

One Word, many tongues²⁶

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There is a Book with one Word. The Word is Read and is. This Word is two, equal and one. The first is Meaning, the Names of all things. It is called Multiplicity. To know one's Name is to be one's Name. It is to know and be this Name in virtue of its place in Meaning. The second is the Breath. It is this that gives the Word shape and life, and it is this upon which Meaning rides. The Breath, however, has no Meaning, nor is the Breath breathed from any mouth. But without the Breath there is no Word. We may understand our Name, and through this the Name that is the Word. But we cannot understand the Breath. The Breath may only be Breath. The Breath is the Oneness of the Word. We may not breathe of the Breath, nor breathe out the Breath, even if we know Meaning. The Breath is the Oneness of the Word upon which Meaning rides in its coat of Names. This is the Word of the Book we are given to read.

Religious forms

Religion is the language between the Divine and the human, or between the Absolute and the Relative; this is none other than Manifestation itself, and, as Schuon says, 'To say manifestation is to say limitation.'²⁷ This it to recognise that religion is "that which binds," for that which binds is the "boundary" of indefinite Manifestation within the Divine Infinitude. 'A religion' says Frithjof Schuon, 'is a form, and so also a limit, which "contains" the Limitless, to speak in paradox; every form is fragmentary because of the necessary formal exclusion of other possibilities; the fact that these forms...each in their own way represent totality does not prevent them from being fragmentary in respect of their particularisation and reciprocal exclusion.'²⁸ Thus Nasr observes that 'Each revealed religion is *the* religion and *a* religion, the religion inasmuch as it contains within itself the Truth and the means of attaining the Truth, a religion since

²⁶ The present essay has been composed from two original writings combined, amended and rewritten: 'Concerning religious forms', *Sacred Web* 8, 2001, 73-98 and 'Preliminary Remarks on Reclaiming the Meaning of "Religion"', *Sacred Web* 7, 2001, 59-66.

²⁷ Schuon, *In The Face Of The Absolute*, 1989, p.35.

²⁸ Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, 1976, p.144.

it emphasizes a particular aspect of Truth in conformity with the spiritual and psychological needs of the humanity for whom it is destined.’²⁹ Schuon remarks that a religion is ‘not limited by what it includes but by what it excludes’³⁰. This has its root in the fact that Manifestation limits itself by exclusion of the Infinite. Still, as Schuon continues, ‘since every religion is intrinsically a totality, this exclusion cannot impair the religion’s deepest contents’.³¹ A religion, strictly speaking, must satisfy all spiritual possibilities.

At the heart of religion lies the *religio perennis*; the essential and principial relationship between the Divine and the human. It is the two-way language of communication between man and God, where the term “language” refers to revelation, ritual, prayer and mantra, as well as the Eternal communication of the cosmogonic Word. The Intellectual core of the *religio perennis* is the *sophia perennis*, or universal *gnosis*, which is essentially concerned with metaphysics. The *sophia perennis* has as its application and complement the *cosmologia perennis*, the science of cosmology.³² The *religio perennis* has as its complement and entelechy *eschatology* which, at its deepest level, is the return of man to God, the realisation of “Supreme Union.” Moreover, as Ibn al-`Arabi says, it is not a question of “becoming one” with God or the Godhead, rather becoming conscious of the Divine Unity which is.³³

At the “historical” level the religious consciousness develops according to a sequential schema that in turn accords with the successional mode of Being. Gershom Scholem sets out such a schema in his work, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*.³⁴ To summarise: The first stage of religious consciousness is one in which no “abyss” exists between “Man and God.” Scholem calls this the “mythical epoch”: it is the Golden Age, the Edenic state. This is the “immediate consciousness” of the “essential unity,” where this unity “precedes duality and in fact knows nothing of it.” Metaphysically speaking

²⁹ Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, 1966, p.15.

³⁰ Schuon, *In The Face Of The Absolute*, 1989, p.79.

³¹ Schuon, *In The Face Of The Absolute*, 1989, p.79.

³² Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 1981, p.190.

³³ Uncited reference in Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.170.

³⁴ Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 1995, p.7-8.

this is religion *in divinis* or *in potentia* inasmuch as it corresponds at the analogous level with Formless Manifestation. Thus, says Meister Eckhart, “before the foundation of the world” (Jn.17:24) everything in the universe was not mere nothing, but was in possession of virtual existence³⁵. In this first stage, says Scholem, “Nature” is the scene of man’s relation to God. Metaphysically this reflects the non-distinction of man and God within “primordial Nature,” where Nature is understood in the same sense as the Hindu term “*prakriti*.” *Prakriti* is said to mean “that which is transcendent”: ‘The prefix *pra* means “higher”; *krti* (action) stands for creation. Hence she who in creation is transcendent is the transcendent goddess known under the name of Nature (*prakrti*).’³⁶

The second stage is the “creative epoch” in which the emergence of formal religion *per se* occurs. Scholem remarks that ‘Religion’s supreme function is to destroy the dream-harmony of Man, Universe and God.’ In this “classical form” ‘religion signifies the creation of a vast abyss, conceived as absolute, between God, the infinite and transcendental Being, and man, the finite creature.’ This “abyss” can be crossed by nothing but “the voice”: the voice of God, directing and law-giving in His revelation, and the voice of man in prayer. Scholem observes that the great monotheistic religions live and unfold in the ever-present consciousness of this bipolarity. This reflects the cosmogonic Voice which, as the principle of Universal Being, implies the bipolarity of ontological Essence and Substance. ‘It is true’ says Guénon, ‘that Being is beyond all distinction, since the first distinction is that of “essence” and “substance” or of *Purusha* and *Prakriti*; nevertheless *Brahma*, as *Îshwara* or Universal Being, is described as *savishesha*, that is to say as “implying distinction,” since He is the immediate determining principle of distinction.’³⁷ For the humankind of this period the scene of religion is no longer Nature, but the moral and religious action of man and the community of men, whose interplay brings about history as, in a sense, the stage on which the drama of man’s relation to God unfolds.³⁸

³⁵ *Comm. John* n.45, see also *Parables of Genesis* n.55.

³⁶ *Brahma-vaivarta Purana* 2.1.5. [43] cited in Daniélou, *The Gods of India*, 1985, p.31.

³⁷ Guénon, *Man and his becoming*, 1981, p.164. In this context Whitall Perry notes the Vedantic doctrine of *bhedâbheda* or ‘Distinction without Difference’ (*The Widening Breach*, 1995, p.15).

³⁸ Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 1995, p.8.

It is, in a sense, in reaction to the solidification of this “classical” expression of religion that the phenomenon called “mysticism” arises. Scholem likens mysticism to the “romantic period of religion.” ‘Mysticism’ he remarks, ‘does not deny or overlook the abyss; on the contrary, it begins by realizing its existence, but from there it proceeds to a quest for the secret that will close it in, the hidden path that will span it. It strives to piece together the fragments broken by the religious cataclysm, to bring back the old unity, which religion has destroyed, but on a plane, where the world of mythology and that of revelation meet in the soul of man.’³⁹ The term “mysticism,” as Burckhardt observes, has, like the words “religion” and “man,” suffered at the hands of religious individualism and modern confusion, losing its precision.⁴⁰ “Mysticism” derives from the root meaning of “silence,” as in a knowledge inexpressible because escaping the limits of form.⁴¹ Properly speaking it refers to the idea of “mystery.” This is the mystery of the silence that precedes the speaking of the cosmogonic Word.⁴² At the human level this is expressed in the initiatory “Mysteries,” the Greater and Lesser Mysteries. At its metaphysical level “Mystery” refers to the necessary enigma of the relationship between Immanence and Transcendence or between the Relative and the Absolute; the mystery of the Hypostatic Substance; again, the mystery of the Universal Spirit, the Intellect, of which Meister Eckhart says that it is uncreated and not capable of creation yet the principle of Creation. This enigma is an imperative of Universal Existence. Impenetrable to the discursive mind it can only be approached by the likes of the Zen *koan* or the apophatic theology of a pseudo-Dionysius.

Religion is *the* Word and each religion is *a* language. Religion is *the* Form or *Eidos* (Formless Manifestation) and each religion is *a* form. Each religion is inspired by Revelation and prolonged by Tradition. Here Revelation expresses the immutable Essence, which touches upon the Absolute, while Tradition manifests the salvational continuity of the religion in the human Substance. The Divine Essence is of itself supraformal, yet its irruption—merciful and necessary—into the formal Substance allows

³⁹ Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 1995, p.8.

⁴⁰ See note 1, p.i, Burckhardt’s intro. to, *al-insân al-kamil* (Universal Man), 1983.

⁴¹ Pallis, ‘Is there a Problem of Evil?’: Needleman (ed), *The Sword of Gnosis*, Penguin, 1974, p.236

⁴² “Precedes” in a logical rather than chronological sense, for, of course, this is “before” the distinction of time.

its perception by the human receptacle. Were Revelation to remain supraformal there would be no dialogue between God and man, which is tantamount to saying that Creation would not be, for the principal Revelation is the Word ‘through which all things came into being’, the Islamic *kun*, ‘be!’. This is to say that religion would not be. Moreover, this would be to deny the Absolute nature of God, for the Absolute by definition includes the Infinite and the infinity of God requires His affirmation, which is the Word made flesh.⁴³ ‘Revelation’ as Schuon says, ‘speaks an absolute language, because God is absolute, not because the form is; in other words, the absoluteness of the Revelation is absolute in itself, relative in its form.’⁴⁴ Revelation is both supraformal and formal; it is the mysterious isthmus between the Divine and the human, the Islamic *barzakh*, the half-divine, half-cosmic frontier separating, and in another sense uniting, Manifestation and the Principle. Each religion is the absolute and supraformal Truth revealed in a relative and formal language.

To recognise the formal aspect of a religion is to recognise its mutability and relativity. The forms that constitute the tradition of a religion are relative by dint of their manifestation. Nevertheless the Relative contains something of the Absolute, for if it did not relativities could not be distinguished qualitatively from one another.⁴⁵ As Ibn al-`Arabi says, ‘Were it not that the Reality permeates all beings as form, and were it not for the intelligible realities, no determination would be manifest in individual beings.’⁴⁶ The essence of all traditional forms is the essence of the revelation they express; the essence of a revelation is the essence of Revelation *per se*, and this is the supraformal Essence, the taste of the Absolute. The traditional forms of a religion are, in the strictest sense, immutable in essence and mutable in substance.

To admit the mutability of forms, albeit contingently, is to question the guarantee of their authorship. If the forms manifest—and necessarily so—in the language of man, how then is their Divine origin and authority to be recognised as such? How are we to

⁴³ See Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.166.

⁴⁴ Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, 1990, p.26.

⁴⁵ Schuon, *Language of the Self*, 1999, p.17.

⁴⁶ Ibn al-`Arabi, *Fusus al-hikam* chapter on ‘Adam’, (tr.) Austin, 1980, p.57.

know Divine intervention delivered through a human instrument as opposed to purely human invention? Considered further this question applies itself equally to the initial institution of a religious Tradition as it does to changes made to religious forms throughout the lifespan of a tradition. And this is to question the very guarantee of Revelation itself.

This line of thinking supposes a fundamental error, namely, that it is man who recognises the Divine in the Revelation. In truth it is the Divine in man that senses something of Itself in the Revelation. Schuon: ‘In the face of the Message of Truth, man could not legitimately pose the question of credibility if he were not himself a form of truth, hence of conformity to the True.’⁴⁷ This remembrance, the Platonic *anamnesia*, is affected by adequation, a “making equal to,” rather than any rational assessment. The human does not grasp the Divine, rather the Divine asserts itself in the human.⁴⁸ This is the “sense of the sacred” and it is this that guarantees the Divine authorship of Revelation and the traditions that issue from it.⁴⁹ Schuon: ‘the sense of the sacred is an adequation to the Real, with the difference however, that the knowing subject is then the entire soul and not merely the discriminative intelligence.’⁵⁰ ‘The sacred’ says Schuon, ‘is the projection of the Immutable into the mutable’. He continues to remark that ‘the sense of the sacred consists not only in perceiving this projection, but also in discovering in things the trace of the Immutable, to the point of not letting oneself be deceived and enslaved by the mutable.’⁵¹ The “sense of the sacred” is the innate consciousness of the presence of God: it is to feel this presence sacramentally in symbols and ontologically in all things.⁵² Truth affirms by Its own nature.⁵³ Here, as Schuon is wont to remark, we are far from scholastic arguments, yet there is an argument nonetheless. The “sense of the sacred”

⁴⁷ Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, 1982, p.118.

⁴⁸ It is this Divine presence that is referred to in the *hadith*: ‘Perfect piety is that you adore God as if you were seeing Him, and if you do not see Him, He nonetheless sees you.’

⁴⁹ See Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, 1982, ‘The Sense of the Sacred’, pp.103-115; cf. Schuon, ‘The Sense of the Absolute’ in *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, 1990.

⁵⁰ Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, 1982, p.103.

⁵¹ Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, 1982, p.105.

⁵² Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, 1982, p.104.

⁵³ ‘Truth by her own simplicity is known’ Robert Herrick (1591-1674, English lyric and spiritual poet) cited in Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.574.

may be ignored—for it is the nature of man to be free even unto his own detriment—but it cannot be manufactured nor perverted, for it is beyond what man can affect.

Revelation is the Word of God directed to man for human salvation. God wills the salvation of man. This, as Schuon remarks, is the essential purpose of religion: ‘the divine wish to save men steeped in passion,’ not necessarily to present an explanation of universal Principles and of the world, but necessary precisely to save.⁵⁴ Man does not save himself: the Word precedes man’s reading of It.⁵⁵ The forms of a religion are mutable contingent on their salvational efficiency. This efficiency is judged precisely by God, for man could not rise above himself to know what he lacked. The lesser cannot contain the greater. Man’s salvation comes in relinquishing his control, abandoning himself to the Divine Mercy. Salvation comes from above, not below.



Diversity of Revelation⁵⁶

‘Intrinsically’ says Schuon, “‘orthodox” dogmas, that is, those disposed in view of salvation, differ from one religion to another; consequently they cannot all be objectively true. However, all dogmas are symbolically true and subjectively efficacious, which is to say that their purpose is to create human attitudes that contribute in their way to the divine miracle of salvation.’⁵⁷ Schuon again: ‘Seeing that there is but one truth, must we not conclude that there is but one Revelation, one sole Tradition possible? To this our answer is, first of all, that Truth and Revelation are not absolutely equivalent terms, since Truth is situated beyond forms, whereas revelation, or the Tradition which derives from it, belongs to the formal order, and that indeed by definition; but to speak of form is to

⁵⁴ Schuon, *In The Face Of The Absolute*, 1989, p.110.

⁵⁵ ‘In truth I tell you, before Abraham ever was, I am’ (Jn.8:58).

⁵⁶ Dr. Kenneth Oldmeadow recognises this as one of the *leitmotifs* of Schuon’s work on religion (*Traditionalism: Religion in the Light of the Perennial Philosophy*, 2000, p.69); by way of examples see Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions; Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, Ch.2 ‘Diversity of Revelation’; *In The Face Of The Absolute*, ‘Diversity of Paths’.

⁵⁷ Schuon, *In The Face Of The Absolute*, 1989, p.110.

speak of diversity, and so of plurality; the grounds for the existence and nature of form are expression, limitation, differentiation. What enters into form, thereby enters also into number, hence into repetition and diversity; the formal principle—inspired by the infinity of the divine Possibility—confers diversity on this repetition.⁵⁸ Diversity is a metaphysical necessity of Creation; diversity of Revelation is God’s merciful recognition of man’s remoteness, separation and isolation.

Schuon observes that the diversity of religions ‘far from proving the falseness of all the doctrines concerning the supernatural, shows on the contrary the supra-formal character of revelation and the formal character of the ordinary human understanding: the essences of revelation—or enlightenment—is one, but human nature requires diversity.’⁵⁹ Elsewhere he remarks that ‘what determines the difference among forms of Truth is the difference among human receptacles.’⁶⁰ In the words of an Indian saying, ‘He takes the forms that are imagined by His worshippers.’⁶¹ Humanity, according to Schuon, is divided into several fundamentally different branches, which constitute so many complete humanities, more or less closed in on themselves.⁶² To speak of each tradition being “closed in on itself” is to recognise the “relative absolute”⁶³ nature of each of the diverse revelations. Schuon remarks that ‘God, when he speaks, expresses Himself in absolute mode; but this absoluteness relates to the universal content rather than the form’⁶⁴.

To speak of the “difference of human receptacles” is to recognise distinction both between individuals and between collectivities. Man is created in the image of the

⁵⁸ Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, 1990, p.25. Again, Meister Eckhart: ‘...everything that falls away from the One, the First of all things, immediately falls into two and into the other numbers by means of duality’ (*Comm. Genesis* prop.26).

⁵⁹ Schuon, ‘No Activity Without Truth’: Needleman (ed), *The Sword of Gnosis*, 1974, p.4

⁶⁰ Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, 1990, p.25.

⁶¹ As per Ananda Coomaraswamy, ‘Sri Ramakrishna and Religious Tolerance’, *Selected Papers* vol.2 ‘Metaphysics’, 1977, p.36. Again: ‘The colour of the water is the colour of the vessel containing it’ (Abu ‘I-Qasim al-Junayd). Coomaraswamy adds, ‘Very surely He is not to be thought of as confined by or fully expressed by any of these forms, Who is Himself the single form or every form, and transcendent with respect to each and every form.’

⁶² Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, 1990, p.25.

⁶³ Schuon coins this “ill-sounding yet metaphysically useful” expression with reference to the theological perspective and the reality to which it refers (see *In The Face Of The Absolute*, 1989, p.57).

⁶⁴ Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, 1990, p.26.

Divine: transcendent and immanent, absolute and relative. The absolute inherent in the human being allows for qualitative distinction. The Infinity of the Absolute is mirrored on the ontological plane by the indefinitude of possible individuals. Relativity manifests itself in the human collectivity in terms of certain limitations applicable to humankind as a whole. The notion of limitation implies, at least in modern thought, a negative sense, yet to say limitation is equally to say orientation, which recognises the positive notion of “order.” These human collectivities may be ordered or mapped according to temporal and geographical dictations. At a deeper level they can be mapped according to the notions of “race” and “caste.”⁶⁵ A person is absolute in terms of their individuality and relative in terms of the limitations that place them in a particular human collectivity or humanity. Without such orientation the human psyche either flounders in a sea of relativism or is lost in uniformity, which, in the end, amounts to the same thing.⁶⁶

The diversity of human collectivities requires the diversity of Revelation. Each revelation, and the tradition that arises from it, is like a different language; the Truth spoken in these languages remains one even if its expression differs. Schuon remarks that the “apparent anomalies” between traditions are ‘like differences of language or of symbol; contradictions are in human receptacles, not in God; the diversity in the world is a function of its remoteness from the diverse Principle, which amounts to saying that the Creator cannot will both that the world should be, and that it should not be the world.’⁶⁷ Each language is specific to the psychological and spiritual needs of the collectivity to which it is directed; moreover it constitutes a “holy strategy,” what the Buddhists call *upaya*, “skillful means.” To talk of such a “strategy” is to recognise a “strategist” whose intention is precisely salvation. ‘One has to realise’ says Schuon, ‘that outward religion is not disinterested; it wants to save souls, no more no less, and at the cost of the truths that do not serve its holy strategy.’⁶⁸ It is thanks to the efficient intention of a tradition’s

⁶⁵ See Schuon, *Castes and Races*, 1989.

⁶⁶ This constitutes the fate of the modern quantitative mentality. One should see here Guénon’s ‘The Principle of Individuation’ and ‘Uniformity and Unity’, Chs.6 & 7 respectively, *The Reign of Quantity & The Signs of the Times*, 1972.

⁶⁷ Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, 1990, p.26.

⁶⁸ Schuon, *In The Face Of The Absolute*, 1989, p.22.

“strategy” that all orthodox dogmas are justified and are in the final analysis compatible despite their apparent antagonisms.

That the exotericism of a tradition is somewhat bound to “misunderstandings” concerning the validity of different traditions derives from the fact that given its mission it ‘has to take into account the weakness of men, and thus also, be it said without euphemism, their stupidity; like it or not, it must itself take on something of these shortcomings, or at least it must allow them some room, on pain of not being able to survive in human surroundings.’⁶⁹ ‘[T]o speak of form’ says Schuon, ‘is to speak of limits and at the same time therefore of the virtuality of error.’⁷⁰ And this is to say that ‘the formal homogeneity of a religion requires not only truth but also errors—though these only in the form—just as the world require evil and a Divinity implies the mystery of creation by virtue of its infinity.’⁷¹ As Coomaraswamy remarks, the exclusive attachment to any one dogma, however pertinent, entails the error of idolatry: ‘the Truth itself is inexpressible.’⁷² These “errors” are the illusion of Relativity or *Maya*, yet they are precisely illusions and suppose no integral error in either their essence or their efficient purpose.

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

⁶⁹ Schuon, *In The Face Of The Absolute*, 1989, p.26.

⁷⁰ Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.70.

⁷¹ Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.73.

⁷² Coomaraswamy, ‘Sri Ramakrishna and Religious Tolerance’, 1977, p.37.

must submit, almost without exception, to the exoteric forms. ‘Forms’ says Huston Smith in his introduction to Schuon’s, *Transcendent Unity of Religions*, are to be transcended by fathoming their depths and discerning their universal content, not by circumventing them.’⁷³

To say the diversity of human collectivities requires the diversity of Revelation admits a certain causal relationship. This is allowed from a certain perspective; however, in truth it is Revelation that precedes human diversity. This is to return to the idea of Revelation as the cosmogonic Word. Hence, the diverse human collectivities manifest the principal possibility of diversity prefigured *in divinis* by the differentiation between the ‘Absolute as such and the Absolute relativized in view of a dimension of its Infinitude’⁷⁴. And this manifestation is necessitated precisely by the Divine will to reveal Itself, which is to say, by Revelation *per se*. The apparent reversal of this relationship at the terrestrial level accords perfectly with the “law of inverse analogy.”⁷⁵

Moreover, the manifestation of diversity accords with precise metaphysical logic. Formal manifestation implies limit but Manifestation is not arbitrary limitation, for Creation is the “image” of God and thus of Divine Order; this is to say that the limitations inherent in Manifestation are precise according to their symbolic efficaciousness. By way of example: it is sometimes said that there are seven fundamental traditions: the Primordial or Mythological Tradition—of which the Koori peoples of Australia and the Plains Indians might be said to have represented large scale vestiges well into our “modern” or post-mythological age—, the Chinese Tradition, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.⁷⁶ With Islam it is said that the age of Revelation came to a close, which is simply to deny the instigation of another great Tradition. The

⁷³ Smith, Intro. to *The Transcendent Unity of Religion*, 1993, p.xxv.

⁷⁴ Schuon, *In The Face Of The Absolute*, 1989, p.73.

⁷⁵ On the “law of inverse analogy” see Schuon, *Treasures of Buddhism*, 1993, p.84, n.2; *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.106, n.1; *Language of the Self*, 1999, pp.35-6; Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity & The Signs of the Times*, 1972, Ch.25; *Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, Chs.52 & 53; *The Great Triad*, 1994, Ch.7. These ideas are outlined in my ‘Understanding “Symbol”’: *Sacred Web* 6, 2000, pp.91-106.

⁷⁶ See for example Dr. Oldmeadow’s diagram, *Traditionalism: Religion in the Light of the Perennial Philosophy*, 2000, p.77.

limitation placed on the number of revelations has nothing arbitrary about it but rather expresses at the deepest level the fundamental symbolic structure of Being, which manifests in the six spatial directions of the symbolic sphere from the seventh “Primordial” point or centre, both origin and end. This centre point is expressed by the Primordial Tradition. The six “historical” revelations manifest in temporal succession the six symbo-spatial directions of Being.

Other schema have been suggested such as the presentation by William Stoddart of three fundamental traditional lineages: the Hyperborean Shamanisms (Taoism, Confucianism, Shinto, Siberian Shamanism, Bon, and American Indian religion); the Aryan Mythologies (Hinduism, Buddhism, Graeco-Roman religion, ancient Germano-Celtic religion, Jainism, and Zoroastrianism); and the Semitic Monotheisms (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam).⁷⁷ Here it is not a matter of disagreement between two schema but rather a matter of an emphasis, which is far from arbitrary, but expresses a precise symbolic structure; and here it is enough to say that the ternary is associated with the process of manifestation at a particular level just as the septenary is.

The differences in human types are fundamentally mapped by race and caste.⁷⁸ ‘Race’ remarks Schuon, ‘is a form while caste is a spirit’.⁷⁹ Race implies horizontal distinction whereas caste expresses vertical graduation. Again, this is to say that caste exists throughout race. Spiritual typologies can also be classified according to either a contemplative or active tendency. Again the division can be made between exoterists and esoterists. These distinctions are not exclusive but exist in each human collectivity. Each religion must, according to its relatively absolute nature, accommodate all spiritual possibilities. Moreover, the lines of demarcation between all the above typologies are never absolute, existing as they do in the formal plane. This means, as Schuon observes, that the ‘recognition of sufficiently homogeneous human groups or spiritualities does not

⁷⁷ Stoddart, *Outline of Hinduism*, Foundation for Traditional Studies, 1993, p.11 and *Outline of Buddhism*, Foundation for Traditional Studies, 1998, p.10.

⁷⁸ Schuon is careful in discussing these terms to recognise the accretions of meaning imposed upon them by human passions (*Castes and Races*, 1989, pp.7-9). In using these terms Schuon has in mind sacred institutions expressing metaphysical principles.

⁷⁹ Schuon, *Castes and Races*, 1989, p.37.

prevent some individuals from being able to leave their framework, for the human collectivity never has anything absolute about it.⁸⁰



Orthodoxy and Grace

In the final analysis the sense of the sacred guarantees or “proves”⁸¹ the Divine authorship of a traditional form. With regard to the initial revelation of a religious tradition it is the “proximity of the Divine”⁸² that makes the sense of the sacred somewhat undeniable. The miraculous growth of the great religions is evidence, if not proof, of this fact. However, religion is precisely necessitated by the degeneration in our ability to recognise the sacred.⁸³ This is to say that were man fully conscious of the sacred there would be no need of religious forms to guide them back to God, for they would “see God everywhere,” which, amounts to saying—and quiet rightly too—that Creation is the form or “image” of God.⁸⁴ The movement away from the Divine source—concurrent with manifestation—comes with a decline in our sense of the sacred; this effectively means that there needs be an “efficient guarantee” of the forms. This is orthodoxy. The orthodoxy of a tradition is the conformity of the forms to the principles revealed. As René Guénon remarks, the necessary and sufficient condition of orthodoxy is the ‘concordance of a conception with the fundamental principle of the tradition’⁸⁵. Similarly, Schuon says that ‘orthodoxy is the principle of formal homogeneity proper to any authentically spiritual

⁸⁰ Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, 1990, p.25.

⁸¹ Schuon: ‘In order to clarify the function of metaphysical proof, one must start from the idea that human intelligence coincides in its essence with certainty of the Absolute’ (*Logic and Transcendence*, 1975, p.57). Again: ‘In the intellectual order logical proof is only a quite provisional crystallisation of intuition, the modes of which...are incalculable’ (*Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1969, p.10).

⁸² Of course the Divine is always immediate—“closer than your jugular”—; to talk of “proximity” is to talk of the illusion of separation engendered by relativisation; it is man who believes himself “near” or “far” from God.

⁸³ Jesus said: ‘It is not those that are well who need the doctor, but the sick. I have come to call not the upright but sinners to repentance’ (Lk.5:31-32). Again: ‘For the Son of man has come to seek out and save what was lost’ (Lk.19:10).

⁸⁴ In a sense Religion serves to create the abyss between the Divine and the human which it then sets out to cross; see my ‘Preliminary Remarks on Reclaiming the Meaning of “Religion”’: *Sacred Web* 7, 2001, p.64.

⁸⁵ Guénon, *Man and his becoming*, 1981, p.15.

perspective'.⁸⁶

Schuon remarks that there are two principal modes of orthodoxy, 'one being essential or intrinsic and the other formal or extrinsic: the latter concerns its accordance with truth in some particular revealed form, the former its accordance with essential and universal truth'.⁸⁷ These two modes may sometimes oppose another outwardly. He gives the example of Buddhism which, 'on the one hand is extrinsically heterodox in relation to Hinduism, because it is separated from the basic forms of the latter, and on the other hand it is intrinsically orthodox because it accords with the universal truth from which it derives.'⁸⁸ Thus Hinduism is able to recognise the Buddha as an *avatar* of Vishnu.⁸⁹ 'By contrast' continues Schuon, 'the Brahmo-samaj, like every other form of "progressive" neo-Hinduism, is heterodox twice over, firstly in relation to Hinduism and secondly in relation to truth itself, heterodox therefore both from the particular point of view of form and from the universal point of view of essence.'⁹⁰

Orthodoxy binds Tradition to its principle, however Tradition is not bound by orthodoxy. Rather orthodoxy is an element of Tradition. Schuon: 'There are two elements in tradition: orthodoxy and grace.'⁹¹ God sometimes intervenes independently of orthodoxy, and this is grace; but, as Schuon stresses, orthodoxy could not make up for the absence of God.⁹² In this sense Schuon observes: 'The Pharisees possessed orthodoxy and regularity, but possessed neither grace nor the virtues. They did not possess grace because in practice they put their orthodoxy and regularity in place of their living God. They did not possess virtues because they replaced human values—the moral qualification—by outward observances which, being thus isolated, lost their efficacy.... Christ did not deny their authority—"they sit in Moses' seat"—but in spite of this he

⁸⁶ Schuon, *Language of the Self*, 1999, p.1, see Ch.1 'Orthodoxy and Intellectuality'.

⁸⁷ Schuon, *Language of the Self*, 1999, p.1.

⁸⁸ Schuon, *Language of the Self*, 1999, p.1.

⁸⁹ On the relationship between Buddhism and Hinduism see Schuon, *Treasures of Buddhism*, 1993, Ch.2 'The Originality of Buddhism'.

⁹⁰ Schuon, *Language of the Self*, 1999, pp.1-2.

⁹¹ Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.83.

⁹² Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.82.

condemned them.’⁹³ Orthodoxy reduced to formalism puts the effect before the cause thus severing the link to the Principle. Formalism, in this sense, differs from true orthodoxy in the manner of being its counterfeit and parody.

Tradition is guaranteed concomitantly by orthodoxy and grace, in respect of its salvational efficacy. As an aspect of Tradition grace allows for the mutability of the forms. Schuon: ‘Without ever contradicting orthodoxy grace gives new forms of expression, as circumstance may dictate’⁹⁴. In truth grace precedes orthodoxy, moreover in the final analysis, grace instigates Tradition. In a certain sense it may be said that Tradition is a proof of Grace or the Divine Mercy, for Religion and each religion is given by the Grace of God for the sake of human salvation.

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



Providence

The Divine All-Possibility requires that God know Himself as “other than God.” As it is said in the words of the famous *hadith qudsi*: ‘*Kuntu kanzan makhfian fa ‘ahbibtu ‘an ‘ur ‘afa, fakhalaqtu ‘khalqa lakai ‘urafa* (I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be known, so I created the creation in order that I might be known).’ Again, Schuon: ‘God unfolds his possibilities in differentiated mode and He creates man in order to have a witness to this unfolding; in other words, He projects Himself into relativity in

⁹³ Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.83.

⁹⁴ Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.83.

order to perceive Himself in relative mode.’⁹⁵ Man’s efficient purpose is the realisation of God. As Mister Eckhart says, ‘God cannot know himself without me.’⁹⁶ But for God to perceive Himself through man man must first perceive himself as separate. It is thus that man must suffer the Fall and, equally, that he must be redeemed. Schuon: ‘Man could not not fall, since God could not not create.’⁹⁷ All this in accordance with the Divine Will.

That man should be willed to “return to God” means that Revelation, Tradition and religious forms are divinely willed. As Schuon remarks, in the elements of orthodoxy and grace dwells a third element, which in reality comes first, and this is the Divine Will, ‘of which man can never grasp all the dimensions at one at the same time.’⁹⁸ Orthodoxy and grace manifest the intention of the Divine Will to salvation.

To talk of the Divine Will is to talk concurrently, in the words of Boethius, of Providence and Fate: ‘Providence is the divine reason itself. It is set at the head of all things and disposes all things. Fate, on the other hand, is the planned order inherent in things subject to change through the medium of which Providence binds everything in its own place. Providence includes all things at the same time, however diverse or infinite, while Fate controls the motion of different individual things in different places and at different times.’⁹⁹ The relationship between the ever-changing course of Fate and the stable simplicity of Providence is like that between that which is coming into being and that which is, between time and eternity, or between the moving circle and the still point in the middle.¹⁰⁰ From the central point of Providence God is afforded total and immediate knowledge of all the possibilities that do, or do not, eventuate in the manifest realm of Fate. God is both immanent and transcendent, allowing at the same time man to have free will without the burden of predestination. All destinations are allowed for

⁹⁵ Schuon, *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, 1976, p.185.

⁹⁶ Again: ‘He hath brought me forth in the image of His eternal fatherhood, that I should also be a father and bring forth Him’ (both citations from Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000 p.50).

⁹⁷ Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.216.

⁹⁸ Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.83.

⁹⁹ Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, tr. Chadwick, 1990, p.135.

¹⁰⁰ Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, tr. Chadwick, 1990, pp.136-37.

virtually if not efficiently.¹⁰¹ Etienne Gilson summarizes this by stressing the name of “providence”: ‘He does not foresee, he provides; his name is not “foresight” but “providence”.’¹⁰²

God provides according to human need. Human need changes according to man’s remoteness from the Divine. Considered with respect to the macrocosm, man’s remoteness is measured according to a pattern of cyclic degeneration.¹⁰³ The Divine Providence “knows” these patterns in the manner of being their principle. The degeneration of human intelligence and the corresponding adaptation of the forms to meet this are prefigured *in divinis*. The forms are providential; they adapt according to requirement, manifesting as such in the realm of Fate, yet these manifestations are far from arbitrary, preexisting as they do in Providence. That certain manifestations of truth may appear to contradict earlier manifestations simply reveals, in the words of Martin Lings, that ‘the needs of the eleventh hour are not the same as those of the sixth or seventh.’¹⁰⁴ Again this is to realise that ‘all contradictory truths are unified in the Truth.’¹⁰⁵



The meeting of religions

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

¹⁰¹ ‘If you wish to consider, then, the foreknowledge or prevision by which He discovers all things, it will be more correct to think of it not as a kind of foreknowledge of the future, but as the knowledge of a never ending presence’ (Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, (tr.) Chadwick, 1990, p.165).

¹⁰² Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, 1955, p.103.

¹⁰³ The most precise formulation of this exists with the Hindu doctrine of cycles (*Manvantara*).

¹⁰⁴ Lings, *The Eleventh Hour*, 1987, p.34.

¹⁰⁵ ‘Abd al-Karim Jili, cited in Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.835.

source, until they vanish into the darkness. This darkness is one. The distinction between the Sun and the dark is analogous to that between Essence and Substance. In reality Essence and Substance are One.¹⁰⁶ As Schuon remarks, Essence and Substance are almost synonymous in practice, differing only in that substance refers to ‘the underlying, immanent, permanent and autonomous nature of a basic reality, whereas essence refers to the reality as such, that is, as “being,” and secondarily as the absolutely fundamental nature of a thing.’ He continues, ‘The notion of essence denotes an excellence which is as it were discontinuous in relation to accidents, whereas the notion of substance implies on the contrary a sort of continuity.’¹⁰⁷

It is said: ‘I being one become many, and being many become one.’¹⁰⁸ Cosmologically, this refers, in part, to the cyclic nature of manifestation. However, the movement towards nondistinction at the end of an age should not be mistaken for a qualitative movement towards Unity, for, as Guénon has remarked, this is a movement into Uniformity, which is “the Great Parody” of Unity.¹⁰⁹ This is simply in keeping with the principle of inversion proper to any cycle.

One effect of this levelling of diversity is the revealing of the analogy between forms. This has both beneficent and maleficent results according to the perspective adopted, which is to say, whether it is viewed from the point of view of truth or that of error. Beneficially, the analogy of traditional forms reveals the essential or “transcendental unity” of the forms, while at the same time affirming the Divine Infinitude in the diversity of form. Thus the analogy of two forms acts to enrich each form without ever denying the specific nature of either form.¹¹⁰ Mircea Eliade remarks,

¹⁰⁶ Thus the Greek term *ousia* is translated variously as ‘essence’ and ‘substance’ (see Burckhardt, *Alchemy*, 1974, p.36, n.3). Similarly the Arabic term ‘*ayn*’ (see Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, 1976, p.62, n.1).

¹⁰⁷ Schuon, *In The Face Of The Absolute*, 1989, p.53, n.1.

¹⁰⁸ *Samyutta-nikaya*, II.212, cited in Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000 p.272, to offer but one such example of this formula.

¹⁰⁹ See Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity & The Signs of the Times*, 1972.

¹¹⁰ This is to say with Adrian Snodgrass that ‘adequation is not equality’ (*Architecture, Time and Eternity Vol.1*, 1990, pp.48). Paul Tillich observes that every symbol has ‘a special function which is just *it* and cannot be replaced by more or less adequate symbols’ (*Religious Symbols and Our Knowledge of God*, 1973, p.482). See my ‘Understanding “Symbol”’: *Sacred Web* 6, 2000.

‘We compare or contrast two expressions of a symbol not in order to reduce them to a single, pre-existing expression, but in order to discover the process whereby a structure is likely to assume enriched meanings.’¹¹¹

In our age it may happen that the understanding of a traditional form can become muddled by the decline in the human intelligence, which is itself somewhat inevitable given the cyclic movement away from the Source. In such cases drawing analogy between forms can serve to clarify. Guénon: ‘The concordances between all traditional forms may be said to represent genuine “synonymies;” that is how we regard them, and just as the explanation of certain things may be easier in one language than in another, so one of these forms may be better fitted than others for expounding certain truths and rendering them easier to understand.’¹¹² Coomaraswamy remarks: ‘every tradition is necessarily a partial representation of the truth intended by tradition universally considered; in each tradition something is suppressed, or reserved, or obscured which in another may be found more extensively, more logically, or more brilliantly developed. What then is clear and full in one tradition can be used to develop the meaning of what may be hardly more than alluded to in another.’¹¹³ Such clarification and enrichment might well occur at any stage of a cycle; the understanding of a form need not become lost before it can be enriched.

There are two principal dangers in the analogy of forms: reductionism and syncretism. Reductionism amounts to a denial of the integrity of the forms. Adrian Snodgrass remarks that, ‘the multivalent nature of the symbol precludes a reductionist methodology.’¹¹⁴ As Eliade says, ‘If we retain only one of its significations, in declaring it the only “fundamental” or “first” or “original” signification, we risk not grasping the true message of the symbol.’¹¹⁵ Snodgrass stresses this point: ‘An exegesis that does justice to the fullness of the symbol in both its horizontal and vertical dimensions will

¹¹¹ Eliade, ‘Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism’: Eliade & Kitagawa, *The History of Religion*, 1959, pp.86-107.

¹¹² Guénon, *The Symbolism of the Cross*, 1975, pp.xi.

¹¹³ Coomaraswamy, ‘Sri Ramakrishna and Religious Tolerance’, 1977, p.40.

¹¹⁴ Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stupa*, 1985, p.8.

¹¹⁵ Eliade, *Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts*, 1992, p.5.

leave its meaning “open” and not confine it within the limiting configuration of a closed hypothesis’¹¹⁶.

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

‘Syncretism’ as Guénon remarks, ‘consists in assembling from the outside a number of more or less incongruous elements which, when regarded, can never be truly unified; in short, it is a kind of eclecticism, with all the fragmentariness and incoherence that this always implies.’ He contrasts this with synthesis, which, ‘on the other hand, is carried out essentially from within; by this we mean that it properly consists in envisaging things in the unity of their principle, in seeing how they are derived from and dependent on that principle, and thus uniting them, or rather becoming aware of their real unity, by virtue of a wholly inward bond, inherent in what is most profound in their nature.’¹¹⁷ ‘Syncretism,’ says Guénon, ‘is something purely outward and superficial; the elements taken from every quarter and put together in this way can never amount to anything more than borrowings that are incapable of being effectively integrated into a doctrine worthy of the name.’¹¹⁸ In contrast, the synthetic analogy between forms in no way indicates “borrowings” but pertains to ‘the Primordial Tradition from which these forms have issued either directly or indirectly.’¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stupa*, 1985, p.8.

¹¹⁷ Guénon, *The Symbolism of the Cross*, 1975, pp.x.

¹¹⁸ Guénon, *The Symbolism of the Cross*, 1975, pp.x.

¹¹⁹ Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, p.27. The mention of the “Primordial Tradition” raises complex questions in the context of a traditionalist critique. For the sake of simplicity we might say that what is at

We have said that examples of the Primordial or Mythological Tradition are, or at least were, recognisable in our day and age in the Koori peoples of Australia and the Plains Indians. In saying, as Guénon does, that the forms have “issued” from the Primordial Tradition we in no way intend to imply that the forms of “later” traditions were derived, as it were, from the forms of these “earlier” primitive traditions. These primitive traditions represent a mentality wherein, as Eliade observes, ‘nature is a hierophany, and the “laws of nature” are the revelation of the mode of existence of the divinity.’¹²⁰ This mentality represents the normative mentality of the human condition, the state of original perfection and unity in which God is seen everywhere. These traditions express the Primordial Tradition not by any singularity of form but by the integrity of being unencumbered by the obscuration of a dualistic perspective and the reflection, in the human plane, of principal eternity itself.¹²¹

The Primordial Tradition refers to the “primordial state.” This, in the final analysis, is none other than Substance, cosmologically speaking, *materia prima*, *mulaprakrti*, hyle, etc.. Substance, as Schuon remarks, ‘is represented at each ontological or cosmic level in appropriate mode; and *a fortiori*, pure Substance or Substance as such underlies each of its secondary manifestations.’¹²² To talk then of the Primordial Tradition is to talk of the continuity between a particular mode of Substance with its underling reality. As such one can say that all traditions born of Divine Revelation are, in their essence and origin, the Primordial Tradition. Likewise the perfection of each tradition coincides with the Primordial Tradition. The forms of the traditions are manifest in Substance and manifest precisely as “things.” Here Schuon remarks, ‘Things are coagulations of universal Substance, but Substance is not affected (this is crucial) by those accidents in the slightest degree. Substance is not things, but things are it, and they

issue is the question of a single “historical” primordial tradition as distinct from a more symbolic reading of this phrase. For some discussion of these issues see:

<http://www.religioperennis.org/documents/smith/PrimordialT.pdf>;

<http://www.religioperennis.org/documents/charlesupton/ATLANTISHYPERBOREA.pdf>.

¹²⁰ Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, 1974, p.59.

¹²¹ Guénon, ‘Aperçus sur l’Initiation’, p.278, cited in Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000 p.561.

¹²² Schuon, *In the Face of the Absolute*, 1989, p.56.

are so by virtue of their existence and of their qualities'¹²³ The Primordial Tradition is thus the underlying reality of form without itself being a formal manifestation *per se*.

To talk of the reestablishment of the Primordial Tradition in any sort of temporal or historical sense is, properly considered, simply to talk of the recognition of unity and purity in the forms of an orthodox tradition. The recognition, by a qualified intellect, of the Primordial Tradition in diverse religious forms is a recognition of the eternal substratum of Reality. It is a recognition of that which was lost but now is found.¹²⁴ The idea of a recreation of a “Primordial Tradition,” in the sense of a new religion is simply a syncretic illusion. Such a singular tradition could never have existed, given precisely that existence is manifestation and this is distinction and diversity. Moreover it is incorrect to think that one could “recreate” the Primordial Tradition in any sort of a-temporal or metaphysical sense either, for it is the very basis of creation itself. In the words of the alchemist, Michael Sendivogius, ‘Let no one presume that he can make the first matter.’¹²⁵ This last point puts to rest the error of thinking that the “transcendent unity of religions” could give rise to a single religious tradition, a criticism sometimes levelled at the *sophia perennis* or *religio perennis*, by those who fail to understand metaphysics *per se*. The *religio perennis* is not a “new” religion far less a “super religion”; worship of God is not to be replaced with discernment of an abstract “Absolute.” Rather, God is Absolute and therefore supremely worthy of worship.



The Message and the messenger

God is the Author and man is the word made flesh. God is the Hand that guides

¹²³ Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, 1965, p.77.

¹²⁴ In the story of the prodigal son (Lk.15) it is the younger or second son that became lost. This may seem to contradict the idea of the Primordial Tradition—that which has become lost—as being the first tradition, however, here we have another example of the law of inverse analogy. Of course, from the Divine perspective the Primordial Tradition is never lost but remains with the father, whereas, it is the younger traditions that become “lost” in the flux and degeneration of creation.

¹²⁵ Sendivogius, ‘The New Chemical Light’: (ed.) Waite, *The Hermetic Museum Vol.2*, 1999, p.95.

and man is the pen. God is the Creator and man is creation. God is immutable Essence and man is mutable form. God is the Message and man is the messenger.

God as Message manifests the divine aspiration to Unity. The divine Message is the message of salvation; to be effective it must submit itself to being delivered on the formal plane, it must be humbled, as with Christ's *kenosis* (Ph.2:1-11), so that it might be "raised on high."¹²⁶ Man as messenger delivers the supraformal Message in formal language so that he himself might recognise in this Message his own essence and be released from the bonds of form. To cite a well-known formula: 'God became man so that man could become God.'

Schuon: 'One cannot understand the meaning of the divine Message without knowing the nature of the human receptacle; he who understands man, understands all the supernatural and cannot help but accept it. Now man is made to contemplate the Absolute starting from the contingency; the Absolute is conscious of Itself in Itself, but It also wishes to be conscious of Itself starting from an other than Itself; this indirect vision is a possibility necessarily included in the Infinitude belonging to the Absolute. ...Fundamentally, this Message comes from "himself," not of course from his empirical "I" but from his immanent Ipseity, which is that of God and without which there would be no "I," whether human, angelic, or any other; credibility of the message results from the fact that it is what we are, both within ourselves and beyond ourselves. In the depths of transcendence is immanence, and in the depths of immanence, transcendence.'¹²⁷

The question of the relationship between Message and messenger is, in the final analysis, the question of identity. To say that the Message is pre-eminent over the messenger is to recognise the absolute discontinuity between the Essence and Substance or between God and man. 'Why do you call me good?' demanded Christ, 'No one is good but God alone.' The human being is a tool in the hand of God, through which and to

¹²⁶ See my 'Withdrawal, Extinction and Creation: Christ's *kenosis* in light of the Judaic doctrine of *tsimsum* and the Islamic doctrine of *fana'*: in *The Essential Sophia*, (ed.) S.H. Nasr & K. O'Brien, Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 2006, 58-77 (originally published in *Sophia*, Vol.7 No.1, 2001).

¹²⁷ Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, 1982, pp.152-53.

whom Revelation is delivered. This tool is necessarily imperfect, or else man would be God. At the same time man is made “in the image” of God; thus there is in man the perfection of the Divine. Here, in the words of a well known Islamic formula, it is perfectly true to say that ‘he who has seen the Prophet has seen God.’ As Schuon says: ‘That we are conformed to God,—“made in His image,”—this is certain; otherwise we should not exist. That we are contrary to God, this also is certain; otherwise we should not be different from God. Without analogy with God we should be nothing. Without opposition to God we should be God.’¹²⁸ ‘No one is good but God alone.’ ‘He who has seen the Prophet has seen God.’ Between these two positions lies the mystery of Revelation.

The perfection of the divine Message is, from the point of view of Manifestation, measured by the perfection of its messenger and then again by the perfection of its recipient. Of course the Message is of Itself Absolute yet for it to be effective it must accept the limitations of the human receptacle. It is in this sense that Schuon places esotericism beyond the “Message,” in that esotericism, as he comments, ‘is not a religious Message and derives from the Intellect more than from Revelation’¹²⁹ Here of course esotericism is, from a certain perspective, identical with the pure Message. The “Word made flesh” remains the Word.

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

¹²⁸ Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.167.

¹²⁹ Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, 1982, p.136.

teaches Nagarjuna.¹³⁰ In the *avatar* Message and messenger are one: “true God and true man.”

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

Thus even in the perfection of the *avatar* there must be, not contractions but paradoxes.¹³¹ Between Jesus’ injunction to “turn the other cheek” and his violent expulsion of the money lenders from the Temple there is the appearance of contradiction—if not hypocrisy—yet here this very paradox serves as a key to the merciful truth of Divine Judgment.¹³² Again, Schuon remarks: ‘The Bible, whose perspective is above all legalistic since it is moral, reproaches Solomon for having constructed temples for the divinities of his foreign wives, but it adds nonetheless that Solomon “slept with his fathers,” a formula which is also used in speaking of David and which refers to posthumous Beatitude. It would be contradictory, to say the least, to doubt the salvation of an author whose writings are included in the Bible; if there are differences of opinion on the subject of Solomon, it is because of a conflict of levels and not because of an ambiguity situated on one and the same plane.’¹³³

¹³⁰ *Madhyamakakarika*, xxv. 19-20. As Schuon observes, ‘the Bodhisattva, since he realizes the “emptiness” of things, thereby also realizes the “emptiness” of the samsara as such and at the same time its nirvanic quality. If on the one hand all is “emptiness,” on the other hand all is Nirvana, the Buddhist notion of vacuity being at one and the same time negative and positive’ (*Treasures of Buddhism*, 1993, p.139).

¹³¹ Schuon: ‘ “Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is God,” said Christ; which signifies that every manifestation, even if divine, implies imperfection; it implies it because it is manifestation, and not on account of its content, since the latter may be divine, and therefore “absolute.” ’ (*Language of the Self*, 1999, p.13).

¹³² ‘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!’ (Gen. R. xxii. 15).

¹³³ Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, 1982, p.131, n.20.

On the one hand it is enough to say that God chooses His messengers; the incidental imperfection of the messenger cannot possibly effect the essence of the Message. It is simply beyond the power of man to do damage to God in any real sense. On the other hand the imperfection of the messenger is both precise and providential. It is a measure of the mystery of Transcendence and Immanence.¹³⁴ At the same time it is a guard against the false attribution of the Message to the messenger; the merciful protection against the error of idolatry.

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

¹³⁴ As Schuon remarks, ‘apparent ineptness is often the measure of the supernatural’ (*From the Divine to the Human*, 1982, p.132).