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The Perennial Philosophy

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The term *philosophia perennis*, which has been current since the time of the Renaissance and of which neo-scholasticism made much use, signifies the totality of the primordial and universal truths—and therefore of the metaphysical axioms—whose formulation does not belong to any particular system. One could speak in the same sense of a *religio perennis*, designating by this term the essence of every religion; this means the essence of every form of worship, every form of prayer, and every system of morality, just as the *sophia perennis* is the essence of all dogmas and all expressions of wisdom. We prefer the term *sophia* to that of *philosophia*, for the simple reason that the second term is less direct and because it evokes in addition associations of ideas with a completely profane and all too often aberrant system of thought.

The key to the eternal *sophia* is pure intellection or in other words metaphysical discernment. To "discern" is to "separate": to separate the Real and the illusory, the Absolute and the contingent, the Necessary and the possible, *Atma* and *Maya*. Accompanying discernment, by way of comple-ment and operatively, is concentration, which unites: this means becoming fully aware—from the starting point of earthly and human *Maya*—of *Atma*, which is both absolute and infinite.

According to certain Fathers of the Church, "God became man so that man might become God"; an audacious and elliptical formula which we might paraphrase in a Vedantic fashion by saying that the Real became illusory so that the illusory might become real; *Atma* became *Maya* so that *Maya* might realize *Atma*. This is the very definition of Revelation and of the Revealer; of *Dharma* and of the *Avatara*.

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The decisive error of materialism and agnosticism is the failure to see that the daily experiences of our lives are immeasurably below the stature of our human intelligence. If the materialists were right, this intelligence would be an inexplicable luxury; without the Absolute, the capacity to conceive it would have no cause. The truth of the Absolute coincides with the very substance of our spirit; the various religions actualize objectively what is contained in our deepest subjectivity. Revelation is in the macrocosm what intellection is in the microcosm; the Transcendent is immanent in the world,

otherwise the world would not exist, and the Immanent is transcendent in relation to the individual, otherwise It would not surpass him.

What we have said about the scope of human intelligence also applies to the will, in the sense that free-will proves the transcendence of its essential end, for which man was created and because of which man is man; the human will is proportioned to God, and it is only in God and through Him that it is totally free.

One could make an analogous observation in the case of the human soul: our soul proves God because it is proportioned to the divine nature, and it is so by compassion, disinterested love, generosity—and therefore, in the last analysis, by objectivity, the capacity to transcend itself; it is this, precisely, that characterizes the intelligence and the will of man.

And it is in these foundations of human nature—image of the divine nature—that the *religio perennis* has its root.

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The most direct doctrinal expression of the *sophia perennis* is undoubtedly *Advaita Vedanta*, with its notions of *Atma*, of *Maya*, and of *Tat tvam asi*; but this doctrine is also found, in one form or another, even if only sporadically in some cases, in the sapiential esoterisms of all the great religions, and this must necessarily be so in that every normal—and thus intrinsically orthodox—religion is itself an indirect and symbolic expression of the eternal *sophia*.

We quoted above the patristic formula which summarizes Christianity and at the same time expresses the *religio perennis*: "God became man so that man might become God." In Islam, the accent is not on the mystery of Divine Manifestation; it is put on that of Divine Oneness, and so on Divine Reality along with the consequences which this essentially comprises; the fundamental expression of this is the testimony of faith: "There is no divinity (= reality) except the (sole) Divinity (= Reality)." In Islam, what saves is not in the first place the Divine Manifestation; it is the acceptance, by the intelligence, of the Divine Oneness, then the fact of drawing from this all the consequences.

To discern the Real; to concentrate on it, or, more precisely, on so much of it as is accessible to us; then to conform morally to its nature; such is the Way, the only one there is. In Christianity, the Real is as if absorbed—with a view to the salvation of man—by its human Manifestation, Christ; concentration is realized through union with Him and through all the forms of prayer and ascesis that contribute thereto, without forgetting the sacraments which confer the corresponding graces; moral conformity demands humility

and charity, and on this point Christianity cannot be distinguished from any other spiritual perspective, except by the specific sentimental coloration that it gives to these virtues.[1]

As for Judaism, it is peculiar in that it puts the whole emphasis on God as the partner of His Chosen People, the link between the two parties being the Law; one might also say that it is the latter that receives the whole emphasis since it is situated between God and Israel; if Israel is the People of God, God for His part is the God of Israel, the pact being sealed by the Sinaitic Law. The drama between God and His People reflects the drama between *Atma* and *Maya*, with all its ambiguity and all its final glory, from the double point of view of cosmic rhythms and of the Apocatastasis.

Completely different from the Semitic religions, and even from the Aryan religions, is Buddhism, although it itself arose in an Aryan and theistic climate: in this perspective, the Absolute-Infinite does not take the form of an objective divinity that is at the same time transcendent, immanent, and omnipotent, but appears uniquely—at least *a priori*—under the aspect of an inward state which in reality is beyond all imaginable states, being, precisely, the absolute and infinite State. The concept of *Nirvana*, though it is clearly non-theistic, is not for all that "atheistic" since it implies the notion of Absolute, Infinite, and Perfect Reality, which could not be nothingness, except in appearance and in comparison with the world of forms and passions. From another standpoint, *Nirvana* is objectivized in the form of the Buddha, which brings us back to the patristic formula already quoted, and which we might here paraphrase in the following terms: *Nirvana* (the "Divine State") became *Samsara* (= the world) so that *Samsara* might become *Nirvana;* now *Nirvana* become *Samsara* is none other than the Buddha, who is in practice God as Logos or *Avatara*.

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The very expression *philosophia perennis*, and the fact that those who have used it were mostly Thomists, and so Aristotelians, raises the question as

[1] The sacraments, apostolic succession, oral tradition, and the decisions of the first seven councils are essential to Christianity; by more or less rejecting or attenuating these elements, as the case may be, Protestantism seems to have placed itself in a formal position of heterodoxy. But one must not overlook the fact that this movement is the providential result of what we may call a "spiritual archetype", whose laws do not necessarily coincide with outward tradition. Baptism and a fervent piety based on the Bible, on faith, prayer, and morality may suffice for salvation, at least where there are no worldly dissipations; this reservation of course applies to Catholics as well. In any case, one must not accuse original Lutheranism or Calvinism with the faults of the "liberal" Protestantism which followed later, and it is important not to lose sight of the fact that a certain Christian esoterism, namely of Boehme and his line—not forgetting Rosicrucianism—flowered in the climate of Lutheran piety.

to what, in this context, is the value of Greek wisdom, all the more so since it is generally presented as a merely human system of thought. In the first place, by Greek wisdom we mean, not just any philosophy of Classical Antiquity, but essentially Platonism with its Pythagorean root and its Plotinian prolongation; on this basis, one can even accept Aristotelianism, but on the express condition that it is combined—as in the spirit of the Muslim philosophers—with Platonism in the widest sense, of which it is then like a particular and more or less secondary dimension.[2] Then one must take account of the following, which is essential: Greek wisdom presupposes, on the one hand, initiation into the Mysteries and on the other hand the practice of the virtues; basically it pertains to gnosis—to the *jnana* of the Hindus—even when it deals with things that have no connection with knowledge; admittedly, Aristotelianism is not a *jnana*, but it nevertheless derives from a perspective which specifically pertains to this order. Aristotelianism is a metaphysics which made the mistake of opening itself towards the world, towards the sciences, towards experience, but which is no less logically valid for all that, whereas Platonism contemplates Heaven, the archetypes, the eternal values.

If on the one hand the Greek spirit—through Aristotelianism but also and above all through the sophists and the skeptics—gave rise to the aberration of profane and rationalistic philosophy, it also provided—especially through Platonism—elements that were highly useful not only for the various theologies of Semitic origin, but also for the esoteric speculations that accompany them and are superimposed upon them; we should not forget that for certain Sufis, Plato enjoys the prestige of a kind of prophet, and Meister Eckhart calls him "that great priest" who "found the way ere ever Christ was born".

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Situated in a sense at the antipodes of Greek philosophy—and some will doubtless be surprised that we should mention them—are the disparate and highly unequal traditions that can be classed under the epithet shamanism. On the one hand, this traditional current, belated witness of the Primordial Tradition, gave birth to the ancient Chinese religion, then to its two complementary crystallizations, Confucianism and Taoism; it is to this current moreover that all the ancient Mongol religions belong, Shintoism as well as Bön, and the religion of Genghis Khan. On the other hand, this same current

[2] As for Stoicism, one hesitates to bring it into this synthesis, in spite of the interest of its moral idealism, and in spite of the influence that it exerted for this very reason. Its pantheistic immanentism can be viewed either as an intentionally fragmentary perspective exclusively aimed at a heroic morality, or as a heterodoxy pure and simple.

is manifested in the shamanism of the Indians of America, although in very different forms from those it assumes in Asia; but American shamanism has this feature in common with the Asiatic—and it is a feature moreover that characterizes all Hyperborean shamanism—namely that it is founded on the cult of the phenomena of nature and thus on a sort of immanent "pantheism",[3] in other words it envisages virgin nature as the Manifestation of the Divine Principle, and not otherwise.[4]

Obviously, the interest of shamanism does not lie in its abuse of magic and of oracles; it lies in its having its root in virgin nature and in its primordial sense of the sacred, and so in the "primordiality" of its cultic expressions, including the characteristic phenomenon of "autoprophetism", from which, moreover, the function of the shaman derives by exteriorization. The sacred Scripture of shamanism is contained, not in a book, but in the symbols of nature on the one hand and in the substance of the soul on the other, the soul moreover reflecting, and prolonging, the external world; from this it results that if on the one hand the dogmas of this religion are expressed by the signs of surrounding nature, on the other hand the soul has access to the mysteries to the extent that it is capable, morally and ritually, of detaching itself from appearances and entering into contact with its own supernatural essence.[5] All this is true in principle and virtually, and must not make us forget the degeneration of vast sectors of shamanism; but it is not the accidental human facts that matter here, it is the principle envisaged and its fundamental reality.

These survivals of the Primordial Tradition contain a message that is addressed to every man conscious of the human vocation, and this is a con-

[3] We would recall here that "pantheism"—like "polytheism"—is only an error when it is interpreted in a narrowly literal fashion, in accordance with the *Deus sive natura* of Spinoza, but not when the aspect of Manifestation presupposes and includes that of Transcendence.

[4] It is difficult to know for certain—and we have no intention of pursuing this simple question of fact—whether the traditions of the peoples who possess no writing, those of the Africans for example, also pertain to shamanism—not Mongolian of course—or whether they constitute different branches of the primordial current; this is independent of the question of their present-day level.

[5] "Our Sacred Book is Nature", an American Indian told us, "and our reading is Inspiration." It is unnecessary to add that this religion is not a matter of improvisation and is not accessible—integrally and *a priori*—to every man, even if he be Indian especially in the conditions of the present-day world. We may add that Zen rests on the same principle as shamanistic autoprophetism, while on the other hand this principle gives rise in our time to the most pernicious falsifications, in contempt of the most elementary traditional rules. "Look for everything within yourselves", the false prophets tell us, without explaining how, and above all while accepting or creating conditions, which go in exactly the opposite direction; all this despite the warnings of the Logos: "Whoso gathereth not with Me scattereth", and likewise, "Without Me ye can do nothing."

sciousness of the sacred character of the universal sanctuary constituted by virgin nature, which includes the most modest flower as well as the stars; it is also the consciousness of the immanence, in the depths of the heart, of the one and total Revelation. But this truth would in practice be nothing without the following one, which shamanism cannot give us, namely that the *religio perennis*, as integral Doctrine and saving Way, is inherent in the great and intrinsically orthodox traditions of humanity, and that it is in them that one must seek and not elsewhere.

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