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SCHAYA, LEO. (2014). *Universal Aspects of the Kabbalah and Judaism*. ROGER GAETANI (Ed.). Bloomington IN: World Wisdom. 200 pp. ISBN: 978-1-93659-733-8. Paperback, \$19.95. *Reviewed by Samuel Bendeck Sotillos*.

“And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech.”

— Genesis 11:1

For those who have yet to discover the work of Leo Schaya (1916-1986),¹ he is no outsider to Judaism; in fact, he was born into a family with Hasidic roots and with

rabbis in their ancestry, received a traditional Jewish upbringing, and remained attuned with the quintessence of the Jewish tradition until his death. Some readers may recall that he is the author of the much-acclaimed book *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah* (1958), and was for a time editor of the French journal *Études Traditionnelles* (“Traditional Studies”) and founding editor of *Connaissance des Religions* (“Knowledge of Religions”). This new volume, which is only his second book to be published in English, *Universal Aspects of the Kabbalah and Judaism*, is a collection of Schaya’s writings on the central theme of the “universal aspects” revealed in Judaism, yet present in all the great religious traditions. This book also includes an informative Preface by the Editor Roger Gaetani, and a Forward by Patrick Laude, a distinguished perennialist writer; both of these pieces contribute important analyses of Schaya’s work.

According to Jewish mystical exegesis, the one “language” of the above passage from the Torah may be understood as a direct reference to the *unanimous tradition* found not only within the Abrahamic monotheisms of—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—but all sapiential traditions of the East and West. It is from this departure that one is able to comprehend certain contentions that exist between the religions in their outer forms. Each religion in its orthodoxy confirms its own validity, and logically so, because it is addressing its own community, and until recently did not need to validate the truth of other religions.

It is in the modern and postmodern world that an unprecedented phenomenon has emerged where diverse beliefs now find themselves living beside one another, unlike any other era before, indicative of the urgent need for a deeper religious pluralism with better delineated bridges between faiths. To understand the relationship between human diversity and religious pluralism, one can greatly benefit from the integral framework informed by the perennial philosophy in order to make the forms of religion intelligible to one’s own faith tradition. It is not enough to know that people have different faiths; one must know why they differ and simultaneously what unifies them at their metaphysical roots. Through this framework human diversity is reflected in religious pluralism, and it is in this dissociation from the sacred that we become estranged from our own natures as beings created “in God’s image,” and from our common spiritual heritage as Schaya illustrates:

[H]uman unity, initially traditional, by raising such a revolt against the divine Unity, compelled the latter to break it into ethnic fragments, dispersed over the entire earth and henceforth opposed one to another; and this through a lack of understanding caused by the confusion, or more precisely by the differentiation of their ‘language’ or single tradition into several ‘languages’ or divergent traditions, but with a foundation that remains unanimous thanks to its divine essence. (p. 10)

A considerable obstacle in understanding religion today is the rise of secularism, religious fundamentalism and New Age pseudo-religions that concurrently obscure and disfigure what religion means in its fullness. This is precisely why religion whose inner dimensions are neglected cannot reveal its

corresponding transcendent and universal dimension. A unique and paramount feature of this work under review is its exploration of the Jewish tradition by way of its mystical roots, which simultaneously elucidates its common ground with other religions. Although the mainstream media mistakenly confounds the distinction between the Jewish tradition with the identity and activities of the secular State of Israel, this is erroneous, for *Judaism is not Zionism*. This false premise has had and continues to have horrific consequences, not only for the plight of the Palestinians but for Jews, Christians and Muslims everywhere. In realizing that each religion has its temporal manifestation, and has been disclosed to different human communities in accordance to their needs and capacities, we are better able to discern the pre-temporal source of the unanimous tradition from which they derive: “What is fundamentally true of Judaism is also true of all genuine religions and traditions: there is but one Absolute, one Real, one God, the basis of all the revelations and their formal antinomies, the basis of all apparent dualism” (p. 26). Schaya once responded to a seeker by way of alluding to the Unity found at the heart of all authentic religions: “We are unconditional devotees of the Absolute!” (*Nous sommes des inconditionnels de l’Absolu!*) (p. xiii). For, according to Schaya, each revelation aspires “to spiritualize man and finally reintegrate him with the Divine Absolute” (p. 1).

At the cornerstone of Schaya’s work, two distinct and yet complementary facets of religion are at the foreground of the entire work, namely the outer and inner dimensions, for both are essential in understanding each revelation in its own and shared context. It is through the exoteric (or the outer) dimension that the wayfarer can prepare for the esoteric (or the inner) dimension. Although all paths ultimately lead to the Divine, we cannot circumvent the religious forms to access their interior, as we must travel one of those paths that have been readied and time-honored through the saints and sages of a particular tradition. It is in this context that we can better understand the esoteric dimension within the Jewish tradition, specifically as it applies to the Kabbalah:

The word *qibbel*, ‘he received’—as in the term *qabbalah*—is derived from *qabbal*, which means ‘to receive,’ but also ‘to welcome’ and ‘to accept,’ and implies also the ideas of being ‘face to face with’ or ‘in the presence of’ (*haqbel*, *qabbal*); here, it indicates direct reception of divine revelation by the man who is ready to accept it, to welcome it, standing before the Revelation’s very source, in His very Presence, which brings enlightenment and redemption. (p. 48)

Although the mistaken belief is rampant that religion is man-made, there is in fact nothing within religion that can be deemed to be a product of the human mind, for this would disavow transcendence and its essential importance to spiritual realization. Even though religion has been negatively labeled “organized religion,” and not without some cause due to the antagonism it has faced and continues to face in the contemporary world, we must turn our minds once again to the original function of religion itself. In order to understand what religion signifies in lieu of present-day biases, we must return to the etymological root of the English word “religion” from the Latin *religare*,

meaning to “to re-bind,” or “to bind back,” by implication to the Divine or the Supreme Identity. For this reason the popular thesis asserting “Spiritual but not religious,” which now has its own acronym “SBNR,” is not only a sign of the times, but an impossible feat since the human individual cannot transcend him or herself without access to what is beyond the human state.

We cannot enact the Psalmist’s injunction to “take off the veil from mine eyes...” (119:18) without first adhering to an authentic religious form. The veil exists for the protection of the seeker and cannot be lifted prematurely without grave consequences, and this is articulated in various ways through the traditional exegeses. In the same way that we give common courtesy to a friend by entering the house through the front and not the back door, we must likewise embark on the spiritual path through one of the revealed traditions and not attempt to access its precinct without the consent and blessing of the religion. The relevance of the Kabbalah for the Jewish tradition is of utmost importance in this context, inasmuch as the exoteric and esoteric domains are inseparable from the revelation of the Torah which Moses received on Mount Sinai:

Moses, [and with him the whole of Israel,] received (*qibbel* = *qabbalah*) the written [and spoken] Torah on the summit of Mount Sinai; he transmitted it [with all its basic interpretations, rules, and levels of sacred exegesis, both esoteric and exoteric] to Joshua; Joshua transmitted it to the Elders, the leaders to the Prophets, and the Prophets transmitted it to the men of the Great Synagogue. (Pirkei Avot 1:1) (p. 63)

Through the spiritual hermeneutics of the perennial philosophy, the exoteric and esoteric domains meet one another in the Jewish tradition, in what Schaya terms the “inward Sinai.” In participating in these two domains the traveler may acquire the direct perception that “God is hidden in everything He creates” and also, “The entire creation is an illusory projection of the transcendental aspects of God into the ‘mirror’ of His immanence” (p. 94). Through this framework the Divine forms become transparent and the Semitic monotheisms of Judaism, Christianity and Islam converge with the revelations of the East in the affirmation of the “One without second.” The connection between the Torah and the Kabbalah is made in the following analogy contained in the *Zohar* and it more broadly in principle is analogous to the underlying realities found in the various traditions:

The foolish see only the clothing of a man; if it is beautiful, the wearer is also beautiful. But the clothing covers something even more precious, and that is the soul. The Torah also has a body, which is the commandments [objects of the *Halakhah*]...it also has raiment, and those are the narrations corresponding to the *Haggadah* which, from one point of view, is inferior to the *Halakhah*, and, from another, superior..... Finally the Torah has a soul which has penetrated by those who were present near Mount Sinai, that is the fundamental root of all things, the real Torah [the real, revealing, and redeeming Presence of God, which is realized directly by the Kabbalah]. (3:152a) (pp. 64–65)

In fact this symbolism could be extended to the meaning of the human body according to the Kabbalah: “God created the human body ‘in His image,’ the image of the infinite ‘Body’ of the ten *Sefirot*, so that man, realizing his ‘deiformity’ can return from his ‘fall-point’ to his supreme starting point” (p. 71).

Schaya demonstrates that the Jewish tradition may be viewed symbolically as, “man—personified in Moses—ascending towards God while raising the fallen world with him so as to unite everything with the One at the summit of the Mountain of Illumination” (p. 8). In contradistinction, the Christian tradition may be viewed as “God descend[ing] into the world, incarnate as man, to bear his sins, to atone for him, to be assimilated by him, until ‘man becomes God’” (p. 8). For this reason Christianity was contrasted with Judaism, in an astute statement made in the Middle Ages: “The teaching [or doctrine] of Moses conceals what the teaching of Christ reveals.” (*Moysis doctrina velat quod Christi doctrina revelat.*) In the final disclosure of the Abrahamic monotheisms, the Islamic tradition has been articulated as “man is obedient to the One until his extinction in Him who is ‘God in Heaven and God on Earth’” (p. 8). Islam, Schaya informs readers, facilitates a unique role as its last revelation in the current temporal cycle, “Islam...actualizes...the *religio perennis*” and more-over:

Islam is the ‘last point’ of the present circle or cycle of revelations—sealed by the ‘Seal of the Prophets,’ Muhammad—the final point which rejoins the primordial Point, the One revealing Himself to the whole of Humanity. This is why the religion of Muhammad confirms all earlier true beliefs, which it represents as both the everlasting quintessence and the final synthesis. (p. 155)

From this point of view one can better contextualize Islam’s criticism of Jews and Christians as it relates to their deviations from the pure monotheism of Abraham; however, Islam does not dispute the validity of these traditions as they are both revealed expressions of the One.

It is at the culmination of the temporal cycle known in Hinduism as the *Kali-Yuga*, a principle not uncommon throughout the religions of the world, that we observe the human collectivity situated furthest away from the Divine radiance: “The traditions declare that we are now in the last age” (p. 42).

Another universal facet found not only in Judaism but in all of the sapiential traditions is the spiritual method of invocation of the Divine Name as prescribed at the end of the temporal cycle: “The Divine Name must be kept holy continuously and, in principle, it unites man with God at all times. Every day of his life, man must invoke the Name which saves and delivers him, and which so fills him with the Divine Presence that It abides, remains, and acts within him as a living temple” (p. 56). It may possibly be the loss of the invocation of the Name *YHVH* that brought about the many punishments and deprivations, not to mention the loss of immanent union with the Divine that befell the Israelites.

Schaya poses question of utmost relevance in these desacralized times which confronts the modern mind to step back away from itself so that it can envision a resacralized world, a world that would recover its center: “If all men were immersed in contemplation of the only Truth and only Reality, where would the problems of humanity be? And if all those who have become incapable of such contemplation were to pray, if they were to serve the contemplatives and follow their advice, where would their difficulties be?” (p. 178). Schaya, in accord with the religious and spiritual traditions, goes on to state, unequivocally, that “the true destiny of man is contemplation” (p. 178). In commencing all activity through the contemplation of these integral metaphysical principles, we can ourselves return to the source of all that is.

It is clear that we can no longer turn our backs on the urgent need for thoughtful rather than superficial religious pluralism. It is easy to see that the consequences of doing so are far too great and that the human collectivity is already bearing witness to horrific events done in the name of religion.

From the myriad writings to appear on the subject of the Kabbalah, Leo Schaya’s are some of the most referenced. This is for a good reason, as they continuously plumb the rich well of the Torah, and particularly its mystical dimension, in order to illuminate the fullness of the Jewish tradition. It is through works such as these that we can comprehend what we all share in common, but also how best to view our differences—namely, through the principle of unity in diversity. Schaya has provided contemporaries with an unerring compass, one which, if heeded, may, through the application of universal metaphysical principles, guide us through many of the pressing dilemmas confronting the modern and postmodern world. It is in times like these that we are especially reminded of the adage of the Kabbalists, which is also true for the perennial philosophy, “it is better to divulge Wisdom than to forget it.” It is our hope that this new collection of Schaya’s work will allow readers who are within the fold of Judaism, as well as those from other faiths, to perceive the reality of our common heritage in the One, and then to think and act accordingly as a consequence. “Lift up your eyes on high and behold who has created these [things]” (Isaiah 40:26).

NOTE

¹See Robert G. Margolis, “At ‘The Meeting of the Two Seas’: An Introduction to Leo Schaya and His Writings,” *Annals of Japan Association for Middle East Studies*, No. 13 (1988), pp. 399-418.

The Author and Editor

Leo Schaya (1916–1986) was born in Switzerland, where he received a traditional Jewish upbringing. From his early youth he devoted himself to the study of the great metaphysical doctrines of East and West, particularly the works of neo-Platonism, Sufism and Advaita Vedanta. Along with some other writers in the Traditionalist/Perennialist school, Schaya is noted for his grasp of sometimes difficult metaphysical concepts and his ability to summarize and interpret the writings of ancient and medieval sages for current readers. He was

for a time editor of the French journal *Études Traditionnelles* and founding editor of *Connaissance des Religions*. He published several articles on the metaphysical and esoteric wisdom of the Jewish Kabbalah, as well as a perspicacious book on the subject entitled *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah* (1958), which remains one of the most often quoted books on the subject. He also wrote a book on the Sufi doctrine of unity, *La doctrine soufique de l'unite* (1962).

Roger Gaetani is an editor, educator, and student of world religions who lives in Bloomington, Indiana. He has co-edited, with Jean-Louis Michon, the World Wisdom anthology on Sufism, *Sufism: Love and Wisdom*. He directed and produced the DVD compilation of highlights of the 2006 conference on Traditionalism, *Tradition in the Modern World: Sacred Web 2006 Conference*, and has edited the book *A Spirit of Tolerance: The Inspiring Life of Tierno Bokar* by Amadou Hampâté Bâ. He also translated (from the original French) and edited the book *Introduction to Sufism: The Inner Path of Islam*, by Eric Geoffroy. He seeks to publish materials that edify, inspire, and lead to very real individual growth.

The Reviewer

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WHITE, GORDON D. (2015). *The “Yoga Sutra of Patanjali”*: A Biography. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. vi + 296 pp, Hardcover, \$24.95. Reviewed by *Stuart Sovatsky*.

Sleuthing Hagiography, The Poignant Self, and A Charismatic Future for Modern Postural Yoga. . .

Three Riffs Upon

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Homage to Author David Gordon White
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