life of a scholar and lecturer almost exclusively. His most mature work was done during this period. He died at his house in Needham, Massachusetts on the 7th of September 1947—shortly after his seventieth birthday.

Of these thirty years devoted entirely to study and writing, the last twenty years of tireless work were his most productive. No definitive bibliography of his work exists despite several attempts. Durai Raja Singam's *Bibliographic Record*, in two volumes with a total of nearly one thousand pages, lists around one thousand items.

Any appreciation of Coomaraswamy's achievement cannot help but be linked with that of René Guénon. Coomaraswamy disavowed any suggestion that his was a prophetic role, but it was certainly providential that both he and Guénon were to remind the West of first principles, in his own words—which could equally apply to Guénon—"in a way that may be ignored but cannot be refuted." Indeed, Coomaraswamy has been described as one of the greatest intellectuals of the modern era—using the word intellect in the sense, its proper sense, of having the habit of first principles.

Coomaraswamy and Guénon were born into a world that had all but erased a principal grasp of the sacred. By the end of the 19th century, and as a result of a complex variety of cumulative developments—including the nominalism of the late Middle Ages, the humanism of the Renaissance, the advent of rationalism, of pragmatic, materialist science and such notions as evolution and progress, the West had indeed evolved beyond its traditional Christian structure. Though there had been voices raised in opposition to this trend towards total secularization—such voices as Nicholas de Cusa, Ficino, Boehme, William Blake, Thomas Taylor and their like—none the less by the turn of the century the West was by and large locked into a self-referring and self-complacent materialism in which the sacred, the true and the beautiful—as first principles—were no longer part and parcel of Western man's intellectual, psychological and practical life.

The result of four centuries of such development was a situation in which religion—by now not much more than the sentimental subscription to a set of moral precepts—was faced with an incompatible and irreconcilable opposite attitude, a science of phenomena that owes its entire allegiance to the material domain. In this situation relativism held complete sway, in the absence of any spiritual or intellectual hold upon the Absolute or supreme principle. And, since no mere sequence of worldly causality can account for it, what we must be obliged to think of as a law of cosmic compensation, this situation was found, in due course, to give rise to a recall to order—a reassessment of all values in terms of first principles.

The contribution of René Guénon to this call to order I will leave to Dr. Martin Lings.² But in the case of Coomaraswamy, initially it was the fact of witnessing at first hand in the early years of this century, in India and Ceylon, the Asian apathy towards the erosion of three thousand years of its cultural heritage in the face of secular imperialism that spurred him on to make his contribution.

As a young man in England Coomaraswamy had imbibed a good deal of the arts and crafts milieu. He admired above others William Morris' example, both his craft works and his writings with their anti-industrial bias. So it was more or less natural that Coomaraswamy should have begun with the arts and crafts rather than with religion or philosophy. And, moreover, to look at the arts not as the expression of

² See "René Guénon" by Martin Lings, *Sophia*, Volume 1, No. 1, Summer 1995, pp. 21-37 [Editors' Note: Chapter 18 of this anthology.]

a rarefied attitude to life—as a special aesthetic compartment of life—but as part of the expression of reality and of the nature of human life as a whole. It was in the arts and crafts of India that Coomaraswamy began his study of the symbolical and mythical patterns that underlie traditional works of art. Here he was able to begin his demonstration of how, in the normal context of human life and work, the arts are like variegated reflections of immutable principles. They are like so many modes of spiritual knowing and being and where art is a knowledge of *how* things are made, and works of art are sensible supports for the contemplation of those inner realities that enable man to realize those truths that pertain to his proper nature and last end.

In this early tracing of mythical patterns and symbolic forms Coomaraswamy began a process that he went on to demonstrate with blinding clarity in the rest of his life's work. That is, that the outer vocabulary of forms in works of art are the outward expression of a veiled or hidden wisdom and that, in essence, this wisdom is shared by all the great religions. These early studies in iconography took place against the background of two interrelated attitudes, current then as now, that he detested. One was the method of studying art from a standpoint that more or less ignored the deeper religious and philosophical implications of its content. The other was the art for art's sake attitude in which art was studied as if it were merely a sophisticated diversion played on exclusively aesthetic terms. What he wanted to oppose was the idea that one can read arbitrary, subjective meanings into art rather than strive to understand their true meanings as they relate to man both spiritually and practically at one and the same time.

He wrote:

Let us admit that the greater part of what is taught in the Fine Arts departments of our universities, all of the psychologies of art, all the obscurities of modern aesthetics, are only so much verbiage, only a kind of defense that stands in the way of our understanding of the wholeness of art, at the same time iconographically true and practically useful, that was once to be had in the market place or from any good artist, and that whereas the rhetoric that cares for nothing but the truth is the rule and method of the intellectual arts, our aesthetic is nothing but a false rhetoric, and a flattering of human weakness by which we can only account for the arts that have no other purpose than to please.

It was this “rhetoric that cares for nothing but the truth” and the “intellectual arts” that henceforth were to totally absorb Coomaras-

wamy until the end of his life, a life spent in demonstrating how they were the expression of *tradition*. It is to this idea of tradition that we must now turn.

It was the providential task of Guénon and Coomaraswamy to restore the authentic notion of tradition. Guénon did so mainly by way of expounding, on the basis of the Vedanta, its metaphysical doctrines, and Coomaraswamy mostly by way of showing how such doctrines are embodied in the themes and images of works of art. Strictly speaking, Coomaraswamy came late to the idea of tradition and as a result of having studied the works of Guénon around 1930. His studies up to then of the symbolic and mythical content of art were in effect a study of the means by which tradition is operative in a given religious context.

For our present purposes we can best understand what tradition is by thinking of religion as being the revelation of the sacred to man, and tradition as being the continuity of the *transmission* of this sacred vision in the spiritual, psychological, and practical life of man. When Coomaraswamy speaks, as he so often does, of a traditional society or of the *normal* view of art, he has in mind a society which is founded upon and orientated towards those first principles of knowing and being that are ultimately rooted in the sacred. That is to say the transcendent principle of the One is the ultimate measure of truth in all human thought and action. About this there could be no argument or disproof. As he wrote:

All tradition proposes means dispositive to absolute experience. Whoever does not care to employ these means is in no position to deny that the proposed procedure can lead, as asserted, to a principle that is precisely . . . no thing and no where, at the same time that it is the source of all things everywhere. What is most repugnant to the nominalist is the fact that granted a possibility of absolute experience, no rational demonstration could be offered in the classroom, no "experimental control" is possible.

Coomaraswamy is not arguing here, and in similar passages, that tradition surpasses religion in any way. All his work demonstrates otherwise; that tradition is concerned with the *maintenance* of what is at the core of a religion and so in this measure is dependent upon religion. So, in the widest sense tradition is the language of the Spirit and in so far as each religion addresses portions of the human race at different times, places, and according to circumstances, so tradition is made up of many dialects that form a universal language. This

universal language of the Spirit, unanimous in its acknowledgment of the one supreme and absolute principle came to be called by the traditionalist writers who followed Guénon and Coomaraswamy, the perennial philosophy. It was Coomaraswamy's great gift to articulate this philosophy by means of works of the most exacting scholarship, a scholarship that challenges the modern intelligentsia with its own weapons. As Martin Lings has written:

It is as if he (Coomaraswamy) had said, you have asked for scholarship and nothing but that, so let us have it, but let it be the real thing, in fullness and in depth, not merely a surface smattering.

Coomaraswamy's scholarship, in other words, is not meant to demonstrate tradition to be the mere history of what men have believed, one after the other, at various times and places. It is much more than this. It is the presentation of an "all embracing metaphysics or science of first principles and of the true nature of reality." As such it represents a sufficient demonstration or *vision* of reality whereas the religion to which it is attached forms the *way* to the verification of this vision in actual experience. Plato, faced with the inexplicable wonder of existence, thought that the best we could do to explain it was to come up with the most likely story. Coomaraswamy, in answer to Aldous Huxley's question as to why he thought tradition was *the truth*, replied, because its "self-authenticating intelligibility explains more things than are explained elsewhere."

The underlying eternal truth of the body of principles and doctrines that are called the perennial philosophy or *sophia perennis* is, as Coomaraswamy says, "always and everywhere the same whatever form it may take." In the words of Augustine, so often quoted by Coomaraswamy, these doctrines are the philosophy of a "wisdom that was not made, the same now that it was and ever shall be." Now in so far as anything is created it is intelligible. That is to say it is informed by this divine wisdom or *Logos*. And this *Logos* (in the terminology of Christianity, Christ, the Son, is the *Logos*) is the intelligible exemplar of all creation.³ The doctrines of the *sophia perennis* are, then, the first principles of a philosophy of the supreme Godhead, the creation and man. Put another way, these doctrines are an account of the One and its passage to or reflections in the Many and then the return of the

³ This is why Eckhart, for instance, lays such stress on the birth of Christ in the soul, and almost no emphasis on the historical Christ.

multiple to a transcendent unity. The supreme principle is the identity of both non-being and all orders of being in the Godhead. This deity has one essence and two natures which together comprise the whole of reality⁴—the One and the All—Creator and creation, from which proceed the two contraries that determine the nature of our existence. As transcendent essence the supreme principle is also the ultimate subject in the experience of being. To unite this ultimate object and ultimate subject in the realization of a state of non-differentiated awareness in which knower and known are one is the final end and perfection of man. This is to know and to see God in so far as humans are able to make such a claim at all.

From the doctrine of the supreme principle as the divine ground of all things, we must move to its natural correlative, the doctrine of the creation, God *in* the many. This is the doctrine of the *Logos* as the divine intelligence at the heart of all created things—for by definition nothing can be outside and beyond the One else it would not be the One. In the final analysis, at the root of all things, there is nothing “different from” or “outside of” the divine Reality. It is the *Logos* that makes possible the analogical correspondence between the spiritual and sensible orders of being. Without this correspondence these two orders of being would, as it were, inhabit disjunct worlds, forever apart from one another. Moreover, the doctrine of the *Logos* entails our seeing the world as a theophany—in Blake’s famous words, often quoted by Coomaraswamy:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.

These axiomatic principles are always assumed by Coomaraswamy—as by all the authorities he quotes—to be incontrovertibly true. They are beyond rational dispute and empirical proof both by what they *confirm* intrinsically and by what they *affirm* extrinsically. They underwrite, both as starting point and as continual orientation, all of Coomaraswamy’s expository analysis. As they are true so they require of us, in the words of the Christian definition of faith, “assent to a credible proposition.” For as Coomaraswamy says:

⁴ “God is both One and All does not mean that the One is two, but that the two are One” (Hermes, Lib. xvi:3)

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.

It is not often enough appreciated that in the modern world religion has a bad name because it is all too often little more than a sentimental subscription to a set of beliefs that have been isolated from any real knowledge worthy of the name—that is, based on the eternal verities—as if belief should function in the absence of a discerning intellectual scrutiny. Coomaraswamy, echoing his sources, always stressed the importance of the need to *know* in order to *believe*, and to *believe* in order to *know*, in order to avoid that condition Heraclitus spoke of: “Most of what is divine escapes recognition through unbelief” (Frag. 86). To which might be added these words by Coomaraswamy:

If Christianity should fail, it is just because its intellectual aspects have been submerged, and it has become a code of ethics rather than a doctrine from which all other applications can and should be derived; hardly two consecutive sentences of some of Meister Eckhart’s sermons would be intelligible to an average modern congregation, which does not expect doctrine, and only expects to be told how to behave.

So, by way of summary so far, one might outline the following archetypal pattern as underlying all human existence and endeavor however it might appear otherwise because of our entanglement with contingent circumstances.

The world of becoming—that is, the world of created things—is the outward expression or manifestation of God who, in proceeding to be many, sacrifices his essential oneness in order to be known. In so far as he is of the created world man is “other” than God. But in so far as he shares in the One he is created in God’s image. As God’s image he is called upon to know God by acting as the “reflector” of God’s consciousness (such terms are obviously analogical). That is, he imitates God, in virtue of his deiformity, by reflecting inversely the original sacrifice. He must, in other words, sacrifice multiplicity in order to realize and return to the primordial unity. In Coomaraswamy’s words:

The sacrifice undertaken here below is a ritual mimesis of what was done by the Gods in the beginning. . . , (it) reflects the myth, but like all

reflections inverts it. What has been a process of generation and division becomes now one of regeneration and composition.

In this passage “in the beginning” (*in principio*, or *in divinis*) means in the first principle. The sacrifice, which is a dismembering of God, is made in order to liberate the possibilities dormant in the divine substance. By means of this generation and division of the One so the many worlds are created, otherwise there would be no worlds—spiritual or sensible.

But what is dismembered must be remembered: that is remembering in the Platonic sense of *recollection*. In order to restore our humanity to its divine prototype a “slaying” or “self-naughting” of that part of us that is “other” than God, the psycho-physical self, is required as a sacrifice. Remember Christ’s words at the Feast of the Eucharist: “This do in remembrance of Me.”

So, as Coomaraswamy concludes:

This conception of the Sacrifice as an incessant operation and the sum of man’s duty finds its completion in a series of texts in which each and every function of the active life, down to our very breathing, eating, drinking and dalliance are sacramentally interpreted and death is nothing but the final catharsis. And that is finally the famous “Way of Works” of the Bhagavad Gita, where to fulfill one’s own vocation, determined by one’s own nature, without self referent motives, is the way of perfection.

In this passage the “texts” Coomaraswamy refers to are Hindu and Buddhist. But one of the recurrent demonstrations of his work is to show that this interpretation is essentially applicable to Platonic, Hermetic and Christian texts also. For instance, referring to those who, by the exercise of their vocation, traverse the field of becoming which is mortal life, in order to achieve their portion of perfection, the Biblical *Book of Wisdom* says, “They will maintain the fabric of the world; and in the handiwork of their craft is their prayer.”

Since it is impossible here to deal with the whole range of Coomaraswamy’s work, we might best use the remaining space to deal with two themes that follow on connaturally from the doctrines we have dealt with so far. These are the doctrine of the two selves and the traditional or “normal” doctrine of art.

As Coomaraswamy’s scholarly writings demonstrate, the doctrine of the two selves is fundamental to all religions. Without it there could hardly be a religion since there would be no “platform” or “arena” for

the dynamic of spiritual action to be played out. The whole notion of sacrifice as a spiritual attainment implies the conquering of our outer self by a superior inner self—an outer empirical self to be guided according to the illumination of an inner, spiritual Self. Without the *reality* that this doctrine expounds such phrases as “self-control” and “know oneself,” let alone the injunction, “the Kingdom of Heaven is within you,” would be utterly meaningless—as indeed they are to a world that will not distinguish noumenal from phenomenal reality.

There are, then, two in man—the individual self (psyche or soul) and the divine Self (pneuma or spirit), the Self of all selves. To quote Coomaraswamy again:

Of these two “selves,” the outer and inner man, psycho-physical “personality” and very Person, the human composite of body, soul and spirit is built up. Of these two, on the one hand, body and soul (or mind), and on the other, spirit, one is mutable and mortal, the other constant and immortal; the one “becomes” the other “is,” and the existence of the one that is *not* [italics ours], but becomes, is precisely a “personification” or “postulation” since we cannot say of anything that never remains the same that “it is.” And however necessary it is to say “I” and “mine” for the practical purposes of everyday life, our Ego in fact is nothing but a name for what is really only a sequence of observed behavior.

In this characteristic passage that situates the psychophysical personality on a level of relative unimportance you will begin to see why Coomaraswamy, as a matter of *principle*, showed little or no interest in biographical matters. He never tired of drawing attention to the impermanence of this outer self or ego. In this he was no doubt fueled by a world accustomed to view man as more or less a congeries of energies and appetites and little else. It is this self, the self of “wants” but not “needs,” that is the great burden of modern society.

It can come as something of a shock to discover Coomaraswamy’s vehemence in denouncing the personal ego. But in all he did he could quote a multitude of traditional sources to confirm the orthodoxy and authenticity of his conclusion. To quote him again:

In the words of Eckhart, “Holy scripture cries aloud for freedom from self.” In this unanimous and universal teaching, which affirms an absolute liberty and autonomy, spatial and temporal, attainable as well here and now as anywhere else, this treasured “personality” of ours is at once a prison and a fallacy, from which the Truth shall set you free: a prison because all definition limits that which is defined, and a fallacy because in this ever-changing composite and corruptible psycho-physical “per-

sonality” it is impossible to grasp a constant, and impossible therefore to recognize any authentic or “real” substance. . . . In so far as man is merely a “reasoning and mortal animal,” tradition is in agreement with the modern determinist in affirming that “this man,” so-and-so, has neither free will nor any element of immortality. . . . Tradition, however, departs from science by replying to the man who confesses himself to be only the reasoning and mortal animal, that he has “forgotten who he is” . . . requires of him to “know thyself,” and warns him, “If thou knowest not thyself, begone.”

But when Coomaraswamy states quite categorically “there is no one that acts or inherits,” we must move to a cosmic frame of reference to understand the “absoluteness” of the denial. We are back at the level of the One and the Many. Hence, as Coomaraswamy explains:

There is no death of anyone save in appearances only, even as there is no birth of anyone, but in appearance only. For when anything turns away from its Essence to assume a nature there is the notion of “birth,” and in the same way when it turns away from the nature, to the Essence, there is the notion of a “death,” but in truth there is neither a coming into being nor a destruction of any essence, but it is only manifest at one time and invisible at another.

The manifestation and invisibility are due respectively to the density of the material assumed on the one hand, and to the tenuity of the essence on the other.

It is clear from this passage that the impermanent, outer self or ego must be seen as a “created accident” of the divine essence that alone is permanent. Coomaraswamy drew upon the whole range of scriptural texts and traditional teachings to underpin his demonstration of the universality of the doctrine of man’s perfectibility by way of attaining to his inner, divine self—spirit, not *psyche* (soul). For in the traditional philosophy “the soul is as much as the body a thing that becomes, according to the food it assimilates.”

For instance, a text such as Augustine’s “things that are not immutable are not at all,” among many others, might be used by Coomaraswamy to authorize his claim that “what we call our consciousness is nothing but a process.” And Eckhart’s “the kingdom of heaven is for none but the thoroughly dead,” as Coomaraswamy points out, is yet another elliptical way of saying that no soul, as a thing that is still becoming, can subsist in the purity and permanence of Heaven. For had not St. John said, “no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven.” No nature returns to essence as a

nature, but must first put on the ungenerated perfection of essence. Such purity is made necessary by the transcendent perfection of the divine essence that is beyond Being itself. As Coomaraswamy puts it—making use again of Eckhart—“man’s last end is to be ‘as free as the Godhead in its non-existence’.”

Now this spiritual drama that is the sacrifice of the ego for the sake of attaining the divine self is not fought out in some specially set aside department of life. It is the living of life itself. It is nothing less than our proper vocation as human beings. If it is not fought out at the very heart of all our thinking and doing it will not be accomplished at all. And here we must deal with our final theme, that of art or right livelihood.

Coomaraswamy’s scholarship is nothing if not an overwhelming demonstration that the traditional view of art is in almost every respect the opposite of the modern. It is in this area that Coomaraswamy makes his most radical challenge to the modern mentality.

In its traditional conception art does not refer to that select category of aesthetic creations set apart from the customary activities of daily life. Here, art is not the thing made, it is the innate principle that stays in the artist. It is the habit of the practical intellect that determines how a thing or action should be brought to its own perfection. In this sense art is not a sort of superior delectation—but is concerned with integrating outward activities with internally realizable states of being and truth. Art therefore serves as a support for contemplation. Again we come back to the notion of man imitating God. Here it is a case of the human artist imitating the divine artificer. As God, the supreme artist, creates the world by outwardly manifesting His inner divine substance, so the artist conceives inwardly, as an image, what it is he must make. Then by the operative habit of his art he fashions that image outwardly in some material substance. To the extent that the artist is able to reduce to a minimum the difference between inwardly conceiving and outwardly executing, so he draws closer to the perfect instantaneity by which God makes the world—and which He saw was Good! Such perfect integration as the human artist is capable of entails mastery over the idiosyncrasies and defects of his outer personality. In other words art (or work)—there is no real distinction in this context—are a form of prayer, as Coomaraswamy never tired of pointing out.

It would be almost impossible to overemphasize the contrast between the modern conception of the artist as a special sort of person, and the traditional conception in which *every* person is an artist and

all work is sacrificial—a “making sacred”—a type of ritual action or performance. The classic statement of the traditional conception of art and work as precisely human vocation comes in the Bhagavad Gita—though Coomaraswamy did confirm the universal application of the same thesis from Platonic, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist and other sources. He translates the passage in the Gita as follows:

Man reaches perfection (or success) by his loving devotion to his own work. . . . And now hear how it is that he who is thus devoted to his own task finds this perfection. It is inasmuch as by this work that is his own he is praising Him from whom all beings (or, all his powers) are projected, and by whom all this (Universe) is extended. More resplendent is one’s own law, however imperfectly fulfilled, than that of another, however well carried out. Whoever does not abandon the task that his own nature imposes upon him incurs no sin. . . . One’s hereditary . . . task should never be forsaken, whatever its defects may be; for every business is clouded with defects, as fire is clouded by smoke.

In order to show the universality of this doctrine we might quote from the Christian tradition, this fragment from Epicharmus of Syracuse:

The divine Logos accompanies all the acts, itself teaching men what they must do for their advantage; for no man has discovered any art but it is always God.

Since the passage from the Gita emphasizes the function of the artist in the wider social context, we might end by quoting a passage that is not only a summary of a good deal of scholarly research by Coomaraswamy, but also refers intimately to the theme of the two selves in the actual operation of art.

In the production of anything made by art, or the exercise of any art, two faculties, respectively imaginative and operative, free and servile, are simultaneously involved; the former consisting in the conception of some idea in an imitable form, the latter in the imitation . . . of this invisible model . . . in some material, which is thus in-formed. Imitation, the distinctive character of all the arts, is accordingly two-fold, on the one hand the work of intellect . . . and on the other of the hands. . . . These two aspects of the creative activity correspond to the “two in us,” viz. our spiritual or intellectual Self and sensitive psycho-physical Ego, working together. . . . The integration of the work of art will depend upon the extent to which the Ego is able and willing to serve

the Self, or if the patron and the workman are two different persons, upon the measure of their mutual understanding.

Obviously nothing could be further from the way in which art is understood and practiced in the modern world. Today the artist works as if it were more or less impossible to serve spiritual needs in and through the material and practical life of everyday. The modern artist, set aside from the mass of society, thinks of art as the expression of his personality—a private invention or fabrication which demonstrates his originality and uniqueness. In such circumstances he must always feel the lash of that tyrant innovation—be “different” or be ignored. All this Coomaraswamy called abnormal for the very reason that it does not, ultimately, correspond to the nature of reality, and so does not correspond immediately to the needs of man himself in the wholeness and integrity of his material and spiritual nature. As Coomaraswamy never tired of demonstrating by the sheer cognitive power of his scholarship, as well as the rhetorical strength of his argument, normal art belongs to a type of culture where the practice of art is the treading of a path towards freedom from that very self or ego that is the almost sole preoccupation of modern culture. All the force of traditional philosophy, as he said, “is directed against the delusion ‘I am the doer’.” “I” am not in fact the doer but the instrument; human individuality is not an end but only a means.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

JEAN BORELLA taught philosophy at the University of Nancy II in France until 1995. From a Platonist foundation, he became immersed in the thought of Guénon and Eastern metaphysics. His work has been in the field of theology, religious ideas and symbolism. He is the author of several works including *Ésotérisme guénonien et mystère Chrétien* and *La Crise du symbolisme religieux*.

WILLIAM C. CHITTICK is one of the most important contemporary translators and interpreters of Islamic mystical texts and poetry. He is a professor in the Department of Comparative Studies at the State University of New York, Stony Brook. Among his publications are *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi*, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-'Arabī's Cosmology*, and *Me and Rumi*.

RAMA P. COOMARASWAMY, son of the renowned Perennialist writer Ananda Coomaraswamy, received his early education in India in an orthodox Hindu setting. He embraced Catholicism as an adult and remains to this day one of the most forceful exponents of traditional Christian teachings. He is the author of *The Destruction of the Christian Tradition* and *The Problems with the New Mass*.

CHARLES LE GAI EATON was born in Switzerland and educated at Charterhouse and King's College, Cambridge. He worked for many years as a teacher and journalist in Jamaica and Egypt (where he embraced Islam in 1951) before joining the British Diplomatic Service. He is now consultant to the Islamic Cultural Centre in London. He is the author of *Islam and the Destiny of Man*, *King of the Castle* and *Remembering God: Reflections on Islam*.

RENÉ GUÉNON was a writer of extraordinary power and insight—in the early decades of the 20th century, it was Guénon who reintroduced the importance and necessity of integral metaphysics to thinkers in the West, and who delivered scathing indictments of the pomp and hollowness of much of modernism. Traditionalists and Perennialists everywhere tend to view Guénon's writings as having had a profound and critical influence on their thinking. He died in 1951.

BRIAN KEEBLE has long been devoted to the promulgation of the traditional arts and his best known book is *Art: For Whom and For What?* He is the founder of Golgonooza Press and co-founder of Temenos

Academy, a teaching organization dedicated to the same central idea that had inspired the earlier *Temenos Academy Review* (a journal devoted to the arts of the Imagination).

PATRICK LAUDE is the author of numerous works dealing with the relationship between mysticism, symbolism and literature. His works include *Approches du Quiétisme* and *Massignon intérieur*. He is the co-editor of *Dossier H: Frithjof Schuon* and *Music of the Sky*, and the co-author—with Jean-Baptiste Aymard—of *Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teachings*. He is currently Professor of French at Georgetown University.

MARTIN LINGS was an author, editor, translator, and specialist in Islamic art and esoterism. Dr. Lings taught for many years at the University of Cairo before becoming Keeper of Oriental Manuscripts at the British Library. The author of numerous books including *The Eleventh Hour, Symbol and Archetype*, and *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*, he was an authority on tradition and on Sufism in particular. He died in 2005.

RUSMIR MAHMUTĆEHAJIĆ is one of Bosnia's leading public intellectuals. He was elected Vice President of the Bosnia-Herzegovina Government in 1991 and played a critical role in attempts to gain international recognition for Bosnia-Herzegovina, but resigned from all government functions at the end of 1993, in protest against the acceptance by the political establishment that Bosnia should be divided into ethnic parts. He is the founder of International Forum Bosnia, a non-government organization that brings together the leading intellectuals in the effort to create and strengthen a civil society founded on dialogue and trust, human rights and the rule of law. He is the author of numerous works in Bosnian on traditional subjects and his recent books, *Bosnia the Good: Tolerance and Tradition* and *Sarajevo Essays* are available in English.

ALVIN MOORE, JR. was an author and translator of traditional works especially concerning Orthodox Christianity. A director of the Foundation for Traditional Studies in the USA, Alvin Moore, Jr. was a resident of New Mexico. He died in 2005.

FRITHJOF SCHUON is best known as the foremost spokesman of the Perennial Philosophy and as a philosopher in the metaphysical current of Shankara and Plato. Over the past 50 years, he has written more than 20 books on metaphysical, spiritual and ethnic themes as well as having been a regular contributor to journals on comparative religion in both Europe and America. Schuon's writings have been consistently

featured and reviewed in a wide range of scholarly and philosophical publications around the world, respected by both scholars and spiritual authorities. He died in 1998.

TIMOTHY SCOTT was awarded his doctorate by La Trobe University (Australia) for his thesis, *Symbolism of the Ark*. His work has appeared in the Traditionalist anthology, *The Betrayal of Tradition* and the University of Sydney anthology, *Esotericism and the Control of Knowledge*. His interests include traditional metaphysics, cosmology, and esoteric sciences within the Western tradition.

HUSTON SMITH is a revered philosopher, lecturer and author. A religious scholar who has dedicated his life to studying mysticism and religion, Smith has taught religion and philosophy at MIT, Syracuse University, Washington University, and the University of California Berkeley. His books include *Why Religion Matters*, *The World's Religions* and *The Forgotten Truth*. A five-part PBS special, "The Wisdom of Faith with Huston Smith," was devoted to his life and work.

WOLFGANG SMITH is a noted scientist and author whose writings represent a unique encounter between contemporary science and metaphysical tradition. After a brilliant career in the sciences which included graduating at age 18 from Cornell University with a B.A. in mathematics, physics, and philosophy, he acquired a taste for Plato and the Neoplatonists, and sojourned in India to gain acquaintance with the Vedantic tradition. Later he devoted himself to the study of theology, and began his career as a Catholic metaphysical author. Besides contributing numerous articles to scholarly journals, Dr. Smith has authored four books: *Cosmos and Transcendence*, *Teilhardism and the New Religion*, *The Quantum Enigma*, and *The Wisdom of Ancient Cosmology*.

NOTES ON EDITORS

SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR is University Professor of Islamic Studies at the George Washington University and President of the Foundation for Traditional Studies. The author of over fifty books and five hundred articles, he is one of the world's most respected writers and speakers on Islam, its arts and sciences, and its traditional mystical path, Sufism. His publications include *Sufi Essays, Knowledge and the Sacred, Religion and the Order of Nature, A Young Muslim's Guide to the Modern World, The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity*, and *Islam: Religion, History, and Civilization*. A volume in the prestigious *Library of Living Philosophers* series has been dedicated to his thought.

KATHERINE O'BRIEN has worked, as executive director of the Foundation for Traditional Studies, to promote better understanding of traditional civilizations and religions through publications, international conferences, and the arts. She is the co-editor of *In Quest of the Sacred* and editor of the journal *Sophia*.

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Jean Borella
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Rama P. Coomaraswamy
Charles Le Gai Eaton
René Guénon
Brian Keeble
Patrick Laude
Martin Lings

Rusmir Mahmutćehajić
Alvin Moore, Jr.
Seyyed Hossein Nasr
Frithjof Schuon
Timothy Scott
Huston Smith
Wolfgang Smith

