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The Logic of Mystery and the Necessity of Faith

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For the person of simple religious faith the sense of being irrational in the light of modern science can sometimes occasion embarrassment. Such people often find themselves believing in a science based on the seen and the knowable, yet having faith in the unseen and the unknowable. Inevitably they feel themselves caught in a contradiction. The scientism of the modern era claims a rational view of reality. Up against this rationality it places what it takes to be the often incongruous demands of religious faith. However, it is a gross error to suggest that rationality and faith-based perspectives are irreconcilable. Faith, fully understood, is conformity to Truth. Rational thought is a mode of perception of truth and as such faith is rational, or more to the point, rationality is an aspect of faith. This without denying an element of mystery in faith; for mystery, properly understood, is a *sine qua non* of Reality, which is to say, it is a logical imperative. By contrast, the modern scientific claim to objectivity can be shown to be intrinsically unsound and anti-rational. Here it suffices to show that it involves a contradiction of first principles.

This essay presents a comparison of the religious and the modern understandings of the nature of Reality. The aim is to show that it is only from the metaphysical perspective—the intellectual understanding of the religious viewpoint—that Reality can be understood in a manner that is logically sound. According to this position faith is fundamental to an understanding of the nature of Reality. However the necessity of faith provides no excuse for being anti-rational. On the one hand, as St. Anselm famously put it, one is obliged to believe in order to be able to understand (*credo ut intelligam*); on the other hand, to say human is to say intelligence and thus the right to use this intelligence. In fact, our right to intelligence is nothing less than an obligation to apply it to its full extent and thus to its limit. That which is limited implies that which limits and, *ipso facto*, that which is "beyond." Yet the limit of intelligence does not imply a failing in its power but in fact the very opposite, for

this limitation, as such, supplies our intelligence with its highest function: the intimation of that which is greater than ourselves.[1]

Credo ut intelligam. Yet, from a certain perspective, it is equally true to say that "with understanding one is obliged to believe." In the words of Ananda Coomaraswamy, "One must believe in order to understand, and understand in order to believe. These are not successive, however, but simultaneous acts of the mind."[2] But this does not mean that subjective intellection can act on its own behalf without the objectifying light of the divine Intellect that manifests Itself through Revelation. As Frithjof Schuon remarks, "One can neither conceive of a Saint Augustine without the Gospels, nor a Shankaracharya without the Veda."[3]

Faith is both rational and supra-rational; this latter and infinitely higher aspect of faith in no way implies a denial of the former. In the first case, the necessity of faith, arising from the logical place of mystery in the structure of Reality, means that faith is fundamentally rational, at least if we are to use this term in the sense of being logical, practical and common-sensical. In the second case, the fulfillment of faith involves an understanding of a level of Reality beyond that accessible to rational thought. It is in this second sense that we might say that faith is non-rational, but this is simply to say that it is not commensurate with rational thought by virtue of transcending it.

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The person of religious sensibility has faith in a reality both seen (immanent: "in the world") and unseen (transcendent: "in heaven"). For the strict rationalist, belief is limited to what can be "seen" and measured. It is thus better to refer to this mindset as empirical rather than rational, for the rational faculty, as a mode of our intelligence, is limited only by its scope and in this limitation it alludes to that which exceeds it; by contrast, the strictly empirical mind is limited by the boundaries it imposes upon itself in denying any

[1] In this way the limit of indefinite space implies the Infinite.

[2] A. Coomaraswamy, *Selected Papers Vol.2: Metaphysics*, ed. R. Lipsey (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 8.

[3] F. Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books, 1995), p. 44.

other reality. For the empiricist what cannot be measured, *ipso facto*, does not exist.

The study of the empirical world of and for itself does have certain benefits as long as it is recognized for what it is. But it cannot answer any so-called "questions of existence," and it is this presumption with which we are here concerned. Here it suffices to note that the empirical mindset rests on a fundamental flaw: it seeks to explain the greater by the lesser. For the empiricist a thing can only be the sum of its parts. The empirical ideology proposes to answer the question of reality by exhausting the measure of the universe. Yet the very mentality that produced empiricism has proceeded to demonstrate the ultimate impotence of the purely empirical methodology when Reality is considered at the quantum level. Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle and Bohr's Copenhagen Interpretation lead to the realization that "uncertainty and fuzziness are intrinsic to the quantum world and not merely the result of our incomplete perception of it."[4] For physicists the "staggering conclusion" of all this is that consciousness is not merely an observer in the dynamics of the universe, but an active participant.[5]

A cautionary note: we must not be fooled into thinking that these new sciences bring the answer to the "meaning of existence." It is sometimes claimed that the new sciences "prove" what was once only primitively intuited (and here both "primitive" and "intuition" have a pejorative coloring). With this "proof" is claimed a victory for modern intellectualism over the traditional acceptance of faith. Let us simply say, without wishing to understate the gravity of this point, that these new sciences bear the seed of a danger more subtle than the simplistic bludgeonings of the empiricist, for they introduce the deceit of the counterfeit; but this is another question.[6]

The empiricists want a reality that can be pegged down. Yet, at the same time they posit a reality constantly in flux, as new "facts"

[4] P.C.W. Davies and J.R. Brown (eds.), *The Ghost in the Atom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 12. The unsatisfactory and implicitly negative notions of "uncertainty" and "fuzziness" are positively expressed through the religious conception of "mystery."

[5] D. Reanney, *The Death of Forever: A New Future for Human Consciousness* (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1992), p. 25.

[6] On the modern counterfeit of traditional understanding, the "Great Parody," see René Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity & The Signs of the Times* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1972), Chapters 38 & 39.

are discovered and old theories abandoned. One must keep in mind that a fact that can eventually be disproved is precisely not a fact. Undoubtedly there are many sincere scientists who readily admit that the scientific ideology is based upon hypotheses and not facts; however, we are far from being concerned with the integrity of those for whom science constitutes an expertise, but instead take issue with the scientism that has become the pseudo-religion of our age.

Mathematically speaking, the empiricists attempt to explain the line as a sum of points and, moreover, to explain this in terms of measure. On the one hand, any single point is indefinitely small, and indefinitely large for that matter. Thus the line is made up of an indefinitude of points, which is to say that any attempt to truly know the line by measure is futile. On the other hand, a point, in itself, can not be said to have a quality of magnitude and thus does not lengthen the line of which it is the principle;[7] this again discounts the idea of a purely quantitative measure of the line.[8] Moreover, as noted above, attempts at measure are influenced by the subjectivity of the measurer. If one sets out to understand a line as the sum of its points then one must start at a point. From the first point the next point is considered with respect to this starting point. However, when one moves on to the next point the relationship is changed and the "original" point is no longer the same point, as it now lacks the element of the measurer's experience of it. Hence this method of understanding can never be more than a subjective approximation. This is not to say that an approximation may not have value as a working figure, but simply that the line cannot be "known," in any absolute sense, by measure.

The growth of the modern mindset was solidified with Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*, with the Cartesian plane becoming the basis for modern measurement. With this statement the modern mindset, which can be traced from the Renaissance onwards, was truly born. Descartes' *cogito* signaled a shift in our perceptive start-

[7] This is a point made by Meister Eckhart, *Par. Gen.* prop. 20. See *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, trans. E. Colledge and B. McGinn (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1981), p. 100. See further, Albert the Great, *On Indivisible Lines* 5-6 and, of course, Euclid's *Geometry*.

[8] On the argument against the modern idea of quantitative measure see René Guénon's, *The Reign of Quantity & The Signs of the Times*, Ch. 4.

ing point from the evidentness of the divine Object to the individual recognizing subject. The error of this shift should be obvious. To use a well-known metaphor: it is as if one were to try to see the faculty of sight with the eye. Still, the irrationality of this notion will be apparent only to those who can see beyond empiricism.

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For all traditional peoples, which is to say religious peoples, the starting point is obvious: God Is; Reality Is; Being Is; the Absolute Is. Thus Descartes' famous proposition is, in a sense, an inversion of what should appear obvious: "Being is, therefore I think." Even this is not precise; better to say, "Being is Consciousness." The traditional mind starts from the evidentness of Reality and in the light of this truth is able to understand existence. The modern mind starts from individual existence, with all its subjective prejudices, and from there attempts to construct a reality. The traditional mind is inward looking; it bases itself on one true Center, a Principle, untainted by its effect, from which everything else can be logically deduced. The modern mind is outward looking; it seeks to measure the extent of that which is not only indefinite, and thus immeasurable, but also constantly affected by this act of measuring. At the risk of delving into the modern psyche, one is tempted to say that the empiricists are compelled to continue looking "outwards," regardless of any sense of the futility of this method that they might feel, for they have tied their whole notion of self to this methodology. What has been said regarding the empirical perspective will not change the minds of those who proclaim it; one cannot argue someone into a position of faith. It is enough to show that the empirical method is essentially irrational. We must now turn to the religious or traditional understanding of Reality to determine the logical consistency of this perspective.

God is both Being and Beyond-Being, and this we may call the absoluteness of God. To say that Being is ontologically evident is a pleonasm, but one that is helpful. Similarly, the Absolute is logically evident. Beginning from this position we may explain the universe and the meaning of our existence. Unlike the modern scientific method, this explanation is not a progression outwards into the absurd but, instead, it is like the opening of a multifoliate rose, revealing layers of petals that have been there all along. Within

this unfolding we find the logical place of mystery and the necessity of faith.

While modern science is the science of physics, the *scientia sacra* of traditional understanding is the science of metaphysics.[9] "In metaphysics," says Schuon, "it is necessary to start from the idea that the Supreme Reality is absolute, and that being absolute it is infinite. That is absolute which allows of no augmentation or diminution, or of no repetition or division; it is therefore that which is at once solely itself and totally itself. And that which is infinite is not determined by any limiting factor and therefore does not end at a boundary; it is in the first place Potentiality or Possibility as such, and *ipso facto* the Possibility of things, hence Virtuality."[10] Here we must not make the modern error of confusing the term "infinite," which refers to that which is beyond the finite, with the term "indefinite," which refers to the perpetual extension of the finite. The Absolute, in the full sense of this term, is identical with All-Possibility or the Infinite, and in this it is the Supreme Perfection or the Good. In fact, as Schuon remarks, "there is no need to consider a trinity formed by the aspects 'Good,' 'Absolute,' 'Infinite'; but rather, what ought to be said is that the Sovereign Good is absolute and, therefore, that it is infinite."[11]

All-Possibility, by definition, includes the possibilities of Being and Non-Being. Regarding the idea of "Non-Being" Plato says that "it is really impossible to speak of Non-Being or to say anything about it or to conceive it by itself, but it is inconceivable, not to be spoken of or mentioned, and irrational."[12] Note again that Non-Being is "irrational" only insomuch as it is not commensurate with the rational domain, which exists within the domain of Being. Ontological Potentiality is *a* possibility of the All-Possibility and thus identical in essence if not extent; that is to say, Potentiality is identical to Possibility without limiting Possibility to Potentiality. Similarly, Being is identical with the Absolute without limiting the

[9] On the *scientia sacra* see S.H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981), Ch. 4.

[10] F. Schuon, *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books, 2000), p. 15.

[11] F. Schuon, *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*, pp. 22-23.

[12] *Sophist* 238 c.

Absolute to Being. Thus one talks of the Absolute as "Beyond-Being." Consider this extended analogy: the Absolute is a sea within which there is a glass of water, which here stands for Being. Furthermore, the glass is itself an illusion, its substance being also water; here one might consider the glass as formed of ice, which in substance, if not in state, is still water, and this is to recognize that illusion is a state and not a substance. The water in the glass and the water of the sea are identical in substance but not in extent. One might say that there is a difference or discontinuity in extent of substance but an identity or continuity of essence/substance (*ousia*).[13] The sea is "beyond" the water of the cup in its extent; at the same time it contains and intimately identifies with the water of the cup so that they are not other than each other or, better to say, there is only the Sea.

The Absolute is transcendent Unity.[14] It is that in which all possibilities are equal by virtue of essential identification. In this context one can say that Being and Non-Being are identical, if not the same. At the same time Non-Being is identified with Beyond-Being. In this connection Titus Burckhardt mentions the Islamic term *al-udum*, which expresses on the one hand "the positive sense of non-manifestation, of a principial state beyond existence or even beyond Being, and on the other hand a negative sense of privation, of relative nothingness."[15] "If I say: 'God is a being,'" says Meister Eckhart, "it is not true; he is a being transcending being and a transcending nothingness."[16]

It is the relativity born of Being that allows for the possibility of Non-Being. The illusion of the Relative represents the possibility for Being of not being. Schuon: "It is in order not to be, that Being

[13] As Titus Burckhardt observes, the Greek term *ousia* connotes both substance and essence (*Alchemy* [Baltimore: Penguin, 1974], p. 36, n. 3); this is likewise the case with the Arabic term *'ayn* (T. Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine* [Wellingborough: The Aquarian Press, 1976], p. 62, n. 1).

14 "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord" (*Shema*: *Deuteronomy* 6:4 [5]). This is the supreme and transcendent Unity and not simply the immanent uniqueness of Being. As Clement of Alexandria says, "God is one, and beyond the one and above the Monad itself" (*Paedagogus*, 71, 1). The distinction in the Islamic tradition is that between *al-Wahidiyah* (the Divine Uniqueness) and *al-Ahadiyah* (the Transcendent Unity).

[15] T. Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, p. 126

[16] Meister Eckhart, Sermon 83 in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons*, p. 100.

incarnates in the multitude of souls; it is in order not to be, that the ocean squanders itself in myriad flecks of foam."[17] This is to regard manifestation as a tendency to nothingness, an idea alluded to by Meister Eckhart when he speaks of all creatures as "nothing."[18] On the one hand, creatures are "nothing" in that they have no reality in comparison with the ultimate Reality of the Absolute. On the other hand, creatures have as their substance principial potentiality, that is, by symbolic transposition, the "Divine Nothingness," analogous, at the appropriate level, to the Waters of Genesis.[19] In the Hindu tradition the identification of Being and Non-Being is expressed by the saying: "Form (*rupa*) is emptiness (*sunyata*), and emptiness is not different from form, nor is form different from emptiness: indeed emptiness is form."[20] Again, this is to say with Nagarjuna that, "There is nothing that distinguishes *samsara* from *nirvana*."[21]

Being is both transcendent principle and immanent creation. It is the isthmus, the Islamic *barzakh*, between the Unmanifest and the manifest.[22] Schuon refers to the *barzakh* as "a dividing line between two domains [which] line appears, from the standpoint of each side, to belong to the other side."[23] He adds, "The archetype of the *barzakh* is the half-divine, half-cosmic frontier separating, and in another sense uniting, Manifestation and the Principle; it is the 'Divine Spirit' (*Ruh*) which, seen 'from above' is manifestation, and seen 'from below' is Principle. Consequently, it is *Maya* in both its aspects; the same thing appears, in a certain manner, in the Christian expression 'true man and true God.'"[24] Similarly,

[17] F. Schuon, *Language of the Self* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books, 1999), p. 27.

[18] Meister Eckhart, Sermon 4 in *Meister Eckhart: Sermons & Treatises*, trans. M.O.'C Walshe (Dorset: Element Books, 1987), Vol. 1.

[19] On the notion of "Divine Nothingness" see F. Schuon, *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*, p. 53.

[20] *Maha-Prajnaparamita-Hrdaya*, cited in A. Govinda, *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism* (Maine: Samuel Weiser, 1969), p. 84.

[21] *Madhyamakakarika*, xxv.19-20.

[22] Surah 25, *Al-Furqan*; Surah 55, *Al-Rahman*. On the *barzakh* see T. Burckhardt, *Mirror of the Intellect* (Cambridge, U.K.: Quinta Essentia, 1987), Ch. 19.

[23] F. Schuon, *In the Face of the Absolute* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books, 1988), p. 187.

[24] F. Schuon, *In the Face of the Absolute*, p. 187, n. 1.

Burckhardt remarks that when seen "from the outside" the *barzakh* must necessarily have the definite meaning of "partition" or "separative element" ("an insurmountable barrier") but, that it cannot be merely this for a perspective which applies to it the principle of non-otherness. He continues: "Looking at it in regard to its ontological situation, if one may so put it, it appears as a simple partition only from the point of view of lesser reality, whereas seen 'from above,' it is the very mediator between the two seas ... The *barzakh* is thus separation only in that it is itself the starting point of a separative perspective, in the eyes of which it appears to be a limit."[25] This echoes the Christian doctrine of the *Logos*, both created and uncreated.

The paradox of Being is that of relativity. It is however a paradox that satisfies the logic of the All-Possibility. As Schuon says, "If the relative did not exist, the Absolute would not be the Absolute."[26] This is necessary, which is simply to say that God cannot not be God.[27] Again: "the All-Possibility must by definition and on pain of contradiction include its own impossibility."[28] This is logical but non-rational, for it pertains to a level of Reality that is beyond the rational domain. Being non-rational it allows of no discursive communication; the nature of Being is inexpressible or, if it may be expressed, it is through silence, which is the root meaning of the term mystery.[29] Here is the place of mystery in the logical framework of Reality: it is the inexpressible meeting of the manifest and the Unmanifest. This is not some "uncertainty" shrouded in "fuzziness," but a precise and clear certainty upon which the argument of existence rests.

[25] T. Burckhardt, *Mirror of the Intellect*, pp. 193-94.

[26] F. Schuon, *Language of the Self*, p. 28.

[27] Necessity in no way places a limit on the Absolute. As Schuon says, "Necessity—not constraint—is a complementary quality of Freedom"; he adds, "Liberty is related to the Infinite, and Necessity to the Absolute" (*In the Face of the Absolute*, p. 57). The Absolute is Necessary by definition; the Infinite expresses Freedom by virtue of its Totality, which is to say, by virtue of being Absolute.

[28] F. Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* (London: Perennial Books, 1987), p. 102.

[29] "The word 'mystical' … must be given its root meaning of 'silent,' of a knowledge inexpressible because escaping the limits of form." (M. Pallis, *A Buddhist Spectrum* [London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980], p. 36).

To say Being is to say Relative. To say Relativity is to say relationship (*ratio*) and it is here that the rational faculty comes into play as the means of distinguishing between relativities. Ironically, it is the "fall" into relativity that allows the All-Possibility the opportunity for perfection. Thus Ibn Arabi says, "It is part of the perfection of Being that there is imperfection in it."[30] Being is the possibility of God knowing Himself as "other." In the words of the famous *hadith qudsi*: "I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be known, so I created the creation in order that I might be known." Meister Eckhart: "God cannot know himself without me"; "He hath brought me forth in the image of His eternal fatherhood, that I should also be a father and bring forth Him."[31] "God," says Schuon, "unfolds His possibilities in differentiated mode and He creates man in order to have a witness to this unfolding; in other words, He projects Himself into relativity in order to perceive Himself in relative mode."[32]

The Relative fundamentally comprises something of the Absolute, and this is necessarily so for Relativity to be. As Ibn Arabi says, "Were it not that the Reality permeates all beings as form [in His qualitative form], and were it not for the intelligible realities, no [essential] determination would be made in individual beings. Thus, the dependence of the Cosmos on Reality for existence is an essential factor."[33] Similarly, Schuon says, "if the relative did not comprise something of the absolute, relativities could not be distinguished qualitatively from one another."[34] This "something of the absolute" is Meister Eckhart's "something in the soul that is uncreated and not capable of creation."[35] At the same time the distinguishing qualifications or limitations that allow relativities to be, cannot be themselves absolute: "The Infinite is that which is absolutely without limits, but the finite cannot be that which is

[30] Ibn Arabi, *Al-Futuhat al-Makkiyyah* (*Meccan Revelations*), cited in R.W.J. Austin's introduction to his translation of Ibn Arabi's *The Bezels of Wisdom* (*Fusus al-Hikam*) (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 40.

[31] Meister Eckhart, both citations from W. Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2000), p. 50.

[32] F. Schuon, *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy* (London: World of Islam Festival Trust, 1976), p. 185.

[33] Ibn Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 57.

[34] Schuon, *Language of the Self*, p. 28.

[35] See Sermons 13 & 48, among others.

'absolutely limited,' for there is no absolute limitation. The world is not an inverted God: God is without a second."[36]

Between the Absolute and the Relative there is at once discontinuity and continuity: discontinuity, for there can be no common measure between God and man; continuity, for nothing can be other than God. Schuon: "it might be said that this separation is absolute as from man to God and relative from God to man."[37] The separation between God and man is in fact relative, dissolved by man's realization that he is not other than God. The separation between man and God is absolute inasmuch as man must "die" absolutely to himself to achieve this realization. This is to say that the very individuality that defines a human subject—the point of reference from which the rational faculty measures the world—must be relinquished on the path back to God inasmuch, precisely, as it constitutes the illusion of the "insurmountable barrier" between man and God.

The "path back to God." From the perspective here being considered the Absolute gives rise to the Relative to maintain logical consistency; but this is not enough, for the Relative must also realize its absoluteness to satisfy a logically sound whole. God must know Himself as both Ipseity and other. God created the world in which to know Himself and created man to know this world in its full potential. Thus the meaning of our existence is to "Know thyself"—our final entelechy, the return to our true self in God. In the words of the Fathers, "God became man so that man could become God."

Man is asked to step into the mystery of "unknowing" so as to know in the fullness of identification, a knowledge so utterly without objectification as to imply absence of knowing. Thus, in the Hindu tradition it is said, "*Brahman* is known to him to whom It is unknown, while It is unknown to him to whom It is known. It is unknown to those who know and known to those who do not know."[38] Again: "Although he does not know, nevertheless he knows; he does not know but there is no loss on the knower's part, since he is indestructible; it is just that there is no second thing

[36] F. Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, p. 168.

[37] F. Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, p. 167.

[38] *Kena Upanisad* 2.3.

other than and distinct from himself that he might know."[39] "God," says Erigena, "does not know what He himself is, because He is not any what; this ignorance surpasses all knowledge."[40] This is Nicolas of Cusa's *docta ignorantia*, a term that exactly indicates the "location" of this unknowing as being the *coincidentia oppositorum*, which has its root in the coincidence of Being and Non-Being, the manifest and the Unmanifest.

The human subject must sacrifice itself in an act of faith, which, from the point of view of Creation, will inevitably appear irrational. The human begins, and necessarily so, from the position of illusion. This is the illusion of Creation, of otherness and relationship, comprehended by the rational faculty. To have faith is to know, intellectually or intuitively (and in the final analysis these are one and the same), the Reality. This is to know that there is that which is beyond the rational domain. However this knowledge remains latent or potential until it is fully actualized by the sacrifice of the individualizing and rational self. Thus the rational self must sacrifice itself to something it cannot by definition know. One must step into the void, the place of silence or mystery, without any rational justification for doing so, but in perfect accord with logic.

There can be no dialectical description of mystery, just as there is no rational argument that can bring about faith. The illusion of a purely empirical "answer" can be penetrated but not necessarily removed. For the person afraid of the darkness of the void the illusion of "objective verification" remains a crutch, regardless of its validity. Faith remains its own argument and justification. It need not apologize but remains patiently, to accept those with courage enough to go beyond their limits, to step into the darkness of mystery.

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[39] *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad* 4.3.30.

[40] Erigena, cited in A. Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time, and Eternity* (New Delhi: Sata-Pitaka Series, 1990), Vol. 1, p. 17, n. 48.