

Alternations in Semitic Monotheism

by

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In order to understand the antagonism between Christianity and Judaism on the one hand and between Christianity and Islam on the other, it is necessary above all to give due weight to the fact that every religion is a form. This means two things: first, each religion has a specific character that is destined to lay claim to a given set of mental tendencies and develop what is best in them; second, the dogmatic premises and sacramental means of each religion—insofar as the characteristics of the particular form or *upāya* are emphasized—have a relative and not an absolute significance at the level of their literal interpretation, even though they reflect in their own way absolute, and not relative, realities. Dogmas and sacraments are keys to the divine Reality, but they do not represent it in an exclusive and irreplaceable fashion.

As for Christianity, it is distinguished by the fact that it constitutes a *mārga*, or specific way, of *bhakti*,¹ and operates within a perspective of sacrificial love, whence its dramatic and ascetic character. Notwithstanding its purely metaphysical implications, the Christian message is a truth expressed in terms of *bhakti* and not the Truth as such, and this is already apparent in the fact that it presents itself as something new; now the quality of newness is proof of particularity, not of general significance. The “new law” of love and other innovations in relation to Mosaism can be explained by the particularism of *bhakti* as opposed to the general scope of the Mosaic Law and also by the relative esoterism represented by *bhakti*, with its insistence on inwardness, as compared to the exoterism clearly represented by the practical prescriptions of Moses. In retrospect it seems more than likely that the interiorization and sentimentalization—not using the last term in any pejorative sense—brought about by Christianity were the only means of spiritually regenerating the Western world, but this does not mean that this “divine stratagem” constitutes the unique, exclusive, and total Truth and that everything else is only error and barbarism. Theology is intellectual insofar as it expresses the intrinsic, hence essential and universal, truth of dogmatic formulations, and it is sentimental insofar as it defends the “letter”—which nonetheless “killeth”, according to Saint Paul—against other possible formulations of the truth; it is no doubt obliged to do so, but this does not make it true in an absolute sense.

If Christianity appears as something new, it could be argued that the same is true of every other religion; but the issue here is obviously not the simple fact that every beginning is new, for in this case we would never think of attributing novelty to Christianity alone. Sinai clearly marks a new stage in Judaism, and yet there was no intention of abolishing the religion of the Patriarchs; its spirit is such that it neither invites nor encourages innovation in any way; the orthodox Messianism of the Jews—this should be emphasized—is opposed to the idea of progress. The same is true of Islam: far from presenting itself as something new, Islam wishes only to restore—not “reform”—what existed from the beginning; the Prophet is simply the last in a succession of Prophets, known and unknown, and he brings nothing that was not brought by his predecessors in one form or another; according to the Koran “there is no change in the words of God”. The situation is just the same in Hinduism and Buddhism: each cosmic cycle has its *Avatāra* or *Buddha*; even the historical Buddha had no intention of innovating; he manifested *Bodhi*, Enlightenment, just as numberless Buddhas did before him and

¹ Let us recall that Buddhists use the word *upāya* to mean a “divine stratagem” or “saving mirage”: it is not intrinsic truth that is of primary importance but saving efficacy. As for the Hindu term *bhakti*, it designates a way of love, not of knowledge or obediential works. Hinduism is even less reducible than Buddhism to a single *upāya* or—with all the more reason—to a single *mārga*, for it includes several of these, and this is at once its strength and weakness.

will do after him; his Enlightenment is not in itself something new but rather the actualization of an eternal reality, that of *Nirvāna*, which bursts forth whenever the human cycles permit or demand it.

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The *Magna Carta* of Christianity is not only the superhumanness of Christ but the unique nature of this superhumanness; otherwise Christ would lack the quality of absoluteness that provides the Christian Revelation with its reason for being as a religious form. This quality, at once superhuman and unique, is therefore required by the Christian *upāya* itself; in other words a personalist *bhakti*—such as Krishnaism—requires a divinity in human form, hence a “divine form” that can provide love with the supreme and irreplaceable object it needs, an object without which it would have no content. Religious personalism is a spiritual possibility that must necessarily appear in certain circumstances and in a certain environment, taking these notions in their broadest sense.

Now saying that the Christian *upāya* requires the intervention of an *Avatāra*, a “God-man”, amounts to saying that it is founded, doctrinally and emotionally, not on the divine Nature as such—as is Islam in particular—but on the divine Manifestation in the world and that this emphasis determines the very way in which the divine Nature is conceived, whence the Trinity, which is fundamentally nothing other than the “Christification” of God, if one may use such an expression.² What this means is that the divine Manifestation is emphasized in an intense and exclusive fashion, even in its principal prefiguration, at the expense of a metaphysically adequate definition of the supreme Principle.³

No doubt God permits this *upāya* for the sake of its efficacy—otherwise Christianity would not exist—but He does not thereby exclude other possible perspectives, to say the least; on the contrary God limits the expansion of the Christian *upāya*—and re-establishes equilibrium within the context of Monotheism—precisely by means of Islam, which places its stress on Substance and not Manifestation. The very notion of *upāya* enables one to understand the following: the fact that Christ appeared in a superhuman form does not mean that Christianity is superior to religions that emphasize the element Truth rather than the element Phenomenon, but simply that the personalist *bhakti* of Christianity requires a divine Manifestation and cannot be satisfied with a metaphysical message of Truth, a message therefore unsuited to support the form of worship in question.

Certainly Christ is a summit, but he is so in his superhumanness and as savior, not as a doctor of metaphysics; Christians acknowledge this, but they conclude that metaphysics has no salvific value, Christ being the sole dispenser of salvation. This disdain of sapience appears indirectly in the way Christians treat Solomon: in their opinion it is not even certain that he is saved nor that he will not have to remain in purgatory until the Last Judgment, and they insist all the more readily upon the incomparability of his wisdom since his fall from grace proves in their eyes the vanity of sapience.⁴ It is perhaps not improper to conclude that this is the ver-

² One might speak in a similar way of an “Israelization” of God in the sense that God is as it were the property of Israel in the Judaic *upāya*.

³ Christ said, “Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, He will give it you”; this causes no difficulty if we take “Father” to mean God and if as Christ said the Father is “greater than the Son”. But if like the Father Christ is also God, why ask something of the Father rather than of the Son, who is present and who speaks? Why does Christ not say: “I will refuse you nothing” since he is just as much God as is his Father? If Christ is God, why ask something of God in the name of Christ, hence in the name of God; or again, why not address oneself to the Trinity, given that the divine Persons are considered equal? In formulating these questions we do not mean to enter into a theological imbroglio; we simply wish to give an idea—indirectly and with the help of a single example—of the problematic nature of a dogmatism that is too intent upon dotting every “i” in a context where holy indetermination would do no harm and would in any case be more appropriate.

⁴ Jesus refers to Solomon in praising the Queen of Sheba and in speaking about the lilies of the field, which in our eyes is a mark of approval for him who was the first “Son of David”. Christ was a second Solomon in the sense that he built a new Temple and included

dict of a perspective that gives primacy to love: it is the verdict of a systematic *bhakti*, comparable to a certain type of devotional Vishnuism. It is quite natural that Islam, where the perspective opens to *gnosis*, should have rehabilitated Solomon by including him in the family of Prophets and accusing the Biblical account of duplicity, this being an indirect and in turn exoteric way of demonstrating the *a priori* narrowly legalistic character of the Book of Kings.

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Before proceeding we must emphasize the following point: even though Christianity is a *bhakti* by virtue of the general form that defines it,⁵ it nonetheless possesses a dimension of *jnāna* or *gnosis*, and this is necessarily so since it is an integral and autonomous tradition. This Christian esoterism is founded upon the idea of the immanent Christ, that is, the Intellect—or the “Heart”—which is at once “Light” and “Love”: for “I am the Light of the world”, and “God is Love”. Now the intellect is essentially identified with the Self; it is *aliquid increatum et increabile*.

The Virgin Mother embodies supra-formal Wisdom; it is from her milk that all the Prophets have drunk; in this respect she is greater than the Child, who here represents formal wisdom, hence a particular revelation.⁶ Next to the adult Jesus, however, Mary is not the nonformal and primordial essence but his feminine prolongation, the *shakti*: in this case she is not the *Logos* in its feminine and maternal aspect but the virginal and passive complement of the masculine and active *Logos*, its mirror, made of purity and mercy. Christic *gnosis* approaches the Essence through different aspects of divine Manifestation:⁷ to enter into the mold of this Manifestation is to realize union with the Self, *Ātmā*, which “became man that man might become God”. The sacrificial aspect of this union is not located merely on the moral or ascetic level, which is outward, but also—or even above all—on the level of the soul as such to the extent it is substance.

The great supports of the Christic way are prayer, fasting, vigil, poverty, chastity; the first is positive and essential, being in principle sufficient unto itself, whereas the others are negative or privative and are meaningful only in connection with the first. Furthermore, fasting and vigil are more directly essential than poverty and chastity; these are voluntary, though they do possess a mystical significance that concerns everyone and that coincides with the spiritual virtue of detachment and purity, as well as with that of childlikeness—in short, with nonconcupiscence, victory over the Fall; this is prefigured in Baptism.

Since it is founded upon divine Manifestation, the Christian perspective is a doctrine of the Intermediary: the Intermediary, “Door”, or *Logos* is any metaphysical or cosmic reality that simultaneously separates and unites two hierarchically different levels and thus relates to both levels without being reducible to either; and this is the case within the Principle as well as in its Manifestation and in the human microcosm as well as in

the Gentiles in the Nation of God.

⁵ “I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and the prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes.” This statement can also be taken as a sign of *bhakti*, although its immediate meaning relates to the “doctors of the Law” and profane philosophers.

⁶ We could also say that the Child is the formal and determinate Intellect, which drinks the milk of the nonformal and indeterminate Intellect. It is thus that a crystal absorbs the undifferentiated light, which it must bring into focus through its own form; the form is perfect because it is a divine reflection, but it is a form nonetheless. On the one hand Christ is the rigorous center, and the Virgin is the gentle ray that prolongs it; on the other the Mother is the ray that infuses itself into the circle, which represents the Child; limitlessness infuses itself into perfection.

⁷ Outward or inward, Eucharistic or onomatological: the *Logos* is Jesus, but it is also the Heart-Intellect, just as it can be the Eucharist or the very Name of Jesus; in the macrocosm the *Logos* is the “Spirit of God” with its archangelic functions, and as such it prolongs or projects the *Logos* inherent in the divine Nature.

the macrocosm.

It is understandable that exoterists should hate *gnosis* since on the one hand it threatens the Trinitarian dogma by contemplating an undifferentiated Absolute and on the other hand universalizes and thus depersonalizes Christ by reducing him to a *Logos* that is at once impersonal and multi-personal. Nonetheless this *gnosis* no more denies the uniqueness of Christ than knowledge of the fixed stars negates the sun: the literal truth remains intact, though it becomes relative even while remaining absolute in its essence, which—in the last analysis—is its reason for being.⁸

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According to Shankara it is necessary to distinguish between absolute truth, which is founded on the idea of Beyond-Being (*Paramātmā* or *Brahma nirguna*), and relative truth, which is founded on the idea of creative Being (*Īshvara* or *Brahma saguna*), the first point of view corresponding to *jnāna*, the way of knowledge, and the second to *bhakti*, the way of love; now within the framework of Semitic monotheism, Islam represents the first of these perspectives whereas Christianity represents the second. It is from this distinction that Islam draws its conviction of superiority, notwithstanding the fact that in its general form—and leaving aside Sufic *gnosis*—it too is derived from the perspective of creationist ontologism; but this is not the point, for what matters here is that Islam, on the very level of what Shankara calls relative truth, reflects absolute truth as directly as possible and thus *a priori* opens the way to it.

From another point of view, Hinduism distinguishes between major and minor *Avatāras*, that is, complete and partial incarnations;⁹ now Christ, who identifies the divine Message with himself, belongs to the first of these two categories whereas the Prophet, who passively receives the Message that God “causes to descend”, belongs to the second; it is because of his avataric plenitude that Christ is “before Abraham”, and it is from this pre-eminence that Christianity draws its conviction of superiority. Islam does not consider this aspect of things since it is founded on the pre-eminence of essential truth and opens to *gnosis*, and this is why it views the Prophet solely in light of the pre-eminence of the Message; for its part Christianity takes no account of this pre-eminence and claims for its doctrine the pre-eminence of Christ. For one, the theophanic excellence of the Messenger is that of the Message; for the other, the metaphysical excellence of the Message is that of the Messenger.¹⁰

When God declared on Mount Sinai, “Thy God is One”, it was neither to promulgate an incomplete truth nor to conceal an essential truth; and when Jesus commanded the Apostles, “Baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”, it was not in order to declare that this triad constitutes the Absolute, that there is no Absolute outside of it, and that God is therefore One through it alone. The Sinaitic definition of God being essential, complete, and definitive, a complement added to it can have only a relative significance—in the metaphysical, not the current, sense of this adjective or in the sense of the “relatively absolute”, if one prefers. For what is at stake here is principial relativity, which means a degree of reality that represents the Absolute in relation to the world and man while nonetheless being relative in relation to the

⁸ By a crowning paradox, modernism—which stands at the antipodes of *gnosis*—accepts certain of its extrinsic theses, whereas traditionalists not only reject *gnosis*, for which they cannot be criticized, but place it in the same category as any and all modern errors, and this is proof of blind prejudice. It is because of this same prejudice that some people confuse modernism with Arianism or Sabellianism, inexcusably losing sight of the fact that the intellectual, moral, and other tendencies of the ancient heresies are diametrically opposed to those of modernism.

⁹ This distinction pertains to the level of the great *Avatāras* and has nothing to do with the distinction between greater and lesser *Avatāras*.

¹⁰ The *Logos* is one, but its modes of human manifestation may differ without in any way detracting from its quality as *Logos*.

Absolute as such.

Compared with the perspective of knowledge, the perspective of love is relative in rather the same way that the Trinity or other hypostatic constellations are relative in relation to the Absolute properly so called; the perspective of knowledge could not determine the Christian Message, which must be what it is, and yet this perspective—that is, *gnosis*—is necessarily included as a virtuality within the Message and is thus rightly called “Christic”. Of course *gnosis* is not a virtuality of the perspective of love as such, but it is contained virtually in the divine Message considered in relation to its universality and sacramentality.

Christian doctrine teaches that Christ has two natures, one divine and one human, but only one Person, which is divine—so divine as to require that Mary be called the “Mother of God”; now this unipersonalist theory, while theologically useful, is problematical to say the least, and in failing to give sufficient weight to the incommensurability between the divine and human orders, it cannot avoid certain contradictions; but this is the price one pays for a perspective that absolutizes the divine Manifestation and in this way weakens the very notion of the Absolute. Integral Christian esoterism—apart from the question of its historical actualizations—restores the neglected or missing dimension by drawing it from Scripture itself; this at least is a principal possibility within Christianity, one that results in fact from all intrinsic orthodoxy.

“There is none good but God”, said Christ; and also, “I ascend unto my Father and your Father; and to my God and your God.” These words imply shades of meaning that have been providentially disregarded by Christian theologians—though this is unrelated to the question of integral truth—but strongly emphasized by Islam in order to “restore equilibrium”, if one may so express it. In other words the extreme stylization of the Christian *upāya* has inevitably lost sight of the complete situation by accentuating the mystery of divine Manifestation—which can be only “this Manifestation” once it has assumed human form—to the detriment of what is required by the divine Nature considered as such and therefore from the standpoint of its Essence. Arianism is not an intrinsic heresy—although it was bound to disappear because of its incompatibility with the fullness of the Christian *upāya*—but it was like a presentiment of the divine corrective that was to appear later as the Islamic Revelation.

In Islam God does not appear in a human form; He simply makes known what He is and what He wishes. Now it is the divine content of the Message that matters and not its mode; the mode is the means and cannot take precedence over the question of truth. The purpose of the Muhammadan phenomenon is first of all to be messenger rather than message, hence perfect man rather than human God, and second to provide a demonstration of clearly differentiated virtues applied to the most diverse situations. Here analysis is the key to synthesis, whereas in the case of Christ synthesis is the key to analysis.

“The stone which the builders rejected is become the head of the corner”: though this saying of David concerns Christ above all, it can also be applied to Ishmael, or more precisely to his progeny: Ishmael was driven from his father’s house only to return at the end of the prophetic cycle in the person of Muhammad, his distant descendant, in whom and in whose community the promises made by God to Abraham and Hagar were fulfilled.¹¹

To use anthropomorphic language—examples of which are furnished moreover by the Bible—one could say that God the Father “regretted” having established an *upāya* upon the earth that took the form of an extension of Himself, of the “Father”, and that He corrected or compensated for this form—though without retracting it—by means of another, which was obliged to stress that God alone is God and that man is always

¹¹ Another Biblical figure that incarnates the same symbolism of the rejected stone is the Patriarch Joseph. “The last shall be first, and the first last”: this formula encapsulates a particular order of possibilities connected with the reversal of relationships that takes place—in a way that is parallel to direct analogy—between the divine Principle and its cosmic projection.

man. The word “regret” may be offensive, but it is Biblical: in the Bible God “regretted” on a number of occasions having done this or that; this is simply a very human way of expressing necessary, hence inevitable, fluctuations in the cosmic unfolding or the interplay of compensations proper to divine *Māyā*.

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We saw earlier that Christianity presents itself as something new, and this moreover by force of circumstance;¹² though legitimate on its own level, this quality of innovation nonetheless contains a danger of disequilibrium and infidelity,¹³ which in fact has been actualized in the Christian world in the form of an increasingly pronounced progressivism;¹⁴ this has been true above all since the Renaissance—a worldly, exteriorizing, and individualistic movement if there ever was one—with its abuse of intelligence on the plane of the arts as well as that of the sciences, notwithstanding the interest aroused at that time in certain circles by Platonic thought. From then on religion readily made common cause with an obviously worldly and ultimately titanic civilization; in the twentieth century the Catholic Church is reaping the poisoned fruits of this amalgam. Here too Islam appears as a divine corrective or a way of re-establishing equilibrium, for it excludes *a priori* the cult of the new; like Mosaism, and even more explicitly,¹⁵ it reduces civilization to religion and thus in a sense reduces human time to religious space.

Our reference to Catholic civilizationism permits us to make the following digression: the amalgam in question can be defended on the grounds that the Church was born into the Greco-Roman world, which lent it its ethnic and cultural substance; this is true, but one should also take into consideration the Germanic world, which instilled itself in this Mediterranean world and exerted considerable influence, a fact to which the role of Charlemagne, the Holy Roman Empire, and the founding of France by the Franks bear witness. The Catholic Church is not only Greco-Latin but also Latino-Germanic; as for the Celtic element, which ultimately is of less importance, it does not differ fundamentally from the Germanic, being simply another branch of the Nordic element.¹⁶

¹² Jesus stresses that he has come “not to destroy the Law” but “to fulfill it”, which indicates that Christic “newness” has nothing to do with human innovations but has the meaning on the contrary of a return to the transcendent origin; it goes without saying that this *distinguo* eludes the innovating psychology of Western humanity in just the same way that the true significance of Israelite Messianism eludes modernistic Jews.

¹³ Men are quick to burn what they have worshipped and to worship what they have burned. The Celts had a reputation for loving novelty whereas the Germans were notorious lovers of adventure; these characteristics, combined with Catholic innovationism, contributed to shaping the Western mentality, which ended up spreading—whether willingly or by force—to Eastern Europeans of the Orthodox faith.

¹⁴ Apart from problematical innovations such as the *filioque* and the obligatory celibacy of the priesthood, there is the disproportionate complication of the rubrics and a kind of *de facto* profanation of the Mass: there are greater and lesser Masses, Masses for this or for that; instead of everything being subordinated to the one and only Mass and as if annihilated before it, the Mass is in practice subordinated to this or that more or less trivial intention, to this or that occasion, and this or that category of men; in the long run this can only undermine the credibility of the Mystery. As for the celibacy of the priesthood, its imposition was a particularly unrealistic innovation—a thousand years after Saint Paul—when Saint Paul had not even found it necessary to forbid the marriage of bishops.

¹⁵ For in Mosaism there were “innovations” of crucial importance from the human point of view, though they were contingent and not dogmatic, namely, the institution of kingship and the construction of the Temple, not to mention the Talmudic or rabbinical innovations, which Christ rejected but which for the rabbis are applications of principles and not novelties.

¹⁶ The prejudice that seeks to reduce the ethnic and cultural substance of the Catholic Church to the Mediterranean world alone is at the root of a number of fatal errors: from the very beginning the needs and rights of the Germanic soul were not taken seriously enough in Rome—Protestantism was the reaction to this—and later on Catholic nationalists and racists of Latin culture obstinately refused to understand that there is no Western Christianity without the Germanic world and that to exclude this world from Christianity or from Western civilization is to destroy the one as well as the other, or the one along with the other; indeed this has already come about to a large extent. Moreover it should not be forgotten that the Renaissance, and later the French Revolution, were Latin and not Germanic misdeeds: to each his role, for good and for ill.

It is significant that in the artistic order—the importance of which cannot be overestimated—Christianity gave birth *grosso modo* to three styles: Byzantine, Roman, and Gothic, which express respectively the Greek, Latin, and Germanic geniuses combined with Semitic and Christian Monotheism.¹⁷ There are the Greek and Latin Churches, which should co-exist without schism; but there should also be another branch of the one Church, namely, the German or Germano-Celtic Church, which would be an extension of the Latin Church in the same manner that the Slavonic and Oriental Churches are extensions of the Greek Church.

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Fundamentally, Muslims criticize Christians for veiling metaphysical truth with a historical phenomenon, or in other words for divinizing Jesus at the cost of humanizing God; for advocating a social and mystical morality that goes against nature; and for having betrayed and in a way destroyed the Biblical world—the world of all the Prophets and of Christ himself—by replacing it with an increasingly profane “civilization”; this final criticism is implicit and the others explicit. Like every religious community Christianity is “triumphalist” by nature, and while it is doubtless human for it to lay claim to the glories of this “civilization”, in the end it is suicide; for one can Christianize pagans but not the sins of paganism.

The excessive number of victims of the Inquisition does not prove the guilt of the condemned as much as it does that of the theologians; for one does not needlessly dot “i’s” if it means the suffering and death of tens of thousands of men. We certainly do not condemn the principle of a legislation designed to protect a religion; what we condemn are the theological subtleties that fed the jails and pyres, and we obviously disapprove of the immoderation and baseness of the methods of repression. In Islam the simplicity of the dogmas corresponds to the intellectual capacity of the average man, and this is both realistic and charitable, without forgetting the essentiality of the Islamic perspective, whence its formal simplicity, which coincides precisely with the mental capacity of the masses. Of course Islam also had its inquisition (*mihnah*), but its principles were less intolerant and its victims less numerous than was the case in Catholicism, and this is because a certain tolerance results from Islamic dogma itself or, to be more exact, from Islamic legislation.

As for real or apparent heresies in the Christian world, we shall call attention by way of example to the antagonism between dyotheletism and monotheletism; the first distinguishes between two wills in Christ, the divine and the human, whereas the second acknowledges only one, the divine.

Dyotheletism, which is the official doctrine of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, is right in the sense that both wills are evident, that they result from the two natures, and that the Gospel testifies to this; even so monotheletists are not inexcusable in upholding a unity of will, for a conflict between the two dimensions of Christ is inconceivable, so much so that for all practical purposes there is only one will, which emanates from God, and the strictly human will is only an appearance. No doubt the Church had the right to decide in favor of the dyotheletist solution, but it erred in misunderstanding the pious intention of monotheletism and in anathematizing its partisans—Pope Honorius I at their head—as if they were enemies of Christ and religion, when metaphysically the idea of one will is neither more extraordinary nor more harmful than that of a “Mother of God”; just as with this latter idea, monotheletism is at once an ellipsis and a hyperbole, and its thesis is all the more pious and honorable in that its intention is to glorify Christ, not to belittle him or favor worldliness in any way. The same remarks apply to monophysitism, which acknowledges in Christ only one nature, the divine, something it certainly does not do out of impiety; one may censure such “heresies” but to

¹⁷ The cathedrals called Gothic are not the expressions of a specifically “French” genius but of the Germanic or Celto-Germanic genius, or of a genius both Frankish and Gallic, if one prefers; this is proven on the one hand by their sometimes exuberant imaginativeness and on the other hand by a certain grandiose heaviness, which is nonetheless never cold; none of this has anything Latin about it, and the disdain the men of the Renaissance affected toward cathedrals is a further proof. Though the specifically French spirit did not appear in the cathedrals as such, it did appear in particular cathedrals and churches, notably in Sainte Chapelle, where it asserts itself in the lightness and joyousness of forms and colors; here no doubt is the Celtic side of the French mentality.

curse them is suicide, and history proves it.

Rightly or wrongly—depending on the case—exoterism operates with alternatives: it does not allow for diverse aspects of the real nor for diverse points of view of the spirit, so that in its eyes a “lesser truth” seems a total error; and let us not forget that psychological, moral, or social usefulness often serves as a criterion of truth.

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We said earlier that God re-established a certain equilibrium within Monotheism by means of Islam in that Islam places its stress on the intrinsic Nature of God and not on a particular divine Manifestation. Another balancing function of Islam—on a less fundamental level, though one that is still of great human importance—is the rehabilitation of sexuality and of natural things in general, these having been discredited by what we might without hesitation call the ascetical prejudice of Christians;¹⁸ we have spoken of this on other occasions, but we will nonetheless recall once again the principle involved, adding perhaps a further shade of meaning. There are two possible relationships between the divine and cosmic orders, one that is adequate and one that inverts: if we compare the cosmic order to a surface of water upon which a tree is reflected, we can see that the inversion of the tree does not affect the adequacy of the image; thus the material character of a thing does not keep it from having a divine content or participating in the nobility of its principal prototype; though matter as such separates, nobility of content unites, provided of course that it is put to good use by a spiritual discipline and that it contributes to the equilibrium demanded by a spiritual framework, an equilibrium that is consistent with the profound requirements of nature.

In other words man is created to achieve equilibrium between the outward and inward, between the world and God, or between diversity and unity; to the extent he disrupts this equilibrium by passionately attaching himself to the world, he must renounce the world and throw himself passionately in the direction of God; but if he is able to maintain the primordial equilibrium, which constitutes his very reason for being, he need not persuade himself that the only way to God is through a renunciation that is unconditional and contrary to nature. This does not mean that renunciation is not “spiritually natural” to man—which is why Islam commends fasting, vigils, poverty, and contempt for one’s life in the Holy War—but spiritual renunciation is not just any renunciation; even though by definition it amounts to a disequilibrium, it must be integrated into the equilibrium determined by the profound nature of things.¹⁹

It is often said that Islam is ambiguous or even contradictory in that neither the Koran nor the *Sunnah* commends asceticism whereas the Sufis preach it without fear of extravagance, or that one and the same man may practice and preach an extreme asceticism while enjoying four wives, and other paradoxes of the kind.

¹⁸ In his treatise on the creation of man, Saint Gregory of Nyssa, referring inappropriately to Saint Paul (Galatians 3:28), asserts that the division into “male and female” is foreign to the divine model of man and that God, foreseeing the fall of man and the impossibility for fallen men to reproduce like the angels—and Gregory does not tell us how they do it!—“established for our nature a means better suited to our slide into sin: in place of the nobility of the angels, He gives us the power of transmitting life to one another like brutes and beings without intelligence”. And Gregory judges that God, foreseeing our inclination to evil, “for this reason mixed something irrational with His own image”, by which he means the sexes, love, and sexual union—things that according to this author normally belong to the animal realm, not the human species. This means that God created the sexes for the sake of sin even while forbidding sin and that He gave the command to “multiply and fill the earth” while foreseeing the sin that would alone make this result possible, which sin He nonetheless forbade. In saying this Gregory does not explain why Christ and the Virgin are in eternal Glory with their sexualized bodies, which according to him bear witness to the fall into sin and animality, hence into degradation and disgrace.

¹⁹ Let us take this opportunity to call attention to the prejudice involved in thinking that only what is difficult or even disagreeable is pleasing to God and brings us closer to Him. We have read in an old manual of piety that “prayer is difficult and therefore satisfying since the difficulty of good works is the principle of satisfaction”. But what becomes of the divine content of certain works and what in particular becomes of the sacramental and satisfying power of the Name of God itself? There is not only transcendence; there is also immanence with all its graces.

The reason for this apparent contradiction lies in the fact—noted above—that there are two possible relationships with regard to the phenomena of the world, namely, opposition and analogy; Islam wishes to take into account all the positive aspects of reality whereas Christianity acknowledges only one point of view, that of opposition; the relationship of analogy is then identified with the notion of sin, directly or indirectly.

Because the doctrine of Christ is a message of inwardness, sincerity, and nonformality, it is therefore a message of relativity in connection with outward practices; there is also the fact that contradictory prescriptions occurring in different religions are necessarily relative, and they become all the more so when man is aware of this *de jure* relativity.

We have said that Islam is the perspective of holy equilibrium and Christianity that of holy disequilibrium: on the one hand stabilizing equilibrium for the sake of ascension, which is its reason for being, and on the other hand propulsive disequilibrium for the sake of inwardness. In Islam natural pleasure is either a sin of “association” (*shirk*) or a merit of “union” (*tawhīd*); in the second case it requires contemplativity on the part of the subject as well as moderation and sacralization; in other words pleasure brings one closer to God when it is limited by sobriety and contained within a framework of religious awareness, for this allows it to convey an element of “benediction” (*barakah*) and spiritual “remembrance” (*dhikr*). Certain rites of purification are necessary not for their own sake but because the average man is little better than a beast; if enjoyment were for him a recollection of the Divine and not an act of idolatry, there would be no need for him to purify himself in order to appease “divine jealousy”. Nonetheless, the *Logos-Man* submits to the rules for the sake of those around him; in doing so he does not purify himself from any particular deed but from human or existential impurity; in a certain way he purifies others in himself, for being identified with “Universal Man” (*Insān Kāmil*) he recapitulates all men within his own form.

In rejecting the prescriptions of the Pharisees, Christ teaches—referring moreover to Isaiah—that it is necessary to keep to the essential, and this principle is clearly related to what we might call the *religio perennis*, the primordial, universal, and underlying religion. This is what Koranic language designates by the term *fitrah*: the primordial norm, the profound nature of things.²⁰

* * *

A very important aspect of Christian morality—not so much its social as its intrinsic morality—is its refusal to exact justice: this attitude presupposes our consciousness of immanent justice on the one hand and of our own quasi-congenital injustice on the other, natural egoism and the danger of pride being traces of the Fall. The renunciation of our rights indicates a presentiment that justice is always there, that it is in God even if we are wronged, and that in claiming our rights we risk adding one injustice to another, given the fact that we are imperfect and our individual claims—being in a sense premature—may therefore compromise our aspiration to perfection and our contemplation of what alone is perfect. As a result one must therefore offer the left cheek; and “all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword”.

As with the issue of pleasure, Islam maintains a balanced and noncontrasting attitude with regard to the question of justice: while integrating the viewpoint of Christ into its perspective, it also considers the rights of nature, taking into account the fact not only that every natural right is in itself harmless to the soul, but that it contains the possibility of virtue and mystical alchemy, which is precisely what makes it natural. This means that the Muslim draws the sword “for God” and “by God” but without forgetting to be generous, wherever generosity can and should be shown; this at least is the *de jure* perspective of Islam, which is to be applied by every Muslim who is scrupulously faithful to the *Sunnah*. From another point of view—and we have made this point on a number of occasions—every possible moral or spiritual attitude is to be found in some form

²⁰ The fact that Christianity gave up the practice of circumcision and the observance of dietary prohibitions is not unrelated to what we have just said.

within every religion: it is impossible for Christians not to fight even though war does not enter into their perspective; conversely, it is impossible that a pious Muslim would never find himself in a situation where, leaving aside what is authorized by Islam, he felt obliged to renounce his rights for the sake of “poverty” (*faqr*) and from fear of God; for it is “better to blush in this world than in the next”.

In accordance with their respective points of view, Christianity advocates the monastic life whereas Islam acknowledges *a priori*—in keeping with the Muslim pattern—that life in the world is consistent with sanctity, or more particularly with a sanctity that has become “radiation” (*jalwah*) after having first been “solitude” (*khalwah*).²¹ “There is no monasticism in Islam”: the authenticity of this *hadīth* has been contested, but this matters little since Muslims readily make use of it to stress the sacred structure of Muslim society, which constitutes a priestly and not a “lay” world, precisely.

* * *

We pointed out earlier that the message of Christ is not directly a message of metaphysical doctrine but primarily a message of interiorization; the idea of the Trinity is perhaps less a metaphysical definition of the Absolute than an instrument of mystical interiorization. From another point of view the voluntarism and epistemological sensationalism of Saint Thomas within the Catholic climate did not prevent the enunciation of the most profound metaphysical truths, notably in the case of an Eckhart and in the very shadow of Thomism.

Be that as it may, if we consider theology directly and at the level of its literal meaning—and this is what it requires—it is impossible not to notice that it is sometimes reduced to the art of reconciling notions that are logically irreconcilable, none of which the theologian is willing to sacrifice: under the pressure of a dogmatic formalism or the moralizing prejudice that is its consequence, he is attached to them all; if he does not succeed in reconciling contradictory but irreplaceable notions, he will gladly resort to the idea of “mystery” and be tempted to denigrate “natural intelligence”, and this is facilitated by the conventional association of intelligence with “pride”. It goes without saying that religious ideas are not sentimental prejudices in themselves, but this is what they become subjectively in the case of those who refuse to admit that there are aspects in God and points of view in man and that what is true in one respect is not necessarily so in another. That God is triune is true in a relative sense—or “relatively absolute” sense if one prefers—unity alone being unconditionally absolute; conversely, that God is one does not prevent Him from having an aspect of trinity on the already relative level of hypostatic differentiation; but when the two theses are both placed on the level of absoluteness—as a result of “piety” and because of a confusion between the absolute and the sublime—they become irreconcilable.²²

We should mention here the danger involved in ill-sounding, even absurd, formulations, which are doubt-

²¹ This same idea gives rise to a curious error of interpretation on the part of Meister Eckhart: he concludes that Martha is superior to Mary because she is capable of achieving sanctity in the midst of material preoccupations, a view that contradicts historical truth and even the opinion of Christ; it is in much the same fashion that an Ibn Arabi comments on the verses of the Koran, reversing their intended meanings in order to support metaphysical or mystical truths, which however have no need of such a stratagem.

²² The assertion that the unity of God applies to the Essence whereas the trinity applies to the Persons does not abolish the contradiction between unity and trinity since both are applied to God considered as such, hence as the Absolute; the moment we introduce two different relationships into a consideration of the divine Principle we are in the realm of relativity, at least insofar as one of the two terms is concerned, so that a proposition containing both relationships could not be a definition of God. What is metaphysically contradictory is not the assertion that God is one and three in different respects, one of these being relative and therefore beneath the level of divine absoluteness, but rather the assertion that God is both one and three in the absoluteness that essentially defines Him, an affirmation characteristic of a *bhakti*—a devotionally totalitarian *bhakti*—that seeks to maintain its momentum by means of metaphysical propositions. This does not mean theologians are totally averse to the notion of relativity *in divinis*, but they do not attach the idea of lesser reality to this relativity, as we do, or else they would have to admit that only the Essence is absolutely real; if God is the Absolute, only the Essence is absolutely God.

less inevitable in a world of voluntaristic and sentimental faith. Thought in this climate is above all “pious”, hence self-interested; perfect objectivity and a critical sense can in these conditions easily give the impression of doubt and intellectual pride. According to this way of seeing things, to think in a way that is *a priori* disinterested is to cut oneself off from faith, and it is to reason like Lucifer: on one’s own and “outside God”; in short it is to fall into rationalism, exposing oneself to the danger of unbelief. Such a prejudice—which side-steps the mystery of intellection—inevitably produces a flowering of pious absurdities, which can be found to a varying degree in all religious climates²³ and which must be accepted, heroically if necessary, as the price of the human effort to transcend oneself.

Basically, zealots connect the function of the Holy Spirit less with truth pure and simple than with the salvific intention of the *upāya*; now this intention cannot be entirely disinterested, intellectually speaking, since its actual usefulness for people, and therefore questions of appropriateness, must be taken into account. All the divergences between religions come down to the distinction between efficacious, opportune, and conditionally saving truth on the one hand and truth as such on the other; truth as such has found many traditional expressions, likewise outwardly divergent for reasons of form, but it resides above all in the inward and permanent Revelation that is the pure Intellect; this Intellect is accessible, however, only through formal and outward Revelation, hence through an *upāya*, which allows a man to be fully himself and thus to rise above himself.

Since Christianity is a *bhakti* it would in principle have been consistent and sensible to renounce integral metaphysics and hold fast to a fideism inspired solely by the Scriptures: hence to record with due piety what they say of God—of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit—without seeking to erect a system and to remain humbly and lovingly content with mystery; theology, which is *de facto* necessary, could have done without certain speculations inspired by Aristotle. But in fact such total faithfulness to itself, or more precisely to the genius of *bhakti*, was scarcely possible for a state religion: it was not possible in the first place because speculation is in the nature of man and the proximity of philosophers was an invitation to imitate them, especially since men are reluctant to acknowledge qualities in others they do not themselves possess—and this, without euphemism, is called jealousy; it was not possible, furthermore, because a number of converts were themselves Greeks or had been Hellenized and were acquainted with philosophy; and it was not possible, finally, because the pagan environment required vigilant apologetics, and there were Christian heresies that had to be neutralized. But here a new difficulty arises: heresy did not always consist in something contrary to the truth but was too often simply something contrary to *bhakti*; theology therefore developed in response to a twofold necessity or twofold temptation: to appropriate the dialectic of real or apparent adversaries, even if it was foreign to the Christian genius, and then with the help of this dialectic to attack its very essence²⁴—in a word, to lay claim to all the rights of *gnosis* or pure intellection while resorting to mystery when this claim came up against a limit, which was inevitable since it is a question here of *bhakti* and dogmatism.

This irregularity or inner contradiction does not explain the phenomenon of heresy and its repression—this is found to some degree in all religions—but it does explain the extraordinary magnitude of this twofold phenomenon in Christianity; if so cruel and persistent an ostracism was inevitable, it is because there is a problematical element in doctrinal formulations, one that favors heresies on the one hand and the pedantry of the judges on the other. Nonetheless, if this problematical element has a *de facto* right to its place in the

²³ A typical example, gleaned from a Muslim book: to walk on water or rise into the air is a small matter whereas the greatest miracles are faith in God and obedience to His Law—as if faith and obedience were miracles and not virtues and graces and as if miracles were not the result of graces united with virtues and did not find in them their reason for being. When pious intentions overwhelm common sense, the image is perhaps sentimentally striking, but literally it remains absurd, and this means that while it impresses or flatters some people, it discourages or repels others. In this sort of two-edged thought the motive is obviously to serve the interests of faith—or to praise it—and not to provide a wholly exact image; the fact that one is “preaching to the choir” no doubt provides an extenuating circumstance.

²⁴ Now the essence of Hellenism pertains to *jnāna* and not *bhakti*—to intellectuality, which is by definition disinterested, and not to the voluntarism of love; rationalism and scientism are deviations from and caricatures of this intellectuality, and this was the case beginning with the period of so-called classical antiquity.

official doctrine of an intrinsically orthodox religion, it is because God tolerates it in just the same way that He tolerates the phenomenon of the *upāya* itself and just as in His patient Mercy He tolerates religious divergences; He tolerates this element, in short, in the same way that He tolerates the fact that man, even while making his way toward Heaven, is always man and nothing more—not man with his sins but man with his limitations. In any case each religious community has its own genius, which is at once divine and human, and therefore its own Law, by which it is judged in accordance with this genius and not in accordance with that of another community; some will be judged according to their love and others according to their faith; God accepts from one man what He would not accept from another, forgiving in one what He would not forgive in another.

It is possible to choose an example of divine tolerance from a much less important and even insignificant level, that of human desires: even while knowing the vanity and impermanence of these desires, God accepts them and permits their sacralization along with their satisfaction; in other words He allows man to be man—a relative subject confronted by relative objects within a space and a time that are equally relative. On the one hand this relativity is pure nothingness in the eyes of God, but on the other hand it is able to convey a message from God to man and to be a way from man to God.

* * *

Muslims acknowledge that God is at once the “Knower” (*Āqil*), the “Known” (*Maʿqūl*), and “Knowledge” (*ʿAql*); one could also say in bhaktic terms that He is at once the “Lover”, the “Beloved”, and “Love”. Muslims would never accept this as the definition of God, however, for the simple reason that God is the Absolute and a differentiation always pertains to relativity even while testifying to a potentiality of the Absolute, which means in practice that the metaphysical validity of the above ternary does not preclude the possibility of other formulations or other numerical crystallizations; in the same way a geometrical figure intended to represent space does not preclude the co-existence of a similar figure, and water may take the form of a particular snowflake without excluding thousands of other perfect forms, each of which also bears witness to the substance that is water as well as to the possibilities of space.

Only the definition of the Absolute as such is absolute, and every explanatory description belongs to relativity precisely because of the differentiated nature of its content; this content is certainly not erroneous, but it is limited and therefore replaceable; if one wished to give an absolute definition of the Absolute, one would therefore have to say that God is One. “The testimony of Unity is one” (*al-Tawhīdu wāhid*), say the Sufis, and by this they mean that within the limits of its possibility an expression must be the same as its content and cause.²⁵

* * *

As we have said, the message of Christ is a message of mystical inwardness and not metaphysical absoluteness,

²⁵ No doubt *Ātmā* is polarized into *Sat*, *Chit*, and *Anānda*, but this polarization results from an analytic perspective pertaining to *Māyā*; one cannot say what *Ātmā* is in itself in an exclusive and exhaustive manner except by affirming that it is, that it is not nothingness, and that everything is it without being it, which is tantamount to saying that it is one, hence absolute. What this means is that *Ātmā* may also be polarized into duality or quaternary: in the first case it is the Absolute prolonged by the Infinite, and in the second it is the Absolute refracted into Wisdom, Power, Beatitude, and Mercy or into inviolable Purity, invincible Strength, unalterable Peace (or Beauty), and irresistible Life (or Goodness), which correspond analogically to the four directions of space. The Judeo-Islamic equation “God = Unity” leaves the door open to all possible polarizations: *Allāh* is not only One (*Ahad*); He is also Total or Full (*Samad*), as is stated in the *Sūrah* “Purity” (*Iklās*); and “to Him belong the most beautiful Names” (*al-Asmāʾ al-husnā*).

at least not directly; the Virgin Mary embodies its maternal aspect of gentleness, not rigor; she is a welcoming, not sacrificial, inwardness, and in this sense one can attribute to her the quality of being “black but beautiful”, as does the Song of Songs; she does not tear us away from the outward world but draws us gently toward the inward; she is hope and not fear. For Islam the Virgin and Christ do not personify a metaphysical and law-giving message but rather sanctity as such; Christ is the “seal of sanctity”, and the Virgin is “primordial sanctity”; now sanctity is essentially inwardness: *Ecce enim regnum Dei intra vos est*.

We could also say that the Virgin is the nonformal Alpha of sanctity and that Christ is its formal Omega: according to Sufis, Mary is the “milk” that flows forth from the Holy Spirit, and Jesus is the “seal” that closes the cycle of its manifestations. To say that Jesus closes the cycle of sanctity (*wilāya*) and not of prophecy (*nubuwwah*) means that he represents above all a way leading from the outward to the inward, a way that is *a priori* sacrificial but made gentle by the grace of the Virgin; these two aspects, rigor and gentleness, are in the nature of things, for God is at once Majesty (*Jalāl*) and Beauty (*Jamāl*).²⁶

Religious life is a complex system that includes the whole of man and thus engages the soul, leaving nothing outside; this system is presented to us as an indispensable condition of salvation, outside of which there is nothing that could save us, even though other systems, just as demanding and exclusive, co-exist beside it.²⁷ This being so, there must necessarily be a level where these systems as such lose much of their importance and where by way of compensation the essential elements they have in common are affirmed, elements which, whether one likes it or not, give the systems all their value; and we gladly define this level as the domain of Mary, the Virgin Mother, who—according to a symbolism common to Christianity and Islam—has suckled her children, the Prophets and sages, from the beginning and outside of time.²⁸

We deliberately close our survey of inter-religious alternations and compensations with some reflections on the Virgin Mary. Mother of all the Prophets and matrix of all the sacred forms, she has her place of honor within Islam even while belonging *a priori* to Christianity;²⁹ for this reason she constitutes a kind of link between these two religions, whose common purpose is universalizing the monotheism of Israel. The Virgin Mary is not merely the embodiment of a particular mode of sanctity; she embodies sanctity as such. She is not one particular color or one particular perfume; she is colorless light and pure air. In her essence she is identified with merciful Infinitude, which—preceding all forms—overflows upon them all, embraces them all, and reintegrates them all.

²⁶ From a certain point of view it is permissible to compare the respective mystical functions of Jesus and Mary to two Mahayanic schools, best known in the West in their Japanese forms, Zen and *Jōdo*: the first bases itself on personal effort, expressed by the term *jiriki*, “self-power”, whereas the second relies upon the merciful and saving grace of Amida, whence the term *tariki*, “other-power”; this is expressed in a certain way in Islam by the two words *salāt* and *salām*, the meanings of which might be rendered respectively as “enlightening grace” and “calming grace”. The first of these modes corresponds to what could be called the “Christic” way, the second to the “Marian” way: the first of these ways is “narrow” and difficult, virile and sacrificial, whereas the second is “little” and in a sense “easy”; the two modes also belong to Christ alone, whose “yoke is easy” and whose “burden is light”, but the second is nonetheless incarnate in the Virgin the moment we consider the complementarity of these holy beings.

²⁷ And yet: “For he who is not against us is for us”, which is in its way a definition of universality, for it is a question of miracles done “in my name”, that is—according to this interpretation—in the name of the one *Logos*.

²⁸ During the Night Journey (*miʿrāj*) the Prophet had to choose between water, wine, milk, and honey; he chose milk, which signifies that he chose the primordial nature (*fitrah*), hence the original religion; and in fact Islam presents itself as a restoration of the primordial religion (*din al-fitrah*).

²⁹ Mary is Virgin, Mother, Spouse: Beauty, Goodness, Love—their sum being Beatitude. Mary is Virgin in relation to Joseph, Man; Mother in relation to Jesus, God-Man; Spouse in relation to the Holy Spirit, God. Joseph embodies humanity; Mary incarnates either the Spirit considered in its feminine aspect or the feminine complement of the Spirit.