

Withdrawal, Extinction and Creation

Christ's *kenosis* in light of the Judaic doctrine of *tsimtsum*
and the Islamic doctrine of *fanā*.

© 2007 Timothy Scott

Published in *The Essential Sophia*, World Wisdom, 2006.

(originally published in *Sophia* 7.2, 2001).

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

St. Augustine, *Enarration on Psalm 30:3*

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

Hadīth qudsī

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

St. Paul, *Romans* 9:3

Blessed are the poor in spirit.

Gospel of Matthew 5:3

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

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

of *Nirvāna*, demonstrating the essential unity of East and West wherever Truth is at issue.

The *Tsimtsum*

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

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

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

² *Exodus Rabba* 25.10; *Leviticus Rabba* 23. 24.

³ Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York: Schocken Books, 1995, p.261.

for Being of not being: ‘It is in order not to be, that Being incarnates in the multitude of souls; it is in order not to be, that the ocean squanders itself in myriad flecks of foam.’⁵

Non-existence must not be confused with the “Divine Nothingness,” a term that alludes to the unknowable transcendence of the Divine Infinitude.⁶ The Divine Nothingness is not non-existence; it is the All-Possibility of Beyond-Being, in which Existence is virtually prefigured and from which Existence is potentially born.⁷ As Plotinus says, ‘It is precisely because there is nothing within the One that all things are from it.’⁸ All-Possibility includes, by definition, the paradoxical possibilities of both Being and Its contrary Non-Being.⁹ According to Parmenides ‘being is and nothing is not’¹⁰. The *Chāndogya Upanishad* examines the question of non-existence, *asat*, in detail with the sage Aruni maintaining the absurdity of the “existence” of non-existence.¹¹ However, the conclusions of both Parmenides and Aruni are more complex than they might first appear. Plato speaks of the

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

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

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

⁷ Schuon says of the Infinite that ‘it is in the first place Potentiality or Possibility as such, and *ipso facto* the Possibility of things, hence Virtuality’ (*Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*, 2000, p.15). Schuon’s use of the term Potentiality is unfortunate if viewed in a strictly Aristotelian sense where the transference from potentiality to actuality is predicated upon the prior reality of an ever actual principle. Thus it would seem more satisfactory to refer to the Infinite as Actuality, in the sense of *the Actual* or the Real. For the sake of precision, one can, as Guénon does, distinguish between the terms “possibility”, “virtuality” and “potentiality”. Thus, possibility primarily refers to the Infinite; virtuality refers to principal Being; potentiality refers to the aptitude of virtual existence to manifest *in actu*, and thus properly to the indefinite. Possibility can be referred to at each level by transposition. However, this does not work in reverse, for it cannot be said of the divine order that it is potential. As Guénon says, ‘there can be nothing potential in the divine order. It is only from the side of the individual being and in relation to it that potentiality can be spoken of in this context. Pure potentiality is the absolute indifferenciation of *materia prima* in the Aristotelian sense, identical to the indistinction of the primordial chaos’ (*Fundamental Symbols*, Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1995, p.300, n.37). Potentiality refers to a change in state and thus to a lack: God lacks nothing.

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

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

¹⁰ Parmenides *Frag.* 6.

¹¹ *Chāndogya Upanishad* 6.2.1-2.

“irrationality” of “not-being”: ‘You understand then that it is really impossible to speak of not-being or to say anything about it or to conceive it by itself, but it is inconceivable, not to be spoken of or mentioned, and irrational.’¹² Non-being is not. This is a logical truth. Nevertheless, as Ibn al-‘Arabī says, ‘It is part of the perfection of Being that there is imperfection in it.’¹³ Schuon: ‘The All-Possibility must by definition and on pain of contradiction include its own impossibility.’¹⁴ This is also a logical truth and at the same time a paradox.

The distinction between Beyond-Being and Being is that which exists in the Hindu tradition between the distinction in the Hindu tradition of *nirguna brahman* (unqualified *brahman*) and *saguna brahman* (qualified *brahman*). Kenneth Oldmeadow sees here ‘a principle analogous to Meister Eckhart’s distinction between god (the ontological, Being dimension of the Absolute; *Īśvara*) and the God-head (the Absolute, Beyond-Being, unqualified; *Brahman*).’¹⁵ In Islam the parallel ideas of Beyond-Being and Non-Being are found in the term *al-‘udum*. Titus Burckhardt observes that in Sufism this expression includes ‘on the one hand the positive sense of non-manifestation, of a principial state beyond existence or even beyond Being, and on the other hand a negative sense of privation, of relative nothingness.’¹⁶ Meister Eckhart: ‘If I say: “God is a being,” it is not true; he is a being transcending being and a transcending nothingness.’¹⁷ To say “Non-Being” is to qualify this with reference to Being; it may be better to say “Beyond-Being” in an attempt to indicate the principial nature of this. In Kabbalah, Beyond-Being is explained metaphorically as Negative Existence. It is said that there are three veils of “negative existence” that serve as the negative background to the positive universe.¹⁸ This schema is a symbolic attempt to explain the ineffable, and it carries the recognition of its own

¹² *Sophist* 238 c.

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

¹⁴ Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, London: Perennial Books, 1987, p.102. Schuon again: ‘Nothing is external to absolute Reality; the world is therefore a kind of internal dimension of *Brahman*. But *Brahman* is without relativity; thus the world is a necessary aspect of the absolute necessity of *Brahman*. Put in an other way, relativity is an aspect of the Absolute. Relativity, *Māyā*, is the *Shakti* of the Absolute, *Brahman*. If the relative did not exist, the Absolute would not be the Absolute’ (*Language of the Self*, Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1999, p.28).

¹⁵ Oldmeadow, ‘Śankara’s Doctrine of *Māyā*’: *Asian Philosophy*, Vol.2, No.2, 1992, p.140.

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

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

limitation. Z'ev ben Shimon Halevi, a contemporary exponent of Kabbalah, expresses the development of manifest Existence thus,

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

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

God withdraws Himself into Himself thereby allowing an empty “primordial space” into which “that which is not God” can come into being. The notion of an “empty primordial space” refers to the Divine Void which, from another perspective, is the Divine Plenum. According to the *Mahā-Prajñāpāramitā-Hrdaya*: ‘Form (*rūpa*) is emptiness (*śūnyatā*), and emptiness is not different from form, nor is form different from emptiness: indeed emptiness is form.’²¹ Again, Nāgārjuna observes that ‘There is nothing that distinguishes *samsāra* from *nirvāna*’²². Schuon: ‘the Bodhisattva, since he realizes the “emptiness” of things, thereby also realizes the “emptiness” of the *samsāra* as such and at the same time its *nirvānic* quality. If on the one hand all is “emptiness,” on the other hand all is *Nirvāna*, the Buddhist notion of vacuity being at one and the same time negative and positive’²³. In the words of the sixth Chinese patriarch, Hui-neng: ‘When you hear me speak about void, do not fall into the idea that I mean vacuity...The illimitable void of the universe is capable of holding myriads of things of various shapes and forms’²⁴.

The Divine Nothingness becomes “pregnant with Nothing.” This phrase comes from Meister Eckhart who spoke of a “waking dream” that appeared to a man in which ‘he

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

¹⁹ Halevi, *Adam and the Kabbalistic Tree*, 1974, p.15

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

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

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

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

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

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

²⁴ Goddard, *A Buddhist Bible*, cited in Govinda, *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*, 1969, p.117-18.

²⁵ Meister Eckhart, Sermon 19 (*Meister Eckhart Sermons & Treatises (3 Vols.)*, (tr.) Walshe, Dorset: Element Books, 1987, *Vol.1*, pp.157-158).

²⁶ Meister Eckhart, Sermon 4 (Walshe, *Vol.1*, 1987, p.43).

²⁷ In the end, as Ibn al-‘Arabī says, ‘it is not a question of “becoming one” with God or the Godhead, rather becoming conscious of the Divine Unity which is’ (uncited reference in Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.170).

²⁸ Schaya, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, 1971, p.65.

²⁹ Schaya, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, 1971, p.65.

you think you can't feel Him and are wholly empty of Him, that is not the case. For if there were anything empty under heaven, whatever it might be, great or small, the heavens would either draw it up to themselves or else, bending down, would fill it themselves.³⁰

Scholem also recognizes the use of parental symbolism when he sees a parallel between the *reshimu* and the “Sonship” of the Gnostic Basilides (c.124 A.D.).³¹ The *reshimu* is the “child” or “seed” of the Infinite. In the *Zohar* this seed or “first point” is variously expressed by the symbols of a “spark, a drop, a stone.”³² In the Vedantic tradition this is the *bindu*.³³ Lama Anagarika Govinda observes the word “*bindu*” as having many meanings, like “point, dot, zero, drop, germ, seed, semen,” etc..³⁴ Alain Daniélou observes the *bindu* or “Point-Limit” as identical with the Self (*Ātman*).³⁵ The *bindu* is the “determinant of space” from which manifestation begins.³⁶ This seed is simultaneously the first Point, the Centre and the “container” of ontological Existence. The entirety of Universal Existence resides in this seed germ: ‘Just as the whole nature of the large banyan tree is contained in its tiny seed, so also the whole universe, moving and unmoving, is contained in the word-seed “*Rāma*.”’³⁷ Similarly, Sri Ramana Maharshi says: ‘The entire Universe is condensed in the body, and the entire body in the Heart. Thus the heart is the nucleus of the whole Universe.’³⁸ Again, according to the famous *hadīth qudsī*: ‘My earth and My heaven contain Me not, but the heart of My faithful servant containeth Me.’³⁹ This idea is expressed beautifully by the third patriarch of the Dhyana school of Chinese Buddhism, Seng-ts’an, who says: ‘The very small is as the very large when boundaries are forgotten; / The very large is as the very small when its outlines are not seen.’⁴⁰ Pseudo-Dionysius quotes Batholomew in saying that ‘the Word of God is vast and

³⁰ Meister Eckhart, Sermon 4 (Walshe, *Vol.1*, 1987, p.44).

³¹ Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 1995, p.261.

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

³³ On the *bindu* see Daniélou, *The Gods of India*, New York: Inner Traditions, 1985; in the Tibetan tradition see Lama Govinda, *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*, 1969.

³⁴ Lama Govinda, *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*, 1969, p.116.

³⁵ Daniélou, *The Gods of India*, 1985, p.50.

³⁶ Daniélou, *The Gods of India*, 1985, p.203.

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

³⁸ Ramana Maharshi, *Talks With Sri Ramana Maharshi Vol.3*, 1955, p.247, cited in Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2000, p.826.

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

⁴⁰ Cited in Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.826.

minuscule'⁴¹. 'He that is the least among you all, he is the greatest.'⁴² To use Pascal's terminology, this seed or point is both the "infinitely small" and the "infinitely big."

The seed as "container of the Universe" is found with the Christian symbolism of the "mustard seed". 'The kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the biggest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air can come and shelter in its branches'.⁴³ In Chinese mythology, *Sumeru*, the Cosmic Mountain (*imago mundi*) is also found contained within a mustard seed.⁴⁴ The *Chāndogya Upanishad* describes the *Ātman* in terms familiar to the Christian mustard seed: 'This *Ātman*, which dwells in the heart, is smaller than a grain of rice, smaller than a grain of 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 *Ātman*, which dwells in the heart, is also greater than the earth [the sphere of gross manifestation], greater than the atmosphere [the sphere of subtle manifestation], greater than the sky [the sphere of formless manifestation], greater than all the worlds together [that is, beyond all manifestation, being the unconditioned].'⁴⁵ René Guénon remarks that the 'Divine Principle which resides at the centre of the being is represented in the Hindu doctrine as a grain or seed (*dhātu*), as a germ (*bija*), because in a way it is in this being only virtually so long as "Union"⁴⁶ has not actually been realized.'⁴⁷

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

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

⁴³ Mt.13:31-32; Mk.4:30-32; Lk.13:18-19. See Guénon, *Man and his Becoming According To The Vedānta*, New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint, 1981, p.41, n.1; 'The Mustard Seed', *Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, Ch.74.

⁴⁴ *His-yu Chi*, see Yu, *The Journey West (4 Vols.)*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, *Vol. I*, p.180, & n.3.

⁴⁵ *Chāndogya Upanishad* 3.14.3. (The inserted comments are Guénon's, *Man and his Becoming*, 1981, p.41).

⁴⁶ Schuon writes: "'Union' (*yoga*): the Subject (*Atmā*) becomes object (the Veda, the *Dharma*) in order that the object (the objectivized subject, man) may be able to become the (absolute) Subject.' (*Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.109).

⁴⁷ Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, p.300. Guénon adds this note: 'We say "virtually" rather than "potentially", because there can be nothing potential in the divine order. It is only from the side of the individual being and in relation to it that potentiality can be spoken of in this context. Pure potentiality is the absolute indifferentiation of *materia prima* in the Aristotelian sense, identical to the indistinction of the primordial chaos.'

The *tsimtsum* is the “unveiling of God in Himself and by Himself.”⁴⁸ Schuon recognizes several expressions of this kind. Ibn al-‘Arabī: ‘According to *Risālat al-Ahadiyah*, “He [the Absolute; *Brahman*] sent His ipseity [the Self; *Ātman*] by Himself from Himself to Himself”.⁴⁹ The *tsimtsum* is the withdrawal of Divine Being (*Ousia* or *hyperousia*), the Substance of God, which, by inverse analogy, is the Infinite Essence of Being or Universal Existence.⁵⁰ This withdrawal allows the night of Divine Nothingness in which Cosmic Existence is concentrated at the *reshimu* (which is itself the Infinite Essence of Being) and born, “outside God.” In this manner the *tsimtsum* does, with the midrash it derives from, express the “concentration” of *En Sof* (the Infinite) at the principal point. Schaya says that ‘thanks to the divine “contraction” and to the void it brings about in the *Shekhinah*, the expansion of the world takes place’. He continues, ‘everything living in the immanence of God is a small world created in the image of the macrocosm.⁵¹ it is a void to which life is given by a luminous “residue” [*reshimu*] of the only reality, by a central and divine “spark” that projects onto it the reflection of some eternal archetype.’⁵²

The *reshimu* is the mysterious interface between Transcendence and Immanence, where the term “mysterious” is used according to its root meaning of “silence,” for this is precisely beyond rational language.⁵³ In Kabbalah this “mystery” is also expressed through the Holy of Holies. Again, the *reshimu* is the “spark” (*vünkeîn*) that lights existence, a symbol favoured by Meister Eckhart; it is the “something in the soul” that Meister Eckhart spoke of as being “uncreated” and “not capable of creation,” which is nevertheless the principle of creation.⁵⁴ In Islam this mysterious interface is expressed by *al-barzakh*, the isthmus or mediating principle mentioned in Surah *al-Rahman* (The Merciful).⁵⁵ Schuon observes of the *barzakh* that it is ‘a

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

⁴⁹ Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, 1965, p.97, n.2. The insertions are mine. The *Risālat al-Ahadiyah* or ‘The Epistle of the Unity’ is a treatise probably by Muhyī al-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī.

⁵⁰ The Greek word *ousia*, as with the symbolism of the Aramaic letter *ayn*, connotes the ideas of both “substance” and “essence”. On *ousia* see Burckhardt, *Alchemy*, Baltimore: Penguin, 1974, p.36, n.3; on *ayn* see again Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, 1976, p.62, n.1.

⁵¹ As the Sufis say: ‘*Al-kawnu insanun kabirun wa-l-insanu kawnun saghir*’ (‘The universe is a big man and man is a little universe’).

⁵² Schaya, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, 1971, p.65.

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

⁵⁴ See Sermons 13, 48, among others.

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

dividing line between two domains [which] line appears, from the standpoint of each side, to belong to the other side.’⁵⁶

The cosmogonic act of *tsimtsum* entails the “retraction” of the Divine Infinity so as to allow creation of “one that is another” or, in other words, the Relative. According to the symbolism of Kabbalah, the Divine Infinity is the Infinite Mercy of God, in Islam, *ar-Rahmān*. The *tsimtsum* is the limiting action of Divine Judgment or Severity upon this infinite Mercy. According to the symbolism of the Sefirot, the “lightning strike” of creation passes from *Binah* (the Upper Mother) through *Hesed* (Abraham; Mercy) before progressing through *Din* (Isaac; Judgment). Mercy and Judgment are balanced in the creative heart of *Tiferet* (Jacob; Beauty). In the Talmud the Creator explains, ‘If I create the world only with the attribute of mercy, sins will multiply beyond all bounds; if I create it only with the attribute of justice, how can the world last? Behold, I will create it with both attributes; would that it might endure!’⁵⁷

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

Corresponding to and simultaneous with the withdrawal of the *tsimtsum*, the Infinite Essence acts upon virtual Substance actualizing the potentiality of onto-cosmological Existence.⁵⁸ The cosmological emanation into the “night of Nothingness” is the realization or actualization of virtual Substance within the infinity of Divine Substance. The act of Manifestation is a “limitation,” to speak paradoxically, on the Divine Infinity. ‘To say manifestation’ remarks Schuon, ‘is to say limitation.’⁵⁹ In

⁵⁶ Schuon, *In The Face Of The Absolute*, Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1989, p.187.

⁵⁷ *Genesis Rabba* 22.15.

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

⁵⁹ Schuon, *In the Face of the Absolute*, 1989, p.35.

the final analysis, this “limitation” is merely the illusion of limitation as viewed from the perspective, illusory of itself, of the Relative.

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

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

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

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

⁶² Guénon, *The Great Triad*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1994, p.47. Guénon observes these “powers” as the properties of the “two keys” common in various traditions. Of these keys one is gold, referring to spiritual authority, and one silver, referring to temporal authority. These are the two authorities united in the figure of Melchizedek in Hebraic tradition. In the Roman tradition these two keys are the attributes of Janus. See Guénon, *ibid.* p.47-48; *Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, Chs.20, 39, 60, 70 (‘Bonds and Knots’); Coomaraswamy, ‘Svayāmatrīna: Janua Coeli’: *Selected Papers* Vol.1 ‘Traditional Art and Symbolism’ (ed.) Roger Lipsey, Surrey: Princeton University Press, 1989.

⁶³ Guénon, *The Great Triad*, 1994, pp.41-42.

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

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

The “indefinite Breath” is the Relative in comparison to the “infinite Breath,” which we may here liken to the Absolute. The Absolute must by definition and on pain of contradiction include the Relative. However this distinction between Absolute and Relative is only legitimate from the perspective of the Relative and then only as an “illusion.” As this is a “distinction” it is necessarily prefigured *in divinis* by the differentiation between the ‘Absolute as such and the Absolute relativized in view of a dimension of its Infinitude’⁶⁶. In reality the Absolute is “without a second.” All

⁶⁴ See Ibn al-‘Arabi, *Fusūs* (1980, p.190).

⁶⁵ Ibn al-‘Arabi, *Fusūs* (1980, p.189).

⁶⁶ Schuon, *In The Face Of The Absolute*, 1989, p.73.

dualities are complementarities expressing the vicissitudes of a multivalent singularity. In the final analysis the illusory duality of all complementarities dissolves in the Unity of the Absolute.

Christ's *Kenosis*

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

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

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

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

The Godhead (*Gottheit*), as Meister Eckhart teaches, is the Absolute, in relation to God (*Gott*), the principle of Universal Existence and, hence, strictly the Relative. The Godhead expresses the Absolute in Its three essential natures as Absolute (Father),

⁶⁷ 1Jn.5:7.

Infinite (Son) and Good (the Holy Spirit). The Absolute is by definition Infinite, comprising the Infinite Substance or All-Possibility, which is the Divine Perfection or the Good. The Son is here recognized as the Infinite, inasmuch as Christ is the Word, the Divine Substance. The Holy Spirit is the Good inasmuch as it is the projection of the Absolute into Relativity which achieves the perfection of the Infinite. However, we could equally say that the Son is the Good inasmuch as it is in Him that Relativity is actualized, or “made flesh.” Likewise, the Holy Spirit can be recognized as the Infinite inasmuch as it is the infinite projection of the Absolute. There is no contradiction here: “these three are One.”

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

Verse 7 reads,

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

Christ’s *kenosis*, his “emptying himself,” is the same as the “withdrawal” of the *tsimtsum*. As with the *tsimtsum*, the *kenosis* corresponds to “limitation”—‘taking the form of a slave.’ In Islam the phrase *al-‘abd* means “the slave or servant.” At its deepest level this designates the creature as dependent on his Lord (*rabb*), where the term “creature” is understood, with Meister Eckhart, as “creaturely existence” or

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

Creation as such.⁶⁹ In Islam this distinction can be seen in that between *al-khalq* (the creature) and *al-haqq* (God).

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

Verse 8 reads,

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

This is a most remarkable section of this hymn. That Christ ‘was humbler yet’ speaks of a “first” humbling. This “first humbling” is none other than His taking ‘the form of a slave,’ for Manifestation is “humble” in comparison with the Great and Infinite Unmanifest that embraces it. In a sense this first “humbling” is itself a “death,” a change of state from Unmanifest to Manifestation. But Christ ‘was humbler yet, even to accepting death;’ this is to say that Christ satisfies every possibility of Universal Existence even the possibility of the individual death but more importantly the possibility of Deliverance from this state, which is “death on the cross,” or the reintegration of Universal Existence along the vertical and horizontal *axes* that measure its expansion. Hence Christ is “humbler yet” than the human can possibly and by definition be because He here passes beyond the state that can properly be called “human,” which is to say that He has accepted death to ontological Existence and returned to the Infinite Unmanifest, the Beyond Being.

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

Verse 9 reads,

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

‘And for this God raised him high’: literally, “super-raised him”. The New Jerusalem Bible says that this term—“super-raised”—refers to a two-part action, to be raised and then to be super-raised: the resurrection and the ascension respectively. These correspond to the two “deaths” which like all “deaths” are simultaneously “births” to a new state of existence. Considered in this way it can be said that Christ “overcomes” each death because he recognizes it as it is a “birth.” Thus the resurrection corresponds to the overcoming of the death of individual existence; this is the full achievement by man in all his potentialities, the Taoist’s “True Man” (*chen jen*). The ascension corresponds to the overcoming of the death of Universal Existence as such; the achievement by man of all his possibilities, the Taoist’s, “Transcendent Man” (*chün jen*). The “True Man” is someone who has attained to the fullness of the human state, who is raised to the highest level of this state. But man also contains the possibility of transcending this state and strictly speaking ceasing to be human as such, this is “Transcendent Man,” who is super-raised, or even better, supra-raised, beyond the human state. This distinction might be helpfully likened to that in the Islamic tradition between *al-wāhidiyah*, Unicity, and *al-ahadiyah*, the Supreme Unity. The attainment of “True Man” corresponds to Christ’s realization of his being God. This distinction of True man and Transcendent Man, who might equally here be called “True God,” is resolved, in a certain sense, in the mystery of the *barzakh* which, as Schuon remarks, has its archetype in this ‘half-divine, half-cosmic frontier separating, and in another sense uniting, Manifestation and the Principle;’ he continues: ‘it is the “Divine Spirit” (*Rūh*) which, seen “from above” is manifestation, and seen “from below” is Principle. Consequently, it is *Māyā* in both its aspects; the same thing appears, in a certain manner, in the Christian expression “true man and true God.”’⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Schuon, *In The Face Of The Absolute*, 1989, p.187, n.1.

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

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

This notion of the "extinction of extinction" giving rise to the affirmation of Reality finds its expression in the Islamic tradition in the doctrine of *baqa* or subsistence. Burckhardt observes this as designating in Sufism the 'spiritual state of the subsistence outside all form, that is to say the reintegration in the Spirit or even in the pure Being.'⁷⁴ He further comments that *baqa* is the "opposite" to *fanā*. Like all opposites these are complementary which is to see that the extinction of the individual or *al-fanā* corresponds correlatively with the "birth" of pure Being. In his *Mathnawi*, Jalal-ud-din Rumi writes: 'Such a nonexistent as has gone out of his own "self" is verily existent *par excellence*; he is exalted and weighty. He is extinct in relation to

⁷¹ Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, 1976, p. 116.

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

⁷³ Schuon, *Treasures of Buddhism*, 1993, p.85, n.5.

⁷⁴ Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, 1976, p. 116.

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

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

Verse 10 reads,

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

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

⁷⁶ Schuon, *Treasures of Buddhism*, 1993, pp.88-89.

⁷⁷ ‘Symbolized by the ink well which contains in a state of indifferentiation the letters (*al-huruf*) of existence, or the Letters of the sacred Book. ‘Abd al-Karim al-Jili establishes an analogy between the “Mother of the Book” and the Christian symbolism of the Virgin, mother of Christ, He who is “Word of Allah”.’ (al-Jilī, *al-insān al-kamīl*, 1983, p.16, n.44).

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

Verse 11 reads,

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

“Every tongue” is as if to say each and every individual being insomuch as each being is a reflection of the Prototypal Word, thus each act of creation, analogous to the act of speaking, at any level imitates the Cosmogony through Christ the Word. Universal Existence “acknowledges” Christ as Lord in that it expresses the fullness, the “glory” of the Infinitude of God the Father. Again, the “glory of God” is a cognomen of the *Shekhinah*, the Divine Immanence, so as to say that Christ as the Form and Principle is both identical with and expressed through the *Shekhinah*. This sense is given to the text in the Vulgate that reads, ‘in the glory of God the Father.’ In the last analysis the “glory” of the Father is the Infinitude of the Absolute achieved, so to speak, in the “mystery” of the Relative, through the *kenosis* of Christ.

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