

The Self and the Other in the Light of the One The Metaphysics of Human Diversity

By *Samuel Bendeck Sotillos*

“[W]hat is your original face before your mother and father were born?”¹

Hui Neng

“In all faces the face of faces is seen veiled and in enigma.”²

Nicholas of Cusa

“Each thing hath two faces, a face of its own, and a face of its Lord; in respect of its own face it is nothingness, and in respect of the Face of God it is Being. Thus there is nothing in existence save only God and His Face”³

Al-Ghazālī

“[F]ace to face with the One that appears as many.”⁴

Śrī Ānandamayī Mā

The contemporary world has been heralded as “post-racial” suggesting that racism is a problem of the distant past and that it has somehow been eradicated. This view is sadly untrue. A prime example is the rise of xenophobia, especially in the post-9/11 era. This is not unrelated to other monstrous and horrific crimes that are proliferating around

¹ Hui Neng, quoted in *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch: The Text of the Tun-buang Manuscript*, trans. Philip B. Yampolsky (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1967), p. 134.

² Nicholas of Cusa, “On the Vision of God,” in *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997), p. 224.

³ Al-Ghazālī, quoted in Martin Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century: Shaikh Ahmad Al-Alawī, His Spiritual Heritage and Legacy* (Cambridge, UK: Islamic Texts Society, 1993), p. 123.

⁴ Śrī Ānandamayī Mā, quoted in Alexander Lipski, *Life and Teaching of Śrī Ānandamayī Mā* (Delhi, India: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993), p. 11.

the globe such as ethnic cleansing, genocide, racial profiling, occupation, deportation, incarceration, violence and economic and environmental injustice. An imperative challenge of the contemporary world is how to properly contextualize and relate the “self” with the “other”. Who exactly is the “other” and what is “otherness”? Influential Muslim scholar Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr has commented that “This question of ‘the other’ has become the subject of some concern in the contemporary period because the 20th century, as well as this century, have been witness to such brutal vilification of so many ‘others’, so many groups viewed as the other, as the alien, as the foreign, as that which is threatening and which therefore should be opposed and even destroyed.”⁵ This matter is far too important to examine at a surface level or to allow it to be considered through the platitudes and soundbites of the mass media’s echo chamber. Both the “other” and “otherness” at the inmost level reflect the profound epistemological and ontological crisis of identity in today’s world. At its very core modernism and postmodernism are inimical to and destructive of all human diversity.

The “self” and the “other” are not as separate as each might imagine, because diversity is an aspect of the sacred Oneness underlying phenomena: “All is one, all is diversity.”⁶ It is with a metaphysical perspective informed by the perennial philosophy and spiritual psychology that human diversity and the putative irreconcilable dichotomy of “self” and “other” can be fully understood.⁷ This is because human identity belongs ultimately to the Divine and needs to return to its Archetype *in divinis*: “‘Otherness’ is a veil over our eyes woven by our own imagination. Neither we ourselves nor the things we perceive outside of ourselves are truly other than God.”⁸ Integral metaphysics teaches that there is only Oneness and that, “There is neither self nor other.”⁹ Ultimately, the “self”

⁵ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “The Self and the Other: Re-Evaluating their Meaning in Our Lives,” *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (2011), p. 54.

⁶ Pascal, “Contradictions,” in *Pensées*, trans. A.J. Krailsheimer (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 62.

⁷ See Samuel Bendeck Sotillos, “Human Diversity in the Mirror of Religious Pluralism,” *Religions: A Scholarly Journal*, No. 9 (2016), pp. 121-134.

⁸ Rūmī, quoted in William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1983), p. 304.

⁹ “Sarah’s Treasury of Songs,” in *Buddhist Texts Through the Ages*, trans. and ed. Edward Conze, I.B. Horner, David Snellgrove and Arthur Waley (London, UK: Oneworld Publications, 2014), p. 228.

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