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PHILOSOPHIA PERENNIS AND THE SENSUS CATHOLICUS

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> "The wise man will seek out the wisdom of all the ancients,
> and will be occupied in the prophets…"
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> Ecclesiastes 39: 1-5

It is generally assumed that there is no room within Christianity for accepting the concept of *Sanatana Dharma*, or what in the west has been called *philosophia perennis* or *priscorium*. This *Sophia perennis*, to use a phrase preferred by Wolfgang Smith holds that certain metaphysical truths, and hence access to a knowledge of the divine, have always been available throughout history and are to be found within the framework of every valid religious tradition.

First of all it should be clear that such a concept in no way contradicts the principle *Extra eclesia nulla salus* — that outside the Church there is no salvation. If one understands this principle in the way the Church has always understood it, one accepts the fact that there are individuals who, as Saint Pius X put it, belong to the soul of the Church. Such individuals are "invincibly ignorant" of the manifest Church, and certainly before the coming of Christ, the ark of salvation had to take other forms.

It is also necessary to consider history, not as a progressive advance from primitive times to the present "enlightened" era but more realistically as a continuous degeneration from a former golden age. Adam's fall from paradise is a paradigm for understanding the present situation. God did not abandon His creation and Adam found regeneration, and is indeed considered by the Church to be a saint. In ancient days, saving revelation, in accordance with man's more "direct" apprehension of truth, was appropriately more "simple. With each succeeding "fall," God provided more stringent requirements for man to follow if he sought to reverse the process of degeneration, until the time of Moses when the rules required encompassed every aspect of life. This is well reflected in the Sacrifice of Abel, followed by that of Abraham, and finally by that established through the medium of Moses. Yet throughout all this we have the Sacrifice of Melchisedech, renewed once again in Christ.

Such an attitude is not a *carte blanche* for every religion that comes down the pike. If salvation is possible outside of the formal structure of the Church, as must have been the case at least before the coming of Christ, one must remember that one cannot be saved by error. It is Truth alone that saves. And so it follows that salvation comes to us by the Divine Logos which

Logos exists and existed from the beginning of time, for "in the beginning was the Word." [1]

The early Church fathers were faced with the plethora of old religious forms which were degenerate in the extreme. They followed one of two courses. They either declared that Christianity had the fullness of the Truth and that therefore there was no need to look elsewhere, or they held that all truth, no matter where it was found, belonged to the integrity of the Faith, and was therefore to be accepted, absorbed, and embraced. As St. Thomas Aquinas said, quoting St. Ambrose, "all truth, no matter where it is found, has the Holy Spirit for its author." In a similar manner, St. Jerome all but adopted the Buddha's life story and Christianized it as we have in the hagiographical account of St Josephat.

Catholic Saints have recognized this reality throughout the centuries. St. Justus referred to Heraclitus as "a Christian before Christ," and Eckhart spoke of an ancient sage in the following terms: "One of our most ancient philosophers who found the truth long, long before God's birth ere ever there was a Christian faith at all as it is now." St. Thomas of Villenova taught the same doctrine: "Our religion is from the beginning of the world. A great Christian was Abraham; a great Christian was Moses; so also David and all the patriarchs. They adored the same God, believed the same mysteries and expected the same resurrection and judgment. They had the same precepts, manners, affections, desires, thoughts, and modes of life; so that if you saw Abraham, and Moses, and David with Peter and Andrew and Augustine and Jerome, you would observe, in all essential things, a perfect identity."[2] One could multiply such quotations but such serves no purpose as long as the principles are understood.

Against this we seemingly have Augustine's retraction which he wrote at the end of his life in an attempt to correct any misunderstanding that his works might lead to. This Retraction runs as follows: "The very thing that is now called the Christian religion was not wanting among the ancients from the beginning of the human race, until Christ came in the flesh, after which the true religion, which had already existed, began to be called 'Christian.'[3]

A closer examination of this retraction however requires an understanding of its reference. The earlier statement occurs in a passage of *De Vera Religione* (X.19) wherein Augustine explains that "the soul, crushed by the sins which envelope it, would be unable to rise towards the divine realities unless there was found within the human sphere something which would allow man to rise from the earthly life, and to renew in himself the image of God. For this reason God, in his infinite mercy, has established a temporal means by which men may be recalled to

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[1] If it is argued that Christ's descent into "hell" allowed for their salvation, this is only to say that all salvation comes through the Word, which is indeed Christ. As St. Clement of Alexandria taught, Christ himself is Wisdom, and that it was his working that showed itself in the [Old Testament] prophets., and that the same wisdom was taught to the Apostles while He was present in the flesh. Jean Borella puts it well: Christianity being the religion of Christ, is by that very fact the religion of Gnosis (Wisdom) Incarnate, since the Word is the Gnosis of the Father. Now this Gnosis Incarnate is also the preeminent spiritual way: "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life." Jean Borella, "The Gnosis with a True Name" in *The Secret of the Christian Way*. SUNY, 2001T

[2] De. Nat. Virg. Mar. III

[3] This material is taken from an article by Stephen Cross entitled "St. Augustine and the perennial Philosophy" published in Avaloka, Vol VI, Nos 1&2, 1992 (ISBN0890-5541)

their original perfection, and by which God comes to the help of each particular individual and of the human race." St. Augustine then adds: "That is in our times the Christian religion, to know and to follow which is the most secure and certain salvation."

In passing it should be noted that Augustine speaks of the "human race," and not just of the Jewish religion with which of course Christianity has a very close connections. Again, St Justin stated: "God is the Word of whom the whole human race are partakers, and those who lived according to Reason are Christians even though accounted atheists." He included in these, not only Heraclitus, but also Socrates and Abraham.

It was this last sentence that Augustine wished to clarify, explaining that in his retraction he had made use of the term "Christian religion" but had failed to express the reality which lies behind the name. To quote him again, "It is said according to this name, not in accord with the thing itself, of which is the name." To make this even clearer Augustine adds: "When, in fact, following the resurrection and ascension into heaven, the Apostles began to preach and many persons came to believe, it was among the people of Antioch — so it is written — that the disciples were first called Christians. This is the reason why I said, 'That is in our times the Christian religion'; not because in earlier times it did not exist, but because in later times this name was accepted."

And so it is that it is possible for a Catholic to hold to the position usually described as "perennial or universal philosophy." The only requirement is that he hold to it as a Catholic who accepts all the teachings of the Church as encompassed in the traditional Magisterium, and this for the simple reason that if one steps outside the Magisterium and entertains one's own personal opinion as being "true," one contradicts all that the *sanatana dharma* holds sacred.[4]

All this has little to do with the false ecumenism that seems to pervade the atmosphere in our days, an ecumenism that would accept not only Protestantism, but every new age deviation imaginable on — as Vatican II puts it — "on an equal footing." This ecumenical outreach often extends itself to Eastern religions where those responsible have little true knowledge and understanding. For example, many will speak of the Trinity in Hinduism as being represented by the exclamation of *sat chit ananda* — which is perhaps best translated as being, knowledge and bliss — names of God equivalent in Islam to *qudrah, hikmah* and *rahmah*. The Hindu Trinity of Powers consists of the solar Father above, a fiery Son on earth (whence he ascends to heaven), and the Gale of their common spiration. St. Frances of Sales warned against those who speak of other religions without adequate knowledge, and indeed, even for those familiar with their own theological terminology (which is rare among current scholars), would have difficulty in understanding ways of expression foreign to their intellectual world.[5]

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[4] The question of the "infallible" nature of the Magisterium has currently been called into question. However, as Leo XIII stated, for the Magisterium to contradict itself is to declare that Christ has taught error. Clearly however, one can point to many statements with seemingly Magisterial authority currently being promulgated that contradicts prior Magisterial teachings. I discuss this in some detail in an article on my web page Coomaraswamy-catholic-writings.com.

[5] These failings are by no means limited to Christianity. Moslems frequently accuse Christianity of being polytheistic because of their belief in the Trinity, and Hinduism is frequently described as such which is in fact absurd.

And so it is that we as faithful Christians can, and indeed must accept the idea of a *sophia perennis*. Wisdom has always been there, it is Christ, the Word made flesh who opens the door and the Church which gives us access to it.

II

An important consequence follows from the above principles. If there are indeed truths to be found in other religions, these truths may serve to clarify some of the obscurities we encounter within our own. In the words of Thomas Aquinas, they can become "extrinsic and probable proofs" of the truths of Christianity. With this in mind, I offer in what follows a study by Ananda Coomaraswamy on a passage in Isaiah: "*there shall come forth a rod out of the root of Jesse, and a flower shall rise up out of his root. And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him: the spirit of wisdom and of understanding…*"

THE TREE OF JESSE AND ORIENTAL PARALLELS[6]

The chapter on this subject in Arthur Watson's admirable and long awaited monograph on the Early Iconography of the Tree of Jesse (Oxford, 1934) is of particular interest. Let me say in the first place that although the formula appears rather suddenly in Christian art in the eleventh century, I have no wish to demonstrate or even to argue for an Indian or otherwise specifically Oriental origin at that time, my view being rather that we have a single example of the many close parallels between mediaeval Christian and Oriental thought and symbolism which are best understood by an ultimate derivation of both from a common source (of which our earliest knowledge is, perhaps, Sumerian); diversities of formulation representing as it were the dialects of one spiritual tradition common to humanity[7]. From this point of views there is no difficulty in assimilating Isaiah XI, 1-3 to the Vedic texts cited in my Tree of Jesse and Indian Parallels or Sources" (*Art Bulletin*, Vol. XI)[8] without suggesting any derivation of one text from the other. In

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[6] Originally published in Parnassus, Vol. VI, No. 8, January, 1935.pp. 18-19.(Slightly edited)

[7] As an example of this AKC offers the following in a footnote. Natya Sastra, II, 5 (Indian 4th Century) "All the activities of the angels, whether at home in their own places or abroad in the breaths of life, are intellectually emanated; those of men are put forth by conscious effort; therefore it is that the works to be done by men are defined in detail," with (1) Plotinus, Enneads, IVC, 3, 18 "Souls in the Supreme operate without reasoning… all their acts must fall into place by sheer force of their nature," (2) Gregory, Moral. II, "Angels do not go abroad in such a manner as to lose the delights of inward contemplation," (3) St. Thomas, Sum Theol, m I. Q. 112 a. 1. Ad 3 "We give ourselves to action through the sensitive faculties, the action of angel, on the contrary regulates his exterior actions by the intellectual operation alone, " (4) Eckhart I, 5, "Man requires many instruments for his external works; much preparation is needed ere he can bring them forth as he has imagined them… More exalted are the angels, who need less means for their works and have fewer images."

[8] In the Mahabharata (ii, 272, 44 and xii, 207, 13) "As soon as that Eternal Being [Narayana] concentrated thought upon a New Creation of the Universe a lotus flower immediately came into existence from His navel and the four-faced Brahma came forth from that navel-lotus." Narayana is the supreme deity of the later Vedic period and is effectively identical with Brahma. Bearing this in mind, we can recognize the

just the same way Exodus XIV corresponds to Rg. Veda III, 33 and VII, 18 (in both cases the chosen people cross the Waters in chariots, the waters lending themselves to easy passage, while the enemy attempting to follow is destroyed by the returning torrent); and *Genesis*, 1, 2 especially as understood by some mediaeval writers, e.g. Ulrich Emngelberti "the Spirit of God moves over the Waters warming (*fovens*) and forming all things,[9] with *Aitareya Aranyaka*, II, 4, 3 "He glowed upon the Waters and from the Waters that were set aglow a form was born," and ib. II, 2, 1, "He who glows is the Spiritus." Parallels of this sort could be indefinitely multiplied and cannot be accidental.

Certain of the problems can be very profitably envisaged from this point of view. We hold for example that the Vedic Tree proceeding from the navel of Varuna (deity preeminently of the waters), the Mahabharata conception of the Birth of Brahma (and corresponding iconography, the lotus rising from the navel of Narayana, who rests in and upon the Waters), and the Bazaklik representation (in which the lotus-Tree rises directly from the Waters)[10] are all true parallels of the Tree of Jesse, which presents an analogous range of variations and if none of the latter (unless possibly Watson's Pl. II, which in any case exhibits "the tree as having a deeper root than Jesse himself") shows the Waters, the same applies to the Burmese representation (Watson's Pl.. XXXIX) and some others where there is no express indication of the underlying Waters. Needless to say that the Waters stand for potentiality as distinguished from act, and it makes little difference whether the roots of the Tree are represented as outspread in the Waters themselves, or in a Ground, whether anthropomorphic or otherwise, that rests upon or in the Waters; in either case, both Ground and Waters are to be understood. The variety in formulation in this respect appears already in the *Rg.Veda;* in I, 182, 7 "the Tree stands in the midst of the Flood" (this corresponds to the Haoma-tree that is in the midst of Vourukasha, where the *kar*-fish swims, in Zoroastrian tradition, *Bundahis* XVIII, *Yusna* XLII, 4, etc.); in I, 24, 7 "its Ground is above," its oriflames or branches tending downwards, *upari budhna* here, and *urdhva mula* in *Katha Up.,* VI, 1 corresponding to Boccacio's "Genealogical Tree of the Gods" in celum versa, radice cited by Watson, p. 45, and to the *Zohar* passage at the beginning of the section Beha Alotheka, "Now the Tree of Life extends from above downwards, and it is the Sun which

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tradition already in the *Rg. Veda* (x, 82, 5): "Prior to the sky, prior to this earth, prior to the living gods, what is that germ which the waters held first and in which all the gods existed? The waters held that same germ in which all the gods exist/or find themselves; on the navel of the Unborn stood that in which all beings stood." Further, in the *Athara Veda* (x, 7, 38) we have a description of Brahma as "a great Yaksa" in the midst of creation, lying upon the sea in penance, therein are set whatever gods there are, like the branches of a tree round about a trunk." The conception of a tree of life rooted in Brahma recurs also in the *Katha Upanishad* (vi,1): "This eternal fig tree! That [root] is indeed the Pure. That is Brahma." It occurs again in a somewhat different way in the *Bhagavad Gita* (xv, 1-3). That our tree of life, in which all beings are set, should be rooted in a naval, whether of Brahma, Narayana, or Jesse is significant.

[9] De Pulchro, part of the Summa de Bono, see Gramann in Sitz. Bayer, Akad. Wiss. Phil. Kl., 1926 Abb. 5, p. 82. Ulrich Engelbert of Strassbrg died A.D. 1277

[10] It is worth nothing that the two dragons knotted about the "waist" of the fasces, vajra, or "thunderbolt" which in the Bazaklik representation divides the upper from the lower range (and corresponds to the Vedic skamba and Gnostic sthauros that at once divides and connects Heaven and Earth) are reminiscent of the paired dragons or nagas that guard the Tree of Life in a well-known Indus Valley seal, often reproduced, e.g. in my History of Indian and Indonesian Art, Fig. 6, cf Fig 243 in Grunwedel's Altbuddhistische Kultstatten in Chinesich-Turkistan. Parallels in Greek mythology will readily suggest themselves.

illuminates all." Again in the Gupta representation at Deogarth the stem of the lotus that supports Brahma is not directly connected with the navel of Narayana. But rises behind him, and this often happens in the representations of the Tree of Jesse. Still, the connection of the root with the navel is, even correct formulation, and this will be evident, if we reflect that the "stem" after all represents the fruition of the "seed" of Jesse, as is especially evident when the Tree becomes a veritable genealogy, and that the navel according to all ancient traditions both Western and Eastern is the progenitive center and a center in every sense of the word, and as such the starting point of manifestation.

The common significance of the aOcci3ental and Oriental trees becomes most evident when we recall that the rose and the lotus are equivalent symbols, and observe that the Christian *virga,* often hermeneutically assimilated to "*virgo,*" is identified with the Virgin as being the ground of the divine manifestation, just as in Oriental art the lotus is the earth or ground of any such manifestation. When in Western art there are doves on the branches (as in the Dijon MS. Illustration cited by Kingsley Porter, *Art Bulletin*, VII, p. 10, Note 2, cf. the mosaic cross in the fault of the apse of S. Clemente in Rome, where the doves are set in the shaft and arms of the cross which rises from a flower provided with proliferating branches like those of the Jesse Tree) this corresponds exactly to Rg. Veda, I, 164, 21 "There the Fairwings (angels) chant their share of aeviternity," *Brhadaranyaka Up.*, IV, 3,2 where "The Swan, the Golden Person, by the Spirit wards His lower nest," and Dante, *Paradiso*, XVIII, 110, "power that is form unto the nests."

Enough has been said, I think, to prove that the fundamental ideologies underlying the Eastern and Western representations are the same; and where borrowing is improbable, and independent origin unlikely because of the complexity of the symbol itself, the theory of an ultimately common source can hardly be avoided. Mr., Watson remarks that "The difficulty in establishing a relationship between Oriental trees and the Tree of Jesse is that, although we may find striking parallels, it is difficult or impossible to demonstrate connecting links" (p. 65). The same difficulty presents itself if we try to connect Isaiah XI, i-3 with the late mediaeval iconography by documentary links. As to this, we can only say with Andrae (? Berlin 1933, p. 66) that in fact "a formal symbol can remain alive not only for millennia, but…it can spring into life again after an interruption of thousands of years"; and add that, while a symbol as such can survive mechanically in traditional arts for an indefinite period, the transmission of symbols together with that of their metaphysical significance belongs for the most part to oral and initiatory teachings which by their very nature leave no documentary traces; and it is just because of this that symbols and their interpretation so often seem to emerge or reemerge simultaneously at some given moment or in some given place as if from nowhere. In the present case it is not impossible that the transmission of a doctrine of the Tree of Jesse had taken place in Kabbalistic circles; the Zohar (e.g. Vo. V, pp. 203,221; in the Simon and Sperling version) is often most informative as to the Tree of Life or Trees of Life and Death, and that the former is above the latter may be compared with the Bazaklik representation, in which the lotus grounds of the mundane and heavenly levels of being are distinguished by position in the same sense.

The present note is not a review of Watson's monograph and cannot pretend to do justice to it as a whole. Nevertheless, in connection with the Chapter entitled "References in Literature to Relevant Imagery," it seems worth while to cite from St. Bernard, *De Adventu Domini*, II, 4 "From these passages I think it now manifest what is the stem proceeding from the root of Jesse,

and what is the flower on which reposeth the Holy Spirit. For the Virgin Mother of God is the stem, her Son the flower… O Virgin! Stem of the highest, to what a summit thou liftest on high thy holiness! Even to Him that sitteth on the throne, even to the Lord in His majesty…. O true tree… O true tree of life, which alone was worthy to bear the fruit of salvation!" As St. Bernard died A.D. 1153, and the passages cited being taken from a sermon suggest that the theme cannot have been one altogether unfamiliar when the sermon was preached, the text is undoubtedly pertinent to the problem of the iconography; and one may suspect that a thorough search of the patristic literature would yield more material of the same sort. And although of later date, reference may be made to Ecklhart's sermon No. LXI in the Evans version, in which he says "Our philosophers teach that the sun draws the flowers out of the roots through the stem, timelessly wellnigh and too subtly for any eye to follow… Jesse means a fire and a burning; it signifies the ground of divine love and also the ground of the soul. Out of this ground the rod grows, i.e. in the purest and highest; it shoots up out of this virgin soil at the breaking forth of the Son. Upon the rod opens a flower, the flower of the Holy Ghost." That "Jesse means a fire" evidently rests upon some hermeneutic etymology, and one would like to know its source; in any case, there results an assimilation to the Burning Bush, which is a form of the Tree of Life, and for which there are also Oriental parallels. I may be noted that in the Vysehred MS (Watson, p. 83) the *rubus igneus* of Moses *virgula Aaron, porta clausa* of Ezekiel, and *virgula Jessa* are shown on two contiguous pages, and as Watson comments "It is clear that these four subjects have been put together on account of a community of significance."

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