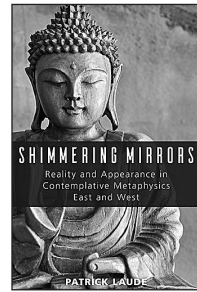


Shimmering Mirrors: Reality and Appearance in Contemplative Metaphysics East and West

By Patrick Laude

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Reviewed by Samuel Bendeck Sotillos



“Enter me, O Lord, into the deep of the Ocean of Thine Infinite Oneness!”¹

- Ibn 'Arabī

It is apparent today that many people are endlessly seeking peace and freedom in the phenomenal world. But ours is a realm that is finite and imperfect, and thus it cannot fulfill our deepest longings. The human heart intrinsically yearns for a spiritual dimension that completes the human condition. A considered reflection on the world's religions will reveal that they possess an underlying metaphysical unity. Each has its unique expression and yet a common core can be discerned that discloses an ultimate reality that is the exclusive possession of neither the East nor the West. This pioneering analysis of comparative metaphysics articulates a shared ground whereby the Absolute can be understood across spiritual traditions.

¹ Ibn 'Arabī, quoted in Martin Lings, *What is Sufism?* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1977), p. 11.

Patrick Laude has responded to the challenge laid down by Toshihiko Izutsu (1914–1993), who called for a “meta-historical” discourse that would crystallize into “a *philosophia perennis* in the fullest sense of the term.”² (p. 207) Interfaith dialogue remains as necessary as ever in establishing authentic modes of understanding among the world’s religions. However, Laude harbors no illusions as he identifies a central obstacle for a common ground across traditions. This is the phenomenon of *historicism* – the dominant ideology in academia today – which is skeptical of any attempts to essentialize doctrinal convergences, viewing metaphysics as a social construct without any objective basis. In response to this critique, Laude’s study presents a cross-cultural analysis – grounded in esoteric ecumenism – that seeks to discern the metaphysical core that unites the sapiential dimensions of each orthodox religion.

This work consists of six stimulating chapters: (1) Shimmering Reality: Contemplative and Mystical Concepts of Relativity; (2) Christian and Buddhist Insights into a Metaphysics of Salvation; (3) On the Good beyond Good and Evil; (4) On Hindu *Bbedābheda* and Sufi *Barzakh*; (5) Knowing the Unknowable: Upāya and Gods of Belief; and (6) Transmutation, the Sacred Word, and the Feminine.

Metaphysics today is often considered merely a matter of speculation and thus as having no real foundation. This is a misunderstanding. The Greek prefix *meta*, denoting what lies *beyond* what can be apprehended empirically is, precisely, what, in being ignored by empiricists, has contributed to their incomprehension of metaphysics. Today’s materialist mindset does not know what to do with metaphysics because it eludes our conventional understanding of phenomenal reality, so it simply rejects it as unimportant to our lived experience. This challenge of defining that which eludes definition is clearly outlined by the French metaphysician, René Guénon (1886–1951), who wrote:

Now, can Metaphysics as we understand it be defined? No, for to define is always to limit, and what is under consideration is, in and of itself, truly and absolutely limitless and thus cannot be confined to any formula or any system whatsoever. Metaphysics might be partially characterized, for example, by saying that it is the knowledge of universal principles, but this is not a definition in the proper sense and in any case only conveys a vague notion. (p. 211)

² See Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984).

The difficulty in defining metaphysics, or rather the inability to do so, serves to confirm its limitless scope. This extends to the nature of the Real itself, as Laude explains: “Reality in the fullest sense is that which cannot be reduced to anything else” (p. 4). Reality and Truth are known across the religions by a rich and varied nomenclature such as *al-Haqq* in Arabic, *Sat* in Sanskrit, and *Tao* in Chinese, among others. It goes without saying that these terms hold a profound significance in their traditional contexts, and all provide diverse ways in which “what is” can be envisioned. Laude points out that understanding Reality and Truth is “in fact nearly impossible” if divorced from “epistemology, soteriology, and metaphysics or ontology.” (p. 11)

The notion of Ultimate Reality or the Absolute – and its relationship to both transcendence and immanence – can be found, for example, in the well-known Buddhist text known as *Udāna* from the Pali canon:

There exists, monks, that which is unborn, that which is unbecome, that which is uncreated, that which is unconditioned. For if there were not, monks, that which is uncreated, that which is unconditioned, there would not be made known here the escape from that which is born, from that which is become, from that which is created, from that which is conditioned. Yet since there exists, monks, that which is unborn, that which is unbecome, that which is uncreated, that which is unconditioned, there is therefore made known the escape from that which is born, from that which is become, from that which is created, from that which is conditioned. (pp. 19-20)

A paradoxical formulation of ultimate reality, as found in Mahāyāna Buddhism, is “*nirvāna* is *saṃsāra* and *samsāra* is *nirvana*” which is to say (as paraphrased by Laude) that the “unbecome is the become and the become is the unbecome” (p. 20); in other words, transcendence is immanence and immanence is transcendence (although there can be no immanence without prior transcendence).

We learn that one of the essential keys for understanding what (in Sufi metaphysics) is called the “Unity of Being” (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) lies in the tension between exclusive transcendence and inclusive immanence. This doctrine can be better understood if viewed in light of the *shabādab*, the central testimony of faith in Islam, particularly in its first half which affirms “*lā ilāha ill’Allāh*” or “no divinity if not the Divinity.” Reza Shah-Kazemi has suggested the following ‘Buddhist

shabādāb': "No conceivable form: only the inconceivable Essence."³ (p. 237) According to Ibn 'Arabī (1165–1240), the Spanish-born mystic known as "the greatest master" (*ash-Shaykh al-akbar*):

The Elevated is one of God's Beautiful Names; but above whom or what, since only He exists? ... In relation to existence He is the very essence of existing beings. Thus, in a certain sense, relative beings are elevated in themselves, since (in truth) they are none other than He and His elevation is absolute and not relative. This is because the (eternal) essences are immutable unmanifest, knowing nothing of manifested existence, and they remain in that state, despite all the multiplicity of manifested forms. The Essence is Unique of the whole in the whole. (p. 35)

Decisive parallels may be drawn between the Sufi doctrine of the "Unity of Being" (*wahdat al-wujūd*) and Kashmiri Śaivism. This is apparent when perspectives of unicity and diversification of the Absolute are affirmed: "There is only one Essence and one Reality. This reality appears as *Ilāh* (God) in a certain respect and as *'abd* (servant) and *khalq* (creature) in another respect." (p. 32) Within Hindu metaphysics, Abhinavagupta (950–1016) declares that everything is pure consciousness and that nothing exists outside of Śiva's consciousness:

For that vibration, which is a slight motion of a special kind, a unique vibrating light, is the wave of the ocean of consciousness, without which there is no consciousness at all. For the character of the ocean is that it is sometimes filled with waves and sometimes waveless. This consciousness is the essence of all. (p. 22)

Certain differences notwithstanding, there are important similarities between the personal dimensions of Divinity such as *Śiva and Allāh*, and the supra-ontological Essence (*dhāt*). From a metaphysical point of view, both *Śiva and Allāh* can be envisaged on two distinct ontological levels – the Personal God and the Divine Essence.

Everything in the created order reflects its origin in the Divine Unity and, correspondingly, the Divine Unity is reflected in the created order. The many are always to be found in the One and likewise the One is to be found in the many. It is therefore in relationship with the created order that the ultimate reality can be known. Ibn 'Arabī insists that

³ See Reza Shah-Kazemi, *Common Ground between Islam and Buddhism* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2010).

“contemplation of the Reality without formal support is not possible, since God, in His Essence, is far beyond all need of the Cosmos.” (p. 38)

In attempting to build bridges between the Christian and Buddhist traditions, Laude puts forward an esoteric ecumenicism rooted in metaphysics, which views Christianity as an “absolutization of the relative,” in contrast with Buddhism, which is viewed as a “relativization of the absolute.” (p. 50) The doctrine of the Trinity — which emphasizes the unity, distinction and equality of the Divine Persons of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit — can be conceived as a single and divine Essence without jeopardizing its theological tenets, as St. Maximus the Confessor (c. 580–662) explains:

For the whole Father is entirely in the whole Son and Holy Spirit; and the whole Holy Spirit is entirely in the whole Father and Son. This is why there is only one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For there is one and the same essence, power, and act of the Father and Son and Holy spirit, and no one of them can exist or be conceived without the others. (p. 57)

The metaphysical paradox that affirms that “Three is One” and “One is Three” cannot be reduced, as St. John of Damascus (c. 676–749) points out:

One essence, one divinity, one power, one will, one energy, one beginning, one authority, one dominion, one sovereignty, made known in three perfect subsistences adored with one adoration, believed in and ministered to by all rational creation, united without confusion and divided without separation (which indeed transcends thought). (p. 64)

Ultimate Reality or the Absolute according to Buddhism can be envisioned as a preexisting context, which does not require what is beyond, as this would imply a dualism when it is fundamentally nondual. Zen Buddhism teaches that emptiness is not a static concept, but an ongoing, dynamic awareness of the present moment:

Ultimate reality is realized in the dynamic realization of emptying. However, as soon as the pure activity of emptying loses its function of self-negation, that is, the negation of negation, it turns into “emptiness” in noun form and the Ultimate Reality will be lost. Incessant self-emptying is essential to the realization of true emptiness. (p. 90)

Laude notes that “the Absolute that Zen Buddhism intends to debunk or deny cannot be the Absolute as it is understood in *Advaita Vedānta* or Sufi metaphysics, for instance, because the Absolute that the latter envisage can in no way be defined as a ‘something.’” (p. 91) It is worth noting that the notions of ultimate truth (*paramārtha*) and conventional truth (*samvrti*) are approximations of what, in Buddhism, can be considered as the absolute and the relative.

Although contemplative metaphysics recognizes the existence of evil, it is viewed as inessential and ultimately unreal. According to Ibn ‘Arabī, “Evil is only the non-existence of good” (p. 106) for the good cannot be equated to the opposite of evil. As Laude observes, “The Ultimate Reality lies beyond the polarity of good and evil as the Unconditioned Good.” (p. 111)

It is through metaphysics that the One and the many can be understood as “a unity within multiplicity, a unity that does not cancel or exclude diversity, but on the contrary, unveils its deepest meaning.” (p. 114) Similarly, without the existence of unity, diversity is not possible; however, unity is difficult to discern at simply the level of phenomena, where only diversity appears to exist. This world of relativity – often mistaken for Reality – is what Shankara, the pre-eminent eighth-century exponent of *Advaita Vedānta*, regards as *māyā*. He draws an important connection between *māyā* and *tamas*, the lowest and most opaque of the three cosmological elements: “The power of *tamas* is a veiling power. It makes things appear to be other than what they are. It is this which is the original cause of an individual’s transmigration and is the cause of the origination of the action of the projecting power.” (p. 11)

The metaphysical understanding of non-duality known as the “One without a second” may be the most pertinent lens through which to view religious pluralism. As Laude points out, “The nondualistic contemplative outlook is in the best possible situation to evaluate the rights and demands of exclusive religion in relation to the infinity of the Ultimate.” (p. 146) While Ibn ‘Arabī affirms the necessity of spiritual forms in the lives of the human collectivity, he cautions us not to become ensnared by phenomenal forms: “Beware of becoming delimited by a specific knotting and disbelieving in everything else, lest great good escape you.... Be in yourself a matter for the forms of all believes, for God is wider and more tremendous than that He should be constricted by one knotting rather than another.” (p. 146)

Human diversity is intimately connected to religious pluralism, which Laude comments on as follows: “Positively ... human limitations make it necessary for the Divine Reality to disclose Itself in ways that are apprehensible to human recipients.” (p. 166) In fact, a unique attribute of the human condition is its intrinsic ability to understand religious pluralism: “This human ability, although rarely actualized, to transcend the limitations of religious belief from within the very system of belief, is a direct reflection of the infinity of the Real.” (p. 174) While often unacknowledged in the present day, it needs to be noted that “The role of religion, in various forms, is to actualize the highest human potential,” (p. 174) true to the etymological root of the English word “religion” which comes from the Latin *religare* meaning to “to re-bind” or “to bind back” to our eternal source.

The reader will find within the illuminating pages of this book an all-embracing system of comparative metaphysics that offers a rich multiplicity of spiritual perspectives. In the words of St. Maximus the Confessor, “God is neither of those who think nor of what is thought for he is beyond them.” (p. 222) Although this timeless and universal wisdom can be integrated into a framework such as the *philosophia perennis*, the Reality it denotes is always pointing to what lies beyond what is described, since “the way that can be spoken of is not the constant [absolute] way.” (p. 210)

Reality and Truth can be discerned as aspects of a single reality that is the Absolute. The phenomenal world appears as a reflection in the mirror of human consciousness, while remaining separate from it. From this perspective, the mirror can be considered as both immanent and transcendent with respect to the phenomena reflected in it. We therefore come to see, as William C. Chittick points out, that “Perception and existence are one. Subjectivity and objectivity are the two faces of the same reality.” (p. 178) In the end, as Laude notes, “The spiritual seeker is therefore confronted by the challenge of knowing the Unknowable.” (p. 151)

We are witness today to a profound unrest in humanity at large. This is evident in its hunger to consume every form of experience, to expand its consciousness, to become whole and free without realizing that limited individuals cannot overcome the ego through mere personal initiative. What is required is for us to step outside ourselves and

come under the sway of the spiritual dimension of reality. The Indian Buddhist sage Aśvaghoṣa (c. 50-150) stated that the “Buddha teaches that all beings are from all eternity ever abiding in Nirvāna.” (p. 83) While that is certainly true from the perspective of ultimate reality, each religion nonetheless constitutes a *path of return* that is necessary in order to realize the Absolute. That every sentient being is always already intrinsically ‘awake’ – albeit in a latent and obscure manner – does not, in any way, exempt them from the need to participate in one of the revealed religions. In fact, it can be argued that to see that one is *not* fully awakened is a condition for realizing that one is, and has always been, intrinsically awake.

This book is a pioneering exposition on comparative metaphysics, demonstrating exceptional breadth and depth. While certainly not intended for the casual reader, it will no doubt reward serious seekers who hunger for a more profound perspective on religion and its inner dimensions. Only metaphysics can respond to the most pressing and perplexing demands of our spiritual lives in the current age — especially in light of the ubiquitous threat posed by secular materialism — and this work gives the reader access to a timeless and universal wisdom to do just that. Finally, the book is a clarion call to restore the plenitude of our proper human state through a deeper knowledge of Divine reality as “an ocean without shore.” (p. 22)