

Vincit Omnia Veritas
Collected Essays

Edited by

Renaud Fabbri & Timothy Scott

Vincit Omnia Veritas: The journal of perennial studies was the online journal of *Religio Perennis: A Gate to Quintessential Esoterism* (www.religioperennis.org) founded and managed by Renaud Fabbri (editor), Patricia Reynaud and Charles Amir Perret.

Vincit Omnia Veritas was published biannually and ran from January 2005 to July 2007. With the advent of several new journals in the field, including *Eye of the Heart* (La Trobe University), the decision was made to discontinue *Vincit Omnia Veritas*. The six issues produced included republications and original articles. Most of these are available through the online “library” of *Religio Perennis*. It was felt that the original articles produced for *Vincit Omnia Veritas* might be presented in a collected format. To that end, *Religio Perennis*, with the assistance of the Philosophy & Religious Studies program, La Trobe University, Bendigo, and *Eye of the Heart: The Journal of Traditional Wisdom*, is happy to offer the following collection of original essays, *Vincit Omnia Veritas: Collected Essays*.

Editorial note: The text has been simplified for the sake of consistency.

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Abbreviations

Ibn al-'Arabi, <i>Fusus</i>	Ibn al-'Arabi, <i>Fusus al-hikam</i> , tr. R. Austin, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1980
B.T.	<i>Babylonian Talmud</i>
Burckhardt, <i>Alchemy</i>	Titus Burckhardt, <i>Alchemy</i> , Baltimore: Penguin, 1974
Burckhardt, <i>ISD</i>	Titus Burckhardt, <i>An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine</i> , Wellingborough: The Aquarian Press, 1976
Boethius, <i>Consolation</i>	Boethius, <i>The Consolation of Philosophy</i> , tr. H. Chadwick, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1990
<i>Dictionary of Symbols</i>	Chevalier & Gheerbrant, <i>Dictionary of Symbols</i> , tr. J. Buchanan-Brown, Penguin, Middlesex, 1996
Coomaraswamy, <i>SP1</i>	Ananda Coomaraswamy, <i>Selected Papers</i> Vol.1: 'Traditional Art and Symbolism', R. Lipsey ed., Surrey: Princeton University Press, 1977
Coomaraswamy, <i>SP2</i>	Ananda Coomaraswamy, <i>Selected Papers</i> Vol.2: 'Metaphysics', R. Lipsey ed., New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977
Daniélou, <i>GI</i>	Alain Daniélou, <i>The Gods of India</i> , New York: Inner Traditions, 1985
<i>ET</i>	<i>Etudes Traditionnelles</i>
Fitzgerald ed., <i>Yellowtail</i>	Michael O. Fitzgerald ed., <i>Yellowtail: Crow Medicine Man and Sun Dance Chief</i> , Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991
Guénon, <i>SC</i>	René Guénon, <i>The Symbolism of the Cross</i> , London: Luzac & Co. Ltd., 1975
Guénon, <i>MB</i>	René Guénon, <i>Man and his becoming</i> , New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint, 1981
Guénon, <i>RQ</i>	René Guénon, <i>The Reign of Quantity & The Signs of the Times</i> , New York: Sophia Perennis et Universalis, 1972
Guénon, <i>LW</i>	René Guénon, <i>The Lord of the World</i> , Yorkshire: Coombe Springs Press, 1983

- Guénon, *GT* René Guénon, *The Great Triad*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1994
- Guénon, *FS* René Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1995
- Guénon, *MSB* René Guénon, *The Multiple States of the Being*, New York: Sophia Perennis, 2001
- JAAR* *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*
- al-Jili, *al-insan* ‘Abd al-Karim al-Jili, *al-insan al-kamil*, tr. T. Burckhardt, Gloucester: Beshara Publications, 1983
- Mails, *FC* Thomas Mails, *Fools Crow*, New York: Doubleday, 1979
- Mathers, *KU* S. L. MacGregor Mathers tr., *The Kabbalah Unveiled*, Middlesex: Arkana Penguin Books, 1991
- Metford, *DCLL* J. C. J. Metford, *Dictionary of Christian Lore and Legend*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1983
- Nasr, *IRI* Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1966
- Nasr, *KS* Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981
- Needleman ed., *SG* Jacob Needleman ed., *The Sword of Gnosis*, Baltimore: Penguin, 1974
- Oldmeadow, *Traditionalism* Harry Oldmeadow, *Traditionalism: Religion in the Light of the Perennial Philosophy*, Colombo: Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies, 2000
- Perry, *WB* Whitall Perry, *The Widening Breach*, Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1995
- Perry, *TTW* Whitall Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2000
- Schaya, *UMK* Leo Schaya, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, tr. N. Pearson, Allen & Unwin, New Jersey, 1971
- Scholem, *MTJM* Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York: Schocken Books, 1995
- Schuon, *SW* Frithjof Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom*, London: John Murray/Perennial books, 1961

- Schuon, *LAW* Frithjof Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, London: Perennial Books, 1965
- Schuon, *LT* Frithjof Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*, London: Perennial Books, 1975
- Schuon, *UI* Frithjof Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, London: Mandala Books, 1976
- Schuon, *IPP* Frithjof Schuon, *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, London: World of Islam Festival Trust 1976
- Schuon, *EPW* Frithjof Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, Middlesex: Perennial Books, 1981
- Schuon, *DH* Frithjof Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1982
- Schuon, *SPHF* Frithjof Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, London: Perennial Books, 1987
- Schuon, *CR* Frithjof Schuon, *Castes and Races*, Middlesex: Perennial Books, 1989
- Schuon, *ITFA* Frithjof Schuon, *In The Face Of The Absolute*, Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1989
- Schuon, *G:DW* Frithjof Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, Middlesex: Perennial Books, 1990
- Schuon, *FS* Frithjof Schuon, *The Feathered Sun: Plains Indians in Art and Philosophy*, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1990
- Schuon, *TB* Frithjof Schuon, *Treasures of Buddhism*, Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1993
- Schuon, *TUR* Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, Wheaton: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1993
- Schuon, *LS* Frithjof Schuon, *Language of the Self*, Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1999
- Schuon, *SME* Frithjof Schuon, *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*, World Wisdom Books, Indiana, 2000
- Schuon, *ASM* Frithjof Schuon, *Adastra & Stella Maris, Poems by Frithjof Schuon*, tr. W. Stoddart, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2003

- Snodgrass, SS Adrian Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stupa*,
New York: South East Asia Program, 1985
- Snodgrass, ATE (1 & 2) Adrian Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity*
2 Vols., New Delhi: Sata-Pitaka Series, 1990
- Steltenkamp, BE Michael Steltenkamp, *Black Elk: Holy Man of the*
Oglala, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993
- Tishby, WZ (1, 2 & 3) Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar* 3 Vols., Oxford:
Oxford University Press, 1991
- Yellowtail, NS Thomas Yellowtail, *Native Spirit: The Sun Dance Way*,
Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2007

Vincit Omnia Veritas

Renaud Fabbri

Discern what is good in God's eyes,
Whether thou be Jew, Christian or Moslem;
Religion does no mean persecuting others,
Religio is what binds us to God –

And nothing else. The world needs many forms –
In God alone are the norms of the Eternal Truth.
From both sources thou canst obtain salvation:
Heroic faith and divine Light from within.

— Frithjof Schuon, 'Religio'¹

It is my pleasure to write this foreword to these collected essays from *Vincit Omnia Veritas*. I would like first to thank Dr Timothy Scott who, despite his time-consuming commitment with *Eye of the Heart*, has reviewed the essays and prepared this paper issue. These collected essays gather articles written for the most part by English speaking scholars whose perspective on religion has been informed by the works of René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy and Frithjof Schuon. Whereas in continental Europe and especially in France, marked by an aggressive secularism, the Traditionalist approach to religion has remained relatively marginalised, despite its more or less discrete influence on well-known scholars such as Mircea Eliade or Henry Corbin in North America, England and now Australia, the Perennialist discourse has been introduced in the university and has been presented as an alternative to more reductionist approach by academics such as Huston Smith, Seyyed Hossein Nasr and James Cutsinger.

¹ Schuon, *ASM*, p.187.

In some circles, Perennialism has been stigmatised as a crypto-theological and *sui generis* approach that tries to interpret religious phenomena in terms that remain themselves religious. This characterisation is however misleading. Too often sociological or psychological approaches proceed to a down falling reduction that ends up destroying its object of study. The phenomenological approach, as illustrated by Mircea Eliade's phenomenology of the Sacred or the writings of Corbin, rightly refuses to collapse the religious phenomena onto a non-religious data but stops halfway, epistemologically speaking and remains bounds to a philosophy of human consciousness. By contrast, it could be argued that Perennialism, along with the most reductionist methods, sees the intrinsic limitations in the religious discourse but draws opposite conclusions. It operates not a *reduction* but a *sublimation* that amounts to a translation of the theological and mystical into metaphysical, a transposition or better a reintegration of the religious forms into their universal essences. By ascending to the roots *in divinis* of religious diversity, Perennialism also explains better than phenomenology the *raison d'être* of this plurality as well as the uniqueness of each religion.

Is it necessary to point out that Perennialism should not be confused with more empirical and less rigorous forms of religious universalism? It is in 1982 that the debate about the value of Perennialism for the academic study of religions first emerged in the annual AAR meeting. In this context, Steven T. Katz published two articles, in which he asserts that there is no perennial philosophy, because all experiences, including the mystical, are socially constructed:

The single epistemological assumption that has exercised my thinking is that there is NO pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences. Neither mystical experience nor more ordinary forms of experience give any indication, or any grounds for believing, that there are mediated ... All experience is processed through, organised by, and makes itself available to us in extremely epistemological ways.²

² S. T. Katz, 'Language, Epistemology and Mysticism' in *Mysticism and philosophical analysis*, S. T. Katz ed., New York: Oxford University Press, 1978, p.26; 'Recent work on mysticism', *History of Religions* 25, 1985, pp.76-86.

Huston Smith, who had discovered the writings of Schuon in 1969 and became since then an academic spokesman for perennialism, responded in an article entitled ‘Is there a perennial philosophy?’³ He began by pointing out, that ‘in aiming his critique of the perennial philosophy at mystical identities, Katz sets out on the wrong foot.’ Katz’s objections against Perennial Philosophy, he says, start from a confusion between the metaphysics of the “transcendent unity of religions” and the phenomenology of the mystical experiences developed by Aldous Huxley, Zaehner, Stace and James. For Huston Smith, the Perennial philosophy has nothing to do with assumptions about “mystical experience.” Instead, it presupposes 1) a metaphysical intuitions (not to be confused with theology or mysticism) and necessarily represent 2) the “minority position” of the esoterists (as opposed to the exoteric majority). Because of their ecumenical outlook, Perennialists do perceive an underlying communality between traditional forms. They may even point out profound *analogies* between religious phenomena across space and time but they identify a rigorous *unity* only at the level of the Pure Absolute, beyond the religious sphere *per se* with the Personal God at its summit.

Strictly speaking, this negative, apophatic, *neti-neti* aspect of the Absolute—metaphysically counterpart of the unmediated mystical experience that Katz goes after—is the only point where perennialists see the traditions converging indistinguishably. Thereafter revelation fractionates like light through a prism, and what the perennial typology spreads before us is correspondence.⁴

Huston Smith’s response to Katz was clearly a restatement of Schuon’s teaching on how in each cosmic sector the “Pure Absolute,” *Atman*, manifests itself through a different religious *upaya* (“celestial stratagems”), comparable simultaneously to a “veil of light” and to a “light veiled.” Like his predecessors Mircea Eliade and Henry Corbin, Huston Smith integrates in his scholarly work the Guenonian criticism of the modern world but by asserting so unconditionally the primacy of the metaphysical standpoint, he goes further and he could make his

³ H. Smith, ‘Is there a Perennial Philosophy?’ in *JAAR* 55.3, 1987.

⁴ Smith, ‘Is there a Perennial Philosophy?’, p.564.

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own the motto of the Banaras Maharajas: 'There is no right superior to that of the Truth,' which drives us back to the title of this journal and the current collection. Despite the shadow of the lower *Maya*, the superior right of this Truth that coincides with the highest Reality guarantees that ultimately, *Vincit Omnia Veritas*.

Quatrains from an Indian Notebook

Barry McDonald for Alvaro Enterría

‘Only the hand that erases writes the true thing’
— Meister Eckhart

The Compass

Still as a boulder in a flowing stream
In solitude a man sits down to pray;
A life is shaped by all this moment means
And by it he is guided through the day.

On earth there is no greater work than this:
To learn what’s necessary is an art.
Rooted in Being, Consciousness and Bliss,
God’s Name is the true compass of the heart.

The Echo

Invoking God, a priest of certainty
Will take a high and long view of the day;
Because he’s summoned by eternity,
From head to heart he travels on the way.

Around him every person says *I am*,
But few know where the echo first began.
Resounding in the cave of nothingness,
A timeless voice repeats *not this, not this*.

Sanctuary

Closing the eyes a temple door is seen,
To enter there abandon every dream.
Where emptiness establishes its shrine,
Eternity peers through its mask of time.

Deep in the sanctuary of the mind
A bell to wake a god is all we find –
Where every moment is a prayer bead
The word that silence teaches is our creed.

Sandcastles

Like sandcastles beside a rising sea
There are no worldly dreams that we may keep.
Death draws us near, as waking does to sleep,
What's nearest to the heart is all we seek.

Behind each veil discern the Absolute:
With every lesser treasure now be done –
With nothing but the beauty of the Truth
The wise man will stand naked in the sun.

The Search

In search of what will make us feel complete
We think the music of desire is sweet;
But ego is the shell and not the pearl –
And world is God, but God is not the world.

A drop of water on a lotus-leaf,
Lit by the sun this life on earth is brief.
To seek the Truth a man falls deep in thought,
But in the heart the seeker is the Sought.

Frithjof Schuon and the American Indian Spirit:

An interview with Michael Fitzgerald

Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998) was the foremost spokesman of the Perennial Philosophy in the twentieth century and, along with René Guénon, is considered as the most important figure of the Traditionalist or Perennialist school of thought. His interests covered a large range of metaphysical and religious topics, providing insights on Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism but also on the Native American traditions. It is generally recognised that Frithjof Schuon had a special interest in the spiritual traditions of the American Indians, but only some aspects of his relationship with them are well known. Michael Fitzgerald has accepted to answer some of our questions about unpublished aspects of Schuon's relationship with the Plains Indians. Michael Fitzgerald was the neighbour of Frithjof Schuon for 18 years. He has also written and edited six books and produced two films on American Indian spirituality that are used in college classes. He has taught university classes on religious traditions of North American Indians and has attended sacred rites of the Crow, Sioux, Cheyenne, Shoshone, Bannock, and Apache tribes. Fitzgerald is an adopted son of the late Thomas Yellowtail, one of the most honoured American Indian spiritual leaders of the last century, and is an adopted member of the Crow tribe.

Religioperennis: For readers who are unfamiliar with the topic, could you explain to us what is meant by American Indian traditions and can you remind us in which circumstances Frithjof Schuon discovered the Native American universe?

The focus of Frithjof Schuon's interest in the American Indians was centred on the spiritual traditions of the pre-reservation nomads who lived on the Plains of the American West—the Plains Indians—and the perpetuation of those ancestral traditions into the present day.

Schuon's affinity with the Plains Indians had begun already in his youth, partly encouraged by his grandmother's fond memories of her close friendship with an American Indian when she was in Washington D.C. at age 17. This is an excerpt from an October 31, 1947 letter that Schuon wrote to Chief Medicine Robe of the Assiniboine people:

Love of the Indians is a family tradition with us—my brother and me—and this is why: as a young girl, our paternal grandmother lived in Washington where she became acquainted with an Indian chief who loved her and made a marriage proposal to her. He was called "Singing Swan," and, with many other chiefs, he had come to Washington for a congress. Unfortunately, my grandmother had to go to Europe with her family and could not marry "Singing Swan." He sent her letters in which he called her "my little child"; he also sent her dried flowers from the prairie. The recollection of "Singing Swan" was so vividly impressed on my grandmother's mind that at the age of eighty she still remembered her friend as if she had seen him the day before, and shortly before she died she still spoke of him. When my brother and I were children, she used to talk to us about "Singing Swan"; she pictured to us his beautiful long hair and his buckskin dress of light blue tinge.

Thus we were educated in the love of the Indian peoples, and this was a providential disposition in the plan of the Great Spirit.

In a 1992 film interview, one of Schuon's childhood friends recalled their attempts to play as Indians when they were eleven years old. 'We played as Indians, especially in the zoo and in the zoological gardens, where we gathered some friends. His elder brother was there and took the Indian name of "Reindeer." Afterwards we gathered also in the forest in the neighbourhood of Basle—that was very serious; we had to practice. Once we had a small battle in the forest' (1992 film interview with Johann Jakob Jenny). When Schuon watched the film interview of his lifelong friend he added that the boys made Indian clothes, practiced Indian dancing, and also read books to learn about the traditional customs of the Plains Indians.

Schuon later described his first memorable encounter with the Red Indian world, 'When I was fifteen years old in Alsace there was a big German circus with real Sioux Indians. It was in 1923, so the Indians were still real old-timers. They were singing and riding on horse back

with wonderful costumes. I already knew English and so I went every day to the circus to talk with these wonderful people' (1991 film interview with a journalist).

In later years Schuon said that he had the "character" of a Red Indian. Schuon's response to a question posed by a journalist in a 1991 film interview helps us to understand this comment. When the reporter asked, 'What was it you read and learned about the Indians that fascinated you?', Schuon responded, 'Oh, the Indian character: courage—incredible courage—then self-domination and dignity—the cult of dignity. When I was in the Far West thirty or forty years ago, the old-timers were very dignified; this I like very much—this dignity, generosity, no pettiness, courage, and piety. They are always praying to the Great Spirit.'

RP: What was the state of these traditions in the first half of the twentieth century when Frithjof Schuon came into contact with them?

To provide some history and context, let me quote Joe Medicine Crow, the Crow tribal historian. He explains: 'In 1884, the Secretary of Interior issued the so-called "Secretary's Order" to "de-tribalize" the Indian people and make them into white men as soon as possible—a unilateral cultural assimilation process.' Medicine Crow details the manner in which children were taken from their homes and forced to stay in boarding schools. He goes on to describe the children's life in boarding school:

[T]hey would become like slaves; they were mistreated and some were even killed there. At the boarding school, the children were also forbidden to speak their native language. If they were caught speaking the Crow language they made the children chew a strong soap—it had a terrible taste. The kids also couldn't play any Indian games—they were forbidden to follow anything to do with the traditional culture. If they violated any of these rules they were not allowed to visit with their parents on the weekends or to go home for family visits. . . .

Over time almost every Christian denomination opened churches and schools on the reservation; each family was assigned to become a member of one or another of the churches. The government encouraged this process to help assimilate the Indians because the

churches actively tried to convert the Indians away from their traditional ceremonies. . . . The government thought that if the Indians became Christians then they would turn away from their Crow traditions, and, of course, some Indians did turn away from the traditions; but most Indians embraced Christianity without abandoning their own cultural traditions. There was no problem in the Indian way; everyone had a little different way to pray but everyone was praying to the same, one God, so there was no problem. . . .

The “Secretary’s Order of 1884” also prohibited the Indians from practicing all activities related to their culture, including all traditional ceremonies. The reservation police had the power to enforce this Order to prevent any traditional singing and dancing. The Crow people were afraid to even put on their native costumes; they were told to wear overalls, white man’s outfits—told to start becoming white men. Our people were forced to become farmers and give up their traditions. For fifty years there was a strict period of cultural transition. However, the government could not take away the intangible things; the Crow people still had their values, their traditional religion, and their philosophy—they kept them. During this time they had to go hide and perform some of their rituals—many families tried to keep their spiritual traditions alive in the secrecy of their homes. And, all of the clan rules were kept intact right up to this day, which is a good thing because those are important rules to follow. So we survived with our values and most of our ceremonials. The tribal culture was kept alive.

In 1934 the Commissioner of Indian Affairs removed those prohibitions in connection with a so-called “Indian Re-organisation Act,” so from that time on the people could do their ceremonials. On the Shoshone Reservation they were Sun Dancing right away—I think they were hiding it and doing it all along. The Crow also started to resume some of our traditional ceremonies, but during the fifty year break when the Sun Dance was outlawed, the Crow tribe lost their own form of the Sun Dance. Because the Crow lost their own tribal Sun Dance . . . the tribe adopted the form of the Shoshone Sun Dance.¹

¹ From the Introduction to *Yellowtail*, NS.

During the first half of the twentieth century all American Indians struggled to retain their ancestral spiritual ways in the face of a government bent on their destruction. Fools Crow (1890-1989) was the most well-recognized Lakota Sun Dance chief of the twentieth century. The book *Fools Crow*² records his vivid descriptions of the extremely difficult situation on his Pine Ridge reservation: ‘As we entered the 1930s, we thought conditions were about as bad as they could be....’ After 1934 the American Indian tribes were allowed to openly practice their spiritual ceremonies, but many of the ancestral traditions had been lost. Fools Crow continues, ‘World War II dominated the lives and consciousness of the Sioux from 1940 to 1950. Our sweat lodges at Pine Ridge were overworked during that awful time....’

I offer these accounts from chiefs of two different Plains tribes to demonstrate that while each situation was different, the picture was largely the same—the first half of the twentieth century was an incredibly difficult period for all American Indians and the time immediately after the end of World War II was in many ways a low point for the preservation of the ancestral spiritual traditions of the Plains Indians.

RP: *Could you describe the relationship between Frithjof Schuon, Joseph Epes Brown, and Black Elk?*

Joseph Epes Brown (1920-2000) was one of the most influential scholars of American Indian spirituality in the twentieth century. His first direct contact with Plains Indian spirituality came in 1946 when Frithjof Schuon recommended to Brown that he attempt to find Black Elk, a Lakota holy man and the subject of John Neihardt’s 1932 book, *Black Elk Speaks*. At that time virtually no non-Indians had yet become interested in shamanistic spiritual traditions and Schuon hoped that Brown might be able to record and preserve the wisdom of some of the nomadic old-timers who were still living at that time, particularly Black Elk, thereby stimulating a resurgence of the ancestral traditions. Joseph Brown was successful in his search and for extended periods of time over a two-year period he lived with Black Elk and his family in South Dakota. The book that resulted was *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk’s*

² Mails, FC.

Account of the Seven Sacred Rites of the Ogallala Sioux, first published in French in 1953. During the preparation and editing of his manuscript, Brown lived in Lausanne, in close proximity to Schuon, and Schuon wrote the introduction to the first French edition of this landmark work.

While Brown was living with Black Elk, there was an ongoing correspondence between Brown and Schuon, including two letters that Schuon sent to the venerable Lakota that were translated by his son, Benjamin Black Elk. Brown wrote:

[Black Elk] said that he had told as yet no one [about the sacred rites of the Lakota], but was telling me because he believed it was connected with my being there and with the Holy Man who had sent me. Black Elk had been having a dream, in which he saw an Ancient Man Above, old with gray hair, whose eyes were always open, and who was constantly looking, looking everywhere. ... The letter from [Schuon] has had a tremendous impact on him. His son translated the whole letter to him; he is excellent at this, and you should also know that he is responding and awakening extremely well. (Letter dated October 28, 1947)

For the rest of his life, Joseph Brown remained in contact with Black Elk's family and other Indian leaders, while maintaining correspondence with and periodically visiting Schuon both in Switzerland and later in Indiana. When Joseph Brown returned to visit Black Elk's family in 1954, Lucy Looks Twice, Black Elk's daughter, told Brown about her father's recurring dream visions during the final weeks of his life in 1951. Brown wrote to Schuon:

Finally she explained that before his death they had been worried about Black Elk. Every afternoon at about the same time he would go into something of a trance as if he were talking with some unseen person. Once he scolded his daughter-in-law for entering the house at that time, for he said that she had made the man leave. When they asked him who it was who came to talk with him (more precisely this person came to pray for Black Elk, saying that he knew that he was soon to die, and he wished to help him in his suffering), he said that it was "a holy man from Europe." His relatives were frightened by these experiences so Mrs. Looks Twice noticed a large wooden rosary which always hung over his bed—a

Fitzgerald: *Frithjof Schuon and the American Indian Spirit*

Moroccan one that I had given him because of his fondness for its *barakah*—and took this away from him. According to her after this he did not talk anymore with the “strange man.” At Black Elk’s death, possibly thinking that it had not been right to do this, she saw that this rosary was buried in the coffin with him. (Letter dated October 8, 1954)³

During Black Elk’s final illness, Joseph Brown had informed Schuon that the aged Lakota holy man was suffering intensely and approaching death. For the last month of Black Elk’s life, Schuon and his wife recited special prayers of Divine Mercy for Black Elk on Moroccan rosaries in their home in Lausanne. The Schuons followed this practice every evening, which corresponds to the afternoon in South Dakota, and thus the same time that Black Elk experienced the dream visions of the “holy man from Europe.” It is almost certainly not a coincidence that Black Elk’s visions of a visiting holy man came at the same moment that Schuon was reciting a rosary for the venerable Lakota sage.

RP: Did Joseph Brown’s work with Black Elk and the Lakota achieve the goals Schuon had in mind when he suggested to Brown that he find Black Elk?

The publication of *The Sacred Pipe* achieved one part of Schuon’s intention—the preservation and dissemination of sacred wisdom. Schuon also hoped to stimulate resurgence in traditional spiritual practices. Joseph Brown’s letters to Lausanne while he was living with Black Elk detail the Lakota holy man’s efforts to perpetuate the living tradition in the hearts of the people. Schuon collected and preserved Brown’s letters and excerpts are contained in the Appendix to *The Spiritual Legacy of the American Indian: Commemorative Edition*.⁴ This is an excerpt from my Preface to this book:

These letters also provide a final chapter to Black Elk’s life because of their sharp contrast to the despair in Black Elk’s closing words in *Black Elk Speaks*, ‘... you see me now a pitiful old man who has

³ Portions of Lucy Looks Twice’s account are also recorded in Steltenkamp, *BE*.

⁴ E. Brown, M. Brown Weatherly and M. O. Fitzgerald ed., *The Spiritual Legacy of the American Indian: Commemorative Edition* Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2007.

done nothing, for the nation's hoop is broken and scattered. There is no centre any longer, and the sacred tree is dead.' These words were spoken at a time when most American Indian traditional ceremonies were still outlawed by the U.S. Government and the majority of Lakota youth were not aware of their ancestral spiritual traditions. Joseph Brown's arrival in 1947 was a catalyst that provided Black Elk the practical support to work toward perpetuating his ancestral spiritual traditions, both through the recording of his account of the seven sacred rites of the Lakota and through Black Elk's efforts to re-establish an "Order of the Pipe" for his tribe. History records the successful re-emergence of the Lakota spiritual traditions, which are vibrant today on every Lakota reservation. This achievement was the result of efforts by many Lakota spiritual leaders, but there is no doubt that Black Elk's work with Joseph Brown was an integral part of the overall success of this re-emergence. The importance of *The Sacred Pipe* to the resurrection and perpetuation of these ancestral traditions is well known. This Appendix of letters clearly documents a largely unrecognised effort by Black Elk to meet with many tribal elders in order to actively stimulate the process of spiritual renewal for the Lakota people. Black Elk recognised Joseph Brown's integral role in facilitating his work when the Lakota holy man said to Brown at the time of his arrival in 1947 that his coming was a "Godsend." *The Sacred Pipe* and these letters therefore document a final chapter in Black Elk's life that fulfilled the great vision of his youth and helped make the sacred tree of the Lakota people bloom again.

RP: Following the work of Michael Steltenkamp,⁵ some scholars have argued that Black Elk was not a valid informant about the Native American traditions. In their view, his beliefs would have been much coloured by Christian doctrines. What would be your answer to these criticisms?

Let us first review some general principles before we examine Black Elk's personal beliefs. There are finally only three fundamental ways to view the phenomenon of religion: first, there is no God and thus all religion is the result of wishful human imagining; second, God exists but He has revealed only one valid religion; or third, one God exists and He

⁵ Steltenkamp, *BE*.

has revealed each of the world's major religions—resulting in what Schuon termed a “transcendent unity of religions.”

American Indian spirituality is perhaps the most “inclusive” form of spirituality—multiple forms of revelation and inspiration are accepted as self-evident reality. Christianity is one of the most “exclusivist” religions, rejecting other forms of revelation and salvation as a general principle. And, a large percentage of scholars today are either atheists or agnostics. This raises a series of questions that put into perspective the issue of whether Black Elk is a valid informant on Lakota spirituality: Is a person who believes there is no God more qualified to opine about religion? Is a person who believes only one religion is true and all other religions are false more qualified to opine about religion? Does the fact that someone believes in a transcendent unity of religions disqualify that person from being a valid interlocutor about a particular religion?

Now let us consider certain beliefs of most Plains Indians tribes. It is evident that the many variations among the tribes are too vast and diverse to create a definitive statement about what it entails; but few would deny that there are unifying themes, including the sacred quality of virgin Nature, the Directions of Space, the use of the Sacred Pipe, and above all the idea of a Supreme Being who revealed multiple spiritual paths to return to Him. Because American Indians accept multiple revelations, they looked at the spiritual teachings of Christianity and found them identical to their own traditional teachings. Then they looked at the life of Christ and saw many parallels. For example, Frithjof Schuon recorded this conversation with a traditional Lakota: ‘Christ had been crucified, but the Indians crucified themselves on the cottonwood tree; the cross of Christ had been of oak, whereas the Sun Dance Tree was, precisely, the cottonwood; a cross section through any branch of this tree always showed a golden star’ (‘1959 Travel Journal’).⁶ It is also evident that Christ and the early Christians were persecuted and martyred by the government. Based on the truth of its teachings and the compelling life story of Christ, how could many American Indians not believe in Christianity?

Many American Indians believe that their understanding of transcendent Reality is enriched when they consider the different views of the same one Reality that are presented by each of the diverse

⁶ In Schuon, *FS*.

revelations. Thomas Yellowtail (1903-1993), the most renowned Crow Sun Dance chief of the twentieth century, provided this insight into Native belief in a prayer to the Maker of All Things Above:⁷

All the people should unite and pray together, regardless of their beliefs. You have given different ways to different people all over the world. As we know, this earth is round like a wagon wheel. In a wagon wheel, all the spokes are set into the centre. The circle of the wheel is round and all spokes come from the centre and the centre is You, *Acbadadea*, the Maker of All Things Above. Each spoke can be considered as a different religion of the world which has been given by You to different people and different races. All of the people of the world are on the rim of the wheel and they must follow one of the spokes to the centre. The different paths have been given to us but they all lead to the same place. We all pray to the same God, to You. Help us to see this wisdom. Aho! Aho!

Many American Indians also speak of “blending” or “mixing” the explanations of God presented by different religions in order to better understand the one Great Spirit. But I have rarely observed a mixing of the forms of two religions into a simultaneous practice—it is generally considered “bad medicine” to mix a practice from one religion into the rites of a different religion. They will fervently participate in their ancestral rites in a completely traditional manner; then later they will go to Church and pray in a Christian manner. For example, in several meetings with Fools Crow at his home and at his Sun Dances, there was no mixing of the two religious forms—he was always a completely traditional Lakota, even though he was also a Catholic. I spent a summer living with Thomas and Susie Yellowtail while John Trehero, the most renowned Shoshone Sun Dance chief of the twentieth century, was also living with them.⁸ I spent many hours in Yellowtail’s pick-up truck listening to these two great spiritual leaders. They both believed in Christianity and in their traditional Indian ways; their understanding of the Maker of All Things Above was enriched by both religions; and they never mixed the two forms.

⁷ This is an excerpt from the closing prayer in Fitzgerald ed., *Yellowtail*.

⁸ For information about John Trehero see Voget, *The Shoshoni-Crow Sun Dance*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984 and Fitzgerald ed., *Yellowtail*.

I am also obliged to note that many tribal leaders, perhaps the majority, have accepted Christianity to one degree or another. This is confirmed by the experience of John Pretty-On-Top, a Crow Sun Dance chief, who was selected to represent all North American Indians at Pope John Paul II's "World Day of Prayer for Peace" in 1986 at Assisi, Italy. This Prayer Day was attended by a representative from almost every different spiritual tradition around the world. Pretty-On-Top explained to me that he was selected to attend because Church representatives could not find another traditional American Indian spiritual leader who was not also a Christian. To reinforce this point, let us consider a few prominent tribal leaders who believe in both religions, including: Thomas Yellowtail and Leonard Bends (Yellowtail's current successor) among the Crow; Chief Washakie (1804-1900), John Trehero (1871-1985) and James Trosper, a current Sun Dance chief, among the Shoshone; and Spotted Tail (1823-1881), Charles Eastman (1858-1939), and Fools Crow among the Sioux. The long-time tribal historian of the Cheyenne, John Stands in Timber (1884-1967), and the long-time tribal historian of the Crow, Joe Medicine Crow (still living at age 93), are both traditionalists and Christians. James Trosper recently pointed out that Chief Washakie, his great-great grandfather, was baptised by two denominations, thus demonstrating that his acceptance of Christianity was based upon its universal teachings. Trosper added, "All Indian people put their traditional Indian religion first; other religions just help us to come closer to the Creator."⁹ Are many of the greatest tribal leaders of the nineteenth and twentieth century disqualified as valid informants because they also believe in Christianity?¹⁰

Now let us turn to Black Elk's personal beliefs about Christianity and consider how other Lakota view Black Elk. Let me provide insights from two different sources, beginning with the words of Fools Crow, the most renowned Lakota Sun Dance chief of the twentieth century:

⁹ Personal interview, 2007. James Trosper is a Shoshone Sun Dance chief, a Trustee of the University of Wyoming, and a director of the Grand Teton National Park Foundation.

¹⁰ In the interest of disclosure, I am considered a member of the Sun Dance religion because I participated in a Crow Sun Dance. As a Schuonian, I also believe in the transcendent unity of religions.

[M]y uncle, Black Elk, became a Roman Catholic in 1904, and I am certain his first name, which was Nicholas, was given to him at that time. Black Elk was very interested in the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, and spent many hours talking to the priests about it. When he and I were discussing it one day, Black Elk told me he had decided that the Sioux religious way of life was pretty much the same as that of the Christian churches, and there was no reason to change what the Sioux were doing. We could pick up some of the Christian ways and teachings, and just work them in with our own, so in the end both would be better. Like myself, Black Elk prayed constantly that all peoples would live as one and would cooperate with one another....

My uncle, the renowned Black Elk, has earned a place above all of the other Teton holy men. We all hold him the highest. I have never heard a bad word about him, and he never said a bad word about anyone. All he wanted to do was love and serve his fellow man. ... [I]n the Indian custom, he was also a father to me. I stayed with him quite often, and sometimes for long periods of time. We also made a few trips together and over the years talked about many things. I learned a great deal about *Wakan Tanka*, prophecy, and medicine from him.¹¹

Now let us turn to observations by Joseph Brown,¹² which highlight factual errors involved in the debate about Black Elk's spiritual practices because it is alleged that he abandoned his ancestral Lakota spiritual traditions after he entered Catholicism in 1904. Joseph Brown's contemporaneous letters while living with Black Elk make it clear that Black Elk still participated in the sweat lodge ceremony and the prayer with the sacred pipe throughout his life—Black Elk did not abandon his ancestral Lakota spiritual practices. And, Black Elk's prayers to *Wakan Tanka* in both *Black Elk Speaks* and *The Sacred Pipe* demonstrate that

¹¹ Mails, *FC*.

¹² I had two conversations in the 1980s with Joseph Brown about Black Elk's relationship to Christianity and traditional Lakota beliefs when Brown stayed at my home while he visited Mr. Schuon. At the end of one conversation, Dr. Brown said he hoped to write an article to clarify this point, but he was never able to do so. He also explained to me that Black Elk's vision of the Great Spirit was completely consistent with Frithjof Schuon's explanation of American Indian spirituality, including the belief that there is one timeless Truth within both Christianity and traditional Native spirituality.

his personal prayer to God was in the traditional Lakota manner. Finally, the new information in Brown's letters makes it clear that Black Elk not only continued to participate in various forms of Lakota spirituality, he was also instrumental in reviving what he called the Order of the Pipe among the Lakota people. Several of Brown's letters from 1947 detail the efforts leading up to a major gathering of traditional Lakota spiritual leaders organized by Black Elk. This excerpt outlines the meeting:

The ceremonials, all different, but all centring around the pipe, went on every night for about five days. Then on the 18th we had the large pipe ceremonial at Manderson. I had sent out notices to all the old Lakota whom we wanted to contact, and perhaps about a hundred came with their teams from all over. ... This was of course the great day for Black Elk, for his vision was now being realised, and he was as happy and excited as a child. He and Little Warrior [Black Elk's close friend and also a Lakota holy man] painted their faces red, and put on their best clothes, and what traditional clothing they had. ... Never have I seen a priest officiate at a rite with more dignity, confidence, and majesty... (Letter dated December 26, 1947, Manderson, South Dakota).

Brown's letter goes on to describe the events, which were intended to revive participation in the sacred ancestral traditions. Brown's next letter to Lausanne describes the confrontation between the irate local Catholic priest and Black Elk subsequent to this gathering:

Last week, as I had long expected, we received a call from the local parish priest, who is also head of the mission school at Pine Ridge. He was quite irate about the pipe ceremonial, and said he did not mind if we merely wanted to put on a show, but if we were serious, it was a terrible thing, for he could not have his people going back to "savagery." At this Ben [Black Elk] launched out with quite an oration, defending and pointing out the truths of his own tradition—during which time the priest became more and more tense and red in the face. When he finished, Old Black Elk started in, and went on for almost half an hour, after which the priest looked at his watch and sped off in his automobile in great haste. Black Elk's speech was later explained to me, and it was indeed a magnificent one. ... The Catholic Church among the Indians in the

early days gained many followers, by making catechists of the old men, tempting them with money, good clothes, and a house, and the opportunity to travel. These old men—Black Elk among them—made hundreds of converts, but now that they have gone, participation in the Church has fallen off, and a vacuum has been left. Let us hope it shall be filled by the renewal of their own Way... (Letter dated January 24, 1948, Manderson, South Dakota).

It seems clear that while Black Elk had a great love of Christianity, he never abandoned his ancestral beliefs and that at the end of his life he recognised the important need to rejuvenate the Lakota ancestral traditions. When looking at Black Elk's life as a whole, perhaps one can paraphrase James Trosper's words, 'Black Elk put his traditional Indian religion first; Christianity helped him to come closer to the Creator.'

RP: Black Elk was not the only informant of Frithjof Schuon about the Native American traditions. What were the other contacts of Frithjof Schuon about these traditions? For instance, I believe that Thomas Yellowtail became a close friend of Schuon.

There were many different indirect contacts between Schuon and the American Indians. For example, Joseph Brown also acted as an intermediary between Schuon and other American Indian leaders. In the closing paragraph of Schuon's letter to Chief Medicine Robe, Schuon adds, 'I have been very happy to hear that Chief Medicine Robe has given Mr. Brown several strands of braided sweet grass for me: I pray every day for [Chief Medicine Robe and his work] and I have told my community to do the same.'

Frithjof Schuon's next direct encounter with Plains Indians was with Thomas and Susie Yellowtail¹³ in Paris in 1953, when the Yellowtails

¹³ Susie Yellowtail was the first American Indian registered nurse and a tireless advocate for her tribe. She is enshrined in the Montana Hall of Fame in the State Capital at Helena. Thomas Yellowtail became one of the most admired American Indian spiritual leaders of the last century. The story of his life and the preservation of the Crow-Shoshone Sun Dance is published in Fitzgerald ed., *Yellowtail*. Yellowtail's recounting of the Crow Sun Dance is also the subject of a fully illustrated book and documentary film of the same title, *Native Spirit: The Sun Dance Way*.

were touring Europe with an American Indian dance troupe.¹⁴ Then in the winter of 1954, the Yellowtails became the first house guests in the Schuons' new home in Lausanne. With these two visits began a friendship between Yellowtail and Schuon that became even closer in later years.¹⁵ At the time this friendship was formed, Yellowtail had not yet received his function as the preeminent Sun Dance chief of the Crow tribe, a role he fulfilled for the last thirty years of his life.

In the last decade of his life, Schuon singled out two men in his private conversations whom he called his profound spiritual friends:

¹⁴ While in Paris, Schuon and Yellowtail had a series of profound discussions and one evening Yellowtail held a Sun Dance prayer ceremony that Schuon and a few of his friends attended. Schuon later commented, 'Yellowtail is a saintly man and we immediately talked of spiritual things, about religion and prayer. It was very interesting and I saw him every day' (1991 film interview). One month after this encounter, Schuon described in a letter to Titus Burckhardt two of his subsequent visionary experiences associated with the meeting: 'Assuredly, the meeting with the Indians was a decisive experience. Yellowtail—who also bears the name Medicine Rock Chief—said to me, amongst other things, that he prayed that what I wished to understand in the Indian tradition would be made clear to me: "Maybe in a dream," he added. As I left Paris, I was as if surrounded by a spiritual magic, in such a way that everything appeared to me as being quite distant; every distraction was for me unbearable. Two days later, towards morning just before awakening, I had the following dream: I was kneeling down and—like Indians in the Sun Dance—I had an eagle-bone whistle in my mouth and was looking towards the sun, whilst from all sides countless buffaloes came rushing and a thousand voices, from all quarters of the sky, sang: "They say: a herd of buffalo is coming . . ." This was sung in Lakota or Absaroka, but I understood it in my dream. I had however forgotten that this was the sacred Sun Dance Song; my wife reminded me when I told her my dream; in fact, this song is mentioned in Black Elk's book, and it runs thus: "A herd of buffalo is coming, it is here now! Their blessing will come to us; it is with us now!" A few days later, when invoking the Supreme Name, I fell into a light sleep; all at once I had a sacred stone Pipe in my mouth and saw the smoke rising; the smoke mingled with the Name *Allah* and, as it were, wrote it in space.'

¹⁵ The Yellowtail visit to the Schuon home in Lausanne also established a link between Schuon, Brown, Yellowtail, and Black Elk that centres on Black Elk's ceremonial pipe bag for his sacred pipe. Black Elk gave his ceremonial pipe bag to Joseph Brown during the time that Brown recorded *The Sacred Pipe*. In 1950 Brown gave this sacred object to Frithjof Schuon in appreciation for the help and support Schuon gave to Brown before, during, and after his stay with Black Elk. In 1954, as a measure of Schuon's respect for Yellowtail, Schuon presented Black Elk's pipe bag to Yellowtail during his European trip so that it could be reunited with its land of origin. This pipe bag remained one of Thomas Yellowtail's most prized possessions for the rest of his life. Thomas Yellowtail related this story to me on several occasions. See also 'Frithjof Schuon's Role in Preserving the Red Indian Spirit', *Sophia* 4:2, 1998.

Titus Burckhardt and Thomas Yellowtail. Schuon wrote about his relationship with Yellowtail:

With Yellowtail I have a quite special relationship; between him and me there is a kind of unspoken friendship that is rooted in our natures. He belongs to those people of whom one knows they will go to Heaven, because the contrary would be quite unimaginable. Yellowtail is a combination of a kind of childlike earth-heaviness and simplicity with an undertone of saintliness ... at a deeper level, something contemplative, sacerdotal, serene, profoundly good and God-centred. When he speaks, he strings image upon image, the flow of speech is mild, slow, and endless, free of all self-mirroring and hypocrisy; withal he is a rock, not out of hardness, but out of strength and patience, and something recollected and profound permeates his whole being. He always accompanies his words with Indian gestures, thereby adding a picturesque and solemn quality to his monotonous and meditative speech. ... This infinitely mild, yet tough man seems to live outside time, as if time flowed more slowly for him. (*Memories and Meditations*)

Four years later—in 1958—the Schuons travelled to Brussels in order to meet a group of sixty Sioux who had come to give Wild West performances in connection with the World's Fair. One Lakota couple that the Schuons met in Belgium was Jackson and Elva One Feather, who became life-long friends.¹⁶ These contacts quickly led to the Schuons' first sojourn among the Plains Indians in their own country.

The Schuons then spent the summers of both 1959 and 1963 in the American West meeting with Indian leaders and, once again, lifelong friendships were formed, including Benjamin Black Elk.¹⁷ On each trip

¹⁶ Their son, Gerald One Feather, later became the tribal chairman of the Pine Ridge Reservation, the highest elected office on this reservation.

¹⁷ At the request of Marco Pallis, the Schuons were accompanied in 1959 by Paul Goble, who was then a young artist with a great love of the American Indians. Goble has since written and illustrated many books on the American Indians and is the winner of the Caldecott Award for children's books. The Schuons were accompanied in 1963 by Whitall and Barbara Perry. Schuon's Travel Journal for his first trip to the American West contains the following postscript: 'Two months after our return home from America, Reginald Laubin wrote me the following lines: "In September a few of our Arapaho and Sioux friends came over to put on a *Yuwipi* ceremony for us. In the sweat tipi they said prayers for their friends and they included Mr. Schuon, for help and

they attended a Crow-Shoshone Sun Dance with the Yellowtails. Schuon wrote about the Sun Dance:

The opening of the Sun Dance was one of the most powerful things I have ever witnessed. ... The clear symbolical significance and the elemental convincing power of the Sun Dance are quite overwhelming. The Tree is the axis, and this is in our heart; the various elements of our soul revolve around this axis, moving backwards and forwards in exteriorization and interiorization, discrimination and union.

On the Tree hangs the buffalo head, adorned with sprigs of sage, facing the sunset, and also the eagle facing the sunrise; the sprigs of sage hang down beneath the buffalo's eyes. The buffalo is the sacred, primordial power and fecundity of the earth, and the eagle is the light that comes from above, the Revelation; the buffalo is mountain or rock, and the eagle sky and lightning; but the buffalo is also the sun, or the earthly image thereof.

The Sun Dance is remembrance of God, purification from the multiple and the outward, union with the One and the Real. ('1959 Travel Journal')

At Pine Ridge in 1959, the Schuons were adopted into the family of Chief James Red Cloud, a grandson of the great chief known to history. The old chief gave Schuon the name "Brave Eagle," while with the Lakota there were many "memorable evenings." Later that summer, at All-American Indian Days in Sheridan, Wyoming, the Schuons were officially received into the Sioux tribe by a delegation of tribal members and Schuon was given the name "Bright Star."¹⁸

guidance in his wonderful work in bringing about an understanding and realisation that so many religions are alike." We never dreamed that they knew of you, so you can imagine our surprise and delight when they mentioned your name and even had a copy of your splendid article on Indian religion. They were very much impressed by your good words. And all help is from God alone!"

¹⁸ Schuon recorded this comment about the adoption ceremony, "The master of ceremonies of the Absaroke—he was called Medicine Crow—said to me as he gave me my name: "Your name is Bright Star; each time we see the Morning Star we shall remember you" (Travel Journal, August 11, 1959). His wife also received a name from Chief Red Cloud and another at Sheridan, but she gives preference to her first Indian name, "Eagle People Woman," given to her by old Black Elk through the intermediary of Joseph Brown.

Schuon wrote in *Memories and Meditations* about his visit to the Far West: ‘I believe it was only then that my soul was fully healed of the wounds of my youth; I also received from the Indians a special kind of spiritual blessing.’

In September 1980 Schuon immigrated to the United States, building a home in the hills and forests of Southern Indiana for the last eighteen years of his life. In October 1980 his Indian friends, Thomas and Susie Yellowtail, came to Bloomington for their annual autumn visit.¹⁹ They were the first visitors in Schuon’s new home in America, just as they had been the first visitors to stay in Schuon’s home in Lausanne in 1953. Later that same month Schuon wrote about the Yellowtails’ visit:

Early this morning the Yellowtails left after a fortnight’s stay at the Fitzgeralds’, whose house is close by. ... [E]very evening at the Fitzgeralds’ house rites of healing, with long prayers, took place, in the course of which Yellowtail touched and stroked friends to be treated with his eagle fan. I was the first he treated, and this contact with the spiritual power of his eagle feathers had a special meaning for me: it was a meeting, through the medium of the Indian world, with the *Religio perennis*, and this at the beginning of my stay on this continent.

When we showed the Indians our new house, Yellowtail said a long prayer in our home and so to speak consecrated it, and this again had a meaning similar to that of the above-mentioned event.²⁰

It was some years later—in 1987, after Schuon’s move to America—that Thomas Yellowtail adopted Frithjof Schuon into his family and the Crow tribe. At the adoption ceremony Yellowtail said of Schuon, ‘He is my brother. We are in the same boat together in all things.’²¹ That same evening Yellowtail said, ‘My spiritual family is in Bloomington.’

¹⁹ Thomas Yellowtail, the venerable Crow Sun Dance chief, came to Bloomington, Indiana for periods of two or three weeks every October from 1975 until his death in 1993. He spent one month in Bloomington in March 1982 after the death of his beloved wife, Susie, and he came to Bloomington in March 1993 for a visit that included a celebration of his 90th birthday.

²⁰ Letter to Leo Schaya, October 20, 1980.

²¹ In a film interview in 1992 Yellowtail spoke about Schuon, ‘I think that he is a great man. ... I know that people come over here to see him from other countries—from all

Whenever Schuon met with representatives of different esoteric traditions the conversation inevitably turned to the underlying Truth (*sophia perennis*) within each religion, and his trips to the American West provide one particularly memorable example. During Schuon's travels he carried with him photographs of spiritual leaders from various esoteric traditions that he often showed to people he was visiting. Schuon later wrote an article that details his profound interaction with the "Keeper of the Sacred Arrows" of the Cheyenne tribe, including the reaction of the American Indian holy man when he saw the photograph of the Jagadguru of Kanchipuram. In Schuon's later article, which is dedicated to the Jagadguru,²² he explains that 'A spiritual encounter between His Holiness the Jagadguru and a Red Indian holy man has taken place, through the medium of a picture of His Holiness and a prayer of the Red Indian.' Schuon concludes his article by explaining:

All this may give the impression of a rather singular contribution in honour of His Holiness the Jagadguru; but it is in reality not so unrelated, and this for three main reasons: firstly, it is certainly a great event that, for the first time in history, a Red Indian holy man manifests his love for a Hindu holy man; secondly, this apparently small incident reminds us of the unity of the Primordial *Sanatana Dharma*, which is more or less hidden beneath the many forms of intrinsically orthodox Traditions; and this unity is especially represented by the very function of the Jagadguru, who incarnates the Universal Truth. Thirdly, this little incident marking a symbolical encounter between a Red Indian priest and a Hindu priest was in fact an act of prayer; and it shows us that in prayer all earthly differences such as space and time are transcended, and that in prayer we are all united in one state of purity and in one perfume of Deliverance.

RP: *Some detractors of Frithjof Schuon have reproached him for depicting Native American traditions in a romantic manner. What is your answer to them?*

over the world. I regard him as a holy man. ... Considering this and because he is a good friend, my wife and I decided that we'd adopt him. We did something well worth doing by adopting a great man into the family.'

²² 'His Holiness and the Medicine Man'—Schuon's entire article is posted on the Internet site of the Jagadguru's ashram, <http://www.kamakoti.org/souv/5-24.html>.

Many scholars today place an emphasis on how a religion was understood and lived by the common man. In the process they sometimes seem to forget that each spiritual civilization also has a human ideal to which all people strive and that the heart of a spiritual tradition is represented and preserved by the exemplars—the great saints and sages—even though it is evident that not all men attain the ideal. Is it “romantic” to focus on the essential spiritual teachings of a religious civilization and the lives led by its paragons?

RP: To conclude, in your opinion, what is the role of Frithjof Schuon in preserving and perpetuating Native American traditions and the contemporary Native American community?

Schuon’s role in guiding Joseph Brown to Black Elk has already been discussed. In addition, Schuon also had a role in the preservation of the Crow-Shoshone spiritual traditions, which started when he introduced Joseph Brown to Thomas Yellowtail. In 1971 I was Joseph Brown’s graduate teaching assistant at Indiana University when Brown introduced me to Yellowtail. With Schuon’s encouragement, I later recorded and edited Yellowtail’s autobiography about the sacred rites of the Crow-Shoshone Sun Dance,²³ thus helping to preserve the sacred wisdom of the Crow-Shoshone tribes for future generations. Frithjof Schuon therefore helped to preserve and perpetuate both the Lakota and Crow-Shoshone spiritual traditions.²⁴ Schuon’s own writings on American Indian spirituality provide abundant evidence to support his view that, ‘The Indian world represents on this earth a value that is irreplaceable; it possesses something unique and enchanting ... which it

²³ Fitzgerald ed., *Yellowtail*. I also produced two documentary films and edited a companion book, *Native Spirit: The Sun Dance Way*, about the Crow-Shoshone Sun Dance from films and photographs of the Sun Dance. The book and films use Yellowtail’s words and film interviews with American Indian spiritual leaders from seven different tribes. They were published in 2007 by World Wisdom.

²⁴ Schuon also reviewed Brown’s manuscript for *The Sacred Pipe* and years later the manuscript for *Yellowtail*. Both Schuon and Yellowtail contributed to the preparation of *Indian Spirit* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2003; revised and enlarged edition, 2006), a book that presents traditional wisdom and rare photographs of the pre-preservation Indians, many of which are from Schuon’s personal collection of photographs.

expresses with profound originality.’ Most of his writings on Plains spirituality are included in the anthology entitled, *The Feathered Sun*. Finally, after Schuon’s adoption into the Sioux tribe, he began the practice of offering a prayer with tobacco on the nights of the full moon for the preservation and perpetuation of the spiritual traditions of the American Indians.

Perhaps Frithjof Schuon’s most enduring contribution to American Indian spirituality will be invisible in the world, owing to the nature of prayer. This was put succinctly by Thomas Merton,²⁵ one of Schuon’s Christian admirers:

Let us not forget the redemptive power of the hermit, the monk, the recluse, the bodhisattva, the nun, the sannyasi who out of pity for the universe, out of loyalty to mankind, and without a spirit of bitterness or resentment, withdraw into the healing silence of the wilderness, or of poverty, or of obscurity, not in order to preach to others but to heal in themselves the wounds of the whole world.²⁶

²⁵ Thomas Merton, the famous Trappist monk, was influenced by Schuon’s writings in the latter part of his life, writing to Marco Pallis, one of Schuon’s Buddhist followers, ‘I think Schuon has exactly the right view. ... I appreciate [him] more and more ... [and] am most grateful for the chance to be in contact with people like [him]’ (published in Merton’s *Hidden Ground of Love*). After receiving a subsequent message from Schuon, Merton wrote in his personal journal, ‘That I can be accepted in a personal and confidential relationship [with Schuon], not exactly as a disciple but at any rate as one of those who are entitled to consult him directly and personally. This is a matter of great importance to me. ... It can have tremendous effects. I see that already’ (Journal entry for June 16, 1966, quoted in *Merton and Sufism*, ed. Rob Baker and Gray Henry, Louisville, Fons Vitae, 2000, pp.20-221).

²⁶ ‘Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude’ from *Disputed Questions*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960. Schuon wrote a similar thought, ‘[T]he world need hermits as much as preachers. In Islam it is said that the equilibrium of the world depends largely on the existence—sometimes hidden—of the saints, or also on the Invocation of God’s Name. If man is not holy, nonetheless, the Name is holy, and man is made holy by the invocation’ (Letter to Hans Küry, December 20, 1951).



‘The Indian world represents on this earth a value that is irreplaceable; it possesses something unique and enchanting. When one encounters it in its unspoiled forms, one is aware that it is something altogether different from chaotic savagery; that it is human greatness, and at the same time harbors within itself something mysterious and sacred, which it expresses with profound originality.’

(Frithjof Schuon, 1963 Travel Journal, published in *The Feathered Sun*)

One Word, many tongues*

Timothy Scott

Religious forms

Religion is the language between the Divine and the human, or between the Absolute and the Relative; this is none other than Manifestation itself, and, as Schuon says, ‘To say manifestation is to say limitation.’¹ This it to recognise that religion is “that which binds,” for that which binds is the “boundary” of indefinite Manifestation within the Divine Infinitude. ‘A religion’ says Frithjof Schuon, ‘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.’² Thus Nasr observes 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.’³ Schuon remarks that a religion is ‘not limited by what it includes but by what it excludes’.⁴ This has its root in the fact that Manifestation limits itself by exclusion of the Infinite. Still, as Schuon continues, ‘since every religion is intrinsically a totality, this exclusion cannot impair the religion’s deepest contents’.⁵ A religion, strictly speaking, must satisfy all spiritual possibilities.

At the heart of religion lies the *religio perennis*; the essential and principal relationship between the Divine and the human. It is the two-

* This essay was composed from two original writings combined, amended and rewritten: ‘Concerning religious forms’, *Sacred Web* 8, 2001, pp.73-98 and ‘Preliminary Remarks on Reclaiming the Meaning of “Religion”’, *Sacred Web* 7, 2001, pp.59-66.

¹ Schuon, *ITFA*, p.35.

² Schuon, *UL*, p.144.

³ Nasr, *IRI*, p.15.

⁴ Schuon, *ITFA*, p.79.

⁵ Schuon, *ITFA*, p.79.

way language of communication between man and God, where the term “language” refers to revelation, ritual, prayer and mantra, as well as the Eternal communication of the cosmogonic Word. The Intellectual core of the *religio perennis* is the *sophia perennis*, or universal *gnosis*, which is essentially concerned with metaphysics. The *sophia perennis* has as its application and complement the *cosmologia perennis*, the science of cosmology.⁶ The *religio perennis* has as its complement and entelechy *eschatology* which, at its deepest level, is the return of man to God, the realisation of “Supreme Union.” Moreover, as Ibn al-’Arabi says, it is not a question of “becoming one” with God or the Godhead, rather becoming conscious of the Divine Unity which is.⁷

At the “historical” level the religious consciousness develops according to a sequential schema that in turn accords with the successional mode of Being. Gershom Scholem sets out such a schema in his work, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*.⁸ To summarise: The first stage of religious consciousness is one in which no “abyss” exists between “Man and God.” Scholem calls this the “mythical epoch”: it is the Golden Age, the Edenic state. This is the “immediate consciousness” of the “essential unity,” where this unity “precedes duality and in fact knows nothing of it.” Metaphysically speaking this is religion *in divinis* or *in potentia* inasmuch as it corresponds at the analogous level with Formless Manifestation. Thus, says Meister Eckhart, “before the foundation of the world” (Jn.17:24) everything in the universe was not mere nothing, but was in possession of virtual existence⁹. In this first stage, says Scholem, “Nature” is the scene of man’s relation to God. Metaphysically this reflects the non-distinction of man and God within “primordial Nature,” where Nature is understood in the same sense as the Hindu term “*prakriti*.” *Prakriti* is said to mean “that which is transcendent”: ‘The prefix *pra* means “higher”; *krti* (action) stands for creation. Hence she who in creation is transcendent is the transcendent goddess known under the name of Nature (*prakriti*).’¹⁰

⁶ Nasr, *KS*, p.190.

⁷ Uncited reference in Schuon, *SPHF*, p.170.

⁸ Scholem, *MTJM*, pp.7-8.

⁹ *Commentary on John* n.45, see also *Parables of Genesis* n.55.

¹⁰ *Brahma-vaivarta Purana* 2.1.5. [43] cited in Daniélou, *GI*, p.31.

The second stage is the “creative epoch” in which the emergence of formal religion *per se* occurs. Scholem remarks that ‘Religion’s supreme function is to destroy the dream-harmony of Man, Universe and God.’ In this “classical form” ‘religion signifies the creation of a vast abyss, conceived as absolute, between God, the infinite and transcendental Being, and man, the finite creature.’ This “abyss” can be crossed by nothing but “the *voice*”: the voice of God, directing and law-giving in His revelation, and the voice of man in prayer. Scholem observes that the great monotheistic religions live and unfold in the ever-present consciousness of this bipolarity. This reflects the cosmogonic Voice which, as the principle of Universal Being, implies the bipolarity of ontological Essence and Substance. ‘It is true’ says Guénon, ‘that Being is beyond all distinction, since the first distinction is that of “essence” and “substance” or of *Purusha* and *Prakriti*; nevertheless *Brahma*, as *Ishwara* or Universal Being, is described as *savishesha*, that is to say as “implying distinction,” since He is the immediate determining principle of distinction.’¹¹ For the humankind of this period the scene of religion is no longer Nature, but the moral and religious action of man and the community of men, whose interplay brings about history as, in a sense, the stage on which the drama of man’s relation to God unfolds.¹²

It is, in a sense, in reaction to the solidification of this “classical” expression of religion that the phenomenon called “mysticism” arises. Scholem likens mysticism to the “romantic period of religion.” ‘Mysticism’ he remarks, ‘does not deny or overlook the abyss; on the contrary, it begins by realising its existence, but from there it proceeds to a quest for the secret that will close it in, the hidden path that will span it. It strives to piece together the fragments broken by the religious cataclysm, to bring back the old unity, which religion has destroyed, but on a plane, where the world of mythology and that of revelation meet in the soul of man.’¹³ The term “mysticism,” as Burckhardt observes, has, like the words “religion” and “man,” suffered at the hands of religious individualism and modern confusion, losing its precision.¹⁴ “Mysticism” derives from the root meaning of “silence,” as in a

¹¹ Guénon, *MB*, p.164. In this context Whitall Perry notes the Vedantic doctrine of *bhedabheda* or ‘Distinction without Difference’ (*WB*, p.15).

¹² Scholem, *MTJM*, p.8.

¹³ Scholem, *MTJM*, p.8.

¹⁴ See Burckhardt, Introduction to *al-Jili*, *al-insan*, p.i, n.1.

knowledge inexpressible because escaping the limits of form. Properly speaking it refers to the idea of “mystery.” This is the mystery of the silence that precedes the speaking of the cosmogonic Word.¹⁵ At the human level this is expressed in the initiatory “Mysteries,” the Greater and Lesser Mysteries. At its metaphysical level “Mystery” refers to the necessary enigma of the relationship between Immanence and Transcendence or between the Relative and the Absolute; the mystery of the Hypostatic Substance; again, the mystery of the Universal Spirit, the Intellect, of which Meister Eckhart says that it is uncreated and not capable of creation yet the principle of Creation. This enigma is an imperative of Universal Existence. Impenetrable to the discursive mind it can only be approached by the likes of the Zen *koan* or the apophatic theology of a pseudo-Dionysius.

Religion is *the* Word and each religion is *a* language. Religion is *the* Form or *Eidos* (Formless Manifestation) and each religion is *a* form. Each religion is inspired by Revelation and prolonged by Tradition. Here Revelation expresses the immutable Essence, which touches upon the Absolute, while Tradition manifests the salvational continuity of the religion in the human Substance. The Divine Essence is of itself supraformal, yet its irruption—merciful and necessary—into the formal Substance allows its perception by the human receptacle. Were Revelation to remain supraformal there would be no dialogue between God and man, which is tantamount to saying that Creation would not be, for the principal Revelation is the Word ‘through which all things came into being’, the Islamic *kun*, “be!” This is to say that religion would not be. Moreover, this would be to deny the Absolute nature of God, for the Absolute by definition includes the Infinite and the infinity of God requires His affirmation, which is the Word made flesh.¹⁶ ‘Revelation’ as Schuon says, ‘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.’¹⁷ Revelation is both supraformal and formal; it is the mysterious isthmus between the Divine and the human, the Islamic *barzakh*, the half-divine, half-cosmic

¹⁵ “Precedes” in a logical rather than chronological sense, for, of course, this is “before” the distinction of time.

¹⁶ See Schuon, *SPHF*, p.166.

¹⁷ Schuon, *G:DW*, p.26.

frontier separating, and in another sense uniting, Manifestation and the Principle. Each religion is the absolute and supraformal Truth revealed in a relative and formal language.

To recognise the formal aspect of a religion is to recognise its mutability and relativity. The forms that constitute the tradition of a religion are relative by dint of their manifestation. Nevertheless the Relative contains something of the Absolute, for if it did not relativities could not be distinguished qualitatively from one another.¹⁸ As Ibn al-ʿArabi says, ‘Were it not that the Reality permeates all beings as form, and were it not for the intelligible realities, no determination would be manifest in individual beings.’¹⁹ The essence of all traditional forms is the essence of the revelation they express; the essence of a revelation is the essence of Revelation *per se*, and this is the supraformal Essence, the taste of the Absolute. The traditional forms of a religion are, in the strictest sense, immutable in essence and mutable in substance.

To admit the mutability of forms, albeit contingently, is to question the guarantee of their authorship. If the forms manifest—and necessarily so—in the language of man, how then is their Divine origin and authority to be recognised as such? How are we to know Divine intervention delivered through a human instrument as opposed to purely human invention? Considered further this question applies itself equally to the initial institution of a religious Tradition as it does to changes made to religious forms throughout the lifespan of a tradition. And this is to question the very guarantee of Revelation itself.

This line of thinking supposes a fundamental error, namely, that it is man who recognises the Divine in the Revelation. In truth it is the Divine in man that senses something of Itself in the Revelation. Schuon: ‘In the face of the Message of Truth, man could not legitimately pose the question of credibility if he were not himself a form of truth, hence of conformity to the True.’²⁰ This remembrance, the Platonic *anamnesia*, is affected by adequation, a “making equal to,” rather than any rational assessment. The human does not grasp the Divine, rather

¹⁸ Schuon, *LS*, p.17.

¹⁹ Ibn al-ʿArabi, *Fusus*, p.57.

²⁰ Schuon, *DH*, p.118.

the Divine asserts itself in the human.²¹ This is the “sense of the sacred” and it is this that guarantees the Divine authorship of Revelation and the traditions that issue from it.²² Schuon: ‘the sense of the sacred is an adequation to the Real, with the difference however, that the knowing subject is then the entire soul and not merely the discriminative intelligence.’²³ ‘The sacred’ says Schuon, ‘is the projection of the Immutable into the mutable’. He continues to remark that ‘the sense of the sacred consists not only in perceiving this projection, but also in discovering in things the trace of the Immutable, to the point of not letting oneself be deceived and enslaved by the mutable.’²⁴ The “sense of the sacred” is the innate consciousness of the presence of God: it is to feel this presence sacramentally in symbols and ontologically in all things.²⁵ Truth affirms by Its own nature.²⁶ Here, as Schuon is wont to remark, we are far from scholastic arguments, yet there is an argument nonetheless. The “sense of the sacred” may be ignored—for it is the nature of man to be free even unto his own detriment—but it cannot be manufactured nor perverted, for it is beyond what man can affect.

Revelation is the Word of God directed to man for human salvation. God wills the salvation of man. This, as Schuon remarks, is the essential purpose of religion: ‘the divine wish to save men steeped in passion,’ not necessarily to present an explanation of universal Principles and of the world, but necessary precisely to save.²⁷ Man does not save himself: the Word precedes man’s reading of It.²⁸ The forms of a religion are mutable contingent on their salvational efficiency. This efficiency is judged precisely by God, for man could not rise above himself to know what he lacked. The lesser cannot contain the greater. Man’s salvation

²¹ It is this Divine presence that is referred to in the *hadith*: ‘Perfect piety is that you adore God as if you were seeing Him, and if you do not see Him, He nonetheless sees you.’

²² See Schuon, ‘The Sense of the Sacred’ in *DH*, pp.103-115; Schuon, ‘The Sense of the Absolute’ in *G:DW*.

²³ Schuon, *DH*, p.103.

²⁴ Schuon, *DH*, p.105.

²⁵ Schuon, *DH*, p.104.

²⁶ ‘Truth by her own simplicity is known’ Robert Herrick (1591-1674, English lyric and spiritual poet) cited in Perry, *TTW*, p.574.

²⁷ Schuon, *ITFA*, p.110.

²⁸ ‘In truth I tell you, before Abraham ever was, I am’ (Jn.8:58).

comes in relinquishing his control, abandoning himself to the Divine Mercy. Salvation comes from above, not below.

Diversity of Revelation²⁹

‘Intrinsically’ says Schuon, “‘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.”³⁰ Schuon again: ‘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.’³¹ Diversity is a metaphysical necessity of Creation; diversity of Revelation is God’s merciful recognition of man’s remoteness, separation and isolation.

Schuon observes that 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.’³² Elsewhere he remarks that ‘what determines the difference among forms of Truth is the difference among human receptacles.’³³ In

²⁹ Oldmeadow recognises this as one of the *leitmotifs* of Schuon’s work on religion (*Traditionalism*, p.69); by way of examples see Schuon, *TUR; G:DW*, ‘Diversity of Revelation’; *ITFA*, ‘Diversity of Paths.’

³⁰ Schuon, *ITFA*, p.110.

³¹ Schuon, *G:DW*, 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).

³² Schuon, ‘No Activity Without Truth’ in Needleman ed., *SG*, p.4.

³³ Schuon, *G:DW*, p.25.

the words of an Indian saying, ‘He takes the forms that are imagined by His worshippers.’³⁴ Humanity, according to Schuon, is divided into several fundamentally different branches, which constitute so many complete humanities, more or less closed in on themselves.³⁵ To speak of each tradition being “closed in on itself” is to recognise the “relative absolute”³⁶ nature of each of the diverse revelations. Schuon remarks that ‘God, when he speaks, expresses Himself in absolute mode; but this absoluteness relates to the universal content rather than the form’³⁷.

To speak of the “difference of human receptacles” is to recognise distinction both between individuals and between collectivities. 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 implies, at least in modern thought, a negative sense, yet to say limitation is equally to say orientation, which recognises the positive notion of “order.” These human collectivities may be ordered or mapped according to temporal and geographical dictations. At a deeper level they can be mapped according to the notions of “race” and “caste.”³⁸ 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.³⁹

³⁴ As per Coomaraswamy, ‘Sri Ramakrishna and Religious Tolerance’ in *SP2*, p.36. Again: ‘The colour of the water is the colour of the vessel containing it’ (Abu ‘l-Qasim al-Junayd). Coomaraswamy adds, ‘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.’

³⁵ Schuon, *G:DW*, p.25.

³⁶ Schuon coins this “ill-sounding yet metaphysically useful” expression with reference to the theological perspective and the reality to which it refers (see *ITFA*, p.57).

³⁷ Schuon, *G:DW*, p.26.

³⁸ See Schuon, *CR*.

³⁹ This constitutes the fate of the modern quantitative mentality. See Guénon, ‘The Principle of Individuation’ and ‘Uniformity and Unity’ in *RQ*.

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. Schuon remarks that the “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.’⁴⁰ Each language is specific to the psychological and spiritual needs of the collectivity to which it is directed; moreover it constitutes a “holy strategy,” what the Buddhists call *upaya*, “skillful means.” To talk of such a “strategy” is to recognise a “strategist” whose intention is precisely salvation. ‘One has to realise’ says Schuon, ‘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.’⁴¹ 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.’⁴² ‘[T]o speak of form’ says Schuon, ‘is to speak of limits and at the same time therefore of the virtuality of error.’⁴³ 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 require evil and a Divinity implies the mystery of creation by virtue of its infinity.’⁴⁴ As Coomaraswamy remarks, the exclusive attachment to any one dogma, however pertinent, entails the error of idolatry: ‘the Truth itself is

⁴⁰ Schuon, *G:DW*, p.26.

⁴¹ Schuon, *ITFA*, p.22.

⁴² Schuon, *ITFA*, p.26.

⁴³ Schuon, *SPHF*, p.70.

⁴⁴ Schuon, *SPHF*, p.73.

inexpressible.’⁴⁵ These “errors” are the illusion of Relativity or *Maya*, yet they are precisely illusions and suppose no integral error in either their essence or their efficient purpose.

The “sense of the absolute”—the criteria 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 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 exoteric forms. ‘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.’⁴⁶

To say the diversity of human collectivities requires the diversity of Revelation admits a certain causal relationship. This is allowed from a certain perspective; however, in truth it is Revelation that precedes human diversity. This is to return to the idea of Revelation as 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 relativized in view of a dimension of its Infinity’⁴⁷. And 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.”⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Coomaraswamy, ‘Sri Ramakrishna and Religious Tolerance’: *SP2*, p.37.

⁴⁶ Smith, Introduction to Schuon, *TUR*, p.xxv.

⁴⁷ Schuon, *ITFA*, p.73.

⁴⁸ On the “law of inverse analogy” see Schuon, *TB*, p.84, n.2; *SPHF*, p.106, n.1; *LS*, pp.35-6; Guénon, *RQ*, Ch.25; *FS*, Chs.52 & 53; *GT*, Ch.7. These ideas are outlined in my ‘Understanding “Symbol”’: *Sacred Web* 6, 2000, pp.91-106.

Moreover, the manifestation of diversity accords with precise metaphysical logic. Formal manifestation implies limit but Manifestation is not arbitrary limitation, for Creation is the “image” of God and thus of Divine Order; this is to say that the limitations inherent in Manifestation are precise according to their symbolic efficaciousness. By way of example: it is sometimes said that there are seven fundamental traditions: the Primordial or Mythological Tradition (of which the Koori peoples of Australia and the Plains Indians might be said to have represented large scale vestiges well into our “modern” or post-mythological age), the Chinese Tradition, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.⁴⁹ With Islam it is said that the age of Revelation came to a close, which is simply to deny the instigation of another great Tradition. The limitation placed on the number of revelations has nothing arbitrary about it but rather expresses at the deepest level the fundamental symbolic structure of Being, which manifests in the six spatial directions of the symbolic sphere from the seventh “Primordial” point or centre, both origin and end. This centre point is expressed by the Primordial Tradition. The six “historical” revelations manifest in temporal succession the six symbo-spatial directions of Being.

Other schema have been suggested such as the presentation by William Stoddart of three fundamental traditional lineages: the Hyperborean Shamanisms (Taoism, Confucianism, Shinto, Siberian Shamanism, Bon, and American Indian religion); the Aryan Mythologies (Hinduism, Buddhism, Graeco-Roman religion, ancient Germano-Celtic religion, Jainism, and Zoroastrianism); and the Semitic Monotheisms (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam).⁵⁰ Here it is not a matter of disagreement between two schemas but rather a matter of an emphasis, which is far from arbitrary, but expresses a precise symbolic structure; and here it is enough to say that the ternary is associated with the process of manifestation at a particular level just as the septenary is.

⁴⁹ See for example Oldmeadow’s diagram, *Traditionalism*, p.77.

⁵⁰ W. Stoddart, *Outline of Hinduism*, Foundation for Traditional Studies, 1993, p.11 and *Outline of Buddhism*, Foundation for Traditional Studies, 1998, p.10.

The differences in human types are fundamentally mapped by race and caste.⁵¹ ‘Race’ remarks Schuon, ‘is a form while caste is a spirit’.⁵² Race implies horizontal distinction whereas caste expresses vertical gradation. Again, this is to say that caste exists throughout race. Spiritual typologies can also be classified according to either a contemplative or active tendency. Again the division can be made between exoterists and esoterists. These distinctions are not exclusive but exist in each human collectivity. Each religion must, according to its relatively absolute nature, accommodate all spiritual possibilities. Moreover, the lines of demarcation between all the above typologies are never absolute, existing as they do in the formal plane. This means, as Schuon observes, that the ‘recognition of sufficiently homogeneous human groups or spiritualities does not prevent some individuals from being able to leave their framework, for the human collectivity never has anything absolute about it.’⁵³

Orthodoxy and Grace

In the final analysis the sense of the sacred guarantees or “proves”⁵⁴ the Divine authorship of a traditional form. With regard to the initial revelation of a religious tradition it is the “proximity of the Divine”⁵⁵ that makes the sense of the sacred somewhat undeniable. The miraculous growth of the great religions is evidence, if not proof, of this fact. However, religion is precisely necessitated by the degeneration in our ability to recognise the sacred.⁵⁶ This is to say that were man fully conscious of the sacred there would be no need of religious forms to

⁵¹ Schuon is careful in discussing these terms to recognise the accretions of meaning imposed upon them by human passions (*CR*, pp.7-9). In using these terms Schuon has in mind sacred institutions expressing metaphysical principles.

⁵² Schuon, *CR*, p.37.

⁵³ Schuon, *G:DW*, p.25.

⁵⁴ Schuon: ‘In order to clarify the function of metaphysical proof, one must start from the idea that human intelligence coincides in its essence with certainty of the Absolute’ (*LT*, p.57). Again: ‘In the intellectual order logical proof is only a quite provisional crystallisation of intuition, the modes of which...are incalculable’ (*SPHF*, p.10).

⁵⁵ ‘Of course the Divine is always immediate—“closer than your jugular”; to talk of “proximity” is to talk of the illusion of separation engendered by relativization; it is man who believes himself “near” or “far” from God.

⁵⁶ Jesus said: ‘It is not those that are well who need the doctor, but the sick. I have come to call not the upright but sinners to repentance’ (Lk.5:31-32). Again: ‘For the Son of man has come to seek out and save what was lost’ (Lk.19:10).

guide them back to God, for they would “see God everywhere,” which, amounts to saying—and quiet rightly too—that Creation is the form or “image” of God.⁵⁷ The movement away from the Divine source—concurrent with manifestation—comes with a decline in our sense of the sacred; this effectively means that there needs be an “efficient guarantee” of the forms. This is orthodoxy. The orthodoxy of a tradition is the conformity of the forms to the principles revealed. As René Guénon remarks, the necessary and sufficient condition of orthodoxy is the ‘concordance of a conception with the fundamental principle of the tradition’.⁵⁸ Similarly, Schuon says that ‘orthodoxy is the principle of formal homogeneity proper to any authentically spiritual perspective’.⁵⁹

Schuon remarks that there are two principal modes of orthodoxy, ‘one being essential or intrinsic and the other formal or extrinsic: the latter concerns its accordance with truth in some particular revealed form, the former its accordance with essential and universal truth’.⁶⁰

These two modes may sometimes oppose another outwardly. He gives the example of Buddhism which, ‘on the one hand is extrinsically heterodox in relation to Hinduism, because it is separated from the basic forms of the latter, and on the other hand it is intrinsically orthodox because it accords with the universal truth from which it derives.’⁶¹ Thus Hinduism is able to recognise the Buddha as an *avatar* of Vishnu.⁶² ‘By contrast’ continues Schuon, ‘the Brahmo-samaj, like every other form of “progressive” neo-Hinduism, is heterodox twice over, firstly in relation to Hinduism and secondly in relation to truth itself, heterodox therefore both from the particular point of view of form and from the universal point of view of essence.’⁶³

Orthodoxy binds Tradition to its principle; however Tradition is not bound by orthodoxy. Rather orthodoxy is an element of Tradition.

⁵⁷ In a sense Religion serves to create the abyss between the Divine and the human which it then sets out to cross; see my ‘Preliminary Remarks on Reclaiming the Meaning of “Religion”’: *Sacred Web* 7, 2001, p.64.

⁵⁸ Guénon, *MB*, p.15.

⁵⁹ Schuon, *LS*, p.1, see ‘Orthodoxy and Intellectuality.’

⁶⁰ Schuon, *LS*, p.1.

⁶¹ Schuon, *LS*, p.1.

⁶² On the relationship between Buddhism and Hinduism see Schuon, ‘The Originality of Buddhism’ in *TB*.

⁶³ Schuon, *LS*, pp.1-2.

Schuon: ‘There are two elements in tradition: orthodoxy and grace.’⁶⁴ God sometimes intervenes independently of orthodoxy, and this is grace; but, as Schuon stresses, orthodoxy could not make up for the absence of God.⁶⁵ In this sense Schuon observes: ‘The Pharisees possessed orthodoxy and regularity, but possessed neither grace nor the virtues. They did not possess grace because in practice they put their orthodoxy and regularity in place of their living God. They did not possess virtues because they replaced human values—the moral qualification—by outward observances which, being thus isolated, lost their efficacy.... Christ did not deny their authority—”they sit in Moses’ seat”—but in spite of this he condemned them.’⁶⁶ Orthodoxy reduced to formalism puts the effect before the cause thus severing the link to the Principle. Formalism, in this sense, differs from true orthodoxy in the manner of being its counterfeit and parody.

Tradition is guaranteed concomitantly by orthodoxy and grace, in respect of its salvational efficacy. As an aspect of Tradition grace allows for the mutability of the forms. Schuon: ‘Without ever contradicting orthodoxy grace gives new forms of expression, as circumstance may dictate’.⁶⁷ In truth grace precedes orthodoxy, moreover in the final analysis, grace instigates Tradition. In a certain sense it may be said that Tradition is a proof of Grace or the Divine Mercy, for Religion and each religion is given by the Grace of God for the sake of human salvation.

Orthodoxy can be verified in the extrinsic mode by recourse to scriptural criteria and in the intrinsic mode in light of metaphysical truth; moreover the former is always, in its essence, concordant with the latter. Where scripture appears to contradict metaphysics—such as the insistence of a particular religion’s exclusive salvational quality—this indicates a limitation of the human intellect placed hand in hand with the priority of grace over orthodoxy.

Providence

The Divine All-Possibility requires that God know Himself as “other than God.” As it is said in the words of the famous *hadith qudsi*: ‘Kuntu

⁶⁴ Schuon, *SPHF*, p.83.

⁶⁵ Schuon, *SPHF*, p.82.

⁶⁶ Schuon, *SPHF*, p.83.

⁶⁷ Schuon, *SPHF*, p.83.

kanzan makhfian fa 'ahbabbu 'an 'ur 'afa, fakhalaqtu 'khalqa lakai 'urafa (I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be known, so I created the creation in order that I might be known).’ Again, Schuon: ‘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 Man’s efficient purpose is the realisation of God. As Mister Eckhart says, ‘God cannot know himself without me.’⁶⁹ But for God to perceive Himself through man man must first perceive himself as separate. It is thus that man must suffer the Fall and, equally, that he must be redeemed. Schuon: ‘Man could not not fall, since God could not not create.’⁷⁰ All this in accordance with the Divine Will.

That man should be willed to “return to God” means that Revelation, Tradition and religious forms are divinely willed. As Schuon remarks, in the elements of orthodoxy and grace dwells a third element, which in reality comes first, and this is the Divine Will, ‘of which man can never grasp all the dimensions at one at the same time.’⁷¹ Orthodoxy and grace manifest the intention of the Divine Will to salvation.

To talk of the Divine Will is to talk concurrently, in the words of Boethius, of Providence and Fate: ‘Providence is the divine reason itself. It is set at the head of all things and disposes all things. Fate, on the other hand, is the planned order inherent in things subject to change through the medium of which Providence binds everything in its own place. Providence includes all things at the same time, however diverse or infinite, while Fate controls the motion of different individual things in different places and at different times.’⁷² The relationship between the ever-changing course of Fate and the stable simplicity of Providence is like that between that which is coming into being and that which is, between time and eternity, or between the moving circle and the still point in the middle.⁷³ From the central point of Providence God is

⁶⁸ Schuon, *IPP*, p.185.

⁶⁹ Again: ‘He hath brought me forth in the image of His eternal fatherhood, that I should also be a father and bring forth Him’ (both citations from Perry, *TTW*, p.50).

⁷⁰ Schuon, *SPHF*, p.216.

⁷¹ Schuon, *SPHF*, p.83.

⁷² Boethius, *Consolation*, p.135.

⁷³ Boethius, *Consolation*, pp.136-37.

afforded total and immediate knowledge of all the possibilities that do, or do not, eventuate in the manifest realm of Fate. God is both immanent and transcendent, allowing at the same time man to have free will without the burden of predestination. All destinations are allowed for virtually if not efficiently.⁷⁴ Eteinne Gilson summarises this by stressing the name of “providence”: ‘He does not foresee, he provides; his name is not “foresight” but “providence.”’⁷⁵

God provides according to human need. Human need changes according to man’s remoteness from the Divine. Considered with respect to the macrocosm, man’s remoteness is measured according to a pattern of cyclic degeneration.⁷⁶ The Divine Providence “knows” these patterns in the manner of being their principle. The degeneration of human intelligence and the corresponding adaptation of the forms to meet this are prefigured *in divinis*. The forms are providential; they adapt according to requirement, manifesting as such in the realm of Fate, yet these manifestations are far from arbitrary, pre-existing as they do in Providence. That certain manifestations of truth may appear to contradict earlier manifestations simply reveals, in the words of Martin Lings, that ‘the needs of the eleventh hour are not the same as those of the sixth or seventh.’⁷⁷ Again this is to realise that ‘all contradictory truths are unified in the Truth.’⁷⁸

The meeting of religions

With the movement away from the unified Source there is a corresponding fragmentation into diversity. In what seems paradoxical but is really just this movement viewed from another perspective, the fragmentation into diversity corresponds to the dissolution of manifestation into nondistinction. The Sun is one but its rays are projected indefinitely; in distancing themselves from the Sun the rays lose the luminosity of their source, until they vanish into the darkness.

⁷⁴ ‘If you wish to consider, then, the foreknowledge or prevision by which He discovers all things, it will be more correct to think of it not as a kind of foreknowledge of the future, but as the knowledge of a never ending presence’ (Boethius, *Consolation*, p.165).

⁷⁵ E. Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, London: Sheed and Ward, 1955, p.103.

⁷⁶ The most precise formulation of this exists with the Hindu doctrine of cycles, *Manvantara*.

⁷⁷ M. Lings, *The Eleventh Hour*, Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1987, p.34.

⁷⁸ ‘Abd al-Karim Jili, cited in Perry, *TTW*, p.835.

This darkness is one. The distinction between the Sun and the dark is analogous to that between Essence and Substance. In reality Essence and Substance are One.⁷⁹ As Schuon remarks, Essence and Substance are almost synonymous in practice, differing only in that substance refers to ‘the underlying, immanent, permanent and autonomous nature of a basic reality, whereas essence refers to the reality as such, that is, as “being,” and secondarily as the absolutely fundamental nature of a thing.’ He continues, ‘The notion of essence denotes an excellence which is as it were discontinuous in relation to accidents, whereas the notion of substance implies on the contrary a sort of continuity.’⁸⁰

It is said: ‘I being one become many, and being many become one.’⁸¹ Cosmologically, this refers, in part, to the cyclic nature of manifestation. However, the movement towards nondistinction at the end of an age should not be mistaken for a qualitative movement towards Unity, for, as Guénon has remarked, this is a movement into Uniformity, which is “the Great Parody” of Unity.⁸² This is simply in keeping with the principle of inversion proper to any cycle.

One effect of this levelling of diversity is the revealing of the analogy between forms. This has both beneficent and maleficent results according to the perspective adopted, which is to say, whether it is viewed from the point of view of truth or that of error. Beneficially, the analogy of traditional forms reveals the essential or “transcendental unity” of the forms, while at the same time affirming the Divine Infinitude in the diversity of form. Thus the analogy of two forms acts to enrich each form without ever denying the specific nature of either form.⁸³ Mircea Eliade remarks, ‘We compare or contrast two

⁷⁹ Thus the Greek term *ousia* is translated variously as essence and substance (see Burckhardt, *Alchemy*, p.36, n.3). The same is true of the Arabic term ‘*ayn*’ (see Burckhardt, *ISD*, p.62, n.1).

⁸⁰ Schuon, *ITFA*, p.53, n.1.

⁸¹ *Samyutta-nikaya* II.212, cited in Perry, *TTW*, p.272, to offer but one such example of this formula.

⁸² See Guénon, *RQ*.

⁸³ This is to say with Adrian Snodgrass that ‘adequation is not equality’ (*ATEI*, p.48). Paul Tillich observes that every symbol has ‘a special function which is just *it* and cannot be replaced by more or less adequate symbols’ (‘Religious Symbols and Our Knowledge of God’ in Rowe & Wainwright ed., *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, New York, 1973 p.482). See my ‘Understanding “Symbol”’: *Sacred Web* 6, 2000.

expressions of a symbol not in order to reduce them to a single, pre-existing expression, but in order to discover the process whereby a structure is likely to assume enriched meanings.⁸⁴

In our age it may happen that the understanding of a traditional form can become muddled by the decline in the human intelligence, which is itself somewhat inevitable given the cyclic movement away from the Source. In such cases drawing analogy between forms can serve to clarify. Guénon: ‘The concordances between all traditional forms may be said to represent genuine “synonymies”; that is how we regard them, and just as the explanation of certain things may be easier in one language than in another, so one of these forms may be better fitted than others for expounding certain truths and rendering them easier to understand.’⁸⁵ Coomaraswamy remarks: ‘every tradition is necessarily a partial representation of the truth intended by tradition universally considered; in each tradition something is suppressed, or reserved, or obscured which in another may be found more extensively, more logically, or more brilliantly developed. What then is clear and full in one tradition can be used to develop the meaning of what may be hardly more than alluded to in another.’⁸⁶ Such clarification and enrichment might well occur at any stage of a cycle; the understanding of a form need not become lost before it can be enriched.

There are two principal dangers in the analogy of forms: reductionism and syncretism. Reductionism amounts to a denial of the integrity of the forms. Adrian Snodgrass remarks that, ‘the multivalent nature of the symbol precludes a reductionist methodology.’⁸⁷ As Eliade says, ‘If we retain only one of its significations, in declaring it the only “fundamental” or “first” or “original” signification, we risk not grasping the true message of the symbol.’⁸⁸ Snodgrass stresses this point: ‘An exegesis that does justice to the fullness of the symbol in both its

⁸⁴ M. Eliade, ‘Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism’: Eliade & Kitagawa ed., *The History of Religion: Essays in Methodology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959, pp.86-107.

⁸⁵ Guénon, SC, pp.xi.

⁸⁶ Coomaraswamy, ‘Sri Ramakrishna and Religious Tolerance’: SP2, p.40.

⁸⁷ Snodgrass, SS, p.8.

⁸⁸ M. Eliade, *Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts*, New York: Continuum, 1992, p.5.

horizontal and vertical dimensions will leave its meaning “open” and not confine it within the limiting configuration of a closed hypothesis⁸⁹.

Reductionism leads to a danger particular to our age, being as Guénon called this, the “Reign of Quantity.” It happens that the modern love affair with quantity leads to a situation where man can become lost in an overwhelming sea of analogy. The accumulation of analogous forms is far from the appreciation of the truth that underpins them all. Such seductive accumulation of forms can be seen only too well in the “occult” movements of the 19th and 20th Centuries, particularly in the writings of H. P. Blavatsky and the endless tables of Aleister Crowley. Sensing this truth in all the diverse forms man is unable to give himself wholly to any. One is left knowing *about* the forms rather than knowing the Truth *through* the forms.

‘Syncretism’ as Guénon remarks, ‘consists in assembling from the outside a number of more or less incongruous elements which, when regarded, can never be truly unified; in short, it is a kind of eclecticism, with all the fragmentariness and incoherence that this always implies.’ He contrasts this with synthesis, which, ‘on the other hand, is carried out essentially from within; by this we mean that it properly consists in envisaging things in the unity of their principle, in seeing how they are derived from and dependent on that principle, and thus uniting them, or rather becoming aware of their real unity, by virtue of a wholly inward bond, inherent in what is most profound in their nature.’⁹⁰ ‘Syncretism,’ says Guénon, ‘is something purely outward and superficial; the elements taken from every quarter and put together in this way can never amount to anything more than borrowings that are incapable of being effectively integrated into a doctrine worthy of the name.’⁹¹ In contrast, the synthetic analogy between forms in no way indicates “borrowings” but pertains to ‘the Primordial Tradition from which these forms have issued either directly or indirectly.’⁹²

We have said that examples of the Primordial or Mythological Tradition are, or at least were, recognisable in our day and age in the Koori peoples of Australia and the Plains Indians. In saying, as Guénon

⁸⁹ Snodgrass, SS, p.8.

⁹⁰ Guénon, SC, pp.x.

⁹¹ Guénon, SC, pp.x.

⁹² Guénon, FS, p.27.

does, that the forms have “issued” from the Primordial Tradition we in no way intend to imply that the forms of “later” traditions were derived, as it were, from the forms of these “earlier” primitive traditions. These primitive traditions represent a mentality wherein, as Eliade observes, ‘nature is a hierophany, and the “laws of nature” are the revelation of the mode of existence of the divinity.’⁹³ This mentality represents the normative mentality of the human condition, the state of original perfection and unity in which God is seen everywhere. These traditions express the Primordial Tradition not by any singularity of form but by the integrity of being unencumbered by the obscuration of a dualistic perspective and the reflection, in the human plane, of principal eternity itself.⁹⁴

The Primordial Tradition refers to the “primordial state.” This, in the final analysis, is none other than Substance, cosmologically speaking, *materia prima*, *mulaprakrti*, hyle, etc.. Substance, as Schuon remarks, ‘is represented at each ontological or cosmic level in appropriate mode; and *a fortiori*, pure Substance or Substance as such underlies each of its secondary manifestations.’⁹⁵ To talk then of the Primordial Tradition is to talk of the continuity between a particular mode of Substance with its underling reality. As such one can say that all traditions born of Divine Revelation are, in their essence and origin, the Primordial Tradition. Likewise the perfection of each tradition coincides with the Primordial Tradition. The forms of the traditions are manifest in Substance and manifest precisely as “things.” Here Schuon remarks, ‘Things are coagulations of universal Substance, but Substance is not affected (this is crucial) by those accidents in the slightest degree. Substance is not things, but things are it, and they are so by virtue of their existence and of their qualities’⁹⁶ The Primordial Tradition is thus the underlying reality of form without itself being a formal manifestation *per se*.

To talk of the reestablishment of the Primordial Tradition in any sort of temporal or historical sense is, properly considered, simply to talk of the recognition of unity and purity in the forms of an orthodox

⁹³ M. Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, New York: Princeton University Press, 1974, p.59.

⁹⁴ Guénon, ‘Aperçus sur l’Initiation’, p.278, cited in Perry, *TTW*, p.561.

⁹⁵ Schuon, *ITFA*, p.56.

⁹⁶ Schuon, *LAW*, p.77.

tradition. The recognition, by a qualified intellect, of the Primordial Tradition in diverse religious forms is a recognition of the eternal substratum of Reality. It is a recognition of that which was lost but now is found.⁹⁷ The idea of a recreation of a “Primordial Tradition,” in the sense of a new religion is simply a syncretic illusion. Such a singular tradition could never have existed, given precisely that existence is manifestation and this is distinction and diversity. Moreover it is incorrect to think that one could “recreate” the Primordial Tradition in any sort of a-temporal or metaphysical sense either, for it is the very basis of creation itself. In the words of the alchemist, Michael Sendivogius, ‘Let no one presume that he can make the first matter.’⁹⁸ This last point puts to rest the error of thinking that the “transcendent unity of religions” could give rise to a single religious tradition, a criticism sometimes levelled at the *sophia perennis* or *religio perennis*, by those who fail to understand metaphysics *per se*. The *religio perennis* is not a “new” religion far less a “super religion”; worship of God is not to be replaced with discernment of an abstract “Absolute.” Rather, God is Absolute and therefore supremely worthy of worship.

The Message and the messenger

God is the Author and man is the word made flesh. God is the Hand that guides and man is the pen. God is the Creator and man is creation. God is immutable Essence and man is mutable form. God is the Message and man is the messenger.

God as Message manifests the divine aspiration to Unity. The divine Message is the message of salvation; to be effective it must submit itself to being delivered on the formal plane, it must be humbled, as with Christ’s *kenosis* (Ph.2:1-11), so that it might be “raised on high.”⁹⁹ Man

⁹⁷ In the story of the prodigal son (Lk.15) it is the younger or second son that became lost. This may seem to contradict the idea of the Primordial Tradition—that which has become lost—as being the first tradition, however, here we have another example of the law of inverse analogy. Of course, from the Divine perspective the Primordial Tradition is never lost but remains with the father, whereas, it is the younger traditions that become “lost” in the flux and degeneration of creation.

⁹⁸ Sendivogius, ‘The New Chemical Light’: A. E. Waite ed., *The Hermetic Museum* Vol.2, Maine: Weiser, 1999, p.95.

⁹⁹ See my ‘Withdrawal, Extinction and Creation: Christ’s *kenosis* in light of the Judaic doctrine of *tsimtsum* and the Islamic doctrine of *fana*’: in *The Essential Sophia*, Nasr & O’Brien ed., Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 2006, 58-77.

as messenger delivers the supraformal Message in formal language so that he himself might recognise in this Message his own essence and be released from the bonds of form. To cite a well-known formula: ‘God became man so that man could become God.’

Schuon: ‘One cannot understand the meaning of the divine Message without knowing the nature of the human receptacle; he who understands man, understands all the supernatural and cannot help but accept it. Now man is made to contemplate the Absolute starting from the contingency; the Absolute is conscious of Itself in Itself, but It also wishes to be conscious of Itself starting from an other than Itself; this indirect vision is a possibility necessarily included in the Infinitude belonging to the Absolute. ...Fundamentally, this Message comes from “himself,” not of course from his empirical “I” but from his immanent Ipseity, which is that of God and without which there would be no “I,” whether human, angelic, or any other; credibility of the message results from the fact that it is what we are, both within ourselves and beyond ourselves. In the depths of transcendence is immanence, and in the depths of immanence, transcendence.’¹⁰⁰

The question of the relationship between Message and messenger is, in the final analysis, the question of identity. To say that the Message is pre-eminent over the messenger is to recognise the absolute discontinuity between the Essence and Substance or between God and man. ‘Why do you call me good?’ demanded Christ, ‘No one is good but God alone.’ The human being is a tool in the hand of God, through which and to whom Revelation is delivered. This tool is necessarily imperfect, or else man would be God. At the same time man is made “in the image” of God; thus there is in man the perfection of the Divine. Here, in the words of a well known Islamic formula, it is perfectly true to say that ‘he who has seen the Prophet has seen God.’ As Schuon says: ‘That we are conformed to God,—“made in His image,”—this is certain; otherwise we should not exist. That we are contrary to God, this also is certain; otherwise we should not be different from God. Without analogy with God we should be nothing. Without opposition to God we should be God.’¹⁰¹ ‘No one is good but

¹⁰⁰ Schuon, *DH*, pp.152-53.

¹⁰¹ Schuon, *SPHF*, p.167.

God alone.’ ‘He who has seen the Prophet has seen God.’ Between these two positions lies the mystery of Revelation.

The perfection of the divine Message is, from the point of view of Manifestation, measured by the perfection of its messenger and then again by the perfection of its recipient. Of course the Message is of Itself Absolute yet for it to be effective it must accept the limitations of the human receptacle. It is in this sense that Schuon places esotericism beyond the “Message,” in that esotericism, as he comments, ‘is not a religious Message and derives from the Intellect more than from Revelation’¹⁰² Here of course esotericism is, from a certain perspective, identical with the pure Message. The “Word made flesh” remains the Word.

The *avatar* is the meeting of the messenger and the Message. The Gautama Buddha, Jesus Christ and Muhammad each manifest this role supremely, so that the essence of their doctrinal orthodoxy rests in the being of their lives. Here messenger and Message are one, with the former being imbued with the perfection of the latter, and the latter accepting the limitations of the former—‘Taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are’ (Phil.2:7)—with such perfect detachment so as to effect the perfection and salvation of form itself. ‘There is nothing that distinguishes samsara from nirvana’ teaches Nagarjuna.¹⁰³ In the *avatar* Message and messenger are one: “true God and true man.”

This means that even in the *avatar* the virtual illusion of “error” exists, and this is simply to say that not everybody is qualified to accept the pure truth; were this otherwise there should be no question of belief. This is again to say that the Absolute includes the contingent by definition and on pain of contradiction; that the perfection of the Infinite includes the possibility of illusion. This is only a contraction from the perspective of illusion.

¹⁰² Schuon, *DH*, p.136.

¹⁰³ *Madhyamakakarika*, xxv. 19-20. As Schuon observes, ‘the Bodhisattva, since he realises the “emptiness” of things, thereby also realises the “emptiness” of the samsara as such and at the same time its nirvanic quality. If on the one hand all is “emptiness,” on the other hand all is Nirvana, the Buddhist notion of vacuity being at one and the same time negative and positive’ (*TB*, p.139).

Thus even in the perfection of the *avatar* there must be, not contractions but paradoxes.¹⁰⁴ Between Jesus' injunction to "turn the other cheek" and his violent expulsion of the money lenders from the Temple there is the appearance of contradiction—if not hypocrisy—yet here this very paradox serves as a key to the merciful truth of Divine Judgment.¹⁰⁵ Again, Schuon remarks: 'The Bible, whose perspective is above all legalistic since it is moral, reproaches Solomon for having constructed temples for the divinities of his foreign wives, but it adds nonetheless that Solomon "slept with his fathers," a formula which is also used in speaking of David and which refers to posthumous Beatitude. It would be contradictory, to say the least, to doubt the salvation of an author whose writings are included in the Bible; if there are differences of opinion on the subject of Solomon, it is because of a conflict of levels and not because of an ambiguity situated on one and the same plane.'¹⁰⁶

On the one hand it is enough to say that God chooses His messengers; the incidental imperfection of the messenger cannot possibly effect the essence of the Message. It is simply beyond the power of man to do damage to God in any real sense. On the other hand the imperfection of the messenger is both precise and providential. It is a measure of the mystery of Transcendence and Immanence.¹⁰⁷ At the same time it is a guard against the false attribution of the Message to the messenger; the merciful protection against the error of idolatry.

God moves in mysterious ways. What appears inexplicable to man accords with Divine Providence. To question the imperfection of the messenger in light of the perfection of the Message is both to confuse the Relative with the Absolute and to question the Divine Intention.

¹⁰⁴ Schuon: "Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is God," said Christ; which signifies that every manifestation, even if divine, implies imperfection; it implies it because it is manifestation, and not on account of its content, since the latter may be divine, and therefore "absolute" (LS, p.13).

¹⁰⁵ '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!' (*Genesis Rabba* xxii. 15).

¹⁰⁶ Schuon, *DH*, p.131, n.20.

¹⁰⁷ As Schuon remarks, 'apparent ineptness is often the measure of the supernatural' (*DH*, p.132).

The Container and the Contained

Timothy Scott

‘Make me a sanctuary so that I can reside among them.’
(Exodus 25:8)

Did not the sea make friends with Noah and Moses?
(Jalal al-Din Rumi)¹

The colour of the water is the colour of the vessel containing it.
(Abu'l-Qasim al-Junayd)²

The Point and the Seed

The religious language of Judaism talks of the tabernacle (*mishkan*) as the receptacle of the Divine Immanence or Presence (*Shekhinah*; literally, “indwelling”). According to Midrash, God concentrated His *Shekhinah* in the Holiest of Holies ‘as though His whole power were concentrated and contracted in a single point’.³ In the Vedantic tradition this principial point is called the *bindu* and is identical with the Self (*Atman*).⁴ Alain Daniélou calls the *bindu* the “Point-Limit” and describes it as the ‘determinant of space from which manifestation begins’ and ‘the centre of the universe’.⁵ The phrase, “Point Limit” alerts us to the idea that the principial point defines the limits of manifestation; it is, to use Pascal’s terminology, the “infinitely small” and the “infinitely large.” As Shaikh al-‘Alawi says, ‘Everything is enveloped in the Unity of Knowledge, symbolised by the Point.’⁶ The Point-Limit is adequately symbolised by the “spatial point” where René

¹ Rumi, *Mathnawi*, I, 2137, tr. M. Gupta, Agra: M. G. Publishers 1997, p.194.

² Al-Junayd, cited in R. A. Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1921, p.159.

³ *Exodus Rabba* XXV, 10; *Lev. Rabba* XXIII, 24, cited in Scholem, *MTJM*, p.410, n.43.

⁴ Daniélou, *MGI*, p.50.

⁵ Daniélou, *MGI*, p.203 & p.229.

⁶ From ‘Le Prototype unique’, in *ET* 1938, p.300, cited in W. Perry, *TTW*, p.778.

Guénon observes that ‘Space itself presupposes the point.’⁷ Moreover, he remarks that ‘the geometric point is quantitatively nil and does not occupy any space, though it is the principle by which space in its entirety is produced, since space is but the development of its intrinsic virtualities.’⁸ As Meister Eckhart says, ‘a point has no quantity of magnitude and does not lengthen the line of which it is the principle.’⁹ Similarly, Guénon observes that ‘though arithmetical unity is the smallest of numbers if one regards it as situated in the midst of their multiplicity, yet in principle it is the greatest, since it virtually contains them all and produces the whole series simply by the indefinite repetition of itself.’¹⁰ For Proclus, ‘Every multitude somehow participates in the One.’ This is again found in the famous Sufic formula: ‘Unity in multiplicity and multiplicity in Unity’.¹¹

From one perspective the Point-Limit alludes to the Unmanifested or that which is beyond Being. As Frithjof Schuon remarks, ‘One can represent Absolute Reality, or the Essence, or Beyond-Being, by the point; it would doubtless be less inadequate to represent it by the void, but the void is not properly speaking a figure, and if we give the Essence a name, we can with the same justification, and the same risk, represent it by a sign; the simplest and thus the most essential sign is the point.’¹² From a more limited and, in a sense, a more precise perspective the point symbolises the principle of Being.

Being has a direct analogy with the Absolute. In this sense, the All-Possibility of the Absolute has its direct correlation with ontological All-Possibility or Potentiality. By inverse analogy, the realisation of Potentiality represents the paradoxical limitation of the Infinite by the indefinite, where ‘to say manifestation is to say limitation’.¹³ Ontological All-Possibility is both a reflection of Divine All-Possibility and itself a possibility plucked from the Infinite to be planted in the Infinite. In this second sense it is acceptable to say that ontological All-

⁷ Guénon, *SC*, p.77; see Ch.16.

⁸ Guénon, *MB*, pp.41-2.

⁹ Meister Eckhart, *Parables of Genesis*, 20. See also Albert the Great, *On Indivisible Lines* 5-6; Euclid, *Geometry*.

¹⁰ Guénon, *MB*, p.42. Each number is composed of “units” or “ones”; see Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 10.1 (1053a30); Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Ia.11.1.ad1.

¹¹ Cited in Perry, *TTW*, p.776.

¹² Schuon, *EPW*, p.65.

¹³ Schuon, *ITFA*, p.35.

Possibility is, *in essence*, identical with All-Possibility. In fact, it is by virtue of this identity that Potentiality on the one hand brings forth manifestation and, on the other hand, provides the opportunity or “potential” for deliverance from manifestation. Being is here the interface, the Islamic *barzakh*, between the Infinite Unmanifested and the indefinite manifested, facilitating both creation and return to the Uncreated. From another perspective and to use the symbolism of Kabbalah, Being is the *reshimu*, the existential seed, which is a luminous “residue” of *En-Sof* or the Infinite. As Lama Anagarika Govinda observes, the word *bindu* also implies a seed.¹⁴ Guénon observes that, in the Hindu tradition, ‘The Divine Principle which resides at the centre of the being is represented ... as a grain or seed (*dhatu*), as a germ (*bija*), because in a way it is in this being only virtually so long as “Union”¹⁵ has not actually been realised.’¹⁶ This qualification relates to the idea of the full realisation of the seed, which is its “return” to the Unmanifested.

The entire existence of the being resides in the “seed germ,” which is to say with the *Rama-parva-tapina Upanishad*, that the Universe is contained in its “seed.” 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.’¹⁷ Again, according to the famous *hadith qudsi*: ‘My earth and My heaven contain Me not, but the heart of My faithful servant containeth Me.’¹⁸ The Centre contains the circumference; the heart contains the existence of the human; the tabernacle contains the Temple, and by extension and analogy, the Temple contains the Cosmos. Being is the Cosmic Seed, simultaneously the first point, the Centre and the receptacle of ontocosmological existence.

¹⁴ A. Govinda, *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*, Maine: Samuel Weiser, 1969, p.116. He also says that *bindu* means point, dot, zero, drop, germ, seed, semen, etc.

¹⁵ Schuon: “‘Union’ (*yoga*): the Subject (*Atma*) becomes object (the Veda, the *Dharma*) in order that the object (the objectivized subject, man) may be able to become the (absolute) Subject’ (*SPHF*, p.109). On Union as “Deliverance” see Guénon, *MB*, 1981, Chs.22 & 23.

¹⁶ Guénon, *FS*, p.300.

¹⁷ Ramana Maharshi, *Talks With Sri Ramana Maharshi* Vol.3, 1955, p.247, cited in Perry, *TTW*, p.826.

¹⁸ Cited in Ibn al-’Arabi, *Lubbu-l-Lubb*, tr. Bursevi, Roxburgh: Beshara Publications, 1981, pp.16 & 42.

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’ (Mt.13:31-32; Mk.4:30-32; Lk.13:18-19).¹⁹ In Chinese mythology, *Sumeru*, the Cosmic Mountain, and thus *imago mundi*, is also found contained within a mustard seed.²⁰ The *Chandogya Upanishad* describes the *atman* in terms familiar to the Christian mustard seed: ‘This *atman*, which dwells in the heart, is smaller than a grain of rice, smaller than a grain of barely, smaller than a grain of mustard, smaller than a grain of millet, smaller than the germ which is in the grain of millet; this *atman*, 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].’²¹

Being unaffected by the conditions of change, of which it is the principle, the Divine Seed is indestructible. In the words of Origen: ‘Because God himself has sowed and planted and given life to this seed, even though it may be overgrown and hidden, it will never be destroyed or extinguished completely, it will glow and shine, gleam and burn and it will never cease to turn toward God.’²²

Guénon sees the symbolism of the “seed” as analogous to that of the “*yod* in the heart.”²³ The *yod*, as Guénon observes, is the letter from which all the letters of the Hebrew alphabet are formed. ‘The *yod* in the heart is therefore the Principle residing at the centre, be it from the macrocosmic point of view, at the “Centre of the World” which is the “Holy Palace” of the Kabbalah, or from the microcosmic point of view in every being, virtually at least, at his centre, which is always symbolised by the heart in the different traditional doctrines, and which

¹⁹ See Guénon, *MB*, p.41, n.1; ‘The Mustard Seed’ in *FS*, Ch.74.

²⁰ *His-yu Chi*, see A. C. Yu, *The Journey West* Vol.1, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, p.180, & n.3.

²¹ *Chandogya Upanishad* 3.14.3. (The inserted comments are Guénon’s, *MB*, p.41).

²² Origen, *Homilies on Genesis* 13.4.

²³ Guénon, *FS*, Ch.73.

is man's innermost point, the point of contact with the Divine.'²⁴ A similar use of the symbolism of letters exists in the Islamic tradition. According to two *hadith qudsi*: 'All that is in the revealed Books is in the Qur'an, and all that is in the Qur'an is in the *Fatihah*,²⁵ and all that is in the *Fatihah* is in *Bismi 'Llahi 'r-Rahmani 'r-Rahim*,' and, 'All that is in *Bismi 'Llahi 'r-Rahmani 'r-Raham* is in the letter *Ba*, which is itself contained in the point that is beneath it.'²⁶ There is a similar tradition in Kabbalah where it is said that all that is in the Torah is in the word *Berashith* (the first word of *Genesis*, generally translated into English as "In the Beginning"), and all that is in *Berashith* is in the letter *beth*, and the spoken *beth* (the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet) is in the unspoken *aleph* (the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet). It is interesting to compare these traditions, for in the first case the Essence is symbolised by a point and in the second by the ineffable void.²⁷ Again, in the classic Russian spiritual tale, *Rasskatz strannika (The Pilgrim's Tale)*, the Pilgrim says, 'The Gospel and the Jesus Prayer [*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me*] are one and the same thing ... For the divine name of Jesus contains in itself all Gospel truths.'²⁸ Boehme: 'In the sweet name, Jesus Christ, the whole process is contained.'²⁹ Thus Schuon says, 'It is in the Divine Name that there takes place the mysterious meeting of the created and the Uncreate, the contingent and the Absolute, the finite and the Infinite.'³⁰

The symbolism of the Divine Name or Word as the "seed" is echoed universally.³¹ Jesus teaches that 'The seed is the word of God.'³² This is the *logos spermatikos* of the Greek Fathers. In the Hindu tradition the

²⁴ Guénon, *FS*, p.297.

²⁵ The *Fatihah* is the first Surah of the Qur'an (literally "the Opening").

²⁶ Cited in M. Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1971, p.148. These traditions are quoted by al-Jili at the beginning of his commentary on them, *Al-Kahf wa 'r-Raqam*.

²⁷ On this symbolism of letters see Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, Ch.7.

²⁸ *The Pilgrim's Tale*, tr. T. A. Smith, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1999, p.75.

²⁹ Boehme, *Signatura Rerum*, VII.14.

³⁰ Schuon, *TUR*, 1993, p.145.

³¹ For numerous examples of this kind see Perry, *TTW*, pp.1031-1037.

³² Meister Eckhart says that the "beginning"—"In the beginning is the Word"—is preexistent in it (the Word) as a seed is in principle (*in principium*, both "beginning" and "principle") (*Commentary on John 4*; see *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defence*, tr. Colledge and McGinn, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1981, p.123).

Word-Seed is the sacred *Om*, the ‘primordial sound of timeless reality’,³³ which “imperishable syllable” is the “whole world” and also “the Self (*atman*) indeed.”³⁴ *Om* is the essence of the *Veda*.³⁵ The *Dictionary of Symbols* describes the *Veda* as the ‘seed and potential evolution of future cycles.’³⁶ According to Hindu tradition, during the cataclysm that separates this *Maha-Yuga* from the previous one, the *Veda* was enclosed in a state of envelopment in the conch (*shankha*), a homologue of the Ark and one of the chief attributes of *Visnu*.³⁷ This notion of the Word-Seed is explicit in the symbolism of the Ark of Noah and the Ark of the Covenant. In the latter this is none other than the Testimony, the tablets of stone upon which God inscribed the Decalogue (Ex.31:18; 32:15; 34:29), the Word of God made writ, or “made flesh” if you will.³⁸ The Ark of Noah contains the Word of God by way of Noah’s son, *Shem*, whose name means “*name*” and more precisely, the “Name of God.”

To talk of the seed is to talk of impetus towards growth, which is to say, towards manifestation. Thus the perfection of the ontological seed includes *in divinis* the impetus towards the imperfection of the manifest world. This is prefigured in the paradox of the Relative as a dimension of the Infinitude of the Absolute. To use an analogous symbolism, the Garden of Eden must contain the serpent. As Marco Pallis remarks, “The perfection of a paradise without the presence of the serpent would be the perfection, not of paradise, but of God Himself. It would be, in Sufic terms, “the paradise of the Essence.””³⁹

Immanence and Transcendence

The Divine Immanence is, in effect, its own receptacle, in a similar manner to which it might be said that a word is the receptacle of its meaning, while at the say time being identical with it. Divine

³³ Govinda, *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*, 1969, p.47.

³⁴ See *Mandukya Upanishad* 1, 8-12.

³⁵ *Chandogya Upanishad* 1.1.1-3; *Brihad-arayaka Upanishad* 5.1.1.

³⁶ *Dictionary of Symbols*, p.229.

³⁷ Guénon, *FS*, p.107.

³⁸ ‘Inside the ark you will put the Testimony which I am about to give you’ (Ex.25:16). The word translated as “Testimony,” ‘*eduwth* (עֲדוּת) is derived from the primitive root ‘*uwd* (עוּד) meaning “to duplicate,” which leads one to recall that God created man “in the image.”

³⁹ M. Pallis, *A Buddhist Spectrum*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980, p.39.

Immanence, or the Divine Presence, is identical with Being, which is both its own principle and effect. In turn, Being gives rise to the distinction, recognised by Plato among others, between Being and becoming.⁴⁰

Immanence implies Transcendence or Beyond Being.⁴¹ The Divine Reality *per se* may be signalled by the term “The Absolute.” A simple overview of the station of Immanence in the context of the Absolute can be expressed thus:

Transcendence = Beyond-Being
Immanence = Being
Being “contains” becoming
becoming = the play of cosmic existence

The existential world is a mode or level of the Divine Immanence. Immanence is itself “contained” or prefigured by the Divine Transcendence. Guénon explains this distinction in terms of Universal (Transcendent) and Individual (Immanent) Existence.⁴²

Universal—The Unmanifested
— Formless Manifestation
Individual—Formal Manifestation
— Subtle state
— Gross state

Guénon is quick to clarify that ‘all that is manifested, even at this higher level [Formless Manifestation], is necessarily conditioned, that is to say, relative.’⁴³ In this sense Formless Manifestation is an aspect of Immanence.

The Unmanifested contains the possibility of Manifestation *in divinis*, this being Formless Manifestation; this gives rise to Formal Manifestation, which, at the level of cosmic existence, gives rise to the Subtle (psychic) and the Gross (corporeal) states. Transcendence, which

⁴⁰ *Timaeus* 27d-28a.

⁴¹ “Beyond Being” is also Platonic (*Republic* 7.6.509b), although it is more usually associated with Plotinus (for example, *Enneads* 4.3.17; 6.9.11).

⁴² Guénon, *MB*, p.34.

⁴³ Guénon, *MB*, p.33.

contains Immanence, is itself embraced by the Divine Totality (the Absolute). Schuon describes this thus: ‘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 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.’⁴⁴

Two difficulties arise with the use of the term “Being.” Firstly, there can be confusion between two distinct usages of the term “Being.” 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. This is the distinction in the Hindu tradition of *nirguna Brahman* (unqualified *Brahman*) and *saguna Brahman* (qualified *Brahman*).

The second difficulty arises inasmuch as the term “Being” is used to refer to an exclusive category of the onto-cosmological chain. We have said that Being is synonymous with Immanence and that Immanence is Individual Existence and that this is Formal Manifestation; we have qualified this last identification by noting that Immanence includes Formless Manifestation. However, from a certain point of view, Being, while not itself the Absolute, is nevertheless of the Divine realm, and thus it might be said that in no way can it be identified as part of Manifestation. Here the term “Being” is used to classify the unmanifested ontological principle or cause. Manifestation is consequently the cosmological effect. Being is thus distinct from Manifestation as the category cause is distinct from the category effect. Yet, from another point of view, cause and effect may be identified in the context of the wholeness of a thing itself; in this sense, Being embraces both its unmanifested principle and its manifested realisation.

Being is both Transcendent and Immanent, both “uncreated” and “created,” to use the language of the Christian doctrine of the *Logos* or Intellect. Here it is the case that Being is an interface—a *barzakh*—between these two “domains.” Being is Transcendent inasmuch as it corresponds to, or is prefigured in, the Supreme Principle and it is

⁴⁴ Schuon, *ITFA*, p.38.

Immanent inasmuch as it is the principle of onto-cosmological existence. Here the distinction between Immanence and Transcendence occasionally becomes blurred. As Schuon remarks,

When we speak of transcendence, we understand in general objective transcendence, that of the Principle, which is above us as it is above the world; and when we speak of immanence, we understand generally speaking subjective immanence, that of the Self, which is within us. It is important to mention that there is also a subjective transcendence, that of the Self within us inasmuch as it transcends ego; and likewise there is also an objective immanence, that of the Principle in so far as it is immanent in the world, and not in so far as it excludes it and annihilates it by its transcendence. ... One finds here an application of the Taoist *Yin-Yang*: transcendence necessarily comprises immanence, and immanence just as necessarily comprises transcendence. For the Transcendent, by virtue of its infinity, projects existence and thereby necessitates immanence; and the Immanent, by virtue of its absoluteness, necessarily remains transcendent in relation to existence.⁴⁵

The Receptacle

To talk of the receptacle of Immanence implies two related notions: that of “container” and that of “receiving.” In the first case, Immanence is a possibility of the Infinite and is thus “contained” by the Infinite.⁴⁶ The Infinite is identical with Transcendence. Thus one can say that Transcendence is the container of Immanence. Transcendence cannot “receive” Immanence, which it already possesses *in divinis*; rather Immanence flows forth from Transcendence according to the Scholastic maxim *bonum diffusivum sui*, “the Good diffuses itself.” It does not flow “out” of Transcendence, for this flowing forth remains a possibility of the Infinite, even if it is now, so to speak, an actualised or realised possibility. Schuon cites Ibn al-'Arabi: ‘According to *Risalat al-Ahadiyah*, “He [the Absolute; *Brahman*] sent His ipseity [the Self;

⁴⁵ Schuon, *EPW*, p.236.

⁴⁶ In discussing the possibilities of the human individuality, Guénon remarks that, ‘Taken literally, the relationship of container to contained is a spatial relationship; but here it should be only taken figuratively, for what is in question is neither extended nor situated in space’ (*MSB*, p.41, n.1). In discussing the Infinite we are discussing Possibility as such, and thus the same proviso applies.

atman] by Himself from Himself to Himself.”⁴⁷ God (Infinite and Transcendent) sends forth His Ipseity (Immanence) by Himself (as a possibility of His Infinity) from Himself (from the Infinite) to Himself (to the Infinite). This flowing forth of Immanence—which is simultaneously a “withdrawal,” in the sense of the kabbalistic doctrine of *tsimtsum*,⁴⁸ of Transcendence—is received *a priori* by Being. Between Immanence and Transcendence there is both discontinuity and continuity. Discontinuity for the container surpasses the contained in extent; continuity for Being is essentially identical with Transcendence.

In the case of Being the container and the contained are identical.⁴⁹ The container of Being is Substance, inasmuch as Being is manifested through or “in” Substance; from another perspective, Being contains Substance, inasmuch as Substance is prefigured in Being. In turn, Substance, as Schuon remarks, ‘has two containers, space and time, of which the first is positive and the second negative’.⁵⁰ Space and time are contained in Being *in divinis*, prefigured by the Infinite and the Eternal. They are “received” and made manifest by cosmological existence, of which they are the defining conditions. Space and time do not “contain” cosmological existence in the sense of being “beyond”; instead they are the receptacle of cosmological existence.⁵¹

The *Mundaka Upanisad* describes these ideas through the symbolism of the spider and its web: ‘a spider spreads and withdraws (its thread) ... so out of the Immutable does the phenomenal universe arise.’⁵² The spider contains the thread and is identical with the thread; the web receives the thread and is identical with the thread; but between the spider and the web there is distinction. Ibn al-’Arabi offers a similar metaphor in his *Diwan of Shashtari*: “‘We are like the silkworm, our obstacles are the result of our own work,” an allusion to

⁴⁷ Schuon, *LAW*, p.97, n.2. The insertions are mine. The *Risalat al-Ahadiyah* or ‘The Epistle of the Unity’ is a treatise probably by Muhyi al-Din Ibn al-’Arabi.

⁴⁸ See my ‘Withdrawal, Extinction and Creation.’

⁴⁹ Ibn al-’Arabi: ‘So the world is both carrier (*hamil*) and carried (*mahmal*). As carried it is form (*sura*), body (*jism*), and active (*fa’il*); as carried it is meaning (*ma’na*), spirit (*ruh*), and passive (*mufa’il*)’ (*al-Futuhat al-Makkiya* Vol.1, tr. Chittick & Morris, New York: Pir Press, 2002, p.52).

⁵⁰ Schuon, *G:DW*, p.97.

⁵¹ Plato’s “receptacle” or “nurse” of becoming (*Timaeus*, 49a; 52).

⁵² *Mundaka Upanisad*, 1.1.7.

the worm which creates its own prison by surrounding itself with its own thread'.⁵³

The Absolute is like a sea (Infinite; Beyond-Being) within which there is a glass of water, which here stands for Being. The glass is itself an illusion (*Maya*), its substance being also water; here one might consider the glass as formed of ice, which in substance, if not in state, is still water, and this is to recognise that illusion is a state and not a substance.⁵⁴ The water in the glass and the water of the sea are identical in essential substance (*ousia*) but not in extent. One might say that there is a difference or discontinuity in extent of substance but an identity or continuity of essence. The sea is "beyond" the water of the cup in its extent; at the same time it contains and intimately identifies with the water of the cup so that they are not other than each other or, better to say, there is only the Sea.⁵⁵

The relationship of Transcendence and Immanence is one of identity and distinction. Schuon: 'That we are conformed to God,—"made in His image,"—this is certain; otherwise we should not exist. That we are contrary to God, this is also certain; otherwise we should not be different from God. Without analogy with God we should be nothing. Without opposition to God we should be God.'⁵⁶ Ibn al-'Arabi: 'God says, *There is naught like unto Him*, asserting His transcendence, and He says, *He is the Hearing, the Seeing*,⁵⁷ implying comparison [Relativity and Immanence].'⁵⁸ 'The Father is greater than I' (Jn.14:28), but, at the same time, 'The Father and I are one' (Jn.10.30).⁵⁹

Identity means that the Cosmos is not other than God. Thus, in his chapter on Noah, Ibn al-'Arabi says, 'the Reality never withdraws from

⁵³ This tentative English translation comes from a paper delivered in French by Jaafar Kansoussi at the Ibn 'Arabi Society's Nineteenth Annual Symposium (2002). He kindly directed me to his French translation of Ibn al-'Arabi's, *Diwan of Shashtari*, p.74.

⁵⁴ Al-Jili: 'In parable, the creation is like ice, and it is Thou who art gushing water. The ice is not, if we realised it, other than its water, and is not in this condition other than by the contingent laws. But the ice will melt and its condition will dissolve, the liquid condition will establish itself, certainly' (*al-insan*, pp.28-29).

⁵⁵ This analogy comes from my 'The Logic of Mystery & the Necessity of Faith' in *The Betrayal of Tradition: Essays on the Spiritual Crisis of Modernity*, Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 2004, 123-145.

⁵⁶ Schuon, *SPHF*, p.167.

⁵⁷ Qur'an 42:11.

⁵⁸ Ibn al-'Arabi, *Fusus*, p.75.

⁵⁹ On the interplay of the hypostases see Schuon, *DH*, pp.41-42.

the forms of the Cosmos in any fundamental sense, since the Cosmos, in its reality, is implicit in the definition of the Divinity'.⁶⁰ This recalls Meister Eckhart: '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'.⁶¹ The essential identity of the Cosmos with God, however, must not be mistaken for the limitation of God to the Cosmos. To say, as Schuon does, that 'if the relative did not exist, the Absolute would not be the Absolute'⁶² does not mean that the Absolute is limited to the Relative. This leads to the error of pantheism. Schuon: 'If God is conceived as primordial Unity, that is, as pure Essence, nothing could be substantially identical with Him; to qualify essential identity as pantheistic is both to deny the relativity of things and to attribute an autonomous reality to them in relation to Being or Existence, as if there could be two realities essentially distinct, or two Unities or Unicities'.⁶³ In the words of the Rabbis: 'God is the dwelling place of the universe; the universe is not the dwelling place of God.'⁶⁴

If the creature submits to you,
It is the Reality Who submits.
And if the Reality submits to you,
The created may not follow Him in that.
Therefore realise what we say,
For all I say is true.
There is no created being
But is endowed with speech.
Nor is there aught created, seen by the eye,
But is essentially the Reality.
Indeed, He is hidden therein,
Its forms being merely containers.
(Ibn al-'Arabi)⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Ibn al-'Arabi, *Fusus*, p.74. St. Augustine, in his *Confessions*, says 'He [God] did not create and depart, but the things that are from Him are in Him' (4.12.18).

⁶¹ Meister Eckhart, *Sermon 4 (Meister Eckhart Sermons & Treatises Vol.1, tr. Walshe, Dorset: Element Books, 1987, p.44).*

⁶² Schuon, *SPHF*, p.108.

⁶³ Schuon, *TUR*, p.41.

⁶⁴ Cited in Radhakrishnan, *Selected Writings on Philosophy, Religion and Culture*, p.146.

⁶⁵ Ibn al-'Arabi, *Fusus*, p.130.

A brief introduction to the “Traditional Doctrine of Art”

Timothy Scott

The first thing which strikes one in a masterpiece of traditional art is intelligence: an intelligence surprising either for its complexity or for its power of synthesis; an intelligence which envelopes, penetrates and elevates.

(Marco Pallis)¹

Traditional art derives from a creativity which combines heavenly inspiration with ethnic genius, and which does so in the manner of a science endowed with rules and not by way of improvisation.

(Frithjof Schuon)²

Sacred art is made as a vehicle for spiritual presences, it is made at one and the same time for God, for angels and for man; profane art on the other hand exists only for man and by that very fact betrays him. (Frithjof Schuon)³

When considering the Traditional doctrine, or understanding, of art we must first guard against any confusion of the term “traditional” with simple “conservatism,” or with the term “classical,” in any scholastic sense. What we have in mind is not a classifiable period of “art history,” such as modern academia might envisage. Tradition, as we are speaking of, is firstly the primordial wisdom, or Truth, immutable and unformed, the supra-formal essence that informs Creation yet is of itself not created; secondly, it is the formal embodiment of Truth under a particular mythological or religious guise, which is transmitted through time. Marco Pallis, observed this second aspect of tradition as ‘namely

¹ Cited in Perry, *TTW*, p.660.

² Schuon, ‘The Degrees of Art’: *Studies in Comparative Religion X, iv*, 1976, p.194, cited in Oldmeadow, *Traditionalism*, p.102.

³ Schuon, *SPHF*, p.31.

an effective communication of principles of more-than-human origin...through use of forms that will have arisen by applying those principles to contingent needs.⁴

In recent times the best expose of the school of thought labelled “Traditionalism” has been provided by Kenneth Oldmeadow’s, *Traditionalism: Religion in the Light of the Perennial Philosophy*. The point is well made that this “school,” far from offering a unique philosophy of its own, is instead based upon the rediscovery or reaffirmation of the orthodox traditions of this world. The preeminent Traditionalist writers of our age are René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy and Frithjof Schuon. Of these Coomaraswamy focuses the most on traditional art. For the sake of recognizable examples of what is meant by Traditional art we might consider the like of Mediaeval and Oriental art. Still these are simply the most recent examples of this mentality and traditional art may equally be recognised in prehistoric art. On this point Coomaraswamy, remarks:

We [and here he is talking of the modern mentality] feel that we should have liked to have taught the primitive or savage artist ... to draw in “correct perspective.” We take it for granted that an increasing naturalism ...represents a progress in art. ... It hardly occurs to us that prehistoric art was a more intellectual art than our own; that like the angels, prehistoric man had fewer (and more universal) ideas, and used fewer means to state them than we...⁵

He continues to add, ‘The ideas and the art of the Middle Ages and the East, even at the height of accomplishment, are far more nearly related to the ideas and the art of prehistory than they are to those of our advanced decadence.’⁶ This last comment shows that, from the Traditional perspective, the so-called “art” of the modern world, and this may be said to begin with the Renaissance, is regarded as a deviation from the what the Traditionalists regard as the true nature of art.

In referring to a “supra-formal” or “beyond formal” essence we are considering the doctrine of archetypes, which has been espoused the

⁴ M. Pallis, *The Way and the Mountain*, London: Peter Owen, 1960, p.203.

⁵ Coomaraswamy, ‘Mediaeval and Oriental Art’ in *SPI*, p.53.

⁶ Coomaraswamy, ‘Mediaeval and Oriental Art’: *SPI*, p.53.

world over through all times excepting our own modern age. This doctrine lies at the root of all traditional art. It is universally taught that this natural world is only an image and a copy of a heavenly and spiritual pattern; that the very existence of this world is based upon the reality of its celestial archetypes. 'Make all things according to the pattern which was shewn thee on the mount' (Ex. 25:40 & Heb.8:5). 'A form' says the Christian gnostic, Jacob Boehme, 'is made in the resigned will according to the platform or model of eternity, as it was known in the glass of God's eternal wisdom before the times of this world.'⁷ The fifth century Chinese painter, Hsieh Ho, observes that 'The painters of old painted the idea (*i*) and not merely the shape (*hsing*).'⁸ This doctrine is given its most definitive European expression in Plato's Theory of Ideals or Forms.⁹

The natural world, the world we inhabit, was understood by all traditional peoples as symbolic.¹⁰ The English poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, describes the Cosmos as 'one vast complex Mythos, or symbolic representation.'¹¹ The Traditional idea of symbol refers to a sensible entity that directs the understanding from the physical towards the supra-physical levels of reality. Traditional art is thus functional, its utilitarian value being spiritual. The ultimate purpose of Traditional art is the leading of the human to the Divine. There is nothing of the modern "art for art's sake" mentality about Traditional art.

In the Traditionalist view there is no distinction between the artist and the artisan. Coomaraswamy:

The concept "art" is not in any way limited to the context of making or ordering one kind of thing rather than another: it is only with reference to application that particular names are given to the arts, so that we have an art of architecture, one of agriculture, one

⁷ *Signatura Rerum*, XV,43 in *The Signature of all Things and Other Discourses*, by Jacob Boehme (from William Law's English edition, 4 Vols. London, 1764-81), London & New York: Everyman's Library, 1912-1934.

⁸ Cited in A. Coomaraswamy, *The Transformation of Nature in Art*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1934, p.15.

⁹ See Oldmeadow, *Traditionalism*, Ch.9 'Symbolism and Sacred Art.' For worldwide examples of this doctrine see Perry, *TTW*, pp.670-74.

¹⁰ On the Traditional understanding of symbolism see our 'Understanding "Symbol"', *Sacred Web* 6, pp.91-106.

¹¹ Coleridge, *Essays on the Principles of Method*.

of smithing, another of painting, another of poetry and drama, and so forth. It is perhaps with the art of teaching that the mediaeval philosopher is primarily concerned...¹²

St. Chrysostom, in his *Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew*, says, ‘The name of art should be applied to those only which contribute towards and produce necessities and mainstays of life.’¹³ In this he includes both the physical necessities such as food, shelter, dress, so forth—and certainly in Traditional society the simplest drinking bowl and the family’s house were works of art—and the spiritual necessities such as poetry, dance, drama, painting, teaching, meditation, and so forth.

Traditional art is inspired from the Divine. It is not then, in the current sense of the word, “self-expression.” Traditional art is anonymous.¹⁴ This is not to say that we are not now aware of the names of artist whose work we can say is inspired and Traditional, but that these artist themselves would not claim “ownership” of the work. Rather it was said that they were “in possession of their art” in the way of being possessed or directed by the art. Coomaraswamy: ‘The possession of any art is such a participation. The possession of an art is, furthermore, a vocation and a responsibility; to have no vocation is to have no place in the social order and to be less than a man’.¹⁵

In contrast to this sense of anonymity, Titus Burckhardt, Islamicist, art commentator and publisher of the *Book of Kells*, observes that,

the modern study of art derives most of its aesthetic criteria from classical Greek and post-medieval art. What ever its latest developments may have been, it has always considered the individual as the real creator of art. From this point of view, a work is “artistic” in so far as it shows the stamp of an individuality.¹⁶

¹² Coomaraswamy, ‘Mediaeval and Oriental Art’: *SPI*, p.51.

¹³ Cited in Coomaraswamy, ‘Mediaeval and Oriental Art’: *SPI*, p.51, n.28.

¹⁴ On anonymity in Traditional thought see Oldmeadow, *Traditionalism*, Ch.1.

¹⁵ Coomaraswamy, ‘Mediaeval and Oriental Art’: *SPI*, p.46.

¹⁶ T. Burckhardt, ‘Perennial Values in Islamic Art’ in *Mirror of the Intellect*, Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1987, p.220.

In the modern study of art, as Coomaraswamy remarks, ‘we are nonplussed by the possibility of substituting a knowledge of biographies for a knowledge of art.’¹⁷

Schuon conceded that the art of the Renaissance retained some qualities of “intelligence and grandeur” but felt that the Baroque style that followed it ‘could hardly express anything but the spiritual poverty and the hollow and miserable turgidity of its period’.¹⁸ ‘When standing before a cathedral,’ says Schuon, ‘a person really feels he is placed at the centre of the world; standing before a church of the Renaissance, Baroque, or Rococo periods, he merely feels himself to be in Europe.’¹⁹ On this point, Schuon remarks that Traditional art is essentially concerned with an expression of what is beyond time rather than the expression of a particular “period”: ‘An art that does not express the changeless and does not want to be itself changeless is not a sacred art’²⁰. This is not to deny ethnic genius. Schuon: ‘A style expresses both a spirituality and an ethnic genius, and these two factors cannot be improvised.’²¹

From the Renaissance, and the so-called “Enlightenment” period that followed in its footsteps, came the humanist conception of art with its “mania” for novelty, which later came to be regarded as “originality,” in contradiction to the very meaning of this word, for originality is a return to the “origin.” In traditional worlds, to be situated in space and time is to be situated in a cosmology and an eschatology respectively. Space and time are symbolised by the centre and the origin respectively, and it is to these that traditional art direct. Thus traditional art guides one towards an increasing sense of unity. Modern “originality,” on the other hand, is a fleeing into an ever shrinking individuality that can only end up in absurdity and bizarreness, into the abnormal and the monstrous and thus surrealism.²² For Oldmeadow, the “liberation” of the Renaissance ‘ends in the grotesqueries of a Dali!’²³

¹⁷ Coomaraswamy, ‘Mediaeval and Oriental Art’: *SPI*, p.50.

¹⁸ Schuon, *SPHF*, p.33.

¹⁹ Schuon, *TUR*, p.65 fn.

²⁰ Schuon, *LAW*, p.13.

²¹ Schuon, *LAW*, p.12.

²² Guénon considers the distinction of Unity as opposed to uniformity in ‘Uniformity against Unity’ and ‘The Principle of Individuation’ in *RQ*.

²³ Oldmeadow, *Traditionalism*, p.113.

Here we might admit, as in fact St. Augustine did, that, ‘some people like deformities.’²⁴ But the beauty of sacred art is not dependent upon our recognition. ‘Art’ according to Hindu tradition, ‘is expression informed by the ideal beauty (*rasa*).’²⁵ For Plato, ‘Nothing makes a thing beautiful but the presence and participation of Beauty in whatever way or manner obtained ... By Beauty all beautiful things become beautiful.’²⁶ According to tradition, Muhammad declared that ‘God is beautiful, and he loves beauty.’²⁷ Moreover, as St. Thomas Aquinas remarks, ‘Beauty relates to the cognitive faculty.’²⁸ In like sense, the Chinese monk and painter, Tao-chi, observes, ‘The works of the old masters are instruments of knowledge.’²⁹ Traditional art partakes of the supra-formal Ideal of Beauty. It is not we who judge art but art that judges us.

For Thomas Aquinas, ‘Art is the imitation of Nature in her manner of operation.’³⁰ This is not to say that it is “naturalistic” in the modern sense. Coomaraswamy:

The “truth” of traditional art is a formal truth, or in other words, a truth of meaning, and not a truth that can be tested by comparing the work of art with a natural object. The artefact need no more resemble anything than a mathematical equation need look like its locus. The Apocalyptic Lamb is seven-eyed, and to have depicted one with only two would have been “untrue” to the first cause of the work to be done, which was to represent a certain aspect of the “nature” of God.³¹

At the same time ‘disproportions do not make sacred art, any more than correctness of proportion by itself involves the defects of naturalism.’³² ‘The reproach of “naturalism”’ remarks Schuon, ‘cannot

²⁴ St. Augustine, *De musica* vi.38, cited in Coomaraswamy, ‘Mediaeval and Oriental Art’: *SPI*, p.60.

²⁵ *Sahitya Darpana* 1.3.

²⁶ *Phaedo* 100e.

²⁷ Cited in Perry, *TTW*, p.664, by way of Burckhardt, *ET* 1954, p.160.

²⁸ *Sum. Theol.* I, 5, 4 ad.1.

²⁹ *Hua Yu` Lu* cited in O. Siren, *The Chinese on the Art of Painting*, New York: Schocken Books, 1963, p.191.

³⁰ *Sum. Theol.* I.117.1 cited in Coomaraswamy, ‘Mediaeval and Oriental Art’: *SPI*, p.52.

³¹ Coomaraswamy, ‘Mediaeval and Oriental Art’: *SPI*, p.47.

³² Schuon, *SPHF*, p.33.

properly be levelled merely at a capacity to observe nature; it concerns rather the prejudice which would reduce art simply and solely to the imitation of nature.’³³

The “manner of operation” of Nature is hierarchic. Sacred or symbolic art operates by the unfolding or unveiling of Reality through a progression of symbolic initiations, acting like so many rungs on a ladder leading “upwards” to the Divine. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Traditionalist and Islamic scholar, says, ‘The symbol is the revelation of a higher order of reality in a lower order through which man can be led back to the higher realm. To understand symbols is to accept the hierarchic structure of the Universe and the multiply states of being.’³⁴

This hierarchic structure is reflected in social structures. When this hierarchy is recognised as a guiding principle for the society—it is not recognised today, even through this by no means eliminates it—then the society at hand must produce an art that is equally relevant at all levels of its structure. The essential needs, both physical and spiritual, of the aristocrat and the peasant are of the same kind.³⁵ Under these conditions we get what is called a “folk art.” In contrast the modern idea of art is precisely class-ist and exclusivist. Traditional art is an art for Everyman.

In the final analysis Traditional art can be summed up thus: God, in creating the Universe, is the Divine Artist. The human is made in the image of God. Thus everything we do is an act of creation and a work of art. The Divine art is the creation of the human; the art of the human is, as a reflective image, the “creation” or recognition of the Divine. This is the purpose and the end of humankind. All art is strictly a science and a craft. In its highest form it is the science and craft of the Beautiful, the Ideal or principle of all beauty. Its purpose is always the return of the human to the Origin through contemplation, meditation, and action, which find their perfection in participation.

³³ Schuon, *SPHF*, p.33.

³⁴ S. H. Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1972, p.88.

³⁵ Coomaraswamy, ‘Mediaeval and Oriental Art’: *SPI*, p.58.



*Whoever shall behold the image of St. Christopher
shall not faint or fall on that day.*

(Inscription frequently born by statues and pictures of St. Christopher.)

Remarks on St. Christopher

Timothy Scott

The demythologizing reforms of the modern Catholic Church have seen many saints “de-canonized.” Among those dropped from the universal calendar is St. Christopher, one of the most popular saints of both the Latin and Orthodox traditions. The cult of St. Christopher has not been suppressed as such, but it is confined to local calendars, those for a diocese, country, and so forth. Before the 1969 reform of the Roman calendar, Christopher was listed as a martyr who died under Decius. *The Catholic Encyclopedia* suggests that the existence of a martyr Christopher ‘cannot be denied, as was sufficiently shown by the Jesuit Nicholas Serarius, in his treatise on litanies, “Litaneutici” (Cologne, 1609), and by Molanus in his history of sacred pictures, “De picturis et imaginibus sacris” (Louvain, 1570).’¹ It is the mythological aspects of the legend of St. Christopher that the Church finds problematic, as evident in the Latin edition in prose and verse of 983 by the subdeacon Walter of Speyer, *Thesaurus anecdotorum novissimus* (Augsburg, 1721-23), II, 27-142, and Harster, *Walter von Speyer* (1878), and in an eleventh century edition of the *Acta SS*, and again in *The Golden Legend* of Jacob de Voragine.

The efforts of the Vatican to demythologize the universal calendar reflect a desire to appear more “serious” in an age when myth tends to be associated with an immature phase of human intellect. In 1998, Pope John Paul II delivered a call for a renewal of Catholic metaphysics suggesting a further inclination towards a more “serious” and intellectual Church.² One must applaud His Holiness’ challenge to the Catholic institution to revitalize its intellectual foundations. However, it is somewhat ironic that, in the face of Pope John Paul’s call, the Church continues to slowly but surely discard the mythological symbolisms that

¹ Mersman, *The Catholic Encyclopedia* Vol. III Online Edition Copyright © 1999 by Kevin Knight, *Nihil Obstat, November 1, 1908*. Remy Lafort, S.T.D., Censor, *Imprimatur*. John Cardinal Farley, Archbishop of New York.

² John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, Vatican: 1988, section 83.

have been the traditional vehicles for so much of Christian metaphysics throughout its history. An examination of the symbolism of St. Christopher will serve both to reveal the importance of this “legendary” figure and to demonstrate, to some small extent, the value of symbolic myth in general.

St. Christopher is commonly depicted wading across a river, holding a staff and bearing the Christ-Child. His name is said to be a Latin pun, *Christo-ferens*, “Christ-carrier.”³ According to popular tradition, a heathen king (in Canaan or Arabia), through the prayers of his wife to the Blessed Virgin, had a son, whom he called Offerus (Offro, Adokimus, or Reprebus) and dedicated to the gods Machmet and Apollo. Acquiring in time extraordinary size and strength, Offerus resolved to serve only the strongest and the bravest. He bound himself successively to a mighty king and to Satan, but he found both lacking in courage, the former dreading the name of the devil, and the latter frightened by the sight of a cross at the roadside. For a time his search for a new master was in vain, but at last he found a hermit (Babylas?) who told him to offer his allegiance to Christ, instructed him in the Christian faith, and baptised him. Christopher, as he was now called, would not promise to do any fasting or praying, but willingly accepted the task of carrying people, for God’s sake, across a raging stream. One night he was carrying a child who continually grew heavier, so that it seemed to him as if he had the whole world on his shoulders. The child, on inquiry, made himself known as the Creator and Redeemer of the world. To prove his statement the child ordered Christopher to fix his staff in the ground. The next morning it had grown into a palm-tree bearing fruit, a miracle that was said to have converted many. This excited the rage of the king of that region (Dagnus of Samos in Lycia?). Christopher was put into prison and, after many cruel torments, beheaded.⁴

Anyone familiar with mythology and symbolism in general will recognise here a Christian account of the symbolic “traversing of the

³ Metford, *DCLL*: ‘Christopher, St.’, p.67-8. Greek: *christos*, Christ, *pherein*, to bear; Latin: *Christophorus*, i.e. Christbearer.

⁴ As per Mersman, *The Catholic Encyclopedia* Vol. III Online Edition.

waters.”⁵ This symbolism expresses a shift in states, generally from “lower” to “higher,” with the river being an interface. Ananda Coomaraswamy has observed that the “traversing of the waters” can be related in three different ways: the voyage can be accomplished either by crossing over the waters to the other shore, by going upstream towards the source of the waters, or by going downstream towards the sea. In the case of going upstream it is a matter of returning to the source, the *Fons Vitae*, the “Well of Honey in Visnu’s highest place” (*Rg Veda* 1.154.5), the Perennial Spring of Plotinus (*Enneads* 3.8.10), etc. In the case of “descent with the current,” the sea, as René Guénon remarks in considering this same symbolism, ‘must then be considered not as an extent of water to be crossed, but on the contrary, as the very goal to be reached’.⁶ As Coomaraswamy says, ‘the Sea, as the source of all existence, is equally the symbol of their last end or entelechy.’⁷ Elsewhere Coomaraswamy comments that ‘this use of symbols which are contrary in their literal but unanimous in their spiritual sense very well illustrates the nature of metaphysics itself, which is not like a “philosophy,” systematic, but is always consistent.’⁸ In the case of St. Christopher we are principally concerned with the “crossing from one shore to the other,” although there are characteristics, for example his stature, which relate to the other aspects of this general symbolism.

The symbolism of crossing from one bank to another is, as Guénon says, doubtless the more commonly known of the above variations. The crossing can be afforded by a boat or ferry, a raft, or a bridge of some fashion. Concerning the boat or ferry, it is probably fair to say that the “ferry of the dead” is the best known motif here, with the Greek myth of Charon being the most familiar example of this in the West, although there are numerous examples, so that Chevalier and Gheerbrant’s *Dictionary of Symbols* claims that ‘all civilizations have

⁵ On this universal symbolism see Coomaraswamy, ‘Some Pali Words’: *samudda*’ in *SP2*, pp.324-27; also, Guénon, *FS*, Ch.58; D. L. Coomaraswamy, ‘The Perilous Bridge of Welfare’, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 8.

⁶ Guénon, *FS*, p.235.

⁷ Coomaraswamy, ‘The Sea’ in *SPI*, p.406. Coomaraswamy continues here to say, ‘The final goal is not a destruction, but one of liberation from all the limitations of individuality as it functions in time and space.’ The sea is a common symbol of the spatio-temporal domain.

⁸ Coomaraswamy, ‘Some Pali Words: *samudda*’: *SP2*, p.324.

their boat of the dead'.⁹ For Guénon, this crossing of the “waters of death” reflects the ultimate transition, where ‘the shore which is left behind is the world subject to change, that is, the corporeal state in particular...and the “other shore” is *Nirvana*, the state which is definitely set free from death.’¹⁰ Death, in this context is to be recognised not in any pejorative sense but as a transition, where ‘new birth necessarily presupposes death to the former state’.¹¹

The “traversing of the waters” can also be made via a bridge.¹² St. Christopher statues were traditionally placed at the entrances of churches and dwellings, and frequently at bridges. Like the boat, the bridge is associated with the notion of death and return to the source: ‘Death is a bridge whereby the lover is joined to the Beloved.’¹³ The bridge is often ‘broad for the righteous but as thin as a blade for the impious’¹⁴. One of the most famous examples of this is the “Sword Bridge” crossed by Sir Lancelot in Chretien de Troyes’ *Le Chevalier de la charrette*.¹⁵ Guénon identifies this symbolism as being that of *Chinvat*, the “Bridge of the Separator” in Zoroastrian tradition, and also, the “narrow” and “hard” way of St. Matthew (Mt.7:14). This symbolism is universal. The mythologist, Joseph Campbell, recalls an Eskimo shaman crossing an abyss on a bridge as narrow as a knife.¹⁶ In the *Katha Upanishad* the path is a “sharpened edge of a razor” (3.14). This symbolism is again found in the assimilation of a bridge to a ray of light; here Guénon observes the double sense of the English word “beam,” which designates both a girder, in the sense of a single beam or single

⁹ *Dictionary of Symbols*: “boat.” In Egyptian tradition we have the ferry-boat of Afu Ra (see W. E. A. Budge, *The Book of the Dead* ‘The Hieroglyphic Transcript and English Translation of the Papyrus of Ani’, New Jersey: Gramercy Books, ‘The Abode of the Blessed’ passim.) In the *Epic of Gilgamesh* this is the ferry of Ur-shanabi (see Tablet I, *Gilgamesh* from S. Dalley ed., *Myths from Mesopotamia* Creation, The Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others, Oxford: Oxford Uni. Press, 1991, p.102).

¹⁰ Guénon, *FS*, p.234.

¹¹ Guénon, *FS*, p.110.

¹² See Guénon, *FS*, Ch.65.

¹³ ‘Abd al-‘Aziz b. Sulayman per Perry, *TTW*, p.226.

¹⁴ *Dictionary of Symbols*: ‘bridge’, p.122. This is the symbolism of the “sword bridge,” see M. Eliade, ‘The Bridge and the “Difficult Passage”’ in *Shamanism*, Middlesex: Arkana, 1989, p.482; also p.456; see p.455 on ‘sword ladders.’

¹⁵ Chretien de Troyes, ‘Le Chevalier de la charrette (The Knight of the Cart)’ from *Arthurian Romances*, tr. W. W. Kibler, Middlesex: Penguin, 1991.

¹⁶ J. Campbell, *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology*, Middlesex: Penguin, 1982, p.333.

tree trunk, as is the case with the most primitive form of bridge, and a luminous ray.¹⁷ The “luminous ray” is a bridge between the terrestrial domain and the celestial or solar domain. Its narrowness indicates its treacherous nature—the “hard way”—and it is properly speaking the path of the “solar hero.”

The bridge, in the most general sense, connects the two “shores” which will always, from a certain level of reference, have between them a relationship corresponding to that between heaven and earth.¹⁸ Guénon: ‘The bridge, therefore, is the exact equivalent of the axial pillar that links heaven and earth even while holding them apart; and it is because of this meaning that it must be conceived of as essentially vertical like all the other symbols of the “World Axis”—for example, the axel of the “cosmic chariot” when its two wheels represent heaven and earth. This establishes also the fundamental identity of the symbolism of the bridge with that of the ladder’.¹⁹ The vertical nature of the World Axis (*axis mundi*) is found in the symbolism of the solar hero’s journey “upstream.” The foremost symbols of the *axis mundi* are the Mountain and the Tree, but it is also commonly recognised that the giant can, in certain cases, play this role. The most obvious example here is the Greek titan, Atlas. In the Hindu tradition, Agni unites both the ideas of the solar ray and the *axis mundi* inasmuch as he is the “Sun-Pillar,” who is the “heaven supporting pillar” (*Rg Veda* 4.5.1). Here two seemingly distinct aspects of St. Christopher’s symbolism, that of his stature and his role as a means of traversing the waters, coincided.

The case of St. Christopher presents a most interesting addition to the boat-bridge symbolism, with St. Christopher himself being the means of traversing the waters. This homology of boat and human body is not unique. St Ambrose saw the Ark of Noah as representing the human body; St Augustine felt that the Ark prefigures the City of God, the Church and Christ’s body; and Hugh of St. Victor, in his treatise, *De arca Noe morali et de arca mystica*, says that the mystic Ark is represented in the human heart. Ibn al-’Arabi, also compared the basket, which was to the baby Moses his “Ark,” to the body in his

¹⁷ Guénon, *FS*, p.260, n.2.

¹⁸ Guénon, *FS*, p.261, n.4.

¹⁹ Guénon, *FS*, p.261.

Fusus al-Hikam (The Bezels of the Prophets).²⁰ In Hindu tradition it is said, ‘The human body is like a boat, the first and foremost use of which is to carry us across the ocean of life and death to the shore of immortality (*Srimad Bhagavatam* XI, xiii).

Man—and here the English term “man” signifies at once the male and the human being *per se* like the Greek *anthropos*, the German *mensch* or the Arabic *insan*²¹—is the *pontifex* (bridge-builder).²² Frithjof Schuon, puts it thus,

Man’s mission is precisely to join the vision of “the Outward” to that of “the Inward;” to be at once witness to God as Principle and to God as Manifestation or Theophany, for “everything is Atma.” Man has therefore a God-given right to these two perspectives; they constitute his sufficient cause and therefore serve to define him; in other words, man is essentially a pontifex, a link between Earth and Heaven, and between the Outward and the Immanent.²³

Man is potentially “true God and true man,” as realised in Christ. Man is the pontifex inasmuch as man is both Principle and Manifestation. This is the doctrine of “Universal Man,” *al-insan al-kamil* of Islamic esoteric tradition;²⁴ *Adam Kadmon* in the Kabbalah.²⁵ Universal Man, as René Guénon remarks, is the principle of all manifestation.²⁶ Guénon further observes that most traditional doctrines symbolise the realisation of Universal Man by the “sign of the cross.”²⁷ This symbolism informs the Crucifixion and Christ’s role as Universal

²⁰ Ibn al-’Arabi, *Fusus*, p.252-53.

²¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, remarks, ‘There is no need to torture the natural structure of the English language to satisfy current movements which consider the use of the term “man” as a sexist bias, forgetting the second meaning of the term as *anthropos*’ (*KS*, p.183, n.1).

²² See Guénon, *LW*, Ch.2, particularly p.6, n.4; Guénon, *GT*, 1994, Chs.9, 14 & 17; also *Dictionary of Symbols*: ‘bridge’, p.123.

²³ Schuon, *IPP*, p.182.

²⁴ Of importance here are the treatises of Ibn al-’Arabi and al-Jili. See Burckhardt’s translation and commentary on al-Jili, *al-insan*; see also Guénon, *SC*, ‘Universal Man.’

²⁵ See Scholem, *MTJM*, p.215, n.31, p.267; Schaya, *UMK*, ‘The Mystery of Man’, p.83, p.126.

²⁶ Guénon, *SC*, p.8.

²⁷ Guénon, *SC*, p.10.

Man; and this, with relation to the boat or vessel, makes one think with St. Peter, of the analogy between Christ and Noah.²⁸

St. Christopher (*Christo-ferens*, “Christ-carrier”) is none other than the vessel by which Christ “traverses the waters.” In *The Golden Legend* it is said that St. Christopher bears Christ in four manners: ‘He bears him on his shoulders by conveying and leading, in his body by making it lean, in mind by devotion, and in his mouth by confession and predication.’²⁹ St. Christopher is here an exemplar for the Christian who must accept Christ in all things.

St. Christopher as “vessel” is comparable to the human form of Jesus Christ, which was the earthly vessel to the “Word made flesh.” Here we recall the story of Jesus walking across the waters (Mt.14:22-33; Mk.6:45-52; Jn.6:16-21). In this story Peter is also able to walk upon the water. Peter’s faith upheld him, which is to say that faith is, in a sense, the “vessel.” In a third century Chinese account of the universal miracle of “walking upon water” the Buddha explained that ‘faith (*sraddha*) can cross the gulf’.³⁰ St. Christopher well expresses this idea of faith “in mind by devotion” and as he waits unquestionably at the stream for his coming master.

St. Christopher can also be seen to represent the essential religious element of submission. He is the son of a king and of “extraordinary size and strength,” yet, for all his power, he wished to submit himself to a master. Here we are presented with a likeness of Christ who is himself the son of the greatest king, moreover, Christ is himself God, yet he submits himself to Himself in the ultimate act of out flowing Mercy. This is the doctrine of Christ’s *kenosis* (Ph. 2:1-11).³¹ Furthermore, the very image of St. Christopher is one of submission, of being beneath the load (Christ and thus the World) that he carries.

We are presented with an obvious comparison between St. Christopher and Atlas. Both were “giants” who bore the weight of the world, yet the analogy is more complex than first appears. Atlas was condemned to bear the weight of the world for eternity. He was only

²⁸ Christ is not only the “new Adam” but also the “new Noah.” St. Peter says that the baptism of Christ corresponds to the passing through the waters of the Flood in the Ark (1Pt.3:21).

²⁹ Jacob de Voragine, *The Golden Legend* Vol. IV, New York, AMS Press, 1973, p.111.

³⁰ *Fa Kui P’i Yu King* cited in Perry, *TTW*, p.226.

³¹ On the doctrine of *kenosis* see my ‘*Withdrawal, Extinction and Creation.*’

relieved momentarily of this weight by Hercules, a solar hero with Christic resemblance. In Christian tradition it is Christ who bears the weight of the world and is relieved, in a sense, momentarily by St. Christopher. Thus to make a direct analogy it is Christ who equates with Atlas as St. Christopher equates with Hercules. According to inverse analogy St. Christopher equates with Atlas as Christ equates with Hercules. In truth Christ is the Axis linking heaven and earth, thus is it right to compare Atlas and Christ; equally so, Christ is the solar hero, traversing the waters of Existence—‘being in everyway like a human being’ (Ph.2:7)—and thus it is right to compare Hercules to Christ.³² Similarly St. Christopher is analogous to both Atlas and Hercules according to the perspective adopted. This is another example of the interplay of symbolisms that has nothing arbitrary about it but expresses a precise relationship.

St. Christopher’s axial symbolism is reinforced by his staff, which Christ ordered be fixed in the ground and which then grew into a palm-tree. The staff is a well-recognised symbol of the *axis mundi*.³³ The blossoming of the staff recalls the similar events of Aaron’s rod (Num.17:1-11 [16-26]), the miracle of Joseph’s rod signalling his betrothal to Mary (*The Protevangelium of James* 9.1),³⁴ and the blooming of Christ’s Cross at the Crucifixion.³⁵ The image of a rod that bursts into flowers, usually lilies, is also an attribute of St. Mary the Virgin.³⁶

The choosing of Aaron as the priestly intermediary between man and God comes just after the rebellion and punishment of Korah. We are told here that Aaron ‘stood between the living and the dead’ (Num.17:13 [48]), an image that portrays him with one foot in either realm, a bridge between worlds. In the story of the betrothal of Joseph and Mary, Joseph is particularly reminded of the punishment of Korah if he should not obey God’s command to accept Mary. In a sense, just as Aaron, and with him the priestly caste, act to bring man to God and

³² In the Judeo-Christian tradition Hercules is most obviously paralleled with Samson, who is also a solar hero.

³³ *Dictionary of Symbols*: ‘staff’, p.918.

³⁴ According to this account a dove came forth from Joseph’s rod and flew on to his head. As the *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. W. Schneemelcher, 1991, p.430, notes, this alludes to Matt.3:16 and the baptism of Christ. Of course, as St. Peter says, baptism corresponds precisely to “traversing the waters” of the Flood (1Pt.3:21).

³⁵ Metford, *DCLL*, ‘Cross, legends of the’, p.76.

³⁶ Metford, *DCLL*, ‘Flowering rod’, p.101.

God to man, so too does Joseph act to bring the Virgin Mother and Child to mankind.³⁷ St. Mary for her part is the very vessel of Christ and in this sense the symbolism of St. Christopher coincides with that of St. Mary the Mother of Christ. Here we should not forget that it was the baby Christ that St. Christopher carried across the stream.

The staff is also associated with the idea of fecundity, an idea that resonates with the idea of marriage, as with the marriage of Joseph and Mary, and more particularly with Mary herself as the Heavenly Mother. This symbolism of the fecundity of the staff expresses itself most prominently in the analogy of staff and phallus but has its final source in the creative diremption and polarisation of the complementary Principles, Essence and Substance. Prior—in a logical rather than chronological sense—to their polarisation, Essence and Substance abide in a nondual bi-unity, coincident but not composed, fused but not confused. The diremption or polarisation of Essence and Substance is, metaphysically speaking, the creative act *par excellence*. This fecundity is well seen in the miracle of the staff becoming a palm tree and bearing fruit. The palm tree is regarded as a symbol of victory, ascension, regeneration and immortality.³⁸ The traversing of the waters, in the sense of crossing to a higher state, precisely accords with victory and ascension. Inasmuch as this is a death to one state and the birth of the primordial state this is regeneration; and inasmuch as the primordial state is the state of divine Unity beyond both Time and Space, this is exactly the abode of immortality. Furthermore, the symmetry of the palm leaf and the androgynous nature of the palm tree perfectly symbolise the resolution of the contraries, Nicolas of Cusa's *coincidentia oppositorum*, from multiplicity through duality to ontological biunity within divine Unity, from contraries to complementaries.

There is a notable and somewhat peculiar variation on the St. Christopher mythology that deserves mention for the manner in which it fleshes out this symbolism. Professor John Metford, among others, remarks on the artistic depiction of St. Christopher with a “dog’s

³⁷ Guénon has remarked on the curious fact that it was a “Joseph” who possessed the “oracular cup” (Gen.44:5) and a Joseph, Joseph of Arimathaea, who possessed the Grail (FS, pp.198-99). We also note it being another Joseph, Joseph husband of Mary, who possessed, so to speak, Mary, herself a well known symbol of the Grail and again the vessel of the blood of Christ.

³⁸ See Metford, *DCLL*: ‘Palm’, p.188; *Dictionary of Symbols*: ‘palm’, p.734.

head.”³⁹ Metford conjectures that this is derived from Christopher admitting to having been a Canaanite before his baptism, the Latin *cananeus* (“Canaanite”) being confused for *canineus* (“dog-like” or “canine”). This may well be so, and if so it would seem to be an interesting case of hermeneutic relationship as discussed by Coomaraswamy in his essay, ‘*Nirukta = Hermeneia*’.⁴⁰ Without dismissing Metford’s conjecture, let us suggest that this depiction of St. Christopher accords with the complex symbolism of the “dog,” including its worldwide role as psychopomp. The dog is commonly seen as the guardian of the Underworld, as with the Greek Cerberus and associated with death, be it as Cerberus, the Egyptian Anubis, the Germanic Garm, or the Chinese T’ien ‘kuan. Furthermore, Chevalier & Gheerbrant’s *Dictionary of Symbols* recalls instances, in the Aztec tradition, of a dog being sacrificed on its master’s grave to help him cross the nine rivers which bar access to the eternal house of the dead.⁴¹ The dog is both guardian and guide, the one who has the “key” to the barrier between the two worlds, or even as the “keyhole” itself, so to speak. The “ferryman” is the means of this crossing. The relationship here is similar to that between the door (the ferryman) and the key (the dog). These are two elements of the one symbolism. In the case of the depiction of St. Christopher with a dog’s head there seems to be a recognition of this symbolic interplay.

Related to this depiction of St. Christopher with a dog’s head is the connection observed by Whitall Perry between St. Christopher and the “Precursor” to the Second Coming of Christ (Elias, John the Baptist, Al-Mahdi).⁴² Perry remarks that ‘St. John the Baptist, whose feast day is June 24, is identified with the summer solstice as the Saint John of

³⁹ Metford, *DCLL*: ‘Christopher, St.’, p.68; also J. Coulson ed., *The Saints A Concise Biographical Dictionary*, London: Burns & Oates, 1958, p. 110.

⁴⁰ Coomaraswamy, ‘*Nirukta = Hermeneia*’ in *SP2*.

⁴¹ See *Dictionary of Symbols*: ‘dog’, p.297 citing H. B. Alexander, *The World’s Rim: Great Mysteries of The North American Indians*, Lincoln (Nebraska), 1953, p.202, also J. Soustelle, *The Daily Life of the Aztecs*, London, 1959.

⁴² Perry, *WB*, p.76. Analogous allusions to this preparatory function are to be seen in Hinduism (the *Kalki Avatar*) and in Buddhism (the *Maitreya Buddha*); see also Lings, *The Eleventh Hour*, 1987, Ch.1.

Summer'.⁴³ Hence, 'the Forerunner to Christ, in his association with the summer solstice, is thus in some manner allied with the constellation of *Canis Major*, due to its heliacal position at this period.'⁴⁴ Moreover, as Guénon says, the solstitial symbolism of the "two St. John's" is related to the symbolism of the Roman Janus, who, with St. Peter in the Christian tradition, is the "holder of the keys."⁴⁵ Furthermore, with respect to the "traversing of the waters" both St. Peter and Janus have as elements of their respective symbolisms the symbol of the boat. Christ excepted, St. Peter may be said to be the fisherman *par excellence* of the Christian tradition; and, as Guénon remarks, Janus had as one of his chief emblems a barque that could move in both directions, forward and backward, corresponding to the two faces of Janus himself.⁴⁶

The Catholic tradition is resplendent with traditional symbolisms and blessed with a wealth of mythologies divinely inspired to communicate symbolic truths to all levels of the human consciousness, which will necessarily be found in any human collectivity. Myth at its most basic level is the property and right of the "general" peoples, the "folk" element, so to speak. Thus the mythic nature of St. Christopher poses little or no problem for the folk mentality. Regardless of rational explanations or conscious recognition of the symbolism involved the folk element of the Catholic Church is well able to accept and benefit from the "simple" truth that St. Christopher offers.⁴⁷ It comes as little surprise that while the Church has dismissed St. Christopher from the universal calendar he nevertheless remains one of the most popular saints of the Catholic tradition.

To show that elements of St. Christopher's symbolism are found in various mythologies around the world is in no way intended to suggest that the mythology of St. Christopher is simply a "borrowing," or that it is in any way non-Catholic. As Guénon remarked, 'there are symbols

⁴³ The feast day of St. John the Apostle and Evangelist is December 27th and St. John the Baptist, June 24th, these dates being those of the traditional Roman calendar; see Guénon, *FS*, p.169, n.4.

⁴⁴ Perry, *WB*, p.75, 76.

⁴⁵ On the symbolism of Janus see Guénon, *FS*, Chs.20 & 39; also Coomaraswamy, '*Svayamatrma: Janua Coeli.*'

⁴⁶ Guénon, *FS*, p.92.

⁴⁷ I do not deny that this simple devotional character can decline into mere superstition, but one does not throw the baby out with the bathwater, as the saying goes.

which are common to the most diverse and widely separated traditional forms, not as a result of “borrowings,” which in many cases would be quite impossible, but because in reality they pertain to the Primordial Tradition from which these forms have issued either directly or indirectly.⁴⁸ Truth is Truth in any tradition. That the fundamental doctrines of any orthodox tradition should find support in the authority of many or all of the other orthodox traditions should come as no surprise. It is in fact a great comfort and confirmation.

⁴⁸ Guénon, *FS*, p.27.

Weaving the symbolism of light

Timothy Scott

God guides towards His Light whomever He wants.
God gives symbols for men. God knows everything.
(*Surah 24: Light*)

According to a well-known universal symbolism, “light” expresses the distinction of creation from the “darkness” of non-distinction or primeval chaos. In India and China, as in the Book of *Genesis*, the first work of creation is the separation of light and dark. Prior¹ to this separation, light and dark abide as the creative principle in a bi-unity, fused but not confused, corresponding to the principal progenitive pair: Essence and Substance.² In practice this pair or complementarity is “almost synonymous”³ given complementarism is essentially a correlation between two terms.⁴ Symbolically, Essence and Substance are respectively the active and passive principles: male and female, communicative and receptive, positive and negative, right and left, above and below, and, light and dark.

Light tends to express a positive affirmation while darkness carries the negative sense of chaos. However, the symbolism of darkness also belongs to the mystical experience of the *via negativa* where it

¹ “Prior” in a logical rather than chronological sense, for, of course, this is “before” the distinction of time.

² Guénon observes, ‘It is true that Being is beyond all distinction, since the first distinction is that of “essence” and “substance” or of *Purusha* and *Prakriti*; nevertheless *Brahma*, as *Ishwara* or Universal Being, is described as *savishesha*, that is to say as “implying distinction,” since He is the immediate determining principle of distinction’ (*MB*, p.164). In this context Perry notes the Vedantic doctrine of *bhedabheda* or ‘Distinction without Difference’ (*WB*, p.15).

³ Schuon qualifies this description by adding that they ‘differ in that substance refers to the underlying, immanent, permanent and autonomous nature of a basic reality, whereas essence refers to the reality as such, that is, as “being,” and secondarily as the absolutely fundamental nature of a thing. ... The notion of essence denotes an excellence which is as it were discontinuous in relation to accidents, whereas the notion of substance implies on the contrary a sort of continuity’ (*ITFA*, p.53, n.1).

⁴ Guénon, *SC*, p.28.

expresses the essence of the Godhead insomuch as it is beyond apprehension by the human reason.⁵ In this sense, darkness has a positive connotation, as evident in the formula of the *Song of Songs*: 'I am black, but beautiful' (Sg.1:5). This apophatic symbolism is alternatively expressed by a super-abundance of light such that it constitutes the "blinding" of the discursive mind, as with the light that blinded Saul upon the road to Damascus (Ac.9:4-9). The blackness of the "beloved" in the *Song of Songs* derives precisely from being "burnt" by the "Sun" (Sg.1:6).

In the final analysis the distinction between light and dark is the "illusion" of duality. The "dark" Substance, the *materia prima*, is from a certain perspective identical with the "light" Essence. This sense of ambiguity is recognised in the Greek word *ousia*, and again, in the symbolism of the letter *ayn*, that each connote the ideas of "substance" and "essence."⁶ At the level of Substance, the Greek word *khaos*, the "void" of Hesiod's theogony, has the double meaning of "primordial abyss" and "indeterminate matter;" 'it is' says Frithjof Schuon, 'neither nothingness pure and simple nor a substance preceding the creative act, but together with the demiurge, the first content of creation; the active demiurge being the center, and its passive complement, the periphery. This two-fold demiurge constitutes the creative power in the midst of creation itself.'⁷ The "active demiurge," identical with ontological Essence, is mythologically most often recognised in the figure of the blacksmith, whose creative prowess involves precisely the co-use of fire (Essence) and water (Substance). In the Pre-Socratic tradition, primordial Substance is expressed alternatively by Water (Thales) and Fire (Heraclitus). In the pre-creational state, says Jalal-ud-din Rumi, 'we were one like sunshine... and we were clean like water.'⁸ What is being described in both instances is the sense of indifferentiation, formlessness, potentiality, purity and unity.

The expansion of light within and upon darkness expresses the "measure" of Creation.⁹ This corresponds to the production of "order,"

⁵ This notion is found in most mystical writings and is particularly well known from the Christian writings of Dionysius the Areopagite.

⁶ On *ousia* see Burckhardt, *Alchemy*, p.36, n.3; on *ayn* see Burckhardt, *ISD*, p.62, n.1.

⁷ Schuon, *SME*, p.52-53.

⁸ Jalal-ud-din Rumi, *Maulana Rum's Masnawi*, tr. M. G. Gupta, Agra: M G Publishers, I, 834.

⁹ Guénon, *RQ*, p.39.

the manifested universe, from “chaos,” in the sense that chaos is opposed to order. Strictly speaking chaos is the indefinite, in the Platonic sense, and the ordered cosmos is the definite.¹⁰ Space *per se* is not a construct of the ordered cosmos but corresponds precisely to the virtuality of chaos, and in this, to the potentiality of Substance. In this sense it is a mistake to talk, as is often the case today, of space as being infinite. Space is indefinite; the Infinite properly refers to that which is Beyond-Being. Guénon observes that this production of order is assimilated in all traditions to an “illumination” (the *Fiat Lux* of *Genesis*). He says that “chaos” is the ‘potentiality from which as starting-point manifestation will be “actualised,” that is to say, it is in effect the substantial side of the world, which is therefore described as the tenebrous pole of existence, whereas Essence is the luminous pole since it is the influence of Essence that illuminates the “chaos” in order to extract from it the “cosmos”’.¹¹

This imagery returns us to the ambiguity of the Essence-Substance complementarity, for we might well say that the “ordered” cosmos, our existential world, is none other than chaos illuminated; what was once hidden is now seen, but it is still “chaos.” It is the Absolute that contains true order in the sense of perfection; cosmic “order,” or the Relative, is in comparison chaotic. Nevertheless, the cosmos constitutes a contingent “order” in keeping with its nature as the reflection of the Absolute.

The “diremption”¹² of light and dark gives rise simultaneously to a polar and an axial symbolism: “polar” in that the progenitive principles now appear as two distinct poles, and “axial” in that their polarisation corresponds to the extension of a central axis that jointly holds apart and unifies the productive poles of the cosmos. This axial symbolism, which is the movement from a “point” (Skt. *bindu*) to a line, can then be recognised in both Essence, as a vertical “exaltation” and in Substance, as a horizontal “amplitude.” Combined this symbolism is expressed thus \perp . This expresses the sense of “weightlessness” of light as opposed to the expansive “heaviness” of darkness. The vertical

¹⁰ Guénon, *RQ*, p.38.

¹¹ Guénon, *RQ*, p.38.

¹² The technical term “diremption” differs from “separation,” in that it implies the extension of biunity into the two “connected” poles, in other words the movement from a point to a line (see Snodgrass, *ATEI*, p.60).

exaltation corresponds to the “Celestial Ray” or “Divine Ray,” the *Buddhi* of Hindu doctrine, and again, the *Fiat Lux*.¹³ The vertical Ray is infinite inasmuch as it “originates” from the Infinitude of the Unmanifest. The horizontal “amplitude” is the indefinite plane of reflection of the vertical Ray, in the manner of the *Fiat Lux* being reflected in the waters of chaos, or the concentric ripples of a stone dropped in water. In the final analysis the horizontal amplitude is a continuation of the vertical exaltation. As Guénon remarks, ‘The “Celestial Ray” passes through all the states of the being and ... marks the central point of each of them by its trace on the corresponding horizontal plane’.¹⁴

This image of a stone dropped upon water can be found in the *Zohar* (I, 231a-231b; II, 222a-222b). The Holy One, it is said, created the world by throwing down a “precious stone” from beneath the throne of His glory that sank into the “abyss.” This stone is also “axial”: ‘One edge of the stone became lodged in the deeps, and another in the realms above. And there was another edge, a supernal one, a single point, which is in the middle of the world, and the world expanded from there, to the right and to the left, and upon all sides, and it is thus sustained by this central point.’ In the language of the Kabbalah this “stone” is said to be the *Shekhinah*, the Divine Immanence, which is, moreover, represented as Divine Light. Isaiah Tishby notes that the expulsion of the *even shetiyah* or “foundation stone” into the abyss corresponds to the ‘light of the *Shekhinah* spreading through the lower worlds as far as the abyss.’¹⁵

The “stone fallen from the sky” constitutes the symbolism of the *lapsit exillis*.¹⁶ This symbolism is connected with that of the Grail, which as tradition says, was fashioned by Angels from an emerald that dropped from Lucifer’s forehead at the time of his fall from heaven.¹⁷ This image of Lucifer’s stone bears comparison with the planet Venus as it is the Morning Star or Lucifer’s Star (Vulg. Lucifer = “brightness”). This is the Star of Light, *Tcholban*, as the ancient Turks called it, the “Shining” or “Dazzling One.” The Church Fathers identified the fall of

¹³ See Guénon, *SC*, Ch.24; *MB*, Ch.20.

¹⁴ Guénon, *SC*, p.105.

¹⁵ Tishby, *WZ2*, p.571, n.77.

¹⁶ See Guénon, *FS*, Ch.46.

¹⁷ See Guénon, *FS*, p.18.

the Morning Star as told of in *Isaiah* 14:12 with that of Lucifer's fall from heaven. This is commonly seen as the same star that St. John speaks of as falling into the waters (Rev.8:10; 9:1), the star called Wormwood ("bitterness"). The ancient Mexicans dreaded the Morning Star as the bringer of disease and death.¹⁸ In his *Mysterium Magnum* Jacob Boehme adopted the positive symbolism of Venus associating it with the Divine Light of God. The alternative appearances of Venus as the Morning Star and the Evening Star have made it a basic symbol of death and rebirth.

According to Hesiod's *Theogony*, Aphrodite (Venus) was born from the waters when the seed of Ouranos (Uranos) was scattered upon them after his castration by Cronos. This is the symbolism of the "god-slaying"¹⁹ which again demonstrates the fall of the Essential seed upon the Substantial waters. The ancient Romans attributed the emerald to Venus.²⁰ Alchemists regarded the emerald as the stone of Mercury where Mercury is both alchemically and mythologically associated with the "intermediary world" as the axial link between Heaven and Earth. In St. John's vision the Ancient of Days sat on a throne 'and round the throne was a rainbow that looked like an emerald' (Rev.4:3). The association of the spectrum of the rainbow with light is obvious. The rainbow is also a well-known "bridge" between Heaven and Earth.²¹ The emerald that fell from Lucifer's forehead signifies a creative and creating link from Heaven to Earth, and signified the loss of immortality that resides in Eternal Unity. The Grail, into which this emerald was carved, contains the blood of Christ, the "draught of immortality" that "re-opens," so to speak, this link in an ascending manner from Earth back to Heaven.

The myth of the fall of Lucifer and of Lucifer as the "bearer of light" is associated with the negative notion of cosmogenesis. Thus the Cathars regarded Satan as the demiurge. In this connection Prometheus, in the Greek tradition, is both demiurge and "bringer of light" or, as it is, fire. Prometheus' gift of fire to mankind is viewed negatively by Zeus. Fire

¹⁸ *Dictionary of Symbols*, p.926.

¹⁹ For example, the dismemberment of Ouranos in Greek mythology, the murder and dismemberment of Osiris in Egyptian mythology, the sacrifice of Prajapati in the Vedic tradition, etc.

²⁰ *Dictionary of Symbols*, p.352.

²¹ See Guénon, *FS*, Chs.65 & 66.

or light is in both instances most readily associated with “knowledge.” The notion of the “light of understanding” as opposed to the “darkness of ignorance” is common. The negative connotations associated with the gaining of knowledge are found in the story of Eden. However, as Marco Pallis observes, the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil are but the one tree.²² Similarly the Chinese patriarch Hui Neng taught: ‘The common run of mankind regards enlightenment and ignorance [light and darkness] as two different things. Wise men who achieved the inward reality know that they are of the same nature.’²³

Mention of the demiurge recalls our earlier allusion to Hephaestus who, like Lucifer, was also flung from heaven like a “falling star” (*Paradise Lost* Bk.1, 745). Hephaestus is also the “cup-bearer” of Olympus, this being the cup containing the ambrosial nectar, the “draught of immortality” as with the Grail.²⁴ Guénon observes the etymological identification of the Hindu *amrita* with the Greek *ambrosia*. Like the dual symbolism of Venus, *amrita* is both the source of life (*a-mrta*) and that of death (*mrta*), a symbolism that Alain Daniélou observes as expressed in all traditions as the oneness of love and death (*a-mor* and *mor-tis*).²⁵ This connection is evident in Greek mythology in the love affair of Aphrodite and Aries. Now *amrita* is, as Guénon says, identical with the Vedic *soma*, the fructifying sap of the “World Tree.” In this context Guénon considers *soma* as identical with the sap of the *Haoma* tree of Zoroastrian tradition, also called *haoma*. This is, to be exact, the white *Haoma* tree, just as *soma* and the analogous symbols of milk and semen are all white. The symbolism of the colour white entails its amalgamation of the spectrum. White is also one of the two colours of Christ along with red, which informs the blood of the Grail and is also the colour of fire. On this point we should recall that the symbolism of the Hindu Agni (fire), who corresponds to Hephaestus, is closely bound with that of *soma*.

²² Pallis remarks: ‘from the view point of ignorance, the Tree of Life *becomes* the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil; regarded from the view point of true knowledge, the Tree of Becoming (as it might just as well be called) *is* the Tree of Life’ (‘Is there a Problem of Evil?’ in Needleman ed., SG, p.238).

²³ *Dictionary of Symbols*, p.602.

²⁴ On the “draught of immortality” see Guénon, *FS*, Ch.55.

²⁵ Daniélou, *Gl*, p.17.

The Greek ambrosia, inasmuch as it was distinguished from “nectar,” is a food rather than a drink, so that it is a question of a “food of immortality” rather than a draught. This is found in the Biblical symbolism of the Tree of Life and its fruit. Again, this is found with the Biblical *manna*, which is associated with light. Leo Schaya remarks: “The pure and redemptive light symbolised in the Talmud by “manna,” is called *Nogah*, “brightness,” in the Kabbalah.”²⁶ Whether “food” or “draught,” it is, as Guénon remarks, ‘always a product of the tree or the plant, a product that contains the concentrated sap which is in a way the very essence of the plant.’²⁷ In this context he notes that the Sanskrit word *rasa* means both “sap” and “essence.” A further pattern emerges from this symbolism when we consider the *apsarases*, the “essences of the waters” (Skt. *ap* = “water”—*rasa*). In the *Ramayana* they are presented as “beautiful women” born out of the cosmogonic “churning of the ocean” (1.45.31), a description that immediately recalls Aphrodite. Daniélou says that these are the ‘unmanifested potentialities, the possible worlds, which exist in the Divine Mind but may never come to exist physically.’²⁸ Their name is also explained as “moving on the waters” (*ap-sarini*)²⁹ which reminds us of the Spirit (*ruach*) on the waters (Gen.1:2). The work of the Spirit is here analogous with the *Fiat Lux*.

In Islam the word for spirit, *Er-Ruh*, is basically identical with the word for Light, *En-Nur*. *En-Nur* comes from the same root as the Hebrew word *ur* (“light”) which as “Ur of the Chaldeans” is the birthplace of Abraham. According to the Sefirotic system of Kabbalah, Abraham corresponds to *Chesed* or Mercy, which is described as “Infinite Light.” *Ur* is again the root to the name *Uriel* (“light of God”), the archangel said to be the medium by which the knowledge of God came to man (Num. R. ii.10). Uriel stands at the gate of Eden with the “fiery sword” which is another way of saying that from the first point or centre (Eden) comes the Divine Ray or radii (the fiery sword). *Uriel* stands as the key-holder to the three hundred and sixty-five lights that came from ‘the light that emerges from the supernal, innermost

²⁶ Schaya, *UMK*, p.94.

²⁷ Guénon, *FS*, p.226.

²⁸ Daniélou, *GI*, p.304.

²⁹ Daniélou, *GI*, p.305.

secluded and concealed *hashmal*’ (*Zohar* II, 78a-78b). Obviously these lights are associated with the light of the solar year, as are the twelve fruit or “Suns” of the Biblical Tree of Life, as Guénon points out.³⁰ The *hashmal* is both the fiery creatures of Ezekiel’s vision (1:4) and the mystery of which they symbolise.³¹ The *hashmal*, says Tishby, is the sefirah *Tiferet*, the “centre” or “heart” of the lower seven “cosmological” sefiroth.³² *Tiferet* synthetically contains the other six sefiroth in the same manner that white light contains the “six” principle colours of the rainbow.

The *Zohar* further says here that this light ‘is comprised of two lights, and they are one. The first light is a white light, which the eye cannot apprehend, and this is the light that is stored up for the righteous... The second light is the sparkling light that flashes with a red color. ... and because it is comprised of two it is called “twins” (*Genesis* 25:24).’ White is the purity and synthesis of the spectrum, the beginning and the end; moreover, insomuch as it is light *per se*, white is the principle of colour without itself actually being colour. Again, as Guénon shows, white is the seventh “colour” of the rainbow, indigo representing a modern deformation on traditional understandings.³³ White is the principle and synthesis of the six colours (red, orange, violet, yellow, blue, green) just as the centre, the seventh direction, is the principle and synthesis of the six spatial directions. This is again the seventh day of Creation, the day of “rest” (*Gen.*2:2). The red light is the cosmogonic irradiation of this principial light. Thus it is spoken of as “sparkling.” Here again is the symbolism of the white semen and the red menses, as Clement of Alexandria has discussed (*Paedagogus* I.48.1-49.4). This white light is firstly the light of Divine Mercy, *Chesed* (Abraham), but as a synthesis and perfection of the Great Work it is the Divine Heart, *Tifereth* (Jacob).³⁴

Tishby considers the *Zohar* to be referring to Jacob alone in reference to the “twins,” however, this symbolism is bound with that Jacob and Esau, whose name is said to come from him being born ‘red,

³⁰ Guénon, *FS*, p.226.

³¹ See *Zohar Hadash, Yitro*, 38a & d.

³² These are the sefirah from Chesed down to Malkuth excluding the supernal triad of Kether-Chokmah-Binah.

³³ See Guénon, *FS*, p.236, n.3.

³⁴ See *Zohar* III, 215a-215b.

altogether like a hairy cloak' (Gen.25:25). Esau is associated with the Kings of Edom who, as Leo Schaya says, represent in the Kabbalah 'the imperfect or unbalanced state of creation preceding its present state—the latter being an ordered manifestation of the *Fiat Lux*'.³⁵ This description recalls that of the *apsaras*. Now Esau (red), the older twin, precedes Jacob (white), however, the above section of the *Zohar* talks of white as the first light. This merely constitutes a shift in perspective from the cosmological to the metaphysic point of view, or to put this another way, an inversion proper to the "law of inverse analogy."³⁶ We might also add to our earlier observations on Venus that, in Aztec tradition, Quetzalcoatl, who was represented by the planet Venus, was called "Precious Twin."³⁷ This symbolism of twins as it is associated with light is best expressed in the relationship of the Sun and the Moon. On this point, the Sun through its fiery nature, is associated with red, while the moon is white. But, by inverse analogy, the Sun, as the source of pure light, is white, while the moon, in its association with blood, is red.

Now the word *nogah*, mentioned above, bears a marked resemblance to the name Noah, which name means precisely "rest," as in the seventh day. The relationship between Noah and the rainbow need hardly be mentioned. Furthermore, we find here the release of the black-red raven, which remains "outside" the Ark, and the release of the white dove, which returns to the Ark in the manner of beginning and end. Of course the dove is a well-known Christian symbol of the Holy Spirit and associated with the Divine Light. To this we can add that the dove, in Greek tradition, is also Aphrodite's bird.

The vertical "flow" of the *Fiat Lux* is again expressed by the "river" that flowed out of Eden (Gen.2:10). This river divides and becomes four rivers. The first river describes a vertical "line" whereas the four rivers represent the four principle directions of the horizontal plane of the "face of the waters." The first river flows from the principal point, symbolically the letter *ayn* which expresses the idea of a "fountain" gushing forth as with Plotinus' *Fons Vitae*. *Ayn* also means an "eye;" the

³⁵ Schaya, *UMK*, p.156, n.1.

³⁶ Guénon, *RQ*, p.186; *FS*, Chs.52 & 53; *GT*, Ch.7. This law follows the oft-quoted Hermetic aphorism, "As Above So Below." See also Schuon, *TB*, p.84, n.2; *SPHF*, p.106, n.1; *LS*, pp.35-6, where he refers to "direct" and "inverse" analogy.

³⁷ *Dictionary of Symbols*, p.1064.

“eye of the needle” or symbolic “Sundoor.”³⁸ This is the divine Eye through which the creative Light flows “out.” In accord with the “law of inverse analogy” the human eye is a receptacle through which light, as we perceive it, flows in. In this connection, the *apsaras* are said to be the daughters of Vision (*Kasyapa*).³⁹

According to Kabbalah this first river is called *Yobel*, which literally means “a blast from a trumpet” expressing a sense of emanation through the cosmogonic sound, the Word, analogous to the *Fiat Lux*. *Yobel* is also the same as the angel Yahoel, the first of the “Seventy Names of Metatron.” Metatron, the “word of God,” is, like Uriel, said to have been the deliverer of knowledge to mankind.⁴⁰ In Christ, who is both the Word and the “light of the world” (Jn.8:12), the connection between sound and light is clear. Again, in his *Mathnawi*, Rumi writes: ‘But when that purest of lights threw forth Sound which produced forms, He, like the diverse shadows of a fortress, became manifold.’⁴¹

Sound and light each manifest through vibration, both physically and symbolically. Thus Robert Lawlor refers to the primal waters, the Egyptian Nun, as the “primordial vibrational field,” *nada* in Hindu tradition.⁴² Lawlor further remarks upon the creative power of the *vesica piscis*, which may be recognised in the path of a vibrating string or line, and visually suggests the eye, the mouth and the opening of the vagina. Returning to the symbolism of the stone dropped in water, this vibration is seen in the production of waves, the *amplitude* proper. The waves constitute movement that distinguish the “creating” waters from their “resting” state.

The *Zohar* talks of how the Holy One created the world by merging light with darkness (*Zohar, Terumah* 164b): ‘He brought them together and harmonized them, and when they were united as one, he stretched them out like a curtain.’⁴³ In Kabbalah this “curtain” is called *pargod*; it

³⁸ See Coomaraswamy, ‘Svayamatrnnā: Janua Coeli’ and ‘Symplegades’ both in *SPI*. Either of these two amazing essays can be consulted for insights into the symbolism being discussed in this paper. Rather than rehearsing them, I have chosen to try to simply “flesh out the picture” a bit further.

³⁹ Daniélou, *GI*, p.305.

⁴⁰ In *The Apocalypse of Abraham* 15.4 Metatron (Yahoel) is portrayed as Abraham’s spiritual teacher.

⁴¹ Jalal-ud-din Rumi, *Masnawi*, tr. Gupta, I, 835.

⁴² R. Lawlor, *Sacred Geometry*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1989, p.22.

⁴³ See Schaya, *UMK*, p.74.

is the “cosmic veil,” the Hindu *Maya*.⁴⁴ The symbolism of the “curtain” is the same as that of a symbolic “garment” which recalls Esau’s “hairy cloak.” The symbolism of the veil or garment is again found in the explanation of the manifestation of the *Shekhinah*. As Schaya observes, “The *shekhinah*,... wraps itself in *metatron*, its active and spiritual manifestation... and in *avir*, its cosmic and substantial receptivity,... The *shekhinah* then unites the spiritual radiation of *metatron* with the subtle manifestation of *avir*, and by this forms the heavens.”⁴⁵ *Avir*, which corresponds to the Platonic *ether* and the Hindu *akasha*,⁴⁶ is the “mysterious” veil—the interface or isthmus (the Islamic *barzakh*)⁴⁷—through which the Divine Light or *Avr* is realised. This symbolism is likewise relevant to the Vedantic tradition. As Schuon remarks, “the term *maya* combines the meanings of “productive power” and “universal illusion;” it is the inexhaustible play of manifestations, deployments, combinations and reverberations, a play with which *Atma* clothes itself even as the ocean clothes itself with a mantle of foam ever renewed and never the same.”⁴⁸ Schuon’s use of the imagery of the “ocean foam” recalls the birth of Aphrodite and the *apsaras*.

There remains an almost infinitely expanding web of homologous symbols that could be woven into this “coat of many colours,” not the least of which include the symbolism of weaving, of the spiders web, of hair and, of course, of the Sun with its infinite rays of light.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the examples presented herein go some little way to weaving together a small section of the symbolic veil through which we are afforded, in a manner protective to our “eyes,” the otherwise blinding Light of the Divine.

⁴⁴ See K. Oldmeadow, ‘Sankara’s Doctrine of Maya’ in *Asian Philosophy* 2.2, 1992.

⁴⁵ Schaya, *UMK*, p.75.

⁴⁶ See Guénon, *FS*, Ch.75.

⁴⁷ Nasr remarks that the *barzakh* is the *intellectus materialis*, or *al-`aql al-hayulani*, which with respect to the intelligible forms acts as *materia prima* (*An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, Thames and Hudson, Great Britain, 1978, p.269).

⁴⁸ Schuon, *LT*, p.89.

⁴⁹ These symbolisms are treated in depth throughout the works of Guénon and Coomaraswamy.

Edom and Eden: Remarks on cosmogonic symbolism

Timothy Scott

The Kings of Edom¹

It is taught in the *Sifra di-Zeniuta*: Before *Atika Atikin* prepared His attributes, He constructed kings, inscribed kings, and conjectured kings, but they could not survive, so that after a time He concealed them. This is [the meaning of] the verse “And after these are the kings that reigned in the land of Edom” (*Genesis* 36:31). ... And if you say that it is written “And he died...and he died...” and [this means] that they were completely annulled, this is not really the case, for whoever descends from the first stage of his existence is referred to as if he had died, as it is said “the king of Egypt died” (*Exodus* 2:23), because he descended from the first stage of his existence. ... But they did not really live until the image of Man was prepared. When the image of man was prepared they resumed another existence, and lived. (*Zohar* III, 135a-135b, *Indra Rabba*)

Do not despise the Edomite, for he is your brother. (*Deuteronomy* 23:8)

I called my son out of Egypt. (*Matthew* 2:15)

‘Edom’ remarks Leo Schaya, ‘symbolises sometimes the imperfect or unbalanced state of creation preceding its present state—the latter being

¹ On the Edomite Kings see *Zohar* III, 128a, 135a, b, 142a, b, 292a, a. See Tishby, *WZL*, p.332-3; Schaya, *UMK*, pp.107-10; Mathers, *KU*, § 41, 56, pp.43, 84-5.

an ordered manifestation of the *Fiat Lux*.² As Gershom Scholem notes, ‘This conception of primeval worlds also occurs in the “orthodox Gnosticism” of such Fathers of the Church as Clement of Alexandria and Origen, albeit with a difference, in as much as for them these worlds were not simply corrupt but necessary stages in the great cosmic process.’³ According to Kabbalah, the Edomite kings were constructed of pure Judgment and contained no Mercy. ‘Edom (אֶדוֹם; “red”), derives from the word ‘adam, (אָדָם; “to show blood”), where red, as Isaiah Tishby observes, is the colour of strict judgment.’⁴ The “Death of the Kings” (*Gen.36:31; Ex.2:23*) refers to the inability of onto-cosmological manifestation to maintain itself before the advent of the image of supernal Man. Tishby: ‘The system of emanation had not yet been prepared in the image of the supernal Man, which constitutes a harmonious structure by balancing the opposing forces. In the idea of the image of Man even the forces of destruction of “the other side” are able to survive. ... Once the image of Man had been prepared all the forces that were not able to exist before existed in it.’⁵

Supernal Man: this is *Adam Kadmon* (“principial man”), also called *Adam ilaah* (“transcendent man”). He is the “prototype” upon which the Universe is modelled—“the Universe is a big man and man is a little universe.” This is the Islamic doctrine of *Al-Insanul-Kamil* (“Universal Man”).⁶ In his introduction to al-Jili’s treatise, *Al-Insan al-Kamil*, Titus Burckhardt remarks that, ‘With regard to its internal unity, the cosmos is ... like a single being;—“We have recounted all things in an evident prototype” (Qur’an 36). If one calls him the “Universal Man,” it is not by reason of an anthropomorphic conception of the universe, but because man represents, on earth, its most perfect image.’⁷ A distinction arises between Universal Man and Primordial Man or Pre-Adamite Man (*al-insan al-qadim*). This, *mutatis mundis*, is similar to the distinction, in the Chinese tradition, between Transcendent Man (*chun jen*) and True

² Schaya, *UMK*, p.156, n.1.

³ Scholem, *MTJM*, p.354, n.30.

⁴ Tishby, *WZI*, p.332, n.252.

⁵ Tishby, *WZI*, p.333, n.258, 259.

⁶ See al-Jili, *al-insan*; also Burckhardt, *ISD*, Ch.12.

⁷ Burckhardt, Introduction to al-Jili, *al-insan*, p.iv. Elsewhere Burckhardt cites St. Gregory Palamas as saying, ‘Man, this greater world in little compass, is an epitome of all that exists in a unity and is the crown of the Divine works’ (*ISD*, p.76, n.3).

Man (*chen jen*), which is the same as that between “actually realised immortality” and “virtual immortality.” René Guénon explains:

“Transcendent man,” “divine man,” or “spiritual man” are alternative names for someone who has achieved total realisation and attained the “Supreme Identity.” Strictly speaking he is no longer a man in an individual sense, because he has risen above humanity and is totally liberated not only from its specific conditions but also from all other limiting conditions associated with manifested existence. He is therefore, literally, “Universal Man,” whereas “true man”—who has only reached the stage of identification with “primordial man”—is not. But even so, it can be said that “true man” is already “Universal Man,” at least in a virtual sense.⁸

According to Kabbalah, the sefirah *Hesed* (Mercy) corresponds to Abraham, *Din* (Judgment) to Isaac, and *Tiferet* (Beauty) to Jacob. Jacob is the balance of Mercy and Judgment, the harmonised “image of Man” who, in his realised state, is Israel. Yet Jacob was not the first born to Isaac: ‘When her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb. The first came forth red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they called his name Esau. Afterward his brother came forth, and his hand had taken hold of Esau’s heel; so his name was called Jacob’ (Gen.25:24-6). The name Jacob, *Ya‘aqob* (יַעֲקֹב), means “heel catcher,” from the primitive root *‘aqab* (אָקַב; “to swell”). The image is of Jacob (order) “swelling” or rising out of the chaotic waters of potentiality (Esau), an image that is common in creation myths. Again, when we think of the “redness” of Esau as “blood” then one is led to think of the swelling of the woman’s belly with the foetal child, which has the same relationship with the “blood” of the placenta as Jacob has with Esau. Esau is potentiality, Jacob is actuality or realisation. Then, as *Genesis* 36:1 tells us, Esau is Edom. The Edomite Kings are ‘the kings who reigned in the land of Edom, before any king reigned over the Israelites’ (Gen.25:31); as Jacob follows Esau, usurps the birthright and

⁸ Guénon, *GT*, p.124. On the “Supreme Identity” see Guénon, *MB*, Ch.24.

becomes the chosen child, so too Israel follows Edom, and so too creation follows the potential for manifestation.

The symbolism of Edom is found with the Exodus from Egypt, for Egypt is commonly identified with Edom in the Kabbalah.⁹ Moreover, the Hebrew word for Egypt, *Mitsrayim*, is the dual of the word, *matsour*, implying the sense of “a limit.” As Schuon says, “To say manifestation is to say limitation.”¹⁰ In being unmanifest potential, Edom is still the first limitation.

Again, this symbolism is found in the symbolisms of both the Ark of Noah and the Ark of the Covenant; both express the “receptacle of Divine Immanence,” which is to say they express the “limits” of manifestation. In the case of the Ark of Noah the state of non-distinction is well expressed by the waters of the deluge. In the case of the Ark of the Covenant this state is expressed by the “desert” or wilderness of the Exodus. Just as the flood lasted forty years, so Israel wandered in the desert for forty years, and so, might it be added, did Christ undergo his testing and “purification” during his forty days in the desert. Both the flood and the desert express the idea of purification through a return to primordial chaos. Again, from a perspective that might be described as “linear,” both the mythology of Noah’s Flood and the story of Moses and the Ark of the Covenant allude to primordial chaos by the “states” described prior to the flood and prior to the exodus. In the first case this is expressed by the age of the Nephilim, the “wicked” generation of Noah. In the second case this is the exile of the Israelites in Egypt. Both of these share in the Kabbalistic symbolism of the “Death of the Kings of Edom”: ‘And these are the kings that reigned in the land of Edom’ (Gen.36:31).

Egypt is an analogue of Edom. The identification of the wicked generation of the Nephilim with the Edomite Kings is more obscure. The Nephilim are said to have been a race of “giants”; symbolically the Nephilim correspond to the Titans of Greek legend, the Mountain

⁹ *Zohar* III, 135a-135b associates the “kings who died” to the “king of Egypt who died” (Ex.2:23). Edom is metaphorically identified as both Egypt and Rome (see Schaya, *UMK*, p.156, n.1). From a socio-symbolic level the civilization of Egypt preceded the civilization of Israel and the civilization of Rome preceded that of Christianity, yet each was necessary for the following civilization to emerge.

¹⁰ Schuon, *IFA*, p.35.

Giants of Norse legend and the Asuras of Hindu myth.¹¹ In each tradition these represent the “unbalanced” state preceding the “Olympian” order. It has further been suggested that the “war of the Titans” corresponds, *mutatis mundis*, with the “war of the kings” (Gen.14:1-16),¹² where the “war of the kings” is again identifiable with the Edomite kings. *Genesis* 36:31 says, ‘Bela the son of Beor reigned in Edom, the name of his city being Dinhabah.’ Tishby explains that ‘the Hebrew word *bela* signifies “destruction,” and the whole name is like that of Balaam, son of Beor, who is on “the other side.”’¹³ Dinhabah we should understand as related to *Din* (Judgment). Here one might suggest the identification, at least symbolically, of “Bela the son of Beor” with “the king of Bela” (Gen.14:8). Added to this, readings from the *Sefirah Dtzenioutha*, the *Book of Concealed Mystery*, and *Ha Idra Rabba Qadisha*, the *Greater Holy Assembly*, suggest the identification between the Kings of Edom and the kings of *Genesis* 14, albeit in an esoteric way. In the *Book of Concealed Mystery* it is said, ‘Thirteen kings wage war with seven.’¹⁴ These “thirteen kings” are “the measures of mercies,” inasmuch as these represent the unity of the Tetragrammaton. Thirteen answers by gematria to the idea of unity: ‘For ACHD, *Achad*, unity yields the number 13 by numerical value’¹⁵. The “seven kings” are the seven Edomite kings named in *Genesis* 36:31-40. There are, in fact, eight kings named in this passage; moreover, there are nine principal personages when we recognize the importance of Mehetabel, the wife of Hadar (v.39). However, concerning the first seven kings it said of each that “[He] died.” Chapter 26 of *The Book of Concealed Mystery* explains that after Adam was constituted these seven were ‘mitigated in a permanent condition through him’; they ceased to be called by their former appellations and hence are considered to have “died.” Concerning Hadar and Mehetabel it is taught that they were not abolished like the others because they were male and female, ‘like as

¹¹ J. Bentley (*Hindu Astronomy* Pt.1 ‘The Ancient Astronomy’, Osnabruck: Biblio Verlag, 1970, pp.18-27) refers to the famous “Churning of the Ocean” (*Mahabharata* 1.15) as otherwise being called the “War between the Gods and the Giants.”

¹² See for example J. R., *The Source of Measures: Key to the Hebrew-Egyptian Mystery* (1894), San Diego: Wizard’s Bookshelf, 1982, p.207.

¹³ Tishby, *WZI*, p.332, n.256.

¹⁴ Mathers, *KU*, p.102.

¹⁵ Mathers, *KU*, p.47.

the palm tree, which groweth not unless there be both male and female.’ Hence, they did not “die” but remained in a fixed condition.¹⁶ ‘Thirteen kings wage war with seven kings’ and, as we are told, there were ‘nine vanquished in war’ (i.e. the eight kings of Gen.36 and Mehetabel). Consider then: *Genesis* 14:9 is explicit in stressing the odds “four kings against five.” This suggests the nine aspects of Edom (the eight kings and Mehetabel). When the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah flee (v.10) the odds shift to four kings against three, which reveals the seven Edomite kings who died. The “thirteen kings” who waged war with the seven correspond to Abraham who, as *Hesed* (*Mercy*), is the “measure of mercy.”

The relationship between Israel (actuality) and Edom (potentiality) is complementary. *Deuteronomy* 23:8 says, ‘Do not despise the Edomite, for he is your brother.’ Manifestation can never exhaust the indefinitude of potentiality, which is to say that there is a continuity of potentiality. A Jewish tradition ties this idea to the mythology of Noah. It is said that at the time of the Flood the giant Og begged admittance to the Ark. He climbed on to the roof and refused to leave.¹⁷ In this way the potentiality of the “giants,” the Nephilim, remained with the Ark through to the next generation.

In the *Second Slavonic Apocalypse of Enoch* there is yet another intriguing reference to Edom that relates it directly to the Flood myth.¹⁸ According to the story of the birth of Melkisedek (Melchizedek), Nir (“light”)—the brother of Noe (Noah)—to whom the new baby had been entrusted was warned by the Lord that He planned “a great destruction onto the earth” (the Flood), but the Lord reassured Nir that before this event the archangel Michael¹⁹ would take the child and put him in the Paradise of Edem (Eden). Chapter 72 finds Michael taking the child: ‘I shall take your child today. I will go with him and I will place him in the paradise of Edem, and there he will be forever.’²⁰

¹⁶ See Mathers, *KU*, pp.176-7; also Tishby, *WZI*, p.332-33.

¹⁷ *Pike de Rabbi Eliezer* Ch.23, cited in A. S. Rappoport, *Ancient Israel* Vol.1, London: Senate, 1995, p.212.

¹⁸ See Andersen tr., 2 (*Slavonic Apocalypse of Enoch*, Appendix: 2 Enoch in *Merilo Pravednoe*: J. H. Charlesworth ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* Vol.1, New York: Doubleday, 1983. pp.204-12.

¹⁹ The [J] text has Michael while the [A] has Gabriel. On the relationship of Michael and Gabriel see A. Cohen, *Everyman's Talmud*, New York: Schocken Books, 1995, pp.50-51.

²⁰ 2 *Enoch* 72.5.

However in verse nine we find the child placed in “the paradise of Edom.”²¹ Again, Schaya recalls that during the destruction of the second Temple, itself another case of the dissolution of the Judaic “world,” all twelve tribes went into exile in the kingdom of Edom.²²

Another incident that deserves consideration in light of the symbolism of Edom and the “imperfect or unbalanced state” preceding the “ordered manifestation” is the destruction of the original tablets of the Law (Ex.32:19). Here one recognises a similar relationship between Esau-Jacob and Jacob-Israel; allowing for certain differences of symbolism, what Esau is to Jacob, Jacob is to the Community of Israel. Thus, as Jacob ascended and descended the “Ladder”—the *axis mundi*—to become Israel, so too Moses ascended and descended Mount Sinai bringing the Testimony that transformed the Israelites to the “Community of Israel” as such.²³ But, in conformity with the symbolism being considered, the prototype tablets had to be destroyed before the Law could be brought forth in a perfect state.

Eden

A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers. (*Genesis* 2:10)

Between Edom and Eden there is a similar relationship as between Esau and Jacob and, by analogy, between the potential of Jacob and the realisation of Israel, or again, between Eden and the Garden. Here it is a matter of the hierarchy of Being and of perspective, from “above” or “below.” According to Kabbalah there is an Upper and a Lower Eden, respectively *Binah* and *Malkhut*, and these are the “upper firmament” and the “lower firmament,”²⁴ the “Upper Mother” and the “Lower Mother,”²⁵ the Upper and Lower Waters.²⁶

²¹ *2Enoch* 72.9. It is strange that this apparent anomaly receives no recognition by Andersen.

²² See Schaya, *UMK*, p.156.

²³ The Community of Israel is a cognomen of the *Shekhinah*.

²⁴ *Zohar* I, 85b-86a.

²⁵ *Zohar* I, 247b; III, 7b-8a.

²⁶ It is said: ‘The two letters of the upper firmament called *Mi* are contained within it [the lower firmament, *Malkhut*], and it is called *Yam* (sea)’ (*Zohar* I, 85b-86a). Tishby adds by way of a note: ‘The Hebrew letters of the word *Mi*, i.e., m, y, a designation of *Binah*, are reversed in the name for *Malkhut*, forming the word *yam* (sea)’ (*WZL*, p.351, n.453).

The name 'Eden (עֵדֵן) derives from the primitive root 'adan (אָדָן; "to be soft or pleasant") expressing the sense of "pleasure" or "enjoyment." However, the *New Jerusalem Bible* speculates that the word Eden may originally have meant "open wastes."²⁷ This suggests the word *tohu* ("formless"; *chaos*), as in the opening of *Genesis*: 'Now the earth was a formless void (*tohu* and *bohu*)'. Eden is the sea of potentiality from which creation stems; it is potentiality of fecundity, as the "ground"—Meister Eckhart's *grunt*—is potentially the garden. According to the perspective adopted, onto-cosmological potentiality presents either a positive (Eden, "pleasure"; plenitude) or negative (Edom, "open wastes"; chaos) face.

Eden corresponds to the sefirah *Binah*, which is called the "Great Sea."²⁸ Ananda Coomaraswamy observes that, 'the Sea, as the source of all existence, is equally the symbol of their last end or entelechy.'²⁹ Mircea Eliade remarks that the symbolism of the Waters expresses 'the universal sum of virtualities; they are the *fons et origo*, "spring and origin," the reservoir of all the possibilities of existence; they precede every form and *support* every creation.'³⁰ Peter Sterry poetically describes this as 'a fountain ever equally unexhausted, a Sea unbounded'³¹. The symbolism of the Sea refers to the "depth" and possibility of the Infinite; this is complemented by the symbolism of Darkness, which refers to the unknowability of the Infinite. The symbolism of the fountain is that of the active Essence that brings life through creation.

'A river flowed out of Eden' (Gen.2:10); here again is the symbolism of "the fountain" and "the Sea." The river that flows out of Eden is the active Essence—the same with the Spirit (*Ruah*) that moved on the Waters and, again, with the *Fiat Lux* that brings light from darkness. In the same way that zero contains the possibility for number and one

²⁷ *New Jerusalem Bible*, 1994, p.19.

²⁸ Mathers, *KU*, p.25.

²⁹ Coomaraswamy, 'The Sea': *SPI*, p.406. Coomaraswamy continues here to say, 'The final goal is not a destruction, but one of liberation from all the limitations of individuality as it functions in time and space.' The sea is a common symbol of the spatio-temporal domain.

³⁰ M. Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1987, p.130; see also *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, London: Sheed and Ward, 1958, Ch.5.

³¹ Sterry, *Vivian de Sola Pinto*, in *Peter Sterry, Platonist and Puritan*, 1934, cited in Perry, *TTW*, p.31.

contains all numbers virtually, so too the symbolism of the word Eden (יְדֵן) contains the idea of the “river” that flows out of it. The letter *ayn* symbolically expresses the idea of a “fountain” gushing forth; it is also an “eye,” that is, the divine Eye through which the creative Light of the *Fiat Lux* flows out. In accord with the “law of inverse analogy” the human eye is a receptacle through which light, as we perceive it, flows in. *Daleth*, the second letter of Eden, is symbolically a “door”; it is the opening that the river of *ayn* flows through. At the same time this idea of the door partakes of *ayn* inasmuch as it is an eye or opening. The letter *nun*, which completes Eden, is symbolically a “fish”; suffice to remark that the fish expresses the potentiality of water in a “living form.” Noted then that Edom expresses a similar symbolism with two informative differences. The first letter of Edom is an *aleph*, symbolically expressing an “ox,” where the ox is a well know symbol of Cosmic Substance.³² The final letter is a *mem*, symbolically expressing “water,” that is to say, it precedes the “living form” (the fish) and highlights the unformed or chaotic nature of potentiality.

Eden is unmanifest Existence in its state of biunity: Essence undifferentiated from Substance—recalling the ambiguity of the words *ayn* and *ousia*. The “river” is the vertical ray of Essence in act upon the horizontal garden (Substance). It is said that the river divided and became “four rivers,” these being the four symbolic directions of a horizontal plane of existence, the same with the “face of the waters” (Gen.1:2).³³ This same symbolism is found in the *Zohar* (II, 13a-13b), with the difference being that in this case it is the Spirit (*Ruah*) dividing into the “four winds.”³⁴ The details we are given concerning these “four rivers” reveal a cosmogonic symbolism. This, of course, is not to deny a geographical reading but simply to recognise the primacy of the cosmogonic reading in this case. In this respect it is enough to recall that the plan precedes the building.

³² See “ox,” “bull” and “cow” in *Dictionary of Symbols*, pp.730; 131 & 237.

³³ As Guénon observes: ‘a degree of Existence can be represented by a horizontal plane of indefinite extent’ (SC, 1975, p.58; see Ch.11).

³⁴ According to *hadith* in the Moslem tradition (Muslim, *iman*, 264; Bukhari, *bad’ al-khalq*, 6), there are four rivers flowing forth from the *sidra* tree (Qur’an 53:14). The *sidra* or “Lotus of the Limit” is the *barzakh* between manifested and unmanifested existence. Ibn Sina says that these four rivers or “seas” are the ‘ideal realities (*haqiqat*) of substantiality, corporeality, Matter, and Form’ (see Corbin tr., *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, Texas: Spring Publications, 1980, p.175).

The first river is Pishon, *Piyshown* (פִּישׁוֹן; “*dispersive*”).³⁵ This word is closely related to the word *Piythown* (פִּיתוֹן; “*expansive*”), which derives from the root *pothah* (פִּתַּה; “to open,” as implying a secret place). Pishon is said to ‘wind all through the land of Havilah’ (Gen.2:11), where Havilah, *Chaviylah* (חַוִּילָה), means “circular” from *chiyl* (חִיל; “to whirl”). To whirl in a circular manner: the image here may be compared to the analogous symbolism of the Masonic plume line (the vertical axis) set swinging in increasing or “expansive” continuous spirals.

The second river is Gihon, *Gichown* (גִּחוֹן), from *goach* (גַּח; “to gush forth” or “to issue,” in the sense of labour). Gihon moves through the land of Cush. The sense here is more obscure. *Kuwsh* (כּוּשׁ) is generally associated with Cush, the son of Ham (Gen.10:6). This is far from inconsequential, for Ham plays an active role in the cosmogony as expressed in the story of Noah. On this point, the name Ham, *cham* (חַם; “hot,” to be inflamed) expresses a similar sense as the bringing forth of the ontological waters, where fire and water are recognised as analogous symbols of the state of undifferentiated Being. It is worth noting the similarity here between *Kuwsh* (כּוּשׁ) and *kuwr* (כּוּר), which means “to dig” but particularly to dig “a furnace.” The two words differ by their final letters, which are subsequent letters in the Hebrew alphabet. *Kuwr* has as its final *resh*, symbolically a “head.” *Kuwsh* has as its final *shin*, symbolically a “tooth.” One might say that the tooth is in the head as the heat is in the furnace. This symbolism of the furnace echoes the alchemist’s athanor (Arabic *at-tannur*, “oven”) and the Kabbalist’s Urn, which are not irrelevant here, for they are both homologues of the Ark of Noah.

The third river is Hiddekel, *Chiddeqel* (חִדְקֵל). The Hebrew here is of uncertain derivation. In Persian this is *Tigra*, which becomes *Tigris* in Greek, as the *Septuagint* calls it. In the old language of Babylonia this river was termed *Idiglat* or *Digla*, meaning “the encircling.”³⁶ The Hiddekel is said to run to the east of Ashur, which is the same name as Assyria. This name carries the sense of “stepping or coming forth”—

³⁵ On the symbolism of dispersion or “scattering” see Guénon, ‘Gathering what is Scattered’ in *FS*.

³⁶ Unger, *Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1965: *Ti’gris*, p.1096. Although the name *Chiddeqel* is of uncertain derivation, if one takes the “*Chi-*” as a typical vowel prosthesis, then the consonant series D-Q-L is, in phonological terms, intimately related to T-G-R (*Digla*).

suggesting the coming forth of manifestation from unmanifest potentiality; this comes from 'ashur (אשור; "a step"), which itself comes from the primitive root, 'ashar (אשר; "to be level"). In this context there is an etymological similarity between Assyria, 'Ashshuur (אשור) and the word 'ashuwyah (אשוייה), which derives from an unused root meaning "foundation." According to sefirotic symbolism, *Yesod* is called "Foundation," as it is the foundation upon which *Malkhut* (the Kingdom) is built; in this connection, note that *Yesod* is symbolically described as a "river."³⁷

The fourth river is Euphrates, *P'rath* (פרה; "to break forth"; "rushing"). We might compare this with the word *porath* (פרה), which is the same with the primitive root *parah* (פרה; "to bear fruit"; to be, or cause to be). An interesting connection is suggested here, for *parah* derives from *par* (פר), which means "a bullock," where the bullock, like the ox, is a universal and common symbol of *prima materia*.³⁸ Moreover, *Strong's Dictionary* suggests that this itself comes from the idea of either "breaking forth in wild strength" or, perhaps, from the image of "dividing the hoof," and this from *parar* (פרר; "to break up"). Again, *paras* (פרש), which differs to *parar* by the shift from the final *resh* to a final *shin*, also means "to break apart" in the sense of "to disperse," which returns us to the symbolism of the first river, Pishon.

Schuon offers the analogy of a wheel to describe Divine Substance: 'expressed in geometric terms, the Substance is the centre, Radiation is the cluster of radii, and Reverberation, or the Image, is the circle; Existence or the "Virgin," is the surface which allows this unfolding to take place.'³⁹ The symbolism described by the "four rivers" is suggestive of this analogy, excepting in this case the radii appear to be described as "spirals," which is, in a sense, more exact.

The description of "encircling" described by both the name Havilah and the Babylonia word *Digla* remind one of the numerous world encircling rivers of mythology, of which the Greek Oceanus is maybe the most familiar. One feels it is fair to say that this passage contains an esoteric expression of the cosmogony, as opposed to Von Rad who claims that this passage 'has no significance for the unfolding action' of

³⁷ Tishby, *WZI*, p.433, n.24.

³⁸ As for example in the mythology of Mithras.

³⁹ Schuon, *IFA*, p.55.

Genesis.⁴⁰ All of the details presented are expressed in the symbolism of the *ayn*, a fountain, which synthetically contains the word Eden.

The Hebrew Scriptures give only the names of the four rivers that divided from the original river yet not the name of this source river. However, according to *Ha Idra Zuta Qadihsa*, the Lesser Holy Assembly, this river is called *Yobel*: ‘What is *Yobel*? As it is written, Jer. xvii.8: “VOL IVBL, Va-El *Yobel*, And spreadeth out her roots by the river”; therefore that river which ever goeth forth and floweth, and goeth forth and faileth not.’⁴¹ The word *yobel* (יובל) means literally “a blast from a trumpet,” and comes from a primitive root, *yabal* (יבל) meaning “to flow,” as a river. The connection of *Yobel* with the sound of a trumpet suggests the idea of creation through the emanation of the primordial sound, the “Word,” which is again the “Name,” analogous by a shift in symbolism with the *Fiat Lux*. In this connection, *Yobel* is also said to be the same as the angel Yahoel, which is the first of the “Seventy Names of Metatron.”⁴² According to the Babylonian Talmud, Metatron is the angel who is given the same name as his master.⁴³ This name is *Shaddai* or “Almighty,” which has the same numerical value as “Metatron.” According to the *Zohar* the name *Shaddai* is related to the word *sadai* or “field,” as in Psalm 104: ‘Who sends forth springs into the streams ... they give drink to every beast of the field’ (11-12). *Zohar* III, 18a: ‘This is [the significance of] the verse “and from thence it was parted and became four heads” (*Genesis* 2:10); these four heads are the beasts of *sadai* ... *Sadai*: do not pronounce it *sadai*, but *Shaddai* (the Almighty), for he receives and completes the name from the foundation (*Yesod*) of the world.’ As Tishby remarks, “the beasts of the field” (*sadai*) are the four beasts of the Chariot.⁴⁴ Concerning the connection between the primordial sound and the primordial light, both the Midrash and the *Zohar* says that the *Fiat Lux* of *Genesis* 1:3 is the light of Metatron.⁴⁵ He is called ‘the light of the luminary of the

⁴⁰ G. von Rad, *Genesis*, tr. J. H. Marks, London: SCM Press Ltd, 1963, p.77.

⁴¹ Mathers, *KU*, p.288.

⁴² On the angel *Yohoel* see Scholem, *MTJM*, pp.68-9. Note the interchange between there being 70 and 72 names of Metatron, see Charlesworth ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* Vol.1, p.313, n.48D.a. On the 72 lettered name of God see Tishby, *WZL*, p.313, n.114; also Schaya, *UMK*, Ch.8.

⁴³ See B.T. *Hagigah*, 15a; B.T. *Sanhedrin*, 38 a; B.T. *Avodah Zarah*, 3b.

⁴⁴ Tishby, *WZL*, p.436, n.60.

⁴⁵ *Midrash ha-Ne’elam; Zohar Hadash, Bereshit*, 8d.

*Shekhinah*⁴⁶. Metatron has been identified with Melchizedek,⁴⁷ who is seen as prefiguring Christ (Heb.5:7); yet even without this identification having been made it is not hard to see the relationship between the creative sound and light in the Christian tradition. Christ is both the Word and the “light of the world” (Jn.8:12). Jalal al-Din Rumi offers the following image of the creation which beautifully sums up all we are considering here: ‘But when that purest of lights threw forth Sound which produced forms, He, like the diverse shadows of a fortress, became manifold.’⁴⁸

Schaya remarks that *Yobel* is the “divine state”: ‘the state of supreme illumination and identity, of total union with God.’⁴⁹ He further recognises *Yobel* as *Binah*, the Upper Mother.⁵⁰ We have said that the Upper and Lower Mothers are *Binah* and *Malkhut*, but from another perspective they are also *Binah* and *Yesod*, which, as Tishby says are both symbolically “rivers.”⁵¹ Furthermore, *Yobel* is the Hebrew word for “jubilee,” the fiftieth year beginning on the Day of Atonement (*kol shofar*, the “voice of the trumpet”). Accordingly *Binah* is conceived of as having 50 gates through which Mercy flows as a river.⁵² It is by the way of the 50 gates of *Binah* that all creation is manifested. In this context it should be noted that the Hebrew word *kol* (“all”) has the numerical value of 50.⁵³ Furthermore, according to Kabbalah, the world is created in and through the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Manifestation, in both its potentiality and actuality, is thus to be found expressed by the number 72 (50 + 22), which reveals, in part, the meaning of the “Seventy-Two Names of Metatron.”

Rabbi Gikatilla observes that it was the angel Yahoel who “performed the slaying of the firstborn”⁵⁴ (Gen.12:29-34). Considering the cosmogony as expressed by the Exile, the slaying of the firstborn

⁴⁶ *Zohar* II, 65b-66b.

⁴⁷ Z’ev ben Simon Halevi, *Kabbalah The Divine Plan*, New York: HarperCollins, 1996, p.14; *The Way of Kabbalah*, London: Rider & Co., 1976, p.16.

⁴⁸ *Mathnawi* I, 835 (Gupta tr., Vol.1, 1997, p.74).

⁴⁹ Schaya, *UMK*, p.135.

⁵⁰ Schaya, *UMK*, p.44.

⁵¹ See Tishby, *WZI*, p.433, n.24.

⁵² Rabbi Gikatilla, *Gates of Light (Sha’are Orah)*, tr. A. Weinstein, Walnut Creek: AltaMira, 1994, p.245.

⁵³ See Guénon, *SC*, pp.19-20, in particular n.8.

⁵⁴ Rabbi Gikatilla, *Gates of Light*, p.35.

and the subsequent Exodus symbolise the “slaying” of cosmic potentiality and the coming forth of Creation. The slaying of the first-born is prefigured in the “rejection” of Ishmael and again the relinquishing of his birthright by Esau, who, as noted, is Edom (Gen.36:1). In this context, the *Zohar* recognises Jacob as “a river of praise” and more explicitly says that he is the “river going out of Eden.”⁵⁵ Jacob, who is Beauty (*Tiferet*) and Order, is the river that flowed out of Eden to water the garden of Creation, expressed, at this level, by a horizontal plane of existence, which in turn is symbolised by the four rivers “breaking forth” in ever “expansive” spirals.

⁵⁵ *Zohar* I, 247b.

The spangled tortoise: The peculiar and unusual feature in hermetic modes of exegesis

Rodney Blackhirst

Introduction

In this brief article I wish to draw attention to a characteristic of traditional exegesis and symbolism that seems to be rarely appreciated. This characteristic is the importance that should properly be attached to some peculiar or unusual feature of that which is subject to exegesis. In fact, I wish to establish this as a principle: that very often in traditional exegesis—whether it be of a text or of an image or of some other order of things—the key to proper interpretation is to be found in the peculiar and unusual feature. This is a mark of uniqueness. It is the peculiar or unusual detail, perhaps the unaccountable adjective, that exposes the chain of associations necessary for the unfolding of the inner dimensions of that which is being studied or contemplated. The modern mind tends to skip over or explain away such details. In traditional modes of exegesis these seemingly insignificant and incongruous details trigger a transformation of understanding.

Texts

There are countless literary examples that come to mind. In the Homeric Hymn to Hermes, to cite a particularly elegant one, we find a description of Hermes' antics with a tortoise, the shell of which the young god eventually turns into a seven-stringed lyre. Modern classical studies of this ancient Greek text are either unable to make any sense of this at all or they resort to bizarrely trivial explanations such as that offered in the Loeb edition of the Hymn, namely that the tortoise was regarded as some form of "good-luck" among the Greeks. The eye of the traditional reader, however—or the ear of the traditional listener, since this was first an oral Hymn before being written down—fixes upon a detail that the modern classicists treat as a mere annoyance, namely that the shell of this tortoise is described as "spangled." This

word is elsewhere used to describe the starry heavens. Here—unaccountably, it seems—it is used to describe the shell of the tortoise that Hermes turns into his seven-stringed lyre. The classicists throw all manner of interpretations at this irritating detail, trying to dislodge it or explain it away, but to the traditional reader it is the key they were waiting for. It suddenly becomes blindingly apparent (to use a phrase befitting Homer) that in this Hymn the tortoise is a symbol of the cosmos, much as it is in the Chinese tradition, and that when the god turns the shell into a seven-stringed lyre, the strings are transpositions of the seven planets, and the whole Hymn becomes an exposition of the Pythagorean and Hermetic theme, the Music of the Spheres. It is the peculiar and unusual detail in the description of the tortoise that both triggers and confirms this interpretation. And this in turn becomes the key for the clarification of scores more peculiar and unusual details later in the same Hymn.

Other Homeric literature is the same. The *Odyssey*, especially, is full of such seemingly unaccountable peculiar and unusual features. And thus too Greek mythology in general. In fact, any mythology, for it is a characteristic of myths in general, not just the colourful myths of the Greeks. Typically, it is the strange, odd detail that “gives it away” or, to resort to a more traditional but still current metaphor, it is the “loose threads” that unravel the warp and weft of the fabric. These loose threads in the weave of traditional stories and myths are vital to analogical hermeneutics. Needless to say, the modern academic mind will have none of this and accuses traditional exegetes of engaging in some sort of game, importing their structures into the text, latching on to and exaggerating the importance of flimsy details while missing such vital considerations as the “socio-economic context” and so forth. There is indeed something playful and game-like about this aspect of traditional exegesis—it involves an intellectual delight and playfulness that is conspicuously lacking from the modern academic milieu—not to mention a sense of humour. The peculiar and unusual feature is often funny and is sometimes absurd. One must engage with the text in the right spirit to participate in the game. This is as much as to say, “Those with ears to hear, let them hear.” The peculiar and unusual feature is a key into an esoteric dimension of the text that is not explicit on the literal level. What the modern critic fails to appreciate in this mode of exegesis is that the chain of associations that opens out from the text

and the depth of meaning revealed in the text is so bountiful, that in traditional exegesis even some mild violations and reconstruing of the literal text is permitted if one must sacrifice a lesser meaning for a greater. But textual contortions are often unnecessary. None are needed in our example of the Homeric Hymn to Hermes. It is plain enough, and immediately the full depth and richness of the Hymn, as an esoteric text, becomes obvious. The “spangled” tortoise shell is the loose thread that unravels the inner meaning of the whole work, and it illuminates the whole work so that it shines from within with profound meanings, rehabilitated from the dusty mausoleums of the “classics.”

Iconography

We also witness the peculiar and unusual feature in traditional iconography. There are many examples in Christian art. Here we need to distinguish between the clever games of Renaissance art and a more traditional order of Christian iconography. We are not thinking of the clever allusiveness and “secret meanings” in Piero’s Flagellation. Rather we are thinking of the icons, quite widespread, in which the child Jesus in the arms of the Madonna is mysteriously losing a sandal from one foot. This is the peculiar and unusual feature. In all other respects these icons are a straightforward rendering of Madonna and Child. But, unaccountably, Jesus has lost or is losing one sandal. Why? There is a deep and profound symbolism attached to this “loose thread” that awaits those that care to contemplate it. It is a simple detail but of the same order as the “spangled” tortoise shell. Such details often seem very clumsy. In the less subtle cases of medieval art it may be simply a case of making one character in a painting much bigger than the others, or giving them a different nimbus or a distinguishing colouring of red and blue over and undergarments. This is a vocabulary of symbols and symbolic devices, and one of the uses to which it is put to is to leave “clues” to deeper meanings in what seem strange and incongruous details. So-called “occult” illustrations in later times exalted in this device, but increasingly as an empty gesture.

AstrologyIn this article, however, I want to suggest that we meet the peculiar and unusual feature in areas of exegesis beyond text or image, even to the extent that it appears to be an hermetic function, woven into nature as much as in the sacred orders revealed to man. It is not

merely a game devised and played by writers and readers of arcane texts and painters and viewers of religious icons, but rather something more integral. And as a principle, and as a tool of exegesis, it should be seen as having wider applications. For example, to continue with the “Music of the Spheres,” we meet the peculiar and unusual feature in the modes of exegesis brought to traditional astrology and horoscopy. In the astrological chart of the heavens, regardless of whether we consult it for noble or ignoble purposes, we encounter an array of planetary and other configurations, some of which are common and some of which are unusual and rare. The astrologer cannot make much of the fact that the Moon is in Aries at any given time because the Moon is in Aries once a month, every month. But if the Moon, Mars, Venus and Mercury are all in Aries—that is peculiar and unusual, and the astrologer therefore grants it a greater significance. All the factors in a chart of the heavens are weighed up in this manner. This is because the astrologer is searching for the unique quality of a particular moment frozen in time. The astrological chart of the heavens is a graphic and symbolic representation of a unique moment, and it is the essence of that uniqueness that the astrologer seeks to divine in his art. But, in any given case, there are so many factors to be considered, so many possible permutations of the data, the multiplicity of symbols becomes overwhelming. Astrology is prone to this. The key to exegesis, then, is to find the peculiar and unusual feature in the case at hand. The astrologer works by considering all the major factors, then other possibilities, attempting to reach a synthesis. But in any given chart of the heavens there will be one thing that stands out, one thing that particularises that chart. The experienced astrologer will have seen thousands of charts of the heavens. What then is peculiar and unusual about this one? That is always the question to be answered. That is how the astrologer grasps for the Unique. When that is grasped, all the symbols of the chart are illuminated from within by profound significances and an overwhelming internal coherence. It is the same method by which one reads such a text as the Homeric Hymn to Hermes or understands a motif in Christian iconography; by noting the peculiar and unusual feature. It is a sad fact that modern astrologers are too hell-bent on being “scientists” or at least “psychologists” to detect any levels of cosmic humour in their horoscopes and nativities, but there is plenty to be found. The ancients described the planet’s courses

as a race track, but the Sun and Moon are also Punch and Judy, and Venus and Mars fall in and out of love, are faithful and not, by season. One must see the fabric before one can see the loose threads. In astrology's integral form, there is a type of intimate humour and playfulness—Hermetic in principle—that happens between the astrologer and his charts. In some respects, until this quality develops in an astrologer—a sense of the cosmos' humour without which one cannot see the peculiar and unusual—he is only an apprentice.

Dreams

Directly analogous to this is the art of dream interpretation. Properly understood, this is not a formulaic or mechanical matter, but a case of learning the particular “language” of dreams, its grammar and structure and its typical modes and techniques of communication. Here again we find that the peculiar and unusual feature is the key to a great deal of understanding. Needless to say, this is almost entirely a lost art in the modern West but is still to be found in cultures informed by tradition where the dream is an important event and where the truth and power and transcendent origin of dreams is implicit. The dream interpreter, like the astrologer, and like the exegete of text or image, is confronted with an array of symbols and amongst them must find the key, the peculiar and unusual feature. Obviously dreams do not communicate in plain speech. They communicate in a language of symbols, but a key to understanding them is that the weave of the dream will leave loose threads, and it is what is peculiar, incongruous, odd that is most important. Much psychoanalytic theory and method acknowledges this simple fact too—the therapist latches on to the incongruous detail—but often (or even systematically) not the right one. The trained dream interpreter knows what to look for. Often the peculiar and unusual thing—the key—will only be peculiar and unusual in a sequence of dreams, or is subject to a “pun” or a play on words. Freud's explorations into these modes of the dream were counter-traditional; the “Freudian slip” (a loose end by which the therapist dismantles your personality) is inverse to the “peculiar and unusual feature” which reveals an abundance of higher, not baser, meanings. It is necessary to add that this principle of the peculiar and unusual feature should in no way be confused with a certain socio-pathology of modernity that, for example, seeks to understand human beings in general by the study of

mass murderers, child molesters, urban cannibals and the like. The peculiar and unusual should not be automatically identified with the morbid and perverse. Contrary to modern assumptions, beauty is as likely to be peculiar and unusual as ugliness.

Homoeopathy

Finally, let us note another and very precise and pure application of the peculiar and unusual feature in a mode of traditional medicine, homoeopathy. Here, as it was reformulated in its modern practice by Samuel Hahnemann, the physician attains a full picture of the patient's symptoms, always searching for that one peculiar and unusual symptom that will lead the physician to the cure. Homoeopathy operates on the hermetic parallel between the microcosm and the macrocosm. The homoeopath searches for parallels between the symptomology of human pathology and the toxicology of natural substances relative to the healthy human organism. The object of the search is to determine the *similimum*—the remedy with the toxicology that is the nearest parallel to the symptoms of the patient. To such a parallel substance, homoeopathic theory maintains, the human organism is supersensitive and thus will respond to it in miniscule doses, the nearer the parallel the smaller the dose required, even to a point beyond which there are no physical molecules of the original substance remaining in the medicine.

But as in astrology, as in rich texts like the Homeric poems, as in dreams, one encounters a profusion of data, in this case a profusion of symptoms and an array of substances known to cause them in a healthy person. Anyone who has ever encountered the massive homoeopathic compendiums published its heyday before the ascendancy of modern industrial medicine (allopathy) can attest to this profusion. In his *Organon of Medicine*—still the bible of purists in the homoeopathic fraternity—Hahnemann formulated his “new” medical science in strict tenets and explained that the key to finding the *similimum* is to find, in any given case, the peculiar and unusual symptom. A patient who has fever and thirsts has nothing peculiar. There are any number of substances with fevered thirst in their toxicology. But a patient who has fever without thirst presents with a more useful symptom. There are fewer substances that induce a fever without an accompanying thirst. And fewer yet with fever accompanied by revulsion of drinking. And so on. Hahnemann was ridiculed for wanting to distinguish between an

itch and a tickle, but he was searching for the strange and unusual symptom. It follows—it should be noted—that a homoeopath must therefore have an excellent knowledge of what is to be expected in pathology in order to be able to see what is peculiar and unusual in any given case. The homoeopath sees the symptoms of disease as a language by which the organism communicates the nature of its imbalance. The trained homoeopath reads these symptoms—very much, I contend, like an interpreter of dreams—watchful for the key. When the homoeopath finds the peculiar and unusual symptom it will point to one and only one remedy, and upon further investigation it is revealed to be a match for symptoms the patient had not even reported at first. The homoeopath has found the *similimum*, the nexus between micro- and macrocosms, by which he can heal. There are no generic medications in homoeopathy. Each case is highly particularised. If a dozen patients present with the flu, they may receive a dozen different remedies because the peculiar and unusual symptom in each case has led the homoeopath to twelve different *similima*.

Conclusion

The purpose of citing examples from such different endeavours as interpreting an Homeric text, casting a horoscope and homoeopathic diagnostics is to draw attention to the range and extent of the application of this principle. The cases of homoeopathy and dream interpretation demonstrate how even in the order of natural phenomenon certain keys occur for those with ears to hear and eyes to see. The reason we find it in sacred texts (and it is scandalous that the Homeric corpus is not routinely considered among sacred texts) is that such texts are effectively parallels to the natural order, or rather to the translucent Nature that is the primordial revelation to which this principle is integral. The principle, in short, is that the peculiar and unusual features reveal the transcendent uniqueness of things, which uniqueness is the key to understanding not only the Unique but also the Universal. It may be the dogs guarding the gates of Alcinoüs' palace realised as the dog stars of Sirius that alert us the astronomical schema of Homer's *Phaiaia*, and then of the whole *Odyssey*, or it may be a remarkable angular relationship between planets in a geniture, or it may be a pun in a dream, or it may be the shade of blue of the lips of a patient presenting to a homoeopath for some seemingly unrelated

ailment: in each case nature or scripture leaves keys or clues—certain peculiar and unusual details—to the inner illumination of the order of things beneath the level of surfaces.

The diabolical symbolism of the automobile

Rodney Blackhurst

‘...these locusts were like horses armoured for battle...’
(Revelation 9:7)

With the possible exception of the television no other item of modern technology is so pervasive and so ubiquitous and is so inseparable from the identity of modern man as that of the automobile. Modern man has displayed an unstinting and passionate love affair with this product of his own invention and automobile transportation has become an unquestionable norm on every continent on the planet. In affluent societies, mom, dad and often the kids have cars of their own, while even poor villages in the “Third World” or the global “South” nowadays will usually depend upon road transport for survival in one way or another, and a truck or jeep is a hallmark of community progress. It is possible to conceive of modern life without other technologies, but the automobile has become so woven into our existence that it is difficult to imagine life without it. The globe is covered from one end to the other with trails of asphalt and literally billions of vehicles traverse them every day. The yellow-brown palls of exhaust that hang over our cities are the outcome relentless road journeys requiring countless gallons of fuel. We wake up in the morning and find there is no milk: without hesitation we climb into our vehicles and drive to the store. We have established a global automobile culture and it is so central to who we are and where we are going that we are happy to have freeways scar our landscapes and are ready and willing to fight evil and immoral wars to ensure there is cheap petroleum in our tanks. This whole culture separates modern life from all that came before. Unlike our ancestors, we have all climbed into automobiles and travelled roads from one place to another at speeds unimaginable by horse, and many of us have spent long hours in automobiles and indeed

some of us have spent a good portion of our lives in them. They are unavoidable: a fact of life.

In a traditional perspective it is clear that all God-created things are part of a symbolic order and have their own inherent symbolism. Indeed, Creation is in whole and in its parts a manifestation of the Divine and, as far as man is concerned, a revelation consisting of ‘signs’ for him to understand. What though of man-created things? Man is the microcosmic encapsulation of the cosmic order and to this extent—his comprehensiveness—he exercises a god-like power by which he can “create” objects that are seemingly as real and as integral as “natural” or God-created objects. What is the status of these things? Are these part of a symbolic order with a symbolism of their own? The answer to this question is yes, certainly, for there is nothing man can do that is not symbolic at some level since this is the very nature of the Creation, and his houses and furniture, clothes and effects are all symbolic of something. And this necessarily extends to his machines of both high and low technologies. When man makes he exercises a God-like demiurgic power. In the Greek tradition the cosmos was understood to be a crafted object, as the word *kosmos* itself implies, and was made from primal materials by a Craftsman god. This is the cosmological God, the lower aspect of the Divine Being that engages with creation, deigning to dirty His hands, unlike the higher aspects of Divinity which remain aloof from the Creation. In the Greek pantheon the demiurge was the blacksmith god Hephaestus, the Hellenized adaptation of the Egyptian potter god Ptah, the lame-legged Olympian who tarried in his workshop all day, manufacturing trinkets and gadgets and mending objects for the other gods who, in the main, found his antics enormously amusing. The human blacksmith in the Greek order reveres this Olympian deity as immortal exemplar, but more importantly the whole art of the smith is understood in terms of *mimesis*—imitation—of the divine model. It follows that one observes the action of the exemplar in the divinely crafted objects of nature, and so not nature but the *action of the exemplar in nature* serves as the basis for *mimesis*. For example, the white-hot flux of metals that occurs in a volcano is terrestrial evidence of the applied arts of the Olympian blacksmith, Hephaestus (Vulcan). The human blacksmith, in a context of reverence for and awe of the Olympian model, will imitate the volcano and the arts of the god in his furnace. Again, he does not imitate nature; he

imitates the *god in nature*. By this means the productions of the forge attain a type of existential legitimacy: such productions have a God-approved legitimacy as much as trees and rocks. There is, in this sense, no distinction to be made between God-made and man-made objects for the man-made object is the product of a sanctified *participation* in the work of the God; the craftsman works with or for the God, imitating the way the God works (in nature, his handiwork) just as an apprentice will imitate the ways of the Master.

At the same time, however, there can be no escaping the fact that a man-made object, though it may be made by participation in a divine work and in this way woven into Creation, is nevertheless a “creation” of a lesser order, for the simple reason that man is man and not God, and the truth of the matter is that he can create nothing that is really *new*, all his so-called “creations” being reworked from existing materials, namely the divinely crafted *kosmos*. In all his productions man is recycling materials that have already been through the primal forge of the divine craftsman. Even the most sophisticated high-tech engineer is really like a backyard inventor recycling junk and spare parts from nature. There is a necessary sense, therefore, in which all human production is secondary and a man-made object is always a remove from natural objects. When we say that God crafted the cosmos from pre-existing materials we only do so for convenience, just as we distinguish a demiurge from a higher deity only for convenience. But in the case of man it is literally the case that he must start with pre-existing materials, so while he can “create” demiurgically from a *materia* he cannot, like God, create *ex nihilo*. God is not merely Demiurge but in so far as man’s powers over nature are God-like those powers are *demiurgic* and *can be nothing more*, for man cannot create from nothing and even his finest productions are, at best, recycled goods. There is therefore something inherently flawed in human productions vis-a-vis natural objects. They can only ever be *like* natural objects but never *be* natural objects by having the same relation to the Principle. Man’s productions are one step removed from the true *prima materia* which—while we speak metaphorically of God as forming the Creation from a pre-existing material (His demiurgic aspect)—is actually the Nothing of *ex nihilo* (His higher aspect). *Mimesis* is also not without its inherent moral and spiritual dangers, for in the exercise of man’s demiurgic powers that are a consequence of his microcosmic

internalisation of the forces of the cosmos, the distinction we have just made is liable to be overlooked and man soon starts to think of himself as god-like in a fuller and inappropriate sense and his “creations” as primary. Again, man creates nothing. He recycles. Just as the backyard inventor imparts inordinate value to what seems to others worthless junk, so man imparts an inflated value to his own productions.

In a traditional social order we find that technological innovations are carefully sacralised and integrated into the continuum of tradition, even if radical adjustments need to be made to weave the new technology into the total symbolic framework that is the matrix of such a society. Sacralisation, though, always consists of ways and means of ensuring that the inherent limitations and dangers of man’s productions are understood. The way that the plough was woven into traditional symbolism illustrates this well, to cite one example. The blacksmith knew well that his materials are already crafted objects (crafted by the Divine Blacksmith) and whatever he makes of them can never be *pristine* because he can never *be* God but only a co-worker to God, and then in only one of His aspects. It happens though, because of cyclic degeneration, and because it is in the nature of technology for one innovation to suggest another and then another and so on, that technological developments inevitably out-pace every effort to integrate them into the symbolic framework, and improvements and modifications in technology call for such complex adjustments to traditional symbolism that, eventually, new technologies evade sacralisation and the traditional constraints and balances cease to be effective or disappear altogether. The obvious example to be cited here is the invention of the printing press which technology—the technology of mass literacy—could not be integrated into what remained of a traditional order in Europe, as we see in the desperately heavy-handed and clumsy devices by which the Inquisition and the Index attempted to enforce some degree of orthodox restraint, and in the fact that they failed so comprehensively to prevent the Protestant Revolt from using the technology to rupture Christendom. Here is a technology that “started a revolution” as the historians say, in this case a decisive rupture from the unified spiritual ideal of the Middle Ages and a catastrophic breaking point for the Christian order. By this time in European history we are already aware that the fabric of tradition is tattered and that new technologies will not be woven into the fabric

but will tear new holes. The clock, so long as it had a round face and two hands in a cosmological soli-lunar order of symbols, could find some symbolic integrity, but little compared to the times and seasons kept before the mechanical regularity of clock-time. Needless to say, by the time the automobile was invented there was no prospect whatsoever that it could be integrated and so to speak neutralized within a matrix of traditional symbology because the Western tradition was in mere threads and European man's pursuit of his demiurgic delusions were well advanced. There can be no question, therefore, that the automobile and all its associated technology is diabolical—or in Greek terms, Promethean—because whatever has not been sacralised is so.

This does not prevent us from examining such a technology as the automobile from within the framework of a traditional symbology, however. As modern man's most prolific "creation" it will surely reveal something significant about the predicament in which he finds himself. From this point of view, there are two peculiar and unusual things about the automobile that require attention: the fact that it has the appearance of being self-moving and the fact that its cabin, into which human beings climb, forms a separate space from its environment. The automobile is, by definition, a self-moving machine, as the term "horseless carriage" suggests—its whole construction gives the illusion of it being self-moving—and in its typical form it is like a capsule, an interior space. In both these cases let us note that these are characteristics of *animals* and also of man. Both animal and man are self-moving creatures. The automobile mimics this characteristic. And both animals and man are "capsules" in that they form microcosmic interior spaces. The car is like this too. The interior is a separate space, with exterior sounds muffled, and increasingly, especially in contemporary vehicles, a whole world of gadgets within, every comfort of home on board. So in these respects the car is like an animal or man: most obviously like an animal and most specifically a *quadruped*. The fact that it replaced the horse is enough to make this plain: it is, amongst other things, a metal horse. An understanding of this is the starting point of any symbolic consideration. The automobile is, first and foremost, an artificial beast. It has four legs in four tyres and eyes and mouth in lights and grill and its power is still measured in horsepower. Modern man's obsession with the automobile is a direct extension of an earlier

preoccupation with the horse. But unlike travel on a horse, the automobile traveller climbs inside the vehicle and so travels within the beast, so to speak, occupying the microcosmic world of the cabin. In this respect the beast has been combined with the cart or carriage. The mythological parallel with the Trojan Horse must be pointed out here; although it is not self-moving it is nevertheless a foreshadowing of the automobile—an artificial horse on wheels into the interior space of which men climb. The Trojan Horse, of course, is an emblem of the sacrilegious sack of Troy and so by extension an emblem of cyclic decline and not in any sense a felicitous symbol. The Trojans mistakenly greeted the evil “gift” as a sign of victory when in fact it was the cause of their fall and the means by which the Achaeans penetrated the walls of sacred Ilium.

The image of the Trojan horse allows us a further imagery, for it was a gargantuan horse and in some ways might remind modern man of the *dinosaurs* of the fossil record. When we remember that the automobile is fuelled by the processed residues of former aeons now compacted into subterranean lakes of crude oil the analogy becomes more apt. The horseless carriage does not really look like a horse, at least of the modern type, but more like some squat, flat-faced, prehistoric ancestor of the horse with a plated protective skin. There is indeed something dinosaur-like about many larger road transport vehicles; it takes little imagination to see this if one is standing on a roadside at night as trains of large transport vehicles roar and rumble by. If the automobile is like some artificial beast from a former aeon, the truck and lorry are like large multi-legged prehistoric monsters. It is characteristic of the later stages of a cosmic cycle for men to plunder the remains of the earlier stages, bringing into circulation with the plunder the psychic residues of those earlier stages. The technology of the automobile is an example of this. To fuel this technology modern man removes from the earth the volatile residuum of former ages and makes from it food for his metal horse which, morphologically, is not an improvement on the horse in any sense but more a reversion to the grotesque quadruped forms of the prehistoric past. There is a strongly “Jurassic” motif in this technology that must be noted as one of its most significant characteristics. What manner of quadruped is the car? Its form is clearly not like that of existing animals, even though it takes its departure from its immediate forerunner, the horse. Where do we find quadrupeds large enough that

men could conceivably sit inside them? To find resemblances we need to look at many dinosaur life forms: just as the Trojan Horse was titanesque, so the automobile is the return of a quadrupedal morphology from a distant era. There is no escaping the implication that this technology is therefore inherently monstrous and unleashes malignant, chthonic forces held in check until modern man released them from the earth.

In alchemical symbolism this is expressed as a *dragon* motif. The locomotive has an obvious resemblance to the classical dragon—especially when locomotives were stream-driven—but so too does a road-train, and there is something dragon-like about the entire automotive technology. The steam-driven locomotive was literally fire-breathing; in automobile technology there is still the exhaust to suggest fire-breathing but more particularly we are reminded of the way dragons carry fire within their bellies by the *internal* combustion engine, the very *internal-ness* of the combustion being the parallel. It is not an accident of symbolism that crude oil is called “black gold.” The lakes of oil under the earth are, in fact, the residuum of the aurumic humus of Edenic times, the physical residue of the gardens of the Golden Age, and so are in that sense the treasure of the alchemical dragon. Modern man has stolen this treasure and unleashed the dragon. The petroleum sciences are, then, a counter-alchemy, a diabolical alchemy that hastens the onset of cyclic dissolution rather than preparing the way for the new cycle. In recent decades it has become obvious that this technology entails transposing the heat and carbon contained in these lakes of oil from the earth into the atmosphere and that this is likely to have a profound impact on the polar structures of the earth and so constitutes a transformation of global, geological proportions. In the long run this must have an impact upon the entire balance of the terrestrial system and perhaps even upon the earth’s axial balance and magnetic polarities and such like. We are belatedly beginning to realise that this—equal to the atom bomb—looms as the greatest threat to our own existence we have yet engineered. Now we face the dragon in, amongst other things, the storms and monsoons, tidal waves and wild perversities of weather that follow from emptying chthonic residues into the atmosphere. This is the full context in which the humble, everyday automobile is dragon-like. In European medieval dragon mythology, also let us note, the dragon is confronted by a knight *in armour*. The metal, protective skin

of the medieval knight prefigures the same in the automobile. In the automobile we find the motif of dragon—with its internal fire—and the motif of the knight's armour combined. Much medieval dragon mythology concerned technological triumph and prepared the spiritual conditions for industrialism. Many of the most basic mechanisms used in automobile technology, such as crankshafts, are actually medieval in origin. The metal-plated knight slew the dragon, stole its treasure, and acquired its powers, specifically the power of internal combustion.

The extension of metal armour plating from man to vehicle is most suggestive of the tank, the military adaptation of the automobile. The Trojan Horse was tank-like too, a military device, and here we must remember the intimate connection between this type of technology and military motivation, the human drive to find new and better ways to kill. Most technological “advances” are of military origin not the outcome of humanitarian sentiment, another instance of the way they are sponsored by the destructive forces of cyclic decline. In the case of the automobile we can see ancient precedents in such military innovations as the Roman's famed “turtle” formation, where groups of foot soldiers would lock shields on all sides and overhead and move into battle as a single, impenetrable “vehicle” that, since the legs of the troops inside the formation were hidden by shields, appeared to be self-moving. The parallel with the turtle in this case is again a comparison with an animal, this time with the emphasis on the idea of a protective shell. Aside from a mammalian quadruped symbolism, devolved from the horse, the automobile has an obvious “turtle-ness” in this respect, and in fact the turtle is a quite appropriate and traditional symbol for the microcosmicness of the automobile's cabin. Even more appropriate, though,—since the turtle is slow—is the same idea expressed in other creatures with exoskeletons, like insects. Frithjof Schuon observed that there is something profoundly insect-like about the conditions of modern living and he compared our sprawling cities to vast hives of frenetic insect activity. In this analogy our automobiles are very much the exoskeletal insects that scurry to and fro throughout our ever-swarming urban hives. A modern city seen from the air is like an ant heap. The way the automobile has devoured the globe is comparable to a Biblical plague of locusts. This analogy is particularly evident in the famous German designed *Volkswagen* which indeed looks insect-like or locust-like and is popularly called a “beetle” or a “bug.” In the Bible, in

fact, we find a peculiar conjunction of the symbols we have discussed: insect and horse. In John's Revelation we are told there will be *locusts*—with the powers of scorpions—which are *like horses* and they are even said to be covered in iron body armour and to make a din, and their appearance is accompanied by the emptying of the Abyss, the smoke of which chokes the atmosphere and obscures the Sun. Another appropriate symbol, with important astrological resonances, is the crab, the zodiacal image of enclosed microcosmicness which is essentially interchangeable with the turtle or tortoise as a symbol but is fast, not slow. The jerky start-stop, scurry-stop, scuttling of the crab is very much like urban automobile travel and even the indirectness of the crab's propulsion has a parallel in the quite peculiar (even counter-intuitive) shift of energy from the motions of the engine's pistons to the turning of wheels in which the "drive" is indirect.

The implication of this exoskeletal technology for man himself is, of course, that he is becoming a crustacean as he lives more and more of his life—from conception to death—in the protective shell of his automobile. Increasingly he feels more at home within this shell than he does stepping out into the fresh air. When he feels like communing with nature he drives to a vantage point to sit in the car and watch the sun set, listening to a CD and enjoying drive-thru food and drive-thru beer purchased with drive-thru money. New technological endeavours are devoted to finding more and more ways to enable the motorist to conduct more and more of his life without once stepping out of his car. Indeed, technological visionaries suppose that soon motorists might be physically connected to their automobiles by way of biotechnological devices and really become part of the vehicle. Naturally, the more man adopts this exoskeleton the further his existence is removed from the pristine craftwork of nature—he is further abstracted from reality—and also the more his inherent bodily powers atrophy. Traditional man in whatever era walked a great deal in his life. Traditional life is local but it also insists on pilgrimage and, even with horse travel, walking was the normal mode of locomotion. It is the uniquely human mode of locomotion that cannot be compared to the gait of any other creature, contemporary or Jurassic. The left-right alternation of walking, moreover, is integral to the human form and is directly analogous to the two halves of the brain so that, in quite a biological as well as symbolic sense, walking is a parallel to the basic operations of thinking. Modern

man walks very little. He drives. This is to say he sits. He spends more and more of his time sitting within the metal and glass protective shell of his automobile. Walking has been reduced to a few movements of the feet on pedals and in clutchless cars to just the accelerator. It is instead the upper body, the head and arms and hands with which ones drives. It is a particularly cerebral, head-focused activity compared to walking. The thinking that accompanies driving is a-physical and abstract. Consequently in this, as in other ways, modern man is being reduced physically and hardened mentally. He needs the protective shell because he is becoming more puny and more vulnerable in himself. This is the tragic paradox of technological man—the more gargantuan his technology becomes the more he is himself diminished as a creature. He is dwarfed by his own giants. He is the little man in the big machine, the Wizard of Oz. Modern mythology projects an image of this in the typical characterisation of the technologically advanced “aliens” or creatures from outer space—pale, shrunken creatures with atrophied limbs and huge heads. Man empties himself into his technology. Bit by bit he replaces his internal faculties with exterior devices. This is the way of the cosmic cycle. Man is *most* microcosmic at the beginning of a cycle. He loses this integrity, however, and throughout the cycle his microcosmic powers are emptied back into the macrocosm. Every technological advance injures some aspect of man’s primeval integrity. Man conquers nature by emptying himself. The conquest of nature is thus profoundly self-defeating. The discovery of fire weakened man’s internal fire. The invention of shoes did injury to his feet. Literacy crippled his memory. We are currently exteriorising the human nervous system into computers and the immune system into vaccines. More and more the human microcosm loses its integrity vis-à-vis the macrocosm. Cyclic decline is an *exteriorization*: the exoskeletal automobile is an image of this in our times. The zodiacal symbol mentioned earlier, the crab, calls for more comment here. In the conventions of modern Western astrology the zodiac begins at Aries and so Aries corresponds to the head in the human body. But an earlier symbolic order has the zodiac beginning at Cancer with that sign corresponding to the head. In this symbolism the crab is analogous to the exoskeletal human cranium. In the symbolism of the greater cycles Cancer is the primal age and the crab is an image of the microcosmic completeness of primordial man. But the beginning is also the end, and so there is a zodiacal symbolism

underlying modern man's metamorphosis into crustaceans: as the end of the cycle approaches and man has emptied his internal powers into his own productions, exteriorising them, the primal symbolic is reversed as a the manner of a parody, so that modern man in his automobile is a counter-image of the primordial microcosmic integrity of the men at the start of the cycle.

Returning to a Greek vocabulary, the sitting posture normal while driving, and the consequent decline of the uprightness of walking, and the idea that a life of this inevitably damages the primal integrity of the human form and its capacities, recalls the lameness of the demiurge, Hephaestus. It is commonly supposed that Hephaestus was made lame by his fall from Olympos to Lemnos, but in fact he was lame from birth and so a defective deity among the Olympians. Automobile technology is very precisely Hephaestean in this regard. Hephaestus is lame: his lower body has atrophied. He hobbles about playing with his gadgets and inventions. The motorist—his lower body irrelevant—is an Hephaestean being, symbolically lame. There is, in fact, in the mythology of Hephaestus recorded in Homer's account of the Trojan War, an uncanny foreshadowing of the self-moving vehicle presented as an Hephaestean device. In the blacksmith god's workshop, we are told, there are a set of metallic stools, forged from the god's furnace, that scuttle to and fro the assemblies of the Gods all of their own accord, like self-moving and intelligent creatures. In the same passage we also meet a group of "golden maidens" crafted of metal but who are nevertheless self-moving and endowed with *nous*, in what other writers have correctly observed to be a prefiguring of the modern robot. Modern technology has realised the contraptions of the Hephaestus' workshop and the automobile is the realisation of his fabulous self-moving stools. Hephaestus is a binding god too, and we note the way the traveller is bound into the cabin of the automobile by belts and straps. But there is no sense in which modern technology participates in a sacralised Hephaesteanism: rather the technology has now been stolen from the god who himself has disappeared in man's demiurgic intoxication and plunder of the earth. Inevitably, there must be demonic and diabolical forces associated with such a technology and indeed we see aspects of this in the way certain people develop obsessions with cars, in the phenomenon of "road rage" and of "speed demons," mild mannered people who are aggressive, maniacal drivers,

and in the others ways people manifest forms of psychic possession regarding cars. Every diabolical technology collects human victims whose lives are overtaken by the technology. Television is the obvious example. It impacts upon most of us, but some people it utterly absorbs and in effect destroys. The automobile is the same. The nature of the possession might be described as microcosmic collapse. Without the machine there is nothing left. Without his car modern man is stranded and cold. As the poet said, *the centre cannot hold*. In the end of days men become like rootless spinifex in a frenzy of pointless transportation from A to B and back again and live their crustacean-like lives as a fitful journey to nowhere looking at reality through a windscreen. Traditional symbolisms provide ways to understand the diabolical nature of these things.

Evolutionism and Traditional Cosmology

Rodney Blackhirst

While it is routine for writers from a traditionalist or perennialist perspective to compose condemnations of Darwinism and to expose what has been referred to as the “transformist illusion”¹ it is rarely acknowledged that the evolutionist doctrine is, in part at least, a corruption of a traditional doctrine. *There is nothing new under the Sun*, as the Preacher sayeth, and the novelties and “discoveries” of modernity are either misconstructions or negations of traditional ideas and forms. Darwinism is no exception. We find it prefigured in traditional accounts by which the human microcosm reflects—and is “coagulated” or “extracted” or “condensed” from—the macrocosm. No less a representative of Tradition than Rumi gives a famous example of an “evolutionary” perspective:

I was a stone and I died as a stone and was born a plant. I died as a plant and was born an animal. Later I died as an animal and I was born as a man.

Those who attempt to marry modern science with traditional wisdom very often quote this passage from Rumi as a way of saying that the sages of old had an intuitive knowledge of truths that Darwin made concrete and scientific. In part—but only in part—they are right to do so. Here Rumi reiterates a sequence of states that at least resembles the Darwinian account of man, for by Darwin too man was once stone, and flower, and so on, in a progressive sequence. Certainly, Rumi does not suggest “natural selection” as the device by which he “dies” from one form after another, but he nevertheless understands the human state as the fulfilment of a sequence of creatures, each more complex and

¹ See D. Dewar, *The transformist illusion*, Hillsdale NY: Sophia Perennis, 2005 (originally published by Dehoff Publications, 1957).

“evolved” than the previous. He was at first a stone—inert matter. Then vegetable. Then animal. And at last human.

But the modernists are wrong to suppose that Rumi is entirely at one with Darwin and that modern, quantitative science is the fulfilment of ancient wisdom traditions. Rather, we must understand Rumi in the context of the traditional cosmological sciences and, in the case of this passage, realise that Rumi is giving expression to the cornerstone of traditional cosmological thought, the microcosm/macrocosm doctrine. He is describing the condensations of the macrocosm into the human microcosm which—by all Traditional accounts, and by definition—contains, in essence or in tincture, the whole of the macrocosm. Man has a nature that is stone, and vegetable, and animal, which is testimony of his “extraction” from the macrocosm. The profane doctrines of evolutionism bear a *resemblance* to this in so far as they propose that the human being has emerged and is constituted from “the environment.” Traditional sources more often describe this in terms of an “involution,” since the microcosm is an “interiorization,” and without the progressive and “evolutionary” sequence used by Rumi, but the crude notion that man has emerged and is constituted from his external world need not be ruled anti-traditional in itself, provided we understand that the modern doctrine is, all the same, a hopelessly limited and partial view—of both man and the universe.

The traditional doctrine—in an admittedly simplified and incomplete rendering—can be presented in the following few points:

1. A Metacosmic Principle—Pure Subject in contemplation of Its own Object, Identity, at once Unique and Infinite.
2. The macrocosm is an “exteriorization” of the Principle (as Object) *through the microcosm*.
3. The microcosm is—at the same time—an “interiorization” of the Principle (as Subject) *through the macrocosm*.

This is leaving aside any account of “patterns” or “forms” or “archetypes” or any further distinctions (hypostases) that reside in and

are manifested from the Principle. It is enough to say that there is a macrocosmic order and a microcosmic order and these are complementary expressions of the same Principle which fact is the basis of their mutual reflection. That is, they reflect each other as well as (and because of) reflecting the Principle—and this because of the very nature of the Principle Itself. Within the non-manifest Principle there is neither an inside nor an outside, subject or object; it is beyond but also the root of these dualities which dualities, therefore, are not final. Taoism, which embodies and preserves the ancient “alchemical” perspective more explicitly than other traditions (and is in some respects, we might say, the least theological and most cosmological of religions) depicts this arrangement in the classical yin-yang symbol where the yin is contained in the yang, and vice versa, and both have identity in a non-manifest Principle (The Tao). In the occident, the caduceus of Hermes, and other symbols with intertwining serpents or dragons, represent aspects of the same thing. There is an unfolding and an infolding at the cosmological level, but no movement at all at the level of Principle.

For our present purposes the thing to note is that point three allows for the idea that man is an extraction of the cosmos and a reorganisation of macrocosmic elements. The organisation of man reflects the organisation of the cosmos, and this because he has been constituted from the cosmos, or rather *from the Principle through the cosmos*, which distinction is all-important. It will be seen that evolutionism is a specific misconception of point three at the level of this distinction and is an overall misconception by being ignorant of points one and two. But in the first instance there is nothing altogether illegitimate about the notion that man is constructed from and has within him the fire, air, water and earth that are the constituent elements of his abode. It is not even necessary to make the proviso that it is only his material frame that is so constituted, for even his “consciousness” may be taken as an internalization of the light that illuminates his abode and so his “consciousness” is in that sense derivative from his “environment.” His waking and sleeping are an internalization of Sun and Moon.

In such a perspective it is entirely possible to conceive of man as the culmination of a succession of animal forms, each more completely internalized than the previous. It is possible, then, to conceive of this internalization as the key to “survival of the fittest”—fittedness being a measure of macrocosmic involution—and we may even hypothesize,

with Darwin, that chance mutation is the propelling device. That is, life “evolves” from inert matter by chance mutations, and those mutations which give rise to internalised forms survive in so far as internalised faculties—because they are reflections—enable a creature to respond successfully to its external circumstance. At length, a creature (*homo sapiens*) “evolves” that is a virtual reflection of the whole cosmos. It is possible to conceive of this as having taken place gradually with other less successfully microcosmic forms appearing along the way, the gradual and linear trajectory of the process being a consequence of the temporal arena in which it occurs.

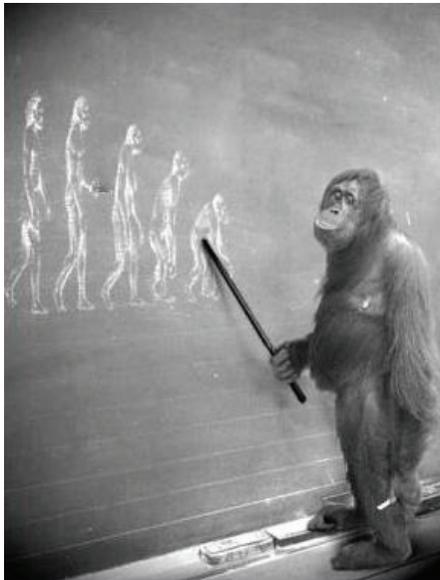
To adapt a traditional symbolism to this, the living entity and the universe that is its environment are as *mirrors* to each other, and the fossil record appears as a process of bringing the mirrors into alignment or into focus. The mirrors move by “chance” forces, let us say, and are sometimes near to focus and at other times wide of focus, until—by “chance” forces, let us say—they hit an alignment that finally yields a true or near-to-true reflection, namely the human form. And let us also say, conceding further to Darwin, that “focus,” in this analogy, is the key to creaturely survival. Man won the race because the human form is the better focus between the two mirrors; this is what it means when we say he is adaptable; his internal resources correspond best to the requirements set by his external world. But, let us remember, there is no “chance” at the level of Principle and the appearance of “chance” at the cosmological level is an illusion. (The Greeks more correctly called it “Necessity.”)

And, more importantly, where these mirrors—entity and world—reach focus they reveal the Principle that is responsible for their correspondence and the basis of the “mirroring.” *The true reflection reveals the principle of reflection.* This is the point at which the subject/object duality is resolved; what is inside is outside and what is outside is inside. The metacosmic Principle is beyond subject-object complementarity and resides in its own Isness, having no complementary opposite, Pure Subject in eternal self-contemplation, its own Object.

There is no need to say anything further about this Principle, for we are considering its cosmological function and not its metaphysical content, and it is especially unnecessary at this level to introduce theological subtleties: the point is that man is not only the summation

of the macrocosm—the subject that answers to its object—but he also embodies the Principle that resolves and transcends subject/object and so is a *spiritual or transcendent being*. This means, precisely, that he is capable of grounding his being in the Principle and make the “point of view” of the Principle his own, so to speak. Darwinism, along with modern thinking generally, is guilty of the most appalling underestimation of the ontological range of man, but so far as they go the general propositions of evolutionism may not be entirely deviant.

Finally, we should note that traditional accounts tend to give priority to point two because Subject is logically prior to Object. If it is true to say that man is an “extraction” of the cosmos it is nevertheless more true to say the cosmos is a “casting off” or “excrescence” or “evaporation” or “filtration” of or “projection” from man—or rather through man (and, if you like, from Man, i.e. Primordial Man, Adam Kadmon, Purusha.) Darwinism, of course, has no notion of this and so is hopelessly partial in its perspective and for that reason destructive to the wisdom traditions of the ages. It is entirely understandable that those in whom a sense of the sapiential heritage of mankind is preserved are hostile to Darwinism and to so-called “spiritual Darwinists” such as Teilhard de Chardin. But like other heresies Darwinism is a perverted truth rather than a complete falsehood. It would be helpful if this point were better appreciated in the on-going debates about evolution and religion.



The transcendent connection and the problem of loneliness

Rodney Blackhirst

Again I saw something meaningless under the sun. There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth...
(Ecclesiastes 4:7-8)

Introduction

Modernity is lonely. By any measure, loneliness is now in epidemic proportions in modern societies and is one of the states most characteristic of the modern condition. Modern man may enjoy a prosperity and so-called “standard of living” vastly better than his ancestors, but inside him there is an emptiness that renders all his achievements null and void. Loneliness is the “new poverty.” It is the hunger of well-fed men. It is the crucial factor in all the social ills of the contemporary era, from alcoholism and eating disorders to drug abuse, teenage shooting rampages, porn addiction and suicide. The atomised, nuclear family is a lonely place, and when the nuclear family fails the modern individual is often left completely disconnected and alienated. Similarly, the pace of change of modern societies creates alienation and estrangement and a lack of social cohesion such that individuals feel themselves to be living in a strange, unrecognizable world, as if they are uncomprehending foreigners in what was only yesterday their own land. Such feelings and problems are so common that we hardly need to describe the pathology here—every modern man knows what loneliness is—yet very little of any penetrating insight on these issues is ever heard in public fora.

Even less do we try to understand loneliness as a spiritual problem and to place it in a context beyond profane theories and the fad-ridden, quantitative “research” of sociologists. Modernity likes to flatter itself with the notion that all is “new” and so the past is “irrelevant” and “out-of-date.” But this prevents us from seeing our woes in the broader

context of the whole life of humanity and the cycles of cosmic dimension in which that life takes place. The plight of loneliness makes no sense if we cling to an ideology of “progress.” How can the best-fed, finest clothed, most literate, and scientifically nurtured people in history be so miserable?

Traditional perspectives such as those recorded in the great scriptures of the world, on the other hand, assume an inevitable decline from the Principle and speak very plainly of our times as days of estrangement and discord. In traditional reckonings the process of cyclic decline of which the modern condition is a culmination is essentially a process of human *self-emptying* by which primal man loses his microcosmic integrity and empties himself, so to speak, into the macrocosm. The inner self-sufficiency of primal man is replaced by a dependency on what is external to himself. This is obvious in physical terms. There comes a time, for example, when the natural, inner immunity of man to disease fails and thus he sets out on the path to an *industrial* medicine in which his inner immunity is forsaken for an array of external devices, vaccines and the like, designed to cocoon his increasingly frail constitution in a sterilised bubble. The notion that human beings are themselves getting better is quite obviously wrong. The quality of human beings is declining, even while the web of man’s infrastructure grows around him. Modern man is a Wizard of Oz, a shrunken soul in a mighty machine. Thus modern man has multiplied his means of communication with mobile phones, satellites, email, SMS—a whole array of devices—but then finds he has nothing to say or no one to whom to say it. He has a diminishing capacity to make any real contacts. He has prolific external means but no inner reality to share. Ours is the age of the space tourist: truly awesome technology devoted to truly trivial human beings.

This is the wider context in which we must locate the problem of loneliness in our times. Modern man buries himself in an avalanche of inane stimuli but still languishes in *ennui*. Above all, he has lost his primordial “centre,” an axial sense of his own being—in fact, the psychic correlate to the upright stance of his body—and since the human predicament is (always was and always will be) a subject/object paradox, when man loses his ‘centre’ that subject/object pathology we call loneliness will surely follow.

Horizontal and Vertical

Moreover, since it is an “axial” problem, it will manifest in two ways, or on two planes: vertically and, by reflection, horizontally. In traditional anthropologies man is a creature with both a vertical and a horizontal life.¹ In Islam—where the symbolism of two axes is made explicit in the movements of prayer—man is both *abd* (servant) and *khalifa* (deputy), while in Christianity—where the symbolism of the two axes makes the sign of the Cross—Christ said that there are two commandments—to love one’s neighbour as oneself and to love God with all one’s heart. There are several manifestations of loneliness and it is important, if we are to conduct any meaningful discussion of the problem, to make the proper distinctions between the various types from the outset. The horizontal dimension of the problem takes the form of common biosocial loneliness, feeling disconnected from one’s fellow human beings. The vertical dimension, however, takes the form of existential or spiritual loneliness, a profound sense of being spiritually adrift and unconnected in a meaningless life in a meaningless universe. Biosocial loneliness is the loneliness of the unloved. It is the anguished separateness of the person who has failed to make real connections with others. Existential loneliness, on the other hand, deals with the fact that we are, existentially (but not biosocially), monads. We are born our own birth, live our own life and die our own death, and no one else can do it for us. This is an immutable fact of our condition. The religions and philosophies of the world all address this particular predicament.

Biosocial (or “horizontal”) loneliness is the most common form of the malady. It is no exaggeration to say that it is rife. Our swarming cities consist of atomized individuals who have few and only superficial connections with others. The money nexus that drives the modern swarm cheapens all relationships. At work we are wage-slaves and at home our mortgage is more meaningful than our marriage. When calamity strikes in life we have no extended networks of close relations to gather around and so we turn to “counsellors,” people we pay by the hour to be our friends, just as—in what is, in fact, the paradigmatic modern relationship—we pay a whore by the hour to pretend they are our beloved. Modernity, stripped of all deep and formal relationships, such as all forms of bonded service, becomes a “whore culture” where

¹ This is a far more useful model than Maslow’s hierarchy.

casual trade is the prevailing nexus between most people at most times. An aggravated existential loneliness is also characteristic of our era. The old religious frameworks and certainties of the past have been diminished or destroyed by the ideologies and pretensions of modernity. We are not raised in a framework of metaphysical certainties any more. We stand on quicksand. Descartes was right: the modern condition is one of doubt. Do I exist? The fact that there is someone who asked the question is cold comfort, a cause for despair, not celebration. We are locked in our own fetid egos seeking solace in the novelty of our desires and fulfilment in shoddy consumer goods. Meanwhile, everything around us says that God is impossible.

Of the two types, biosocial (horizontal) loneliness is the easier to remedy. It will usually abate if one expands one's circle of friends, meets a partner, gets a job, joins a club, raises a family, returns to study, moves into a commune, and so on. There is still the problem of the impermanence and shallowness of the connections made, but in the first instance biosocial loneliness is susceptible to biosocial solutions. Spiritual loneliness is a more difficult problem. No extension of our social networks will ameliorate a sense of existential or spiritual loneliness. There are people who have friends, family, career—a rich social life—and are happy in those things, yet still feel a deep, inner emptiness that they cannot seem to fill. Indeed, there are those who will throw away friends, family, career, to suddenly run off to Nepal to become a Buddhist monk. They will throw away their biosocial connections to try to fulfil their spiritual yearning. It is a deeper yearning than the hunger for human company. It is a yearning that oppresses the soul, is felt as a sickness in the bones, and from which no bar or night-club, strip-joint, speak-easy or coffee-lounge in the land is refuge. It is possible for one to be at peace with God but still long for human company, but more commonly, though we have our share of human entanglements, we find they do not answer our spiritual needs and leave us empty inside. This is a loneliness inherent in the human circumstance. It is the loneliness of the separateness of the creature. It has no cause other than the fact of creatureliness and the creature's longing for the Creator.

Paradoxically, most religious and spiritual systems tell us that the cure for existential loneliness is to be alone with oneself in meditation and prayer. The monk seeks a cure for spiritual loneliness in solitude.

The cure for biosocial loneliness is to extend beyond ourselves—to “go out and meet people.” But with existential loneliness the connection we yearn is inner. One cannot find it in connections with someone else. The only connection that will help is, by definition, transcendent, beyond the social. Different religions have different emphases, though. The three monotheisms, in particular, express a certain range of responses to these matters typical of their roles and postures within the single framework of Semitic monotheism. Judaism, for example, is a religion constructed around biosocial connections. The family, the tribe, the nation—biosocial connectedness—is emphasized. Thus is God anthropomorphized as a transcendent “Father,” thus is marriage the arena for the transcendent connection (and thus too is seeking God in a woman’s love a distinctly Jewish neurosis). Classical Christianity, on the other hand, (not the modern versions of the faith) has the monastery at its heart and, like Buddhism, places an emphasis on solitary contemplation rather than the social virtues. Celibacy is the ideal and marriage is a concession to nature. Love of one’s neighbour is only “as oneself” while love of God is with all one’s heart and soul, so Christianity (in its classical forms) tends to sacrifice all for love of God.

Islam claims a position between these two extremes. Islam adheres to an ideal of “married monks.” The prophet said, “Marriage is one half of religion” ... but only one half. Islam strives for a contemplative spirit held in balance within a highly social “horizontal” order. More to the point, in Islam all of creation longs for Allah “for whose self-same beauty,” as the poet sings, “the nightingale laments.”² And ‘Listen!,’ sings Rumi, alluding to the mournful solitude of the reed flute (*ney*) ‘Listen to the reed forlorn, torn from its bed...’ A homesickness for Paradise is the great theme—the tone—of Islamic spiritual life. Spiritual loneliness, in the form of a soul-felt longing for God, is made a positive theme and regarded as a virtue. About the lonely soul of man, torn by its separation from God, the Koran says, ‘If Allah afflicts you with some hurt, there is none who can remove it except Him.’³ As the last of religions Islam responds to modern man’s sense of remoteness from the divine by transmuting his loneliness into a proper yearning of the soul. It does this by preserving the solitary and primal spirituality of the nomad

² From the exordium to Attar’s *Conference of the Birds*.

³ Holy Qur’an 10:107.

alone in the timeless emptiness of the desert and transposes it into an era when men feel minuscule and lost in the vast, barren emptiness of the galaxies, the deserts of astronomical space.

Primary attachments

One of the more useful notions in modern psychology, though hardly an astounding “discovery,” is the idea of a primary attachment. Biosocially, human beings function best with a primary attachment. For a newborn child, this is usually their mother. For adults, it is a partner or a close companion or a trusted friend.⁴ ‘And God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone...”’⁵ Human beings need and seek not only wide social contacts but deep and special ones as well. This is true—on the vertical level—for the spiritual seeker too. It is even true of the monk. A monk does not live alone, strictly speaking, but in a *controlled aloneness* created by the monastic community. True hermits are rare, even in strongly ascetic traditions. Rather, every renunciate has a ‘primary attachment’—their teacher, confessor, guide, guru—who looks after their progress and nurture. Most religious systems insist that it is difficult (or even dangerous) to undertake the inner journey/confrontation without supervision by one who has been there, and in most systems the student/teacher relationship is a very close and especially sacred one.

The inner journey may consist of *the One alone, all alone, seeking the One alone*, but since the quest, as far as man is concerned, takes the form of a subject/object paradox it is rare that a man can dispense altogether with a guide external (objective) to himself. The nature of the quest demands an “other,” but not for any biosocial reason. The object of the teacher/student relationship is not to amend biosocial loneliness—the guru does not drop over to play scrabble in the evenings. His purpose is only to lead the student through the subject/object maze and guide him or her to make the *inner* connection at the centre and solution of the labyrinth.

In much religious literature and praxis metaphors of biosocial connections are employed to describe this inner connection, though,

⁴ Increasingly in Western societies, for the young and the old, it is an animal kept as a pet rather than another human being.

⁵ Gen. 2:18.

more correctly, it is the horizontal that reflects the vertical: the biosocial relationships are reflections of the archetypal ones. Thus in Sufism, for instance, God is sometimes called the Friend. Sometimes—even in the strongly patriarchal religions—God is called the Lover (feminine), and longing for Him/Her is analogized to the longing one feels for a human lover. Implicit in such parallels is the idea that we can learn about the existential problem from the biosocial manifestations, and vice versa. Our need for friends is a reflection of our need for the Friend. Our need for a lover is a reflection of our need for the Lover. And so on. The teacher or guru is neither friend nor lover but guides the pupil to the Friend, the Lover within (and beyond). It is common, of course, for a man or woman to seek the Lover in lovers and the Friend in friendships, and to never find satisfaction even in a profusion of connections. This is a confusion of horizontal and vertical planes, an error of mistaken reflections. This is precisely the type of error that an external authority—a guide—can correct. It is also common, however, for the same modern man who complains of being lost and lonely to insist that he does not need anyone to guide him.

Therapy

It is important not to confuse the spiritual journey with the similar processes used in psychoanalysis, where the analyst/therapist—through a long process of discussion and talking—helps a patient form an internalized, secure emotional base, usually by trying to rebuild the mother-infant primary attachment from the ground up. This is a biosocial therapy (of questionable value), not a cure for the human condition. Such therapies may alleviate chronic states of emotional insecurity (created by biosocial factors) but even the most emotionally secure person can feel a chill of spiritual insecurity, existential loneliness, when they stop to contemplate their mortality in the universe. Therapy and the analyst/patient relationship is about one's relationship with others (especially one's mother in the case of Freudian-based therapies). Spiritual disciplines, and the teacher/student relationship, on the other hand, are about one's relationship with one's Maker (and by extension one's Self, the authentic Self, and not the imposter of one's vain thinking.) To express loneliness as a spiritual problem, let us say that the lonely person must learn to forsake the "one" and realise the "One." It is finally just a tiny shift in awareness,

but it changes everything. God is not lonely in his Oneness. His self-sufficiency is joyous and overflowing. It is the self-loving gaze of the ego, the *nafs*, the *false* self—the thought of oneself that wrongly boasts of being Real—that is lonely.

It is questionable whether biosocial loneliness (and the unhappiness it causes) should ever be treated as a medical matter—medication always tends to mask symptoms and create new problems when the real problems are social and environmental in nature—but it is certain that medical therapies offer nothing to fulfil genuine spiritual yearning. No mode of therapy can ever help spiritually. Is there any therapy—other than Socrates' hemlock—that can cure one's creatureliness? Should a psychiatrist treat the yearning homesickness of the spiritual man? There was a time when *iatros* meant priest and healer of souls, but the profane medicine of modern times is entirely carnal. We can hardly expect a science that denies the existence of the soul to be able to sooth the soul of man.

In fact, some types of modern therapy can do great damage. Contemporary medical theories concerning brain chemistry and accompanying modes of chemical therapy are dehumanizing and destructive. It is arguable that some so-called “mental diseases” such as schizophrenia are actually spiritual in nature and, further, that the whole “science” of psychiatry—a science whose macabre history has been populated by an equal number of fools and ghouls, it must be said—serves to mask modern society's social and spiritual deterioration. A psychiatrist is not a healer of the soul. Existential loneliness—deep spiritual longing from metaphysical disconnectedness—is never a disease (except that “salvation” is its cure) and should never be treated as one.

One of the most disturbing aspects of the contemporary West is its increasing tendency to regard spiritual yearning, spiritual disquiet, as a disease, a malfunction of the brain. In Australia recently there was serious discussion in the psychiatric fraternity about classifying religious belief as a mental disorder. As one newspaper correspondent put it, it is only the out-moded convention called “religion” that prevents “people who speak to invisible friends in the sky” from being treated as mentally ill. The truth behind such thoughts is that a man with genuine spiritual aspirations is increasingly a danger to the soporific hedonism that is these days shamelessly promoted as the *summum bonum* of human life and the fulfilment of human history. The purpose of much

psychological counselling is to dissuade the unhappy of ever extending themselves beyond the most pedestrian forms of contentment. It is true: a man with no dreams can never be disappointed. But that is to deny that there is a vertical dimension to the human state and to suppose that man can live by bread—and mindless entertainment—alone. The modern world is a denial of the depth of man and so a self-betrayal and a travesty. Ten minutes of contemporary television is enough to demonstrate that the first rule of modernity is that shallowness is so pervasive as to be compulsory. Any aspiration outside the consumerist stupor is a threat. The medication of the discontent, the pathologizing of normal human states (we are no longer “sad,” we are “depressed”) and the collapsing together of the roles ‘citizen’ and ‘patient’—is an integral part of the modern programme to build a “horizontal” utopia. The suppression and containment of the religious instinct is a necessary part of the secular project. ‘A man’s reach should exceed his grasp, or what’s a heaven for?’ wrote Browning. In the modern technological paradise-on-earth there is no heaven and any man whose reach exceeds his grasp will be viewed as deluded and defective.

Confusions

Many problems, let it be observed, can be caused by seeking spiritual answers to biosocial problems, or vice versa. There are many people, for example, who are just biosocially lonely and disconnected but who seek happiness in a spiritual path. They will usually drop out from the chosen spiritual path after a while because they have miscalculated the cause of their discontent. On the other hand, joining a religious group does enhance one’s biosocial connections because one is among like-minded people gathering in a common cause. But then the spiritual commitment may be shallow. In contrast to the monasteries that maintained a culture of perpetual contemplation at the core of classical Christianity, many modern Christian churches are merely social clubs on a Christian theme and no longer address the eternal problems of the soul. Anyone with an authentic sense of the spiritual and a compelling sense of existential longing is likely to find their dilemmas untended in such congregations. At worse, such churches are little more than dating pools. There are people who are lonely, become very religious, join a church, meet a partner in the church scene, leave the church and go

back to being not very religious at all. (“His wife still goes to church but he doesn’t feel it is relevant to him anymore..”).

Commonly, too, people will seek existential solutions in biosocial relations—as if marriage and children will provide one with the meaning of life. And some people clearly do not know what their problem is or on what level or plane their problem lies. They try social solutions, build families, explore sex, take drugs, live in the fast lane, and then veer to spiritual solutions, suddenly shaving their heads and cutting off from friends to become obsessed with yoga and vegetarian food. And soon they lapse back into social bingeing. And so on. Spiritual teachers, gurus and guides see an endless parade of fickle and oscillating souls among modern seekers. Biosocial connections will make life rich and enjoyable but will not reveal the meaning of life. Rather, sound biosocial relations should be a platform from which to address spiritual things. This is why religions in general stress marriage and family. The rabid pursuit of biosocial connections can fill up one’s life and deflect one from addressing the need for deeper connections. Religions usually stress conservative biosocial relations with a view to creating a very secure, stable biosocial framework in which, ideally, deeper spiritual pursuits can be nurtured.

In so-called “progressive” social thinking there is an “emotional authenticity” to be found in “liberating” all human relations from the yoke of traditional patterns. Life becomes a pursuit of this authenticity through a succession of love affairs, infidelities, casual flings, bisexual experiments, breakdowns, crises and turning-points. This is the humanist authenticity of Hamlet’s “to thine own self be true,” but it should not be mistaken for a spiritual ideal. It makes no reference to a transcendent connection, and Hamlet, in any case, is hardly a worthy spiritual model. In traditional societies it is understood that existential loneliness is best addressed from within a secure biosocial framework. Many traditional spiritual disciplines require students to be over thirty-five years old, with a career and family intact, before tackling the problems of a deeper connectedness. In any full religious perspective, marriage and family and social bonds are not ends in themselves but are supposed to create the conditions for a deeper spiritual life. The weakening of marriage and family as institutions and the increasingly superficial nature of those institutions in modern conditions aggravates biosocial loneliness in a direct way but also deprives many people of the

secure social framework in which an atmosphere of spiritual nurture can develop. People who busy their lives dealing with social dislocation have little time for meditation.

It is conspicuous that family life has been sentimentalized and commercialized in the modern West where, in the strange realm of delusions that is advertising, it is conceived of as an end in itself, not as a platform for higher aspirations. This is why the modern home can be such a pressure-pot. Much of the anguish of the common man is caused by the steady realisation that the television ideal of family life as an absolute, as ultimately fulfilling, is just a highly polished lie. No matter how much we inflate the value of the nuclear family with sentiment, it cannot satisfy the need for a transcendent connection. Existential loneliness is nagging and persistent and it does not matter how happy you are with your spouse, how beautiful your children, how rewarding your job, how shiny the car in your garage, how hefty your retirement pay-out, how “emotionally authentic” your love affairs, nothing will help. There are values beyond family. Christ said that we must love him even more than we love our mothers and fathers. Our social connections become idols if they prevent us from aspiring to the blessed (and not merely the comfortable) life.

Conclusion

Utopians estimate that if the world economy continues to expand at a rate of around 3% per year for the next fifty years, as it has throughout the ‘Long Boom’, then it is possible for every person on the Earth to enjoy what is today a middle-class American “standard of living.” Modernity, as Marx realised, is defined by the unprecedented, exponential unleashing of the “forces of production,” a revolution in the productive (and destructive) capacity of mankind. Utopians speak of abolishing poverty, vanquishing disease, extending life expectancy, universal literacy, free cable TV to every home on the planet with a thousand channels at the fingertips of every man, woman and child.

But what, we should ask, happens then? There is overwhelming evidence that these things alone do not, will not, cannot bring human beings deep and lasting satisfaction. It is self-evident that we have an innate longing for a transcendent connectedness that a materialist utopia will never cure. And it is glaringly self-evident that middle-class Americans are far from being the most fulfilled beings in the world.

They complain of acute biosocial loneliness, and all the associated social ills, and increasingly of existential misery. When their music video idols have exhausted sex, cocaine and serial divorce traumas they turn to Scientology, UFO cults and pop Kabbalah. The loneliness of modernity is a spiritual problem that no measure of affluence can remedy. On the contrary, the great productive surge of the modern revolution inevitably involves the further deterioration of man's primal integrity—machines exteriorise human faculties, technological man is hell-bent on a strangely misconceived quest to make himself redundant, thinking that this somehow fulfils all human dreams. But “transhuman” is really *sub-human*.⁶ “Robo-buddies” are the proposed solution to the biosocial loneliness of an advanced, atomized ultra-selfish society, but there is no technological solution yet—other than sedatives—for metaphysical longing.

We are very rapidly moving into a world in which our problems are quite nakedly spiritual rather than material in character. Let us be optimistic and suppose that the material infrastructure of the planet is indeed to be transformed in the next fifty years, and the great devils of the past—famine, plague—have all been defeated. Let us suppose that technological man can conquer want. Then the great problems of the spiritual life of man cannot be ignored or discounted any longer, and first amongst them is the problem of the loneliness that bedevils modern man. After the revolution comes the time to take stock of what has been lost in the madness of the rush. Modernity is lonely, both in the horizontal and the vertical sense, both biosocially and existentially. Man is diminished, overshadowed by his own inventions. Very soon loneliness will need to be acknowledged as a scourge of our times and we will need to consider the problem in an expanded context and finally address many of the issues sketched in outline in the notes above.

⁶ See D. Catherine, ‘In defiance of the natural order: The origins of “transhuman” techno-utopia’ in *Eye of the Heart* 1.1, Bendigo: Latrobe University, 2008, pp.81-103.

Notes on “Spirituality”

Harry Oldmeadow

Outside tradition there can assuredly be found some relative truths...but outside tradition there does not exist a doctrine that catalyzes absolute truth and transmits liberating notions concerning total reality... (Frithjof Schuon)¹

“Spirituality” has become a rather fashionable catch-word, recently appropriated by all manner of people, many of whom are disillusioned with the sterile paradigms of the mechanistic, hyper-rationalistic, materialistic and utilitarian worldview which characterises modernity but who are also often hostile to traditional religious forms which might provide the necessary antidotes. “Spirituality” stands as a banner under which some of the richness and complexity of human consciousness and experience can be rescued from various physiological and psychological reductionisms. While one might well sympathize with these efforts to combat what William Blake called the “Single Vision” of scientism it must be said at the outset that much of the present-day discussion of “spirituality” really amounts to a kind of sentimental indulgence in which the word itself can be made to mean almost anything—more often than not referring to some kind of vaguely-defined inner life or experience. If the term is to be at all useful we must establish a provisional definition of “spirituality” and make a few remarks about its relation to religion, outside of which the whole notion makes little sense.

“Spirituality” might be conceptualised in many ways. Here is one: spirituality is both a mode of *understanding* Reality, one in which we recognise the Spirit within us, “the immortal spark of God’s Being, eternally living in the depths of man’s soul,”² and a mode of *being*

¹ Schuon, ‘No Activity Without Truth’ in Harry Oldmeadow ed., *The Betrayal of Tradition*, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2005, p.11.

² Barry McDonald ed., *Every Branch in Me: Essays on the Meaning of Man*, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2003, p.ix.

wherein we conform ourselves to that Reality. Further, one might say that spirituality is the domain of human experience in which a transmutation of the soul leads, depending on the vocabulary at hand, to God, to the Self, to *Nirvana*. A Hindu swami asked to sum up the message of Hinduism replied this way: “God Is; God can be realised; to realise God is the supreme end of human life; God can be realised in many ways.” Whilst this kind of formulation poses problems for some religious perspectives it might here stand as a signpost to the spiritual life in general.

Implicit in the idea that spirituality concerns both *understanding* and *being* are the parallel notions of a *doctrine* (an account of Reality in both its absolute and relative “dimensions”) and a *path* (a spiritual method, provided by religious forms, whereby one might live in accordance with the Will of Heaven). One of the myriad problems surrounding many contemporary attitudes to “spirituality” is that the doctrine of an Ultimate Reality (by whatever name—the Absolute, God, Allah, *Atman-Brahman*, *Nirvana/Sunyata*, the *Tao*, *Wakan-Tanka*) and the elaboration of a spiritual method attuned to our relationship therewith, are left out of the picture altogether! What we are offered instead is a notion of “spirituality” as some kind of subjective inner state, a kind of “warm fuzzy glow,” sometimes harnessed to formulations such as “the kingdom of Heaven is within you”—as if by these words Christ meant that the kingdom of Heaven is of a psychological order! This is all of a piece with the notion that “spirituality” is a private affair, and that the spiritual life can be fashioned out of the subjective resources of the individual in question. Some of the factors which, over several centuries, have conspired to create a climate in which such ideas could take root include the rebellion against all authority, the cult of the individual, the humanistic prejudice that “man is the measure of all things,” the triumph—even in the religious domain itself—of sentimentalism over intellectuality, the shibboleths of “egalitarianism” and “democracy,” and the emergence of a rampant psychologism which usurps functions which properly belong to religion. In recent times we have seen many attempts to assimilate spirituality into the domain of psychology, a move which fails to distinguish between the contingent plane of the psyche and the inviolate Self, or Spirit—this failure generating confusions of all kinds, on full display in “occultist,” “New Age” and

purportedly “Eastern” movements which lay claim to some kind of spirituality but which scorn traditional religious forms and practices. The same confusion can easily be discerned in the works of many modernistic writers on religious subjects, even when their general disposition towards religion is sympathetic.³ It might also be observed in passing that it is also quite possible to be “religious” in some externalist sense—punctilious in the observation of ritual obligations and so on—yet remain quite “unspiritual”; this is the phenomenon of an empty religiosity wherein the true goals of the path have been forgotten, and all that remains is an empty husk. (Such folk might usefully remember Martin Buber’s remark that “it is far more comfortable to have to do with religion than to have to do with God.”⁴) However, even such an attenuated form of religious practice is preferable to a so-called “spirituality” which has been stripped of all sense of the Transcendent. There remains some chance that the practices which are performed only to the letter might yet re-ignite embers which seem to have died.

Traditional peoples everywhere, whatever their religious commitments, start from very different premises. To state them succinctly, and without privileging any particular theology: man is an “amphibious” or “axial” creature who lives, so to speak, between two worlds—on the one hand, the ever-changing tissue of relativities which comprise the time-space world of multiplicity and contingency (*maya* or *samsara* in the Indian lexicon), and on the other, the boundless realm of the Divine, the Absolute, God, from whence come various Revelations which provide us, in our terrestrial condition, with all things needful for our spiritual welfare and pertinent to our ultimate destiny. Such peoples could hardly conceive the idea that ‘spirituality’ might be an *ad hoc*, improvisatory and subjective affair; on the contrary, the God-given forms and practices of tradition (Scriptures, myths, doctrines, rituals, sacred art, moral codes and so on), the example of the saints and sages, and the guidance of those qualified to provide it (masters, lamas, directors, gurus, shamans, priests, shaykhs), provide the adherent with a detailed map of the spiritual path. It is not a matter of dreaming up a new map (which may bear little relation to

³ On the disastrous conflation of the psychic and the spiritual see Guénon, RQ.

⁴ M. Buber, *A Believing Humanism*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967, p. 110.

the terrain to be traversed!) but of following the map which tradition invariably provides to those who seek.

In 1984 representatives of all the major religions gathered at St Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado, to "meditate together in silence and share their personal spiritual journeys" and to deliberate on those elements of belief and practice which their traditions shared. Out of this gathering and subsequent meetings emerged a list of points of agreement. It is worth considering this list as an example of the kinds of convergences which can be discerned by adherents of different traditions working together in a spirit of cooperative fellowship and dialogue. It also throws some light on our present considerations. The Snowmass meeting proved less vaporous than many attempts at dialogue and produced the following list of elements common to all the major religions:

- The world religions bear witness to the experience of Ultimate Reality to which they give various names....
- Ultimate Reality cannot be limited by any name or concept.
- Ultimate Reality is the ground of infinite potentiality and actuality.
- Faith is opening, accepting and responding to Ultimate Reality...
- The potential for human wholeness—or in other frames of reference, enlightenment, salvation, transformation, blessedness, nirvana—is present in every human person.
- Ultimate Reality may be experienced not only through religious practices but through nature, art, human relationships and service to others.
- As long as the human condition is experienced as separate from Ultimate Reality, it is subject to ignorance and illusion, weakness and suffering.
- Disciplined practice is essential to the spiritual life... Humility, gratitude and a sense of humour are indispensable in the spiritual life.⁵

⁵ T. Keating, 'Meditative Technologies: Theological Ecumenism' in *The Other Half of My Soul: Bede Griffiths and the Hindu-Christian Dialogue*, ed. B. Bruteau, Wheaton: Quest Books, 1996, p. 115.

It might be observed that this register, whilst it encompasses a good deal, rather underplays the significance of tradition as the fountainhead of spiritual practice. It also somewhat marginalizes several aspects of spirituality which are fore-grounded in primordial cultures—namely, the paradigmatic function of religious mythology, the sacramental conception of the natural order, and the centrality of ritual life. Nonetheless, in the context of the Snowmass statement one may speak of “spirituality” as a disciplined practice, within the framework of an integral doctrine (derived from a Revelation), whereby we seek to realise the “infinite potentiality and actuality” of Ultimate Reality within ourselves, thus becoming conduits, so to speak, through which Divine Grace may be radiated into the world around us. Needless to say, this kind of formulation will command no assent from materialists, humanists, existentialists, and the like, not to mention those for whom the human being is nothing more than a highly evolved animal, a biological organism whose secrets will be unlocked by a materialistic science and who believe, with Francis Crick, that the soul is a fiction.⁶ All that need presently be said on this front is that the whole notion of “spirituality” can have no real meaning for such people

It might be objected that there have been individuals who have experienced the deepest insights into Reality outside the cadre of any integral tradition and without any disciplined religious practice: the experience of Ramana Maharshi as a seventeen-year old—without doubt a mystical illumination of the most profound kind—might be cited as an instance. As Schuon observes, such experiences are certainly possible as a kind of “isolated miracle,”⁷ exceptions which prove the rule but certainly could not constitute it. In the vast majority of cases, the deepest spiritual experiences *do* take place within the embrace of a formal religion, the soil having been prepared, so to speak, by some sort of practice as prescribed by the tradition in question. In those cases where a more or less spontaneous and quite unexpected illumination occurs, if it is to become intelligible to others and to have any efficacy in guiding them along the spiritual path, it must be assimilated into the forms (both doctrinal and practical) of the tradition in question. This, of

⁶ Oldmeadow, *Traditionalism*, p. 122.

⁷ Schuon, *SW*, p. 57.

course, is precisely what happened in the case of the Sage of Arunachala.⁸

It might also be suggested that all spiritual experience is in some sense an adumbration, no matter how faint, of the mystical experience proper. One mode of spirituality is the awareness of the metaphysical transparency of every cosmic situation, awakened by what are variously called epiphanies, theophanies, hierophanies and mystical illuminations. In the theistic traditions this mode of experience is sometimes called the gift of “seeing God everywhere”—but it is a universal phenomena and one dramatically exemplified by those many saints and sages who perceive the transcendent dimension which is “hidden” in all natural phenomena. One may cite as representative examples such figures as Rumi, St Francis of Assisi, St Seraphim of Sarov, Ramakrishna and Black Elk.

To conclude: “spirituality” *in vacuo* is indeed a vacuous notion! If the term is to have any meaning and vitality it must be understood within the framework of a religious tradition. In its most simple formulation, spirituality is to do with shattering the fetters of the ego (in Sufi terms, the taming of the *nafs*), the submission of the human will to the Will of Heaven, the “alchemical” transformation of the soul and, in the language of the Vedanta, the re-discovery of that Self (*Atman*) which Alone is Real. All of this lies infinitely beyond the scope of any profane science; nor can it be accommodated in those pseudo-spiritual and humanistic counterfeits which claim to dispense with the dictates of tradition.

⁸ See T. M. P. Mahadevan, *Ramana Maharshi: The Sage of Arunachala*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1977.

The Cave of the Heart: The Life of Swami Abhishiktananda,

by Shirley du Boulay

(Maryknoll, NJ: Orbis Books, 2005, 276pp.)

Reviewed by *Harry Oldmeadow*

Father Henri Le Saux, a French Benedictine monk, arrived in South India in 1949 to join his compatriot, Father Jules Monchanin, in the establishment of a “Christian Ashram” at Kulittalai, on the banks of the sacred Kavery River. In *A Benedictine Ashram* (first published 1951) they articulated their goal this way:

... to form the first nucleus of a monastery (or rather a *laura*, a grouping of neighboring anchorites like the ancient *laura* of Saint Sabas in Palestine) which buttresses the Rule of Saint Benedict—a primitive, sober, discrete rule. Only one purpose: to seek God. And the monastery will be Indian style. We would like to crystallize and transubstantiate the search of the Hindu *sannyasi*. *Advaita* and the praise of the Trinity are our only aim. This means we must grasp the authentic Hindu search for God in order to Christianize it, starting with ourselves first of all, from within.

In short: Vedantic philosophy, Christian theology, Indian lifestyle. The hope was that ‘what is deepest in Christianity may be grafted on to what is deepest in India’. This was not a syncretic exercise which would issue forth some kind of religious hybrid but an attempt to fathom the depths of Christianity with the aid of the traditional wisdom of India which, in the monks’ view, was to be found in Vedanta and in the spiritual disciplines of the renunciate. The bridge between Indian spirituality and the Church was to be monasticism, ‘the plane whereon they may feel themselves in consonance with each other’. They looked forward to the day when God would send to the hermitage many ‘true sons of India, sons of her blood and sons of her soul’,

priests and laymen alike, gifted with a deep spirit of prayer, an heroic patience, a total surrender, endowed with an iron will and right judgment, longing for the heights of contemplation, and equipped, too, with a deep and intimate knowledge of Christian doctrine and Indian thought...

The lifestyle at the ashram was to be thoroughly Indian: meditation, prayer, study of the Scriptures of both traditions, a simple vegetarian diet, the most Spartan of amenities. Each donned the ochre cloth of the *sannyasi* and lived Indian-style—sleeping on the floor, dispensing with almost all furniture, eating with the hands, and so on.

Thus it was that Le Saux, soon to be known as Swami Abhishiktananda, embarked on a spiritual journey which continued to the end of his life in 1973. Shantivanam, the ashram opened on the Feast of St Benedict, 1950, later came to full fruition under the guidance of Father Bede Griffiths, and survives to this day. The establishment of the ashram is but one chapter in Abhishiktananda's life in India. Over nearly a quarter of a century he immersed himself in Advaita Vedanta and in the spiritual practices of Saivite Hinduism, always seeking a bridge between his deeply-rooted Christian faith and the mystical awakenings which came through his encounters with two indubitable Indian sages, Ramana Maharishi and Swami Gnanananda, and through his extended meditations and austerities on the holy mountain of Arunachala. Eventually Abhishiktananda left the ashram which he had founded with Monchanin, built a small hermitage at Gyansu in the Himalayas, and adopted the life of a semi-itinerant renunciate. In the last decade of his life he wrote about a dozen books, concerned with such subjects as Advaita Vedanta, the teachings of the *Upanishads*, Hindu-Christian dialogue, the Church in India and the ideal of renunciation. Among his most captivating and striking works are *Guru and Disciple* (first English edition, 1970), *The Further Shore* (1975) and *The Secret of Arunachala* (1978). He also wrote dozens of articles and maintained a spiritual journal, running to something in the order of two thousand pages by the time of his death.

There is now a burgeoning interest in the life and work of this obscure but quite extraordinary monk. Shirley du Boulay's *The Cave of the Heart* is the second biography to appear, following James Stuart's *Swami Abhishiktananda: his life told through his letters* (1989). Stuart

undertook an heroic labour in assembling Abhishiktananda's prodigious correspondence, and in weaving it into a autobiographical narrative. As well as Stuart's work we have various articles, memoirs, tributes and the like, written by friends and acquaintances of "Swami-ji." Then, too, there are the excerpts from his journal, edited by his friend and internationally renowned scholar, Raimon Panikkar, and published as *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart* (1998). However, du Boulay provides us with the first full-dress biography which takes account of all the available sources and traces the full sweep of Abhishiktananda's life. She follows a more or less chronological trajectory, starting with the childhood of young Henri, the first of seven children born into a pious bourgeois family in St Briac, on the northern coast of Brittany. The story ends sixty-three years later, in 1973; soon after Abhishiktananda has experienced a series of mystical illuminations in the Himalayas he is struck down by a heart attack in the marketplace of Rishikesh, one of the sacred cities of the Ganges. Between his childhood and his final days lies a remarkable pilgrimage which took Abhishiktananda deep into the spiritual treasure-hold of one of the world's primordial traditions.

The scope of the present review does not allow us to rehearse the inspiring and often poignant story of Abhishiktananda's life—his happy childhood which instilled an abiding love of his family and his homeland, the long years in a French monastery, the second World War, the 'call of India', the struggle to establish a Christian ashram in South India, the dramatic meetings with Ramana and Gnanananda, the direct and momentous lightning-strike of *advaita* (non-duality), the search for some sort of *experiential* and *existential* reconciliation of Vedantic non-dualism and Christian Trinitarianism, the lonely years of self-interrogation and self-doubt, the intrepid exploration of a foreign spiritual universe, bringing him finally to a resolution of the theological and existential predicaments entailed in the attempt to fully fathom the depths of the two religious traditions to which he was heir. Readers will find this story sympathetically and elegantly rendered in du Boulay's splendid biography.

Shirley du Boulay has a well-earned reputation as an intelligent, clear-eyed and sensitive biographer, having previously given us engaging studies of such figures as Archbishop Desmond Tutu, St Teresa of Avila and Father Bede Griffiths, another bridge-builder between the spiritual worlds of East and West, and one of Abhishiktananda's friends and

associates. In her treatment of Abhishiktananda she navigates a skilful course between the Scylla and Charybdis which lie in wait for the unsuspecting biographer of religious subjects—the temptations of sentimental hagiography on one side, a corrosive ‘debunking’ exercise on the other. The biography is clearly a labour of love in tribute to a man whom the author admires deeply—and, indeed, what better motive could there be? She is also attuned to the spiritual modalities which shaped the life of this pilgrim of the Absolute. Abhishiktananda’s personal life is portrayed in some detail and the book sheds much light on his hitherto little-known life in France. *The Cave of the Heart* is generously illustrated with many photographs, not only of Abhishiktananda at various stages in his life, but of his family, friends and teachers. The biography is not marred by the heavy-handed and impertinent psychologism which is so much in vogue these days. This highly readable book is written with a light and deft touch, and is burdened with neither unnecessary theological speculation nor pompous academic theorising. In the end, du Boulay is interested not only in the contours of this particular life but in its exemplary significance. Both in his own person and through his writings Abhishiktananda communicated a timeless teaching about the inner unity of all the great religious traditions, a message of the most urgent significance in our own troubled times.

Many years ago, in *Sufi Essays* (1971), Seyyed Hossein Nasr wrote of those vocation it is to provide the keys with which the treasury of wisdom of other traditions can be unlocked, revealing to those who are destined to receive this wisdom the essential unity and universality and at the same time the formal diversity of tradition and revelation. To be sure, Abhishiktananda belonged to this small company. Much of Abhishiktananda’s thought, tempered in the crucible of his Indian experiences, was in accord with the *sophia perennis* which has been so authoritatively expounded in recent times by figures such as René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Frithjof Schuon and Titus Burckhardt. Abhishiktananda did not have recourse to their work and he occasionally succumbed to some of the prejudices of modernity; but he intuitively understood that the surest guides on the spiritual path were the great Scriptures, the teaching and example of the saints and sages, and the religious forms and spiritual practices sanctioned by Tradition. In his case this meant an immersion in both the Gospels and the

Upanishads, a devotion to both the Church Fathers and to his Indian gurus, an unflinching fidelity to his monastic vocation, and an untiring search for the *inner meaning* of the religious rites and disciplines of both Latin Christianity and Saivite Hinduism. He also came to the hard-earned understanding that the necessary formal diversity of religions is complemented by an inner harmony—by what Schuon called ‘the transcendent unity of religions’. As Abhishiktananda wrote in *Saccidananda* (first French edition 1965), ‘...diversity does not mean disunity, once the Centre of all has been reached.’

If pressed for a criticism of du Boulay’s book, one might suggest that this aspect of Abhishiktananda’s life and work is not given the kind of close-grained study which it deserves. It might also be argued that our biographer marvellously evokes the mystical riches of the Catholic tradition but that the further reaches of Hindu spirituality are perhaps sometimes beyond her grasp. But it would be mean-spirited to dwell on those things which the book does not do—let us rather give thanks for its very considerable accomplishments. *The Cave of the Heart* will perform a noble service in bringing the attention of a much wider audience to one of the few spiritual luminaries of recent times. In our own crepuscular era, the story of Abhishiktananda’s life will provide hope, inspiration and guidance for all genuine spiritual wayfarers, no matter on what particular path they are travelling. Here are the closing lines from this fine biography:

Here was someone who risked everything, who reached his goal... Abhishiktananda was a pioneer who had the courage to break boundaries and to forge a path that inspires and illumines people today... Over his sixty-three years he himself was transformed, but the significance of his life has not stopped there. This was a man who joined a small group of people whose lives have changed our perception and reminded us that we are all capable of simply ‘being’ and that the Awakening is there for all of us (p.242).

Surrender and Realisation: Imam Ali on the Conditions for True Religious Understanding

James Morris

Do not seek to know the Truth (*al-Haqq*) according to other people. Rather first come to know the Truth—and only then will you recognise Its people.¹

One of the most striking characteristics about those surviving oral traditions that have come down to us from the earliest periods of each of the world-religions—as with the Gospels, the earliest Buddhist teachings, or the Prophetic hadith—is the distinctive directness, simplicity, and extreme concision of those original oral teachings. It is as though everything else that follows is only a kind of endlessly extended commentary on those few simple words. Certainly this is true of many of the surviving sayings attributed to ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 40/660)—including the short, but highly memorable passage that is the focus of this study, which has inspired repeated commentaries and elaborate theological and even dramatic interpretations down through the centuries.²

The wider significance of this particular passage is that it illustrates so perfectly Ali’s emblematic role as the fountainhead of virtually all the esoteric traditions of Islamic spirituality, both among the many

¹ A well-known saying commonly attributed to Ali, here as cited by al-Ghazali at the beginning of his famous spiritual autobiography, the *Munqidh min al-Daial*.

² Many of these same points were later developed by the famous religious author Ghazali (Abu Hamid al-Ghazali) in the influential closing chapter of his *Mazan al-‘Amal* (‘The Scale of [Right] Action’), translated in our forthcoming volume *Openings: From the Qur’an to the Islamic Humanities*, from which this essay has also been adapted. And already a century before the actual collection of *Nahj al-Balagha*, this same story of Ali and Kumayl provided the architectonic framework for a highly creative dramatic reworking of these spiritual lessons in Ja’far ibn Mansar’s *Kitab al-‘Alim wa’l-ghulam* (see our translation and Arabic edition, *The Master and the Disciple: An Early Islamic Spiritual Dialogue*, London, I. B. Tauris, 2001).

branches of Shiite Islam (which revere him as their first Imam) and throughout the even more numerous Sufi paths, where his name is almost always included as the initial transmitter of the Prophetic *baraka* in each order's chain of transmission. That central initiatic role is beautifully summarised in the famous Prophetic saying: 'I am the city of (divine) Knowing, and Ali is its doorway.' And perhaps the most important literary vehicle in the wider transmission of Ali's teachings, since it has been equally revered by both Sunni and Shiite audiences down to our own time, is the *Nahj al-Balagha* ('Pathway of Eloquence'), a wide-ranging collection of various sermons, letters, and wise sayings attributed to Ali, that was assembled several centuries later by the famous scholar and poet al-Sharif al-Radi (d. 406/1016).³



The famous saying of Ali placed as the epigraph for this study, with which al-Ghazali begins his own spiritual autobiography, highlights the indispensable—if somewhat paradoxical—starting point for any well-grounded discussion of religious and spiritual understanding. For all problems of inter-religious understanding—and perhaps even more important, of that initial “*intra-religious*” understanding on which all further dialogue depends—necessarily come back to this fundamental question of what is the ultimate divine Reality (*al-Haqq*), and how we can come to know and properly conform to what It requires of us (“the Right,” which in Arabic is also an inseparable dimension of the divine *Haqq*)? Almost all the extensive sermons and teachings of the *Nahj al-Balagha* are devoted to one or another of the equally essential dimensions of this question—to that ongoing interaction between our purified actions and intentions (*'amal*), and our maturing spiritual understanding (*'ilm*), which together constitute each person's uniquely individual, spiralling process of spiritual realisation (*tahqiq*).

³ To give some idea of the ongoing popular importance and relative familiarity of that text even today, I have seen beautifully calligraphed Arabic proverbs and epigrams drawn from the *Nahj al-Balagha* on the walls of homes in every part of the Muslim world, framed for sale in suqs and bazaars, and even being sold as postcards. Even more tellingly, the owners (or sellers) of that calligraphy would often explain that this or that saying was simply “a hadith.”

Now one of the most important keys to approaching this primordial question in the *Nahj al-Balagha* is the famous passage (translated in full in the Appendix at the end of this study) describing Ali's intimate advice to one of his closest companions and disciples, Kumayl ibn Ziyad al-Nakha'i.⁴ The difficulty and intrinsic dangers of that unique lesson are emphasized already in its dramatic setting. Kumayl, who recounts the story, stresses the great pains that Ali takes to assure his privacy and solitude, leading his disciple out to the cemetery beyond the city wall of Kufa: that is, to the symbolic home of those who—like those rare true Knowers of God described in the rest of Ali's saying—are spiritually already at once 'alone with God' and 'dead to this world.' In addition, the wider historical setting at that particular moment in time—so full of religious intrigues, claims, betrayals, and prolonged bloody civil wars among the triumphant Arabs—only highlights the profound wealth of concrete earthly experience which underlies Ali's conclusions and intimate teachings summarised in this saying.

No other text of the *Nahj al-Balagha* is so pointedly set in the same kind of strictest privacy and intimacy. As a result, this famous testament to Kumayl constitutes the indispensable link between the more public, relatively exoteric teachings of the *Nahj al-Balagha* and the wealth of more intimate, often esoteric spiritual teachings of Imam Ali that were eventually preserved—at first orally, and eventually often in writing—in both Shiite and Sufi Islamic traditions.

The contents of Ali's lesson to Kumayl are all presented as a clarification of his opening statement that:

There are three sorts of people (with regard to Religion, *al-Din*). A divinely inspired Knower (*'alim rabbani*); the person who is seeking (that true spiritual) Knowing (*muta'allim*) along the path of salvation; and the riffraff and rabble, the followers of every screaming voice, those who bend with every wind, who have not sought to be illuminated by the Light of (divine) Knowing and who have not had recourse to a solid support.

⁴ Saying number 147 in the final section of short maxims, corresponding to pages 600-601 in the complete English translation by Sayed Ali Reza (*Peak of Eloquence*, NY, 1978). Details on the Arabic text in the Appendix below.

In the remainder of his lesson, Ali goes on to explain some of the basic conditions for these three radically different levels of (and potentials for) true religious understanding. Each of his points here—is throughout the *Nahj al-Balagha*—is of course profoundly rooted in the central teachings of the Qur'an. However here we can only summarise his most essential observations in the simplest possible terms.

First, and most importantly, it is human *Hearts* (the Qur'anic *qalb al-insan*) that are the locus of true spiritual “Knowing” (*'ilm*) and of our awareness of God and Truth: that is, it is not simply our mind or intellect or passion. Hence the decisive practical importance, throughout the *Nahj al-Balagha*, of Ali's constant stress on the purification of our hearts, through inner surrender to the divine Will (*taslim*), as the underlying *spiritual* purpose of the many divine commandments. Divine, inspired “Knowing,” however it is outwardly acquired, can only be perceived as such by the Heart that has been “polished,” emptied of this world's distractions and attachments, and thereby opened up to the full significance and reality of the divine Word—and to the further rights and obligations (another dimension of the Arabic *al-Haqq*) flowing from that opening.

Second, the practically indispensable key to this human potential for religious Knowing is the real existence and efforts of a limited number of divinely guided individuals—again, not of particular books, rituals, doctrines or worldly institutions, none of which are even mentioned in this intimate, highly personal lesson. Ali refers here to those very special human doorways to true religious understanding by several profoundly significant Qur'anic expressions: the “divine Knowers”; the “Friends of God” (*awliya' Allah*); God's “Proofs” or “Clear Signs” on Earth (*hujja, bayyina*); God's “True Servants” (*'ibad Allah*); and finally as God's true earthly “stand-ins” or “Stewards” (*khalifat Allah*).

The Imam tells us several other very important things in his description of these true “Friends of God”:

- They are always present on earth, “whether openly or in secret.”⁵

⁵ It is perhaps important to note that this last qualification (*sirr^{an}*, “secretly”) can be understood to refer not simply to the outward modesty and relative social and historical “invisibility” of the vast majority of the true “Friends of God”—a point also strongly

- They are directly inspired by the divine Spirit of Certainty (*ruh al yaqin*).
- Therefore they pre-eminently possess true spiritual Insight (*haqiqat al-basara*) into the deeper spiritual realities underlying earthly events and experiences, into the actual meanings of the infinite divine “signs” constituting our existence.
- Their spiritual task and mission on earth is to pass on this divine Knowing to those properly qualified souls who are truly ready for and receptive to their divinely inspired teachings.

In contrast to these particular points of ‘Ali’s teaching here, it is surely essential to recall all those manifold dimensions of what we ordinarily, unthinkingly call or presume to be “religion” which in fact are *not* central to the particular divine mission of these inspired individuals as it is described in this lesson.

Third, Ali describes the divine “Knowing” that can be conveyed uniquely by these specially missioned individuals as having the following qualities:

- It is the ‘*Din* (true Religion/true Justice) by which God is truly worshipped and served.’
- It is the indispensable key to realising what the Qur’an constantly describes as our ultimate human purpose: i.e., to transforming the mortal biped or “human-animal” (*bashar*) into the theomorphic, truly human being (*insan*), who alone can freely follow and truly obey God (the inner state of *ita’a*), eventually becoming a pure manifestation of the divine Will.
- Their divinely inspired Knowing is the true “Judge” or Criterion for rightly perceiving and employing all the illusory possessions (*mal*) of this world .

Fourth, the “true Seekers” (*muta’allimun*) of that divine Knowing have at least the following basic pre-requisites, each of which

emphasised in the famous Prophetic hadith about the qualities of the *wali*—but also to their ongoing *spiritual* presence, actions and effects, even more visible and widespread long after their bodily sojourn on earth, which is of course central to the manifest spiritual role of the prophets and “Friends” (*awliya’ Allah*) throughout every authentic religious tradition.

distinguishes them from the large majority of ordinary souls (*al-nas*).

One might therefore say that each of these following five points mentioned by Ali here is in itself an essential pre-condition for acquiring true religious understanding:

- Those true religious Seekers have a rare natural spiritual capacity to recognise, absorb, and actualise the inspired teachings of the Friends of God.
- They know that they need the indispensable guidance of God’s Friends (the *awliya*’), and therefore actively seek it out. That is to say, they actually realise that they are spiritually ‘ignorant’ and needy.
- They are willing and able to submit to the guidance of those divine Knowers and Bearers of Truth, especially with regard to acknowledging the true, ultimate aims of this inspired spiritual Knowing. In other words, they have the indispensable humility to recognise their inner ignorance and to overcome the central spiritual obstacle of pride.
- They have the practical insight and active spiritual perspicacity (*basara*) to “see through” the ongoing divine “private lessons,” the most essential divine “signs” (*ayat*) of each soul’s life. (This particular point is one that Ali especially stresses throughout all the sermons and teachings of the *Nahj al-Balagha*.)
- They are not secretly governed by their desires for power and domination, qualities which Ali stresses (along with pride) as the particular psychic passions most likely to trip up the otherwise apt potential spiritual seekers of this group.

Finally, the rest of humanity are clearly—indeed even vehemently—said to lack, for the time being, the above-mentioned prerequisites for realised spiritual learning and illumination, because of the current domination of their hearts by their psychic passions of the *nafs*: for power, pleasure, possessions, and the attractions ‘this lower world’ (*al-dunya*) in general. In this particular context, Ali does not openly clarify whether or not “purification” of our hearts from such worldly passions is in itself the only obstacle to deeper spiritual and religious realisation, or whether some individuals are simply born with dramatically greater, relatively unique spiritual capacities and potential. However, his

recurrent and insistent practical stress on the ethically purifying dimensions of Islamic ritual and devotional practice throughout much of the rest of the *Nahj al-Balagha* is a strong indication that revealed prescriptions for religious teaching and practice can and should be understood as well as an indispensable preparatory discipline that can be used to move at least some individuals toward the receptive inner state of these true “seekers.”

Now the practical consequences of all of Ali’s observations briefly enumerated here are quite visible in the particular structure and emphases of almost all his longer sermons and discourses throughout the *Nahj al-Balagha*. To put it in the simplest possible form, each longer text in that work typically stresses the dual religious dimensions of both *taslim* (‘surrender’) and *tahqiq* (‘realisation’).⁶ That is, almost all of Imam Ali’s teachings are directed at the same time toward both (1) the essential purification of our own will—i.e., the discovery and gradual distillation of the true human/divine *irada* from the endless promptings of our domineering ego-self or *nafs*—through true inner conformity and surrender (*taslim*) to the authentic divine commandments; and (2) the subsequent stage of more active “realisation” (*tahqiq*) of the divinely inspired teachings that can only come about when an individual has developed enough humility and inner awareness of their spiritual ignorance to recognise their unavoidable need for a divine Guide and Knower, along with the many other essential qualities of the ‘seeker on the path of salvation’ that have just been summarised above. From this perspective, all of the *Nahj al-Balagha* constitutes an extended, lifelong example of the sort of essential spiritual teaching and guidance (*ta’lim*) alluded to here in Ali’s private advice to his close disciple.



In conclusion, we cannot help but notice that Ali’s remarks to Kumayl ibn Ziyad here provide a radical contrast to many prevailing modern-day assumptions about “religious understanding” and religious teaching, whether our focus happens to be on inter- or intra-religious concerns. Here I can mention only a few of the most salient points of contrast

⁶ See the more adequate discussion of this key polyvalent term in our Introduction to *Orientations: Islamic Thought in a World Civilization*, London: Archetype, 2004.

between popular contemporary conceptions of inter-religious understanding and Imam Ali's own teachings on this subject, without entering into a more detailed discussion of the deeper philosophic underpinnings and presuppositions on either side.

To begin with, the primary focus of most modern attempts at inter-religious understanding is either intellectual and theological, where formal doctrines and religious symbols are concerned; or else on "social ethics," where certain historically accumulated external practical precepts and rituals of two religious traditions are being compared. In either case, the particular comparison (or "understanding") of the religious traditions concerned is typically carried out in an external, reductive social, historical or political way that supposedly reveals the "real," common meanings and functions of the religious phenomena in question. In this widespread approach, the aims of those particular practical or theological dimensions of a given religion are usually reduced, explicitly or implicitly, to a given, presumably familiar and universally accessible set of historical, this-worldly (*dunyawa*) social, political, or even psychic ends.

What is key in each such case, of course, is the reductive, socio-political emphasis and assumptions shared by virtually all such modern approaches. Now no rational observer would deny that every historical religion does indeed 'function' in such ways in this world—in ways that are in fact so poignantly illustrated by the endless "religious" polemics, strife, and open civil warfare of early Islamic history during Ali's own lifetime, seminal events that are recorded in such thorough detail throughout the *Nahj al-Balagha*. But modern writers unfortunately too often tend to ignore the equally obvious limits of such reductive forms of interpretation and understanding: what is it, one might ask all the same, that also differentiates, for example, a genuine Sufi *tariqa* from a social club, real spiritual guidance from psychiatry, or transformative spiritual music (*dhikr* and *sama'* in their primordial sense) from any other concert performance?

In dramatic contrast to such popular contemporary approaches to "religious understanding," Ali's remarks in this passage focus on radically different, spiritually distinctive and difficultly attainable—but nonetheless fundamental—aspects of religious life and understanding, whatever the particular historical traditions in question:

First, for Imam Ali, true inter-religious understanding—at any of the three levels he distinguishes here—is always *between individuals*, growing out of each soul’s individual encounter with the “other” and their common spiritual reality and relationship with *al-Haqq* (God, Reality, and Truth). From this perspective, therefore, true religious understanding is always the ultimate fruit of a sort of “*tri-ologue*”—not a worldly dialogue—in which both the human parties, the Knower and the properly prepared disciple, share and gradually discover their common divine Ground of reality and true being.

Secondly, the possibilities of religious understanding (again whether inter- or intra-religious) are essentially limited above all by the intrinsic barrier of the specific spiritual capacities, shortcomings and level of realisation of each individual. As in the familiar imagery of so many hadith and later Islamic writings, souls here are indeed revealed as *mirrors*, who can only see in the “other”—whether that be a religious phenomenon or anything else—their own reflection. Therefore the basharic “rabble” of whom Ali speaks so painfully here—whatever their particular religion or historical situation—are necessarily and unavoidably in the position so aptly described in Rumi’s famous tale of the blind men and the elephant.

Thirdly, for Ali, even the first beginnings of our approach to a true, immediate awareness of God and the divine Religion (*din*) are necessarily grounded above all in humility, in an awareness of one’s own essential spiritual ignorance and limitations—and therefore not in the acquisition of some further external form of knowledge, ritual, or belief. In other words, the greatest, primordial obstacle to any serious religious understanding—as Socrates and so many other inspired teachers have repeatedly reminded us down through the ages—is our own “compound ignorance” (*jahl murakkab*), our own illusion that we truly “know” so much that we in fact only believe or imagine.

Finally, if Ali teaches us—as this story itself so dramatically illustrates—that the keys to the deepest and most profound forms of religious understanding are to be found in seeking out God’s true “Knowers” and Guides and our own intimate spiritual relation to them, then the corresponding area of human religious life and experience most likely to lead to genuine inter-religious understanding is that of our particular individual devotional life and prayer, of each soul’s unique, ongoing inner relationship with its Guide and source of Light, in what

has traditionally been termed “practical spirituality” (*irfan-i ‘amala*). Not surprisingly, this domain of our personal spiritual experience and practice, where God is so obviously and unavoidably the ultimate “Actor” and Creator, in reality exhibits an extraordinary phenomenological similarity across all external historical and credal boundaries and socio-political divisions....

These brief reflections on some of the central teachings of the *Nahj al-Balagha* cannot help but remind us of one of the most remarkable Qur’anic verses on the subject of humankind’s recurrent religious misunderstandings and their ultimate resolution in and by the Truly Real (*al-Haqq*). Not surprisingly, this verse also serves well as a remarkable symbolic allusion to the strife-torn historical events and conflicts among the early Muslims, those critical, paradigmatic “tests” (*fitan*) that are so vividly illustrated and evoked throughout the remainder of the *Nahj al-Balagha*—and which continue to recur, with such poignancy, in our own and every age.

The verse in question (*al-Baqara, 213*) begins with the reminder that ‘*all people were one religious community,*’ but then:

God sent prophets bearing good news and warning, and He revealed through them the Scripture with Truth (*Haqq*), so that He might judge among the people concerning that about which they differed. And only those differed concerning It to whom (the Scripture) was brought, after the Clear Proofs came to them, out of strife and rebellion among themselves. But then God guided those who had faith to the Truth about which they had differed, through His permission. For God guides whoever He wishes to a Straight Path!

Appendix: Ali's Speech to Kumayl ibn Ziyad al-Nakha'i⁷

Kumayl ibn Ziyad said: The Commander of the Faithful—Peace be upon him!—took my hand and brought me out to the cemetery (beyond the city walls). So when he had entered the desert he let out a great sigh, and then he said:

O Kumayl ibn Ziyad, these Hearts are containers: the best of them is the one that holds the most. So remember well what I am going to say to you!

The people are (divided into) three groups: a lordly (divinely inspired) Knower⁸; one seeking Knowing along the path of salvation; and the riffraff and rabble, the followers of every screaming voice, those who bend with every wind, who have not sought to be illuminated by the Light of Knowing and who have not had recourse to a solid Support.

O Kumayl, Knowing is better than possessions: Knowing protects you, but you must guard possessions. Possessions are diminished as they're spent, but Knowing multiplies (or "purifies") as it is shared. But whoever makes the possessions disappears as they do!

O Kumayl ibn Ziyad, the awareness/recognition (*ma'rifa*) of Knowing is a Religion (*din*) by which (God) is worshipped and served: through it the truly human being (*insan*) acquires willing obedience (to God) during their life (here), and a beautiful, wonderful state after their passing away. For Knowing is the Judge, and possessions are what is adjudged!

⁷ This particular well-known passage from *Nahj al-Balagha*, the famous later compilation (by al-Sharif al-Radi, 359/970-406/1016) of the many letters, teachings, sermons and proverbs attributed to Ali ibn Abu Talib, is also included in almost identical form in a number of earlier extant Shiite works, in both the Imami and the Ismaili traditions. The text translated here is from a popular Beirut edition of *Nahj al-Balagha* (Dar al-Andalus, 1980), pp. 593-595, numbered 147 in the long later section of 'Wise Sayings' (*hikam*). The setting of this particular lesson is apparently outside the new Arab settlement of Kufa (on the edge of the desert in southern Iraq), during one of the drawn-out, bloody civil wars that divided the nascent Muslim community throughout the period of Ali's Imamate.

⁸ *Alim rabbani*: "Knower" here is used in the strong and inclusive Qur'anic sense, to refer to profound, God-given spiritual Knowing ('*ilm*'). The qualifier recalls the Qur'anic term *rabbaniyun* and apparently is related both to the Arabic root referring to God as "Lord" (*rabb*, hence "divine" or "god-like"), and to another Arabic root referring to spiritual *teaching* and education in the very broadest sense (*r-b-y*). The latter meaning is emphasized at Qur'an 3:79, which probably underlies the special usage here: ...*Be rabbaniyun through your teaching the Book and through your studying (It)*.

O Kumayl, those who accumulate possessions have perished, even while they are still alive. But the Knowers endure for all eternity: their particular-instances⁹ are lost, but their likenesses are found in the Hearts. O what Knowledge abounding there is *right here!*—and he pointed with his hand to his breast¹⁰—if only I could reach those who are its (rightful) bearers.

True, I've reached a quick-learner who couldn't be trusted with It, who would seek to use the instrument of Religion for this world—who would try to use God's blessings to dominate His (true) servants and His proofs to overcome His Friends.¹¹ Or someone submissive to the bearers of the divine Truth (*al-Haqq*), but without any true Insight (*basara*) into Its twists and curves, whose Heart is consumed by doubt at the first onset of some difficulty. But alas, neither this one nor that (can truly bear the Truth)! Or someone greedy for pleasures, easily led by their passions? Or someone engrossed in acquiring and accumulating (worldly possessions)? Those two are not among the guardians¹² of Religion in any respect—the closest semblance to that sort are the grazing cattle! Thus Knowing dies with the death of those who bear it.

Yet indeed, O my God, the world is never without one upholding the Evidence¹³ for God, either outwardly and known to all, or secretly and in obscurity,¹⁴ so that God's Evidences and His illuminating-manifestations may not come to nought. But how many are these, and where are they!?

⁹A 'yan (pl. of 'ayn): that is, their individual, temporal earthly manifestation, as opposed to their "images" or "likenesses" (*amthal*, or "symbols") in the Hearts of other human individuals after them. Here we can see how Ali's perspective parallels—and at the same time embodies—the Qur'anic understanding of the relationship between the archetypal divine "Names" (which ultimately constitute this Knowing) and their infinitely re-created individual manifestations.

¹⁰ Here, as in the Qur'an, the term "breast" or "chest" (*sadr*) is virtually synonymous with the "Heart" (*qalb*) as the locus of *all* true perception, selfhood, etc.

¹¹ *Awliya' Allah*: see the Qur'anic use of this key term (10:62).

¹² Or "shepherds," "pastors": *ru'at*.

¹³ Or "Proof" (*al-Hujja*)—but in the sense of the indisputable living human *Manifestation*, not any sort of logical or rhetorical "argument"; this is another central Qur'anic concept (4:165, 6:149) frequently alluded to in other teachings of Imam 'Ali in the *Nahj al-Bahagha*. The Qur'anic expression *bayyinat* ("Illuminating-manifestations") used several times in the immediately following passage seems to refer to the same key spiritual figures in this context.

¹⁴ Literally, "*in fear*" (used in the Qur'an, for example, of the young Moses fleeing Egypt for Midian) and "*submerged*" (by the power of earthly tyranny).

By God, these (true Knowers) are the fewest in number, but the greatest of all in their rank with God! Through them God preserves His Evidences and His Illuminating-manifestations, so that these (Knowers) may entrust them to their (true) peers and sow them in the Hearts of those like them. Through (those Knowers) Knowing penetrates to the inner reality of true Insight (*haqiqat al-basara*). They are in touch with the Spirit of Certainty (*ruh al-yaqin*). They make clear what the lovers of comfort had obscured. They are at home with what distresses the ignorant. And their bodies keep company with this world, while their spirits are connected to the Loftiest Station.

Those are the ones who are (truly) *God's Stewards*¹⁵ on the earth, who are calling (the people) to *His Religion*. Oh, how I long to see them! Go on now, Kumayl, if you want.

¹⁵ This famous Qur'anic phrase (*khalifat Allah*) is variously applied to prophets (Adam, at 2:30; David, at 38:27) and to "you-all" (= all of humanity), at 6:165, 10:14 and 73; 35:39; 27:62; etc. Within a short time after the death of the Prophet—and certainly by the time of this story—it had taken on a highly charged and disputed political significance in the long and violent decades of protracted civil wars over the worldly leadership of the nascent Arab-Muslim political community.

