

# The one and only true path

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Seek ye wisdom, even if it be in China! (*Hadith*)

There are as many paths towards God as there are human souls. (Sufi adage)

Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord. (*Shema*)

If the idea of “crossing religious frontiers” is to mean more than some kind of well-meaning but superficial “tolerance,” or merely an invitation to “spiritual tourism,” then we need to find a common ground on which authentic dialogue may take place. It is only at a level that transcends accidental forms or expressions that commonalities can safely be said to be more than similarities. It is just such a common ground that Frithjof Schuon had in mind when he spoke of the “transcendent unity of religion.” Put simply, the various religions each refer to the one and unique Divine Object through their diverse and subjective modes of contemplation and expression. The diverse expressions and dogmas are absolutely true, not because they reduce the Absolute to a given relative aspect of the Real, but because they reveal the Absolute Truth in subjective mode. In the language of Sufism the Transcendent Unity (*al-Aḥadiyah*) is said to be beyond all distinctive knowledge; however, the Divine Unicity (*al-Wāḥidiyah*) appears in the differentiated just as principal distinctions appear in it. To talk of Unicity is to talk of the archetypal realm, wherein reside the unique realities, or essences, which universally inform the various expressions of the religions. The archetypal realm is thus the true common ground of the diverse religions. Unicity is a long way from the mere appearance of similarity between individual forms.

The “transcendent unity of religion” is also referred to as the “underlying unity of religion,” a phrase that has the virtue of describing

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the sense in which each religion is built upon a single “ground.” Meister Eckhart describes this *Grund* as ‘the quiet desert, into which distinction never gazed ... a simple silence, in itself immovable, and by this immovability all things are moved, all life is received by those who in themselves have rational being’.<sup>1</sup> Schuon’s phrase has the virtue of recognising that this unformed ground is not ontologically “inferior”<sup>2</sup> to the formal manifestations it gives rise to, by dint of recognising that this unity transcends the formal domain.

The metaphysical expression of the transcendent and underlying reality which unites all religions is found in the *sophia perennis*. This “eternal wisdom” is in turn the “Wisdom of the Eternal.” The value of engaging with this wisdom may be variously recognised: for the present let us consider three points of merit.

First, and by far foremost, is the merit of seeking to know the Eternal Truth. This seeking aims at the ultimate entelechy of the human state, that is, that one should know God and in knowing God that one should love God. Let it be said that an engagement with the *Sophia Perennis* (the use of the proper noun here is deliberate) in no way requires recourse to comparative recognition of other religions, nor for that matter does it require knowledge of other religions beyond one’s own. The *Sophia Perennis* is true and accessible within each authentic religion according to the internal integrity of that religion. Moreover, it is a gross confusion to think that knowledge of the *sophia perennis* gained through practice of one’s unique religion equates to formal knowledge of other religions. That is to say, and this seems obvious, one may climb to the summit of one’s religion without being granted information about the paths which constitute the other religions.

The second merit arises from the therapeutic effect that an encounter with truth as expressed in another tradition can have upon that seeker who has become “blind” to truth within their own tradition. This blindness can arise because of various reasons, but the sad fact is that this is most often the numbing result of mundane familiarity. The recognition of a truth in a “foreign” religion can awaken and revivify the

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<sup>1</sup> Meister Eckhart, Sermon 48, tr. E. Colledge, O.S.A. & B. McGinn, *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defence*, Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1981, p.198.

<sup>2</sup> In the sense that one might be tempted to say that potentially is inferior to actuality—an unsatisfactory comparison; or, to highlight this more clearly, in the sense that a plan of a building might be considered inferior to the actual building.

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dormant understanding of an element of one's own religion, which is then more efficacious (than the foreign religion) in terms of one's journey precisely because of its familiarity.

The third merit of engaging with the *sophia perennis*—one that has great immediacy in this age of the meeting of religions—is that we may recognise the Truth in different forms; that is to say, that we may recognise God in our neighbour's belief and religion, and in recognising and knowing God in our neighbour that we should love our neighbour as our self.



It is not uncommon to find those who confuse the idea of the *sophia perennis* with a program of syncretic and reductionistic comparative religion; that is to say, who mistake the *sophia perennis* for the recognition of external similarities between the religions. No doubt this type of comparative religion exists; this is particularly evident within academia. This type of comparative religion is least satisfactory where it becomes little more than the cataloguing of similarities—regardless of if they are accidental or essential—which are then explained away exclusively in terms of historical “borrowings.”

The other error one encounters in understandings of the *sophia perennis* is that it somehow constitutes a formal “religion” in and of itself, above and beyond the recognised world religions: that it is a meta- or uber-religion. No doubt there have been some “practitioners” who have thought to privilege themselves above the “simply religious” by declaring themselves adherents of a “religion of the *sophia perennis*.” In turn, it is a not an uncommon error among academics to imagine this to be the vision espoused by the likes of Schuon and René Guénon, who are commonly associated with the *sophia perennis*.<sup>3</sup> However, an informed reading of the so-called “perennialist” corpus reveals the warnings against imagining the *sophia perennis* to be a new religion and

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<sup>3</sup> Schuon is accused of this pretence, albeit in my experience those who have made this criticism have been unfamiliar with his thought in general and his writings on this issue in particular. Moreover, there seems to be a tendency to confuse criticism of a particular person's application of an idea with the idea itself, so that these critics seem to think that *if* a Schuon had succumbed to the pretence of a meta-religion (which is far from saying that this was in fact the case!) that this *ipso facto* discredits the idea of the *sophia perennis* as such.

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the emphasis placed upon the need to fully and authentically participate in an orthodox religious tradition.

To talk of full and authentic participation in an orthodox religious tradition is not necessarily the same as saying that one may not engage in a practice of another tradition, where one is able to recognise the essential truth of the practice and where the practice does not contradict the formal and theological strictures of one's own religion. Thus, for example, a Christian may practice *salāt*—considered in a general sense<sup>4</sup>—with a Muslim, for there is nothing contradictory for the Christian in offering prayer to the Greatness of God through prostration. However, a Muslim would no doubt find participation in the Christian Eucharist contradictory to their fundamental conception of Jesus. Of course these comments are offered as generalisations and it is theoretically possible that a Muslim, such as Ibn al-‘Arabī, might have been able, within himself, to accept the Eucharist inasmuch as he was able to recognise Jesus as the ‘Word of God, the Spirit of God, and the slave of God’ saying that ‘such a manifestation in sensible form belongs to no other’.<sup>5</sup> But here it is probably best to say that ‘God knows best.’<sup>6</sup>



It may well be asked why one would engage in a practice from a “foreign” religion if the comprehensive integrity of one's own religion deemed this superfluous? In the first place, one might participate in the religious practice of another out of due respect for that individual or even out of respect for the culture that one might perchance find oneself in. The cynic may wish to dismiss this as simply a case of “manners”—as if having manners where not worthy of praise in and of itself! However, the high regard that proper manners, and in particular

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<sup>4</sup> In a more specific sense we may find the Christian balk at the recognition of Muhammad as “the Prophet of God”; nevertheless, Christianity *does* recognise other prophets, and there are Christians who reconcile Muhammad in this sense.

<sup>5</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Fusus*: ‘Chapter on Jesus,’ tr. R. Austin, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1980, p178.

<sup>6</sup> The cynic will no doubt see in this saying, so popular in Islam and rooted in the Qur’an (6:124; 11:33), an attempt to “avoid the question”; however, far from this I here intend precision. Let me be clear: the situation we are considering is possible, precisely because it is a spiritual possibility and in God ‘all things are possible’; the legitimacy of such a particular case may only be judged according to the understanding and sincerity of the individual's heart, and this only God knows (Qur’an 27:67).

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the practice of hospitality to strangers,<sup>7</sup> had (and has) in traditional cultures worldwide is rooted in more than a simple idea of social cohesion. Rather the various practices of manners find their meaning in the charitable recognition of the divine in the other. This is precisely “charitable” in the sense of the Christian *caritas*, the love of all others held to be the ultimate perfection of the human spirit, glorifying and reflecting the nature of God. The self-sacrificial nature of *caritas* means that one may generously share in the experience of a neighbour’s religious practice, and this regardless of the question of discrimination, for the higher virtue is not that one might be able to pass judgment on one’s neighbour’s practice (correct or otherwise),<sup>8</sup> but that one may recognise God in their intention and love, and honour both one’s neighbour and God in this. Thus respect and manners are elevated to the level of the knowledge of the divine Unity.<sup>9</sup>

A second possibility arises from the “vagaries” of the individual’s natural disposition. Each religion is comprised of essential and accidental elements. The essential elements provide the means to Realisation and Union with the Divine, which are the *raison d’être* of the religion; they also define the religion by excluding other formal possibilities.<sup>10</sup> The accidental elements act as supports, so to speak, and are contingent upon the disposition and need of the individual. Thus, to consider the Abrahamic religions: it is essential for the Jew to profess the *Shema*, the Christian to profess Jesus Christ and the Muslim to profess the

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<sup>7</sup> In the Judaic tradition Abraham’s entertainment of the three strangers at the Oak of Mamre is the epitome of hospitality (Genesis 8:1-8); Noah is also recognised for his charitable acts on the Ark (*Midrash Tanchuma*, Genesis 8:16); hospitality is also a key element of Arabic *adab* (etiquette). It is worth mentioning that this is an important theme in the *Odyssey*, and that Zeus was not only the head of the Greek pantheon but also the “protector of wayfarers.”

<sup>8</sup> Of course as St. Augustine says, ‘Charity is no substitute for justice withheld,’ and there is great virtue in remedying error; still, what I have in mind here is a matter of submission to right intention.

<sup>9</sup> Titus Burckhardt: ‘Charity is to recognise the eternal Word in creatures’ (*Études Traditionnelles*, 1953, p.174); Schuon: ‘Love of one’s neighbour receives all its meaning through the love of God’ (*Esoterism as Principle and Way*, Middlesex: Perennial Books, 1981, p.153).

<sup>10</sup> Schuon: ‘A religion is a form, and so also a limit, which “contains” the Limitless, to speak in paradox; every form is fragmentary because of the necessary formal exclusion of other possibilities; the fact that these forms ... each in their own way represent totality does not prevent them from being fragmentary in respect of their particularisation and reciprocal exclusion’ (*Understanding Islam*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1976, p.144).

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*Shahadah*. It is accidental that an individual of any of these religions might find spiritual support in, for example, the poverty and silence of asceticism, or the reflective practice of meditation, or the hieratic beauty and awe of sacred art, or the symbolism and anagogic power of ritual. Thus, with respect to the individual, one may, for example, be a Christian in terms of essential belief and practice, who, according to natural disposition, is supported in one's "sense of the sacred" by the beauty of religious art and even art that is not culturally Christian.

This raises the spectre of idolatry, particularly in light of the fourth commandment. However, here we must distinguish between idolatry and the intellectual and transformative participation with beauty that is rightly anagogic. As Ananda Coomaraswamy observes, 'seeing that God alone is truly beautiful, and all other beauty is by participation, it is only a work of art that has been wrought, in its kind (*idea*) and its significance (*dynamis*), after an eternal model, that can be called beautiful.'<sup>11</sup> Coomaraswamy highlights the following insight from Dionysius the Areopagite, which is fundamental in its influence on the Mediaeval theory of Beauty: 'The beautiful and beauty are indivisible in their cause, which embraces All in One.'<sup>12</sup> The Areopagite also says: 'The Beautiful is therefore the same as the Good, for everything looks to the Beautiful and the Good as the cause of being, and there is nothing in the world without a share of the Beautiful and the Good.'<sup>13</sup> Therefore, according to one's aesthetic intuition and natural disposition towards supra-formal Beauty, one may find in the art or ritual of a foreign religion support for spiritual contemplation. Here it is important to remark that this is not to be confused with profane aestheticism. As Schuon remarks, 'sacred art ignores the aesthetic aim; its beauty arises above all from its spiritual truth and so from the exactitude of its symbolism and from its usefulness for purposes of ritual and contemplation, and only secondarily from the imponderables of

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<sup>11</sup> A. Coomaraswamy, 'A Figure of Speech, or a Figure of Thought?' in *Figures of Speech, or Figures of Thought? The Traditional View of Art*, ed. W. Wroth, Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2007, p.12. Coomaraswamy in turn cites Plato, *Timaeus* 28 AB. See also 'The Mediaeval Theory of Art' and 'Imitation, Expression, and Participation,' both in this edition.

<sup>12</sup> *De divinis nominibus* 4.5 (701c). Colin Luibheid's translation has: 'But do not make a distinction between "beautiful" and "beauty" as applied to the Cause which gathers all into one' (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987, p.76).

<sup>13</sup> *De divinis nominibus* 4.5 (704B), tr. Luibheid.

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personal intuition'.<sup>14</sup> This talk of “exactitude of symbolism” and ritual “usefulness” does not necessarily entail conceptual knowledge. As Schuon said of himself, ‘For me visual assimilation came before conceptual assimilation.’<sup>15</sup> The disposition towards the sacred art of “foreign” religions, which may included dress, ritual and other forms, is thus not only acceptable but may even be profitable in terms of establishing an ambience of interiorizing beauty complementary to the ‘imponderables of personal intuition.’

A third reason why one might engage in a practice from a “foreign” religion resides in the profound recognition of the essential unity of forms. Thus, having been granted such a realisation, the person engages in the various practices not for the consequence that they can bring about—which that person has already attained—but for the glory of God which resides in each form, and simultaneously as a means to praise Diversity in its totality, which is an image of the Divine Infinitude. This is to say that such a person (and we are talking of a exception to the norm) would engage wholeheartedly in the religion of their calling as a way to and a means of glorifying the Divine Unity, while concurrently declaring and participating in (where the opportunity occasioned) “foreign” religious practices as a glorification of the Absolute as Infinite.



In all this we are considering the question in the abstract; that is to say, we are considering *possibilities* that are inherent in the human condition, privileged, as it is in all traditions, by the capacity to know God both as Object and Subject. But considering “universalist” possibilities is far from advocating universalism as the norm or, for that matter, proposing universalism as a spiritual method.

From the perspective of the formal integrity of a particular religion the real issue might be summed up by the question: Are we to have orthodoxy? Undoubtedly we must. Yet this demands that we understand the meaning of “orthodoxy” beyond the mere idea of conventional or institutional “tradition.” The adherent of a religion

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<sup>14</sup> F. Schuon, ‘Principles and Criteria of Art’ in *Language of the Self*, Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1999, pp.80-81.

<sup>15</sup> Letter to Marco Pallis, June 8, 1982.

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turns to orthodoxy as the arbiter of truth without necessarily questioning the criteria by which such and such a belief has been deemed orthodox.<sup>16</sup> Here we must recognise that institutional “orthodoxy” is proclaimed by humans, and that this allows for idiosyncrasies that are not necessarily coherent with Truth, according to the understanding and motivation of the individuals involved. Such transgressions aside, orthodoxy is founded on two essential principles which can appear contradictory but which never are: Revelation and Truth. Truth is synonymous with the *Sophia Perennis*. Again, Guénon observes that the “necessary and sufficient condition” of orthodoxy is the ‘concordance of a conception with the fundamental principle of the tradition’.<sup>17</sup> This “principle” is none other than the *Sophia Perennis*, as expressed by the particular Revelation.

The purpose of each orthodox revelation is the soteriological—or liberating—communication of Truth. Here Schuon remarks:

Seeing that there is but one truth, must we not conclude that there is but one Revelation, one sole Tradition possible? To this our answer is, first of all, that Truth and Revelation are not absolutely equivalent terms, since Truth is situated beyond forms, whereas revelation, or the Tradition which derives from it, belongs to the formal order, and that indeed by definition; but to speak of form is to speak of diversity, and so of plurality; the grounds for the existence and nature of form are expression, limitation, differentiation. What enters into form, thereby enters also into number, hence into repetition and diversity; the formal principle—inspired by the infinity of the divine Possibility—confers diversity on this repetition.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Putting aside the question of *sola scriptura* as this pertains to certain evangelical movements, which nevertheless take scripture as orthodoxy. The issue of orthodoxy and movements such as Pentecostalism and the neo-charismatics raises questions that go beyond our general considerations.

<sup>17</sup> Guénon, *Man and his becoming*, New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint, 1981, p.15.

<sup>18</sup> Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, Middlesex: Perennial Books, 1990, p.25. Again, Meister Eckhart: ‘...everything that falls away from the One, the First of all things, immediately falls into two and into the other numbers by means of duality’ (*Commentary on Genesis* prop.26).



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Diversity is a metaphysical necessity of Creation; diversity of revelation is God's merciful recognition of man's remoteness, separation and isolation.

The idea of the diversity of religions can appear to be irreconcilable with the dogmatic nature of orthodoxy. For Schuon the resolution is found in understanding the purpose of dogma:

Intrinsically "orthodox" dogmas, that is, those disposed in view of salvation, differ from one religion to another; consequently they cannot all be objectively true. However, all dogmas are symbolically true and subjectively efficacious, which is to say that their purpose is to create human attitudes that contribute in their way to the divine miracle of salvation.<sup>19</sup>

The diversity of religions 'far from proving the falseness of all the doctrines concerning the supernatural, shows on the contrary the supra-formal character of revelation and the formal character of the ordinary human understanding: the essences of revelation—or enlightenment—is one, but human nature requires diversity.'<sup>20</sup> Elsewhere Schuon remarks that 'what determines the difference among forms of Truth is the difference among human receptacles.'<sup>21</sup> Coomaraswamy recalls the following Indian saying, 'He takes the forms that are imagined by His worshippers.'<sup>22</sup> This recalls Abu 'l-Qasim al-Junayd's famous saying, 'The colour of the water is the colour of the vessel containing it.'<sup>23</sup> Ibn al-'Arabī recognises two kinds of religion, 'the religion of God and those whom God has taught His religion and those whom they have taught and, second, the religion of created beings, which God acknowledges.'<sup>24</sup> He continues to declare that 'It is the servant who

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<sup>19</sup> Schuon, *In The Face of the Absolute*, Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1989, p.110.

<sup>20</sup> Schuon, 'No Activity Without Truth' in J. Needleman ed., *The Sword of Gnosis*, Baltimore: Penguin, 1974, p.4.

<sup>21</sup> Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, p.25.

<sup>22</sup> As per A. Coomaraswamy, 'Sri Ramakrishna and Religious Tolerance' in *Selected Papers* Vol.2: Metaphysics, R. Lipsey ed., New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977, p.36.

<sup>23</sup> Cited in R. A. Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1921, p.159.

<sup>24</sup> Ibn al-'Arabī, *Fusus*: 'Chapter on Jacob' (Austin, p.113). Ibn al-'Arabī observes monasticism as something "created" by Christians, which, nevertheless, 'Since the Wisdom and good apparent in it are in harmony with the divine determination respecting the purpose of revealed Scripture, it is in God's sight as that which He laid down, although *He did not prescribe it for them* [Qur'an 57:27]' (p.114).

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establishes the practice of the religion and God Who determines its nature, for submission is your action and the religion is from your act, since your being blessed may be only through that which is from you yourself. ... All religion is for God, from you not Him, except as being your Origin.’

Religion is from the human inasmuch as it manifests the latent essences of the individual necessary for the miracle of salvation. At the same time Revelation precedes human diversity, inasmuch as Revelation is identified with the cosmogonic Word. Hence, the diverse human collectivities manifest the principal possibility of diversity prefigured *in divinis* by the differentiation between the ‘Absolute as such and the Absolute relativised in view of a dimension of its Infinitude’.<sup>25</sup> This manifestation is necessitated precisely by the Divine will to reveal Itself, which is to say, by Revelation *per se*. The apparent reversal of this relationship at the terrestrial level accords perfectly with the “law of inverse analogy.”

God accepts the limitations of diverse forms as a Mercy granted to the diversity of human receptacles. Nevertheless this limitation is only contingent and God, as He is in Himself, remains unlimited. As Coomaraswamy remarks, ‘Very surely He is not to be thought of as confined by or fully expressed by any of these forms, Who is Himself the single form or every form, and transcendent with respect to each and every form.’<sup>26</sup>



To speak of the “difference of human receptacles” is to recognise distinction both between individuals and between collectivities. Humanity may be seen to be divided into several fundamentally different branches, which constitute so many ‘complete humanities, more or less closed in on themselves’.<sup>27</sup> This completeness is a part of the quasi-absolute character of the religions that corresponds to these “complete humanities.” These human collectivities can be ordered or mapped according to temporal and geographical determinations. Even more fundamentally they may be mapped according to spiritual

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<sup>25</sup> Schuon, *In The Face of the Absolute*, p.73.

<sup>26</sup> Coomaraswamy, ‘Sri Ramakrishna and Religious Tolerance,’ p.36.

<sup>27</sup> Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, p.25.

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temperaments. A person is absolute in terms of their individuality and relative in terms of the limitations that place them in a particular human collectivity or humanity. Without such orientation the human psyche either flounders in a sea of relativism or is lost in uniformity, which, in the end, amounts to the same thing.

The diversity of human collectivities requires the diversity of revelation. Each revelation, and the tradition that arises from it, is like a different language; the Truth spoken in these languages remains one even if its expression differs. Apparent anomalies between traditions are ‘like differences of language or of symbol; contradictions are in human receptacles, not in God; the diversity in the world is a function of its remoteness from the diverse Principle, which amounts to saying that the Creator cannot will both that the world should be, and that it should not be the world.’<sup>28</sup>

To speak of each tradition being “closed in on itself” is to recognise the “relative absolute”<sup>29</sup> nature of each of the diverse revelations. Schuon: ‘God, when he speaks, expresses Himself in absolute mode; but this absoluteness relates to the universal content rather than the form ... Revelation speaks an absolute language, because God is absolute, not because the form is; in other words, the absoluteness of the Revelation is absolute in itself, relative in its form.’<sup>30</sup>

Man is created in the image of the Divine: transcendent and immanent, absolute and relative. The absolute inherent in the human being allows for qualitative distinction. The Infinity of the Absolute is mirrored on the ontological plane by the indefinitude of possible individuals. Relativity manifests itself in the human collectivity in terms of certain limitations applicable to humankind as a whole. The notion of limitation carries, at least in modern thought, a pejorative implication, yet to say limitation is equally to say orientation, which recognises the positive notion of “order.”

Each language is specific to the psychological and spiritual needs of the collectivity to which it is directed, that is to say, it constitutes a “holy strategy,” what the Buddhists call *upāya*, “skillful means.” To talk of such a “strategy” is to recognise a “strategist” whose intention is

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<sup>28</sup> Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, p.26.

<sup>29</sup> Schuon remarks on recourse to this ‘unavoidably ill-sounding expression’ as being one that is nevertheless, ‘metaphysically useful’ (*In The Face of the Absolute*, p.57).

<sup>30</sup> Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, p.26.

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precisely salvation. ‘One has to realise’ as Schuon remarks, ‘that outward religion is not disinterested; it wants to save souls, no more no less, and at the cost of the truths that do not serve its holy strategy.’<sup>31</sup> It is thanks to the efficient intention of a tradition’s “strategy” that all orthodox dogmas are justified and are in the final analysis compatible despite their apparent antagonisms.

That the exotericism of a tradition is somewhat bound to “misunderstandings” concerning the validity of different traditions derives from the fact that given its mission it ‘has to take into account the weakness of men, and thus also, be it said without euphemism, their stupidity; like it or not, it must itself take on something of these shortcomings, or at least it must allow them some room, on pain of not being able to survive in human surroundings.’<sup>32</sup> ‘[T]o speak of form’ says Schuon, ‘is to speak of limits and at the same time therefore of the virtuality of error.’<sup>33</sup> And this is to say that ‘the formal homogeneity of a religion requires not only truth but also errors—though these only in the form—just as the world requires evil and a Divinity implies the mystery of creation by virtue of its infinity.’<sup>34</sup> As Coomaraswamy remarks, the exclusive attachment to any one dogma, however pertinent, entails the error of idolatry: ‘the Truth itself is inexpressible.’<sup>35</sup> These “errors” are the illusion of Relativity, yet they are precisely illusions and suppose no integral error in either their essence or their efficient purpose.

The “sense of the absolute”—the criterion for any true religion—asserts itself on the exoteric level of a particular religion by evoking a quasi-exclusivist posture. At the esoteric heart of a tradition the “sense of the absolute” leads one to the “transcendent unity of religion.” The relative truth of each of these levels acts to balance the error potential in the other: the illusion of diversity at the exoteric level is balanced by the unity in the esoteric heart; the erroneous denial of the Relative in the face of the unity of the Absolute is tempered by the Divine institution of the diverse forms. The totality of a tradition demands both the esoteric and exoteric levels. Moreover, the recognition by the

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<sup>31</sup> Schuon, *In The Face of the Absolute*, 1989, p.22.

<sup>32</sup> Schuon, *In The Face of the Absolute*, 1989, p.26.

<sup>33</sup> Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, London: Perennial Books, 1987, p.70.

<sup>34</sup> Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, p.73.

<sup>35</sup> Coomaraswamy, ‘Sri Ramakrishna and Religious Tolerance,’ p.37.

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esotericist of the Absolute in the Relative and the moral conformity to the contingent forms of a tradition, recognised as a mode of the Absolute, means that the esotericist must submit, almost without exception, to the forms of a religion.<sup>36</sup>



The merit of the *sophia perennis*, as noted, is that it presents a cogent understanding of the diversity of truths and permits one to accept the validity of other religions. From a purely pragmatic point of view this acceptance is undoubtedly a benefit in a world savaged by the violence born of religious intolerance and fanatical fundamentalism. From a more profound point of view, this understanding opens us to see God in our neighbour and thus love our neighbour as our self. The recognition of God in one's neighbour is, in turn, the recognition of the divine Unity, which is to 'know thy self.'

For the spiritual traveller there is a danger in a merely peripheral awareness of the *sophia perennis* insomuch as the acceptance of the truth of each path can render the indecisive person impotent with respect to actually setting out upon a particular path. Similarly, the awareness of the relative truth of each path can lead the weak-willed to balk at the first obstacle they encounter on a particular path, causing them to quit this path and turn to another, fancying that this will be free of obstacles. This attitude, we might add, reveals an ignorance of the spiritual value of obstacles.

Some perceive the *sophia perennis* to threaten the unique saving power of one's own religion. If we are to be unsympathetic we might say that there is something insecure or even selfish about this anxiety. A more generous reading of this attitude recognises in this a dedication to knowing God that is most admirable. That is to say: in accepting the Unity of God the practitioner transfers this quality of uniqueness to religion *per se* so that, for them, to admit the truth of multiple religions would be tantamount to admitting multiple gods. In rejecting this, their intention and understanding—as it is—is soteriologically justified. From the point of view of the *sophia perennis* the acceptance of the Unity of

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<sup>36</sup> 'Forms' says Huston Smith in his introduction to Schuon's *Transcendent Unity of Religions*, 'are to be transcended by fathoming their depths and discerning their universal content, not by circumventing them.'

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God necessitates acceptance of the diversity of valid religions, inasmuch as this diversity is prefigured *in divinis* by the Divine All-Possibility; moreover, the divine Unity necessitates that nothing can be other than God—‘Whichever way you may turn, there is the face of God’ (Qur’an 2:115)—so that each religion can be naught but an expression of God.

The advocate of the *sophia perennis* might say, as Seyyed Hossein Nasr has, that ‘Each revealed religion is *the* religion and *a* religion, the religion inasmuch as it contains within itself the Truth and the means of attaining the Truth, a religion since it emphasizes a particular aspect of Truth in conformity with the spiritual and psychological needs of the humanity for whom it is destined.’<sup>37</sup>

It is *a* religion because it is one means (*upāya*) amongst others offering a saving truth. The adherent of a religion who sees in their religion the very Message of God may well object to the description of their religion as simply a “means,” imagining that this term somehow denigrates the glory of divine revelation. However, even if a particular religion were *the* unique manifestation of divine Mercy it would still be a mercy granted by God to guide and aid the human back to God, and inasmuch it would precisely be a means.

In talking of a particular religion as *the* religion one must understand that, except in the most exceptional of cases, attainment of Realisation requires the integral practice of one religion in its totality. This is more than “just” a matter of psychological expediency, although this is an important aspect of what is here at issue. At a deeper level, Realisation entails identification with God or Reality, where this is the unique Unity. The divine institution of *a* religion ontologically manifests Unity; the integral participation in *a* religion existentially identifies and unites the individual with Reality.

Each religion is thus *the* “relative absolute” religion. This term may be repellent to the adherent who sees it as a mere façade used to avoid the subjective relativity of religions. However, for Schuon, this phrase refers *both* to the ‘theological perspective, *and the reality to which it refers*’.<sup>38</sup> This reality is, from one perspective, Being, which gives rise to “ontological All-Possibility,”<sup>39</sup> which is to say, distinction and diversity.

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<sup>37</sup> Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1966, p.15.

<sup>38</sup> Schuon, *In The Face of the Absolute*, p.57, [my italics].

<sup>39</sup> Schuon: ‘The Absolute by definition contains the Infinite—the common content being Perfection or the Good—and the Infinite in its turn gives rise, at the degree of

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The theological perspective is that emphasis on the absolute and unique nature of God that recognises in *a* religion the exclusive soteriological prerogative. Again let it be stressed that this is more than just a psychological expedient. The exclusivist argument is, properly understood, rooted in the reality of Unicity. The emphasis here is not on the “relative absolute” but on the Absolute in the relative. As Schuon remarks, ‘if the relative did not comprise something of the absolute, relativities could not be distinguished qualitatively from one another.’<sup>40</sup> Here he is no doubt thinking of Ibn al-‘Arabī who says, ‘Were it not that the Reality permeates all beings as form [in His qualitative form], and were it not for the intelligible realities, no [essential] determination would be made in individual beings. Thus, the dependence of the Cosmos on Reality for existence is an essential factor.’<sup>41</sup> Yet, at the same time, the distinguishing determinations, or limits, that allow relativities to manifest as such cannot be themselves absolute. Schuon: ‘The Infinite is that which is absolutely without limits, but the finite cannot be that which is “absolutely limited,” for there is no absolute limitation. The world is not an inverted God: God is without a second.’<sup>42</sup>



According to a Sufi adage, ‘There are as many paths towards God as there are human souls.’ In a sense, one might say that there are as many “religions” as there are human souls, at least inasmuch as we take religion to be the language between the Divine and the human, or between the unique Object and the myriad subjects. As St. Augustine says, ‘God loves each of us as if there were only one of us’; God also saves each one of us as if we were the one and only soul.

In “crossing religious frontiers” we look into the heart of our neighbour. To the degree that we have realised God in our own heart we are able to recognise God in our neighbour’s heart, for ‘like knows

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that “lesser Absolute” that is Being, to ontological All-Possibility. Being cannot not include efficient Possibility, because it cannot prevent the Absolute from including the Infinite’ (*In The Face of the Absolute*, p.38).

<sup>40</sup> Schuon, *Language of the Self*, Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1999, p.17.

<sup>41</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Fusus*, (Austin, p.57).

<sup>42</sup> Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, p.168.

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like.’ That which we realise is the Divine Unity. In the final analysis it is not that we know God in our neighbour, for the distinction of self and neighbour is no longer real. Rather we might say that both neighbour and self are known in God, by God. In the words of Nicholas of Cusa, ‘God alone knows Himself.’<sup>43</sup> In turn, as ‘Alī says, ‘I know God by God, and I know that which is not God by the light of God.’<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Nicholas of Cusa, *De Docta Ignorantia* 1.26, tr. Fr. G. Heron, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954.

<sup>44</sup> Cited in Hujwārī, *Kashf al-Mahjūb* tr. R. A. Nicholson, London: Luzac, 1959, p.269.