

Religio Perennis

Frithjof Schuon

One of the keys to understanding our true nature and our ultimate destiny is the fact that the things of this world are never proportionate to the actual range of our intelligence. Our intelligence is made for the Absolute, or else it is nothing; among all the intelligences of this world the human spirit alone is capable of objectivity, and this implies—or proves—that the Absolute alone confers on our intelligence the power to accomplish to the full what it can accomplish and to be wholly what it is.¹ If it were necessary or useful to prove the Absolute, the objective and transpersonal character of the human Intellect would be a sufficient testimony, for this Intellect is the indisputable sign of a purely spiritual first Cause, a Unity infinitely central but containing all things, an Essence at once immanent and transcendent. It has been said more than once that total Truth is inscribed in an eternal script in the very substance of our spirit; what the different Revelations do is to “crystallize” and “actualize”, in different degrees according to the case, a nucleus of certitudes that not only abides forever in the divine Omniscience, but also sleeps by refraction in the “naturally supernatural” kernel of the individual, as well as in that of each ethnic or historical collectivity or the human species as a whole.

Similarly, in the case of the will, which is no more than a prolongation or complement of the intelligence: the objects it commonly sets out to achieve, or those that life imposes on it, do not measure up to the fullness of its range; only the “divine

¹ “Heaven and earth cannot contain Me (Allah), but the heart of My faithful servant containeth Me” (*hadith qudsî*). Similarly Dante: “I perceive that our intellect is never satisfied if the True does not enlighten it, outside which no truth is possible” (*Paradiso* 4:124-26).

dimension” can satisfy the thirst for plenitude in our willing or our love. What makes our will human, and therefore free, is the fact that it is proportioned to God; in God alone it is kept free from all constraint, hence from everything that limits its nature.

The essential function of human intelligence is discernment between the Real and the illusory or between the Permanent and the impermanent, and the essential function of the will is attachment to the Permanent or the Real. This discernment and this attachment are the quintessence of all spirituality; carried to their highest level or reduced to their purest substance, they constitute the underlying universality in every great spiritual patrimony of humanity, or what may be called the *religio perennis*;² this is the religion to which the sages adhere, one which is always and necessarily founded upon formal elements of divine institution.³

* * *

Metaphysical discernment is a “separation” between *Âtmâ* and *Mâyâ*; contemplative concentration or unifying consciousness is on the contrary a “union” of *Mâyâ* with *Âtmâ*. Discernment is separative,⁴ and it is what “doctrine” refers to; concentration is unitive, and it is what “method” refers to; “faith” is connected to the first element and “love of

² These words recall the *philosophia perennis* of Steuchus Eugubin (sixteenth century) and the neo-scholastics; but the word *philosophia* suggests rightly or wrongly a mental elaboration rather than wisdom and therefore does not convey exactly the sense we intend. *Religio* is what “binds” man to Heaven and engages his whole being; as for the word *traditio*, it is related to a more outward and sometimes fragmentary reality, besides suggesting a retrospective outlook; a new-born religion “binds” men to Heaven from the moment of its first revelation, but it does not become a “tradition”—or have “traditions”—until two or three generations later.

³ This is true even in the case of the pre-Islamic Arab sages, who lived spiritually on the heritage of Abraham and Ishmael.

⁴ This is what the Arabic word *furqân* signifies, namely, “qualitative differentiation”, from *faraqa*, to separate, discern, bifurcate; it is well known that *Furqân* is one of the names of the Koran.

God” to the second.

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

The two-fold definition of the *religio perennis*—discernment between the Real and the illusory and a unifying and permanent concentration on the Real—implies in addition the criteria of intrinsic orthodoxy for every religion and all spirituality; in order to be orthodox a religion must possess a mythological or doctrinal symbolism establishing the essential distinction in question, and it must provide a path that guarantees both the perfection of concentration and its continuity; in other words a religion is orthodox if it provides a sufficient, if not always exhaustive, idea of the absolute and the relative, and thus of their reciprocal relationships, and a spiritual activity that is contemplative in its nature and effectual with regard to our ultimate destiny. For it is notorious that heterodoxies always tend to adulterate either the idea of the divine Principle or the manner of our attachment to it; they offer a worldly, profane, or—if one prefers—“humanist” counterfeit of religion or else a mysticism containing nothing but the ego and its illusions.

* * *

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

Truth is one, and it would be vain to refuse to look for it except in one particular place, for the Intellect contains in its substance all that is true, and truth cannot but be manifested wherever the Intellect is deployed in the atmosphere of a Revelation. Space can be represented by a circle as well as by a cross, a spiral, a star, or a square; and just as it is impossible for there to be only one figure to represent the nature of space or extension, so it is also impossible for there to be only one doctrine giving an account of the Absolute and of the relations between the contingent and the Absolute; in other words, believing that there can be only one true doctrine is like denying the plurality of the geometrical figures used to indicate the characteristics of space or—to choose a very different example—the plurality of individual consciousnesses and visual points of view.

In each Revelation, God says “I” while placing Himself extrinsically at a point of view other than that of earlier Revelations, hence the appearance of contradiction on the plane of formal crystallization.

The objection might be raised that the various geometrical figures are not strictly equivalent in their capacity to serve as adequations between graphic symbolism and spatial extension and thus that the comparison just made could also be used as an argument against the equivalence of traditional perspectives; to this we reply that traditional perspectives are not meant so much to be absolute adequations—at least *a priori*—as to be paths of salvation and means of deliverance. Besides, though the circle—not even to mention the point—is a more direct adequation of form to space than is the cross or any other differentiated figure, and though it therefore reflects more perfectly the nature of extension, there is still this to be considered: the cross, the square, or the spiral expresses explicitly a spatial reality that the circle or the point expresses only implicitly; the differentiated figures are therefore irreplaceable—otherwise they would not exist—and they are in no sense various kinds of imperfect circles; the cross is infinitely nearer the perfection of the point or the circle than is the oval or trapezoid, for example. Analogous considerations apply to traditional doctrines as regards their differences of form and their merits as an equation.

* * *

Let us return to our *religio perennis*, considered either as metaphysical discernment and unifying concentration or as the descent of the divine Principle, which becomes

manifestation in order that manifestation may return to the Principle.

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

In Islam the same fundamental theme—fundamental because it is universal—is crystallized according to a very different perspective. Discernment between the Real and the non-real is affirmed by the Testimony of Unity (the *Shahâdah*): the correlative concentration on the Symbol or permanent consciousness of the Real is effected by this same Testimony or by the divine Name which synthesizes it and which is thus the quintessential crystallization of the Koranic Revelation; this Testimony or this Name is also the quintessence of the Abrahamic Revelation—through the lineage of Ishmael—and goes back to the primordial Revelation of the Semitic branch. The Real “descended” (*nazzala, unzila*); it entered into the non-real or illusory, the “perishable” (*fânin*)⁵, in becoming the Koran—or the *Shahâdah* that summarizes it, or the *Ism* (the “Name”) that is its sonorous and graphic essence, or the *Dhikr* (the “Mention”) that is its operative synthesis—in order that upon this divine barque the illusory might return to the Real, to

⁵ The word *fanâ*, sometimes translated as “extinction” by analogy with the Sanskrit *nirvâna*, has the same root and literally means “perishable nature”.

the “Face (*Wajh*) of the Lord that alone abides” (*wa yabqâ Wajhu Rabbika*),⁶ whatever the metaphysical import attributed to the ideas of “illusion” and of “Reality”. In this reciprocity lies all the mystery of the “Night of Destiny” (*Laylat al-Qadr*), which is a “descent”, and of the “Night of Ascension” (*Laylat al-Mi‘râj*), which is the complementary phase; contemplative realization—or “unification” (*tawhîd*)—partakes of this ascension of the Prophet through the degrees of Paradise. “Verily”—says the Koran—“prayer guards against the major (*fahshâ*) and the minor (*munkar*) sins, but the mention (*dhikr*) of *Allâh* is greater”.⁷

Nearer to the Christian perspective in a certain connection, but much more remote in another, is the Buddhist perspective, which on the one hand is based on a “Word made flesh”, but on the other hand knows nothing of the anthropomorphic notion of a creator God. In Buddhism the two terms of the alternative or of discernment are *Nirvâna*, the Real, and *Samsâra*, the illusory; in the last analysis the path is the permanent consciousness of *Nirvâna* as *Shûnya*, the “Void”, or else it is concentration on the saving manifestation of *Nirvâna*, the Buddha, who is *Shûnyamûrti*, “Manifestation of the Void”. In the Buddha—notably in his form Amitabha—*Nirvâna* became *Samsâra* that *Samsâra* might become *Nirvâna*; and if *Nirvâna* is the Real and *Samsâra* is illusion, the Buddha is the Real in the illusory, and the *Bodhisattva* is the illusory in the Real,⁸ which suggests the symbolism of the *Yin-Yang*. The passage from the illusory to the Real is described in the *Prajnâpâramitâ-hridaya-sûtra* in these terms: “Gone, gone—gone for the other shore, attained the other shore, O Enlightenment, be blessed!”

⁶ *Sûrah* “The Merciful” [55]:27.

⁷ *Sûrah* “The Spider” [29]:45.

⁸ See “Le mystère du Bodhisattva” (*Études Traditionnelles*, May-June, July-August, September-October, 1962). [Translator’s note: For an English translation of this article, see “Mystery of the Bodhisattva” in *Treasures of Buddhism* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1993), pp. 107-34.]

* * *

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

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

The “proofs” of God and religion are in man himself: “Knowing his own nature, he also knows Heaven,” says Mencius, in agreement with other analogous and well-known maxims. We must extract from the givens of our own nature the key-certainty that opens up the way to certainty of the Divine and Revelation; to speak of “man” is to speak implicitly of “God”; to speak of the “relative” is to speak of the “Absolute”. Human

nature in general and human intelligence in particular cannot be understood apart from the religious phenomenon, which characterizes them in the most direct and most complete way possible: grasping the transcendent—not the “psychological”—nature of the human being, we thereby grasp the nature of revelation, religion, tradition; we understand their possibility, their necessity, their truth. And in understanding religion, not only in a particular form or in a word for word way, but in its formless essence, we also understand the religions, that is to say, the meaning of their plurality and diversity; this is the plane of *gnosis*, of the *religio perennis*, where the extrinsic antinomies of dogma are explained and resolved.

* * *

On the outward and therefore contingent plane—which nonetheless has its importance in the human order—there is a concordance between the *religio perennis* and virgin nature and by the same token between it and primordial nudity, that of creation, birth, resurrection, or the high priest in the Holy of Holies, a hermit in the desert,⁹ a Hindu *sâdhu* or *sannyâsin*, a Red Indian in silent prayer on a mountain.¹⁰ Nature inviolate is at once a vestige of the earthly Paradise and a prefiguration of the heavenly Paradise; sanctuaries and garments differ, but virgin nature and the human body remain faithful to the initial unity. Sacred art, which seems to move away from that unity, in reality simply

⁹ Such as Mary of Egypt, in whose case the non-formal and wholly inward character of a love effected by God partakes of the qualities of *gnosis*, so much so that one could call it a “*gnosis* of love” in the sense of *parabhakti*.

¹⁰ Simplicity of clothing and its color, white in particular, sometimes replace the symbolism of nudity within the framework of sartorial art; on every plane the laying bare that is inspired by the naked Truth counterbalances a worldly “culturism”. In other connections, however, a sacred robe symbolizes the victory of the Spirit over the flesh, and its hieratic richness—which we are far from criticizing—expresses the inexhaustible profusion of Mystery and Glory.

serves to restore to natural phenomena their divine messages, to which men have become insensitive; in art, the perspective of love tends toward overflowing and profusion whereas the perspective of *gnosis* tends toward nature, simplicity, and silence; such is the contrast between Gothic richness and Zen sobriety.¹¹ But this must not lead us to lose sight of the fact that outward frameworks or modes are always contingent and that all combinations and all compensations are possible, especially since in spirituality every possibility can be reflected in every other according to the appropriate modalities.

A civilization is integral and healthy to the extent it is founded on the “invisible” or “underlying” religion, the *religio perennis*, that is, to the extent its expressions or forms are transparent to the Non-Formal and tend toward the Origin, thus conveying the recollection of a Lost Paradise, but also—and with all the more reason—the presentiment of a timeless Beatitude. For the Origin is at once within us and before us; time is but a spiral movement around a motionless Center.

¹¹ But it is very apparent that the most sumptuous sacred art is infinitely nearer to *gnosis* than the ignorant and affected “springness” of those of our contemporaries who profess to be “making a clean sweep”. Only a simplicity that is qualitative, noble, and conformable to the essence of things reflects and transmits the perfume of non-formal wisdom.