

# Universal Eschatology

Frithjof Schuon

Courtesy of World Wisdom.

This article was initially published in *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*.

Eschatology is part of cosmology, and cosmology is a prolongation of metaphysics, which in turn is essentially the same as the *sophia perennis*. It may be asked by what right eschatology is part of this *sophia*, given that, epistemologically speaking, pure intellection does not seem to reveal our destinies beyond the grave, while it does reveal universal principles; but in reality, the knowledge of these destinies is accessible thanks to the knowledge of principles, or to their correct application. In fact, it is not solely through the outward way of Revelation<sup>8</sup> that we can know the immortality of the soul but also by comprehending the profound nature of subjectivity; for to speak of total or central subjectivity — not partial and peripheral as in the case of animals — is to speak thereby of capacity of objectivity, intuition of the Absolute, and immortality.<sup>9</sup> And to say that we are immortal means that we existed before our human birth — for what has no end cannot have a beginning — and in addition, that we are subject to cycles; life is a cycle, and our former existence also must have been a cycle in a chain of cycles. Our future existence may also proceed by cycles, namely it is condemned to this to the extent that we have not been able to realize the reason for being of the human state which, being central, permits precisely of escaping the "round of existences" .

The human condition is in fact the door towards Paradise: towards the cosmic Center which, while forming a part of the manifested Universe, is nonetheless situated — thanks to the magnetic proximity of the Divine Sun — beyond the rotation of the worlds and of destinies, and thereby beyond "transmigration" . And it is for that reason that "human birth is hard to attain" , according to a Hindu Text; in order to be convinced of

---

<sup>8</sup> Although Revelation always constitutes the occasional cause, or the initial cause, of the corresponding intellection.

<sup>9</sup> As we have demonstrated on other occasions, above all in our book *From the Divine to the Human*, in the chapter "Consequences Flowing from the Mystery of Subjectivity" .

this, it suffices to consider the incommensurability between the central point and the innumerable points of the periphery.

\*  
\* \*

There are souls who, fully or sufficiently conformed to the human vocation, enter directly into Paradise: they are either the saints or the sanctified. In the former case, they are great souls illuminated by the Divine Sun and dispensers of beneficent rays; in the second case, they are souls who, having neither faults of character nor worldly tendencies, are free — or freed — from mortal sins, and sanctified by the supernatural action of the means of grace that they have made their viaticum. Between the saints and the sanctified there are doubtless intermediary possibilities, but God alone is the judge of their position and their rank.

Nevertheless, among the sanctified — those saved by sanctification both natural and supernatural<sup>10</sup> — there are those who are not perfect enough to enter directly into Paradise; thus they will await their maturity in a place which the theologians have termed an "honorable prison" , but which in the opinion of the Amidists is more than that, since according to them this place is situated in Paradise itself; they compare it to a golden lotus bud which opens when the soul is ripe. This state corresponds to the "limbo of the fathers" (*limbus* = "edge") of the Catholic doctrine: according to this very particular perspective, the just of the "Ancient Alliance" found themselves in that limbo before the "descent into the hells" of the Christ-Savior;<sup>11</sup> a conception above all symbolic and very simplifying but perfectly adequate as to the principle, and even literally true in cases which we need not define here, given the complexity of the problem.

After the "lotus" we must consider "purgatory" properly so called: the soul faithful to its human vocation, that is, sincere and persevering in its moral and spiritual

---

<sup>10</sup> This is not a contradiction, for the specific nature of man comprises by definition elements of the supernatural which are available in the human state. .

<sup>11</sup> All things considered, it is in this place that Dante places *de facto* the sages and heroes of antiquity, even though he associates them with the Inferno for theological reasons, since they were "heathens" .

duties, cannot fall into hell, but before entering Paradise it may pass through that intermediary and painful state which the Catholic doctrine terms "purgatory"; it must pass through purgatory if it has faults of character, or if it has worldly tendencies, or if it is charged with a sin for which it has not been able to compensate by its moral and spiritual attitude or by the grace of a sacramental means. According to Islamic doctrine "purgatory" is a transient abode in hell: God saves from the fire "whomsoever He wills" , which is to say that He alone is the judge of the imponderables of our nature; or in other words, He alone knows what our fundamental possibility or our substance is. If there are Christian denominations that deny purgatory, it is at root for the same reason: because the souls of those who are not damned, and who *ipso facto* are destined for salvation, are in the hands of God and are His concern alone.

Regarding Paradise, it is necessary to take into account its "horizontal" regions as well as its "vertical" degrees: the former correspond to circular sections, and the latter to concentric circles. The former separate the various religious or confessional worlds, and the latter the various degrees within each of these worlds: on the one hand, there is the *Brahma-Loka* of the Hindus, for example, which is a place of salvation like the Heaven of the Christians, although it does not coincide with it;<sup>12</sup> and on the other hand, within one and the same Paradise, the place of Beatitude of modest saints or of the "sanctified" is not the same as that of the great saints. "There are many rooms in my Father's mansion" ,<sup>13</sup> and yet there are no impenetrable barriers between the various degrees, for the "communion of saints" forms part of Beatitude;<sup>14</sup> neither is there any reason to maintain that there is no communication possible between the various religious sectors, at least on the esoteric plane where it can be meaningful.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Those Hindu Paradises from which one is expelled after the exhaustion of "good karma" are places, not of salvation but of transient reward; "peripheral" and not "central" places, and situated outside the human state since they pertain to transmigration.

<sup>13</sup> This saying also, and implicitly, comprises an esoteric reference to the celestial sectors of the diverse religions.

<sup>14</sup> And let us specify that, if there are degrees in Paradise, there are also rhythms, which the Koran expresses by saying that the blessed will have their nourishment "morning and evening" . There is, moreover, no world without hierarchic levels of cycles, that is, without "space" or "time" .

<sup>15</sup> This possibility of interreligious communication is also clearly meaningful when one and the same personage, at once historical and celestial, appears in different religions, as is the case of the Biblical Prophets, even though their functions differ according to the religion in which they manifest themselves.

Before going further, and regarding eschatology in general, we would like to make the following remark: it has often been argued that neither Confucianism nor Shintoism explicitly admits the ideas of the Beyond and of immortality, but this is not quite so since they have the cult of ancestors; if there were no afterlife, this cult would be meaningless, and there would be no reason for an emperor of Japan to go and solemnly inform the souls of the deceased emperors of this or that event. Moreover it is known that one of the characteristics of shamanistic traditions is the parsimony — not the total absence — of eschatological information.

\*  
\* \*

We must now comment on the one hand on the infernal possibility, which maintains the soul in the human state, and on the other hand of the possibilities of "transmigration" , which on the contrary cause the soul to leave the human state. Strictly speaking, hell too is a phase of transmigration, in the final analysis, but before releasing the soul towards other phases or other states, it imprisons it "perpetually" , but not "eternally"; eternity pertains to God alone, and in a certain manner also to Paradise in virtue of a mystery of participation in the divine Immutability. Hell crystallizes a vertical fall; it is "invincible" because it lasts until the exhaustion of a certain cycle whose duration God alone knows. Those who enter hell are not those who have sinned accidentally, with their "husk" so to speak, but those who have sinned substantially or with their "kernel" , and this is a distinction that may not be perceptible from without; they are in any case the proud, the wicked, the hypocrites, hence all those who are the opposite of the saints and the sanctified.

Exoterically speaking, man is damned because he does not accept a given Revelation, a given Truth, and does not obey a given law; esoterically, he damns himself because he does not accept his own fundamental and primordial Nature which dictates a given knowledge and a given comportment.<sup>16</sup> Revelation is none other than the objective and symbolic manifestation of the Light which man carries in himself, in the depths of his

---

<sup>16</sup> "God wrongeth not mankind in aught; but mankind wrong themselves." (Koran, Sura "Jonah," 44).

being; it reminds him of what he is, and of what he should be since he has forgotten what he is. If all human souls, before their creation, must attest that God is their Lord — according to the Koran<sup>17</sup> — it is because they know "preexistentially" what Being, the Truth, and the Law are; to exist is, for the human creature, to know "viscerally" what Being, Truth, and the Law are; fundamental sin is a suicide of the soul.

It remains for us to speak of another possibility of the afterlife, namely "transmigration",<sup>18</sup> which lies totally outside the "sphere of interest" of Semitic Monotheism, which is a kind of "nationalism of the human condition", and for this reason has in view only what concerns the human being as such. Outside the human state, and without speaking of angels and demons,<sup>19</sup> there remains, for this perspective, only a kind of nothingness; to be excluded from the human condition amounts, for Monotheism, to damnation. However, between this way of looking at things and that of the transmigrators — Hindus and Buddhists especially — there is a point of juncture, and it is the Catholic notion of the "limbo of infants" where infants who have died without baptism are supposed to abide, without suffering; now this place, or this condition, is none other than transmigration through worlds other than our own and consequently through non-human states, inferior or superior, as the case may be.<sup>20</sup> "For wide is the gate, and broad is the way that leadeth to perdition, and many there be which

---

<sup>17</sup> "And (remember) when thy Lord brought forth from the Children of Adam, from their reins, their seed, and made them testify of themselves, (saying): Am I not your Lord? They said: Yea, verily. We testify. (That was) lest ye should say at the Day of Resurrection: Lo! of this we were unaware; Or lest ye should say: (It is) only (that) our fathers ascribed partners to God of old and we were (their) seed after them . . ." (Sura "The Heights," 172 and 173) — These preexistential creatures are the individual possibilities necessarily contained within All-Possibility, and called forth to Existence, not produced by a moral Will, but by the existentiating Radiation.

<sup>18</sup> Not to be confused with metempsychosis, whereby the psychic elements — perishable in principle — of a dead person graft themselves upon the soul of a living person, which may give the illusion of a "reincarnation". The phenomenon is benefic or malefic according to whether the psychism is good or bad; that of a saint or that of a sinner.

<sup>19</sup> Islam also acknowledges *jinn*, "spirits", such as the genii of the elements — gnomes, water-spirits, sylphs, salamanders — and other immaterial creatures, sometimes attached to mountains, caverns, trees, sometimes to sanctuaries; they intervene in white or black magic, thus either in therapeutic shamanism or in sorcery.

<sup>20</sup> Either "peripheral" or "central": analogous to the state of animals in the first case, and to that of men in the second; the fact that there is something absolute in the human state — as there is something absolute in the geometric point — precludes the evolutionist and transformist hypothesis. As with earthly creatures, angels also are either "peripheral" or "central": either they personify a divine Quality, which confers upon them both a given perfection and a given limitation, or they reflect the divine Being Itself, in which case they are ultimately one: it is the "Spirit of God", the celestial Logos, which polarizes into Archangels and inspires the Prophets.

go in thereat": since, on the one hand, Christ could not have wished to say that most men go to hell, and since, on the other hand, "perdition" in monotheistic and Semitic language also signifies leaving the human state, one has to conclude that the saying quoted concerns in fact the mass of the lukewarm and the worldly, who lack the love for God — including those unbelievers who benefit from extenuating circumstances — and who deserve, if not hell, at least expulsion from that privileged state which is man; privileged because giving immediate access to paradisaal Immortality. Moreover, the "paganisms" offered access to the Elysian Fields or to the Isles of the Blessed only to the initiates in the Mysteries, not to the mass of the profane; and the case of the "transmigrationist" religions is more or less similar. The fact that transmigration, when starting from the human state, begins almost always with a kind of purgatory, clearly reinforces the image of a "perdition" , that is, of a definitive disgrace from the human point of view.

The baptism of newborn infants has the objective — aside from its intrinsic purpose — of saving them from this disgrace, and it has *de facto* the effect of keeping them, in the event of death, in the human state, which in their case will be a paradisaal state, so that in practical terms this outcome—which the "nationalism of the human state" has in view—coincides with the celestial end that the sacrament has in view for adults; and it is with the same motive that Moslems pronounce the Testimony of Faith into the ear of the newborn, which, all told, evokes the whole mystery of the sacramental power of the *Mantra*. The intention is just the opposite in the very special case of the voluntary transmigration of the *bodhisattvas*, which passes only through "central" states, that is, those analogous to the human state; for the *bodhisattva* does not desire to stay in the "golden prison" of the human Paradise, but on the contrary seeks to radiate in non-human worlds until the end of the great cosmic cycle. This is a possibility which the monotheist perspective excludes and which is even confined to *Mahayana* Buddhism, without for all that being obligatory for all Mahayanists, even if they be saints; the Amidists, in particular, aspire only to the Paradise of *Amitabha*, which in practical terms is equivalent to the Hindu *Brahma-Loka* and to the Paradise of monotheistic religions, and which is considered not as a "celestial dead-end" , if one may so express it, but quite on the contrary as a virtuality of *Nirvana*.

We cannot pass over in silence another aspect of the problem of destinies beyond the grave; it is the following: theology — Islamic as well as Christian — teaches that the animals are included in the "resurrection of the flesh":<sup>21</sup> but whereas human beings are sent either to Paradise or to hell, animals will be reduced to dust, for they are not supposed to have an "immortal soul" ; this opinion is founded on the fact that the Intellect is not actualized in animals, whence the absence of the rational faculty and of language. But in reality, the infra-human situation of the animals could not mean that their subjectivity is not determined by the law of *karma* and thus engaged in the "wheel of births and deaths";<sup>22</sup> this law also concerns, not a given isolated plant, but the vegetable species, each of which corresponds to an individuality, although it is not always possible to distinguish between the limits of a species and which groups which merely amount to modalities of it.

\*

\* \*

We have distinguished five posthumous exits from earthly human life: Paradise, the limbo-lotus, purgatory, limbo-transmigration, hell. The first three exits maintain the human state; the fourth brings one out of it; the fifth maintains it only to bring one out of it ultimately. Paradise and the lotus are beyond suffering; purgatory and hell are states of suffering in varying degrees; transmigration is not necessarily a suffering in the case of the *bodhisattvas*, but it is a mixture of pleasure and pain in the other cases. Or again: there are two places of waiting for Paradise, one gentle and one rigorous, namely the

---

<sup>21</sup> Bodily death and the subsequent separation of the body and the soul are the consequence of the fall of the first human couple; a provisional situation which will be repaired at the end of this cosmic cycle, except for some privileged beings — such as Enoch, Elijah, Christ, the Virgin — who mounted up to Heaven with their bodies "transfigured" .

<sup>22</sup> In Sufism, it is "unofficially" admitted that particularly blessed animals were able to follow their masters into Paradise, full as they were of a *barakah* of irresistible compulsion; which, all things considered, is not at all implausible. As for the question of knowing whether there are animals in Heaven, we cannot deny it, because the animal world, like the vegetable world which constitutes the Heavenly "Garden" (*Jannah*), is part of the natural human ambience; but neither the paradisaal animals nor the plants of the "Garden" have to come from the earthly world. According to the Moslem theologians, the plants and animals of Heaven have been created then and there for the elect, which amounts to saying that they are of a quasi-angelic substance; "and God knoweth best" .

lotus and purgatory; and there are two exclusions from Paradise, also one gentle and the other rigorous, namely transmigration and hell; in both of these latter cases, the human condition is lost, either immediately as in the case of transmigration, or ultimately, as in that of hell. As for Paradise, it is the blessed summit of the human state, and strictly speaking it has no symmetrical opposite, despite certain simplifying schematizations having a moral purpose;<sup>23</sup> for the celestial world stems from the Absolute "by adoption" , and the Absolute has no opposite, except in appearance.

Eternity belongs to God alone, as we have said; but we have also alluded to the fact that what is called "eternity" in the case of hell is not the same as in the case of Paradise, for there is no symmetry between these two orders, the one nourishing itself from the cosmic illusion and the other from the divine Proximity. Paradisal perpetuity is nonetheless relative by the very nature of things, in the sense that it opens onto the Apocatastasis, through which all positive phenomena return to their Archetypes *in Divinis*; but in this there is no loss or privation, firstly because God never gives less than He promises or never promises more than He intends to give, and secondly — or rather above all — because of the divine Plenitude, which could not lack anything.

Considered from this point of view, Paradise is really eternal;<sup>24</sup> the end of the "manifested" and "extra-principial" world is a cessation only from the point of view of the limitations which produce manifestation, but not from that of intrinsic and total Reality, which on the contrary allows beings to become again "infinitely" what they are in their Archetypes and in their single Essence.

\*

\* \*

---

<sup>23</sup> The cosmic "opposite" of Paradise is not only hell, but also transmigration, and this illustrates the transcendence and independence of Paradise. Let us add that there are *ahadith* which testify to the disappearance — or the final vacuity — of hell; "watercress will spring up therein," the Prophet is supposed to have said, and also, that God will pardon the worst of sinners.

<sup>24</sup> Which, moreover, is indicated in Sufism by the expression "Garden of the Essence," *Jannat adh-Dhat*; this Garden divinely transcends the "Gardens of the Qualities," *Jannat as-Sifat*.



All our preceding considerations may seem arbitrary and imaginative in the highest degree to one who clings to that immense simplification which is the scientific perspective; however, they become plausible when on the one hand, one acknowledges the authority of diverse traditional data — and we need not return here to the validity of this authority, which coincides with the very nature of the "naturally supernatural" phenomenon of Tradition in all its forms — and when on the other hand, one knows how to draw from human subjectivity all the immediate and remote consequences it implies. It is precisely this subjectivity — this mystery of dazzling evidence — that modern philosophers, including the most pretentious psychologists, have never been able to grasp nor wished to grasp, and that is not surprising since it offers the key to metaphysical truths as well as mystical experiences, the one like the other requiring all that we are.

"Know thyself," said the inscription of the temple at Delphi;<sup>25</sup> and the same is also expressed by this *hadith*: "Whoso knoweth his soul, knoweth his Lord"; and similarly the Veda: "That art thou"; namely *Atma*, the Self at once transcendent and immanent, which projects itself into myriads of relative subjectivities undergoing cycles and determined by localizations, and which extend from the least flower to that direct divine Manifestation which is the *Avatara*.

---

<sup>25</sup> Formulated by Thales, then commented upon by Socrates.