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Outline of the Christic Message

If we start from the incontestable idea that the essence of all religions is the truth of the Absolute with its human consequences, mystical as well as social, the question may be asked how the Christian religion satisfies this definition; for its central content seems to be not God as such, but Christ—that is, not so much the nature of the divine Being as its human manifestation. Thus a Patristic voice aptly proclaimed: "God became man that man might become God"; this is the Christian way of saying that "*Brahma* is real; the world is appearance". Christianity, instead of simply juxtaposing the Absolute and the contingent, the Real and the illusory, proposes from the outset a reciprocity between the one and the other: it sees the Absolute *a priori* in relation to man, and man—correlatively—is defined in conformity with this reciprocity, which is not only metaphysical, but also dynamic, voluntary, eschatological. It is true that Judaism proceeds in an analogous fashion, but to a lesser degree: it does not define God in relation to the human drama, hence starting from contingency, but it does establish a quasi-absolute relationship between God and His people: God is "the God of Israel"; the symbiosis is immutable; however, God remains God, and man remains man; there is no "human God" or "divine man".

Be that as it may, the reciprocity posited by Christianity is metaphysically transparent, and it is necessarily so, on pain of being an error. Unquestionably, once we are aware of the existence of contingency or relativity, we must know that the Absolute is interested in it in one way or another, and this means first of all that contingency must be prefigured in the Absolute, and then that the Absolute must be reflected in contingency; this is the ontological foundation of the mysteries of Incarnation and Redemption. The rest is a matter of modality: Christianity proposes on the one hand an abrupt opposition between the "flesh" and the "spirit", and on the other hand—and this is its esoteric side—its option for "inward-

ness" as against the outwardness of legal prescriptions and as against the "letter that killeth". In addition, it operates with that central and profoundly characteristic sacrament which is the Eucharist: God does not limit Himself to promulgating a Law; He descends to earth and makes Himself Bread of life and Drink of immortality.

In relation to Judaism, Christianity comprises an aspect of esoterism through three elements: inwardness, quasi-unconditional charity, the sacraments. The first element consists in more or less disregarding outward practices and accentuating the inward attitude: what matters is to worship God "in spirit and in truth"; the second element corresponds to the Hindu *ahimsa*, "non-harming", which can go so far as to renounce our legitimate rights, hence deliberately to step out of the mesh of human interests and social justice; it is to offer the left cheek to him who has struck the right and always to give more than one has to. Islam marks a return to Mosaic "realism", while integrating Jesus into its perspective as a prophet of Sufic "poverty"; be that as it may, Christianity itself, in order to be able to assume the function of a world religion, had to attenuate its original rigor and present itself as a socially realistic legalism, at least to a certain degree.

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If "God became man", or if the Absolute became contingency, or if Necessary Being became possible being—if such is the case, one can understand the meaning of a God who became bread and wine and who made communion a condition *sine qua non* of salvation; not, to be sure, the sole condition, for communion demands the quasi-permanent practice of prayer, which Christ commands in his parable of the unjust judge and the importance of which is stressed by Saint Paul when he enjoins the faithful to "pray without ceasing". One can conceive of a man who, prevented from taking communion, is saved by prayer alone, but one cannot conceive of a man who would be prevented from praying and who would be saved through communion alone; indeed, some of the greatest saints, at the beginning of Christianity, lived in solitude without being able to take communion, at least for several years. This is explained by the fact that prayer takes precedence over everything, consequently that it contains communion in its own way and does so necessarily, since in

principle we bear within ourselves all that we can obtain from without; "the kingdom of God is within you". Means are relative; not so our fundamental relationship with the Absolute.

As regards the Eucharistic rite, the following specification appears permissible: the bread seems to signify that "God enters into us", and the wine that "we enter into God"; presence of grace on the one hand and unitive extinction on the other. God is the absolute and perfect Subject, who either enters into the contingent and imperfect subject or else assimilates that subject by delivering it from the shackles of objectified subjectivity, this subjectivity having become exteriorized and thereby paradoxically multiple. It could also be said that the bread refers more particularly to salvation and the wine to union, which evokes the ancient distinction between the lesser and the greater mysteries.[1]

In the Eucharist, the Absolute—or the divine Self[2]—became Nourishment; in other cases, It became Image or Icon; in still others, Word or Formula: therein lies the entire mystery of concrete assimilation of the Divinity by means of a properly sacramental symbol: visual, auditive, or some other. One of these symbols, and even the most central one, is the very Name of God, quintessence of all prayer, whether a Name of God as such or a Name of God become man.[3] The intention of the Hesychasts is that "the heart drink the Name so that the Name might drink the heart": thus the liquefied heart, which, owing to the effect of the "fall", was "hardened", whence the frequent comparison of the profane heart with a stone. "For the hardness of your heart he (Moses) wrote you this precept";

1. In a more general sense, we would say that the Christian sacraments are exoteric for exoterists, and esoteric or initiatic for esoterists; in the first case their end is salvation pure and simple, and in the second it is mystical union.
2. Once the Supreme Principle makes Itself man's interlocutor, It enters into cosmic relativity by the very fact of Its personification; It nonetheless remains the Absolute with respect to man, except from the standpoint of the pure Intellect.
3. Let us quote Saint Bernardino of Siena, the great promoter—today forgotten—of the invocation of the Name of Jesus: "Place the Name of Jesus in your homes, in your chambers, and keep it in your hearts." "The best inscription of the Name of Jesus is that in the heart, then that in the word, and finally that in the painted or sculpted symbol." "All that God hath created for the salvation of the world is hidden in the Name of Jesus: all the Bible, from Genesis to the last Book. The reason for this is that the Name is origin without origin. The Name of Jesus is as worthy of praise as God Himself."

Christ intended to create a new man through his sacrificial body as God-Man and starting from a particular moral anthropology. Let us specify that a possibility of salvation manifests itself, not because it is necessarily better than another, but because, being possible, precisely, it cannot but manifest itself; as Plato said, and after him Saint Augustine, it is in the nature of the Good to wish to communicate Itself.

Not without relationship to the mystery of the Eucharist is that of the Icon; here too it is a question of a materialization of the heavenly and thus of a sensible assimilation of the spiritual. Quintessentially, Christianity comprises two Icons, the Holy Face and the Virgin with the Child, the prototype of the first icon being the Holy Shroud and that of the second, the portrait of Mary painted by Saint Luke. It is from these two sources that spring, symbolically speaking, all the other sacred images, ending with such liturgical crystallizations as the Byzantine iconostasis and the Gothic retable; it is also necessary to mention the crucifix—painted or sculpted—in which a primordial symbol is combined with a later image. Let us add that statuary—foreign to the Eastern Church—is closer to architecture than to iconography properly so called.[4]

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"God become man": this is the mystery of Jesus, but it is also, and thereby, that of Mary; for humanly, Jesus had nothing that he did not inherit from his Mother, who has rightly been called "Co-Redemptress" and "divine Mary". Thus the Name of Mary is like a prolongation of that of Jesus; to be sure, the spiritual reality of Mary is contained in Jesus—the converse is also true—but the distinction between the two aspects has its reason for being; synthesis does not preclude analysis. If Christ is "the Way, the Truth and the Life", the Blessed Virgin, who is made of the same substance, holds graces which facilitate access to these mysteries, and it is to

4. Judaism and Islam, which proscribe images, replace them in a certain way with calligraphy, a visual expression of the divine discourse. An illuminated page of the Koran, a prayer-niche decorated with arabesques, are "abstract Icons".

her that this saying of Christ applies in the first place: "My yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

It could be said that Christianity is not *a priori* such and such a metaphysical truth, it is Christ, and it is participation in Christ through the sacraments and through sanctity. This being so, there is no escaping the quintessential divine Reality: in Christianity, as in every other religion, there are fundamentally two things to consider, abstractly and concretely: the Absolute, or the absolutely Real, which is the Sovereign Good and which gives meaning to everything, and our consciousness of the Absolute, which must become second nature for us and which frees us from the meanderings, impasses, and abysses of contingency. The rest is a matter of adaptation to the needs of given souls and societies; but the forms also have their intrinsic worth, for the Truth wills beauty, in its veilings as well as in ultimate Beatitude.

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Intrinsically Christian, non-Hellenized, metaphysics is expressed by the initial statements of the Gospel of Saint John. "In the beginning was the Word": obviously what is meant is not a temporal origin, but a principial priority, that of the divine Order, to which the universal Intellect—the Word—pertains, while nonetheless being linked to cosmic Manifestation, of which it is the center both transcendent and immanent. "And the Word was with God": with respect to Manifestation precisely, the *Logos* is distinguished from the Principle, while being "with" it through its essence. "And the Word was God": with respect to the divine Order, the *Logos* is not distinct from the Principle; the distinction between the two natures of Christ reflects the inevitable ambiguity of the relationship *Âtmâ-Mâyâ*. "All things were made by him": there is nothing created that was not conceived and prefigured in the divine Intellect. "And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not": it is in the nature of *Âtmâ* to penetrate into *Mâyâ*, and it is in the nature of a certain *Mâyâ* to resist it,[5] otherwise the world would

5. What is in question here is the negative dimension proper to sub-celestial *Mâyâ*, which is made of darkness inasmuch as it becomes distant from the Principle and

cease to be the world; and "it must needs be that offences come". Christ's victory over the world and over death retraces or anticipates the victory—as such timeless—of Good over Evil, or of Ohrmazd over Ahriman; a victory that is ontologically necessary because it results from the nature of Being itself, despite initial appearances to the contrary. Darkness, even in winning, loses; and light, even in losing, wins; Passion, Resurrection, Redemption.

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of light inasmuch as it manifests aspects of the Principle. It is the domain of imperfection and impermanence, but also of potentially liberating theomorphism, whereas heavenly *Mâyâ* is the domain of archetypes and *hypostases*.