

# Religion and Spirituality According to the Perennial Philosophy\*

SAMUEL BENDECK SOTILLOS

It is the one truth, which *jñānins* call by different names.<sup>1</sup>  
*R̥gveda* 1.164.46

There is one Lord revealed in many scriptures.<sup>2</sup>  
Saraḥa

When the Great Tao prevailed the whole world was one community.<sup>3</sup>  
*Li Chi*

And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech.  
Genesis 11:1

Wisdom uncreate, the same now as it ever was, and the same to be forevermore.<sup>4</sup>  
St Augustine

To every people We have sent a Messenger; some of them We have mentioned, others We have not mentioned.  
Qur'ān 40:78

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1. *R̥gveda* 1.164.46, quoted in Jagadguru H. H. Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswati Swamigal, Sankaracharya of Kanchi, *Introduction to Hindu Dharma: Illustrated*, ed. M. O. Fitzgerald (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2008), p. 19.

2. 'Saraḥa's Treasury of Songs', in *Buddhist Texts Through the Ages*, trans. and ed. Edward Conze, I. B. Horner, David Snellgrove and Arthur Waley (London: Oneworld Publications, 2014), p. 235.

3. *Li Chi (Book of Rites)*, quoted in J. C. Cooper, *Yin and Yang: The Taoist Harmony of Opposites* (Wellingborough: Aquarian Press, 1981), p. 28.

4. St Augustine, *Confessions* IX.10, quoted in *The Spirit of Man: An Anthology in English and French from the Philosophers and Poets*, ed. R. S. Bridges (London: Longmans Green & Company, 1919), book 1, selection 32.

Across the world, throughout the four directions and encompassing all times and places including the diverse societies and civilizations, is the recognition that the human being was and is inseparable from Spirit and that there are many paths to realize this unanimous Truth. There are many names for this universal and timeless wisdom known as the perennial philosophy. Aldous Huxley (1894–1963) is responsible for popularizing the term in recent times with his anthology *The Perennial Philosophy* (first published in 1944).<sup>5</sup>

It was in the early twentieth century that several key figures, later regarded as the Perennialist or Traditionalist school of comparative religious thought, became associated with the perennial philosophy. Among the most prominent of these luminaries are René Guénon (1886–1951), Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877–1947), Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998) and Titus Burckhardt (1908–1984).<sup>6</sup> Other noteworthy individuals are Marco Pallis (1895–1989), Lord Northbourne (1896–1982), Martin Lings (1909–2005), Whittall N. Perry (1920–2005), Joseph Epes Brown (1920–2000), William Stoddart (b. 1925) and Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933).<sup>7</sup>

#### WHAT IS AND WHAT IS NOT THE PERENNIAL PHILOSOPHY

Although the perennial philosophy is not a monolith and has innumerable variations and expressions, this does not mean that there are multiple or divergent forms of the perennial philosophy. To suggest the existence of perennial philosophies in the plural is erroneous and contradicts the very principle of its underlying transcendent Unity. It is paramount to clarify also that the existence of a single perennial philosophy does not mean that all religions are the same, or that one religion or spiritual path is viewed from this perspective as being superior to another religion or path. To assume this is to mistake what the perennial philosophy signifies. This again is because '[T]ruth is one, and it is the same for all who, by whatever way, come

5. Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), p. vii.

6. Frithjof Schuon emphasized that the Perennialist or Traditionalist school has two 'originators' – Guénon and himself; and two 'continuator' – Coomaraswamy and Burckhardt (William Stoddart, *Remembering in a World of Forgetting: Thoughts on Tradition and Postmodernism*, ed. M. Soares de Azevedo and A. Vasconcellos Queiroz [Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2008], pp. 51–66).

7. See Kenneth Oldmeadow, *Traditionalism: Religion in the Light of the Perennial Philosophy* (San Rafael: Sophia Perennis, 2011); Setareh Houman, *From the Philosophia Perennis to American Perennialism*, trans. E. Q. Lohja (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 2014).

to know it'.<sup>8</sup> In the same way that 'there can be only one metaphysics',<sup>9</sup> correspondingly, '[T]here is only one "Perennial Philosophy"'.<sup>10</sup> The perennial philosophy, like metaphysics, cannot be the exclusive property of any individual or school, as is made clear by Schuon: 'The truths just expressed are not the exclusive possession of any school or individual: were it otherwise they would not be truths, for these cannot be invented, but must necessarily be known in every integral traditional civilization.'<sup>11</sup> Guénon powerfully states:

[I]f an idea is true, it belongs equally to all who are capable of understanding it; if it is false, there is no credit in having invented it. A true idea cannot be 'new', for truth is not a product of the human mind; it exists independently of us, and all we have to do is to take cognizance of it; outside this knowledge there can be nothing but error.<sup>12</sup>

When we speak here of 'philosophy' as it is associated with the perennial philosophy, we mean the ancient understanding of *philosophia*, or the 'love of wisdom' grounded in a way of life to achieve its goal and assimilating the primacy of Truth<sup>13</sup>—in order to 'put [everything] in its rightful place'<sup>14</sup>—and to learn 'how to think'.<sup>15</sup> It is the doctrines and methods found across the religions that provide discernment between the Real and the illusory or the Absolute and the relative, together with the concentration on the Real as a means to return to the One. As Schuon maintains,

8. René Guénon, *Studies in Hinduism*, trans. H. D. Fohr, ed. S. D. Fohr (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2004), p. 87.

9. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Coomaraswamy: Selected Papers*, vol. 2: *Metaphysics*, ed. R. Lipsey (Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 38.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

11. Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (Wheaton IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1993), p. xxxiii.

12. René Guénon, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, trans. A. Osborne, M. Pallis and R. C. Nicholson (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2004), pp. 56–7.

13. See Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. M. Chase, ed. A. I. Davidson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999).

14. René Guénon, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, p. 42.

15. Frithjof Schuon, quoted in James S. Cutsinger, 'Introduction', *Splendor of the True: A Frithjof Schuon Reader*, trans. and ed. J. S. Cutsinger (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), p. xxxii. On the ease with which the word 'philosophy' can be misinterpreted in a modern context, see Guénon, *Studies in Hinduism*, p. 77.

The quintessence of all tradition and all spirituality is discernment between the Real and the illusory and concentration on the Real. Everything is contained in this twofold definition. This is doctrine and method in a more outward sense; now there are many doctrines and many methods, but there is only one discernment between the Real and the illusory, the Absolute and the contingent, the Infinite and the finite, just as there is only one concentration on the Real, only the one Union, only one Deliverance.<sup>16</sup>

This perspective is first and foremost concerned with spiritual discrimination and realization—'Ye shall know the Truth and the Truth shall make you free' (John 8:32). As the maxim of the Maharajas of Benares declares, 'There is no right superior to that of truth'.<sup>17</sup> Earlier, the same perception is expressed in the words 'Lead me from the unreal to the Real; Lead me from darkness to Light; Lead me from death to Immortality' (*Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 1.3.27).

Regarding the central question of spiritual realization and the diverse spiritual paths, Reza Shah-Kazemi observes:

[I]s the summit of the mystical quest one and the same, or are there as many summits as there are religions? The overriding conclusion is that . . . one can justifiably speak of a single, transcendent essence of spiritual realization, whatever be the religious starting-point. The stress here is on the word 'transcendent'; anything short of this level inescapably entails multiplicity and hence differences as well as similarities, but not unity: unity in an absolute sense is only to be found at the level of the Absolute, that is, at the transcendent level, precisely.<sup>18</sup>

Nasr presents the general task of the exponents of the perennial philosophy: '[T]here are . . . those whose vocation it is to provide the keys with which the treasury of wisdom of other traditions can be

16. Frithjof Schuon, quoted in *Prayer Fashions Man: Frithjof Schuon on the Spiritual Life*, trans. M. Perry, J.-P. Lafouge, D. Casey and J. S. Cutsinger, ed. J. S. Cutsinger (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2005), p. 187.

17. Quoted in William Stoddart, *Outline of Hinduism* (Washington, D.C.: Foundation for Traditional Studies, 1993), p. 72.

18. Reza Shah-Kazemi, *Paths to Transcendence: According to Shankara, Ibn Arabi, and Meister Eckhart* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2006), p. xiv.

unlocked, revealing to those who are destined to receive this wisdom the essential unity and universality and at the same time the formal diversity of tradition and revelation.<sup>19</sup> It is worth pointing out that among the exponents of the perennial philosophy, arguments proving or disproving it are inconsequential: '[W]e are not . . . concerned to prove dialectically any doctrine whatever, but only to exhibit its consistency and therewith its intelligibility'.<sup>20</sup> What takes primacy in the perennial philosophy is the True and the Real, which are not reducible to the empirical order.<sup>21</sup>

#### THE RELEVANCE OF THE PERENNIAL PHILOSOPHY IN OUR TIMES

Perhaps no other theme is more perplexing to the contemporary mind than religion, and how to understand religious pluralism in today's world amidst all of the confusion that surrounds it. Due to the militant secularism and skepticism in these times, an integral framework for building bridges between the religions is imperative. This is especially necessary at a time when 'the outward and readily exaggerated incompatibility of the different religious forms greatly discredits, in the minds of most of our contemporaries, all religion'.<sup>22</sup> Without the integral framework of the perennial philosophy authentic bridge-building between the religions cannot take place.

While the word *religion* has become off-putting and is less used today than *spirituality*, it is necessary to remember that the etymological root of the English word 'religion' is the Latin *religare*, meaning to 'to re-bind', or 'to bind back', by implication to the Divine or the Supreme Identity that is at once transcendent and immanent.<sup>23</sup> This etymology itself alludes to religion's role in restoring the integral human condition that has become estranged and besieged with myriad ill-fated diagnostics: originally, religion was understood to be essential for both the individual and the human collectivity as it was the unitive force of humanity.

19. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Sufi Essays* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1973), p. 126.

20. *Coomaraswamy*, vol. 2, p. 90.

21. As Schuon states: 'Metaphysical evidence takes precedence over "physical" or "phenomenal" certainty' (*Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, trans. G. E. H. Palmer [Bedfont: Perennial Books, 1990], p. 15).

22. *Idem*, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, pp. xxxiii–xxxiv.

23. Stoddart, *Remembering in a World of Forgetting*, pp. 41–2.

Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), Romanian historian of religion, confirms the inseparable link between the human and the transpersonal: ‘The man of the traditional societies [and civilizations] is admittedly a *homo religiosus*.’<sup>24</sup> He adds that ‘*homo religiosus* represents the “total man”.’<sup>25</sup> The task of the world’s religions and their inner dimension is to awaken or reintegrate into our primordial nature (*fiṭrah*) the ‘image of God’ (*imago Dei*), Buddha-nature (*Buddha-dhātu*) or Self (*Ātmā*), our true identity *in divinis*. Guénon makes a crucial distinction between *homo religiosus* and the ordinary man or woman of the present-day: “‘true man’ is also “‘primordial man”, that is, his condition is that which was natural for humanity at its origins, and from which it has moved away bit by bit in the course of its terrestrial cycle to arrive where we now find what we have called the ordinary man, who is properly fallen man’.<sup>26</sup> Joseph Epes Brown, a renowned scholar of Native American traditions and world religions, conveys the sense of the sacred as it was known in the traditional world: ‘The total world of experience is seen as being infused with the sacred’.<sup>27</sup> According to Coomaraswamy, ‘in a traditional society there is little or nothing that can properly be called secular’;<sup>28</sup> yet more radically, Brian Keeble states that ‘it is axiomatic that there is no such thing as a secular culture’.<sup>29</sup> This is to make clear that ‘There is no people on earth which is not religious *a priori*.’<sup>30</sup>

The traditional doctrine of identity that can be found across the religions is closely related to the image one has of Reality. It is the metaphysical order that guides the human being beyond the bifurcation of consciousness that splits the mind and matter, or subject and object, in order to harmonize and unify them. This framework recognizes the significance of spiritual forms for human beings as exemplified by the saying from India, ‘He takes the forms that are imagined by His

24. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. W. R. Trask (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987), p. 15.

25. *Idem*, *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion* (University of Chicago Press, 1969), p. 8.

26. René Guénon, *The Great Triad*, trans. H. D. Fohr, ed. S. D. Fohr (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2004), p. 61.

27. Joseph Epes Brown, *The Spiritual Legacy of the American Indian: Commemorative Edition with Letters While Living with Black Elk*, ed. M. B. Weatherly, E. Brown and M. O. Fitzgerald (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2007), p. 56.

28. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), p. 70.

29. Brian Keeble, *Art: For Whom and For What?* (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2005), p. 9.

30. Frithjof Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, trans. G. Polit and D. Lambert (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1982), p. 23.

worshippers'.<sup>31</sup> Each human being praises the Divine in accordance with his or her own essence: 'God wishes to be worshiped by every man according to the nature He gave him'.<sup>32</sup> According to the *ḥadīth qudsī*: 'I am as My servant thinks I am, and I am with him when he remembers Me'; or, in another *ḥadīth* authenticated by Bukhārī (810–870), 'I am in my servant's notion of Me'.<sup>33</sup> Spirit discloses itself in the form of a particular revelation and adapts itself to the unique expression of a given human collectivity and the distinct human beings found within these communities. This is encapsulated in the words of the Sufi mystic al-Junayd (835–910): 'The water takes on the color of its cup'.<sup>34</sup> Each human being is a cup or a receptacle with its distinctive and unique beliefs and traits, that assimilate the one and the same symbolic water or transpersonal Essence.

The human being exists in both the horizontal and vertical domains, that are both in time and in what is timeless, both in the physical and in the metaphysical. The human being is therefore a bridge between these two domains, and this is why religion is imperative in understanding what it means to be human and consequently for the realization of the human condition.<sup>35</sup> Speaking of the interdependence of these domains, Guénon states: '[T]he vertical and the horizontal can be taken as representing two complementary terms; but obviously the vertical and the horizontal cannot be said to oppose each other'.<sup>36</sup> For this reason it has been said that, '[T]here is no "vertical" illumination without the corresponding "horizontal" perfection'.<sup>37</sup> The human being is in essence made for religion. As Schuon states: '[M]an's vocation is the consciousness of the Absolute,<sup>38</sup> for the very reason that 'Man is made for the Absolute'.<sup>39</sup> The Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution

31. Quoted in *Coomaraswamy*, vol. 2, p. 36.

32. Frithjof Schuon, 'Letter to Ben Black Elk – October 7, 1947', in Harry Oldmeadow, *Black Elk, Lakota Visionary: The Oglala Holy Man and Sioux Tradition* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2018), pp. 163–5 (p. 164).

33. Bukhārī, quoted in Ibn al-'Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R. W. J. Austin (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 283.

34. Quoted in William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 341.

35. See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 160–88.

36. René Guénon, *The Symbolism of the Cross*, trans. A. Macnab (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2004), p. 40.

37. Frithjof Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*, trans. P. N. Townsend (London: Perennial Books, 1984), p. 110.

38. Frithjof Schuon, *The Play of Masks* (Bloomington, World Wisdom, 1992), p. 82.

39. *Idem*, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, trans. Lord Northbourne (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1984), p. 114.

and the Enlightenment project have all aided in the eclipse of the sacred, which has not only undermined what it means to be human but has inverted or turned it on its head.

#### THE SPIRITUAL CRISIS OF THE MODERN AND POSTMODERN WORLD

The Perennialist critique of the modern and postmodern world is concerned with the loss of the sense of the sacred and the spiritual crisis that has developed in its wake. Although this crisis emerged in post-medieval Western Europe, it has since spread throughout the world, becoming a global phenomenon, and the human collectivity is now grappling with its destructive consequences. Huston Smith (1919–2016)<sup>40</sup> frames the present-day predicament thus: '[T]he East and the West are going through a single common crisis whose cause is the spiritual condition of the modern world.'<sup>41</sup> The perennial philosophy views the 'secularizing and desacralizing tendencies'<sup>42</sup> as being at the heart of the crisis of modernism and postmodernism. This eclipse of the sacred has had catastrophic effects on the contemporary West. René Guénon astutely diagnosed its fundamental abnormality in 1927:

Nothing and nobody is any longer in the right place; men no longer recognize any effective authority in the spiritual order or any legitimate power in the temporal; the 'profane' presume to discuss what is sacred, and to contest its character and even its existence; the inferior judges the superior, ignorance sets bounds to wisdom, error prevails over truth, the human is substituted for the Divine, earth has priority over Heaven, the individual sets the measure for all things and claims to dictate to the universe laws drawn entirely from his own relative and fallible reason. 'Woe unto you, ye blind guides' [Matthew 23:16], the Gospel says; and indeed everywhere today one sees nothing but blind leaders of the blind, who, unless restrained by some timely check, will inevitably lead them into the abyss, there to perish with them.<sup>43</sup>

40. See Samuel Bendeck Sotillos, 'Huston Smith, Pilgrim of the Perennial Philosophy', *Sacred Web: A Journal of Tradition and Modernity* 39 (Summer 2017) 109–146.

41. Huston Smith, *Why Religion Matters: The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), p. 1.

42. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Need for a Sacred Science* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 159.

43. Guénon, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, pp. 67–8.



Given the topsy-turvy context of the contemporary era the recognition that at the core of this predicament is first and foremost a spiritual crisis is much needed: 'That which is lacking in the present world is a profound knowledge of the nature of things; the fundamental truths are always there, but they do not impose themselves because they cannot impose themselves on those unwilling to listen.'<sup>44</sup>

A fundamental divide, and no less of a conflict, exists between the tenets of modernism and Tradition. Nasr underscores the essential distinction between Tradition and the ideology of modernism, describing the latter as 'that which is cut off from the transcendent, from the immutable principles which in reality govern all things and which are made known to man through revelation in its most universal sense'.<sup>45</sup> This outlook culminates in the now famous phrase and false thesis of the 'Clash of Civilizations',<sup>46</sup> which has been aptly debunked as the 'Clash of Ignorance'.<sup>47</sup> The 'clash' is in many ways aggravated by the extremism of anti-religious secularism and religious fundamentalism. When considered in a larger context, the rise of modernism which gave birth to secularism has created a void in the human collectivity which has heavily impacted the religions themselves. This vacuum has created an imbalance, which religious fundamentalism and New Age spirituality attempt to fill. Religious fundamentalism, which emerged to defend itself from the threats of anti-religious secularism, has totally lost sight of what religion is, and is in fact a betrayal of religion.<sup>48</sup> The loss of the sense of the sacred has created an unbalanced human psyche, which has become myopic and almost impermeable to the invisible or unseen world that is of a higher order of reality. While diagnosing the errors of the present day is essential, the function of the perennial philosophy is not limited to the critique of modernism or postmodernism. As Martin Lings makes clear, 'its purpose is positive, for it was written in the intention of affirming truth, not of denying error'.<sup>49</sup>

44. Frithjof Schuon, 'No Activity Without Truth', in *The Sword of Gnosis: Metaphysics, Cosmology, Tradition, Symbolism*, ed. J. Needleman (London: Arkana, 1986), pp. 27–39 (p. 28).

45. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 'Reflections on Islam and Modern Thought', *Studies in Comparative Religion* 15:3-4 (Summer/Autumn 1983) 164–76 (p. 164).

46. Bernard Lewis coined the term 'clash of civilizations' before Samuel P. Huntington; see the former's 'The Roots of Muslim Rage', *The Atlantic Monthly* 266:3 (September 1990) 47–60; followed by Huntington, 'The Clash of Civilizations?', *Foreign Affairs* 72:3 (Summer 1993) 22–49.

47. See Edward W. Said, 'The Clash of Ignorance', *The Nation* 273:12 (22 October 2001) 11–14.

48. See Joseph E. B. Lumbard (ed.), *Islam, Fundamentalism, and the Betrayal of Tradition: Essays by Western Muslim Scholars* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2009).

## ALDOUS HUXLEY, WHITALL N. PERRY AND THE PERENNIAL PHILOSOPHY

Huxley attributed the initial use of the Latin term *philosophia perennis* or 'perennial philosophy' to Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716). As Huxley writes: 'Philosophia Perennis—the phrase was coined by Leibniz; but the thing . . . is immemorial and universal.'<sup>50</sup> Leibniz utilized the term in a letter that he wrote on 26 August 1714, to Nicolas-François Remond de Montmort, yet the term was employed earlier by the Vatican librarian and theologian Agostino Steuco (1497–1548). However, careful research indicates that the idea dates even further back, to the Middle Ages.<sup>51</sup> While '[Leibniz] played a major role in making this term [*philosophia perennis*] famous . . . he did not have full access to the totality of traditional metaphysics and what traditional authorities understand by perennial philosophy'.<sup>52</sup> Steuco in his *De perenni philosophia* of 1540 described this timeless and universal wisdom as the 'one principle of all things, of which there has always been one and the same knowledge among all peoples'.<sup>53</sup> Steuco additionally states that 'the aim of philosophy is the knowledge of God, and, as it were, the actual beholding of Him'.<sup>54</sup> This position is upheld by St Augustine (354–430): 'If God is Wisdom . . . the true philosopher is a lover of God.'<sup>55</sup> The influential philosopher and priest, Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499), termed it the *philosophia priscorum* or *prisca theologia*. The leading Byzantine scholar and philosopher, Gemistus Plethon (1355–1452), used the term *vera philosophia*, describing it as a religion 'as old as the universe and . . . always among mankind'.<sup>56</sup> Within Hinduism this teaching is known as the *sanātana dharma* (eternal religion), and in Islam as *al-ḥikmat al-khālidah* (eternal wisdom; *jāwīdān-khirad*,

49. Abū Bakr Sirāj ad-Dīn, *The Book of Certainty: The Sufi Doctrine of Faith, Vision and Gnosis* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1996), p. x.

50. Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, p. vii.

51. Charles B. Schmitt, 'Perennial Philosophy: From Agostino Steuco to Leibniz', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 27:4 (October/December 1966) 505–32.

52. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 105.

53. Quoted in Brian P. Copenhaver and Charles B. Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 185.

54. Quoted in Schmitt, 'Perennial Philosophy', p. 520.

55. Saint Augustine, Book VIII in *The City of God*, trans. F. R. Montgomery Hitchcock (New York: Macmillan Company, 1922), p. 44.

56. Gemistus Plethon, quoted in Karl H. Dannenfeldt, 'The Pseudo-Zoroastrian Oracles in the Renaissance', *Studies in the Renaissance* 4 (1957) 7–30 (p. 10).

in Persian),<sup>57</sup> or also *al-dīn al-ḥanīf* (primordial religion). Other Latin phrases that are also used to articulate the perennial philosophy are: *sophia perennis* (perennial wisdom), *religio perennis* (perennial religion) and *religio cordis* (religion of the heart). It is sometimes known as the transcendent unity of religions,<sup>58</sup> the underlying religion,<sup>59</sup> Great Chain of Being,<sup>60</sup> Primordial Tradition<sup>61</sup> or simply as Tradition.<sup>62</sup> Coomaraswamy has additionally referred to this metaphysical doctrine as the 'Universal and Unanimous Tradition'<sup>63</sup> or 'Philosophia Perennis et Universalis'.<sup>64</sup>

Despite some noteworthy selections, Huxley's work is incomplete due to its adoption of an individualistic pick-and-choose approach, rather than letting the wisdom traditions speak for themselves. Gai Eaton (1921–2010) points out that 'Huxley's book, *The Perennial Philosophy* . . . has, on the whole, given a dangerously misleading impression of the traditional religious and metaphysical teaching . . . Huxley . . . filched from various doctrines, without any regard for their context, those elements which seem to support his own attitude to life.'<sup>65</sup> Coomaraswamy too did not agree with Huxley's

57. See 'Perennial Philosophy (Wisdom) (from *al-Ḥikmat al-khālidah* or *Jāwidān-khīrad*)', in *An Anthology of Philosophy in Persia*, vol. 1: *From Zoroaster to 'Umar Khayyām*, ed. S. H. Nasr and M. Aminrazavi (London: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 2008), pp. 326–55.

58. See Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, trans. P. Townsend (London: Faber and Faber, 1953).

59. 'A civilization is integrated and healthy to the extent that it is founded on the "invisible" or "underlying" religion, the *religio perennis*' (Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, p. 143). Cf. *idem*, *Christianity/Islam: Essays on Esoteric Ecumenicism*, trans. G. Polit (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1985), p. 138.

60. See Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1964).

61. '*Sanātana Dharma* . . . derives most directly from the primordial tradition' (Guénon, *Studies in Hinduism*, p. 83). 'The primordial tradition—a synonym for perennial philosophy—would not be primordial if it surfaced in one tradition only' (Huston Smith, 'The Process Critique of Perennialism: A Reply to David Griffin', in David Ray Griffin and Huston Smith, *Primordial Truth and Postmodern Theology* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989], p. 63). See also *idem*, *Beyond the Post-Modern Mind* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), pp. 32–57.

62. This has been repeatedly affirmed by Perennialist writers; see for instance the recent discussion by Reza Shah-Kazemi, 'Tradition as Spiritual Function: A "Perennialist" Perspective', *Sacred Web: A Journal of Tradition and Modernity* 7 (Summer 2001) 37–58.

63. Coomaraswamy, *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*, p. 144.

64. '*Philosophia Perennis et universalis* must be understood, for this "philosophy" has been the common inheritance of all mankind without exception' (Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *The Bugbear of Literacy* [Bedfont: Perennial Books, 1979], p. 68).

65. Gai Eaton, *The Richest Vein: Eastern Tradition and Modern Thought* (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2005), pp. 167, 182; cf. Stoddart, *Remembering in a World of Forgetting*, p. 51.

version of the *philosophia perennis*; as he said in a letter written to Huxley in 1944: 'I do not approach the great traditions, as you seem to do, to pick and choose in them what seems to me to be "right"'.<sup>66</sup>

Very different from Huxley's anthology is Whitall N. Perry's work *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*,<sup>67</sup> consisting of more than a thousand pages; this has been praised as the 'Summa of the Philosophia Perennis'. Perry came into close personal contact with Coomaraswamy in 1946; and it was through this contact that Perry first conceived of the idea to compile an anthology underscoring the world's religions and spiritual traditions, both in their universality through their esoteric dimensions and in their necessary differences in their exoteric dimensions. In 1943, Coomaraswamy had written of the pressing need for an authentic portrayal of the *philosophia perennis* or perennial philosophy: 'Indeed, the time is coming when a Summa of the Philosophia Perennis will have to be written, impartially based on all orthodox sources whatever.'<sup>68</sup> After seventeen years, Perry's labor of love bore fruit; unfortunately, Coomaraswamy was not alive to see its publication. Yet, Marco Pallis writes, 'I can say with certainty that had he [Coomaraswamy] lived to see the present Anthology [*A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*] published he would have welcomed it'.<sup>69</sup>

Even though Huston Smith was introduced to the perennial philosophy through Huxley, he came to recommend not Huxley's anthology but Perry's anthology as a definitive guide to the perennial philosophy:

*A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom* is foundational to the school of thought that affirms and explores the primordial tradition at the heart of all the great religious and philosophical traditions, popularized by Aldous Huxley as the perennial philosophy. Perry's is the essential reference work, and it affords rich and vital reading.<sup>70</sup>

66. *Selected Letters of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy*, ed. A. Moore, Jr. and R. P. Coomaraswamy (Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 193.

67. *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, ed. Whitall N. Perry (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971). See also William Stoddart (ed.), *Invincible Wisdom: Quotations from the Scriptures, Saints, and Sages of All Times and Places* (San Rafael: Sophia Perennis, 2008).

68. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Hinduism and Buddhism* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1943), p. 86.

69. Marco Pallis, 'Foreword', *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, p. 8.

70. Huston Smith, quoted on the back cover of a subsequent edition of *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom* (Louisville KY: Fons Vitae, 2000).

TOWARD A DEFINITION OF THE PERENNIAL PHILOSOPHY  
AND SACRED TRADITION

'[T]he *Philosophia Perennis* . . . embodies those universal truths to which no one people or age can make exclusive claim.'<sup>71</sup> While it is known by varying terms, the phrase "*Philosophia perennis*" is generally understood as referring to that metaphysical truth which has no beginning, and which remains the same in all expressions of wisdom'.<sup>72</sup>

William Stoddart provides the following description of the *philosophia perennis*:

The central idea of the perennial philosophy is that Divine Truth is one, timeless, and universal, and that the different religions are but different languages expressing that one Truth. The symbol most often used to convey this idea is that of the uncolored light and the many colors of the spectrum which are made visible only when the uncolored light is refracted.<sup>73</sup>

Guénon articulates this universal and timeless metaphysics as follows:

[I]n truth pure metaphysics is neither Eastern nor Western, but universal, being in essence above and beyond all forms and all contingencies. It is only the exterior forms in which it is clothed in order to serve the necessities of exposition, so as to express whatever is expressible, that can be either Eastern or Western; but beneath their diversity there is always and everywhere a selfsame basis, at least wherever true metaphysics exists, and this for the simple reason that truth is one.<sup>74</sup>

Marco Pallis offers the following definition of what is implied by the use of the term 'Tradition' as it is linked to the perennial philosophy:

Tradition, because of its universal character, defies definition; but a few indications may make it clearer. It embraces the whole of a

71. Coomaraswamy, *Hinduism and Buddhism*, p. 4.

72. Frithjof Schuon, 'Sophia Perennis', in *The Essential Frithjof Schuon*, ed. S. H. Nasr (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2005), pp. 534–9 (p. 534).

73. William Stoddart, 'Foreword' to *Ye Shall Know the Truth: Christianity and the Perennial Philosophy*, ed. M. Soares de Azevedo (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2005), p. ix.

74. Guénon, *Studies in Hinduism*, p. 86.

civilization, in all its modes and departments, so that it cannot be said of any element that it exists independently of the traditional influence; there is no place for a 'profane' point of view. A traditional civilization has its roots set in a doctrine of the purely metaphysical order, from which all the other constituents of the tradition, whether ethical, social, or artistic, down to the most petty activities of daily life, derive their sanction. Metaphysical ideas are the cement that binds every part together. The whole body of thought and action must be viewed as a hierarchy, with pure metaphysic at the head . . . No set boundaries can be recognized by Tradition as a whole; it can only be taken as the equivalent of [Transcendent] Knowledge itself.<sup>75</sup>

Pallis elsewhere writes on Tradition:

It will already be apparent to the reader that by tradition more is meant than just custom long established, even if current usage has tended to restrict it in this way. Here the word will always be given its transcendent, which is also its normal, connotation without any attempt being made, however, to pin it down to a particular set of concepts, if only because tradition, being formless and supra-personal in its essence, escapes exact definition in terms of human speech or thought. All that can usefully be said of it at the moment is that wherever a complete tradition exists this will entail the presence of four things, namely: a source of inspiration or, to use a more concrete term, of Revelation; a current of influence or Grace issuing forth from that source and transmitted without interruption through a variety of channels; a way of 'verification' which, when faithfully followed, will lead the human subject to successive positions where he is able to 'actualize' the truths that Revelation communicates; finally there is the formal embodiment of tradition in the doctrines, arts, sciences and other elements that together go to determine the character of a normal civilization.<sup>76</sup>

As Nasr maintains, "Tradition is inextricably related to revelation and religion, to the sacred, to the notion of orthodoxy, to authority, to the

75. Marco Pallis, *Peaks and Lamas* (Washington DC: Shoemaker and Hoard, 2005), p. xv.

76. *Idem, The Way and the Mountain: Tibet, Buddhism, and Tradition*, ed. J. A. Fitzgerald (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2008), pp. xxvii–xxviii.

continuity and regularity of transmission of the truth, to the exoteric and the esoteric as well as to the spiritual life, science and the arts.<sup>77</sup>

The notion of Tradition from this perspective escapes precise definition as its etymology signifies ‘that which is transmitted’ and is in a sense ineffable like the notion expressed in the *Tao Te Ching*, ‘The Tao that can be expressed is not the eternal Tao’. As Guénon asserts, ‘in all truly metaphysical conceptions, allowance must always be made for the inexpressible’;<sup>78</sup> similarly, he speaks of ‘the *philosophia perennis*—the primordial doctrine that transcends every articulated definition, lying behind all the diverse traditional forms and illuminating them from within’.<sup>79</sup> Tradition in its fullest sense pertains to the supra-formal order and is not in any way limited to the observance of customs, habits or the transitory events of history. In the words of Philip Sherrard (1922–1995): ‘Sacred tradition in the highest sense consists in the preservation and handing down of a method of contemplation ... in order to attain through intellectual vision a knowledge of and communion with the Divine.’<sup>80</sup>

#### MAKING SENSE OF RELIGIOUS EXCLUSIVISM AND PLURALISM

A fundamental question remains as to how to make sense of the world’s different religions, when each asserts its own exclusive validity and truth claims. How can all of the religions be true? And if they are all true does this then suggest that one religion cannot possess the fullness of Truth? This is something that Huston Smith struggled with prior to finding an integral framework within which to reconcile these differences. Smith recalls his perplexed state of mind with regard to understanding religious pluralism: ‘[H]ow can we [hold our truth to be the Truth] when others see truth [so] differently?’<sup>81</sup> He notes that the main criticism of the perennial philosophy is the affirmation of the universality of religion at the expense of the loss of the distinctions between the faith traditions.<sup>82</sup> Yet it is the metaphysical framework

77. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, p. 68.

78. Guénon, *Studies in Hinduism*, p. 90.

79. Hans Küry, *Death as Gateway to Eternity: Nature’s Hidden Message*, trans. G. Harris (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2013), p. 105.

80. Philip Sherrard, *Christianity: Lineaments of a Sacred Tradition* (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1998), p. 11.

81. Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth: The Common Vision of the World’s Religions* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 4.

82. *Idem*, *The Way Things Are: Conversations with Huston Smith on the Spiritual Life*, ed. P. Cousineau (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), p. 9.

of the perennial philosophy, especially its ability to reconcile and discern vital differences between the religions, that is necessary and providential. From one point of view the validity and truth of a given religion appears to contradict the validity and truth of the other, yet when viewed through the metaphysics of the perennial philosophy their inner dimension illuminates the validity and truth of each faith tradition without falling into religious exclusivism or syncretism.

Numerous passages from the world's religions can be found demonstrating the formal incongruities among their theological perspectives. We recall the Latin phrase *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* 'outside the Church there is no salvation', which is the dogma of the Catholic Church. Yet within every religion similar exclusivist claims can be identified as the founder of each faith tradition represents the *Logos*. According to the Christian tradition it is asserted: 'Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me' (John 14:6); in Islam, 'No man shall meet God who has not first met the Prophet' (*ḥadīth*); a corresponding principle, although not exclusivist in its outlook, can be found within the Buddhist tradition, 'He who sees the *Dhamma* [Dharma] sees me, and he who sees me sees the *Dhamma* [Dharma]' (*Samyutta Nikāya* 3.120).

While passages expressing religious exclusivism are to be found, it is also vital to balance these passages with the abundant examples of statements exemplifying universality to obtain a fuller understanding of the perennial philosophy or what has been termed the 'transcendent unity of religions'.<sup>83</sup> In the Hindu tradition, the *Bhagavad Gītā* declares, 'They worship me as One and as many, because they see that all is in me' (9:15). Śrī Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950),<sup>84</sup> the consummate exponent of *Advaita Vedānta*, affirmed: 'Under whatever name and form one may worship the Absolute Reality, it is only a means for realizing It without name and form. That alone is true realization, wherein one knows oneself in relation to that Reality, attains peace and realizes one's identity with it.'<sup>85</sup> According to Śrī Ānandamayī Mā

83. With this said, certain traditions are more exclusivist in their doctrinal formulations than other traditions, yet this at the same time does not take away from the underlying universality of the True and the Real.

84. See Samuel Bendeck Sotillos, 'René Guénon and Sri Ramana Maharshi: Two Remarkable Sages in Modern Times', published in four parts in *The Mountain Path* 51:2 (April/June 2014) 93–101; 51:3 (July/September 2014) 85–91; 51:4 (October/December 2014), 93–102; and 52:1 (January/March 2015) 93–104.

85. Ramana Maharshi, 'Forty Verses', in *The Collected Works of Ramana Maharshi*, ed. A. Osborne (Boston: Weiser Books, 1997), pp. 72–3.



(1896–1982): '[T]rue realization . . . [is when] one is fully enlightened as to all faiths and doctrines, and sees all paths as equally good. This is absolute and perfect realization.'<sup>86</sup> The 68th Jagadguru of Kanchi (1894–1994) confirms that all spiritual paths lead to the same summit—*Paramātman* or 'Transcendent Unity':

The temple, the church, the mosque, the *vihāra* (a Buddhist monastery; a residence for meditation) may be different from one another. The idol or the symbol in them may not also be the same and the rites performed in them may be different. But the *Paramātman* (Transcendent Unity) who grants grace to the worshipper, whatever be his faith, is the same. The different religions have taken shape according to the customs peculiar to the countries in which they originated and according to the differences in the mental outlook of the people inhabiting them. The goal of all religions is to lead people to the same *Paramātman* according to the different attitudes of the devotees concerned.<sup>87</sup>

Within the First Peoples and their Shamanic traditions it has been told: 'I have created these First People . . . gave them speech, a different language to each color, with respect for each other's difference.'<sup>88</sup> In the Confucian tradition it has been stated that: 'The true doctrine has always existed in the world'.<sup>89</sup>

Within the Christian tradition, we need to recall that Jesus declared that 'In my Father's house are many mansions' (John 14:2), and that there are 'other sheep who are not of this fold' (John 10:16); Jesus also emphasized that 'Before Abraham was, I am' (John 8:58). All of these passages allude to Jesus as the Logos.<sup>90</sup> The manifestation of the Logos in Christianity does not therefore suggest that it is in any way limited to a single religion, for the principle of the Logos can manifest in other religions as well. We recall the often-cited passage with reference to

86. Ānandamayī Mā, quoted in *The Essential Śrī Ānandamayī Mā: Life and Teachings of a 20th Century Indian Saint*, trans. Ātmānanda, ed. J. A. Fitzgerald (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2007), p. 130.

87. Swamigal, *Introduction to Hindu Dharma*, pp. 7–8.

88. Hopi Elders, quoted in Frank Waters, *Book of the Hopi: The First Revelation of the Hopi's Historical and Religious Worldview of Life* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 7.

89. Chou Li, quoted in *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, p. 794.

90. See the discussion of these words by Frithjof Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds: A New Translation with Selected Letters*, trans. D. Casey, M. Perry, J.-P. Lafouge and J. S. Cutsinger, ed. Deborah Casey (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2006), p. 57.

this idea: 'The wind [or Spirit] bloweth where it listeth' (John 3:8). St Ambrose (340–397) writes, 'Every truth, by whomsoever spoken, is from the Holy Ghost.'<sup>91</sup> This is similar to the words of Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464): '[T]here is one religion and worship, which is presupposed in all the diversity of the rites.'<sup>92</sup> St Augustine observes, 'For what is now called the Christian religion existed even among the ancients and was not lacking from the beginning of the human race.'<sup>93</sup>

According to the Islamic tradition, 'We never sent a messenger save with the language of his folk, that he might make the message clear for them' (Qur'an 14:4). The following passage encapsulates this universal dimension within the Islamic tradition:

For each among you We have appointed a [different] law and a way. And had God willed, He would have made you one community, but [He willed otherwise], that He might try you in that which He has given you. So vie with one another in good deeds. Unto God shall be your return all together, and He will inform you of that wherein you differ . . . (Qur'an 5:48)

The validity of the diverse religious paths is also illustrated in the following Qur'anic passage: 'Truly those who believe, and the Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabeans—whoever believeth in God and the Last Day and performeth virtuous deeds—surely their reward is with their Lord, and no fear shall come upon them, neither shall they grieve' (2:62). The metaphysical reality of the Prophet of Islam is expressed in the *ḥadīth* which attributes to Muḥammad the words 'I was a Prophet when Adam was between water and clay'. Another point regarding religion is that one's religion is often determined by the family that one is born into and not necessarily by one's own choice. According to a famous *ḥadīth*: 'Every child is born according to primordial nature (*fiṭrah*); then his parents make him into a Jew, a Christian, or a Zoroastrian.'

91. St Ambrose, quoted in Saint Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica, Part II-II*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1922), p. 30.

92. Nicholas of Cusa, quoted in Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa's De Pace Fidei and Cribratio Alkorani: Translation and Analysis, Second Edition* (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, 1994), p. 640.

93. St Augustine, *The Retractions*, trans. Sister M. Inez Bogan RSM, Fathers of the Church Patristic Series (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1999), p. 52.

Ibn 'Arabī (1165–1240), the Spanish-born mystic known as 'the greatest master' (*al-shaykh al-akbar*), provides a quintessential example of this universal dimension as it pertains to Islamic metaphysics in this often-cited verse:

My heart has become capable of every form: it is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks,

And a temple for idols and the pilgrim's Ka'ba and the tables of the Tora and the book of the Koran.

I follow the religion of Love: whatever way Love's camels take, that is my religion and my faith.<sup>94</sup>

Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī (1207–1273), often known within the world of Islamic spirituality simply as Mawlānā, 'our Master', writes: 'Love's creed is separate from all religions: The creed and denomination of lovers is God.'<sup>95</sup>

#### EXOTERISM AND ESOTERISM AS KEYS TO UNDERSTANDING THE RELIGIONS

It needs to be remembered that 'Every exoteric perspective claims, by definition, to be the only true and legitimate one. This is because the exoteric point of view, being concerned only with an individual interest, namely, salvation, has no advantage to gain from knowledge of the truth of other religious forms.'<sup>96</sup> To go beyond the exclusivist or formalistic interpretations of religion requires the vantage point of metaphysics to realize the common ground among the religions, without which the 'transcendent unity of religions' is indiscernible. Lings points out, '[O]ne has to understand that there are different degrees, different points of view, different levels of reality which have to be taken into consideration.'<sup>97</sup> From this point of view exclusivist or

94. Ibn al-'Arabī, quoted in *The Tarjumān al-Ashwāq: A Collection of Mystical Odes*, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1911), p. 67.

95. Rūmī, quoted in William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), p. 213. Elsewhere, Rūmī states: 'I am neither Christian, nor Jew, nor Gabr [Parsi], nor Moslem. I am not of the East, nor of the West, nor of the land, nor of the sea . . . I have put duality away, I have seen that the two worlds are one; One I seek, One I know, One I see, One I call. He is the first, He is the last, He is the outward, He is the inward . . .' (*Selected Poems from the Divāni Shamsi Tabriz*, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson [Cambridge University Press, 1889], pp. 125, 127).

96. Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, p. 15.

97. Martin Lings, *Enduring Utterance: Collected Lectures (1993–2001)*, ed. T. Banyard (London: Matheson Trust, 2014), p. 80.

formalistic interpretations of religion become intelligible from a higher or more inclusive perspective.

While a deep immersion in the sapiential traditions is needed to comprehend what they say about each other, to recognize their uniqueness and even the necessary and providential nature of these differences, the goal is simultaneously 'To see beyond the veil of multiplicity . . . that unity which is the origin of all sacred forms,'<sup>98</sup> to discover 'the truth that shines forth within each authentic religious universe manifesting the Absolute'.<sup>99</sup> This does not in any way minimize the formalistic practice of religion, as each orthodox faith tradition provides the fullness of truth through its doctrines and methods which contain 'truth sufficient unto salvation'.<sup>100</sup> When the religions are understood through metaphysics, they are no longer viewed as a limitation, but rather as a necessity leading to the doorway of the supra-formal: 'Forms are doors to the essences'<sup>101</sup> rather than obstacles. These spiritual or 'traditional forms...are keys to unlock the gate of Unitive Truth'.<sup>102</sup>

#### EACH RELIGION IS A MANIFESTATION OF THE 'RELATIVE ABSOLUTE'

The notion of religious exclusivity can be understood and even reconciled with pluralism if we recognize the 'relative absolute' that is the existence of the Absolute in the relative that is each religion. Each religion derives from the Absolute, yet each religious form is relative in and of itself. 'The unity of religions is to be found first and foremost in this Absolute which is at once Truth and Reality and the origin of all revelations and of all truth.'<sup>103</sup> The Divine expresses itself in absolutes because it alone is Absolute, yet the distinct religious forms are not absolute. Schuon summarizes this idea: 'Revelation is absolute in itself, but relative in its form.'<sup>104</sup> Thus each exclusive truth claim is a 'relative absolute' that is religion: 'If "no man cometh unto the Father, but by me", it is because this "me" as such possesses a saving and unitive virtuality; every subjectivity as such is in principle a door towards its

98. Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, p. 18. 99. *Ibid.*

100. Huston Smith, 'Foreword', to Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (Chicago: ABC International Group, 2000), p. x.

101. Frithjof Schuon, *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*, trans. G. Polit (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1986), p. 11.

102. Pallis, 'Foreword' to *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, p. 10.

103. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, p. 293.

104. Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, p. 26.

own transpersonal Essence.<sup>105</sup> Stoddart explains that ‘Each religion is an expression of the Absolute—the Logos—otherwise it would not be a religion, but a man-made ideology, with no power to save.’<sup>106</sup>

All of these exclusive truth claims, while necessarily differing from each other in their exoteric or outer dimensions, do not present contradictions or irreconcilable differences within their esoteric or inner dimension, as there is what has been termed a ‘transcendent unity of religions’. This is clarified further by Schuon:

Our starting point is the acknowledgment of the fact that there are diverse religions which exclude each other. This could mean that one religion is right and that all the others are false; it could mean also that all are false. In reality, it means that all are right, not in their dogmatic exclusivism, but in their unanimous inner signification, which coincides with pure metaphysics or, in other terms, with the *philosophia perennis*.<sup>107</sup>

If each Revelation differentiates itself from others, it is because of its supra-formal essence which cannot be reduced to its formal manifestation. As Schuon states, ‘the existence of dogmatic antinomies, [serves] to show that for God truth is above all in the efficacy of the symbol and not in the “bare fact”’.<sup>108</sup> It is essential to take into consideration that ‘every tradition is necessarily a partial representation of the truth intended by tradition universally considered’;<sup>109</sup> and equally that ‘What then is clear and full in one tradition can be used to develop the meaning of what may be hardly more than alluded to in another’.<sup>110</sup>

Regarding the notion that more recent Revelations abrogate or repeal and replace those of the past, we have to ask: What is abrogated if Revelation itself derives from the Absolute? Ibn ‘Arabī rejects the idea that more recent Revelations abrogate the religions of the past and clarifies this matter in his monumental work *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*:

105. Frithjof Schuon, *Roots of the Human Condition* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1991), p. 50.

106. Stoddart, *Remembering in a World of Forgetting*, p. 32.

107. Frithjof Schuon, quoted in Deborah Casey, ‘The Basis of Religion and Metaphysics: An Interview with Frithjof Schuon’, *The Quest: Philosophy, Science, Religion, the Arts* 9:2 (Summer 1996) 74-8 (p. 75).

108. Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, p. 20. 109. *Coomaraswamy*, vol. 2, p. 40.

110. *Ibid.*

All the revealed religions [*sharā'i*] are lights. Among these religions, the revealed religion of Muhammad is like the light of the sun among the lights of the stars. When the sun appears, the lights of the stars are hidden, and their lights are included in the light of the sun. Their being hidden is like the abrogation of the other revealed religions that takes place through Muhammad's revealed religion. Nevertheless, they do in fact exist, just as the existence of the light of the stars is actualized. This explains why we have been required in our all-inclusive religion to have faith in the truth of all the messengers and all the revealed religions. They are not rendered null [*bāṭil*] by abrogation—that is the opinion of the ignorant. (III 153.12)<sup>111</sup>

#### RELIGION AS THE DOORWAY TO INTEGRAL SPIRITUALITY

Huston Smith states that without the perennial philosophy he might have never fully understood the complexities of how the religions differ on the formal level and where they meet on the supra-formal level:

I am not sure that if I had been left to my own devices I could have ever solved this problem, which would have meant knocking my head against its wall for my entire career. Frithjof Schuon rescued me from that fate . . . It is enough if I say that when his position came into focus for me—it took some time, for though passages in his writing are so inspiringly beautiful as to make the reader interrupt his reading and pause to pray, others are as difficult as any passage in philosophy one can name—I realized that I was in the presence of a metaphysical genius, a man who was doing exactly what I was trying to do: honor equally religion's breadth, embracing its manifold historical expressions, and its vertical height, anchored in the One Living God . . . I apprenticed myself to Schuon and will keep on doing so for the rest of my life.<sup>112</sup>

We are reminded to approach the spiritual path on the terms of the Divine and not our own: 'We ought to obey God rather than men' (Acts 5:29). As it has been pointed out: '[E]nter houses through their

111. Ibn al-'Arabī, quoted in William C. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-'Arabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), p. 125.

112. Smith, 'Foreword' to *Splendor of the True*, p. xiv.

proper doors' (Qur'ān 2:189). The inner dimension of religion is only accessible through the outer dimension; as Meister Eckhart noted, 'If you would have the Kernel, you must break the husk'<sup>113</sup>—break it in the sense of passing through it from the outer to the inner. The inner and outer dimensions of religion are inseparable from one another and are complementary, since both are revealed by God alone.<sup>114</sup> This is in accordance with Schuon's view: 'Truth does not deny forms from the outside, but transcends them from within'.<sup>115</sup> This is because 'Pure metaphysics is hidden in every religion'.<sup>116</sup> The particular forms of religion and spirituality become intelligible through understanding the relationship and interdependence of the exoteric and esoteric: 'Man cannot penetrate into the inner meaning of a form except through inner or esoteric knowledge'.<sup>117</sup>

Again, in order to participate in the inner or mystical dimension of a religion, the outer dimension needs to be present; religion cannot be discarded in an attempt to solely practice its inner dimension.

Clearly, there is no Zen without Buddhism, and although the inner or esoteric dimension of every religion necessarily has affinities with those of other religions, there is also no Yoga without Hinduism, no Kabbalism without Judaism, or Sufism without Islam, nor is there true Hesychasm (the last surviving form of Christian esoterism) outside the Orthodox Church.<sup>118</sup>

While the saints and sages transcended the formal limitations of their respective religions, this does not mean that they therefore abandoned the doctrines and methods of these faith traditions; they in fact conserved the outer dimension or exoteric elements while practicing the inner or esoteric dimension. This is affirmed by Schuon: 'It is obvious that a spiritual means has significance only within the

113. Meister Eckhart, quoted in Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, p. 32.

114. 'Exoterism does not come from esoterism but directly from God' (Frithjof Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts: A New Translation with Letters*, trans. M. Perry, J.-P. Lafouge and J. S. Cutsinger, ed. J. S. Cutsinger [Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2007], p. 78). Cf. Smith, 'Introduction' to Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, p. xxv.

115. Frithjof Schuon, *Language of the Self* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1999), p. 40.

116. Quoted in Casey, 'The Basis of Religion and Metaphysics', p. 75.

117. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, p. 293.

118. Shaykh 'Abd al-Wahid Pallavicini, *A Sufi Master's Message: In Memoriam René Guénon* (Louisville KY: Fons Vitae, 2011), p. 40.

rules assigned to it by the tradition which offers it . . . nothing is more dangerous than to give oneself up to improvisations in this field.<sup>119</sup> He further outlines the relationship between the inner and outer dimensions of religion as follows:

[E]soterism on the one hand prolongs exoterism—by harmoniously plumbing its depth—because the form expresses the essence and because in this respect the two enjoy solidarity, while on the other hand esoterism opposes exoterism—by transcending it abruptly—because the essence by virtue of its unlimitedness is of necessity not reducible to form.<sup>120</sup>

#### WHY THE PERENNIAL PHILOSOPHY CANNOT BE A RELIGION OF ITS OWN

The perennial philosophy, while timeless and universal, does not in any way advocate a religion or tradition of its own: that it does so is a common misconception. There cannot be a 'supra-religion' or 'meta-religion' that places one religion above all others, as the diverse religions correspond to the diverse human beings and derive from the Absolute. Each faith tradition is sufficient for the return or reintegration into the Divine and requires diverse means of facilitating this function. An *ad hoc* all-encompassing construction of religion is erroneous as no such formation can exist that replaces all the sapiential traditions: this would distort the intrinsic tenet of the perennial philosophy that all the religions are fundamentally unique manifestations of the Absolute. 'Metaphysically speaking, unity lies at the opposite pole of uniformity, and the reduction of religions to a least common denominator in the name of the religious unity of mankind is no more than a parody of the "transcendent unity of religions" which characterizes the traditional point of view.'<sup>121</sup> It is also important to keep in mind that: 'No new religion can see the light of day in our time for the simple reason that time itself, far from being a sort of uniform abstraction, on the contrary

119. Frithjof Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1995), p. 130.

120. Frithjof Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, trans. W. Stoddart (Bedfont: Perennial Books, 1990), p. 26. On the importance of the inner dimension in supporting the outer dimension see *idem*, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, p. 9.

121. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, p. 288.



alters its value according to every phase of its development. What was still possible a thousand years ago is so no longer.<sup>122</sup>

#### DISCERNING NEW AGE SPIRITUALITY AND SYNCRETISM

As the perennial philosophy acknowledges the ‘transcendent unity of religions’, it can sometimes be confused with New Age pseudo-spirituality, which is syncretic in nature and is a parody of integral spirituality.<sup>123</sup> Let us be clear: the perennial philosophy has nothing to do with this counterfeit spirituality. Schuon writes, ‘it is one thing to manufacture a doctrine by assembling scattered ideas as best one can and quite another to recognize, on the basis of what we willingly call the *Sophia Perennis*, the single Truth contained in various doctrines.’<sup>124</sup>

The phenomenon of syncretism has been systematically critiqued by Guénon:

‘Syncretism’ in its true sense is nothing more than a simple juxtaposition of elements of diverse provenance brought together ‘from the outside’ so to speak, without any principle of a more profound order to unite them . . . Modern counterfeits of tradition [or integral spirituality] like occultism and Theosophy [i.e. the New Age movement] are basically nothing else, fragmentary notions borrowed from different traditional [spiritual] forms, generally poorly understood and more or less deformed, are herein mixed with ideas belonging to philosophy and to profane science . . . Whatever is truly inspired by traditional [or authentic spiritual] knowledge always proceeds from ‘within’ and not from ‘without’; whoever is aware of the essential unity of all [sapiential] traditions can, according to the case, use different traditional forms to expound and interpret doctrine, if there happens to be some advantage in doing so, but this will never even remotely resemble any sort of syncretism.<sup>125</sup>

122. Frithjof Schuon, ‘No Activity Without Truth’, in *The Sword of Gnosis*, pp. 27–39 (p. 33). See also Titus Burckhardt, *Mirror of the Intellect: Essays on Traditional Science and Sacred Art*, trans. and ed. W. Stoddart (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), p. 251.

123. See Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, p. 147; also Samuel Bendeck Sotillos, ‘New Age or the Kali-Yuga?’, *AHP Perspective* (April/May 2013), pp. 15–21.

124. Frithjof Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence: A New Translation with Selected Letters*, trans. M. Perry, J.-P. Lafouge and J. S. Cutsinger (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2009), p. 2.

125. René Guénon, *Perspectives on Initiation*, trans. H. D. Fohr, ed. S. D. Fohr (Ghent NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), pp. 38, 41.

As Perry discerningly states: 'A supra-formal synthesis cannot be recast in terms of a formal syncretism'.<sup>126</sup>

Eliade goes straight to the kernel of the matter:

The most erudite and devastating critique of all these so-called occult groups was presented, not by a rationalist 'outside' observer, but by an author from the inner circle, duly initiated into some of the secret orders and well acquainted with their occult doctrines; furthermore, that critique was directed, not from a skeptical or positivistic perspective, but from what he called 'traditional esotericism'. This learned and intransigent critic was René Guénon.<sup>127</sup>

Guénon cautions serious seekers of the present day against the dangers of New Age counterfeit spirituality in the following words:

[T]he 'pseudo-traditional' counterfeits, to which belong all the denaturings of the idea of tradition . . . take their most dangerous form in 'pseudo-initiation', first because in it they are translated into effective action instead of remaining in the form of more or less vague conceptions, and secondly because they make their attack on tradition from the inside, on what is its very spirit, namely, the esoteric and initiatic domain.<sup>128</sup>

#### METAPHORS FOR THE SPIRITUAL PATH AND REALIZING THE ONE AND THE MANY

A defining symbol that is used to describe the perennial philosophy and the diverse spiritual paths is the *circumference and the center* of a circle, and correspondingly the *mountain and the summit*. Regarding the circumference and the center, the outer dimensions of the religions are situated along the points of the circumference while the inner or mystical dimensions of the religions are the radii leading from the circumference to the center: 'the Centre where all the radii meet,

126. Perry, 'Introduction' to *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, p. 20.

127. Mircea Eliade, *Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural Fashions: Essays in Comparative Religions* (University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 51.

128. René Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, trans. Lord Northbourne (Ghent NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), p. 243. See also *idem*, *Theosophy: History of a Pseudo-Religion*, trans. A. Moore, Jr., C. Bethell, H. and R. Schiff (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2001); *The Spiritist Fallacy*, trans. A. Moore, Jr. and R. P. Coomaraswamy (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2001).

the summit which all roads reach. Only such a vision of the Centre,' Nasr continues, 'can provide a meaningful dialogue between religions, showing both their inner unity and formal diversity.'<sup>129</sup> Martin Lings comments:

Our image as a whole reveals clearly the truth that as each mystical path approaches its End, it is nearer to the other mysticisms than it was at the beginning. But there is a complementary and almost paradoxical truth which it cannot reveal, but which it implies by the idea of concentration which it evokes: increase of nearness does not mean decrease of distinctness, for the nearer the centre, the greater the concentration, and the greater the concentration, the stronger the 'dose'.<sup>130</sup>

From this we can logically deduce that in aligning oneself with an authentic spiritual form, one can by similitude know other traditions and where they converge—as radii traveling from the periphery of the circle to its center. Again, we need to keep in mind that 'at the center of each religion, there is a core of truth (about God and man, prayer and morality) which is identical'.<sup>131</sup>

The symbol of the mountain and the summit illustrates the diverse religions and at the same time the 'transcendent unity of religions'. At the bottom or the base of the mountain the distances between the various religions or paths up the mountain appear to be wide and incompatible, yet at the summit there is the unanimity of the One or Ultimate Reality. Stoddart utilizes what he has termed the 'mountain-climbing metaphor' to articulate the perennial philosophy and the spiritual path:

The doctrine of the transcendent or esoteric unity of the religions is not a syncretism, but a synthesis. What does this mean? It means that we must *believe* in all orthodox, traditional religions, but we can *practice* only one. Consider the metaphor of climbing a mountain. Climbers can start from different positions at the foot of the mountain. From these positions, they must follow the particular path that will lead them to the top. We can and must believe in

129. Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, p. 150.

130. Martin Lings, *What is Sufism?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 21–2.

131. Stoddart, *Remembering in a World of Forgetting*, p. 52.

the efficacy of all the paths, but our legs are not long enough to enable us to put our feet on two paths at once! Nevertheless, the other paths can be of some help to us. For example, if we notice that someone on a neighboring path has a particularly skillful way of circumventing a boulder, it may be that we can use the same skill to negotiate such boulders as may lie ahead of us on our own path. The paths as such, however, meet only at the summit. The religions are one only in God.<sup>132</sup>

Nasr observes this ascent of the spiritual path within the human being: 'The human spirit is One only at the summit of the human soul. Therefore, means must be found for men to climb to this summit of their own being.'<sup>133</sup>

Stoddart explains what this means for those who change their religion:

[W]hile it is a grave matter to change one's religion, the mountain-climbing metaphor nevertheless illustrates what takes place when one does. One moves horizontally across the mountain and joins an alternative path, and at that point one starts climbing again. One does not have to go back to the foot of the mountain and start again from there.<sup>134</sup>

#### WHY LIVING ONE'S RELIGION IS IMPERATIVE IN THESE TIMES

Schuon astutely comments from the esoteric or mystical perspective that 'to practice one religion is implicitly to practice them all'.<sup>135</sup> This is because 'a given religion in reality sums up all religions and . . . all religion is to be found in a given religion, because Truth is one'.<sup>136</sup> This vastly differs from endless dabbling in the various religions or mystical practices, as it is decisive that one path be taken and traveled until its end. The non-committal way of approaching religion is very deceptive and ultimately goes nowhere, as Shaykh ad-Darqāwī (1743–1823) makes clear: 'They are like a man who tries to find water by digging a little here and a little there and [who] will die of thirst; whereas a man who

132. Ibid., pp. 30–31. 133. Nasr, *The Need for a Sacred Science*, p. 49.

134. Stoddart, *Remembering in a World of Forgetting*, p. 31.

135. Frithjof Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom, A New Translation with Selected Letters*, ed. James S. Cutsinger (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2006), p. 20.

136. Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, p. 147.

digs deep in one spot, trusting in the Lord and relying on Him, will find water; he will drink and give others to drink.<sup>137</sup>

There are exemplars, like Śrī Rāmakrishna (1836–1886), who have demonstrated the unique ability to remain firmly rooted within a single religion (in his case that of Hinduism), and at the same time to be universal in their orientation, allowing them simultaneously to travel other spiritual paths.

There is something in Ramakrishna that seems to defy every category: he was like the living symbol of the inward unity of religions; he was in fact the first saint to wish to enter into foreign spiritual forms, and in this consisted his exceptional and in a sense universal mission—something allying him to the prophets without making him a prophet in the strict sense of the word; in our times of confusion, distress, and doubt, he was the saintly ‘verifier’ of forms and the ‘revealer’ as it were of their single truth . . . [His] spiritual plasticity was of a miraculous order.<sup>138</sup>

Rāmakrishna in no way repudiated or brought into question his participation in Hinduism, but affirmed the universality of all sapiential traditions, while abiding within the fold of his own faith tradition. It goes without saying that Rāmakrishna is unique and a rather remarkable embodiment of the ‘transcendent unity of religions’, yet it needs to be remembered that the universality of religion can be realized by practicing a single religion; and that one need not attempt, nor is it recommended that one attempt, to travel multiple spiritual paths.

#### CLARIFICATIONS ON THE CRITIQUES OF THE PERENNIAL PHILOSOPHY

There are some who assert that ‘there is no *philosophia perennis*’,<sup>139</sup> denying its very existence; while others have attempted to update

137. Shaykh ad-Darqāwī, *Letters of a Sufi Master*, trans. T. Burckhardt (Louisville KY: Fons Vitae, 1998), pp. 61–2. ‘You can’t chase two rabbits at the same time’ (quoted in Francis Dojun Cook, *How to Raise an Ox: Zen Practice As Taught in Zen Master Dogen’s Shobogenzo* [Los Angeles: Center Publications, 1978], p. 77).

138. Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, pp. 122, 127.

139. Steven T. Katz, ‘Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism’, in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. S. T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 22–74 (p. 24).

it, putting forward a so-called 'neo-perennial philosophy'<sup>140</sup> which ultimately culminates in 'integral post-metaphysics' or 'participatory theory'.<sup>141</sup> What is noteworthy about these assertions is that they all hold a common tendency to reduce the esoteric or inner dimension of religion to categories that are unable to recognize the full transcendent and metaphysical aspects of the spiritual domain. Metaphysics pertains to the domain of immutable principles, to which nothing can be added and from which nothing can be taken away. As Coomaraswamy makes clear, 'An "evolution" in metaphysics is impossible'.<sup>142</sup> As Ramana Maharshi further states, 'There is no evolution for that which is Eternal.'<sup>143</sup>

These attempted revisions are a fundamental reduction and subversion of the perennial philosophy, creating what could be identified as an 'integral flatland' that is essentially a relativistic pluralism which cannot go anywhere and ends in a *cul-de-sac*. Privileging immanence at the cost of transcendence is not only a reduction, but a fundamental error, for it must be remembered that transcendence is prior to immanence and there can be no immanence without transcendence.<sup>144</sup> There can be no 'neo-perennial philosophy', just as there is no 'integral post-metaphysics', in the same way as there is no post-epistemology or post-ontology, for if there were it would be devoid of transcendence and metaphysics and therefore inoperative. As stated earlier, there is only a single metaphysics and a single perennial philosophy—which is timeless and universal originating in the supra-formal reality.

It is argued that '*There are no pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences*'.<sup>145</sup> But even given that the context in which transcendent or mystical experience occurs is relevant, few would therefore conclude that this gives reason to accept the axiom that context will determine the nature

140. Ken Wilber, 'The Neo-Perennial Philosophy', *The Quest: Philosophy, Science, Religion, the Arts* 5:3 (Autumn 1992) 16–21; 'The Neo-Perennial Philosophy', *The American Theosophist* 71:10 (November 1983) 349–55; *The Eye of Spirit: An Integral Vision for a World Gone Slightly Mad* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1998), pp. 58–79.

141. See Jorge N. Ferrer, *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory: A Participatory Vision of Human Spirituality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).

142. Coomaraswamy, *Selected Letters*, p. 211.

143. Śri Ramana Maharshi, quoted in B. Sanjiva Rao, 'Bhagavan Sri Ramana and the Modern Age', in *Golden Jubilee Souvenir*, ed. V. S. Ramanam (Tiruvannamalai, India: Sri Ramanasramam, 1995), pp. 82–99 (p. 87).

144. See Mark Perry, 'Who Am I?' in *The Mystery of Individuality: Grandeur and Delusion of the Human Condition* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2012), pp. 39–59.

145. Katz, 'Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism', p. 26.

of these experiences. Reza Shah-Kazemi perceptively illuminates what is erroneous about seeking mystical experiences, their intrinsic limitations, and why they are not equivalent to spiritual realization:

The concept and reality of 'experience' presuppose an essentially dualistic ontological framework, for experience is the result of an encounter between an experiencing subject and an object experienced, even if this object be of an inward order. To experience 'something' is to be contrasted with 'being' that thing. To say experience, then, is to say irreducible alterity; at the transcendent level, alterity—and thus experience—is illusory; transcendent realization entails complete identity with the Absolute, and this Absolute does not experience anything 'other', for nothing 'other' truly exists.<sup>146</sup>

The very means whereby the empirical ego perceives the phenomenal world is problematic, as its starting point is rooted in a fictional identity that presumes a fundamental split between the subject and object. Ramana Maharshi presents this dilemma from the perspective of Ultimate Reality: 'An illusory being watches an illusory world.'<sup>147</sup> With this said, as Huston Smith points out, to validate the perennial philosophy we need 'not appeal to experience at all' but rather place attention on 'doctrines [that] derive from metaphysical intuitions . . . that the perennial philosophy appeals [to]. To discern the truth of a metaphysical axiom one need not have an "experience"'.<sup>148</sup> According to Śrī Nisargadatta Maharaj (1897–1981), all experience is unreal as the empirical ego is illusory: 'Experience, however sublime, is not the real thing. By its very nature it comes and goes. Self-realization is not an acquisition.'<sup>149</sup> It is through grounding oneself in the primacy of metaphysics and not through seeking mystical experience that the True and the Real can be fully discerned.<sup>150</sup> The relative and the Absolute characterize two distinct domains of knowing; however, the perennial philosophy also includes all contingent modes of knowing and levels

146. Reza Shah-Kazemi, 'Tradition as Spiritual Function', p. 48. See also *idem*, *Paths to Transcendence*, pp. 229–52.

147. Śrī Ramana Maharshi, 'January 8th, 1938', in *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi* (Tiruvannamalai, India: Sri Ramanasramam, 1996), pp. 412–14 (p. 413).

148. Huston Smith, 'Is There a Perennial Philosophy?', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55:3 (Autumn 1987) 553–66 (p. 554).

149. *I Am That: Talks with Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj*, trans. M. Frydman, ed. S. S. Dikshit (Durham: Acorn Press, 1999), p. 323.

150. On this point see Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom*, p. 157.

of reality that connect them. The perennial philosophy provides an integral framework that remedies the Cartesian bifurcation that has plagued the mindset of the modern West since the seventeenth century.<sup>151</sup>

Some have suggested that the perennial philosophy privileges pure metaphysics or non-duality, pointing to Schuon's characterisation of Śaṅkara's *Advaita Vedānta* as 'one of the most adequate expressions possible of the *philosophia perennis* or sapiential esoterism'.<sup>152</sup> Such a view overlooks the fact that this doctrine is timeless and universal, and can be found within all the world's religions and their mystical dimension, including the religions of the First Peoples and their Shamanic traditions. As it has been stated, 'that which in each religion provides the key for total or non-dualist esoterism . . . is the very presiding idea of the religion'.<sup>153</sup> Ultimate Reality transcends linguistic limitations and the rational mind's definitions and conceptualizations; it is beyond all categorization. The cataphatic theology, also known as affirmative theology (*via affirmativa*), pertains to what can be spoken about the Divine or God. By contrast, the apophatic theology, also known as negative theology (*via negativa*), pertains to what cannot be spoken about the Divine Essence or Godhead. Nasr makes it clear that the framework of the perennial philosophy honors all facets of religion and spirituality:

The traditional method of studying religions, while asserting categorically the 'transcendent unity of religion' and the fact that 'all paths lead to the same summit', is deeply respectful of every step on each path, of every signpost which makes the journey possible and without which the single summit could never be reached. It seeks to penetrate into the meaning of rites, symbols, images, and doctrines which constitute a particular religious universe but does not try to cast aside these elements or to reduce them to anything other than what they are within that distinct universe of meaning created by God through a particular revelation of the Logos.<sup>154</sup>

151. On the consequences of Cartesian dualism see Guénon, *The Great Triad*, p. 68; also Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 'In the Beginning was Consciousness', in *The Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, ed. W. C. Chittick (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2007), pp. 223–9 (p. 224).

152. Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, p. 21; cf. *idem*, *The Unanimous Tradition: Essays on the Essential Unity of All Religions*, ed. R. Fernando (Colombo: Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies, 1999), p. 22, and *Language of the Self*, pp. 19 and 201.

153. Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, pp. 25–6.

154. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, p. 293.



It is important to emphasize that the 'Native American religion embodies the *Sophia Perennis* in its own distinctive idiom'.<sup>155</sup> The Great Spirit (*Wakan-Tanka*) according to Black Elk (1863–1950), a remarkable sage of the Lakota Sioux, embraces both transcendence and immanence. 'We should understand well that all things are the works of the Great Spirit. We should know that He is within all things . . . and even more important, we should understand that He is also above all these things and peoples.'<sup>156</sup> Black Elk emphasizes the transcendent Unity of creation: '[A]ll are really one'.<sup>157</sup> The many originate in the One: 'the two are really only one; it is only the ignorant person who sees many where there is really only one.'<sup>158</sup> Brown has noted the common metaphysical underpinnings that exist between the First Peoples religions and other religions: '*Wakan-Tanka* as Grandfather is the Great Spirit independent of manifestation, unqualified, unlimited, identical to the Christian Godhead, or to the Hindu *Brahma-Nirguna*. *Wakan-Tanka* as Father is the Great Spirit considered in relation to His manifestation, either as Creator, Preserver, or Destroyer, identical to the Christian God, or to the Hindu *Brahma-Saguna*'.<sup>159</sup> This does not therefore suggest a false dichotomy between the relative and the Absolute, as the perennial philosophy recognizes diverse modes of knowing and levels of reality where each higher level of reality includes those that precede it, where nothing is excluded. 'Reality affirms itself by degrees, but without ceasing to be "one", the inferior degrees of this affirmation being absorbed, by metaphysical integration or synthesis, into the superior degrees.'<sup>160</sup>

The correlation between human diversity and religious pluralism is made evident in the perennial psychology: '[W]hat determines the difference among forms of Truth is the difference among human receptacles.'<sup>161</sup> Each religion originates in the Absolute and requires the integral metaphysics of the perennial philosophy to discern and reconcile human diversity and the corresponding diversity of religions.<sup>162</sup>

154. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, p. 293.

155. Huston Smith, 'What They Have That We Lack: A Tribute to the Native Americans via Joseph Epes Brown', in *The Essential Sophia*, ed. S. H. Nasr and K. O'Brien (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2006), p. 93.

156. Black Elk, 'Foreword' to Joseph Epes Brown, *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), p. xx.

157. Black Elk, quoted in Brown, *The Sacred Pipe*, p. 70.

158. Black Elk, quoted *ibid.*, p. 95. 159. Brown, *ibid.*, p. 5.

160. Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, p. 38.

161. *Idem*, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, p. 25.

162. See Samuel Bendeck Sotillos, 'The Self and the Other in the Light of the One: The Metaphysics of Human Diversity', *Sacred Web: A Journal of Tradition and Modernity* 41

The plurality of religions is no more contradictory than the plurality of individuals: in Revelation, God makes Himself as it were an individual in order to address the individual; homogeneity in relation to other Revelations is inward and not outward. If humanity were not diverse, a single Divine individualization would suffice; but man is diverse not only from the point of view of ethnic temperaments, but also from that of spiritual possibilities; the diverse combinations of these two things make possible and necessary the diversity of Revelations.<sup>163</sup>

As human diversity mirrors religious pluralism, in the same way 'the underlying truth is one ... because man is one'.<sup>164</sup> The many ways to the Divine belong to the diversity of human types, as Ānandamayī Mā points out: 'Infinite are the *sādhana*s . . .'.<sup>165</sup> Likewise, the Sufi adage maintains: 'There are as many paths to God as there are human souls' (*ḥadīth*).

Contemporary ecumenical or interfaith dialogue, although for the most part well-intentioned in accepting other faiths as legitimate, and advocating tolerance towards other religions, radically falls short and does not truly plumb the depths of the religions to understand how authentic bridges may be established between them. Often without necessarily realizing it, such dialogue ends up concluding that no one religion can possibly possess the fullness of the Truth: since they are all the same and each facilitates a part of the Truth, it is implied that each religion is an imperfect receptacle of Truth. It goes without saying that no amount of tolerance is the same as understanding and, while tolerance is much needed, it is limited to say the least. Again, while we need to be cautious and critical of religious exclusivism, the same applies for ecumenical or interfaith movements as Nasr stresses:

[M]uch of modern ecumenism has become like an engulfing amorphous mass which aims at dissolving all forms and removing all distinctions from several different realities by drawing them within a single or at best composite substance. One can detect in this current movement of ecumenism that same lack of distinction

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(Summer 2018) 34-76; 'Human Diversity in the Mirror of Religious Pluralism', *Religions: A Scholarly Journal* 9 (2016) 121-34.

163. Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, p. 133.

164. *Idem*, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, p. 16.

165. Quoted in *The Essential Śrī Ānandamayā Mā*, p. 62.

between the supraformal and the informal which results from the loss of an integral metaphysics in the West in modern times.<sup>166</sup>

This perspective unequivocally restricts the full scope of what religion signifies, and therefore it cannot facilitate a true understanding and authentic meeting between the diverse religions. What is needed is to build bridges between the religions based on an 'esoteric ecumenicism'<sup>167</sup> that transcends sectarian boundaries, is rooted in metaphysics, and is an expression of the universal and timeless wisdom of the perennial philosophy that is 'neither of the East nor of the West' (Qur'ān 24:35).

The expositors of the perennial philosophy in no way attempt to alter or update the religions and their mystical dimensions, as this would be unnecessary and even mistaken, but rather allow the traditional sources and their saints and sages to speak for themselves on their own terms, in order to present the universal and timeless wisdom to contemporaries seeking the one Truth hidden in all the forms. Schuon points out that:

[I]n fact everything has been said already, though it is far from being the case that everyone has always understood it. There can therefore be no question of presenting 'new truths'; however, what is needed in our time, and indeed in every age as it moves away from the origins of Revelation, is to provide some people with keys fashioned afresh—keys no better than the old ones but merely more elaborated and reflective—in order to help them rediscover the truths written in an eternal script in the very substance of the spirit.<sup>168</sup>

What is of essential importance in this topsy-turvy and radically confused time is to adhere to an authentic religious form and to practice it with all of one's heart and mind. Yet this commitment cannot be imposed from without and needs to come directly from the individual, as we are reminded: 'There is no compulsion in religion' (Qur'ān 2:256).

Tradition speaks to each man the language he can understand, provided he be willing to listen; this reservation is essential, for

166. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, pp. 289–90.

167. See Schuon, *Christianity/Islam*.

168. *Idem*, *Understanding Islam: A New Translation with Selected Letters*, trans. M. Perry and J.-P. Lafouge, ed. P. Laude (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2011), p. xvii.

tradition, we repeat, cannot become bankrupt; it is rather of man's bankruptcy that one should speak, for it is he who has lost the intuition of the supernatural and the sense of the sacred.<sup>169</sup>

While religion derives from a supra-formal order, human beings need forms to travel the spiritual path in order to return to the Spirit. Forms themselves are the disclosure of the supra-formal order, as 'Form is a revelation of essence'.<sup>170</sup> Human beings live in the world of forms and analogously require them for their return to the Divine: 'To say man is to say form',<sup>171</sup> and likewise, 'to say man is to say spirit'.<sup>172</sup> Spiritual forms correspond to both human diversity and religious pluralism: 'Truth is situated beyond forms, whereas Revelation, or the Tradition which derives from it, belongs to the formal order, and that indeed by definition; but to speak of form is to speak of diversity, and so of plurality'.<sup>173</sup>

The resolution to the confrontation between the plurality of religions and their transcendental unity is none other than the universal metaphysics that has existed at all times and in all places, known as the perennial philosophy. Yet it needs to be made clear that the recognition of the perennial philosophy—'the assertion of the spiritual equivalence of the great revelations'<sup>174</sup>—is not a prerequisite for a human being's salvation or Spiritual Realization, and should not serve as a substitute for a divinely revealed tradition. What is needed in order to restore the myopic condition of human consciousness is 'To see all things in the yet undifferentiated, primordial unity',<sup>175</sup> or as exemplified in the Heart Sūtra (*Prajñāpāramitā-hṛdaya-sūtra*): 'Form is emptiness; emptiness is form. Emptiness is not other than form; form is not other than emptiness.'<sup>176</sup> Coomaraswamy asserts the essential need for this integral framework in order to comprehend these necessary and providential differences between the sapiential traditions: 'I am in fullest agreement about the necessity of recognizing a common basis

169. *Idem*, *The Play of Masks*, p. 77.

170. Meister Eckhart, quoted in Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, p. 673.

171. Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, p. 29.

172. *Idem*, *From the Divine to the Human*, p. 76.

173. *Idem*, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, p. 25.

174. *Idem*, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, p. 122.

175. Lao Tzu, quoted in Jean C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Introduction to Taoism: The Wisdom of the Sages*, ed. J. A. Fitzgerald (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2010), p. 37.

176. The Heart Sūtra, quoted in Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *The Heart Sutra Explained: Indian and Tibetan Commentaries* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 57.

of understanding, but see no basis ... other than that of the *philosophia perennis*.<sup>177</sup>

What any serious seeker on the path must understand is that not all facets of religion will be comprehended at once and that these matters are not dependent on the human (for 'He guides whomsoever He will to a straight path' (Qur'ān 10:25)), but derive from a higher source, from what is above: 'The point I am making is correct, but if you cannot grasp it then let it be, until God himself helps you to understand.'<sup>178</sup> 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. Traveling the spiritual path requires defending the True and the Real within the heart and mind in order not to be diverted away from the 'one thing needful' (Luke 10:42). Each human being again is a reflection of the diverse and unique religions and spiritual paths that lead to the same summit. In the same way, each of the religions are paths of return. According to Ibn 'Arabī, 'If he knew what Junayd said—that the water takes on the color of the cup—he would let every believer have his own belief and he would recognize God in the form of every object of belief.'<sup>179</sup>

177. Coomaraswamy, *Selected Letters*, p. 285.

178. *The Cloud of Unknowing and The Book of Privy Counseling*, ed. W. Johnston (New York: Doubleday, 1996), p. 80.

179. Ibn al-'Arabī, quoted in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, p. 344.