

# Towards a Christian Anthropology

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*"The Self-existent pierced the openings of the senses outward; therefore, one looks outward and not within oneself." (Katha Up. II.1.1)*

AN exterior, centrifugal orientation of the powers of the soul and of the psychic and organic life they serve is, with the rarest exceptions, a basic condition of human experience. It is cognate with that ignorance in which Hinduism sees the mortal imperfection of human nature; with the endless skein of desire and suffering from which the Buddhist seeks release; with the forgetfulness of his theomorphic nature which for Islam is the chronic infirmity of humanity; and with the malice *ab origine* which, in the Judeo-Christian perspective, is the root of human deficiency. Ignorance; desire, aversion and suffering; an existential forgetfulness; malice: these characterize unregenerate humanity, and while they do not define human nature they do to a considerable degree define our ordinary outlook; and they constitute tares which no man, unaided, can uproot or transmute. All the traditions and revelations of mankind have been unanimous in this respect: their sacred anthropologies, whatever their differences of perspective and emphasis, all agree that the man of ordinary experience is an existentially imperfect creature whose disequilibrium and consequent suffering will increase if the theory and orientation they recommend and the means of redress they offer are ignored. Moreover, they all agree explicitly or implicitly that man does not possess himself, that he is radically deficient in self-knowledge and consequently is not his own master.

Midway in our life's journey, I went astray  
from the straight road and woke to find myself  
alone in a dark wood. How shall I say  
what wood that was! I never saw so drear,  
so rank, so arduous a wilderness!  
Its very memory gives a shape to fear.

Death could scarce be bitterer...!

\* \* \*

How I came to it I cannot rightly say...

*Inferno* I.1.10.

We may leave to the modern mentality, with its meretricious optimism, the myopic presumption of human perfectibility and of humanity's control of its own destiny. Collectively and individually, humanity will go out as far as its reins permit; then, if not overcome and despairing, we must make our return. End and beginning are inevitably the same.

It could not be otherwise, however, than that "the senses are pierced outward," that our mundane life be externally oriented; for this is the expression, in the human situation, of the law that creation or manifestation can only develop in a sense extrinsic to its Principle. Self-

possession, justice and peace have no history. Nor did the androgynous Adam (i.e., he who was made from the earth), pro-genitor of the human race, have a history until the creation "bone from my bone and flesh from my flesh" of the aesthetic Eve, whose name means "life." Their thirst for experience is coincident with the rupture of a primal equilibrium and with their new found duality, itself a reflection in our world of a penultimate duality between the poles of which is played out all that exists under the Sun.

But an equilibrium was shattered, an injustice done which has its reverberations in the entire environment; for man is the center of his world and his inner harmony or disharmony is projected around him and reflected back towards him. "Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shall you eat of it all the days of your life... With sweat on your brow shall you eat your bread until you return to the earth as you were taken from it." (*Genesis* III, 17, 19). And in a similar vein, the Upanisads: "Verily all creatures here run about day after day, desiring to get food... This world was fashioned by Brahma with a desire for food." (*Maitri Up.* VI 12). "From food, verily, are produced whatsoever creatures dwell on earth. Moreover, by food alone they live. And then also into it they pass at the end." (*Taittiriya Up.* II 2.1.). We understand by bread, by food, not the literal significance alone, but whatever sustains our rational, affective and organic life—i.e., the substance of experience, our becoming.

For the Christian there is a most important sense in which our experience, our daily bread, is susceptible to an anagogic transposition rendering it symbolic of that which was done *in principio*. The bread and wine, under which forms the "lamb slain from the foundation of the world" is communicated to us—the bread and wine which form the elements of the Holy Eucharist, are properly supplied by the participating faithful who, after the consecration in which these elements are transubstantiated, receive them back again sacramentally. "Panem nostram *supersubstantialem* da nobis hodie" is the Vulgate rendering of this petition. Our participation in the Eucharistic sacrifice is incomplete unless we both make an offering of ourselves and receive the sacred species; and this implies the ultimate transubstantiation of the participant himself into Christ, the Logos of God. The Christian, in his humanity, participates further in the Eucharist; in the Latin rite, the drops of water added to the wine before consecration signify human nature and constitute, in one important respect, the water of "the spirit, the water and the blood" which on earth testify to Christ; the blood being the consecrated wine, and the spirit the words of the priest who pronounces the formula of consecration (cf. *I John* V, 7, 8).

All experience, then, is necessarily a reflection of that which was done in the beginning, *in principio*, and of that which is even now taking place *in divinis*. It cannot be otherwise; we are, willy nilly, made in the image of God—an image we can certainly befoul or ignore, but which we are powerless to unmake.

... Each thing, proceeding as it does from a metaphysical principle from which it derives all its reality, translates or expresses that principle in its own fashion and in accordance with its own order of existence, so that from one order to another all things are linked together and correspond in such a way as to contribute to the universal and total harmony, which in the multiplicity of manifestation, can be likened to a reflection of the principial unity itself.

(The Symbolism of the Cross, René Guénon).

If creation or manifestation in its totality and in its total equilibrium is properly conceived as a reflection of the primordial unity, it is, unfortunately, much less easy to see particular creatures, events, or phenomena as such reflections; were it not so our world would, perhaps, be peopled with saints. There are things and acts, however, which do show forth divinity in a manner to

which extrinsic proof is irrelevant: the sun in itself and in its apparent movements; the pole star; the moon; the oceans and the rivers that flow into them; mountains; virgin nature; the love of man and woman; in short, most if not all "natural phenomena." Similarly, the genuine taste of beauty; virtue; sacrifice; not to speak of the sacred scriptures and the intricate symbolism they set forth. "From the beginning of the world the invisible mysteries of God are grasped by the intelligence through creatures, even His eternal power and Divinity" (St. Denys the Areopagite). That we do not see through more things, that we do not see more of the particulars of our common experience as so many epiphanies, is due precisely to our manner of seeing (i.e., knowing), and can in a very valid sense be considered as our choice, a choice incarnated in our human condition; and if not "my" choice originally, few will deny that it is now all too frequently my choice—again, with the rarest exceptions. Adam, in his innocence, knew the essences of creatures, seeing in them their divine paradigms; "blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see..." We, in our conceits, see only the outer semblances of things and the aspects of their utility in terms of our desires of the moment. Knowing creatures, ourselves included, extrinsically and incidentally, we know in part and fearfully and with a dissatisfaction inherent in their and our finitude.

There are certain barriers which separate the personal (i.e., individual) existence of the soul from the stream of cosmic life... the *intellectus agens*... which runs through the whole of creation. There is a dam which keeps the soul confined within the natural and normal borders of human existence and protects it against the flood of the divine stream which flows... all around it; the same dam, however, also prevents the soul from taking cognizance of the Divine. The `seals' which are impressed on the soul protect it against the flood and guarantee its normal functioning. Why is the soul, as it were, sealed up? Because... the ordinary day to day life of human beings, their perception of the sensible world, fills and impregnates the mind with a multitude of sensible forms or images... As the mind perceives all kinds of gross natural objects and admits their images into its consciousness, it creates for itself, out of its natural functioning, a certain mode of existence which bears the stamp of finiteness. The normal life of the soul is kept within the limits determined by our sensory perceptions and emotions, and as long as it is full of these it finds it extremely difficult to perceive the existence of spiritual forms and things divine. (*Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, G. Scholem).

The soul, or more specifically our individual consciousness, is hedged about on every side in this our mundane life, and "we have received the most remote habitations as punishment for our outlandish ignorance" (*Timaeus*); yet it is true that "we are a plant not of an earthly but of a heavenly growth" (*ibid.*).

The seven human elements of the Primordial Tradition can be resumed in a triad... and... are quite compatible with the triad: *body, soul, spirit*... The human being is not an entity; it is an aggregate, and in reality an aggregate of elements not naturally coherent among themselves, because they differ essentially one from the other. These three elements which make up man as we know him, exist independently of one another; there are bodies without souls; there are souls without spirits or bodies, as the invisible fluids (i.e., forces) emanating from physical, celestial or wandering forces (unindividualized psychic energies; cf *L'Erreur Spirite*, René Guénon); there are spirits without bodies or souls as that which Catholics refer to as the `choirs of angels' and which respond to an absolute reality... The elements which compose man do not have to be together to exist; but it is their union (in this world) which constitutes man. Before (i.e., logically, in the symbolism of temporal sequence) their union there was as yet no humanity; after their dissociation there will be no more humanity. Humanity is formed by their temporary coherence. It is therefore not on these elements themselves but on their conjunction and cohesion that the phenomena of birth and death, particular to our species, are exercised. We must even say that these elements, taking each singly, are indifferent to birth and death, which can only affect their modalities or their protean qualities. Nevertheless, the human aggregate, if it is not as homogeneous as one might expect, is substantial; it possesses interiorly a cohesive force which it obeys... This force, which is an emanation of the will of heaven, pertains properly to ourselves; this force which holds together the human aggregate and which brings to birth and animates the human individual is the *personality*... The individuality is, in appearance, the personality considered within a cycle; it is not really even that; for the personality exists

entirely outside the individual, and is not affected either by the individual's birth or death nor by any of its changes within a cycle. Precisely, the individual is the resultant of the exertion of the personality on a human composite. In consequence the individuality is absolutely tied to the composite, and is transformed with it; the personality subsists always like unto itself. The personality, in so far as it is exercised on the composite, is called the human personality; but this is only an avatar, only a temporary measure of its value; it is applied today on the human composite, yesterday on the composite which preceded it, and tomorrow on the composite which will follow it; and it is always like unto itself; for the nature and determinants of a force are independent of its point of application. The individual is therefore protean and contingent; the personality is immortal; and it contains the indefinite succession of individuals (the Lord is the only transmigrant)... It is in this immutability of the person that our vague desire of the infinite is satisfied; the much more definite affection which we have for ourselves through our fellows must be placed in this immutable personality; it will suffice for us, if we can sublimate these affections and detach ourselves from inferior aspirations which are too gross to follow us through' our indefinite ascension... This it is which in Christianity is the immortality of the soul. This it is which is at once the witness and the measure of our eternity. (*La Voie Metaphysique*, Matgioi (Albert de Pourvoirville).

The Personality is "in" the spirit, the spirit in the soul, and the soul in the body; or, more realistically and in the sense of "spiritual envelopment," the body is in the soul, the soul in the spirit, and the spirit in the personality; our personality being our proper principle, "fused but not confused," in the divine Word, the *locum possibilium* in which all things under the Sun find the principle of their existence. Even in our fall, dispersion and confusion there thus. "... stands One in our midst whom we have not known" (John I, 26); One whose presence reminds us that "he who gathers not with Me scatters" (Luke XI, 23). One stands in our midst whom we know not; yet it is he by whom we know all things that we know and by whom alone we can know. He is the "light which enlightens every man who comes into the world" (John I, 9), and "the light of His countenance is signed upon us" (Ps. IV, 7). All created things are "life in Him" and this life is the light of men" (John I, 3-5).

"At the summit of the mental complex... our common sense... resides the consciousness... It alone of the human faculties is permeable by the divine ray which animates all things... the point of intersection between the mental..." (*Vers la Connaissance Interdite*, Ludovic de Gaigneron) and the spirit, the created intellect, "... the celestial ray which constitutes the tie between God and man and which conducts man to God... the *buddhi* of the Hindus..." (*Aperçus sur l'Esoterisme Chretien*, René Guénon).

The soul and the spirit are always together, but follow a perpetual dialogue and are never confounded. The soul is individual but it is the same spirit (being beyond form) which is present to all souls. The soul is mediatrix between the body and the spirit; it is a kind of spiritual body which permits the soul to carry light even to matter and which permits matter to carry even to the spirit emotion and trembling. It is only the soul which is endowed with consciousness, for consciousness is born of the struggle between flesh and spirit. The soul inclines now to the one side, now to the other; now it listens to all the voices of nature, now it seems enlightened by a supernatural light. Consciousness resides in this oscillation which it never interrupts, in this initiative which inhibits its stability, in this choice which it renews indefinitely. The body does not participate in consciousness (except by reflection); it is beneath it; it is the consciousness which participates in the spirit, and not the spirit in the consciousness; the spirit surpasses it; it is the principle which illuminates consciousness and one cannot say of the sun which enlightens all the rest that it is itself enlightened. Now we well know that our consciousness is weak and miserable, that it never opens sufficiently to permit the penetration into it of all that the spirit has to offer; the spirit is constricted in the soul where the individual captures it within his own limitations (i.e., reflects the spirit incompletely); but the individual always aspires to dilate these limitations and to find again his lost unity. (*La Conscience de soi*, Louis Lavelle).

Unregenerate man is by nature in a state of constant flux, if not of flight and dispersion. It was the role of religion to maintain those to whom it was addressed, i.e., all of a particular people, in a state of relative equilibrium; to order and set limits to curiosity, imagination and

desire, and to impress on man's experience some similitude of divine paradigms by which he could gradually sublimate his interests and energies. "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." This is yet true in principle, but the popular tendency—now worldwide—is to reduce the requirements of religion to the merest externals; even among those who still consider themselves believers, the intelligence is all too often brought to bear on anything but the Kingdom that is within; "... today theologians are absorbed in social problems and have no time for God" (Rev. Jules Monchanin). Again, no one is personally responsible for the quality of the times, yet we all share this quality. Is not our common choice likely to be this or that distraction, rather than the "one thing needful"? There is a thirst operative within the professions, education, science, commerce, the press, and now even within religion, which ceaselessly requires something new—a something which, needless to say, becomes ever more fleeting and vacuous. The natural exteriorization and centrifugal tendencies of the mind are exacerbated in every possible manner, as if it were a matter of duty.

Corporeal nature is your wife, O soul, and Intellect is your father; and a blow given by your father's hand is better than a kiss given by your wife. You cannot separate yourself from your father; for the bond of kinship between you and him cannot be broken, whether you part from him or live with him; whether there is anger or good will between you; under all conditions alike, kinship stands fast (Hermes, *de Castigatione Animae*).

The misogynic implications are more apparent than real; what is needed for male and female alike is to allot everything its proper place—a prudence which is likely to be perfect only in the degree to which our self-knowledge is perfect. Given our good will, however—itself a gift of Providence—Providence itself compensates for our ignorance in a measure determined by Providence.

We are captives in one of the most restricted orders of a finite universe. No matter how much we may "extend our horizons"—which commonly means empirical horizons—either in a sense of diminution or of grandeur, we remain within essentially the same boundaries and experiential limitations. The truth of our nature cannot be changed, however one might wish to deny it, or emphasize one element at the expense of another; or to ignore the spiritual, the formless, in favour of the aesthetic—or the vastly less common contrary. But the fact of our attitude can be changed; and there is no question as to which element within us is the greater:

It is fitting that the workman should use the tool and not the tool the workman; that the rider should guide and spur the horse and not the horse (however noble the animal may be) the rider; and that the sovereign should direct and govern the people, and not the people the sovereign. If in such things as these the natural order is maintained, the result is harmony and beauty; but if the relations are reversed, the result is confusion, ugliness, and disorder... You are not dealing fairly, O soul; you are neither just nor wise. Your father addresses you with teachings and warnings, the issues of which are salutary for you and the fruits thereof full of delight; but you turn away from him and turn to your wife and to her deceptions and lures and to her sweet flatteries, the fruits of which are cares and sorrows, and the pain of unsatisfied desire (Hermes, *de Castigatione Animae*).

The mind becomes in a manner all things that it knows; and as we are "a plant not of an earthly but of a heavenly growth," the mind can become remarkably spiritualized and gain a foretaste of a joy that is supra-mental. Similarly, identifications with finite objects are at best fleeting; at worst horrendous and deadly. But all identifications leave their mark for better or for worse.

Thence it comes my name receives a brand  
And almost thence my nature is subdued  
To that it works in, like the dyer's hand.  
(Shakespeare)

Almost innocently and unconsciously we identify with the objects of our curiosity and desire; then, willy nilly, with the state of curiosity and desire. "For the good of man as regards the senses of the body is not the good of man as man, but the good according to the reason. More men, however, follow sense" (*Summa Theologica* I, 49.3). The extrinsic orientation persists with all its woe and ultimate despair. It is a question of identity and of theory behind the identification. Practically, what is needed is a turning away, an interiorization of our faculties. "Some wise man... seeking life eternal, with his eyes turned inward, saw the Self" (*Katha Up.* II.1.1). "The Soul's true good is in devotion to the Intellectual Principle, its kin; evil to the Soul lies in frequenting strangers. There is no other way for it than to purify itself and so to enter into relationship with its own; the new phase begins by a new orientation." (*I Ennead* II.4). "Man will never aspire to God unless he deem himself mightier than all the world, stronger than passion or the lure of the flesh or the burden of contrition; unless he regard himself as more than finite, himself an eternity, in union with the First Cause by some measure of resemblance." (Yves de Paris).

Again, a theory is necessary; all the major traditions, *Deo gratias*, provide this. For the westerner, the most accessible and the best suited for our particular aesthesis is unquestionably Christianity. Not a residual Platonism, nor a Hinduism without roots beyond the Indus, and not any of the occult schools; but one of the one or two main streams of the Christian tradition, with all it contains that is valid and all and only the validities it contains. "You have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you" (John XV, 16) is a vocation addressed to each of us; as also, *mutatis mutandis*, to all those within each extra Christian tradition. One may be appalled by the apparent paucity of contemporary Christianity; certainly such an impression could find some support. He who makes a beginning, however, may find that the suspected paucity lies rather within himself

For the understanding of truth is given to those who have become participants in the truth. Those who are not participants in the truth and are not initiated therein, when they seek this understanding, draw from it a distorted wisdom. Of such men the Apostle says: 'The natural man receives not the things of the Spirit.' (St. Gregory of Sinai in the *Philokalia*.)

Or, more succinctly: "Live the life and you will understand the doctrine." (St. Bernard).

"All you who thirst come to the waters..." (Isaias LV, 1). "Anyone who drinks of the water I give him will never thirst again; the water I give will become in him a fountain of water springing up to eternal life." (John IV, 13, 14). "This is eternal life, that they shall know Thee, the one true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent." (John XVII, 3). This is the "... repose of the Seventh Day, reserved for the elect of God." (Hebrews IV, 9). In these passages—and there are numerous others—we have the clearest possible formulation within the Christian canon, of the key doctrines of metaphysical realization: totalization of the being, and liberation from the cosmos.

Now no one is so egregiously silly as to ask 'How do you know that a life of unchangeable wisdom is preferable to one of change?' For that very truth about which he asks 'How do I know it?' is unchangeably fixed in the minds of all men and presented to their common contemplation. And the man who does not see it is like a blind man in the sun whom it profits nothing that the splendour of its light, so clear and so near, is poured into his very eyeballs. The man on the other hand who sees but shrinks from this truth is weak in mental vision from dwelling long among the shadows of the flesh. And thus men are driven back from their native land by the contrary blasts of evil habits and prefer lower and less valuable objects to that which they know to be more excellent and more worthy. (St. Augustine, *de Doctrina Christiana*).

When one asks the separate self to renounce himself for the sake of that grace... by which descends into it the very principle of knowledge and love, this self experiences a sentiment of joy and enthusiasm at such a promise,

because it feels that it is about to break its limits and enlarge itself indefinitely. And on the other hand it is inevitable that it opposes this action, which supplants it, with a desperate resistance: for it feels it must disappear, that it must yield place to another whom it does not yet know, in which its most familiar being will, so to speak, be consumed; the thought of its own annihilation causes an inexpressible anguish which must be transformed into a total and sweet renunciation. (*La Conscience de soi*, Louis Lavelle).

"He who would come after Me, let him renounce himself and take up his cross (i.e., himself) and follow Me." (Matt. XVI, 24).

The beginning of self-knowledge is to know that one is nothing, and by reverberation to affirm the being of God in whom, with Christ, rests the secret of our identity.

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The title of this essay may well seem redundant; for it is not that Christianity lacks a doctrine of man in the scriptures, in the fathers, or in the great scholastics. Our understanding and penetration of the scriptures, however, has been progressively attenuated—especially of late by modern exegetical treatment. Whatever clarifications may have resulted from linguistic analysis and refinement, and from an improved understanding of the cultural scene as it is thought to have existed at the beginning of the Christian era, these minor clarifications have been more than offset by the far-reaching obfuscation stemming from an historical and academic point of view—as if said point of view could provide the sole key to all knowledge and understanding.

The same considerations apply to much of the contemporary study of the fathers. There have been in recent years many efforts to publish new editions of these classical Christian texts but there is as yet little evidence of a new assimilation of their more interior, even gnostic, approach. Too often one encounters an assumption of superiority vis-à-vis the fathers, as if the contemporary moralistic outlook were an adequate vantage point from which to judge something which far surpasses it.

With the scholastics there was a new synthesis of Christian dogma and Aristotelian philosophy; but despite the glories of this achievement, the new synthesis was clearly a retrogression from the more interior and immediate point of view of the Greek and even of the Latin fathers. The scholastic viewpoint was more exterior, less speculative; more rational and descriptive, less intuitive and percipient. Man was considered solely in his individuality, as soul and body; if *soul* was used by the scholastics to cover what they considered as the essentials of *spirit* and *soul*, this subtlety was soon lost on their successors. With post-Tridentine theologians one finds both a suspicion of anything suggesting a speculative interest and an endless repetition of that very inadequate Cartesian dichotomy of spirit and matter. The door was then opened to all the confusions resulting from the failure to distinguish between the psychic and the spiritual. Our understanding of our own nature has suffered, needless to say, from this degrading; today we see Christian spokesmen, in their efforts to understand human nature, borrowing from all the modern theories which alienate man and reflect his alienation.

An understanding of man's nature, implying an understanding of our principle and destiny, is most necessary for anyone who has a serious interest in truth or in anything but the most superficial integrities. If, as some believe, the time has come to rediscover the truest and most profound meanings in Christianity (and may the Lord teach us His way and lead us in the path of integrity), then we must begin—as always—with ourselves. And this means an adequate theory

of man. And if we find this to some extent lacking or inaccessible within Christianity, we can take encouragement from the position recently expressed (in *Concilium*, Vol. I, No. 3) that the Church has been asleep to the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking through extra-Christian traditions, nor has she heeded this voice within her own midst. We can find no better exterior support than in the voice of the Holy Spirit uttered through the most orthodox metaphysical traditions of the major religions, for *omne verum a quocumque dicatur, est a Spiritu Sancto* (St. Ambrose). And according to St. Thomas, "revelation has been made to many pagans."

Then, our thirst awakened but not quenched, we will "drink water from our own cistern, and the streams of our own wells" (cf. Prov. V, 15). "Whoever knows his own essence returns to it."

(Original editorial inclusions that followed the essay:)

*I wept into the sea; it did not overflow.*

Author Unkown