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23. Christian Esotericism and Primordial Tradition*

Two kinds of ecumenisms are usually distinguished: "branches" and "roots."

The "ecumenism of branches" concerns the reconciliation of the three Christian confessions. With generous intentions, it all too often addresses the problem from the wrong end by dwelling on historical or dogmatic considerations having little interest today with respect to the seriousness of the times, and without any of the three confessions in question being thoroughly convinced of the need for making the first sacrifices. In all immediate susceptibility, it would be incumbent upon Catholicism to renounce its legalism and papal monolithism, upon Protestantism to give up its rigid moralism and open up to the monastic and supernatural dimensions, upon Orthodoxy to abandon a certain intransigence that is no longer in season.[1]

Even when concessions are made here and there, even when a harmonization is in sight, a serious danger subsists: that of the break-up and thoughtless mixture of forms for which the traditional movements pay. An excessive opening to the others increases the disorder under the cover of intercommunion, as well as developing the seeds of a dissolution of structures and a phenomenon of entropy. Similarly, an excessive withdrawal encourages a lack of growth, vitality, and flexibility, imprisons in ritualism and fossilization, turns the sanctuary into a "laundered sepulcher." In one case or the other, the absence of balance and moderation creates a risk of death. Rather than wanting to sew the too disparate points of view together, it would be undoubtedly wiser to consider that beyond the outdated disputes, the differences of mentalities and temperaments—Latin, Germanic, and Slavic to simplify—constitute

* From *Return to the Essential*, III, 3.

[1] We know these schematizations may be excessive. There are very different, if not opposing, tendencies in the bosom of the Reformed Church, including, since recently, a contemplative tendency. The Roman Church has become more flexible and decentralized, though a firm authority is justified in the dissolution phases. As for the Byzantine Church, its defiance with regard to Western Christians is explained by its minority position and its legitimate fear of being absorbed. Its internal dissentions do it great harm.

and inspire the diverse visages of a Church that is one and the same, whose true unity is not at the level of rites and theologies, which are tributary to these same differences, but at the level of an identical core which is none other than Christian esotericism.[2]

The "ecumenism of roots" concerns the meeting of religions growing from the same tree; as it happens, the three Semitic religions. A meeting that, from certain aspects, presents serious difficulties, especially at the level of the Divine Unity that seems disturbed by the Incarnation of the Son, but which under other aspects and paradoxically, seems more readily feasible: the same metaphysical elements of Super-Being, Being, and Manifestation, the same eschatological elements concerning the "ultimate ends" of man and the world, the same mystical elements of the realization are found, through changing imageries, in the Torah, the Gospels, and the Koran. Judaism refers to Abraham by Isaac and Jacob, as does Islam by Ishmael, while Christianity refers to Abraham and to Melchizedek, which explains its special role with regard to the two others. If the major element is moved—the Super-Being in Judaism, the Divine Unity in Islam, the Trinity in Christianity—if the essential priorities equally differ, such as Gnosis or Rigor in Islam and Judaism, Mystic and Mercy in Christianity, the three religions unite in the conceptions of a unique and transcendent God, of the macrocosm and microcosm.

We can, however, imagine a third ecumenism, which would be the one of "flowers," of an infinitely more delicate order, where each of the three religions considered—in the same way that flowers are the result of subtle elaborations and the convergence of slow and secret previous maturations—would reveal its hidden goods with the movements that preceded them and from which they are derived, or the even more distant ones that they encountered and that enriched them with their contributions. In this way, step by step, Judaism would be put in touch with Ancient Greece and Mesopotamia, as Christianity with Greece and India, and Islam with Iran and China.

[2] On the notion of "Christian esotericism," we refer to two essential authors: F. Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (1st ed.), chapters VIII and IX, and S. H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, chapter 1.

The "ecumenism of flowers" is not limited to a defined geographic region, nor to a precise historic era; it embraces the totality of existing spiritual forms and by that constitutes the veritable reconciliation for which the two others are just the preambles. It constitutes it even more so in that this somewhat horizontal meeting is superimposed on a vertical meeting where borrowing and influences cease. All these revelations proceed from a transhuman plane, from a supra-conscious or supermental center, unique in any case, and which are themselves just terrestrial refractions.

Jung showed that at the psychological level, there are two kinds of unconscious that he qualified as personal and collective. The first one refers to each individual's particular patrimony; the second one to the inner subjacent patrimony, common to all of humanity. Likewise, at the spiritual level, by turning these terms in the direction of the supra-conscious and the transconscious, we can establish that if exotericism corresponds to the conscious, the esotericism of one's own religion will correspond to the personal unconscious; and to the collective unconscious, the esotericism that is common to the whole of religions, which will be called indiscriminately Universal Esotericism, *philosophia perennis*, or Primordial Tradition. As the archetypical dreams unite the heart of every man to the universe of symbols and myths belonging to all civilizations, we can say that at the level of Universal Esotericism, beyond the level of particularisms and dogmatic oppositions, the different traditions communicate with each other implicitly. At this level of intimacy, they reveal their common quintessence, the Spirit that originally animates them in the nudity anterior to all clothing, and that allows the introduction, even at the cost of agonizing revisions, and perhaps even thanks to them, of an entire system of equations where the *Adam Qadmon*, the *Purusa*, and the *Chen-jen*, where the pre-eternal *Shekhinah*, the *Theotokos*, *Shakti*, Demeter, and Kwan-yin, where Merlin and al-Khidr, Dionysos and Shiva are more than just distant cousins: a system of equations that is a system of evidences.

This first comparison inspires us with another one. We know that scientists today are leaning more and more toward a systemic vision of the world, seeing in it an indivisible whole for which the diverse components are essentially relationships. Consequently, the universe appears as a unitary whole, composed of relatively separate and distinct parts, but which vanish at the level of subatomic particles, and are only definable in their interconnections. We might

even say, *mutatis mutandis*, that Universal Esotericism is the systemic vision of the Spiritual, linking together these religions (whose main role is to link together[3]), and tracing between their different doctrinal points, over the artificial demarcations, henceforth abolished, an entire network of lines similar to those linking together the stars. For Universal Esotericism, the veritable reality is a whole made up of several revelations communicating with each other at the keenest level, that of "transcendent Intellect." We might even complete the comparison by adding that, as in David Bohm's theory of the so-called "implicate" or "enveloped" order, where each part of the hologram contains the whole, each religion, similarly, contains, implicates the others. Each one, however, favors some aspects to the detriment of certain others; and it doesn't take much more for these differences in the degrees of *insistence* to create the belief that the religions are radically opposed to each other.

We are mistaken besides in believing that Christianity wanted to oust other religions for good. It undoubtedly felt tempted more than once in its phase of conquering expansion, at that time moved less by the action of the Holy Spirit than by what Camus calls "European arrogance." But these vague hegemonic impulses pertain to the instances of exotericism and sooner or later collide with territorial limits. Christ himself proclaims "in my Father's house there are many mansions," and "they shall come from the east, the west, the north and the south, and shall sit down in the kingdom of God." Among the interpretations of these verses, there is one that is quite significant: the plurality of mansions corresponds to that of the paradises obtained at the end of different posthumous evolutions, which are related to the diversity of the spiritual paths. As for the East, which is alluded to, it seems difficult to restrict it to Palestine. For the Easterners who did not receive his message, Christ recognizes implicitly the legitimacy of their own tradition, its possibility for their "redemption" and to appear at the messianic wedding banquet. That "the wind bloweth where it listeth" is to be taken in a similar meaning: the spirit's gratuitousness of action is such that men of God exist in all the forms of spirituality.

[3] Translator's Note: From a play on words in the original French text: "*reliant ensemble les religions dont le rôle principal est lui-même de relier....*" This is based on the Latin roots of religion: *religere* meaning to "bring together" and *religare*, to "assemble" (See also the Translator's Note on this point at Chapter 7, fn. 8 [p. 88]).

The acceptation of the latter by Christianity is found mentioned in numerous written texts, some examples of which we will give. Justin, in his *Apology*: "Everyone who has lived according to the Logos is Christian, even if they passed themselves off as atheists, as Socrates, Heraclitus and their kind among the Greeks." Origen, in his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*: "The Word became man at the end of time, it became Jesus Christ; but before this visible coming of flesh, he was already, without being man, the mediator of humans." Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against the Heresies*: "There is only one unique Father God, and his Word is forever present in humanity, although with diverse dispositions and multiform workings, saving since the commencement those who have been saved, that is to say those who love God and who, according to their time, follow the Word." And later, "Christ did not come for those alone, who starting with the Emperor Tiber, believed in him, and the Father did not use his providence only in favor of men who live now, but in favor of all men who, without exception, from the commencement, according to their abilities and those of their time, feared and loved God, practiced justice and kindness toward their neighbor, desired to see Christ and hear his voice." All religions, and even all cultures, have received a "visit from the Word." The latter, according to Maximus the Confessor, appeared in three ways at the time, which are like as many degrees of "incorporation": considered as theophany in the cosmos; in the wisdoms included in the core of the Holy Scriptures; in the assumed Incarnation of the Son of God. More precisely informed, Nicolas of Cusa could say that "the revelations are multiple"; he sees dogma and ritual as partial truths. "Through the diversity of Divine Names, it is You who they name, for as You are, as You live, unknown and ineffable."

This kind of affirmation regularly punctuates the history of Christianity. Even if they are rarely quoted and heard, they explicitly tell the validity of the non-Christian traditions, and by way of consequence, recognize the inspiration inhabiting them, the orthodoxy of their instruction, the saintliness of their representatives. If Saint Paul wants us to refuse the messages that do not come from Christ, it is not because they are all necessarily untrue, but because the message of Christ, as much by its content as by its expression, is the most adapted to the Westerners of the time and their descendents. These same affirmations admit perfectly that the Word can reveal itself on several occasions during human history—which relates to the ques-

tion of the *Avatara*s, or "Divine Descents" in Hinduism. These, we know, distinguish between the major *Avatara*s, or plenary Incarnations of the Divine, and the minor *Avatara*s, or partial Incarnations. Christ, who is identified with the Logos and was "before Abraham was," obviously belongs to the first category, from the jnanic point of view, with its constant concern for putting into perspective *in divinis* the manifestations of the Absolute with regard to the Absolute itself. He will even be placed above the avaritic series according to the bhaktic point of view, insisting on the fact that "God became man" only once, and once for all time.

It should be noted, however, that Christianity is not alone in insisting on the notion of a personal God: Vishnuism, Amidism, and Buddhism do so as well. Also, favoring such a way does not necessarily lead to condemning the way of the impersonal God just because it does not offer any human mediator between man and Heaven, as in Judaism, Islam, and Zen. The worshipers of God have not forgiven the successors of Plato and Shankaracharya for wanting to attain this "unknown God," even though he would make himself known.[4] They want all human types to be like their own—affectionate, emotional, proselyte—without thinking that others could in the past, can still today, although in diminishing numbers, realize the Divine by their own means. Christ appeared at the critical and *crucial* moment where the cyclical degeneracy made the ways of "God within" dangerous or impracticable. He certainly did not descend into Hades to save the pagans that couldn't have known him, but the ones who turned away from all spirituality.

To assume that the Incarnation of Christ has nothing in common with the *Avatara*s may be an act of faith worthy of respect and justified by the unconditional love devoted to the divinity of one's choice and in response to his love; it may also be an easy way to ignore what is being said and done on the other side of the river. Overall, unlike the *Avatara* who haunt the "cosmic religions" and appear every time humanity needs them, while at the same time remaining more or less blurred in the mists of the mythological, Christ would mark the intrusion of God in History. This neglects

[4] According to Saint Paul, this is what he did by incarnating himself in the person of Christ, but it is not what he did if we consider that the "unknown God" of the Athenians is and remains forever the Super-Being.

that such an intrusion had begun much earlier: with Abraham to say the least. Moreover, to support this perspective, which plunges the centuries preceding the coming of Christ into the shadows of ignorance, fatally reduces the Christian tradition to historicism; it results in an evolutionary and progressive vision of humanity, based on the impossible dialogue between Christians and atheists, on technology and massing, which in the end consists of finding the "nuclear winter" that, when all is said and done, is preferable to the springtime of the Golden Age.

The unique Son of God is unique, if the words still have meaning. This won't keep Augustine of Hippo from admitting that "we shouldn't doubt that Gentiles also have their prophets." And Thomas Aquinas won't hesitate to write what deserves to be read with the utmost attention: "The power of a Divine Person is infinite and cannot be limited to something created. This is why we should not say that a Divine Person has assumed a human nature *in such a way that he could not assume another one.*" [5]

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Such notable changes of attitude might make one think that we are henceforth heading toward a broader Christianity that, without giving up any of its basic principles, bears witness to its true universality. Some Christians who, only several decades ago, would have been condemned for their boldness, are now opening up to sister religions: a rather hostile curiosity is followed by a sincere interest. This creates hope that perhaps the day will come where, risking a second stage, they will also become interested in the "polytheist paganisms" of which an in-depth study will show that they are neither paganisms nor polytheisms. One will realize that such *open-mindedness* does not pose any threats to the Christian tradition one personally adheres to, that faith in Christ is in no way weakened for all that, that it is even quite revived with the breath of the East, more faithful to the meaning of holiness, more inclined to veneration. Following Clement of Alexandria, Augustine, by considering in *The City of God*

[5] *Summa Theologica*, III, a P. 3, 7. Emphasis mine. Even if Aquinas had not admitted the *Avatara*s, such a statement remarkably broadens the horizon.

that the gymnosophists of India belonged to the "terrestrial city," felt their ideas about the divinity were correct. Remarkable concession for a man who, given the era in which he lived, could not have the precise idea about the yogis that we have since acquired. It is no longer possible to depict them as they had been in medieval imageries, with ears larger than their body—unless one wants to see the symbol of Knowledge; no longer possible to describe Marco Polo's tales of China as diabolical.

The *Lumen gentium* constitution, promulgated by Vatican II, admits among the just "those who have not yet received the Gospel," and who "under the influence of his grace, try their best to fulfill his will"; these ones "can attain eternal salvation." There is still a bit of condescendence in this judgment, but the angle of tolerance is noteworthy. The publications from the office of secretary for non-Christians multiply the invitations to stop rejecting the other religions, expressions of the "Spirit of Truth" working beyond the visible boundaries of the "mystic Body." It is no longer a question of integrating unfamiliar elements to purify them, or after having purified them, but to think of them as full expressions of the Word, without any afterthought of salvaging.

Pioneers paved the way for the encounter. While, on the Eastern side, Swami Siddheswarananda brought the "face of silence" to the West—Sri Ramakrishna—and explored the *raja-yoga* of John of the Cross, or while D. T. Suzuki revealed Zen to us and saw in Meister Eckhart the closest mystical Christian to the Far East,[6] on the Christian side, men like Thomas Merton explored Buddhism, Olivier Lacombe and Jean Herbert, Hinduism, Louis Massignon and Henri Corbin, Sufism and Iranian Islam. More recently, we could see a Catholic monk who studied the *Advaita-vada* and the Christian tradition for many years equally borrow from Thomas Aquinas and Shankara, Bernard of Clairvaux and Ramana Maharshi. If he is careful to distinguish, in his work *Doctrine de la Non-dualité et Christianisme*, the "hypostatic Union" and the "Supreme Identity," the author concludes no less with these terms: "We have not found anything (in the Hindu doctrine of Non-duality) that strikes us as incompatible with our complete and full faith in the Christian Revelation."

[6] Lossky speaks of this as a "Christian non-dualism."

But the most significant example is that of Dom Henri Le Saux (Swami Abhishiktananda), who completed the Himalayan pilgrimage, retreated into the caves of Arunachala, met several sages, studied the Upanishads—referring to them as a "frightening experience of truth." It was not a question of distancing himself from Christianity, even less of him giving it up, but of living it at a much deeper level than the one generally suggested. He judged that the Hindu metaphysics of Non-duality teaches interiorization and unification; it purifies Christianity of the contributions that obscured it. "No one believes more deeply than the Advaitin in the Divinity of Jesus." As Marie-Magdeleine Davy wrote in the essay she devoted to him, "it was through the Upanishads that he was able to capture the true meaning of Christianity, to live it and spread it." Dom Le Saux wrote in *Ermites de Saccidananda*: "Of all the peoples of the earth, it seems that India has received a special mission from the Divine Providence. It seems that a message had been entrusted to her, a message to deliver to the world and to proclaim throughout time.... Testimony and message focused on the primacy of the mystery of God in relationship to the mystery of the created, on the unique value of what does not occur." In his *Journal*, he sees, with the incorporation of Hinduism in Christianity, a highlighting of the apophatic theology. And he writes more: "The advaita is not beyond the Church of Christianity, it is within it…." Lastly, in *Gnanananda*, he says that the moment has come, as much for Christianity as for Eastern wisdom, to reach across their borders, and this, no longer only at the level of the "initiates." One might imagine, consequently, that the "I am that I am" (*Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*) of the Burning Bush is not very different from the "I do exist" (*Aham Asmi*) of the Vedanta, in the pure transparence of the Absolute Being.

In fact, Christianity in crisis undoubtedly has a duty to work essentially in a double movement. The first consists of *going back* to its deepest roots contained in the Hebrew tradition, to which we have already made several allusions elsewhere. Remember that this tradition is the esoteric explanation of this "transmission," the whole of which constitutes the Torah, and for which Christ declares he never came to abolish; it is thus an *integral part* of the Christian heritage. The second movement consists of *opening* Christianity to the whole of the Eastern traditions, which, far from conflicting with it, confirm its authenticity, and in certain areas, complete it, stimulate it, make it develop.

This double movement of *deepening* and *widening* is not at all contradictory when taken from the point of view of esotericism. It should be simultaneous in its two directions. There is nothing scandalous about it, at least for the minds that are used to it, who hate nothing more than the effort of revision or renovation and the shocks of awakening. The return to Jewish sources in no way signifies the abandon of the evangelical contribution; the reference to Asian sources does not carry the underlying meaning of a submersion of Christianity by foreign alluvion. Both are the enrichment and renewal, Christianity's return to itself.

We won't cover the return to the sources in Hebrew esotericism again, which, in the eyes of many, is taken for granted.[7] The Eastern question is much more difficult. Without a doubt, Thomas Merton was right to warn against hasty assimilations; but this Cistercian monk, with a remarkably open mind, consecrated his last years to the study of Taoism and Zen, adding that "there are certain analogies and a correspondence that are from now on obvious and that may indicate the way towards a better mutual understanding." Thomas Merton's precautions can be explained by a certain sense of discretion dictated by his membership in the Church. This distance fades at the purely intellectual level.

Let's quote the important text from Marie-Magdeleine Davy in *Le désert intérieur*: "It is normal for man to grow, thanks to the different contributions that refer to traditions other than his own.... It is not because of this that he abandons his own path; he will be enriched, and on the contrary, it will be possible for him to better understand it by studying it more deeply...." The one who attends the school for inner life doesn't need to listen to those who attack him with accusations of syncretism. "Envious, jealous, stubborn, devoted to human prudence," unable to broaden their knowledge to that of a universal order, these ones "wouldn't know how to accept that others free themselves from what they are able to overcome. Primitive Christianity knew how to take advantage of Greek and Jewish thinking. Why wouldn't modern man, Christian or not, use the metaphysics from the Far East, which are available to him today?" The length of this quotation will be forgiven by considering the defini-

[7] We need to pay tribute here to the essential work of a pioneer such as Claude Tresmontant.

tive nature presented in its very conciseness.[8] But what can be understood from these contributions, if not, in addition to the Hassidic teachings and the Presocratic and Neoplatonic vision of the world, most certainly and at the same time, the poems from the Sufi mystic, the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishads*, the Taoist treatises, the Zen aphorisms and—their common point of convergence—those alchemic works that only seem foreign to us because our ignorance and infidelity has tossed them behind the bookshelves of oblivion?

It has been largely proven that the areas of the richest fertility are found where different trends meet, born of geographical places and cultural domains that are very distant from one another, from different eras, stemming from equally different traditions. There is good reason to believe that any Christian awakening will remain chimerical without this fertilization and intellectual revival of central truths irrelevant to all hurried syncretism and ignorant confused thinking.

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The opening up of Christianity to the Hebrew and Eastern traditions has led to ever broader horizons, to the original Knowledge, common to all of humanity, born of an era anterior to the revealed religions, and to which Augustine directly refers in his *Confessions*, when he speaks of "the wisdom that had not been suitable, but is now such as it always was and will forever be." Clement of Alexandria notes on his side, Christianity's elaboration of an extended, strictly initiatory synthesis that does not suppose victory of a particular Church over paganism, but unites with a supra-confessional spirituality that borrows its traits from the Primordial Tradition. The same ultimate reference has continued throughout Christianity, shines in the sixteenth century as a cracked replica of humanist provincialism. Pico della Mirandola, sets out, it may be said, the foundations of comparative esotericism, he for whom

[8] This text develops the word of Christ: "Woe to you, jurists, because you have taken away the key to knowledge (gnosis); you have not entered and you have kept out the ones who wanted to enter."

Oratio curiously recalls the Sufi set of themes of the "perfect man." Guillaume Postel, a Catholic priest who covered the Middle East, was interested in Islam whose language he spoke, and in Japanese Buddhism, concluded on a spiritual unity of the world. Nicolas of Cusa not only placed the authority of the ecumenical Council above that of the Popes, but the Roman Cardinal that he was recognized the fundamental unity of the traditions.[9]

This idea of unity, we see, is already familiar to its precursors; but its time had not yet come, although it seemed to have considerably matured in the eschatological *context* that we are aware of. We often hear today that the only international language is contemporary science that, by using the same signs, can be understood by scientists the world over. Where science agrees, religions clash. This obviously forgets *philosophia perennis*, which is found at the heart of these religions, prior to the excesses, the late additions, the diverging literalisms, and offers exactly the same values and same guarantee of universality.

Two characters especially incarnate this Primordial Tradition in Judeo-Christian tradition: Elias (Elijah) and Melchizedek.

Elias has ties with the Revelation God made to the first man: the "unique language" of the origins that will change into a plurality of "languages," that is to say, religions, each one renewing the first Revelation in its own style. While Babel consecrates the blooming of exotericism, Elias clears the way for the Messiah, prepares another cycle, the reign of the New Jerusalem. It is within this same perspective and following the inspiration of this prophet that we should place today's extensive trend of interest in the whole of traditions. Melchizedek is the exteriorization of the Primordial Tradition. It is "without genealogy," that is to say of supra-human origin; it is itself the prototype of man, the image of the Divine Word; the leader of the Three Kings, who personalize the three supreme functions according to Guénon.

The exoteric point of view cannot help protesting against this immersion of Christianity into the whole of traditions stemming from the Primordial Tradition, fearing to see Christian singularity be dissolved in the relativism of false concordances. One might imagine quite the opposite, that this apparent assimilating *ingestion*

[9] Especially in his dialogue, *De Pace fidei*, condemning the wars between the believers in the name of the same God they all worshiped.

gives the Christian revelation its true universal character. Indeed, this revelation makes Christ the most direct resurgence of the Primordial Tradition, since, as Saint Paul said, Christ is "the priest according to the order of Melchizedek," he who, like Melchizedek, is "before Abraham," and has neither a beginning nor an end; he who, by establishing the Eucharistic offering, somewhat reiterates and makes official the sacrifice of Melchizedek, the offering of bread and wine.

By breaking the limits of Judaism, the Christlike revelation marks the return to the first Tradition. Since then, "there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek, because they have the same Lord"; "there is only one God who justifies by faith the circumcised and the uncircumcised." Christianity appears from then on as the reactualization of the Primordial Tradition, the return of the Golden Age at the very heart of the time of the end, this Golden Age mysteriously saluted by Virgil in his fourth eclogue; and it is this that legitimizes one more time the need for Christianity to open up to the other traditions. The Light of Pentecost is its answer to the confusion of languages, in anticipation of Heaven where everyone will understand each other.

This reconciliation by the top is placed even above the "ecumenism of flowers"; it would concern a fourth kind of ecumenism that is located at the most subtle level of the Spiritual, the anterior and unanimous Essence, and could be called the "ecumenism of perfumes."

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