

Letters to the Editor

Christianity and Traditional Metaphysics

Etre parfaitement objectif, c'est un peu mourir.

[Frithjof Schuon]

Thanks to Dr. Wolfgang Smith for replying at length to my questions about the Trinity and Christian metaphysics in issue 29 of *Sacred Web*, and thanks to him in particular for his great clarity of expression. Even if one disagrees with him, one knows exactly what one disagrees with.

This is a difficult letter. I fear I must disagree with what Dr. Smith has written, and of course I am in these matters out of my depth while he can fairly be described as brilliant and his immense erudition is obvious. But the matters discussed are so central to an understanding of Christian doctrine and of the Christian way that I feel obliged to obey even inchoate objections and express them even inarticulately in the hope that this may raise further discussion to clarify these things, not least for my own sake.

And the crux of the matter is that it seems *necessarily untrue* that Christianity should bring anything essentially different or new or superior to that offered by the other revelations, and this because ultimate Truth must be in the very structure of reality and in the very nature of consciousness, and therefore in principle be always available—how could God be God and man be man if this were not so? It would seem to be the intrinsic nature of reality that prompts revelation. “It is a great joy to realize that the Path of Deliverance which all the Buddhas have traveled, is always existent, always unchanging and always open to those who are ready to enter upon it.” We can never be “utterly cut off.” We

have in addition the proof of other revelations' manifest saving power, their supernatural beauty, their earth-moving effect.

Further and more concretely, the writings of Guenon, Schuon, Coomaraswamy and others have borne hugely of good fruit in an understanding of the Christian religion and more particularly toward its assimilation in a reconciliation with and the beginning of an assimilation to the Interior Christ whose life, as Boehme and Law both eloquently say, must be lived within the soul if the soul is to be saved. What would a Christian do in these Last Times were he left without their guidance, particularly if Sherrard is right in saying that most of the Church's deepest teachings were left unwritten? How else could it be that Vedanta, which is the basic viewpoint of these authors, should have such an essentially clarifying and deepening effect on a Christian's faith? Not everyone is capable of assimilating the entire corpus of the Fathers!

St. Thomas said somewhere that raising and answering objections to a position has the effect of clarifying the truth. May it be so here! Please God, I place my judgment in submission to the Truth and its legitimate spokesmen, and I ask readers to help both with clarifying the questions and supplying answers.

I reproduce below excerpts from Dr. Smith's response to my letter to him on Christian Metaphysics, with my comments and questions following:

What renders the issues Mr. Moore has raised significant in the extreme is the fact that not only Christian theology and metaphysics, but the Christian life as such rest squarely upon that Trinitarian doctrine. And this explains the immense concern, on the part of nascent Christianity, to formulate that primary and all-important doctrine with the greatest conceivable precision, and to protect the faithful from contact with heretical sects. It seems the Fathers understood, far better than we, the havoc erroneous theological conceptions invariably wreak upon the spiritual life.

I agree wholeheartedly with Dr. Smith that the Christian viator's salvation lies precisely in his relationship with the Persons, in particular with Christ, and that the first duty of the Church is to preserve the purity of this doctrine and the related sacraments.

The first question Mr. Moore poses relates to what some refer to as the "God beyond God" hypothesis: the idea, namely, that the Trinity refers to a "lesser God," a God that stands to the Absolute essentially as *Isvara* to *nirguna Brahman*. For my part, I maintain that this thesis is in fact heretical, and can be viewed as inherently Sabellian. And Mr. Moore disagrees: what I, in the name of Christian orthodoxy, judge to be heresy, he perceives apparently as an esoteric truth.

The question whether the doctrine of the Trinity is exoteric or esoteric is beside the point, which is: is it really true that this hypothesis is inherently Sabellian? I am far out of my depth here. But if the Essence is as the Fathers say beyond all being and knowledge (by “excess of clarity”) the question of “mode” would seem not to arise. There is no “what” of which the Persons can be modes. If “Unity is already a procession”, being coextensive with Being, then Trinity too would seem to be within the uncreated *Maya*, and a “face of God” turned toward man: as Schuon put it, “an arrangement of God in view of incarnation.” It would not be the Essence That is revealed to man, or with Which man has a relation, or Which saves him. It is the Trinity that saves us by the Father begetting the Son in us and by the Spirit filling the soul with His gifts. Eckhart says in his Commentary on Exodus, “...the emanation of the Persons in the Godhead is the prior ground of creation.” And Sherrard: “Yet if God according to His Essence is unknowable, He may nevertheless be known as a Trinity of three Persons ...” But of course “there are not two”: “The Essence is not the hypostasis, nor the hypostasis the Essence. On the other hand, there is no absolute separation between them, in the sense that the Essence may be considered as without hypostasis, or without hypostatic powers [Sherrard means that It cannot be so considered], or conversely, that the hypostasis, or the hypostatic powers, may be considered as without the Essence.” There is no facile division, but Essence in a sense has nothing to do with man.

The point is made in the form of a query: “How does Dr. Smith explain the undeniable reality that, to put it baldly, ‘one comes before three’?” It is needful, first of all, to understand that Trinitarian theology is not a question of arithmetic. The Greek and Latin Fathers, who formulated that doctrine, realized full well that in fact it transgresses the bounds of human rationality. And this means that words, or the concepts they signify, assume a radically new significance. Call it “symbolic” or what you will: the point is that Trinitarian theology is not simply a matter of philosophical discourse in the ordinary sense.

This does not conclude. Of course metaphysical number is not discrete quantity, but if numbers have any role as symbols in metaphysical discourse, which of course they do, it is because their qualities reflect higher realities and therefore shed at least dim light on them for our minds. Likewise, it is true that we are reasoning about things that transcend not only the mode of existence we most readily experience, but the entire created order. But concepts have their rights—the Fathers do not hesitate to speak even of the incommunicable Essence. *Intellege ut*

credas! So: one comes “before” three at all levels, in the mode appropriate to each level, and this cannot be gainsaid. The question remains then, how to apply this truth to the case of the three co-equal Persons? At the level of the Trinity itself, this priority exists in the Father who “originates” the Son and the Holy Spirit, but even here one can ask whether Being is one “before” it is three, and the answer to this question would obviously affect the answer to the question of other revelation’s validity.

One needs to realize that what gives substance to the doctrine and renders it both sacred and true are the actual words of Christ Himself: the very words declared by the Savior to be “spirit and life.” It suffices in fact to read the Gospel of St. John in light of the Patristic commentaries to discern the twin doctrines upon which Christianity is based: that of the Trinity and of the Incarnation.

Very true: Christianity is first and foremost Christ; thus Incarnation; thus Trinity. That the Trinity be an arrangement of God in view of incarnation would seem to explain the care the Church has taken to defend Trinity, for without interior incarnation, death and resurrection, our faith is vain.

But let us get back to “the undeniable reality that one comes before three”: I will not attempt, at this point, to argue against the “God beyond God” thesis from the ground up; after all, I have devoted an entire book to that task. Suffice it to show, with the utmost brevity, that Meister Eckhart—who is generally perceived by the erudite as the prime champion of “God beyond God” theology—has in fact repudiated that position. He does so, for instance, in Sermon 10, which broaches the subject with the words: “There is a power in the soul which seeks the ground [of God] ... and takes God in his oneness and in his solitary wilderness, in his vast wasteland, and in his own ground.” Admittedly, this does sound very much like “God beyond God” theology; but wait: this is not all the Meister has to tell.” I once said in a Latin sermon on the Feast of the Trinity” he continues, and goes on to say:

The difference comes from the oneness, that is, the difference in the Trinity. The oneness is the difference and the difference is the oneness. The greater the difference, the greater the unity, because this is difference beyond difference.

Here we have it: in the Trinity “the one is the three and the three is the one.” The “one,” thus, is not after all “before the three”! What confronts us in this Eckhartian dictum is indeed the authentic Trinitarian nondualism, which seems not to coincide with the Shankarian. But let it be clearly understood that this does not render the Christian doctrine “exoteric” as many incline to believe: nothing could be further from the truth!

Once again, the question of exoterism is irrelevant. As to the Eckhartian text, once again I am out of my depth, but it is fair to point out that the context is the soul’s oneness with God in her highest part and that Eckhart seems—audaciously—to be using the oneness of the Trinity as

a parallel. Moreover, in the same text Eckhart describes the soul as being satisfied neither with God as good nor as true—predicates that belong to the Persons. In Sermon 40 Eckhart says, also speaking of the soul's unity with God, "Concerning the Three Persons in God: there are three of them without number [ie, the three in question is not a quantity], but they are a multiplicity. Between man and God, however, there is not only no distinction, there is no multiplicity either." In the last sentence, Eckhart is speaking of the Supreme Identity. Lastly, how can one speak of "different kinds" of non-dualism?

One more point pertaining to Question 1: Mr. Moore refers to the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas, according to which Essence stands to Person as "substance" to "relation." Now, without wishing to deny that this (inherently Aristotelian) formulation has its merit and its *raison d'être*, I would argue that it ranks in authority below the less articulated formulations of the Fathers, which are common to both the Roman and the Orthodox Church. The fact, moreover, that the Eckhartian nondualism does not apply so long as the Trinity is viewed Thomistically is to me an argument against the primacy of that formulation.

It has been many years since I read Thomas's exposition of the Persons being relations *per se subsistens*, so I cannot comment adequately on this doctrine, but from memory Thomas's entire purpose here is to explain how the Essence and the Persons are one while preserving the distinction among the Persons. In any event, I agree with Dr. Smith that Thomas's theory is a permissible but not obligatory theological opinion.

This brings us to the second query: what is it that differentiates Christian metaphysics from that of other traditions? Again, an excellent and vitally important question. On the face of it, if one defines metaphysics classically as "the science of being as being," or as "the doctrine of the Absolute and the Relative, or the One and the Many," as does Mr. Moore, it would seem that there can be no such thing as a Christian metaphysics, any more than there can be, say, a "Christian arithmetic." Yet the fact remains that Patristic metaphysics broke away from the Platonist mold at its very inception. Take Clement of Alexandria, for instance: an ardent Platonist prior to his conversion, who continued moreover to regard Greek philosophy as a providentially ordained preparation for the reception of the Christian faith, he had this to say:

Our gnosis, and our spiritual garden, is the Savior Himself, into whom we are planted, being transferred from our old life into the good land... The Lord, then, into whom we have been transplanted, is the Light and the true Gnosis.

Obviously this is a far cry from Platonism! It appears that with the advent of Christ everything on earth has changed; even the metaphysical landscape is no longer the same: not for the Christian! A profound division has befallen mankind: what is sacred and saving truth for the disciples of Christ is indeed "foolishness to the Greeks" as St. Paul has declared. And the fateful divide persists to this day, and only grows deeper with the passing of time.

This is *not true!* How can anything essential “change”? If Christ brought “change” He would not be worth listening to, *quod absit!* Christ came to restore! And how does Christ’s advent as the true Gnosis mean that Gnosis is not in principle accessible always and everywhere and without condition? The Word remains Word, *Intellectus*—the Light enlightening every man and *incretatus et increabile*—remains *Intellectus*. Christ simply reveals Word and Intellect once again. It is the interior Word and assimilation to It and by It that is all in all; that this assimilation should have been made possible by the Incarnation in *no way* implies that the Word did not reveal Itself in other ways at other times to other men. As for the Greeks to whom the new revelation is foolishness, are we speaking of true “philosophers” or of sophists? In any event, Christians have made use of Greek thought to elaborate Christian doctrine so that, to the extent they have done so, there is no contradiction. The apostles and the fathers rightly emphasized the newness of the gospel because it was their role to articulate and spread a new revelation to a world that had forgotten the truth—but it is a revelation of a truth that is itself far beyond any possibility of newness.

What needs to be grasped with the utmost clarity is that Christianity rests squarely upon the Petrine recognition, the one “flesh and blood has not revealed”: the realization, namely, that “Thou art the Son of the living God.” This “act of faith” is indeed “the rock” upon which the true Church is founded (Matt 16.17,18), the pivot upon which everything Christian turns—even its metaphysics! Let us never forget that Jesus of Nazareth was neither a *rishi* nor a prophet: clearly, no *rishi* and no prophet ever said—or could say—what Christ has declared. What prophet, indeed, has ever proclaimed: “*Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood there is no life in you*”? Only a madman—or in truth the Son of the living God!—can speak these words. And let us clearly understand that Christian metaphysics springs from the teaching of Jesus Christ; as I have said before, what renders the new metaphysics both sacred and true are indeed the actual words of Christ: words which spring directly from the Word and lead back to the Word, from which, as “spirit and life,” they are inseparable. It turns out, thus, that Clement of Alexandria was right: “the Savior Himself, into whom we have been transplanted, is the Light and the true Gnosis.” And let me emphasize also the words “into whom we have been transplanted”: everything hinges upon that!

This tells us what it is that distinguishes Christian metaphysics from that of all other sapiential traditions, and shows why this teaching is nowhere to be found in any non-Christian religion.

Indeed for the Christian it is Christ who is Son begotten of the Father and Word. But this in no way except in form distinguishes Christianity from other revelations of the Word. Indeed, it is precisely the universality

of the Word at the heart of existence and at the heart of every man that makes the Christian revelation irrefutable and inescapable: Christ came to reveal *what we had lost*.

I believe that the Essence is, as the Fathers say, beyond predicate, being, and knowing; for the Essence “there exists neither heaven nor earth”. But God made the Trinitarian and Incarnationist revelation precisely to allow Fallen man once again to return to his source through the Man-God, Jesus Christ, who is the Way back to the Father, and it is not until we have returned to our source in Being that we can thence step over into the Unknown Good.

Admittedly, there exists a plethora of concordances between Christianity and other *bona fide* religions—not to speak of a meeting of hearts!—yet the fact remains that these concordances do not take us into the core of the Christian teaching, which is precisely the Trinitarian metaphysics. On the contrary: Shankarian Vedanta, for example, inasmuch as it commits us to a “God beyond God” interpretation of the Trinity, repudiates the Trinitarian metaphysics by demoting that doctrine in effect to the status of an exoteric belief, while replacing it with its own version of *advaita*. I must consequently disagree with Mr. Moore when he asserts (again in the form of a question): “Is it not precisely the depths of one’s own tradition that can best be elucidated, at need, through metaphysics as articulated through other traditions?” But how can “other traditions” elucidate “the depths” of Christian doctrine if they lead to an erroneous conception of the Trinity? And is it not strange to imagine that one can glean from a human master, no matter how enlightened, what cannot be learned from the Son of God? I would contend that no matter how true and profound these non-Christian teachings may be in their own right, they are far more likely to prevent us from ever grasping the core teachings of Christianity: that a Christian who turns, say, to the Vedanta for enlightenment, is far more likely to end up in a state of considerable confusion, if not in outright heresy. There is wisdom, after all, in the biblical admonition not to “drink from foreign cisterns”! Whatever the gain may be, to do so courts danger of various kinds, not the least of which, it seems, springs from the pretensions of a questionable esoterism.

On the contrary: to take one particular example, Guénon’s essay *Al Faqr*, based essentially on Vedanta but citing Muslim, Taoist, and Christian sources, is unsurpassed in helping a Christian understand the meaning of, and thus in supporting a Christian’s acquisition of that *apatheia* which Christ demands as a condition of salvation. There are so many examples of this that it is surprising one has to mention it. For that matter, the *Bhagavad Gita* makes Eckhart’s admonition to act without a purpose intelligible in an orthodox way. The legitimate and inspired spokesmen of other religions are not speaking for themselves!

Most fittingly, therefore, Mr. Moore concludes with the question: “How then can ‘truth be one’?” The answer, I believe, is the same for Christians, Hindus, or Platonists: that

the ultimate gnosis, namely, is perforce no longer doctrinal, no longer conceptual, no longer *mediated*." For now we see through a glass, darkly, but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known" (1 Cor. 13.12). We need to realize that concepts as such constitute "a glass" through which one sees "darkly." It is thus in *unmediated* gnosis that metaphysics attains its consummation. And so too, presumably, it is in the ultimate gnosis that the "transcendent unity of religions" is to be found, if indeed there is such a unity.

We do see now only through a glass darkly. But men must think, even about the unthinkable. Reason, aided by Intellect, has its rights and right reason has an immensely fruitful effect on one's relationship with Christ. True, we shall, God willing, fully understand the essential unity of revealed truth once we have attained to unmediated gnosis, but that is no argument that we cannot glimpse this unity obscurely even in our fallen state.

I don't believe that there is any "primordial religion" accessible to man today; if one ever existed it is long in the past. But essential and ultimate truth *must* exist in the very nature of reality at all levels and at all times. It is precisely because Christianity reveals—anew—the truth that is in reality's very substance and that is in the very nature of consciousness that it has saving power.

Thanks once again to Dr. Smith for his thoughts. They have helped me to clarify my own. If he cares to continue the discussion, I for one am very eager to hear what he has to say.

God knows best.

Patrick Moore

Response to a Letter on the Trinity

In his response to Patrick Moore on Christian Metaphysics, Wolfgang Smith writes:

The first question Mr. Moore poses relates to what some refer to as the "God beyond God" hypothesis: the idea, namely, that the Trinity refers to a "lesser God," a God that stands to the Absolute essentially as *Isbvara* to *Nirguna Brahman*. For my part, I maintain that this thesis is in fact heretical, and can be viewed as inherently Sabellian.

The distinction between *Saguna* and *Nirguna Brahman* is none other than the distinction between the Absolute and the relative *in divinis*, and it corresponds exactly to the distinction Being and Beyond-Being;

metaphysically, the distinction pertains to *Maya*, precisely, for both terms relate to *Atma* as the sole reality, this being the essential point of the doctrine. The metaphysical distinction between the Absolute and the relative, or between Beyond-Being and Being, is the primary and fundamental distinction in metaphysics, hence it is intrinsically orthodox, by definition. Confessional, theological, or formal orthodoxy is one thing, and necessarily varies from one tradition to another, while intrinsic, metaphysical orthodoxy is another, and is universal and invariable. Consequently, the distinction between Being and Beyond-Being, the ontological and the supra-ontological Principle, cannot be heretical, and in fact is the very essence and foundation of every integral traditional esoterism.

That being the case, can the Trinity legitimately be envisaged at the degree of Being, which corresponds to *Saguna Brahman*? Of course, and that is how it is envisaged in Christian theology, which does not—and given its function could not—attain in a fully consequential manner to the metaphysical idea of Beyond-Being. Inasmuch as the Trinity is affirmed as a Trinity of three distinct Persons it is necessarily situated at the degree of the unity of pure Being. As for its reality at the degree of the Essence, it cannot be otherwise than as Schuon formulates it here:

[T]o be sure ... nothing is above God, but the Essence is not, precisely, another God above the differentiated and acting God; it is the same God, but envisaged in another respect, or rather outside of all determinative and limitative relationships.

In a note Schuon continues:

Concerning the transcendence of Beyond-Being, it is necessary to emphasize that in reality it is absolute plenitude and cannot in consequence have a privative meaning: to say that the Trinity is surpassed therein means not that it is abolished as regards what is essential to it but that it is comprised—and prefigured in respect of its ontological or hypostatic projection—in Beyond-Being in a manner at once undifferentiated and eminently positive; in the manner of the Vedantic *Sat-Chit-Ananda* which, while corresponding to an already relative vision, is nonetheless comprised in an ineffable and super-eminent manner in the pure absoluteness of *Atma*.¹



In the light of Schuon's quote just mentioned, one can agree that a "Trinitarian *Advaita*" would be to view the Trinity as the Self-Revelation

¹ Frithjof Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 1982), p. 28, n. 11.

of the Essence, and that “in” the Essence the Trinity, as pure possibility, non-different from the Essence, is necessarily more real than it ever could be as it is in the distinction-in-unity of the Persons in the Unity of God as Being, that is, in relativity *in divinis*, at the summit of *Maya*, because God as Being, who is the “Lord of *Maya*,” implies relationship, hence relativity, whereas God as infinite Essence, hence as the pure Absolute, does not.² These discernments refer to the “metaphysical and not theological Trinity”³ that Schuon has elucidated on several occasions.⁴ Regarding the idea that the Trinity necessarily is both “contained” within the Essence and also “emanates” from it, Schuon explains,

The Hypostases are not “relative,” that is to say “non-absolute” or “less absolute,” inasmuch as they are “contained” in the Essence—this latter, according to a certain early perspective coinciding with the “Father”—they are relative inasmuch as they “emanate” from It; if they were not “contained,” they could not “emanate.” The Hypostases are relative with respect to the Essence and absolute with respect to the world, which amounts to saying—paradoxically but necessarily—that they are “relatively absolute”; that they are so at the ontological level of “emanation,” and not in essentiality, wherein they coincide with the pure Absolute.⁵

Here, Schuon gives a concise summary:

The Trinity can be envisaged according to a “vertical” perspective or according to either of two “horizontal” perspectives, the former of them being supreme and the other not. The “vertical” perspective—Beyond-Being, Being and Existence—envisages the hypostases as “descending” from Unity or from the Absolute—or from the Essence it could be said—which means that it envisages the degrees of Reality; the supreme “horizontal” perspective corresponds to the Vedantic triad *Sat* (supra-ontological Reality), *Chit* (Absolute Consciousness), and *Ananda* (Infinite Bliss), which means it

² “When it is said that the personal God is situated in *Maya*, which runs the risk of being ill-sounding, one must be careful to make it clear that this God is the Supreme Principle ‘entering’ into universal Relativity, hence still ‘Supreme’ despite the ‘entering’; this enables one to affirm that God the Creator and Legislator is at one and the same time *Atma* and *Maya*, or *Atma* in *Maya*, but never simply *Maya*” (Frithjof Schuon, *In the Face of the Absolute* [Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 1994], pp. 21-22, n. 1).

³ Frithjof Schuon, *Roots of the Human Condition* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 1991), p. 71.

⁴ See the chapter “Evidence and Mystery” in *Logic and Transcendence* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2009), as well as the chapters “Transcendence is Not Contrary to Sense” and “The Interplay of the Hypostases” in *From the Divine to the Human*. See also the chapter “The Christian Tradition: Some Thoughts on its Nature” in *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2006), *To Have a Center* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 1990), p. 128, and also in various places *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (Wheaton, IL: Quest, 1984), especially pp. 24-26 and pp. 132-133.

⁵ *From the Divine to the Human*, pp. 41-42.

envisages the Trinity inasmuch as It is hidden in Unity;⁶ the non-supreme “horizontal” perspective on the contrary places Unity as an essence hidden within the Trinity, which is then an ontological Trinity representing the three fundamental aspects or modes of Pure Being, whence we have the triad: Being, Wisdom, Will (Father, Son, Spirit). Now the concept of a Trinity seen as a “deployment” (*tajalli*) of Unity or of the Absolute is in no way opposed to the unitary doctrine of Islam; what is opposed to it is solely the attribution of absoluteness to the Trinity alone, or even to the ontological Trinity alone, as it is envisaged exoterically. This last point of view does not, strictly speaking, attain to the Absolute and this is as much as to say that it attributes an absolute character to what is relative and ignores *Maya* and the degrees of reality or of illusion. It does not conceive of the metaphysical (but not pantheistic) identity between manifestation and the Principle, and still less, therefore, does it conceive of the consequence this identity implies from the point of view of the Intellect and the knowledge which delivers.⁷

It should be clear, therefore, that what could not be acceptable metaphysically is an intrusion of confessional theological bias characterized as a unique metaphysics, which would have this Trinitarian constellation of pure possibilities in the Essence be uniquely identical with the Essence, because the Essence would then be fundamentally limited in this conception, whereas the Essence coincides not only with the pure Absolute but also with All-Possibility. Furthermore, it would not be correct to formulate this matter in a way that implies or affirms that the only possible Self-Revelation of the Essence is Trinity or The Trinity. The Trinity can be discerned in the Essence, but the Trinity conceived in this way within the Divine Essence cannot be held to be unilaterally and exclusively identified with the Divine Essence. It would make no sense—and would also negate the reality of any other religion—to think that the Self-Knowledge of the Absolute coincides exclusively with knowledge of the Trinity. One cannot enclose the Essential Real thus because It is both Absolute and Infinite. The Divine Self “is” *neti, neti*. What is metaphysically legitimate is to say that the Christian Trinity is one possible expression of that Self-Disclosure or Knowledge, namely as its Archetype within pure Being—a possibility which is the foundation of the Christian religion, but not of every religion.

⁶ In a note Schuon adds: “The Absolute is not the Absolute inasmuch as it contains aspects, but inasmuch as It transcends them; inasmuch as It is Trinity It is therefore not Absolute.”

⁷ *Understanding Islam* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 1994), pp. 53-54. Regarding this explanation by Schuon, it may be worth pointing out that metaphysically a manifestation is always essentially one with its cause and never really emerges from it other than “mayically”; and this is prefigured *in divinis*. The whole point of *Maya* is cause and effect. The fundamental or essential non-emergence of the effect from the cause is the whole point of non-duality.

It should also be clear that the distinction Absolute-relative *in divinis*, whether expressed as Beyond-Being and Being or as *Nirguna Brahman* and *Saguna Brahman*, pertains to metaphysical science, and not to any given theology, nor has it any relationship with Sabellianism as a dogmatic perspective. However, the idea that the Persons of the Trinity at the degree of ontological reality must have an aspect of modes is not inherently wrong, provided it not be taken as an exclusively correct perspective: “Equally anti-metaphysical is the Christian opinion that the hypostases are neither substances nor modes, that they are merely ‘relations’ and yet that they are persons. It is appropriate to distinguish between the Trinity and trinitarian theology, and not less between Unity and unitarian theology.”⁸ And also,

According to the Scholastics, Divine Reality is neither purely absolute nor purely relative, but contains *formaliter eminenter* both absoluteness and relativity; this has not prevented the theologians from being apparently disinclined to grasp the implication of these two terms, since they do not draw the obvious conclusions from them. We shall take this opportunity to make the following observation: that the hypostases should have a Personal character—or should be “Persons”—because the Substance imparts its own Personality to them, does not in any way prevent them from being in another respect, or from another point of view, Modes of the One Substance, as Sabellius maintained.⁹

Further, in this connection, Schuon points out that

The theology of the Trinity does not constitute an explicit and homogeneous revelation; it results on the one hand, like the concept of transubstantiation, from a literalistic and quasi-mathematical interpretation of certain words in the Scriptures and on the other hand from a summation of different points of view that are related to different dimensions of the Real.

⁸ Frithjof Schuon, *To Have a Center*, p. 70, n. 2. “This also explains Trinitarianism: there is no need to protest disdainfully—against Sabellius—that the hypostases are not modes but persons; divine modes are necessarily—and by definition—persons as soon as the divine Nature is personal; this is not because the divine Essence could have an individual character but because it is pure Consciousness and is therefore capable of individualizing itself in relation to man” (Frithjof Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence* [Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2009], Appendix selection no. 9, p. 241).

⁹ Frithjof Schuon, *In the Face of the Absolute*, p. 55, n. 3. “When hypostases are defined as ‘modes,’ an objection immediately presents itself, which is the following alternative: if they are modes, they are therefore not Persons—as if there were an irreducible incompatibility; in fact modes can perfectly well have a personal nature, and this tri-personalism in no way prevents God from being a unique Person, to the extent that, or on the plane on which, this definition can properly be applied to Him” (Frithjof Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*, p. 87, n. 9).

Continuing with this explanation, Schuon points out that one of the paradoxes in theological Trinitarianism

is the assertion that the Persons are only relations and that outside these relations they are the Essence, but this amounts to saying that they are nothing, for a pure and simple relation is nothing concrete. One of two things: either the relation gives the Person a certain substance, and then it is by this substance that the Person is distinguished from the other Persons; or else the relation does not confer a substance, and then it is a pure abstraction about which it is useless to speak—unless the relation is attributed to the Essence and the Essence is said to contain relations that render its nature explicit, but this would lead us to the modalism of the Sabellians.¹⁰

Regarding the Eckhartian phrase, “the Trinity ‘is’ the Essence, and the Essence ‘is’ the Trinity,” we believe it should be clear now that what is in question in this elliptical formulation is explained by the metaphysically essential truth of the degrees of reality. As for Eckhart’s saying that that the “oneness is the difference and the difference is the oneness,” it must not be overlooked in the first place that he also says that the “difference comes from the oneness,” and this can be taken as something almost self-evident, the Unity of God always taking precedence metaphysically

¹⁰ Frithjof Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*, p. 82. A note at the end of this quote adds: “Rejected because of an inability to combine it with the complementary thesis. The truth is here antinomic, not unilateral: the hypostases are at the same time three modes of one divine Person and three relatively distinct Persons.”

The entire question of gnosis in Christianity has always been a somewhat thorny one, owing to the fact that Christianity presents itself *a priori* as a way of Love. Schuon explains this admirably, as follows: “Christianity is thus a doctrine of union, or the doctrine of Union: the Principle unites with manifestation, so that manifestation can unite with the Principle; whence the symbolism of love and the predominance of the ‘bhaktic’ way. God became man ‘because of His immense love’ (St. Irenaeus), and man must unite with God also by ‘love,’ whatever be the meaning—volitive, emotive, or intellectual—that one may give to this term. ‘God is Love’: God—as Trinity—is Union, and desires Union...”

“If it is wrong to reproach Christ for not having explicitly taught pure gnosis—which in fact he did teach by his very coming, and by his person, his gestures and his miracles—it is equally wrong to deny the gnostic meaning of his message, and thus to deny to intellectual contemplatives—who are centered on metaphysical truth and pure contemplation, or on pure and direct Intelligence—any right to existence, and to offer them no spiritual way in conformity with their nature and vocation. This is contrary to the parable of the talents, and to the saying that ‘in my Father’s house are many mansions.’

“The whole of Christianity is expressed in the trinitarian doctrine, and this essentially represents a perspective of union; it already envisages union *in divinis*: God prefigures in His very nature the relationships between Himself and the world, relationships which are ‘external’ only in illusory mode.

“The Light shineth in the darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not’: the truth of these words has been manifested—and is still manifested—within Christianity, by the misunderstanding and rejection of gnosis. And this explains in part the destiny of the Western world” (“Christian Gnosis,” in Jean-Baptiste Aymard and Patrick Laude, *Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teachings* [Albany, NY: SUNY, 2004], pp. 133-135).

over the aspect of multiplicity at any degree of Divinity, notwithstanding the mystery of the Three-in-One, the explanation of which, once again, will vary according to the perspective and the degree involved, whether at the degree of the Unity of the Essence or of Pure Being. Of course, it is ultimately the Unity of pure Being which stamps any qualitative distinction with its seal of unity, otherwise it could not be distinguished in the first place, and in this sense too, the “oneness is the difference and the difference is the oneness.” All possible distinctions are comprised in the Unity of the Divine Principle, which can be symbolized by the geometric center which both unites and determines the divergent direction of the radii issuing from it. Similarly it is the one luminosity of light which enables each color of the spectrum to be viewed in its distinctiveness. Unity necessarily lies at the basis of any qualitative distinction, thanks to which we can say not only that something “is” but that it is “this.” Otherwise there would be nothing but chaos, in the proper sense of the term as pure potentiality, which is unintelligible by definition. Without the stamp of unity, and thus of unicity or uniqueness, how could the Person—or indeed anything at all—be distinguished or be distinguishable? Each “thing” is distinctively “something” or “one thing” or “itself” thanks to its participation at some degree or other in the Unity of Being, which alone really “is,” and thus contains synthetically—“fused, but not confused,” as Eckhart said—all possible positive and qualitative determinations.

In this connection, Schuon has the following very apposite and profound formulation:

There are three great Divine mysteries: the world, Being, and Non-Being.

In the world no quality is another quality and no quality is God. In Being no quality is another quality but each of them is God. In Non-Being—Beyond-Being—there are no qualities; but since Non-Being is transcendence and not privation, and is devoid of qualities because it is beyond all diversity, it can be said that in it every quality is every other and that their non-distinction—or their transcending—is God.

What reason cannot understand is how it is that the world is metaphysically reducible to God and how it is that God is Non-Being or (preferably) Beyond-Being. The world exists, but it “is” not. When the whole of Divine Reality is envisaged God “is” not, but he “possesses Being”: God-Being is in reality only the Being of God. It is not, however, false to say, in relation to the world, that God “is.”¹¹

¹¹ Frithjof Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* (Bedfont: Perennial Books, 1987), p. 172.

Thus, when Schuon speaks of the Divine Qualities in the Essence as “each being the other” and that “their non-distinction or transcending is God”, he is necessarily pointing to That which transcends the Unity of Being; he is pointing to the Infinite. Being is the first determination of the supra-ontological Essence, and therefore can be said to “be,” as distinct from “created” or manifested reality—the cosmos—which merely “exists,” and is subject to creation and dissolution. Thus God is said to “possess” Being; but it is only in relation to the world that one can say God “is,” because God in His pure Selfhood, as Beyond-Being, must be conceived of as pure Illimitation or Indetermination, and therefore totally “free,” that is, transcending the ontological or any other determination, and therefore also transcending all relationship whatsoever. Hence God or the Divine Reality in Its pure Selfhood, or as pure absolute and infinite Essence, cannot be said to “be,” for the Divine Essence is “beyond” Being, precisely, that is, It altogether transcends the degree of Being. Ultimately there is no reality other than the Divine Self, which alone is absolutely Real and which is also infinite Plenitude. Any otherness is necessarily *mayic*.¹²



The inestimable advantage of the works of Guénon and Schuon is the metaphysical synthesis they accomplish—a possibility that is properly “Eliatic,” corresponding to a cyclic moment, and representing an instance of the “meeting of extremes”—the end of a cycle meeting the primordial

¹² “[T]he Personal God pertains to *Maya*, of which He is the center or the summit, otherwise He could not be an interlocutor for man” (Frithjof Schuon, *The Play of Masks* [Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 1992], p. 17, n. 1). Without reference to relativity *in divinis*, there would be no world, because alongside the Essence there is literally nothing. “Let us specify that for Beyond-Being we do not exist; it is only ‘as Being’ that the Absolute conceives our existence” (Ibid., p. 25). “The great pitfall of the monotheistic theologies is the *de facto* confusion between the two levels. There is no ‘God’ which in one and the same respect is Being and Beyond-Being, Person and Essence, *Gott* and *Gotttheit*, *Isbhava* and *Paramatma*; a personal will is one thing, All-Possibility is another” (Ibid., p. 25, n. 9). This leads to the stumbling block for some persons of the Divine “Impersonality,” which more precisely could be termed “Supra-Personality.” It has been imagined that this Supra-Personality entails a “devaluation” of the Personal. But this is to turn reality on its head. On the contrary, the essence of the personal is the Divine Selfhood, which is Infinite Consciousness. The Personal God is Its Self-determination, and in consequence cannot but have a Personal character.

Golden Age, and hence the *Sanatana Dharma*. There is nothing specifically Vedantic in the fundamental metaphysical distinction between the Absolute and the relative, nor in the further insight that the root of the relative is necessarily within the very nature of the Absolute as Infinite. In fact, this latter precision is not a Vedantic expression, but closer to Sufic formulations and to those of Kashmir Shaivism. It matters little which traditional metaphysical formulation one chooses to serve as a support for intellection or to express an intellection, because intellection always has in view universal and not confessional realities, and this universalism is part and parcel of the jñanic spirit. At any rate the crucial metaphysical discernments expounded by Schuon do no harm at all to Christian realities, but on the contrary are practically indispensable for clarifying them completely as regards their universal scope and metaphysical essence. Moreover, one would be hard-pressed to find a more profound expositor of Christianity or a more exacting defender of all orthodoxy. As for the *religio perennis*, its basis is that every authentic religion, originating as it does in the one Divine transcendent reality, necessarily results from a distinct archetype included in the Divine Being. There is no quarrel between them at this degree of perfect distinction-in-unity, but only at the level of their formal manifestation is there opposition and contrast, as is to be expected. At any rate, the whole point of a religion is the relationship between the Absolute and the relative. As for the reality of these archetypes within the Divine Essence, it could not be otherwise than that they subsist there as pure possibilities *in a manner at once undifferentiated and eminently positive*.

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