

Book Reviews

***Christian Gnosis: From St. Paul to Meister Eckhart* by Wolfgang Smith (Sophia Perennis, 2008). \$19.95, ISBN 978-1-59731-092-5**

Reviewed by Samuel Bendeck Sotillos

“Woe unto you, lawyers! for ye have taken away the key of *gnosis*: ye entered not in yourselves, and them that were entering in ye hindered.” – Luke 11:52

A distinctive mark of the contemporary era, it can be said, is the utter absence of doctrinal gnosis, which has its contingent expressions in all of the world’s spiritual traditions, yet is distinctively articulated, in the Christian tradition. This recent publication by Dr. Wolfgang Smith has been hailed as the *magnum opus* of his life’s work—he remains true to the perennial philosophy as he does not seek to create a “new” theory, but adheres rigorously to the traditional authoritative sources on the subject at hand. Former professor of MIT and UCLA, Dr. Smith brings a unique perspective as an accomplished scientist and mathematician as well as a committed Christian.

Christian Gnosis contains seven chapters with compelling themes of uncommon wisdom not readily found in other present-day works: I. Gnosis and Nascent Christianity, II. Cosmology in the Face of Gnosis, III. Transcending the *Creatio Ex Nihilo*: The Kabbalistic Exegesis, IV. The Wisdom of Christian Kabbalah, V. The Gnosis of Jacob Boehme, VI. Meister Eckhart on Creation, VII. Eckhart’s Trinitarian Nondualism, including a Postscript by the author.

This book covers the broad spectrum of doctrinal gnosis pertaining to the Christian tradition—“from Saint Paul to Meister Eckhart”—including its analogous currents found in the Kabbalah exemplifying the esoteric tradition of Judaism. The term gnosis has been abused and deserves caution; especially with New Age proponents taking siege of it in order to substantiate their subjective notions. In return the misuse of the term has caused many to confuse gnosis as a deviation of orthodox religion, not to be confused with fundamentalism, but rather understood as “right thinking”. The author categorically clears the air on the topic when responding to a point made by Clement of Alexandria: “Authentic gnosis, then,

is something divine, something that belongs, not to a man, but to God himself.”

Readers can also note that nondualism is an essential theme presented throughout the entire work and can be found in every authentic sapiential tradition. Although nondualism is often associated with the esoteric or “inner” dimensions of religion, it is correspondingly inseparable from exoterism or its “outer” dimensions: “in fact, the first finds its consummation in the second.” In Dr. Smith’s illustration of the distinct facets of gnosis he does so by allowing each tradition to remain integral and distinctively its own *in divinis* and not a Vedāntic rendition of these traditions. That many seekers in the contemporary era have found their way to the spiritual path *via* the Eastern doctrines is striking, yet how can the West come to recognize the analogous wisdom of its own traditions?

The author points out that Meister Eckhart, who Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (1887-1947) key perennialist author regarded as “the greatest European ever born”, is not another great Master among other Masters, but a paragon of the Christian religion, a *jivanmukta*. “One must bear in mind that Eckhart stands at the end of ‘golden age’: on the brink of the very ‘fall’ which gave rise, in rapid succession, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the modern world.” When Eckhart affirms the *negatio negationis*—“a negation of a negation”—paradoxical as it may appear to the discursive mind—it is through the *negatio negationis* that the supreme affirmation of the Divine or Absolute becomes intelligible: “The One is a negation of negation.” The *negatio negationis* is not comparable with the popular notions of “God beyond God” theology nor does this signify that Eckhart was not orthodox in his exposition of the Christian tradition.

This recent publication *Christian Gnosis: From St. Paul to Meister Eckhart* provides a definitive work on the subject of gnosis in the Christian West, adding an implicit dimension to integral interfaith dialogue that is fundamental in a rapid and ever increasing globalizing era. This work will provide for deeper reflection on the Christian tradition and at the same time contextualizes this presentation within what has been termed the “transcendent unity of religions”. Dr. Smith concludes his opus with the following disclosure dedicating its

merits to the much needed restoration of the Christian tradition: “there is need today for teachings of Eckhart, the Master who—better perhaps than any other—can help to restore ‘the key of gnosis’ to its rightful place within the Church.”

***Hinduism and Its Spiritual Masters*, by William Stoddart (Fons Vitae, 2006). 136 pp., \$15.95,**

Reviewed by Samuel Bendeck Sotillos

Lead me from the unreal to the Real;

Lead me from darkness to Light;

Lead me from death to Immortality.

- Brihadâranyaka Upanishad, I, 3, 27.

It is regrettable that, amidst the mammoth surplus of competing titles, such a vital work as this—a veritable “hidden treasure”—has gone virtually unnoticed. It is a characteristic of the contemporary milieu that it repeatedly favors *quantity* at the expense of *quality*. Yet, this phenomenon becomes graspable when treated and viewed in relationship to a much larger symptom that is interconnected with the systematic obscuration of spirituality or “intellectual regress” of the historical cycle known in the Hindu tradition as the *Kali-Yuga* or “Dark Age”—underscoring the very quintessence of the “signs of the times”.

In terms of etymology, religion is that which binds, specifically, that which binds man to God.... In the first place, religion is a *doctrine* of unity.... In the second place, religion is a *method* of union.... Whatever they may be called, these two components are always present.... Doctrine, or theory, concerns the mind; method, or practice, concerns the will. Religion, to be itself, must always engage both mind and will.

The most important single point about religion is that it is not man-made. Religion is not invented by man, but revealed by God. Divine revelation is a *sine qua non*; without it, there is no religion, only man-made ideology, in which no sacramental or salvational element is present.

This present work by Dr. William Stoddart is imbued by what has become known as his signature method as—“a master of synthesis”—succeeding in illuminating the rudiments of whatever topic he is drawing

upon, always utilizing as few words as possible, to present the essential keys needed to adequately comprehend the subject at hand. This signature method or *modus operandi* is fittingly contextualized alongside the numerous years studying the *philosophia perennis* or the perennial philosophy that illuminates the universal metaphysics at the heart of each revealed and orthodox (doctrinal purity or right understanding) spiritual tradition—“*Sages call the One Reality by many names.*” (Rig Veda, I, 164, 46.) It is thus relevant to illustrate that amid the oldest living esotericism, the Hindu tradition and the youngest living esotericism within Islam known as Sufism there is an identical underlying metaphysic: “The science of Sufism and the science of Vedânta are one.” declared Dârâ Shukûh, the son of the Mughal emperor Shâh Jahân.

It is improbable and perhaps rightfully so that a book cannot *de facto* capture the breadth and depth of an entire tradition, yet even while acknowledging the *apophatic* quality of the ineffable nature of the Absolute, this book regardless, does just that by way of elucidating what is indispensable to the Hindu tradition or *sanâtana dharma*. This book is a new and revised edition of the formerly titled book: *Outline of Hinduism* (Oakton, VA: The Foundation for Traditional Studies, 1993) that has been out of print for sometime. In this work readers will be guided through the multifaceted anthropology of the Hindu *dharma* articulating its mythology, metaphysics, cosmology and spirituality. The author expounds upon matters that will challenge the very edifice of the modern and postmodern mind in order to clarify the lost sense of the transpersonal that was traditionally a norm: The Place of Hinduism Amongst the Religions of the World, Hindu Pantheon, The Incarnations (*Avatâras*) of Vishnu, Masculine (*Purusha*) and Feminine (*Prakriti*) Principles, The Five Levels of Reality, The Four Castes (*varna*), The Three Spiritual Ways (*mârgas*), Yoga and Its Branches, The Hindu Scriptures, The Six Points of View (*darshanas*), The Four Ages (*yugas*), The Four Stages in Life (*âshramas*), Transmigration or Reincarnation, Classical Sages and Saints, Modern Sages and Saints and Holy Cities, Holy Rivers, Pilgrimage Points.

Contrary to the *Zeitgeist* the import of the caste system (*varna dharma*) is not an apparatus to impose a collective tyranny or exploitation for the indulgence of the *brahmins* or elite nor is it an outdated mode of government or temporal power. With this said, it needs to be remembered that traditionally the temporal power was always subject to the spiritual authority.