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Some Observations on a Problem of the Afterlife

by

Frithjof Schuon

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The great revelations are at one and the same time, in varying degrees, both total and fragmentary: total by reason of their absolute content or their esoterism and fragmentary by reason of their particular symbolism or their exoterism; but even this exoterism always contains elements which make it possible to reconstitute the total truth. In Islam, for example, one of these elements is the idea, expressed in various ways, of the relativity — or non-eternity — of Paradise and Hell. The Koran mentions the blessed and the damned as abiding respectively in Paradise and Hell "so long as the heavens and the earth endure, except as thy Lord wisheth."[1] The everlastingness in question is thus doubly relative. As regards Paradise we may quote also the saying of the Prophet: "God will say (to the people of Paradise): are ye content? They will answer: wherefore should we not be content, seeing that Thou hast given us what Thou hast not given to any of Thy creation? Then He will say: I will give you better than that. They will say: What thing, O Lord, is better? Then will He say: I will let down upon you My Beatitude and never afterwards shall I be wroth with you."[2] This recalls the verse of the Koran: "Beatitude from God is greater (than Paradise)."[3] Mention must also be made of the saying of the Sufis that Paradise is "the prison of the gnostic" or that it is "inhabited by fools"; and the Koran itself affirms that "everything is perishable but the Face (Essence) of Allah."[4]

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[1] xi, 107-8.

[2] Bukhārī, *Riqaqq* 1.

[3] ix, 72.

[4] xxviii, 88. So also the Gospel: "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my Words shall not pass away" (St Luke, xxi, 33).

The profound meaning of all these allusions is as follows: towards the completion of a major cosmic cycle, in the words of a *hadīth:* "the flames of Hell will grow cold";[5] correlatively, but without there being any true symmetry — for "My Mercy takes precedence over my Wrath"— the Paradises, at the approach of the Apocatastasis, will of metaphysical necessity reveal their limitative aspect, as if they had become less vast or as if God were less close than before; they will experience a sort of nostalgia for the One without a second or for the Essence, for proximity is not Unity and comprises an element of otherness and separativity. Without involving suffering of any kind, which would be contrary to the very definition of Heaven, the aspect "other than God" will manifest itself to the detriment of the aspect "near to God." This will be no more than a passing shadow, for then will come the Apocatastasis whose glory will surpass all promises and all expectation, in conformity with the principle that God never fulfils less than He promises, but on the contrary always more.[6] At the very moment when, perhaps, one of the blessed will ask himself whether he is still in Paradise, the great veil will be torn asunder and the uncreated Light will flood all and absorb all: the "garden" will return to the "Gardener"; Universal Manifestation will be transmuted and everything will be reintegrated within the ineffable Plenitude of the Principle; Being itself, together with its possibilities of creation, will no longer be detached from the indivisible Self; its possibilities will expand into what might be called, notwithstanding a certain inherent absurdity in the expression, the "absolute Substance." This aspect of Paradisal "twilight" reveals itself to the Sufis as a direct consequence of the contingency of the celestial states themselves; it is also implicit in the *Shahādah* — the testimony of Unity — which is the key to discernment between the Absolute and the contingent;[7] it is this discernment which allows them to compare Paradise — or the Paradises — to a "prison"; in other words, they see the effects in the causes and perceive *a priori* the limits of all that is not God, while at the same time, and from another standpoint, they see God through phenomena. On the other hand, the Sufis analogically rejoin the Buddhist perspective when describing the Divine Beatitude as the "Paradise of the Essence," which corresponds directly to Nirvana; the latter is in fact "God" considered from the standpoint of Beatitude and Permanence. All this reveals an important point of contact between the Semitic and Brahmano-Buddhic eschatologies, and illustrates the crucial idea of the "impermanence of all things."

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[5] Abdul-Qādir Al-Jīlānī states in the place of Hell, when it is extinguished, there will spring up a green tree called *Jarjir*, `and the best of the colors of Paradise is green," opposed to the red of fire.

[6] This explains an apparent contradiction in the Koran which, having limited Paradise to "so long as the heavens and the earth endure" immediately adds that Paradise is "a gift which shall not be cut off."

[7] Christianity possesses the same key in this saying of Jesus "There is none good but one; that is, God" (*Nemo bonus nisi onus Deus*) (St Mark x, 18). This sentence contains the whole doctrine of the relationship of the contingent to the Absolute and consequently expresses the non-eternity of created states: Heaven, not being God, could not be "good," it is thus of necessity ephemeral when considered on the scale of the "Lives of *Brahma*" and in relation to "existence."

We have just seen that as the final absorption of the Paradises into the Essence approaches, the aspect of separativity will be accentuated at the expense of the aspect of nearness, at least in a certain measure. The case of Hell — or the Hells — is however analogically inverse, in the sense that they comprise, on the one hand an aspect of remoteness (from God) which is their *raison d'être,* and on the other hand, an aspect of necessity or existence which perforce attaches them to the Will of God, and thus to Reality itself; at the beginning the first aspect will predominate, but the second aspect is bound to be affirmed towards the end of the cycle, and this is precisely the reason for the "cooling"— as the *hadīth* expresses it — of the flames of Hell. God being Love or Mercy — more essentially than Justice or Rigor — his Goodness is included in Existence and in all existential substances, and it will finally take possession of everything that exists. In each thing and in each creature, that which is good is firstly its pure and simple existence, then its deiformity, even the most indirect, and lastly its particular qualities; these positive aspects, without which nothing can exist, will in the end triumph over the negative accidents, and they will do so by virtue of the universal law of equilibrium with its two-fold aspect of wearing out and compensation.[8] Considerations of this kind, whether relating to Heaven or Hell, can only be schematic, and cannot take account of all possible modalities, which in the nature of things are unknown to us; Revelation teaches us directly or indirectly that Paradise and Hell comprise regions and degrees — in both the "horizontal" and "vertical" dimensions[9] —, but the "life" or "movements" in these abodes cannot be penetrated by earthly under-standing, unless it be through rare and fragmentary images. In any case, the metaphysical basis of the whole of this doctrine rests on the most solid of foundations, for it coincides with the very notion of contingency.

Existence necessarily implies particularity and change; this is demonstrated by space and time on the plane of corporeal existence, and by the cosmic cycles on the plane of universal Existence. Existence is, analogically speaking, both a "form" and a "movement"; it is at once both static and dynamic, but at the same time comprises the alternation of unfolding and crystallization; the transmigration of souls has no other meaning.[10] At the summit of universal Existence this "migratory vibration" comes to a stop, because it turns inwards in the direction of the Immutable; there remains only a single movement, a single cycle, that of Paradise, which opens onto the Essence. In God Himself, who is beyond Existence, there is an

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[8] A Hindu text describing the Apocatastasis says that *lamas* will be converted into *rajas,* and *rajas* into *sattva.* In the Apocalypse of St Peter, the risen Christ speaks of the Apocatastasis while at the same time forbidding the disclosure of this doctrine, in order that men may not sin the more; it is indeed only logical that it has not been retained in the general teaching of the church. But in our days the situation is quite different, at least as regards the opportuneness of certain truths, though not as regards the dogmas.

[9] "There are many mansions in my Father"s house," said Christ. St Irenaeus refers to this saying when echoing a doctrine according to which some will enter Heaven, others the earthly Paradise, and others again the celestial Jerusalem; all will see the Savior, but in different manners according to their degree of worthiness.

[10] The meeting point between the monotheistic eschatology and Indian "transmigrationism" lies hidden — in Monotheism — in the concepts of Limbo and Hell, and also in the "resurrection of the flesh," in which the being is not, however, invested with a new individuality.

element which pre-figures Existence, and this is the Divine Life, which the Christian doctrine attributes to the Holy Spirit and which it calls Love; towards this Life converge those existences that are plunged in the light of Glory and sustained by it; and it is this Light, this "Divine Halo," which keeps the Paradises outside the "migratory vibrations" of existences that arc still corruptible. The sage does not strictly speaking emerge from his existential movement — although from the standpoint of the cosmic wheel he does so — but turns it inwards: the movement becomes lost in the Infinite or expands in the "changeless movement" of the "Void."

To identify oneself with movement is to engender movement and therefore change, the series of movements; to identify oneself with pure being engenders being and therefore the interiorization and transmutation of movement, or the cessation of movement in the Immutable and the Unlimited. Desire is movement, and contemplation is being.

Revelation offers truths that are not only explicit but also implicit; it presents both postulates and conclusions, causal ideas and consequential ideas; it cannot escape from reckoning with these consequences concretely once it has provided the keys to them. These keys necessarily imply the corresponding consequences, of which they are as it were the living anticipations. The "totality" of love in Christianity, and the "sincerity" of faith and knowledge in Islam, imply the most decisive metaphysical truths, even though these truths must needs reveal the illusory nature, not of the literal interpretations which are always valid on their own levels, but of these levels themselves. It is for this reason that the criterion of traditional orthodoxy does not necessarily consist in agreement with a particular exoteric thesis, but in agreement with the principle of knowledge or realization by which this thesis is accompanied: he who says "ice" says "water," even if from the point of view of immediate vision — which only counts at a certain level — there is opposition between solidity and liquidity. It is also for this reason that it is absurd to expect from Revelation explicit teachings about every truth; it needs to be explicit in regard to those truths which necessarily concern all men, but it has no cause to be explicit in regard to truths which are neither comprehensible nor necessary to the majority of men, and which should remain in a state of potentiality that only esoterism is called upon to actualize. For example, when the Scriptures proclaim that "God is Love," that implies metaphysically the relativity and even the end of Hell; he who says "relativity," says "limit," and so "end"; but this end derives from a "dimension" that is higher than the reality of Hell; it is not therefore Hell which comes to an end, but the end which does away with Hell. It is as though the dimension of depth were to absorb one of the other two dimensions, or rather both of them at the same time, by dissolving or transmuting the plane surface; neither of the two dimensions would cease to exist in relation to their common plane, it is this plane itself which would cease to exist.