Eye of the Heart is a scholarly journal providing a forum for the exploration of the great philosophical and religious traditions. It addresses the inner meaning of philosophy and religion through elucidations of metaphysical, cosmological, and soteriological principles, and through a penetration of the forms preserved in each religious tradition.

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Notices
Eye of the Heart: A Journal of Traditional Wisdom arises out of the perceived need for an academic journal that recognises traditional approaches to the study of philosophy and religion. There are in fact numerous journals of both philosophy and religion. Those which might be labelled academic tend, on the whole, to approach their subject through the application of contemporary theoretical models and analytical procedures that may well be described as non-traditional, at best. These have their value, but this intellectual weltanschauung does not have exclusive right to academic recognition and worth. The many non-academic publications in this field range from the highly questionable (to say the least) to some of the most exciting and intellectually stimulating works available. Still, even the best of these are rarely allowed the academic recognition they deserve. We hope Eye of the Heart may go some way to addressing this situation.

A few words about the name of this new journal will not be out of place. Our first criterion for choosing a name was that it should be universal. The phrase “eye of the heart” fits this as the quotes from the various traditions on each page of the journal website show. We opted for a name in English, eschewing technical or obscure languages as these might suggest emphasis on either a particular tradition or a linguistic approach. So while Oculus Cordis may have lent a certain esoteric panache or even a scholarly credibility it was, in the end, not true to the inclusivity to which we aspire. Similarly there was debate about the subtitle, A Journal of Traditional Wisdom, the issue being the use of the English word “wisdom,” which has been so tainted by New Age abuse. Again, if we had opted for the Greek sophia we would have saved ourselves some angst. But we have chosen wisdom to remain true to our original idea.

It remains to explain our use of the term “traditional.” Those who know the work of the Philosophy and Religious Studies department here at La Trobe, Bendigo will know that several members—but not all—of the editorial board are sympathetic to perennialism. However, we are not aiming to make a specifically “perennialist” or “traditionalist” journal. In the first place we feel that this niche is well filled by such publications as Sophia: The Journal of the Foundation of Traditional Studies, Sacred Web: A Journal of Tradition and Modernity, Connaissance des religions, and the recently re-released Studies in Comparative Religion. Secondly, as the editor I am keen to
develop the content of *Eye of the Heart* beyond a purely perennialist current, to move beyond the traditions that perennialism is usually associated with, and to open perennialism itself to a wider dialogue. I am well aware that there are many people sympathetic to a traditional study of philosophy and religion, who, at the same time, may have never heard of perennialism, or who may even be hostile to elements that they perceive therein. Our intention with *Eye of the Heart* is to facilitate a forum where a variety of perspectives may be expressed. Our fundamental tenet is that the great philosophical and religious traditions of the world are treated with respect in light of the Reality they express.

In referring to traditional approaches to the study of philosophy and religion, we have in mind two things. Firstly, a general approach that begins from the context of the traditions considered. The main thing here is the acceptance of a Reality as the essential starting point. We should also note the fundamentally symbolic mentality of traditional peoples. The second thing we have in mind, when talking of traditional approaches, are the various methodologies of the traditions as such. For example, *Hermeneia* (Greek), *Nirukta* (Hinduism), *Lectio Divina* (Christian), Kabbalistic practices such as *gematria*, *notariqon*, and *temura*, and the Islamic science of letters, *ilm al-huruf*. It is with these in mind that we have decided to republish some seminal works. These, it is hoped, will go some way to providing the methodological justification for original studies that wish to use these traditional approaches, or may serve to inspire further works on these modes of thought. In this first issue the reader will find Ananda Coomaraswamy’s essay, ‘*Nirukta=Hermeneia,*’ and Professor Pierre Lory’s article on the Islamic science of letters (*ilm al-huruf*), ‘The Symbolism of Letters and Language in the Work of Ibn ‘Arabi,’ both of which are republished here by kind permission. Our second issue will include a new article by Father Michael Casey on the practice of *Lectio Divina*. Fr Casey is the internationally acclaimed author of *Sacred Reading: The Art of Lectio Divina* and *Toward God*. I will let the other articles herein speak for themselves.

Finally may I offer my thanks to all those people who have aided in various ways to getting *Eye of the Heart* on its feet: the editorial advisors, the contributors, and the reviewers. Special thanks are due to Mr Stephen Williams, Production Director of World Wisdom, Inc., for advice and material support and to Mr Graeme Castleman who helped in the task of transferring the republished articles from print text to electronic format and then undertook the painstaking task of proofreading these texts.
Nirukta = Hermeneia*

Ananda Coomaraswamy

Every student of Vedic literature will be familiar with what are called by modern scholars “folk etymologies.” I cite, for example, the Chāndogya Upaniṣad (VIII.3.3), “Verily, this Spirit is in the heart1 (eṣa ātmā hṛdi). The hermeneia (niruktam) thereof is this: ‘This is in the heart’ (hṛdayam), and that is why the ‘heart’ is called ‘hṛdayam.’ Whoever is a comprehensor of this reaches Heaven every day.” Specimens, of course, abound in Yāska—for example, Nirukta V.14, “Puṣkaram means ‘mid-world,’ because it ‘fosters’ (poṣati) things that come to be.2 Water is puṣkaram too, because it is a ‘means of worship’ (pūjākaram), and ‘to be worshipped’ (pūjayitavya). Otherwise, as ‘lotus’ (puṣkaram) the word is of the same origin, being a ‘means of adorning’ (vapuṣkaram); and it is a ‘bloom’ (pūṣyam) because it ‘blossoms’ (puṣpate).” Explanations of this kind are commonly dismissed as “etymological triflings” (J. Eggeling), “purely artificial” (A. B. Keith), and “very fanciful” (B. C. Mazumdar), or as “puns.” On the other hand, one feels that they cannot be altogether ignored, for as the last-mentioned author says, “There are in many Upaniṣads very fanciful explanations … disclosing bad grammar and worse idiom, and yet the grammarians who did not accept them as correct, did not say anything about them”;3 that is, the early Sanskrit grammarians, whose “scientific” abilities have been universally recognized, did not embody these

* [This essay originally appeared in the Viśva-Bhāratī Quarterly, NS II (1936) and concurrently in French in Études traditionelles, XLI (1936); the Addendum which concludes the essay was published in each journal the following year. The current version follows the bibliographical formatting used in Coomaraswamy, Selected Papers: 2 Metaphysics, ed. R. Lipsey (Princeton, 1987). Republished here by kind permission of the estate of Ananda Coomaraswamy and World Wisdom, Inc.]

1 I.e., “within you,” in the sense that “The Kingdom of Heaven is within you.”

2 The space between Heaven and Earth, being and not-being, light and darkness, essence and nature, being precisely the locus, opportunity, and “promised land” of all birth and becoming.

“explanations” in their “grammar,” but at the same time never condemned them.

_Nirukta_ is not, in fact, a part of philology in the modern sense; a hermeneutic explanation may or may not coincide with the actual pedigree of a word in question. _Nirukta_ = _hermeneia_ is founded upon a theory of language of which philology and grammar are only departments, one may even say the most humble departments, nor do I say this without a real and genuine respect for those “omniscient impeccable leviathans of science that headlong sound the linguistic ocean to its most horrid depths, and (in the intervals of ramming each other) ply their flukes on such audacious small fry as even on the mere surface will venture within their danger,”4 and whose advice in matters of verbal genealogy I am always ready to accept. Etymology, an excellent thing in its place, is nevertheless precisely one of those “modern sciences which really represent quite literally ‘residues’ of the old sciences, no longer understood.”5 In India the traditional science of language is the special domain of the _pūrvamāṃsā_, of which the characteristic is that “It lays stress on the proposition that articulate sounds are eternal,6 and on the consequent doctrine that the connection of a word with its sense is not due to convention, but is by nature inherent in the word itself.” When, however, A. A. Macdonell adds to this excellent characterization that “Owing to its lack of philosophical interest, the system has not as yet much occupied the attention of European scholars,”7 he only means that the subject is not of interest to himself and his kind; it is implausible that he should have had in mind deliberately to exclude Plato from the category of “philosophers.” For not only does Plato employ the hermeneutic method in the _Cratylus_—for example, when he says “‘to have called’ (τὸ καλέσαν) things useful is one and the same thing as to speak of ‘the beautiful’ (τὸ καλὸν)”—but throughout this dialogue he is dealing with the problem of the nature of the relation between sounds and meanings, inquiring whether this is an essential or an accidental one. The general

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4 Standish Hayes O’Grady, _Silva Gadelica_ (London and Edinburgh, 1892), II, v.
6 What is meant by the “eternity of the Veda” is sometimes misunderstood. “Eternal” is “without duration,” “not in time” (akāla), therefore ever present. The “eternity” of tradition has nothing to do with the “dating” of a given scripture, in a literary sense. As St. Thomas Aquinas expressed it, “Both the Divine Word and the writing of the Book of Life are eternal. But the promulgation cannot be from eternity on the part of the creature that hears or reads” (_Sum. Theol._ II-I.91.1 _ad_ 2).
7 _History of Sanskrit Literature_ (London, 1900), p. 400.
conclusion is that the true name of anything is that which has a natural (Skr. sahaja) meaning—i.e., is really an “imitation” (μίμησις) of the thing itself in terms of sound, just as in painting things are “imitated” in terms of color—but that because of the actual imperfection of vocal imitation, which may be thought of as a matter of inadequate recollection, the formation of words in use has been helped out by art and their meaning partly determined by convention. What is meant by natural meaning can be understood when we find that Socrates and Cratylus are represented as agreeing that “the letter rho (Skr. r, ṛ) is expressive of rapidity, motion, and hardness.” Cratylus maintains that “he who knows the names knows also the things expressed by them,” and this is as much as to imply that “He who first gave names to things did so with sure knowledge of the nature of the things”; he maintains in so many words that this first giver of names (Skr. nāmadhāḥ) must have been “a power more than human” and that the names thus given in the beginning are necessarily their “true names.” The names themselves are dualistic, implying either motion or rest, and are thus descriptive of acts, rather than of the things that act; Socrates admits that the discovery of real existence, apart from denotations, may be “beyond you and me.”

It is likewise the Indian doctrine (Brhad Devatā i.27 ff., Nirukta i.1 and 12, etc.) that “Names are all derived from actions”; insofar as they denote a course of action, names are verbs, and insofar as someone or something is taken to be the doer of the action, they are nouns. It must not be overlooked that Skr. nāma is not merely “name,” but “form,” “idea,” and “eternal reason.”8 Sound and meaning (śabdārtha) are inseparably associated, so that we find this expression employed as an image of a perfect union, such as that of Śiva-śakti, essence and nature, act and potentiality in divinis. Names are the cause of existence; one may say that in any composite essence (sattva, nāmarūpa), the “name” (nāma) is the form of the “phenomenon” (rūpa) in the same sense that one says that “the soul is the form of the body.” In the state of nonbeing (asat) or darkness (tamas), the names of individual principles are unuttered or “hidden” (nāmāni guhyā, apīcyā, etc.; Ṛgveda passim);9 to be named is to proceed from death to life. The Eternal Avatar himself, proceeding as a child (kumāra) from the

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9 “When names were not, nor any sign of existence endowed with name” (Rūmī, Dīvan, Ode XVII).
unfriendly Father, demands a name, because it is “by name that one strikes away evil” (pāpmānam apahanti, Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa vi.1.3.9); all beings on their way dread most of all to be robbed of their names by the powers of Death, who lies in wait to thieve (krivir nāmāni pravaṇe muṣayati, RV v.44.4). “It is by his deathless name (amartyena nāmnā) that Indra overliveth human generations” (RV vi.18.7). So long as an individual principle remains in act, it has a name; the world of “names” is the world of “life.” “When a man dies, what does not go out of him is ‘name,’ that is ‘without end,’ and since what is ‘without end’ is the Several Angels, thereby he wins the ‘world without end’ ” (Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad III.2.12).

It is by the enunciation of names that a “more than human power” not merely designates existing things correctly but endows them with their being, and the All-maker can do this because He is omniscient of the hidden or titanic names of things that are not yet in themselves; it is by the foreknown names of mediate causes that He does all that must be done, including the creation of all separated beings. For example, RV 1.155.6, “He by the names of the Four [Seasons] has set in motion the rounded wheel [of the Year] that is furnished with ninety steeds”; x.54.4, “Thy titan names, all these, O Maghavan, thou surely knowest, whereby thou hast performed thy mighty deeds”; VIII.41.5, “Varuṇa knoweth the hidden names remote, many a locution maketh he to blossom (kāvyā purū ... puṣyati), even as the light of heaven (dyauḥ, here the Sun, pūsan, savitr, as in V.81.2) bringeth into blossom all kind (puṣyati ... rūpam).” It is by the same token that all words of power are efficacious—for example, Pañcavimśa Brāhmaṇa vi.9.5 and vi.10.3, “By the word ‘born’ (jātam) he ‘brings to birth’ (jījanat).” In saying ‘lives’ he enlivens them that ‘live.’ ”

It is thus by a divine providence that all things are brought forth in their variety: “Varuṇa knows all things speculatively” (viṣvam sa veda varūno yathā dhiyā, RV x.11.1). “All-maker, supernal seer-at-one-glance (samdrk), of whom they speak as ‘One beyond the Seven Prophets,’ who is the only one Denominator of the Angels (yo devānāṃ nāmadhā eka eva), to him all other things turn for information (sampraśnam),” RV x.82.2-3,10 should be

10 It is quite right for us to think of “names as the consequences of things” (Aristotle, as quoted by Dante in the Vita nuova), because our knowledge of things is not essential, but accidental; aspiring to essential knowledge, names are for us a means to knowledge and not to be confused with knowledge itself. But let us not forget that from the point of view of the Creator, Plato’s “more than human power” which was the First Denominator, names (ideas)
read in connection with I.72.3, where the Angels, by their sacrificial service, “obtained their names of worship, contrived their high-born bodies”; to be named—to get a name, in other words—is to be born, to be alive. This denominative creation is a dual act: on the part of the One Denominator, the utterance is as single as himself; on the part of the individual principles, this single meaning that is pregnant with all meanings is verbally divided, “by their wordings they conceived him manifold who is but One” (RV X.114.5). And inasmuch as such a sacrificial partition is a contraction and identification into variety, it must be realized that to be named, while indispensable to wayfaring, is not the goal: “Speech (vāc) is the rope, and names the knot whereby all things are bound” (Aitareya Āranyakā II.1.6). The end is formally the same as the beginning; it is as one “no longer fed by form or aspect (nāmarūpādvimuktah) that the Comprehensor reaches the heavenly Person beyond the yon, knowing the Brahman becomes the Brahman” (Munḍaka Upaniṣad III.2.8-9). “As these flowing rivers tend towards the sea, their name and aspect are shattered, it is only spoken of as ‘sea’ ” (Praśna Upaniṣad VI.5). “The fastidious soul,” as Eckhart says, “can rest on nothing that has name”; “On merging into the Godhead all definition is lost,” and this is also why he says, “Lord, my welfare lies in thy never calling me to mind”; for all of these quotations innumerable parallels could be cited from other Christian as well as from Sūfi and additional Indian sources.

One thus begins to glimpse a theory of expression in which ideation, denomination, and individual existence are inseparable aspects, conceptually distinguishable when objectively considered, but coincident in the subject. What this amounts to is the conception of a single living language, not knowable in its entirety by any individual principle but in itself the sum of all imaginable articulations, and in the same way corresponding to all imaginable acts of being: the “Spoken Word” of God is precisely this “sum of all language” (vācikam sarvanmayam; Abhinaya Darpana 1). All existing languages are partially remembered and more or less fragmented echoes of this universal tongue, just as all modes of vision are more or less obscure refractions of the world-picture (jagaccitra; Svātmanirūpaṇa 95) or eternal mirror (speculum aeternum; Augustine, De

preceded things, which He knew before they were. Already possessed of essential knowledge, for Him to name is the same as to create, from the point of view of the First Mind, “things are the consequences of names.”
civitate Dei XII.29) which, if one knew and saw in their entirety and simultaneity, would be to be omniscient. The original and inexhaustible (aksara) affirmation (OM) is pregnant with all possible meaning; or, thought of not as sound but as “omniform light” (jyotir-visvarūpam, VS v.35), is the exemplary form of very different things, and either way is precisely “that one thing by which when it is known, all things are known” (Mundra Upaniṣad 1.3, Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad 1.4.5). The paternal comprehension and the mother tongue which are, thus, in their identity the first principle of knowledge are evidently inaccessible to empirical observation;11 as long as an individual consciousness can be distinguished as such, an omniscience is inconceivable, and one can only “turn to the One Denominator for instruction” (RV X.82.3)—namely, to Plato’s “more than human power,” to recover lost potentialities by acts of recollection, raising our level of reference by all available dispositive means. The metaphysical doctrine of universal language is, thus, by no means to be thought of as asserting that a universal language was ever actually spoken by any people under the sun; the metaphysical concept of a universal speech is, in fact, the conception of a single sound, not that of groups of sounds to be uttered in succession, which is what we mean when we speak of “a spoken language,” where in default of an a priori knowledge of the thought to be expressed, it

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11 “And thus, as a modern scholar would say, “meaningless to us and should not be described as knowledge” (A. B. Keith’s edition of the Aitareya Āranyaka, Oxford, 1909, p. 42), where, however, it should be borne in mind that the kind of knowledge intended corresponds to Skr. avidyā, as being a relative knowledge or opinion, as distinguished from an ascertainment. [Augustine, Confessions XI.4, “Scientia nostra scientiae tua ecomparata ignorantia est ... Ignorantia divisiva est erratum.”] It is not, as Macdonell pretends, because the theory of an adequate symbolism of sound is devoid of philosophical (or, rather, metaphysical) interest, but because the modern scholar is not interested in principles but only in “facts,” not in truth but only in statistical prediction, that “the [Pūrva Mīmāṃsā] system has not as yet much occupied the attention of European scholars.” The same might be said with respect to any other traditional science.

All tradition proposes means dispositive to absolute experience. Whoever does not care to employ these means is in no position to deny that the proposed procedure can lead, as asserted, to a principle that is precisely aniruktam, no thing and no where, at the same time that it is the source of all things everywhere. What is most repugnant to the nominalist is the fact that, granted a possibility of absolute experience, no rational demonstration could be offered in a classroom, no “experimental control” is possible, very much as cogito ergo sum is to every individual an adequate proof of his own conscious existence, of which, however, no demonstrative proof could be offered to the solipsist because he cannot directly experience the consciousness of another who also claims to be a “person.”
may be “difficult to tell whether it is the thought which is defective or the language which has failed to express it’ (Keith, Aitareya Āranyaka, p. 54).

The assumption more immediately underlying the traditional science of hermeneutics (nirukta) is that there remains in spoken languages a trace of universality, and particularly of natural mimesis (by which, of course, we do not mean a merely onomatopoetic likeness but one of true analogy); that even in languages considerably modified by art and by convention, there still survives a considerable part of a naturally adequate symbolism. It is assumed, in other words, that certain assonances, which may or may not correspond to the actual pedigrees of words, are nevertheless indications of their affinities and meanings, just as we recognize family likeness, both of appearance and of character, apart from the line of direct inheritance. All of which is anything but a matter of “folk etymology”; it is not a matter of etymology at all in the narrowest sense of the word, but rather of significant assonance, and in any case the “folk” tradition is a matter of the “folk” only in respect to its transmission, not its origin; “folklore” and Philosophia Perennis spring from a common source.

To neglect the nirukta is, indeed, to impose upon oneself a needless handicap in the exegesis of doctrinal content. Compare in this connection the more intelligent procedure of “Omikron”: “A further decision led me constantly to consult such ancient lexika and fragments of lexika as were obtainable; for I believed that in these original dictionaries of the Hellenes, the ancient scholars would have given apposite meanings, as well as clues to symbolic and allegoric expression. I paid particular attention to the strange Hermēneia of the old grammarians, supposing that they had good reasons for it, and even for giving, usually, more than one Hermēneia for the same word.”

From an empirical point of view, it can hardly be claimed that the connection of sounds with meanings has been seriously investigated in modern times; we have the word of Macdonell that “the system has not much occupied the attention of European scholars.” Even if such investigations had been made, with indefinite or negative results, it would

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12 “For example, we do not mean to imply that as between the words Agmus and Ignis (Latin equivalent of Agni) there is anything more than one of those phonetic similarities to which we referred above, which very likely do not correspond to a line of linguistic descent, but are not therefore to be regarded as purely accidental” (René Guénon, L’Esotérisme de Dante, Paris, 1925, p. 92, n. 2).
still hold that hermeneia (nirukta) as actually employed by ancient authors presents us with an invaluable aid to the understanding of what was actually intended by the verbal symbols that are thus elucidated. The words of Scripture are for the most part highly technical and pregnant with many meanings on various levels of reference, so that even the nominalist should feel himself indebted to the hermeneutist from a semantic point of view.

**NIRUKTA = HERMENEIA: ADDENDUM**

In the preceding article, I described the Oṃkāra as the “sum of all language” (vācikāṃ sarvaṇmayam), and “that one thing by which when it is known, all things are known.” There is a remarkable text exactly to this effect in Chāndogya Upaniṣad II.23.3, “As all the leaves [of a book] are pinned together by a spike (śaṅkūṇā), so all speech (sāvā vāc) is pinned together by the Oṃkāra; verily, the Oṃkāra is all this, the Oṃkāra verily [is] all this”; and for this, too, there is a striking parallel in Dante (Paradiso XXXIII.85-92): “Within its depths I saw ingathered, bound by love in one volume, the scattered leaves of all the universe ... after such fashion that what I tell of is one simple flame. The universal form of this complex I think that I beheld.” The parallel is all the closer because in the first case the universal form is that of the eternal sound, in the other, that of the eternal light; for light and sound are coincident in divinis (cf. svar and svara), and just as Dante speaks of “these singing suns” (Paradiso X.76; cf. XVIII.76, “So within the lights the flying sacred creatures sang”), so Jaiminiya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa III.33 has “The Sun is sound, therefore they say of this Sun ‘It is as sound that He proceeds’ (svara eti),” and in Chāndogya Upaniṣad I.5.1, “The Sun is OṂ, for he is ever sounding forth ‘OM.’ ”

Incidentally, the Chāndogya passage cited above, “As all the leaves are pinned together by a spike (yathā śaṅkūṇā sarvāṇi parṇāni samtrāṇṇi),” affords very strong evidence for the contemporaneity of writing with the redaction of this Upaniṣad, for everyone who has seen a South Indian palm leaf manuscript of many leaves held together by a spike passed through one of the string-holes will recognize the aptness of the simile.
Swami Abhishiktananda, Pilgrim of the Absolute*

Harry Oldmeadow

The monk is a man who lives in the solitude (Greek: *monos*) of God, alone in the very aloneness of the Alone... He does not become a monk in order to do social work or intellectual work or missionary work or to save the world. The monk simply consecrates himself to God. (Abhishiktananda)¹

The monk is a man who, in one way or another, pushes to the frontiers of human experience and strives to go beyond, to find out what transcends the ordinary level of existence. (Thomas Merton)²

On the Banks of the Ganga

It is early in the morning, late in June, 1973. We find ourselves on the bank of India’s most holy river, Mother Ganga, a short distance from the Sivananda Ashram of Rishikesh. We notice three men in the river. One is evidently an Indian swami; there is a bearded and elderly European, also clothed in the garb of an Indian renunciate; the third man, another European, is very much younger. Having discarded all his clothing the young man is being plunged under the water as the other two recite strange chants. At the end of what is apparently a religious ceremony in which all three are quite rapt, the young man is enveloped in a fire-coloured cloth, given a bowl and, it seems, told to depart. Who are these people and what are they doing? The Indian is Swami Chidananda, successor to Swami Sivananda at

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* [This article is largely made up of excerpts from *A Christian Pilgrim in India: The Spiritual Journey of Swami Abhishiktananda*, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2008. Many issues which are only touched on here are explored in more depth in the book.]


the nearby ashram which bears his name; the somewhat wild-looking and dishevelled older man—who seems to have fallen into an ecstatic state—is Swami Abhishiktananda, a French Benedictine monk who had arrived in India nearly a quarter of a century earlier; the young man is a French seminarian, Marc Chaduc. They are conducting a “trans-religious” Hindu/Christian initiation ceremony from which the young man will emerge as a *sānyāsī* (“renunciate”) and with the new name of “Swami Ajatananda.”

How did Henri Le Saux, raised in an atmosphere of fervent Catholic piety in a small provincial town in Brittany, come, on this June morning, to be chanting Sanskrit mantras and reciting the *mahāvākyas* (“great sayings”) from the *Upanishads*? Following his arrival in 1949 in the land of the Vedic *rishis* Le Saux undertook an intrepid journey of spiritual exploration. His quest for ‘the secret of Arunachala,’ initiated by his contacts with Ramana Maharshi and glimpsed during his sojourns in the caves of the Holy Mountain, attained its goal in the last years of his life when, in the deepest recesses of the ‘cave of the heart,’ he experienced fully that inner awakening to the mystery of the Self which the Upanishadic sages had extolled millennia before. In his last years he found, too, the resolution of the acute existential tensions arising out of the ‘dual presence’ in his heart of the Christian Gospel and the *Upanishads*.

Abhishiktananda confronted many of the challenges which face the spiritual wayfarer in our own crepuscular era, in particular the problem of religious pluralism and the inter-relations of the world’s integral traditions. Abhishiktananda was immediately concerned with the encounter of Christianity and Hinduism, but his experiences and his ever-deepening reflections on this subject illuminate a range of more far-reaching issues. His life also illuminates the universal and timeless significance of the monastic vocation. In an age when we are surrounded by the clamour of false prophets on all sides spiritual wayfarers can find inspiration (in-the-spirit-ness) in the example of this obscure, humble and immensely courageous French monk. He is one of the spiritual luminaries of our time. This article provides an introductory overview of Abhishiktananda’s life and work.

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3 The use of single quotations throughout indicates Abhishiktananda words.
Early Life and the ‘Irresistible Call’
Henri Hyacinthe Joseph Marie Le Saux was born on August 30, 1910, in St. Briac, a small town on the north coast of Brittany, not far from Saint-Malo.\(^4\) He was the first of seven children born to Alfred Le Saux and Louise Sonnefraud. His parents ran a small grocery business. The last of the siblings, Marie-Thérèse, later to become the confidante to whom Henri sent many letters, was not born until 1930. The young boy breathed in Catholic piety in the very atmosphere of the family home and the early signs that he might be destined for the priesthood were encouraged. At age ten he was sent to the Minor Seminary at Châteaugiron. Three years later his mother nearly died in childbirth. When she fell pregnant again the following year Henri vowed that if she survived he would go ‘even to the most distant mission’ in God’s service—perhaps to follow in the footsteps of an uncle who had gone to China as a missionary a year or two earlier. 1926 saw him enter the Major Seminary at Rennes where, under the influence of a friend who had died, he determined to become a Benedictine monk. His thirst for the monastic life and for God is evident in a letter from the young seminarian to the Novice Master of the Abbey of Saint Anne de Kergonan:

What has drawn me from the beginning and what still leads me on, is the hope of finding there the presence of God more immediately than anywhere else. I have a very ambitious spirit—and this is permissible, is it not? when it is a matter of seeking God—and I hope I shall not be disappointed... I feel an irresistible call.\(^5\)

But the path to the monastery was not without obstacles: parental opposition; the reluctance of the Archbishop; the problem of his compulsory military service. Nor was Henri without his own doubts. But in 1929 he entered the Abbey where he was to remain for the next two decades. In 1931 he made his first profession and soon after completed his military service before returning to the Abbey where he was ordained as a priest in December 1935. He assisted with novices and served as the Abbey librarian, and during these years immersed himself in the Patristical and mystical literature of the Church, especially the Desert Fathers, as well as

\(^4\) On his ordination as a priest in 1935 he also took on the name “Briac” in honour of his hometown.
reading about the spiritual traditions of India. He was particularly taken by the work of St Gregory Nazianzen and his ‘Hymn to God Beyond All Names,’ which struck a theme that was to ‘accompany him all the way till his death’:

You who are beyond all, what other name befits you?  
No words suffice to hymn you. Alone you are ineffable.  
Of all beings you are the End, you are One, you are all, you are none.  
Yet not one thing, nor all things….  
You alone are the Unnameable.⁶

Among his other favourite authors were Athanasius, Cyril of Alexandria and Gregory Palamas.⁷ By 1942, when Le Saux came to write *Amour et Sagesse*, a manuscript for his mother, he was already familiar with some of the Hindu literature and closed each chapter of this work with the sacred syllable OM.

In 1939 he was called up for military service. His unit was captured by the Germans. Whilst his captors were registering the names of the prisoners, Le Saux took advantage of a momentary distraction to slip away and hide in a cornfield. A nearby garage-keeper gave him a pair of workman’s overalls and a bicycle on which Le Saux was able to make his way home where he went into hiding before eventually returning to the monastery. After the war Father Henri taught novices at Kergonan and also served as Master of Ceremonies, a duty he discharged with some relish.

From one of his letters written many years later it seems that he first heard the call of India in 1934, by which time he was already feeling ‘deep dissatisfaction’ with his life at Kergonan.⁸ His dream of a monastic life in India was not to come to fruition for fifteen years, and only after he had worked his way past many obstacles. In 1947 he wrote to Msgr. James Mendoñça, the Bishop of Tiruchirapalli (in South India), stating that he aspired to ‘the contemplative life, in the absolute simplicity of early Christian monasticism and at the same time in the closest possible conformity with the traditions of Indian sannyāsa.’ The Bishop was himself

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⁷ *Letters*, p.7.
Oldmeadow: *Swami Abhishiktananda*

a man of considerable vision.\(^9\) The answer Le Saux was praying for came in a letter written on behalf of the bishop by Fr. Jules Monchanin, thus initiating one of the most important relationships of Le Saux’s life and clearing the way for his momentous passage to India. From Monchanin’s letter:

> Your letter came to me as an answer from God... If you come his Lordship is very willing for us to begin together a life of prayer, poverty and intellectual work. Learn as much English as you can. You will have no objection to a purely vegetarian diet (essential for the life of the *sannyāsī*). You will need unshakable courage (because you will have disappointments), complete detachment from the things of the West, and a profound love of India. The Spirit will give you these three gifts...\(^10\)

**Passage to India**

On July 26, 1948, Abhishiktananda left his homeland, never to return. He was to join Father Monchanin in setting up a Christian Ashram at Kulittalai on the Kavery River, there to achieve his ‘most ardent desire’. Father Bede Griffiths was later to describe an ashram this way:

> An ashram must above all be always a place of prayer where people can find God, where they can experience the reality of the presence of God in their lives and know that they were created not merely for this world but for eternal life.

Furthermore, ‘An ashram is a place which should be open to all such seekers of God, or seekers of Self-realization, whatever their religion or without any religion.’\(^11\)

On arrival in India, via Colombo, Le Saux was captivated by India—by its colour and vitality, its history, its people, its temples and ashrams, but

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\(^9\) As well as supporting the radical experiment proposed by Monchanin and Le Saux, the Bishop made many decisions which, in the context of the times, were courageous and controversial—permitting these priests to don the garb of the Hindu *sannyāsī*, for instance, or encouraging their visits to Ramana Maharshi’s ashram. On the question of visiting Hindu ashrams and the like, see Shirley du Boulay, *The Cave of the Heart: the Life of Swami Abhishiktananda*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 2005, p.64.


above all by the vibrant spiritual life pervading the whole culture. He immediately set about learning Tamil and was able to preach his first sermon in that language on Christmas Day, only a few months after setting foot on Indian soil. He travelled extensively in Tamil Nadu, familiarizing himself with the people, the language, the customs, with all aspects of Hinduism, and with the Indian Church with which he was now associated. He also took on his Indian name, Abhishiktananda (“Bliss of the Anointed One”).

By early 1950 Abhishiktananda and Monchanin were ready to establish their ashram, variously known as Eremus Sanctissimae Trinitatis (Hermitage of the Most Holy Trinity), Shantivanam (Grove of Peace), and Saccidananda Ashram (after the Vedantic ternary Being-Awareness-Bliss). Appropriately enough, the ashram was formally opened on the Feast of St Benedict, 21st March, 1950. Monchanin and Abhishiktananda articulated their agenda:

Our goal: to form the first nucleus of a monastery (or rather a laura, a grouping of neighboring anchorites like the ancient laura of Saint Sabas in Palestine) which buttresses the Rule of Saint Benedict—a primitive, sober, discrete rule. Only one purpose: to seek God. And the monastery will be Indian style. We would like to crystallize and transubstantiate the search of the Hindu sannyāsī. Advaita and the praise of the Trinity are our only aim. This means we must grasp the authentic Hindu search for God in order to Christianize it, starting with ourselves first of all, from within.

In short: Vedantic philosophy, Christian theology, Indian lifestyle. The hope was that ‘what is deepest in Christianity may be grafted on to what is deepest in India’. This was not an exercise in syncretic fabrication but an attempt to fathom the depths of Christianity with the aid of the traditional wisdom of India which, in the monks’ view, was to be found in Vedanta and in the spiritual disciplines of the renunciate. However, whilst India had ‘her own message to deliver,’ it would only be ‘after finding her own

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achievement in Christ, the Truth, the Way and the Life (John 14.6) that she [would] be able to radiate to the world her message, imprinted, by the Word and the Spirit, in the very depth of her own culture.\textsuperscript{15} The bridge between Indian spirituality and the Church was to be monasticism, ‘the plane whereon they may feel themselves in consonance with each other’.\textsuperscript{16} The two monks looked forward to the day when God would send to the hermitage many ‘true sons of India, sons of her blood and sons of her soul’.\textsuperscript{17}

The lifestyle at the ashram was to be thoroughly Indian: meditation, prayer, study of the Scriptures of both traditions, a simple vegetarian diet, the most Spartan of amenities. Each donned the ochre cloth of the \textit{sannyāsī} and lived Indian style—sleeping on the floor, dispensing with almost all furniture, eating with the hands rather than with ‘those strange implements that the West substitutes in a disgraceful way for the natural implements given by the Creator’.\textsuperscript{18} The skimpy bamboo and thatch shelters, their first abode, soon had to be abandoned because the snakes, scorpions and monkeys, perhaps claiming the rights of prior occupation, disturbed their sleep and their meditations.\textsuperscript{19}

Monchanin had alluded earlier to the case of Dom Joliet, a French naval officer in China who became Benedictine in 1897 and waited thirty years to realize his dream of founding a Christian monastery in the Far East. Monchanin had written, ‘Will I someday know the same joy, that in India too—from its soil and spirit—there will come a [Christian] monastic life dedicated to contemplation?’\textsuperscript{20} The dream was not to be fully realized in Monchanin’s own lifetime. On the face of it, the efforts of the French monks were less than successful: it was a constant struggle to keep the ashram afloat; there was little enthusiasm from either European or Indian quarters; there were endless difficulties and hardships; not a solitary Indian monk became a permanent member of the ashram. By the time of Monchanin’s death in 1957 there seemed little to show for the hard years behind them. Monchanin was not able even to realize his desire to die in India as he had been sent to Paris for medical treatment. But the seeds had

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{16} \textit{A Benedictine Ashram}, p.27.
\item\textsuperscript{17} \textit{A Benedictine Ashram}, p.90.
\item\textsuperscript{18} Abhishiktananda quoted in du Boulay, \textit{The Cave of the Heart}, p.63.
\item\textsuperscript{19} See Abhishiktananda, \textit{Swami Parama Arubi Anandam}, pp.18-19.
\item\textsuperscript{20} J. G. Weber, \textit{In Quest of the Absolute}, pp.21-22.
\end{itemize}
been sown. As Bede Griffiths later wrote, ‘It was Monchanin’s vocation not to reach the goal to which he aspired, but to open the way to it for others.’

A decade after Monchanin’s death Father Bede Griffiths and two Indian monks left their own ashram at Kurisumala and committed themselves to Shantivanam. There were to be many difficult years still ahead but Monchanin’s vision finally came to fruition under the husbandry of Bede Griffiths who later wrote of Monchanin’s mission:

The ashram which he founded remains as a witness to the ideal of a contemplative life which he had set before him, and his life and writings remain to inspire others with the vision of a Christian contemplation which shall have assimilated the wisdom of India, and a theology in which the genius of India shall find expression in Christian terms.

There are today something like fifty Christian ashrams in India, owing much to the pioneering efforts of Fathers Monchanin, Le Saux and Griffiths, as well as those of the redoubtable Brahmabandhav Upadhyay (1861-1907), a Bengali Brahmin, pupil of Ramakrishna, friend of Vivekananda and Tagore, and convert to Christianity. Many of these ashrams are peopled entirely by indigenous Christians who seek to live out a distinctively Indian form of Christianity.

The Secret of Arunachala
Abhishiktananda was soon to find himself moving in another direction. The die was cast as early as January 1949 when Monchanin took him to Arunachala, the linga-mountain of Lord Shiva, and to visit Bhagavân Sri Ramana Maharshi, one of the most remarkable saints and sages of modern

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22 Quoted in J. G. Weber, *In Quest of the Absolute*, p.3.
23 Brahmabandhav Upadhyay’s original name was Bhavani Charan Banerji. After entering the Christian fold he boldly proclaimed that he would be ‘the first Indian to sing the praises of the same triune Saccidānanda in the sacred tongues of the rishis.’ In 1894 he became a bhikhu (wandering beggar), wearing the kavi dress of the sannyāsī, but pitching up for worship in Catholic Churches. In 1900, in Hyderabad, Upadhyay established the journal *Sophia* in which he developed his ideas about ‘Christian Vedanta,’ ‘Christian sannyāsa,’ *advaita*, the Trinity, monasticism and an Indian theology—precisely the themes which were to preoccupy Abhishiktananda throughout his years in India. On this remarkable person see E. Vattakuzhy, *Indian Christian Sannyasa and Swami Abhishiktananda*, Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1981, pp.68-73.
times—or, indeed, of any times. So potent was the impact of the Sage and of Abhishiktananda’s several sojourns on Arunachala that by early 1953 he was writing,

Shantivanam henceforth interests me so little. Arunachala has caught me. I have understood silence... Now sannyāsa is no longer a thought, a concept, but an inborn summons, a basic need; the only state that suits the depths into which I have entered...\(^{24}\)

In other words, Abhishiktananda was no longer primarily motivated by the ideal of a monastic Christian witness in India but was now seized by the ideal of sannyāsa as an end in itself. It can fairly be said that from the early 50’s onwards Abhishiktananda’s life was a sustained attempt to live out this ideal.

Although Abhishiktananda’s first sightings of Ramana left him somewhat dissatisfied and with a sense of distaste for the way in which the devotees venerated him, it was not long before the Benedictine felt the mesmerizing darśana of the gentle saint:

Even before my mind was able to recognize the fact, and still less to express it, the invisible halo of this Sage had been perceived by something in me deeper than any words. Unknown harmonies awoke in my heart... In the Sage of Arunachala of our own time I discerned the unique Sage of the eternal India, the unbroken succession of her sages, her ascetics, her seers; it was as if the very soul of India penetrated to the very depths of my own soul and held mysterious communion with it. It was a call which pierced through everything, rent it in pieces and opened a mighty abyss...\(^{25}\)

One can find any number of testimonies of this kind. Monchanin himself wrote of the meeting, ‘I did not for a moment cease to be lucid, master of myself. And I was nevertheless captivated... There is a mystery in this man, who has rediscovered the one essence of Indian mysticism.’\(^{26}\)

Abhishiktananda came to regard Ramana as ‘the most manifest embodiment


\(^{26}\) Quoted in S. Rohde, *Jules Monchanin*, p.33.
in our time of that experience which has been handed down in India from the days of the rishis’. 27 We can juxtapose Abhishiktananda’s words with Frithjof Schuon’s strikingly similar account of the Maharishi’s nature and significance:

In Sri Ramana Maharshi one meets again ancient and eternal India. The Vedantic truth—the truth of the Upanishads—is brought back to its simplest expression but without any kind of betrayal. It is the simplicity inherent in the Real, not the denial of that complexity which it likewise contains... That spiritual function which can be described as the ‘activity of presence’ found in the Maharishi its most rigorous expression. Sri Ramana was as it were the incarnation, in these latter days and in the face of modern activist fever, of what is primordial and incorruptible in India. He manifested the nobility of contemplative ‘non-action’ in the face of an ethic of utilitarian agitation and he showed the implacable beauty of pure truth in the face of passions, weaknesses and betrayals. 28

Abhishiktananda had no real “relationship” with Ramana in the normal sense of the word—for instance, he was never in his presence alone but only as part of a group. His encounters with the Sage were few and rather fleeting and his hopes of more sustained contact were thwarted by Ramana’s passing in January 1950. But assuredly the meeting with Ramana precipitated a series of radically transformative experiences for Abhishiktananda.

In the years following Ramana’s death Abhishiktananda spent two extended periods as a hermit in one of Arunachala’s many caves. He wrote of an overwhelming mystical experience while in retreat on the mountain, an experience of non-duality (advaita), and stated that he was ‘truly reborn at Arunachala under the guidance of the Maharishi,’ 29 understanding ‘what

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is beyond silence: śūnyatā (voidness).’ ‘Ramana’s Advaita is my birthplace. Against that all rationalization is shattered.’³⁰

He who receives this overwhelming Light is both petrified and torn apart; he is unable to speak or to think anymore; he remains there, beyond time and space, alone in the very solitude of the alone. It is a fantastic experience, this sudden irruption of the fire and light of Arunachala.

Ramana and Arunachala alike had, he said, ‘become part of my flesh, they are woven into the fibres of my heart’.³¹

Abhishiktananda’s last extended stay at Tiruvannamalai was in December 1955, one with momentous consequences. During this period, accompanied by his friend Harold Rose, he also visited Tirukoyilur, some thirty miles to the south. From a letter written on Christmas Eve:

I have met... through an unforeseen combination of circumstances, an old Hindu sannyāsī (they say is 120 years old; 70 or 150, what does it matter?), before whom, for the first time in my life, I could not resist making the great prostration of our Hindu tradition, and to whom I believe I might give myself over completely...³²

The “old Hindu sannyāsī” in question was Swami Sri Gnanananda, or to give him the full treatment, Paramahamsa Parivrajacharya Varya Sri Gnanananda Giri Swami, disciple of Paramahamsa Parivrajaāchārya Varya Sri Sivaratnagiri Swami, belonging to the Kashmir Jyotir Mutt Peetam of the lineage of Adi Sankara Bhagavat Pada! Here is Abhishiktananda’s first impression:

He had short legs and his body was half shrouded in an orange dhotī, which left one shoulder bare, while one end was draped over his head. He was unshaven. On his forehead there was no trace of his hundred and twenty years!—only the three lines of ash worn by devotees of

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Shiva and the vermilion mark in the centre. But from this deeply peaceful face shone eyes filled with immense tenderness.33

Interestingly, Abhishiktananda remarks that upon meeting Gnanananda he automatically yielded his allegiance to him, something which he had never previously done.34 Here is his third-person account (in which “Vanya” is Abhishiktananda himself):

[Vanya] had often heard tell of gurus, of the irrational devotion shown to them by their disciples and their total self-abandonment to the guru. All these things had seemed utterly senseless to him, a European with a classical education. Yet now at this very moment it had happened to him, a true living experience tearing him out of himself. This little man with his short legs and bushy beard, scantily clad in a dhotī, who had so suddenly burst in upon his life, could now ask of him anything in the world... 35

Abhishiktananda had spontaneously become a disciple of Gnanananda. In February and March of the following year, at the swami’s invitation, Abhishiktananda returned to his ashram at Tapovanam, there to give himself over to Gnanananda and to experience nearly three weeks ‘which have been among the most unforgettable of my life’ (vividly recounted in Guru and Disciple, one of Abhishiktananda’s most arresting books).36

On the role of the guru, Abhishiktananda wrote this:

The guru is one who has himself first attained the Real and who knows from personal experience the way that leads there; he is capable of initiating the disciple and of making well up from within the heart of the disciple, the immediate ineffable experience which is his own—the utterly transparent knowledge, so limpid and pure, that quite simply “he is.”37

35 Abhishiktananda, Guru and Disciple, p.27.
36 Letters, 14.3.56, p.89.
37 Abhishiktananda, Guru and Disciple, p.29.
This was the function which Gnanananda fulfilled. Abhishiktananda stresses that it was not a question of learning “new ideas” from Gnanananda; insofar as the guru was intellectually important it was in the way in which he enabled Abhishiktananda to understand old ideas anew for ‘what the guru says springs from the very heart of the disciple’. Indeed,

What does it matter what words the guru uses? Their whole power lies in the hearer’s inner response... When all is said and done, the true guru is he who, without the help of words, can enable the attentive soul to hear the ‘Thou art that,’ Tat-tvam-asi of the Vedic rishis; and this true guru will appear in some outward form or other at the very moment when help is needed to leap over the final barrier.38

And so it was with Gnanananda and Abhishiktananda, though perhaps the final barrier was not altogether cleared until Abhishiktananda’s last days.

On the Christian-Hindu Frontier
From the early 50s onwards Abhishiktananda faced a daunting problem: how to reconcile the advaitic insight which Ramana, Arunachala and Gnanananda had ignited with his own deep Christian commitment and his vocation as a priest and a monk. In September 1953 we find him articulating the dilemma in his diary, in all its fully-felt pain:

What does it mean, this agony of having found one’s peace far from the place and form of one’s original commitments, at the very frontiers of Holy Church? What does it mean, to feel that the only obstacle to final peace and ānanda [joy] is one’s attachment to that place, that form, that mythos? Who is there on either side of the frontier to whom I can cry out my anguish—who, if he belongs to this side, will not take fright and anathematize me, and if he is on the other side, will not take an all too human delight because I am joining him?39

He was also troubled in these early years by the failure of his abbot to seek the renewal of his indult of exclaustration (the ecclesiastical authority to live outside his monastery), and thought about going himself to Rome:

38 Abhishiktananda, Guru and Disciple, pp.29-30.
Eye of the Heart: A Journal of Traditional Wisdom

What use would it be to go to Europe? What use in going to Rome in search of ecclesiastical authorization? When Saint-Exupery had lost his way and was flying a course between Orion and the Great Bear, he could laugh a Claudelian laugh when a petty airport official radioed to him that he was fined because he had banked too close to the hangars... So it is with the letters of Fr. Abbot.40

But it was the interior problem which was most acute. He agonized over it for many years—to put his problems before Rome? to abandon his Christian faith? to turn his back on advaita? There was no simple answer and it was not until his last years that the dilemma was fully resolved. Here is one of many tormented cries from his journal: ‘Therefore I am full of fear, plunged in an ocean of anguish whichever way I turn... And I fear risking my eternity for a delusion. And yet you are no delusion, O Arunachala.’41 Nor was his predicament eased by his growing disenchantment with many aspects of the institutional church:

If only the Church was spiritually radiant, if it was not so firmly attached to the formulations of transient philosophies, if it did not obstruct the freedom of the spirit... with such niggling regulations, it would not be long before we reached an understanding.42

He was deeply troubled by the thought that he might be ‘wearing a mask of Christianity, out of fear of the consequences’ (of taking it off).43 Abhishikatananda’s spiritual crisis was at its most intense in the years 1955-56, and was to the fore during his month long silent retreat at Kumbakonan.44

With heroic audacity, Abhishikatananda chose to live out his life on a dangerous religious frontier, neither forsaking the light of Christ nor repudiating the spiritual treasures which he had found in such abundance in India: ‘I think it is best to hold together, even though in extreme tension,

40 Abhishikatananda, The Spiritual Diary, 19.9.53, p.73.
43 Abhishikatananda, The Spiritual Diary, 12.4.1957, p.204.
44 For a detailed account of Abhishikatananda’s inner travail during this period see du Boulay, The Cave of the Heart, Chs 9 & 11.
these two forms of a unique faith until the dawn appears." It was a position which was to cause him much distress and loneliness, and a good many difficulties with some of his fellow Christians—be they ecclesiastical authorities, priests and scholars, or acquaintances—though we should also note that many of his Christian friends, far from anathematizing him, showed a remarkable level of understanding of Abhishiktananda’s predicament, an unwavering love of the man himself and a deep respect for the path he had chosen.

Here is Abhishiktananda in later years, pondering his journey and the two traditions which had nurtured him, both of which he loved profoundly:

Whether I want it or not, I am deeply attached to Christ Jesus and therefore to the koinonia of the Church. It is in him that the ‘mystery’ has been revealed to me ever since my awakening to myself and to the world. It is in his image, his symbol, that I know God and that I know myself and the world of human beings. Since I awoke here to new depths in myself (depths of the self, of the ātman), this symbol has marvelously developed. Christian theology had already revealed to me the eternity of the mystery of Jesus in the bosom of the Father. Later India revealed to me the cosmic wholeness of this mystery... Moreover I recognize this mystery, which I have always adored under the symbol of Christ, in the myths of Narayana, Prajapati, Siva, Puruṣa, Krishna, Rama etc. The same mystery. But for me, Jesus is my sadguru.46

In another letter he wrote this:

It is precisely the fact of being a bridge that makes this uncomfortable situation worthwhile. The world, at every level, needs such bridges. The danger of this life as “bridge” is that we run the risk of not belonging to either side; whereas, however harrowing it may be, our duty is to belong wholly to both sides. This is only possible in the mystery of God.47

He had few companions on this path. Until the Church was much more widely pervaded by contemplative awareness and open to the experience of advaita, ‘...there is only the loneliness of the prophet... and the

46 Letters, 23.7.71, pp.331-2. (Sadguru: “real guru” or, sometimes, “root guru.”)
impossibility of being at one’s ease anywhere except with those few people who have an intuition of this “transcendent” level—like travelling faster than sound, or escaping from earth’s gravity, to use physical metaphors. 48

The Way of Sannyasa
Monchanin’s death in 1957 left Abhishiktananda in charge of Shantivanam and he struggled on with his various duties there as best he could, as if cultivating a piece of land he no longer owned. 49 Towards the end of 1958 he wrote to his friend in France, Fr Lemarié, ‘I no longer have any desire for a monastic institution; it is too heavy a responsibility’. 50 More critical than the burden of responsibility was his growing conviction that ‘the completion in Christ of the mystical intuition of advaita is the fundamental ontological condition for the building up not in statistics, not in masonry, but in reality of the Church in India.’ 51 Increasingly he found himself allured to the holy sites of Hinduism and spent more and more of his time on such pilgrimages and peregrinations. Before his last years in the Himalaya, when he withdrew from the world as far as he was able, he journeyed thousands of miles all over India, always travelling third class—often being able to get in or out of the astonishingly crowded carriages only through the window! Robert Stephens has characterized him as ‘the hermit who could not stay put’. 52 (He refused to fly anywhere as he believed that such a mode of travel was quite incongruous for a sannyāsī vowed to poverty.)

It was not until 1968 that Abhishiktananda formally relinquished the leadership of Shantivanam to Father Bede Griffiths. After this hand-over he never returned. He formalized his Indian citizenship in 1960—he had long been a spiritual citizen—and built a small hermitage on the banks of the Ganges at Gyansu, a tiny hamlet near Uttarkashi, in the Himalayas. Here Abhishiktananda plunged ever deeper into the Upanishads, realizing more and more the Church’s need of India’s timeless message. He also consolidated his grasp of Sanskrit, Tamil and English, and often participated

48 Letters, 5.7.66, p.182.
49 Abhishiktananda uses this image in reference to his former life (The Spiritual Diary, 27.8.55, p.118.
50 Letters, 5.7.66, p.182).
51 Quoted in S. Visvanathan, An Ethnography of Mysticism, p.73.
52 R. Stephens, Religious Experience as a Meeting-Point in Dialogue, p.44.
in retreats, conferences, seminars and the like. How appropriate that most of his books were written here, near the source of the holy river!

It was only in the last few years of his life that he resolved the tension between his Christian commitments and his advaitic experience, becoming ever more firmly convinced that the meeting place of the two traditions was not to be found in any doctrinal or philosophical formulations but in the lived reality of sannyāsa:

Believe me, it is above all in the mystery of sannyāsa that India and the Church will meet, will discover themselves in the most secret and hidden parts of their hearts, in the place where they are each most truly themselves, in the mystery of their origin in which every outward manifestation is rooted and from which time unfolds itself.53

In his journal he wrote of himself as ‘at once so deeply Christian and so deeply Hindu, at a depth where Christian and Hindu in their social and mental structures are blown to pieces, and are yet found again ineffably at the heart of each other.’54 As Frithjof Schuon has remarked,

When a man seeks to escape from “dogmatic narrowness” it is essential that it should be “upwards” and not “downwards”: dogmatic form is transcended by fathoming its depths and contemplating its universal content, and not by denying it in the name of a pretentious and iconoclastic “ideal” of “pure truth.”55

Abhishiktananda never denied or repudiated the doctrines or practices of either Christianity or Hinduism, nor did he cease to observe the Christian forms of worship and to celebrate the sacraments; rather, he came to understand their limitations as religious signs. His own “statements” on doctrinal matters, he said, were to be regarded as ‘no more than working hypotheses’ and as ‘vectors of free inquiry’.56 Religious forms and structures (doctrines, rituals, laws, etc.) were signposts to the Absolute but should

53 Abhishiktananda, Guru and Disciple, p.162.
54 The Spiritual Diary, 30.6.64, quoted in J. M. D. Stuart, ‘Sri Ramana Maharshi and Abhishiktananda’, p.173.
never be invested with any absolute value themselves.\textsuperscript{57} In this insight he again echoes Schuon who writes:

Exoterism consists in identifying transcendent realities with the dogmatic forms, and if need be, with the historical facts of a given Revelation, whereas esoterism refers in a more or less direct manner to these same realities.\textsuperscript{58}

In Abhishiktananda’s writings we can trace a move \textit{away} from all notions of Christian exclusivism and triumphalism, \textit{through} the theology of fulfilment, \textit{towards} the \textit{sophia perennis}, which informs all integral traditions but is bound by none.

All the evidence suggests that Abhishiktananda did indeed undergo the plenary experience and see that Light that, in Koranic terms, is “neither of the East nor of the West.” In communicating that experience, and the knowledge that it delivers, Abhishiktananda freely resorts to the spiritual vocabulary of both theistic Christianity and non-dualistic Hinduism. Take, for instance, passages such as these:

The knowledge (\textit{vidyā}) of Christ is identical with what the \textit{Upanishads} call divine knowledge (\textit{brahmavidyā})... It comprises the whole of God’s self-manifestation in time, and is one with his eternal self-manifestation.\textsuperscript{59}

Step by step I descended into what seemed to me to be successive depths of my true self—my being (\textit{sat}), my awareness of being (\textit{cit}), and my joy in being (\textit{ānanda}). Finally nothing was left but he himself, the Only One, infinitely alone, Being, Awareness and Bliss, \textit{Saccidānanda}.\textsuperscript{60}

In 1971, in his Introduction to the English edition of \textit{Saccidananda}, Abhishiktananda had this to say:

Dialogue may begin simply with relations of mutual sympathy. It only becomes worth while when it is accompanied by full openness... not merely at the intellectual level, but with regard to [the] inner life of the

\textsuperscript{57} Abhishiktananda, \textit{The Secret of Arunachala}, p.47.
\textsuperscript{59} Abhishiktananda, \textit{Guru and Disciple}, p.xi.
\textsuperscript{60} Abhishiktananda, \textit{Saccidananda}, p.172.
Oldmeadow: Swami Abhishiktananda

Spirit. Dialogue about doctrines will be more fruitful when it is rooted in a real spiritual experience at depth and when each one understands that diversity does not mean disunity, once the Centre of all has been reached.\(^{61}\)

Likewise,

Real dialogue will be a purification of each one’s own faith, not indeed in its essence which is pure gold but of the alloy with which it is always mixed. It will be a discovery of unity in diversity and diversity in unity.\(^{62}\)

Abhishiktananda makes an interesting contrast with Monchanin insofar as he gave primacy to his own mystical realization over the theological doctrines to which he was formally committed as a Christian.\(^{63}\) As he somewhere remarked, ‘Truth has to be taken from wherever it comes; that Truth possesses us—we do not possess Truth’, thus recalling St Ambrose’s dictum that ‘All that is true, by whosoever spoken, is from the Holy Ghost.’\(^{64}\) On the basis of his own testimony and that of those who knew him in later years we can say of Abhishiktananda that through the penetration of religious forms he became a fully realized sannyāsī—which is to say, neither Hindu nor Christian, or, if one prefers, both Christian and Hindu, this only being possible at a mystical and esoteric level where the relative forms are universalized. As he wrote in The Further Shore, ‘The call to complete renunciation cuts across all dharmas and disregards all frontiers... it is anterior to every religious formulation.’\(^{65}\)

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\(^{61}\) Abhishiktananda, \textit{Saccidananda}, p.xiii (italics mine).


\(^{65}\) Abhishiktananda, \textit{The Further Shore}, Delhi: ISPCK, 1975, p.27.

Abhishiktananda never figured himself to be anyone special—just a humble monk. As his sixtieth birthday approached, some of his friends canvassed the idea of a special tribute with which to mark the occasion. His response in a letter to one of its proponents:

> The interest that I arouse is restricted to a very limited circle. My withdrawal to the Himalayas perhaps adds a mythical touch to my personality. In any case, I cannot imagine where you have ‘fished up’ this idea of a commemorative volume... it would be a betrayal of all that I stand for, solitude, silence and monastic poverty... nothing else remains for me but to be a hermit for good, not a mere salesman of solitude and monastic life.  

Mother Yvonne Lebeau, with whom Abhishiktananda became friendly at the Sivananda Ashram, has left us with a snapshot of Abhishiktananda in his later years:

> Nothing seemed to vex him; he was always smiling and happy. I treated him as my pal. He was lucid.... He did things without ill-feeling or criticism... He was pure like a child, and strikingly honest.

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John Alter, the son of some friends at the Rajpur Retreat and Study Centre, recorded his impressions of Abhishiktananda in early 1972:

His eyes twinkled. That struck me immediately. His bright, sparkling gaze. And the comical nimbus of white hair. A jester in the court of God... with his disorganized simplicity. The first glance deepened, of course... As the days opened around us, his silence—the sadness which sometimes enveloped him—his spiritual authority and experience—the realism of his instructions—his very real and practical affection for each of us as fellow pilgrims on the long path home—his delight in the day and the moment—enriched and affirmed this first impression. Nothing was denied. At the mouth of the guha Swamiji did know mirth. The encounter deep within the speechless silence of himself did not eclipse or deflate the garrulous human reality... Swamiji knew that paradox, the comical disproportion between advaitic experience and the ordinary, daily world... what he made manifest in his human, often less than royal, way was the vow of ‘insecurity’ he had taken. It was a vow which committed him to an almost unimaginable loneliness. Out of that solitude he returned to us, with a twinkle in his eye.69

Knocking on Heaven’s Door
In his last years Abhishiktananda assumed the role of guru to his only real disciple (using that word in its strict sense), the young French seminarian Marc Chaduc. Abhishiktananda also spent a good deal of time at the Sivananda Ashram in his last years and became a close friend of its ācārya, Swami Chidananda, another who had actualized within himself the light of the Upanishads.

Abhishiktananda’s early advaitic experience at Arunachala and Tapovanam was deepened by further experiences in the two years before his death in 1973. One particular advaitic experience must be noted, as recounted by Marc Chaduc:

It was on the way to Pulchatti that the grace erupted. In these mountains which have sheltered so many contemplatives, overwhelmed by the interior vision, the Father was seized by the mystery of the purely acosmic one who leaves all in response to the burning invitation of God. The blessed one who receives this light, the Father told me, is

69 Quoted in Letters, p.266n.
paralyzed, torn asunder, he can no longer speak nor think, he remains there, immobile outside of time and space, alone in the very solitude of the Alone. Absorbed in this way, the Father relived—lived again—the sudden eruption of the infinite Column of fire and the light of Arunachala...  

One measure of Abhishiktananda’s mystical extinction in Advaitic non-dualism, and the problems this posed for some of his Christian contemporaries (and for all rigidly theistic theologies), is evident in the manuscript of a talk he prepared in the last months of his life:

In this annihilating experience [of Advaita] one is no longer able to project in front of oneself anything whatsoever, to recognize any other “pole” to which to refer oneself and to give the name of God. Once one has reached that innermost center, one is so forcibly seized by the mystery that one can no longer utter a “Thou” or an “I.” Engulfed in the abyss, we disappear to our own eyes, to our own consciousness. The proximity of that mystery which the prophetic traditions name “God” burns us so completely that there is no longer any question of discovering it in the depths of oneself or oneself in the depths of it. In the very engulfing, the gulf has vanished. If a cry was still possible—at the moment perhaps of disappearing into the abyss—it would be paradoxically: ‘but there is no abyss, no gulf, no distance!’ There is no face-to-face, for there is only That-Which-Is, and no other to name it.  

This passage, reminiscent of Eckhart, can take its place amongst the most exalted of mystical commentaries; it also dispels any doubts as to the validity of Abhishiktananda’s own mystical annihilation, called by whatever name.

Early on the morning of June 30, 1973, a small group of people gathered on the banks of the Ganges, close to the Sivananda Ashram at Rishikesh. We have arrived back at the scene at which we started. This lovely ceremony on the banks of India’s most holy river, in the company of his disciple and the Hindu holy man, was to be one of the last formal events of Abhishiktananda’s life.

In the fortnight following he spent three days with Ajatananda in complete isolation, without food, at a Saivite temple at Ranagal, close to

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Rishikesh. James Stuart describes this experience as one of ‘holy inebration’, ‘like that of the keśī (hairy ones) of the Rig-Veda’. Ajatananda wrote of Abhishiktananda at this time:

These were days when Swamiji discovered ever deeper abysses of the soul... The inbreaking of the Spirit snatched him away from himself, and shone through every inch of his being, an inner apocalypse which at times blazed forth outwardly in a glorious transfiguration.

On July 14th, in the Rishikesh bazaar, shopping for groceries before returning to Ranagal, Abhishiktananda was felled to the ground. Mother Yvonne Lebeau, his compatriot and friend from the Sivanananda Ashram, happened to be passing and was able to come to his assistance. He had, in his own words, been ‘brushed by Siva’s column of fire’, an experience he described as his definitive ‘awakening’, his discovery of the Grail, whose physiological accompaniment was a massive heart attack:

Really a door opened in heaven while I was lying on the pavement. But a heaven which was not the opposite of earth, something which was neither life nor death, but simply “being,” “awakening”... beyond all myths and symbols... that coronary attack was only a part, but an essential one, of a whole process of grace.

He wrote in one of his last letters, ‘the quest is fulfilled’. No doubt, in his last days, Abhishiktananda more than once recalled the Upanishadic verse he had quoted so often in his writings:

I know him, that great Puruṣa  
Of the colour of the sun,  
Beyond all darkness.  
He who has known him  
Goes beyond death.  
There is no other way.  

(Śvetāsvatara Upanishad, III.8.)

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72 James Stuart in Letters, p.305.  
73 Quoted in M. Rogers & D. Barton, Abhishiktananda, p.34. (The fact that this kind of language is used indiscriminately about all manner of dubious ‘gurus’ should not blind us to the fact that, in some cases—and this is one—such language is perfectly appropriate.)  
74 Letters, 10.9.73, 311.  
As Confucius said, ‘one who has seen the way in the morning can gladly die in the evening’—but, to his own surprise, Abhishiktananda lingered on for several months, concluding that the only possible reason for this “extension” was the opportunity to share something of his final awakening with his friends. He was taken to Rajpur and thence to Indore to be cared for by the Franciscan Sisters in the Roberts Nursing Home where he found ‘a homely atmosphere, medical attention, suitable food, and all that “for the love of God”.’ In a letter to Ajatananda on October 9th he feels the time is near to abandon this ‘old garment’ and writes to his beloved sister Marie-Therese a fortnight later: ‘When the body no longer responds to the guidance of the spirit, then you understand St Paul’s agonized desire to be relieved of it’. Finally, on December 7th, after a day during which he had spent much time contemplating an icon of Elijah, and with prayerful friends at his bedside, Abhishiktananda crossed to the further shore.

Abhishiktananda, Metaphysics and the Perennial Philosophy

Was Abhishiktananda a metaphysician, a jñānī who had mastered metaphysical doctrines? Had principal and universal truths “incarnated” in his mind? If by this term we mean someone like a Guénon or a Schuon, one who has a clear understanding of trans-religious metaphysical principles whereby both the outer diversity and inner unity of religious traditions can be authoritatively explained, and the various antinomies unequivocally resolved, then we cannot answer the question affirmatively without significant qualifications. Although Abhishiktananda had many of the appropriate credentials, he did not move primarily in the realm of doctrinal intellectuality. This was a matter of spiritual temperament. Throughout his life, he was in the grip of immediate and overwhelming spiritual experiences, and his principal task was the resolution in his own person of the apparent tensions and contradictions between Trinitarian Christianity and Advaita Vedanta. In the course of his struggle to solve this experiential problem Abhishiktananda developed many piercing and profound metaphysical insights—how could it be otherwise for a devotee of the Upanishads, one who had himself plunged into the void of advaita and

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76 Letters, 28.8.73, p.309.
77 Letters, 9.10.73, p.315.
78 Letters, 22.10.73, p.317.
79 See F. Schuon, Spiritual Perspectives, p.11.
thereby developed *viveka*, the power of discriminating between the Real and the illusory? But to be a mystic is not necessarily to be a metaphysician, as history repeatedly demonstrates. Metaphysics requires not only a contemplative and jnanic disposition but a kind of detached and synthetic intelligence which Abhishiktananda, for all his formidable gifts, did not possess. Abhishiktananda’s spiritual genius manifested itself in his *being* rather than in the objectivization of metaphysical doctrine. Put it another way: Abhishiktananda’s medium was not doctrinal intellectuality but ontological realisation (though of course the two often inter-penetrate). In some respects it might be said that Abhishiktananda was essentially a *bhakta* rather than a *jñānī*: *bhakti* ‘is *a priori* not “intellectual”; *bhakti* plumbs mysteries through “being”, not through “intelligence”.’

Nor, in the fullest sense, was Abhishiktananda a traditionalist: traditionalism is above all a metaphysical *theoria*; its leading exponents must therefore be metaphysicians. Abhishiktananda could not strictly be described as a traditionalist or perennialist if by such a term we mean one who self-consciously subscribes to the kind of exposition of the *sophia perennis* given by a Guénon, a Schuon or a Titus Burckhardt. Nonetheless, he shared a great deal of common ground with the traditionalists.

Abhishiktananda came to an ever-deeper understanding of the outer diversity and inner unity of religions. He did not always couch this understanding in quite the vocabulary used by perennialists. But many of his insights are fundamentally the same. Much of his discussion of religion as *nāma-rūpa* (“formulations-structures”) demonstrates his understanding of *both the relativity and the inviolability* of religious forms, even if he did not always accent the latter as heavily as do the traditionalists. Likewise, his writings about *advaita* signal a kind of esoteric insight, even though this was not a term he often used himself—indeed, when he did so it was often in a disparaging sense, referring to what might more properly be called “occultism,” “spiritualism” or “psychism,” according to the case at hand. But there is no gainsaying the fact that Abhishiktananda *did* arrive at an understanding of “the transcendental unity of religions” which traditionalists would call “esoteric” because it is an understanding hidden from the vast majority whose disposition and sensibility are more attuned to the outward and exoteric forms of religion than to the ‘inner mystery.’ Let us state the

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81 See *Letters*, 4.5.64. p.161. The same letter contains his disparaging allusion to Guénon.
matter slightly differently: only those of a contemplative spiritual temperament are able fully to enter the guha, the cave of the heart. It is also perhaps worth recalling that the very name of the Upanishads, the Scriptures in which Abhishiktananda immersed himself, implies an “esoteric” wisdom—‘that which is heard when sitting up close’ (to the guru and to the Scriptures themselves). 82 Perhaps Abhishiktananda took a somewhat sanguine view when he insisted that anyone could enter the guha; this is true in principle, to be sure, but not in fact. To understand this is not be guilty of some sort of “elitism” or spiritual snobbery (an oxymoron in any case!), but simply to recognize palpable realities. By the same token, it bears repeating that a merely theoretical understanding of metaphysics, unaccompanied by the existential “leap into the void” and by a transformative alchemy in the soul, counts for nothing in itself—a principle on which Abhishiktananda had a very firm purchase. It explains much of his impatience with the apparently endless speculations of theologians and philosophers!

A complete and firmly anchored understanding of metaphysical principles would have made Abhishiktananda quite immune to the follies of modernistic thought (whether Eastern or Western). He was unerring in his instinctive certainty that the surest guides on the spiritual path were to be found in the ancient Scriptures, in the saints and sages of yore, and in those living masters who embodied the age-old message of the rishis, quite unaffected by the grotesqueries of profane modernistic thought. However, Abhishiktananda was not altogether invulnerable to the seductive but confused theories and speculations of such figures as Aurobindo (himself prey to all manner of Western influences), Jung and Teilhard de Chardin. Occasionally such thinkers seduced him into foolish and ill-considered formulations. Take this, for instance: ‘Teilhard’s viewpoint—absolutely Pauline—is the only way to save Christianity.’ 83 However, from another point of view it is astonishing that Abhishiktananda was able to maintain his footing in the world of Tradition as well as he did, generally turning his back on modern theorizing in such fields as philosophy, theology and comparative religion. All to his credit! Nonetheless, a fully-fledged metaphysician of the order of a Guénon would have had no interest in such works, save in their symptomatic aspects. Nor for a moment would such a

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82 See The Further Shore, 76.
83 The Spiritual Diary, 19.10.65, p.283.
one have entertained any kind of evolutionist schema, as Abhishiktananda sometimes applied to the development of religion itself—a field in which evolutionism becomes not merely wrong in its claims but particularly sinister in its effects. No doubt there is a certain contradiction, or at least confusion in Abhishiktananda’s belief that the ancient Vedic rishis had unlocked the deepest secrets of the Self and his intermittent adherence to an evolutionistic model of religion. It is true that no religious man of any depth can swallow evolutionism unqualified, in either its biological or sociological-historicist guise. But to even flirt with evolutionist ideas (as Abhishiktananda does, for instance, in Chapters 5 and 6 of Saccidananda) is to betray some confusion about those immutable principles which are flagrantly violated by a pseudo-science which announces that ‘the flesh became Word’—for this, in a nutshell, is what the biological hypothesis amounts to.

How, then, are we to situate Abhishiktananda with respect to the traditionalist school? In many ways Abhishiktananda’s metaphysical intelligence, with all of the qualifications above notwithstanding, was of a rare and precious kind. His thinking was forged in the fiery crucible of his own inter-religious experience and this gives his writings an urgency and existential edge unmatched by the vast majority of contemporary writers on religious and spiritual subjects. If he sometimes falls short in his understanding of both metaphysical principles and religious forms this is hardly surprising. Let us also not forget the truth of these words, from another Frenchman, ‘To know is not to prove, not to explain. It is to accede to vision. But if we are to have vision, we must learn to participate in the object of vision. The apprenticeship is hard.’

In his reflections on René Guénon, Schuon refers to the intrinsically pneumatic or jnanic type in these terms:

The pneumatic is in a way the “incarnation” of a spiritual archetype, which means that he is born with a state of knowledge which, for others, would be precisely the end and the not the point of departure; the pneumatic does not “progress” to something “other than himself,” he remains in place so as to become fully himself—namely his archetype—by progressively eliminating veils or husks,

impediments contracted from the ambience and possibly also from heredity.85

There can be no doubt that both Guénon and Schuon himself were pneumatics in this sense. In other cases, such as that of Ananda Coomaraswamy, one sees in the early work a more or less latent understanding which is suddenly catalyzed by contact with the appropriate stimulus—in his case, the work of Guénon. This is not the sense we get in Abhishiktananda’s work. True, there is a decisive moment, or series of moments, when the moulds in which Abhishiktananda’s thought had been cast were shattered beyond any hope of repair—the encounters with Ramana, Arunachala and Gnanananda. To be sure, Abhishiktananda had been hit by lightning and was not thereafter the same man. Nor was there any possibility of ignoring the illuminations in the cave, the cave of Arunachala being but the symbolic locus of the *guha*. Abhishiktananda was too courageous to countenance the idea of turning back. However, in his case, the transformation from a French priest provincial in both upbringing and outlook to a ‘knower of Brahman’, embodying in his own self the timeless wisdom of the *Upanishads*, was to take up the rest of his life. Nevertheless, his ability to penetrate the religious forms of both West and East, and the progressive elimination of ‘husks’ and ‘impediments’ in order to ‘become fully himself’ does suggest something of the pneumatic. Furthermore, as Barry McDonald has recently suggested, Abhishiktananda’s ‘one-pointed dedication to his quest for the Real points to an extraordinary spiritual station, an experiential immersion in which it is difficult to distinguish between thought and being’.86

To return to the question in front of us, Abhishiktananda’s “relation” to perennialism. My own view, with regard to what is most valuable and vital in Abhishiktananda’s thought, is that more often than not it at least loosely conforms with traditionalist thought. Here is a tiny sample of characteristic formulations which might just as easily have come from the pen of the most thoroughly traditionalist authors:

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86 Personal correspondence with the author. October 2005.
...diversity does not mean disunity, once the Centre of all has been reached.  

Truth cannot be given because it does not belong to anyone...truth is not the object of possession—rather, one can only be possessed by the truth...  

Every dharma is for its followers the supreme vehicle of the claims of the Absolute.  

The mystery to which [religion] points overflows its limits in every direction.  

...what’s important... is to be sufficiently “deep” in order to transcend the letter, which does not mean to “reject” it.  

[Religious] pluralism is a gift of God...  

Real dialogue will be ... a discovery of unity in diversity and diversity in unity.  

He is one of those who, in many respects, is a traditionalist without knowing it, if one might put it that way; he arrived at more or the less same position by a process of trial and error, as it were. It is impossible to believe that he would not have found in the work of Schuon a resounding confirmation of his own deepest intuitions. Recourse to the traditionalist authors might well have saved him much anguish by showing him the way towards a reconciliation of the different spiritual economies which were at work in his soul, sometimes in an agonizing tension. As it was—and perhaps this was part of his special vocation and his singular achievement—he had to find his way through the labyrinth alone, although he was no doubt guided by the grace which accompanies any sincere pilgrim and which came to Abhishiktananda not only through his sadguru, Jesus Christ, His sacraments and His Church, but through Ramana, Arunachala and Gnanananda, as well as through the inseparable companion in whom he put his trust throughout

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87 Saccidananda, p.xiii.  
88 The Further Shore, p.62.  
89 The Further Shore, p.25.  
93 ‘The Depth Dimension of Religious Dialogue’, p.211.
his Indian sojourn, the Upanishads. As he wrote in his journal, ‘The inner mystery calls me with excruciating force, and no outside being can help me to penetrate it and there, for myself, discover the secret of my origin and destiny.’

Abhishiktananda’s Legacy
Abhishiktananda’s life and his writings have touched many people, both in the West and on the subcontinent. We could trace his influence in many fields—the indigenization of the Indian Church, monastic renewal and the revivification of contemplative spirituality, the spread of the Christian Ashram movement, inter-religious dialogue, the fertilization of Christian theology by Eastern influences, the study of comparative religion, and so on. It can hardly be doubted that, in the words of Raimon Panikkar, Abhishiktananda was ‘one of the most authentic witnesses of our times of the encounter in depth between Christian and Eastern spiritualities.’ His ultimate significance, however, rests not on what he did, his outer activities in the world, but on who he was and, we might say, still is. Abhishiktananda might well have said, as Gandhi did, ‘My life is my message’.

If we share Frithjof Schuon’s view that ‘the only decisive criterion of human worth is man’s attitude to the Absolute’, then Abhishiktananda’s life was exemplary. From his youth until his passing he consecrated his life to God—in the full plenitude of that word. His earthly journey was an unfaltering pilgrimage, a return to God Whose centre is everywhere and circumference nowhere. It was a quest which Abhishiktananda undertook with unyielding courage, fortitude and tenacity, leaving behind all that was not conducive to the search for God. As he himself wrote, ‘Spiritual experience... is the meeting-place of the known and the not-known, the seen and not-seen, the relative and the absolute...’. This was no place for the faint-hearted! His spiritual heroism consisted in overcoming his very human fears to make the “leap into the void”; it was his faith which gave him courage, that ‘attachment with the very depths of our being to the

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94 The Spiritual Diary, 19.4.56, quoted in Panikkar, 435.
96 F. Schuon, Spiritual Perspectives, p.22.
97 The phrase is attributed to Hermes Trismegistus (Book of Propositions or Rules of Theology, said to be by the Philosopher Termegistus, prop.2).
98 Abhishiktananda, Hindu-Christian Meeting Point, p.112.
Truth that transcends us’,\textsuperscript{99} and the selfsame faith which motivated his austerities, his renunciation, his allegiance to \textit{sannyāsa}. As Schuon reminds us, ‘Sincere and integral faith always implies renunciation, poverty and privation, since the world—or the ego—is not God.’\textsuperscript{100} By the same token, ‘there is no spirituality devoid of ascetic elements’.\textsuperscript{101}

During one of his silent sojourns on Arunachala, Abhishiktananda was importuned by some pesky boys with questions about his identity. Rather than breaking his silence, he wrote down the following words: ‘Like you, I come from God; like you, it is to him that I am going; apart from that, nothing else matters.’\textsuperscript{102} He found God—or the Self—in the innermost chamber of the lotus in the cave of the heart. But he saw God everywhere: in his \textit{sadguru}, Jesus Christ, in the “call of India,” in his fellows, in the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. Although his life evinces some of the penitential and sacrificial character of the faith in which he was reared, Abhishiktananda’s life was full of joy and a delight in all of God’s creation. Little wonder that he felt such an affinity with the Saint of Assisi.

In an essay on Gandhi, George Orwell observed that all of the Mahatma’s sins and misdeeds, like his worldly goods, added up to a very meagre collection.\textsuperscript{103} The same might be said of Abhishiktananda. His human faults were of a very minor order, perhaps most evident in his sometimes troubled relations with his fellow-monks at Shantivanam—occasional irascibility and impatience, now and then a failure to understand a point-of-view different from his own, a tendency to sometimes make harsh judgements. But these are of very little account next to his generosity and compassion, his openness, warm-heartedness, and good humour, as well as those other character traits to which we have already drawn attention.

As a bridge-builder between the spiritual traditions of West and East the most obvious comparisons are with his fellow monks, Bede Griffiths and Thomas Merton, whilst we may also remember figures such as William Johnston, Klaus Klostermaier and Richard Wilhelm, and the great German theologian and comparative religionist, Rudolf Otto, with whom he shared an understanding of the ‘astonishing conformity in the deepest impulses of

\textsuperscript{99} F. Schuon, \textit{Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts}, p.128.
\textsuperscript{100} F. Schuon, \textit{Spiritual Perspectives}, p.129.
\textsuperscript{101} F. Schuon, \textit{Spiritual Perspectives}, p.131.
\textsuperscript{102} Abhishiktananda, \textit{The Secret of Arunachala}, p.35.
human spiritual experience’, independent of ‘race, clime and age’. These were all Europeans with a deep existential engagement with Eastern spirituality in its various forms. I am inclined to share James Royster’s judgment that ‘It is, in fact, doubtful if any Christian monk in the second half of the twentieth century has taken more seriously than Abhishiktananda the deep call to discover and explore experientially the ultimate ground that unites monks of different traditions.’

In *A Benedictine Ashram* Father Monchanin and Abhishiktananda anticipated the day when Shantivanam might open her doors to the ‘true sons of India, sons of her blood and sons of her soul’,

priests and laymen alike, gifted with a deep spirit of prayer, an heroic patience, a total surrender, endowed with an iron will and right judgment, longing for the heights of contemplation, and equipped, too, with a deep and intimate knowledge of Christian doctrine and Indian thought…

Do we not, in fact, have here a snapshot of Abhishiktananda himself? That he was a man imbued with the deepest “spirit of prayer” is attested by his whole life. His “heroic patience” is evident in his fidelity to the call of India, to his vocation as a monk, to his membership in the Mystical Body of Christ’s Church, and in the attentive equanimity with which he awaited the messages of the Spirit. He had an “iron will,” not in the service of his own ego but in the pursuit of “the one thing necessary” and in his loyalty to Truth. Few men have made a more “total surrender” than this monk who put his hand to the plough and did not look back. As a young man of eighteen, considering his monastic vocation, he had written,

...I feel myself driven by something which does not allow me to draw back or turn aside, and compels me, almost in spite of myself, to throw myself into the unknown which I see opening before me.

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107 *Letters*, 3.6.29, p.4.
Throughout his life he had the courage to defy convention and to surrender to the unknown. Like all mortals he made mistakes but, assuredly, in the things that matter most, he showed “right judgment.” He not only longed for but attained “the heights of contemplation.” He never ceased his prayerful study of the Christian Scriptures, and of the works of the great saints and doctors of the Church of whom he had the most “intimate knowledge” while his understanding of the Indian tradition came through Ramana, Gnanananda and Arunachala, and through his immersion in the tradition’s loftiest and most venerable Scriptures, the *Upanishads*. How much he loved the *Chāndogya* and the *Bṛhadāranyaka*, and what delight he took in sharing their secrets!

Although it was the Sage of Arunachala who exerted such a powerful influence over Abhishiktananda’s life, in some ways it was that other great Indian saint of modern times, Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, who might have served as a spiritual exemplar. Strangely enough, Abhishiktananda seems to have known little of Ramakrishna himself. The only references we find in his books, journals and letters concern some of the more disturbing aspects of the Ramakrishna Mission, founded by the redoubtable Vivekananda against the express wishes of the Master himself. Ramakrishna might have provided an inspiration for Abhishiktananda in at least two respects. Firstly, it was Ramakrishna’s “ontological plasticity” which allowed him to penetrate foreign religious forms in a more or less unprecedented fashion. As Schuon remarks,

> In Ramakrishna there is something which seems to defy every category: he was like the living symbol of the inner unity of religions; he was, in fact, the first saint to wish to penetrate foreign spiritual forms, and in this consisted his exceptional and in a sense universal mission... In our times of confusion, disarray and doubt he was the saint called to “verify” forms and “reveal,” if one can so express it, their single truth.108

No one with any sense of proportion would elevate Abhishiktananda to the quasi-prophetic status of Ramakrishna. But is there not in Abhishiktananda’s life an echo of the Paramahamsa’s mission to “penetrate foreign spiritual forms” and to “reveal” the “single truth” enshrined in the two traditions to which he became heir? Ramakrishna was a Hindu *bhakti*

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who penetrated and “internalized” the spiritual forms of both Christianity and Islam; Abhishiktananda was a Christian monk who plunged into the boundless experience of _advaita_ as extolled in the Vedanta. Secondly, there is some affinity between the bhaktic character of these two spiritual personalities, Ramakrishna and Abhishiktananda, one which is expressed ontologically, in realisation—in their being—rather than intellectually, in the unerring understanding and exposition of doctrinal orthodoxy in both its extrinsic and intrinsic senses.\(^{109}\)

Abhishiktananda lived a life of contemplative spirituality, disciplined by his monastic vocation—a life dedicated to prayer, solitude and silence. Whilst it is true that Abhishiktananda often found himself embroiled in “activities” of one sort and another, he was ever replenishing his soul by drinking from “the waters of silence.” As Schuon reminds us, ‘Love of God, far from being essentially a feeling, is that which makes the wise man contemplate rather than anything else.’\(^{110}\) Abhishiktananda lived a life of prayer, remembering his own words that ‘To pray without ceasing is not so much consciously to _think_ of God, as to act continuously under the guidance of the Spirit...’\(^{111}\) In his war-time memoir Antoine de Saint-Exupéry observes that there is “a density of being” in the monk at prayer: ‘He is never so much alive as when prostrate and motionless before his God.’\(^{112}\) Here indeed, in prayer and contemplation, Abhishiktananda himself attained the full “density of being.”

Abhishiktananda’s life might be considered as the living out of St Basil’s four principal elements of spirituality: _separation_ from the profane world, _purification_ of the soul, Scriptural _meditation_ which infuses the discursive intelligence with Divine Light, and unceasing _prayer_. Schuon formulates these elements in this way: ‘in renunciation the soul leaves the world; in purification the world leaves the soul; in meditation God enters the soul; in continual prayer the soul enters into God.’\(^{113}\) Renunciation, purification, meditation, prayer—the very hallmarks of Abhishiktananda’s vocation, one which recalls the words of Swami Ramdas, another of India’s great saints: ‘a sustained recollection of God, destroying all the distempers of the mind,

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\(^{109}\) On this distinction see F. Schuon, _Language of the Self_, p.1.
\(^{110}\) F. Schuon, _Spiritual Perspectives_, p.157.
\(^{112}\) A. de Saint-Exupery, _Flight to Arras_, p.73.
\(^{113}\) F. Schuon, _Spiritual Perspectives_, p.198.
purifies and ennobles life.”\textsuperscript{114} In the end they brought Abhishiktananda to that wisdom which is the “perfection of faith” and to that peace which “passeth all understanding.”

The Deposition, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.
Golgotha, Athens and Jerusalem
Patristic intimations of the *religio perennis*

Graeme Castleman

And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd. (*John 10:16*)

From the beginning the knowledge of God is the dowry of the soul, one and the same amongst the Egyptians, and the Syrians, and the tribes of Pontus. (Tertullian, *adversus Marcionem*)

Let us not forget that theology comprises necessarily, or nearly so, elements of universality: even while being obliged to affirm that there is “no salvation outside the Church,” it admits nonetheless that Christ can save whom he will, and that there are everywhere souls which belong “invisibly” to the one and only Church.

(Frithjof Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*)

**Introduction**

The first Christian centuries were situated in the context of a resurgent attempt at synthesizing the Jewish and Gentile worldviews. The Maccabean revolt (168–7 BCE) had established a valorous paradigm extolling martyrdom as the “proper” Jewish response to Hellenization.¹ The attempted “universalisation” of the Jewish religion through enforced syncretism had resulted in a religious and nationalistic revival that defended the Jewish identity against further incursions of alien cultures.² The failed syncretism of

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¹ See 2Macc.6:18-7, 42 for examples of such martyrdom.
² As Johnson remarks, ‘it was not enough to halt the old Temple sacrifices—that was welcome to many. The pious Jews had also to be forced to make symbolic sacrifices in the new way, on altars they regarded as pagan. The *hasidim* brushed aside the reformers’ argument that these rituals signified the ubiquity of the one God, who could not be penned into a particular place of human fabrication; to the pious, there was no difference between the new universalism and the old Baal-worship, condemned so many times in their scriptures’ (*A History of the Jews*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1987, p.104).
the high priest Menelaus—including the deliberate violation of the Temple
by the introduction of a statue of Olympian Zeus—had established a
perceived dichotomy and lasting resistance to reform programmes. This
polarization, which occurred almost contemporaneous with Christ, was
represented by the competing tendencies of the Bet Shammai and Bet
Hillel: champions of Jewish exclusivism and monotheistic universalism
respectively. There are numerous other figures who variously inform the
Jewish-Gentile question. From the Gentile camp we have the dualist
Numenius, who famously proclaimed Plato to be an “Atticizing Moses.”

Among Jewish sources Philo Judaeus stands out for the magisterial nature
of his enterprise and his largely successful attempt to straddle two cultures,
while Josephus attempted a similar programme from a politically motivated
perspective.

similar process took place two thousand years later during the so-called “Enlightenment”
when the haskalah sought the reformation of Jewish belief and culture in accord with the
rationalistic thought of the age. That movement too, had its excesses in casting aside aspects
of the Mosaic Law as “superstitious,” conversions to Lutheran Christianity, and the shifting
of the Jewish observance of Shabbat to Sunday to bring it in line with the Christian
observances. Again, these excesses were resisted by a traditionalist reaction and a renewed
call for Jewish purity (see Pelli, ‘The Impact of Deism on the Hebrew Literature of the
Enlightenment in Germany,’ Eighteenth-Century Studies 6, 1, 1972).

3 ‘With their failure, the reformers discredited the notion of reform itself, or even any
discussion of the nature and direction of the Jewish religion. Such talk was henceforth
denounced … as nothing less than total apostasy and collaboration with the foreign
oppression, so that it became difficult for moderates of any kind, or internationally minded
preachers who looked beyond the narrow enclave of Orthodox Judaism, to get a hearing’

4 Johnson: ‘…the original argument between the Sadducees, who admitted only the written
Pentateuch, and the Pharisees, who taught the Oral Law, had by Jesus’ time been
supplemented by a further argument… One School, led by Shammai the Elder took a
rigorist view especially on matters of cleanliness… On the other hand, there was the school
of Hillel the Elder… He brought with him a more humane and universalistic notion of
Torah interpretation. To Shammai, the essence of the Torah lay in its detail; unless you got
the detail exactly right, the system became meaningless and could not stand. To Hillel, the
essence of the Torah was its spirit: if you got the spirit right, the detail could take care of
itself. Tradition contrasted Shammai’s anger and pedantry with Hillel’s humility and

5 Numenius, in The Neoplatonic Writings of Numenius, Lawrence: Selene Books, 1987,
frag.13. Like Philo, Numenius employed the same allegorical methods he used for Homer
(frag.54) with Jewish and Christian Scripture, comprehending its content as a kind of
“philosophical mythology”; see frags.24, 58, and 65. For a discussion on the influence of
Alexandrian Jewish esoterica on Numenius see Quispel, ‘Hermes Trismegistus and the
It is with this world clearly in the foreground that we approach the seminal development of Christianity’s understanding of the “religio perennis.” By religio perennis is designated the perpetual (perennial) economy or function of the divine Wisdom (Sophia), by virtue of which a real salvific or liberating bond (religare, “to bind together”) or covenant is established between heaven and earth. This bond is, in the words of Frithjof Schuon, ‘the descent of the divine Principle which becomes manifestation in order that manifestation may return to the Principle’ and is, moreover, essential to the human condition as such: of the order of grace that is natural to man, what Schuon repeatedly calls the “supernaturally natural.”

It is our purpose to annunciate the Christian synthesis of the early Church Fathers, from whom the conceptual framework of Christian theology unfolded. I have avoided Scripture as a support for this endeavour for two reasons: firstly, it has been done satisfactorily elsewhere; secondly, Christian exclusivists can equally employ Scripture in support of their position, thus reducing the matter to the validity of varying exegetic methods. From an orthodox or traditional point of view it is the Church that establishes the validity of one reading of Scripture over another and so it is to the Church Fathers that we turn. Furthermore, our investigation is confined to the ideas and expositions prior to the conversion of Constantine and the imperial sanction of the Church, because this event, whatever its positive outcomes, led to a certain obscuration of theology under the pressures and temptations of political authority.

Approaching the Fathers one must be careful to recognise that this immense collection of works, stretching over several centuries and from the full expanse of the ancient world, does not form a catechism but rather a corpus not unlike that of Jewish midrash, with a large number of differing views and interpretations presented without comment. The Patristic literature includes heretics, schismatics, scholars, saints and martyrs. As a collection, it presents us with a remarkable witness to those ideas,

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Schuon, Light on the Ancient Worlds, London: Perennial Books, 1965, p. 140 In this phrase Schuon deliberately echoes the Patristic refrain attributed to St Athanasius amongst others: “[God] became man so that we might be made god”—Athenasius, de incarnatione verbe (On the Incarnation of the Word) 54.3; cf. Irenaeus, adversus haeres (Against Heresies) 3.19.


Although of a different literary form: midrash is largely aphoristic, collecting short statements by several authorities on one theme or portion of scripture together; Patristic literature presents extended treatises grouped by author.
expositions, exegeses and teachings that would prove of enduring value to Christianity, as well as those which would wither on the vine. It is important to remember that it includes teachings that have been judged incompatible with the Christian revelation—if not in their explicit content then in their implications—sometimes, as in the cases of Origen and Tertullian, in the same writer. Still, the growth of a genuine tradition, as Titus Burkhardt notes, ‘resembles that of a crystal, which attracts homologous particles to itself, incorporating them according to its own laws of unity.’ In other words it is synthetic, absorbing into its own structure insights, conceptual frameworks, and practices that are compatible with it while protecting itself against those which are not. It is the integrity of the whole that is at issue and the need to adhere to its own unity that would inform the unfolding of the Christian Revelation, surpassing the individualities of the Church Fathers in the unfolding of the whole. It is our contention here, and our purpose to demonstrate, that the *religio perennis* (although not named as such) is not only current amongst the ante-Nicene Fathers but essential to an orthodox vision of Christ and Christianity.

**Who has spoken through the prophets…?**

And God said “Let us make man.” Does not the light of theology shine, in these words, as through windows; and does not the second Person show Himself in a mystical way, without yet manifesting Himself until the great day? Where is the Jew who resisted the truth and pretended that God was speaking to Himself?  

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10 St. Basil, *In Hexaemeron* 9.6. For the sake of convenience and for the ease of the general reader, references to the Church Fathers follow the translations and numbering system of the American Editions of Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans); Philip Shaff, ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Series I*, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans); and Philip Shaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Series II*, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans). While these editions are not always the best translations, nor reflective of more recent critical editions of the texts, they have the virtue of being readily available in libraries and online. In instances where the translations (or the text upon which the translations are based) is insufficient for the purposes of this paper, I have noted such and retranslated as required.
Ignatius of Antioch and Marcion of Sinope

Ignatius of Antioch (c.35–c.107), on his way to martyrdom in Rome, warned the Magnesians: ‘Be not deceived with strange doctrines, nor with old fables, which are unprofitable. For if we still live according to the Jewish law, we acknowledge that we have not received grace.’ As the longer version\(^\text{11}\) makes clear in a reference to 2 Corinthians, ‘Old things are passed away: behold, all things have become new.’ As a result ‘those who were brought up in the ancient order of things have come to the possession of a new hope, no longer observing the Sabbath, but living in the observance of the Lord’s Day.’\(^\text{12}\)

Ignatius criticises those who would recognise Christ yet abide by the Mosaic Law, writing:

\[
\ldots \text{let us learn to live according to the principles of Christianity. \ldots Lay aside, therefore, the evil, the old, the sour leaven, and be ye changed into the new leaven, which is Jesus Christ. \ldots It is absurd to profess Christ Jesus, and to Judaize. For Christianity did not embrace Judaism, but Judaism Christianity, } \left[ \chiρστιανισμός \ οὐκ \ εἰς \ Ιουδαϊσμόν }\right. \\
\left. \ επίστευσεν, \ άλλ } \ Ιουδαϊσμός \ εἰς \ χριστιανισμόν \right]^{\text{13}}
\]

The longer version gives:

\[
\text{It is absurd to speak of Jesus Christ with the tongue, and to cherish in the mind a Judaism which has now come to an end [παύσθέντα]. For where there is Christianity there cannot be Judaism.}
\]

The choice of words is instructive. Judaism does not end in the sense of having achieved a completion or perfection (τέλος) but simply stops, is silenced, or even negated (παύω).\(^\text{14}\) Ignatius perceived a radical discontinuity

\[^{11}\] The authenticity of the longer versions of these letters is dubious; regardless of their authorship they add a dimension of interpretation entirely in accord with the shorter texts.

\[^{12}\] Ignatius of Antioch, *epistula ad Magnesios* (Letter to the Magnesians) Ch 9. Again, the longer version elaborates: ‘But let every one of you keep the Sabbath after a spiritual manner, rejoicing in meditation on the law, not in relaxation of the body.’

\[^{13}\] Ignatius of Antioch, *Magn.* Ch 10. Literally: ‘For Christianity did not believe in Judaism, but Judaism anticipated Christianity.’ In the context of his supercessionism, which is addressed throughout this section of his letter, his meaning is clear: *For Christianity did not anticipate Judaism, but Judaism anticipated Christianity.*

\[^{14}\] Cf. Ignatius of Antioch, *epistula ad Ephesios* (Letter to the Ephesians) Ch 14: ‘None of these things is hid from you, if ye perfectly (τελείως) possess that faith and love towards
and incompatibility between the dispensation of the Jews and that of the Christians. It seems that he was either unable to consider Judaism in its ideal aspect or believed that the integrity (and hence efficacy) of the Jewish tradition had collapsed to such an extent as to be unrecoverable. Similarly Frithjof Schuon remarks that ‘the situation of Judaism in the face of Christ was not that of a perfectly homogeneous and fully orthodox religion, and... the nascent Church was clearly aware of this, to say the least.’ While there is some uncertainty over his view of Judaism, it was for him either evil by nature or had become evil through degeneration; whatever the case, it was an impediment to salvation.

There is a certain metaphysical law—however exaggerated—at work in Ignatius’ position, for the axial penetration of a revelation into the created order results in a disruption of horizontal continuity. As Jean Borella observes,

The advent of a new revelation supposes... a divine intervention in the cultural tissue of such and such a humanity, a tissue that cannot but be torn apart in some respects... Each religion is the fruit of a divine initiative which, in a certain manner, breaks with the weft of prior traditions and therefore had no need of any jurisdiction whatsoever to sanction it: God knows what he is doing.

While Judaism “anticipates” Christianity it does not define or limit it: rather, Christianity understands itself to have surpassed the limits of Judaism, not just in its universalism but in the content of its revelation which it understands itself to have received directly from God without the mediation of a prophet. In the Incarnation, God did not speak to a man but became man as such. This is strikingly presented in prologue of St John’s

Christ Jesus which are the beginning and the end (τέλος) of life. For the beginning is faith, and the end (τέλος) is love (ἀγάπη).’ This comparison makes it clear that Ignatius wished to avoid any positive notions of Judaism having achieved a completion in its end just as here in his Letter to the Ephesians he impresses upon his reader the end as perfection and completion in Christ (cf. Jn.9:30; τετέλεσται – ‘It is finished’).

15 The history of Judaism to the present day has proved him wrong and in some ways Judaism not only re-established its integrity but has also preserved it to a greater extent than many forms of Christianity.


Gospel in which the Jewish cosmogonic teachings are revisited and “surpassed,” being understood more fully in the light of the Incarnation.\(^\text{18}\) In this way, Christianity would reinterpret the entire Old Testament; in turn, Judaism would, from the point of view of its own integrity, reject these reinterpretations.

The new faith need have no horizontal continuity with the older dispensation, heaven itself being its immediate origin, mandate and validation. As Schuon says, ‘every religious Message is a Message of the Absolute; this character of Absoluteness penetrates the entire Message and confers upon it its quality of uniqueness.’\(^\text{19}\) This insight is accentuated by the incorporation into Christianity of the symbolic content of the mystery religions, which offered an initiatic entry into a reordered \textit{kosmos}. Such a reordering, initiated by the divine, destroys the old order of things, the old divisions between the worlds, and establishes a new participation in the life of the divine. So it is essential that the new faith articulates a discontinuity with its own Jewish heritage. Schuon again:

\[
\ldots\text{to say that the Christian message was destined to become a religion is to say that it had to become independent of the religion that constituted its original milieu; in this case, therefore, there is much more of necessity than there is of simple possibility.}\]

\(^\text{20}\)

The unqualified application of the principle of horizontal discontinuity is prone to certain inadmissible conclusions and the confusion of mistaking horizontal discontinuity for vertical disassociation. This manifests as a rejection, not just of Judaism, but also of the Jewish God. We see this in Marcion\(^\text{21}\) (excommunicated in 144) when he posits two distinct divinities. The “evil Demiurge” who created the material world and bound immaterial souls to a fleshy prison of suffering and separation from God was, he taught, the divinity whom the Jews worshipped. Christians, on the other hand,

\(^\text{18}\) As Lightfoot declares, ‘whereas Genesis begins with the creation, in Jn.1:1, 2 we are taken behind or beyond history and learn of the eternal existence of the \textit{Logos}…’ (\textit{St John’s Gospel: A Commentary}, ed. Evans, London: Oxford University Press, 1960, p.78.)


\(^\text{21}\) Marcion’s works have not survived, except in sections and fragments preserved in the treatises of his opponents. As a result, scholars must rely upon these hostile texts for an understanding of the Marcionite position. Of especial significance is Tertullian’s \textit{adversus Marcionem} (Against Marcion).
were under the auspices of the “Good God” through whom they might be liberated from the clutches of the evil one and the prison of material existence. What the Marcionite position lacks, but what the Church would demand, is (along with metaphysical intelligibility) the sense of sacred history that Christianity inherited from Judaism. By declaring that the Christian God has nothing to do with material existence, which is the realm of the evil God, Marcion makes the work of Divine Providence in history impossible; even worse, the assertion that God became incarnate and took upon Himself the fullness of man, body and soul becomes impossible. Yet Marcion does not reject the Incarnation, still his thought in effect limits the person of Christ to His Incarnation and post-incarnate work, thereby compromising His Godhead.

Marcion’s position offers a theodicy that is, perhaps, its primary attraction.\(^{22}\) Still, it entails the most dangerous implication of an unqualified rejection of Judaism: either the Incarnation becomes a docetic mirage or the fullness of the Godhead is rendered metaphysically unintelligible because the evil Demiurge has sovereignty over matter.\(^{23}\) It is essential to the Church then, for theological as well as polemical reasons, that at the same time that it articulates a discontinuity with Judaism as a function of its autonomous identity, it must also stress its continuity. The alternative is to maintain a vision of Christ that is incompatible with the absolute character of His divinity. We find such continuity expressed in an almost unalloyed form in the teachings of Theophilus of Antioch (late 2\(^{nd}\) cent.), and it is to his position that we now turn.

**Theophilus of Antioch**

Second century Antioch was a centre of Jewish learning and Theophilus had the benefit of the education of a Hellenised Jew. His teaching on *Logos*, Spirit, and Wisdom, reflect the hypostasising interpretation of the *Wisdom of Solomon* and the general thrust of Hellenised Judaism. In essence, Theophilus was a Hellenised Jew who saw the *Logos* and Spirit (the two are often merged) at work in Christ as they were in the prophets of old. For

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\(^{22}\) See, for example, Tertullian, *adv. Marc.*, 1.2.

\(^{23}\) Thus the Church was to articulate a very different theodicy; see Castleman, ‘Cosmogony and Salvation: The Christian Rejection of Uncreated Matter*: *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies* 9.2, 2003/04, pp.122-127.
Theophilus, the Mosaic Law retains its authority:24 his interpretations of Scripture follow the modes and content of haggadic midrash prevalent in Jewish thought and his Christianity is an extension of this Hellenic Jewish foundation.25 While his Judaism is mostly unremarkable, his Christianity is autodidactic and idiosyncratic. Therefore, while his Christological interpretations of the Old Testament theophanies (employing established Jewish exegetical methods) would prove of enduring value to Christianity, many elements of his Christianity would not.

For Theophilus, Christianity is a natural continuation of Judaism and is ultimately indistinguishable from it. The Christian gnosis is a quantitative addition to the Jewish gnosis of his heritage in seamless continuity with it. His descriptions of Christians and Jews, churches and synagogues are virtually identical26 and he devotes four chapters of his third book to demonstrating the agreement of the Torah, the prophets and the gospels.27 Those who are in the service of God he variously identifies as Jews,28 Christians29 and (possibly) both.30 Christ adds to, even completes, the Mosaic covenant but he does not abrogate it. Theophilus understands Christ as the “True Prophet” promised to the Hebrews in Deuteronomy:

I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him. And it shall come to pass, that whosoever will not hearken unto my words which he shall speak in my name, I will require it of him.31

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24 Theophilus does not, however, mention the ritual circumcision or the keeping of the Sabbath, and employs a revised Decalogue (Grant, ‘The Problem of Theophilus’: The Harvard Theological Review 43, no. 3, 1950, p.194.)
25 ‘For his exegesis Theophilus generally turns back to his Jewish or Jewish-Christian teachers. Almost everything in his exegesis can be paralleled in Jewish haggadic literature’ (Grant, ‘Theophilus of Antioch to Autolycus’: The Harvard Theological Review 40, no. 4, 1947, p.237; see 234-242, 254-55).
27 Theophilus of Antioch, Ad Autolycum (To Autolycus) 3.11-14; cf. Tertullian, who acknowledges the distinctions between the Old Testament teachings and those of the new (adv. Marc., 4.1.)
28 Theophilus, Autol., 3.9.
29 Theophilus, Autol., 3.4.
30 Theophilus, Autol., 2.30.
31 Deuteronomy 18:18-19.
The nature of this “True Prophet” is like that of Moses, a human vehicle through whom God speaks to the people, and the message he conveys is of the same order of knowledge as that of the entire prophetic lineage. The Islamic distinction between two orders of prophets, rasul and nabi, is instructive here. The rasul brings a new Revelation and therefore establishes a new religion, discontinuous with those that came before. The nabi, on the other hand, restates an already existing revelation, revivifying and correcting it. For Theophilus, Christ is a nabi following on from the revelation given to the rasul Moses. There is no room, from Theophilus’ perspective, for the formal break with Judaism of the Pauline tradition (indeed, he is anti-Pauline) that found such a vocal champion in Ignatius. Theophilus’ position is almost the polar opposite of Ignatius’ yet is prone to similar limitations: it reduces Christ to His human nature, diminishing Him and His message.

It is insufficient to claim that Christ fulfills the Law in the same way that the last drop of water fills the glass. Such a claim would be permissible of a human messenger but not of the Divine Messenger who rends the veil between heaven and earth, making the unknown God fully known.\(^{32}\) The tradition would assert (although not in the language of Islam) that Christ’s salvific economy is that of the rasul. Being God, however, He is also greater than the rasul, whose function He assumes without being limited to it. With Gospel and Pauline precedent, Christianity would understand both its founder and His revelation as being of a superior order of gnosis than that given to the rasul Moses.

**Tertullian**

Tertullian (c.160–c.225), often described as the Father of Latin Christianity, presents an unambiguous exposition of religio perennis which he employs in his supercessionist theology to uphold the validity of Christianity as a new revelation and to dismiss the continuing validity of the Mosaic covenant. While this is his primary concern in *adversus Iudaeos* (An Answer to the Jews), he also presents its universal significance, asking rhetorically:

\[^{32}\text{Without, however, compromising His “hiddenness.” Pseudo-Dionysius: ‘he is hidden even after this revelation, or, if I may speak in a more divine fashion, is hidden even amid the revelation. For this mystery of Jesus remains hidden and can be drawn out by no word or mind. What is to be said of it remains unsayable; what is to be understood of it remains unknowable’ (Epistle 3, 1069B). This paradox lies at the heart of the Palamite theology of divine essence and energies.}\]
For why should God, the founder of the universe, the Governor of the whole world, the Fashioner of humanity, the Sower of universal nations be believed to have given a law through Moses to one people, and not be said to have assigned it to all nations?\textsuperscript{33}

This dilemma, heightened by the historical nature of the Incarnation, is a common one and one regularly employed to advocate the acceptance of the \textit{religio perennis} amongst Christians. Jean Borella formulated it thus:

\begin{quote}
\ldots it is hard to accept the idea that God has left millions and millions of men, for perhaps one or two million years, not only in ignorance of the true religion, but even under the sway of false ones.\textsuperscript{34}
\end{quote}

Tertullian’s solution is to distinguish between eternal law—the \textit{lex aeterna} (\textit{religio perennis})—and the temporal or historical laws, which are particularizations and images of the eternal.\textsuperscript{35}

But—as is congruous with the goodness of God, and with His equity, as the Fashioner of mankind—He gave to all nations the selfsame law, which at definite and stated times He enjoined should be observed, when He willed, and through whom He willed, and as He willed.\textsuperscript{36}

This is the same law in each circumstance and to each nation inasmuch as it is the same eternal law that is the prototypical source of each temporal modulation. If it were not so then one could not say that God is good. This argument has been challenged as sentimental and it may certainly be employed in such a way.\textsuperscript{37} To dismiss it on such grounds, however, is to overlook the fact that the alternative is contrary to the nature of the divine itself. The \textit{lex aeterna} (\textit{religio perennis}) is, according to Tertullian, a direct function of the very nature of God. The Absolute does not withhold itself

\textsuperscript{33} Tertullian, \textit{adversus Iudaeos} (An Answer to the Jews), 2.

\textsuperscript{34} Borella, ‘The Problematic of the Unity of Religions,’ 2006, p.166.

\textsuperscript{35} The legend of the “Harrowing of Hell” provides another such solution. Justin Martyr also addresses this issue; see \textit{I apol.} 46. While the theme of universalism in Christianity could be fruitfully explored in reference to this salvific work accomplished \textit{from the tomb}, it lies beyond the scope of this paper.

\textsuperscript{36} Tertullian, \textit{adv. Iud.}, 2.

but by its perfect goodness and justice makes the means of salvation available to all as an act of grace. As Plato says, “in God there is no envy.”

Tertullian’s position is based on an orthodox understanding of the Incarnation and is therefore inherently realistic: human conceptions of Justice and Goodness are at least partial reflections of the divine attributes. As a result, a theory of the *religio perennis* is not only possible but necessary for Christianity. In contrast, the Marcionite position, being unable to accommodate a concept of sacred history, is nominalistic, or even anti-realistic. The fate of those who lived prior to Christ does not weigh upon the Good God’s nature because the material and temporal order is not of Him. That those souls be damned for not knowing Him is at best of no interest and, at worst, is a necessary corollary of Marcion’s theology: they belong to and worshipped the evil Demiurge.

Tertullian calls the Edenic law, the primordial manifestation of the eternal law, the *embryo* of all subsequent laws, which are the unfolding of that primordial seed and the making explicit or manifest the possibilities contained in the first command not to eat of the forbidden tree: ‘Which law had continued enough for them, had it been kept.’

Because Edenic man breached the primordial covenant which bound him to God, subsequent manifestations of this same law were necessary. The Decalogue is contained in principle in the primordial law, which is ‘the womb of all the precepts of God.’

... in this general and primordial law of God, the observance of which, in the case of the tree’s fruit, He had sanctioned, we recognise enclosed all the precepts specially of the posterior Law, which germinated when disclosed at their proper times.

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39 Tertullian, *adv. Iud.*, 2. The passage continues: ‘In short, if they had loved the Lord their God, they would not have contravened His precept; if they had habitually loved their neighbour—that is, themselves—they would not have believed the persuasion of the serpent, and thus would not have committed murder upon themselves, by falling from immortality, by contravening God’s precept; from theft also they would have abstained, if they had not stealthily tasted of the fruit of the tree, nor had been anxious to skulk beneath a tree to escape the view of the Lord their God; nor would they have been made partners with the falsehood—asseverating devil, by believing him that they would be “like God;” and thus they would not have offended God either, as their Father, who had fashioned them from clay of the earth, as out of the womb of a mother; if they had not coveted another’s, they would not have tasted of the unlawful fruit.’
If one bond between heaven and earth is breached or is not present in a particular time or place, then another is given to replace it. This bond, without which there would be no existence, is ever and continuously present. Superficial differences and horizontal discontinuities between one manifestation of the *religio perennis* and another reflect the different conditions of the recipients but *religio* itself is everlasting.

Tertullian describes the “primordial Law” as “unwritten”: ‘before the Law of Moses, written in stone tables, I contend that there was a law unwritten, which was understood naturally, and by the fathers [patriarchs] was habitually kept.’ This is the Uncreated Intellect of Plotinus. Seyyed Hossein Nasr observes that this is the spiritual organ of perception that ‘pierces the density and coagulation of cosmic manifestation,’ which is ‘endowed with the possibility of knowing the Absolute,’ and which is ‘the direct means of access to that Original Reality that “was” at once the source of cosmic reality “at the beginning” and is the origin of all things in this eternal “now”’. Adrian Snodgrass clarifies the contrast between the Intellect and the ratio-cinative mind:

The mind has to do with thought, which has form, and the Intellect with Forms, which are formless; the mind is a faculty of distinctive and discursive knowledge, the knowledge that is indirect and mediate, whereas Intellect apprehends intuitive knowledge, the knowledge that is direct and immediate.

Snodgrass’ contrast between Intellect and mind is instructive in paralleling the distinction between eternal and temporal laws. Tertullian considers this same principle in its universal human context, declaring:

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41 Tertullian, *adv. Iud.*, 2.
42 Compare, for example, Plotinus, *Enneads* 4.3.13: ‘...it is not from without that the law derives the power by which it is executed; on the contrary the law is given in the entities upon whom it falls; these bear it about with them. Let but the moment arrive, and what it decrees will be brought to act by whose beings in whom it resides; they fulfil it because they contain it; it prevails because it is within them; it becomes like a heavy burden, and sets upon them a painful longing to enter the realm to which they are bidden from within.’ And 5.5.12: ‘...all that exists desires and aspires towards the Supreme by a compulsion of nature, as if all had received that without it they cannot be.’ (MacKenna translation.)
The greater part ... of the human race, although they knew not even the
name of Moses, much less his writings, yet knew the God of Moses; and
even when idolatry overshadowed the world with its extreme
prevalence, men still spoke of Him separately by His own name as God,
and the God of gods, ... To none of the writings of Moses do they owe
this. The soul was before prophecy. From the beginning the knowledge of
God is the dowry of the soul, one and the same amongst the Egyptians, and
the Syrians, and the tribes of Pontus. ... Never shall God be hidden, never
shall God be wanting. Always shall He be understood, always be heard,
nay even seen, in whatsoever way He shall wish. God has for His
witnesses this whole being of ours, and this universe wherein we
dwell.45

Tertullian’s reconciliation of the seeming incompatibility between
revelation and intellection is echoed by Schuon, who explains that ‘An
irreducible opposition between intellection and grace is as artificial as it
could be, for intellection is also a grace, but it is a static and innate
grace...’46 The distinction, maintains Schuon, is primarily that between
microcosm and macrocosm and ‘the diverse religions actualize objectively
that which is contained in our deepest subjectivity. Revelation is to the
macrocosm what intellection is to the microcosm.’47 This is a distinction
within the order of manifestation, between the corporate and the
individual, and while this manifested distinction entails distinction in the
divine economy, it should not suggest differences in content except those of
temporal modulation as we have already seen Tertullian describe. In any
case, the correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm—as above,
so below—makes any attempt to present the two as contradictory,
untenable. The revealed law, Tertullian explains, confirms the inner,
intellective recognition of the divine, applying to the human collectivity as
intellection applies to the individual. He writes:

But, that we might attain an amplier and more authoritative knowledge
at once of Himself, and of His counsels and will, God has added a
written revelation for the behoof of every one whose heart is set on

45 Tertullian, adv. Marc., 1.10, emphasis added.
46 Schuon, Light on the Ancient Worlds, p.69.
seeking Him, that seeking he may find, and finding believe, and believing obey.\textsuperscript{48}

One may distrust one’s own perceptions—even spiritual or noetic perceptions—but when the internal, intellective, knowledge is confirmed externally, through the agency of prophets, only willful rebellion against the nature of reality can explain the refusal to accept it. The whole \textit{kosmos}, from the interiority of the individual human soul to the social collectivity and the testimony of nature itself, speaks of God.

For from the first He sent messengers into the world,—men whose stainless righteousness made them worthy to know the Most High, and to reveal Him,—men abundantly endowed with the Holy Spirit, that they might proclaim that there is one God only who made all things... \textsuperscript{49}

Tertullian’s purpose was to defend the Pauline perception of the Incarnation as initiating a new relationship between heaven and earth. For Tertullian, this is explicable as a new temporal manifestation of the eternal law. This new dispensation in Christ fulfils the expectations of Judaism in the Incarnation but also surpasses them in the Resurrection.\textsuperscript{50} Thus it is continuous with Judaism in one respect but discontinuous in another. This new modulation or manifestation supplants the previous ones, for it is in the nature of temporal things to come to be and to pass away and this is, he declares, the fate of the Mosaic covenant which was temporal\textsuperscript{51} and hence temporary,\textsuperscript{52} and is now suppressed,\textsuperscript{53} abolished,\textsuperscript{54} obliterated,\textsuperscript{55} having reached its cessation.\textsuperscript{56} The Mosaic Law, he claims, is perpetuated for two purposes only: firstly, the Torah testifies to the true God—‘Whoever gives ear will find God in them [the sacred books of the Jews]; whoever takes

\textsuperscript{48} Tertullian, \textit{apologeticum} (Apology) 18.
\textsuperscript{49} Tertullian, \textit{apol.}, 18.
\textsuperscript{51} Tertullian, \textit{adv. Iud.}, 6.
\textsuperscript{52} Tertullian, \textit{adv. Iud.}, 4.
\textsuperscript{53} Tertullian, \textit{adv. Iud.}, 7.
\textsuperscript{54} Tertullian, \textit{adv. Iud.}, 3.
\textsuperscript{55} Tertullian, \textit{adv. Iud.}, 3.
\textsuperscript{56} Tertullian, \textit{adv. Iud.}, 3.
pains to understand, will be compelled to believe—^57—and secondly as a punishment: ‘This, therefore, was God’s foresight,—that of giving circumcision to Israel, for a sign whence they might be distinguished when the time should arrive wherein their abovementioned deserts should prohibit their admission into Jerusalem...’.58

Theoretically, there is no impediment to believing in the possibility of two modulations of the religio perennis, addressing differing human temperaments, being contemporaneously active and intact. Even if we accept, as Tertullian does, the superiority of the Christian dispensation then the rejection of Judaism’s continued validity does not necessarily follow from it. The truth of the Mosaic covenant is not altered in any way by the emergence of Christianity (whatever its virtues) and there is no persuasive reason why it should not continue to be efficacious. In fact, it might be said that the Mosaic covenant cannot be abrogated in principle precisely because it is a modulation of the lex aeterna.

The issue of continuing Jewish validity becomes more urgent when we consider the position of Justin Martyr (c.100–c.165), with whom Tertullian is largely consistent but who articulates the perceived superiority of Christianity over Judaism in greater detail.

Justin Martyr
Justin distinguishes between a Judaism prior to the Incarnation and the Jews who lived during and after the Incarnation. For the Jew, according to Justin, there ‘was appointed to be performed’ certain requirements—such as the observance of the Sabbath—‘by reason of the hardness of the people’s hearts’59 and their ‘ingratitude towards Him’.60

You [Jews] have now need of a second circumcision, though you glory greatly in the flesh. The new law requires you to keep perpetual sabbath, and you, because you are idle for one day, suppose you are pious, not discerning why this has been commanded you: and if you eat

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57 Tertullian, apol., 18.
58 Tertullian, adv. Iud., 3. This interpretation of circumcision is also found in Justin Martyr’s dialogus cum Tryphone Iudaeo (Dialogue with Trypho) 92. In the same chapter Justin puts forward another argument that Tertullian would adopt, namely, that the Mosaic Law is proved temporary because of the Scriptural testimony that the righteous, such as Noah, lived before the covenant sealed by circumcision.
59 Justin Martyr, dial., 45.
60 Justin Martyr, dial., 27.
unleavened bread, you say the will of God has been fulfilled. The Lord
our God does not take pleasure in such observances: if there is any
perjured person or a thief among you, let him cease to be so; if any
adulterer, let him repent; then he has kept the sweet and true sabbaths
of God. If any one has impure hands, let him wash and be pure.61

For Justin the ritual observances of the Mosaic Law were laid upon the
Jews because they were incapable of the interiority demanded of the
Christian. Because they could not abide by the “circumcision of the heart” a
“circumcision of the flesh” was given to them: because they were incapable
of a perpetual interior Sabbath they were required to observe an exterior
Sabbath.

There is a fundamental misapprehension at work here. The Mosaic Law
transforms interior states by exterior forms while the Christ transforms
exterior states by force of His interiority. Both traditions address the need
for human transformation (or transfiguration) in the light of God and base
their pedagogy in an acknowledgement of the interpenetration of the inner
and the outer.62 The Mosaic Law emphasises the ability of exterior forms or
states to effect an interior transformation, while the teachings of the
Christ—and many of the patristic theologians considered here—emphasise
the need for interior states to manifest in exterior forms. Neither tradition
properly understood in the fullness of their teachings (rather than the
excesses or limits of certain practitioners or the deteriorations of certain
times) considers one to the exclusion of the other. The difference between
the two traditions here is one of emphasis, not exclusion.

If one considers the Jewish covenant abolished and inefficacious, as did
Tertullian, then one asserts that a large portion of mankind is bereft of its
divine inheritance irrespective of their volitional acceptance of God: the
immediate interiority which Christianity demands in simply not within the
reach of all men: many (including many Christians) require the exterior
regulation of the divine law as a mean to access and transform interior

61 Justin Martyr, dial., 12; cf. Tertullian, adv. Iud., 3: ‘For, as the carnal circumcision, which
was temporary, was in wrought “a sign” for a contumacious people, so the spiritual has been
given for salvation to an obedient people. ... the coming cessation of the old law and of the
carnal circumcision was declared [by the prophets], so, too, the observances of the new law
and the spiritual circumcision has shone out into the voluntary obediences of peace.’
62 The underlying principle here is that which is expounded in the creation of Adam from
dust and spirit and the doctrine of the resurrection in the body: in man, body and soul are
distinct but they are not separable.
states. Their faith would, therefore, find itself maintaining precisely the position of Gnostic elitism—that some are born capable of earning salvation while others are born incapable—that it rejects. Whether aware of this problem or not, Justin avoids it declaring that under the Mosaic Covenant, salvation in Christ is still possible.

Then he said, ‘Tell me, then, shall those who lived according to the law given by Moses, live in the same manner with Jacob, Enoch, and Noah, in the resurrection of the dead, or not?’

I replied to him, ‘...each one, ...shall be saved by his own righteousness... those who regulated their lives by the law of Moses would in like manner be saved. For what in the law of Moses is naturally good, and pious, and righteous, and has been prescribed to be done by those who obey it; ... Since those who did that which is universally, naturally, and eternally good are pleasing to God, they shall be saved through this Christ in the resurrection equally with those righteous men who were before them, namely Noah, and Enoch, and Jacob, and whoever else there be, along with those who have known this Christ, Son of God, who was before the morning star and the moon, and submitted to become incarnate, and be born of this virgin of the family of David...’^63

Still, post-Incarnation Judaism must, according to Justin, recognise its role in the rejection and persecution of Christ and Christians.

[T]hose who have persecuted and do persecute Christ, if they do not repent, shall not inherit anything on the holy mountain. But the Gentiles, who have believed on Him, and have repented of the sins which they have committed, they shall receive the inheritance along with the patriarchs and the prophets, and the just men who are descended from Jacob, even although they neither keep the Sabbath, nor are circumcised, nor observe the feasts. Assuredly they shall receive the holy inheritance of God.^64

Justin is here taking aim at those Jews who, of their own will, reject the Logos, the Truth, and hence reject their own place in the Kingdom of Heaven. He is not damning Jews as such; those Jews who have embraced

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^63 Justin Martyr, *dial.*, 45.
Christ—whether knowingly or not, whether they find Him in Christianity, Judaism, or elsewhere—will have their place in the Kingdom: ‘each one shall be saved by his own righteousness.’ Judaism as such is sufficient for salvation. In practice, however, those who scorn Christ and his followers (and Justin understands this—rightly or wrongly—to have been institutionalized in Judaism by his time) separate themselves from the spirit of their own tradition, just as any grave offence against the Mosaic Law would separate the perpetrator from the people. In the same way as, according to Tertullian, anyone who calls himself a Christian but lives in violation of the Christian law is a false Christian and ‘persons of this doubtful stamp do not assemble with us, neither do they belong to our communion: by their delinquency they become yours [ie. pagans] once more’.

The continuity of the Jewish revelation is held in balance with the discontinuity that is necessitated by the eruption into the created order of a new revelation. The Jewish law remains efficacious (in principle at least) and the Jewish Scripture becomes Christian Scripture also. The continuity between these two traditions is such that Christianity may claim this venerable tradition, the ancient immensities of Judaism that surpass those of the Romans and even the Greeks, as its own. The continuities and discontinuities between Judaism and Christianity are stated in principle by Tertullian; there is not, he states ‘any other contention between them and us, than that they believe the advent has not yet occurred’; but in all other respects, Christians do not ‘differ from the Jews concerning God.’ The simplicity of this statement, however, belies the complexity of its implications.

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65 See Krauss, ‘The Jews in the Works of the Church Fathers’: The Jewish Quarterly Review 5, no. 1, 1892, pp.130-134, also Boyarin, ‘Justin Martyr Invents Judaism’: Church History 70, no. 3, 2001, pp.428-437. According to Krauss, this accusation by Justin ‘is repeated by all the Fathers of the first four centuries’ (p.130). Boyarin believes that the earliest unequivocal evidence of such an institutionalised curse is of the mid third century (p.430).
66 Tertullian, apol., 19. Tertullian counters the imperial persecution of Christians on this very issue. If the Roman religious customs are validated by their antiquity then this validation applies to the Christians also, and to a greater degree.
67 Tertullian, apol., 21.
Like Tertullian, Justin Martyr distinguishes between the efficacy of the Mosaic covenant before and the after the Incarnation but separating Judaism from Jews he presents the implication that Judaism is defunct not *de jure* but *de facto* and this because the Jews have betrayed their own tradition by refusing to recognise the fulfilment of their own expectations.

On the whole Christian tradition upholds the validity of Judaism, distancing itself from it only insofar as it seemed incompatible with the revelation of Christ. Thus Theophilus follows the haggadic exegeses of Scripture and Jerome values the instruction of his Jewish teachers, without whom Christians can never know Scripture fully. Justin Martyr may have—in at least one instance—rejected a polemically useful Christological reading of a certain part of Scripture in favour of the traditional Jewish one. While demonstrating little explicit interest in Judaism, Clement of Alexandria extols the values of the esoteric meanings of Scripture that Christians had inherited from the Jewish prophets (a position shared by Eusebius) and seems to have made unacknowledged use of Jewish sources, even adopting a Jewish interpretation of Genesis 15:5, rather than the christological interpretation current at his time. Even those Fathers, such as Eusebius, who seem bitter and scornful of the Jews are indebted to the influence of Jewish belief and exegesis. The extremes of Ignatius and Theophilus would, in hindsight, prove to be incompatible with the structure of the emerging Christian tradition suffering, as they do, by limiting the Person of Christ to His Incarnation and failing to perceive the cosmic functions and metacosmic nature of the *Logos*. This supra-

69 ‘For his exegesis Theophilus generally turns back to his Jewish or Jewish-Christian teachers. Almost everything in his exegesis can be paralleled in Jewish haggadic literature’ (Grant, ‘Theophilus of Antioch to Autolycus’: *The Harvard Theological Review* 40, no. 4, 1947, p. 237; see also 234-242, 254-5).
70 Krauss, ‘The Jews in the Work of the Church Fathers VI’: *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 6, no. 2, 1894; see especially pp.227-228. ‘Jerome assumes that in Scriptural questions, every Jew, without exception, is competent to give satisfactory replies’ (p.233).
71 Krauss, ‘The Jews in the Works of the Church Fathers’: *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 5, no. 1, 1892, p.129. I do not share Krauss’ reading here (Justin Martyr, *dial.*, 73) but as there is some ambiguity in the passage I have chosen to mention it as a possibility.
Incarnational vision of Christ would later be codified in the creeds as the work of the Holy Spirit, “who spoke through the prophets.”

Moses Speaking Greek?

“So God created man,” It is not “They made.” Here Scripture avoids the plurality of the Persons. After having enlightened the Jew, it dissipates the error of the Gentiles in putting itself under the shelter of unity...

The continuity between Judaism and the new revelation of Christianity was of grave concern to the early Church; equally so, Gentile Christians were concerned to understand a continuity between their Greek heritage and the new faith. If second Temple Judaism was disintegrating by the time of Christ, the pagan world was no doubt in worse shape. As Schuon observes, Christianity, at its beginning, ‘was confronted with a religion valid in itself, but nonetheless decadent in more than one respect.’ The intellectual life of the Empire had become disconnected from its cultic life; philosophy had ceased to be grounded in spiritual or intellectual perception and become increasingly worldly, rationalistic, and abstracted from human realities. The arts of rhetoric had become dislocated from Truth and turned to serve political self interest. Clement of Alexandria (c.150–c. 215) echoes Socrates when he warned:

...the art of sophistry, which the Greeks cultivated, is a fantastic power, which makes false opinions like true by means of words. For it produces rhetoric in order to persuasion, and disputation for wrangling. These arts, therefore, if not conjoined with philosophy, will be injurious to every one.

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75 Compare St Augustine, In Ps. 99.9. ‘He who first spoke out of the cloudy pillar, hath in Person spoken unto us in His footstool; that is, on earth, when He had assumed the flesh... He Himself used to speak out of the cloud, which was not then understood: He hath spoken in His own footstool, and the words of His cloud have been understood.’
77 The following is a brief overview and, of necessity, we have passed silently over certain details. It is, however, the general ambience which gave rise to the Christian response that is of interest to us here.
78 Schuon, From the Divine to the Human, 1982, p.120.
79 Clement of Alexandria, stromateis (Miscellany) 1.8.
Roman religion became increasingly superstitious and syncretic as it sought to adapt to the cosmopolitan Empire. For Tertullian the Greco-Roman pantheon had had a certain integrity, but the arbitrary absorption of the Egyptian, Parthian and Persian gods was a sign of the loss of true religion:

What need had they of uncertain gods, when they possessed certain ones? ... as they had certain gods, they ought to have been contented with them, without requiring select ones. In this want they are even found to be irreligious! For if gods are selected as onions are, then such as are not chosen are declared to be worthless.\(^80\)

The adoption of new gods implies a lack in the native system. Rome had previously resisted the arrival of foreign pantheons and attempted to preserve its own cultic and moral integrity but this was no longer the case. The mystery cults had lost coherence; old gods were revived with little understanding and new gods compromised the cultus of the Greco-Roman world. In response to these conditions Tertullian addressed the Romans thus:

The laws... your fathers in their wisdom had enacted concerning the very gods themselves, you their most loyal children have rescinded. The consuls, by the authority of the senate, banished Father Bacchus and his mysteries not merely from the city, but from the whole of Italy. The consuls Piso and Gabinius, no Christians surely, forbade Serapis, and Isis, and Arpocrates, with their dogheaded friend, admission into the Capitol—in the act casting them out from the assembly of the gods—overthrew their altars, and expelled them from the country, being anxious to prevent the vices of their base and lascivious religion from spreading. These, you have restored, and conferred highest honours on them.\(^81\)

Deprived of its traditional cosmological foundation the Hellenic culture of the later Empire degenerated into emperor worship. While this provided the expanding Empire a cultic cohesion religious life was increasingly directed by the interests of the state: priesthoods became political offices

\(^80\) Tertullian, *ad nat.*, 2.9.
\(^81\) Tertullian, *apologeticum* (Apology) 6.
rather than spiritual ones. Judaism and Christianity were persecuted precisely because they refused to compromise themselves in the interests of the Empire. Schuon offers the following revealing observation on this period:

...we would say that in the clash between nascent Christianity and the Greco-Roman world, a bhakti at the height of its vitality encountered a jnâna in full decadence; on the whole at least and excepting the initiatic mysteries and Neoplatonism.\footnote{Schuon, \textit{From the Divine to the Human}, 1982, p.127.}

The native Greek mysteries, especially those of Eleusis, seem to have preserved their integrity and indeed the greatest flowering of Neoplatonism, Plotinus, was still to come. Neither, however, could reverse the general decline. The Eleusinian Mysteries presupposed the traditional ambience that was already reduced to a remnant and Neoplatonism was only nominally and allegorically connected to the gods, a spiritual science rather than a religion, a kernel without a shell. Herein lies the danger of Neoplatonism: it was, in effect, Intellection without Revelation. For Tertullian, Revelation is, in practice but not in principle, superior to Intellection. He asserts the value of Intellection by which the soul can apprehend God yet adds: ‘But, that we might attain an ampler and more authoritative knowledge at once of Himself, and of His counsels and will, God has added a written revelation.’\footnote{Tertullian, \textit{apol.}, 18.} Intellection is efficacious but not foolproof. Schuon:

Fallen man, and thus the average man, is as it were poisoned by the passional element, either grossly or subtly; from this results an obscuring of the Intellect and the necessity of a Revelation coming from the outside. Remove the passional element from the soul and from the intelligence—remove “the rust from the mirror” or “from the heart”—and the Intellect will be released; it will reveal from within what religion reveals from without.\footnote{Schuon, \textit{Esoterism as Principle and as Way}, Bedfont: Perennial Books, 1981, p.20.}
Regarding the gods of the ancient world, the apologists are clear: they are idols (εἴδωλα), ‘the works of men’s hands and unclean demons (ἐργα χειρών ἀνθρώπων καὶ δαίμονια ἀκάθαρτα).’ They are not merely “wrong” but dangerous: ‘And such may all those become who make them and put their trust in them!’ 85 Van Winden observes that Christians commonly identified the gods of the pagan world with fallen angels. 86 Theophilus, Tertullian, Justin Martyr and Clement (amongst others) all make this claim. The intent of the fallen angels, as Van Winden explains, ‘was to divert mankind from its destiny by drawing to themselves human worship which was due to God and to Him alone.’ 87 In his Dialogue, Justin asserts: “And when I hear, Trypho,” said I, “that Perseus was begotten of a virgin, I understand that the deceiving serpent counterfeited also this”; 88 elsewhere he states:

...for having heard it proclaimed through the prophets that the Christ was to come, and that the ungodly among men were to be punished by fire, they [wicked demons] put forward many to be called sons of Jupiter, under the impression that they would be able to produce in men the idea that the things which were said with regard to Christ were mere marvellous tales, like the things which were said by the poets. 89

Tertullian, Justin and Theophilus also understand the gods euhemeristically, noting that certain of the gods are, according to their mythologies, deified men. 90 Of course, the Imperial cult is the glaring example, and one that the Apologists often disparage for its banality and novelty. Many early Christian martyrs were martyred precisely because they refused to pay homage to the deified Emperors. 91 The gods, it is claimed, simply do not exist but the worship offered them is perpetuated and diverted by the fallen angels and

85 Theophilus of Antioch, Autol., 1.10.
88 Justin Martyr, dial., 70.
89 Justin Martyr, 1 apologia (1 Apology) 54.
90 Theophilus of Antioch, Autol., 1.10; Tertullian, de idololatria (On Idolatry) 15; Tertullian, ad nat., 2.12-14; Justin Martyr, cohortatio ad Graecos (Hortatory Address to the Greeks) 16.
91 See, for example, Tertullian, ad nat., 1.17.
their demonic progeny away from God and towards themselves. To this end, they offer counterfeits and parodies of Truth, giving falsehood the appearance of truth and leading man, without his knowledge, away from God. This understanding originates in the Enochian tradition and was adopted by Christianity from Jewish Apologists.

The dislocation of intellectual life from religious practice in the later Empire, while detrimental to the pagan world, made it possible for the Church Fathers to evaluate the Greco-Roman philosophy and religion separately. As a result, the Church was able to accommodate the insights of philosophy into its own spiritual vision while rejecting the pantheons of gods in favour of its own monotheistic théoria. Moreover, Greco-Roman philosophy tended to reject the mythological gods and was therefore an unexpected ally.

In his Timaeus, Plato traces primordial knowledge to Egypt, whose culture remained continuous with the primordial state of man. To this Justin Martyr adds:

...your most renowned historian Diodorus ... travelled over both Asia and Europe for the sake of great accuracy, and thus became an eye-witness of very many things... [He] wrote of [Moses] in these very words: “For subsequent to the ancient manner of living in Egypt which gods and heroes are fabled to have regulated, they say that Moses first persuaded the people to use written laws, and to live by them...”

According to the Apologists, if Pythagoras and Plato brought Egyptian gnosis to Greece, the Egyptians themselves had received it from the revelation of the Judeo-Christian God to Moses. Justin Martyr claimed that Plato ‘accepted, as is likely, the doctrine of Moses and the other prophets regarding the one God, which he learned while in Egypt’ yet feared that he might suffer the same fate as Socrates and veiled his knowledge. While

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92 Tertullian, apol., 12.
93 Justin Martyr, 2 apologia (2 Apology) 5.
95 Justin Martyr, coh. Gr., 9.
96 Justin Martyr, coh. Gr., 20.
this means that he did not communicate the whole prophetic truth, he nevertheless gave veiled intimations of the Mosaic wisdom to which he had been exposed. Plato’s knowledge of the God of Abraham and his prophets is a claim Justin returns to many times, championing Plato’s *Timaeus*, for example, as inspired by the first book of Moses.

After his conversion to Christianity, Justin would continue to wear the characteristic robe of the philosopher; in his mind, the two were entirely compatible. Theophilus is less sympathetic: he asserts that the philosophers contradicted one another and themselves. He accuses the Hellenic philosophical tradition of a lack of internal integrity and overall coherence: its intellective vision had been mixed with and distorted by ratio-cinative speculation. Philosophy had splintered into disparate schools, having no real common denominator and only the name “philosophy” to connect them: a syncretism of false opinions but also partial truths.

For Justin Martyr the Abrahamic tradition had been passed by mundane means to the Gentile world, where it was largely suppressed by cowardly philosophers who disguised the truth revealed to them. However, Justin also envisaged a transmission of knowledge that was beyond the historical and horizontal and was rather mystical and vertical.

For whatever either lawgivers or philosophers uttered well, they elaborated by finding and contemplating (*εὑρέσεως καὶ θεωρίας*) some part of the Word (*λόγος*). But since they did not know the whole of the Word (*λόγος*), which is Christ, they often contradicted themselves. Those who by human birth were more ancient than Christ, when they attempted to consider and prove things by reason (*λόγος*), were brought before the tribunals as impious persons and busybodies.

Socrates, he claims,

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97 Theophilus of Antioch, *Autol.*, 3.3. As if this phenomenon does not also manifest amongst Christian thinkers!
98 Cf. Irenaeus on the Valentinians: ‘[The Valentinians] bring together the things which have been said by all those who were ignorant of God, and who are termed philosophers; and sewing together, as it were, a motley garment out of a heap of miserable rags, they have, by their subtle manner of expression, furnished themselves with a cloak which is really not their own. They do, it is true, introduce a new kind of doctrine, inasmuch as by a new sort of art it has been substituted [for the old]. Yet it is in reality both old and useless, since these very opinions have been sewed together out of ancient dogmas redolent of ignorance and irreligion’ (*adversus haereses* 2.14.2).
taught men to reject the wicked demons and those who did the things which the poets related; and he exhorted them to become acquainted with the God who was to them unknown, by means of the investigation of reason (διὰ λόγου), saying, “That it is neither easy to find the Father and Maker of all, nor, having found Him, is it safe to declare Him to all.”

The possibility of partial gnosis is innate to the human condition ‘for He was and is the Word who is in every man, and who foretold the things that were to come to pass both through the prophets and in His own person’. A mystical theōria or intellective vision of the Logos is possible because Christ, the Logos, is ‘the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.’ The logos in man corresponds to the Logos who is Christ. It is the spiritual or intellectual organ whereby one may perceive the divine light and is intrinsic to human nature. All peoples of all races and times possessed it. Tertullian:

... whenever the soul comes to itself, as out of a surfeit, or a sleep, or a sickness, and attains something of its natural soundness, it speaks of God; ... O noble testimony of the soul by nature Christian!

Christ the Logos, as uncreated God, is eternal and hence Real outside of and prior to the Incarnation. Consequentially, those who lived prior to the Incarnation—a relatively recent event in the history of religion—were not bereft of Truth. Christ’s salvific economy is not confined to the Incarnation; it is grander and more expansive, encompassing the whole of the created order, amongst and in all men as revelation and intellection respectively. Justin Martyr:

He is the Word (Λόγος) of whom every race of men were partakers; and those who lived reasonably are Christians, even though they have been thought atheists; as, among the Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus...

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100 Justin Martyr, 2 apol., 10.
101 Justin Martyr, 2 apol., 10.
102 John 1:9.
103 Tertullian, apol., 17.
104 Justin Martyr, 1 apol., 55.
For each man spoke well in proportion to the share he had of the spermatic word (τοῦ σπερματικοῦ θείου λόγου),... Whatever things were rightly said among all men, are the property of us Christians. ... For all the writers were able to see realities darkly through the sowing of the implanted word that was in them.

Clement of Alexandria offers a positive view of philosophy. Philosophy, says Clement, ‘does not ruin life by being the originator of false practices and base deeds, although some have calumniated it, though it be the clear image of truth, a divine gift to the Greeks’. By “philosophy” he means only that which it true amongst the various philosophical schools.

I do not mean the Stoic, or the Platonic, or the Epicurean, or the Aristotelian, but whatever has been well said by each of those sects... this eclectic whole I call philosophy. But such conclusions of human reasonings, as men have cut away and falsified, I would never call divine.

For Clement, philosophy was provided to the Greeks by God as a preparation for the Christian Revelation in the same way that Judaism prepared the Jews for the Incarnation of the Word.

Accordingly, before the advent of the Lord, philosophy was necessary to the Greeks for righteousness. And now it becomes conducive to piety; being a kind of preparatory training to those who attain to faith through demonstration. ... For God is the cause of all good things; but of some primarily, as of the Old and the New Testament; and of others by consequence, as philosophy. Perchance, too, philosophy was given to the Greeks directly and primarily, till the Lord should call the Greeks.

105 Literally, “The spermatic Word of God.”
106 Justin Martyr, 2 apol., 13.
107 Clement of Alexandria, str., 1.2.
108 Clement of Alexandria, str., 1.7.
109 Clement of Alexandria, str., 1.5. He continues: ‘For this was a schoolmaster to bring “the Hellenic mind,” as the law brings the Hebrews, to Christ.’
Philosophy prepares and supports the intellective human temperament for the Christian revelation, paving the way by “demonstration” for the faith that is its climax and perfection. The truth that philosophy seeks is the truth of which the Lord Himself said, “I am the truth” and it ‘exercises the mind, rouses the intelligence, and begets an inquiring shrewdness, by means of the true philosophy, which the initiated possess, having found it, or rather received it, from the truth itself.’

True philosophy is the inheritance of the initiated. In other words, it must be connected to an orthodox religious tradition.

Clement understands not just Greek philosophy but Greek culture as preparatory for the Gospel. His position is not, however, uncritical.

The Greek preparatory culture, therefore, with philosophy itself, is shown to have come down from God to men, not with a definite direction but in the way in which showers fall down on the good land, and on the dunghill, and on the houses. ... But they have not the same grace as those which spring up in rich soil, in as much as they are withered or plucked up.

Philosophy is not innately flawed but has only become so over the course of time. Its source is divine but it does not bind man to God in the religious sense, as does a Revelation. Preparatory for the Gospel, philosophy is incomplete without it. Philosophy is a ray of the divine light, but one that has been severed from its source and fragmented by the Promethean exercise of human reason (distinct from and inferior to the Intellect).

... just as the Bacchantes tore asunder the limbs of Pentheus, so the sects both of barbarian and Hellenic philosophy have done with truth, and each vaunts as the whole truth the portion which has fallen to its lot.

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110 Clement of Alexandria, str., 1.5.
111 Clement of Alexandria, str., 1.7.
112 Such an hierarchical vision of gnosis is also present in Philo Judaeus, again in an Enochian context: see de gigantibus (On the Giants) 13 (58-61).
113 Clement of Alexandria, str., 1.13.
Generally speaking, Tertullian gives ‘positive assessments of the culture of classical antiquity.’ He was, from his early years, a student of Stoicism and valued, for example, the work of Seneca the Younger (c.4 BC–65 AD) ‘whom we so often find on our side.’ Tertullian was involved in a synthesizing of Christian revelation and Greco-Roman philosophy but was extremely cautious in how he proceeded. Heresy, he claims, springs from pagan philosophy.

Indeed heresies are themselves instigated by philosophy. From this source came the Aeons, and I known not what infinite forms, and the trinity of man in the system of Valentinus, who was of Plato’s school. From the same source came Marcion’s better god, with all his tranquillity; he came of the Stoics. Then, again, the opinion that the soul dies is held by the Epicureans; while the denial of the restoration of the body is taken from the aggregate school of all the philosophers; also, when matter is made equal to God, then you have the teaching of Zeno; and when any doctrine is alleged touching a god of fire, then Heraclitus comes in. The same subject-matter is discussed over and over again by the heretics and the philosophers; the same arguments are involved.

Forced to choose between the world-denying dualism of Marcion and the pantheism espoused by some philosophers, Tertullian chose the latter as the least erroneous. He writes:

... the majority of the philosophers hesitated to assign a beginning and an end to the... world, lest its constituent elements, great as they undoubtedly are, should fail to be regarded as divine... It is, indeed, enough for me that natural elements, foremost in site and state, should have been more readily regarded as divine that as unworthy of God.

It is not philosophy itself that cause error but its misapplication. Tertullian objects to the use of philosophy as a criterion of the truth of Revelation. Instead, Revelation must be used as the criterion to evaluate the truth of philosophy. Christian philosophers were, according to Tertullian, ‘intent on making Christianity philosophically respectable. Making Christ

115 Tertullian, de anima (On the Soul) 20.
116 Tertullian, de praescriptione haereticorum (The Prescription Against Heresies) 20.
reasonable and respectable, however, Christian philosophers often made themselves heretics. Philosophy must, to use a well known phrase, be “the handmaid of theology” and not the other way around: Revelation has priority as the criterion of truth and philosophy must be adapted to it. Attempts to interpret and evaluate Scripture philosophically lead to heresy. Scripture has no need of philosophy for its interpretation: it provides its own hermeneutic tools and difficult passages can be understood by reference to other, thematically similar, passages. When Scripture is taken as a whole it interprets itself. Philosophy must, in its incorporation to Christianity, be re-formed in accordance with the principles of truth revealed in Scripture. Thus Tertullian famously proclaimed:

What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? what between heretics and Christians? Our instruction comes from “the porch of Solomon,” who had himself taught that “the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart.” Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition!

The truths revealed in the Christian Revelation must be taken axiomatically. Faith in the external manifestation of the divine leads to its confirmation by the Intellect, God’s interior manifestation, the “dowry of the soul.” Only when the soul is submitted to the “yoke of heaven” does it, in St Augustine’s words, ‘become worthy of knowing what [it] believe[s].’

Conclusion

“By their fruits ye shall know them.”

The fruits of the Christian synthesis of Jewish and Greek wisdom are many and varied. Jewish modes of knowledge and worship informed that of their Christian brothers and sisters, but so did the symbolic forms of the mystery religions prevalent in the Hellenic world in the first Christian centuries.

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120 Tertullian, de praescriptione haereticorum (The Prescription Against Heresies) 7.
121 St Augustine, de moribus ecclesiae catholicae (Of the Morals of the Catholic Church) 20.
Jewish realism mitigated the Hellenic tendency to abstraction and the Jewish allegiance to Truth railed against the philosophy that had become, in too many cases, sophistry.

Christianity finds a valid synthesis of the Jewish and Greco-Roman cultures amidst the turmoil of its first centuries. Christianity was, for the most part, able to assimilate elements of Jewish and Gentile cultures valuable to itself without compromising its own structural and symbolic integrity. In the creative tension of continuities and discontinuities that this required, a vision of the divine salvific economy emerged that was universal in its principles and discerning in its applications. By insisting on the Revelation as the principle criterion of Truth, Christianity was able to correct and incorporate into itself the intellectual life of the Greco-Roman civilization and reconnect it to a revealed religious tradition. In doing so, it would provide the Empire with the spiritual cohesion that it had lost. At the same time, Christianity was able to acknowledge its Jewish heritage without being bound by it and becoming simply another of the many Jewish sects.

The ante-Nicene insights of the *religio perennis* were not suppressed by the emerging orthodoxy and creedal formulations of the imperial Church but continue down through the ages. In the fifth century, St Augustine of Hippo, one of the most influential Christian thinkers of all time, famously wrote as he summed up the content of his life’s work:

> For that thing itself, which is now called the Christian religion, used to exist and was not lacking amongst the ancients from the beginning of the human race until Christ himself came in the flesh, from which time the true religion began to be called “Christian.” And after his resurrection and ascension into heaven, the Apostles had begun to proclaim him, and many believed; first in Antioch (as it is written) the disciples were called “Christians.” Therefore I have said: ‘This is the Christian religion in our time,’ not because it did not exist previously, but because it received this name in later times.122

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122 *‘Nam res ipsa, quae nunc christiana religio nuncupatur, erat et apud antiquos nec defuit ab initio generis humani, quo- usque ipse Christus veniret in carne, unde vera religio, quae iam erat, coepit appellari christiana. Cum enim eum post resurrectionem ascensionemque in caelum coepissent Apostoli praedicare, et plurimi crederent, primum apud Antiochiam, sicut scriptum est, appellati sunt discipuli “Christiani.” Propterea dixi: Haec est nostris temporibus christiana religio, non quia prioribus temporibus non fuit, sed quia posterioribus hoc nomen accepit.’ St Augustine of Hippo, *Retractationes*, 1.13.3. (PL 32.)* My translation. In quoting the first part
The *religio perennis* (in various forms and considering the Western tradition only) is also expounded by St Ambrose (c.338–397, another “Doctor of the Church”) and through the centuries by Hugh of St Victor (c.1078–1141), St Thomas Aquinas (c.1225–1274), and Meister Eckhart (1260–1328), Johannes Tauler (1300–1361) and Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464) amongst others. Although this idea was condemned by the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) and the Council of Florence (1442), by the 16th century the *religio perennis* was again under consideration and authorised by the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. Underutilised and often ignored or refuted, the *religio perennis* is nevertheless an essential aspect of the Christian vision with a distinguished lineage. It is not a novelty introduced into the faith but an ancient vision essential to an orthodox Christology.

Recognising man’s inherent spiritual or intellective capacity to perceive the Divine, Christianity recognised the presence of Christ in all men. Revealed fully in the Incarnation, Christ was nevertheless present outside of the formal Christian economy. In coming to comprehend the nature of its own Revelation, Christianity would discern the divine presence of Christ outside of the formal bounds of the Church and hence arrive at a vision of Christ’s salvific economy that encompasses all of creation. Consequentially, the vision of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ extends beyond the bounds of the formal *ecclesia*. At the heart of the Christian tradition lies a vision of the *religio perennis* that is a necessary corollary of the nature of Christ himself. Like all religions, Christianity perceives its own metaphysic as the fullest and most perfect possible but at the same time it recognises the presence of the One God at the heart of other religious visions and the righteous amongst them as members of the Mystical Body of Christ and denizens of the Kingdom of Heaven.

of this passage, Ananda Coomaraswamy remarks ‘Had he not retracted these brave words, the bloodstained history of Christianity might have been otherwise written!’ (*Am I My Brother’s Keeper?* p.46) and this is repeated by Whitall Perry in his *Treasury of Traditional Wisdom* (p.793). This understanding of Augustine’s *Retractationes* is, however, mistaken: the treatise is not a ‘retraction’ as the English title would suggest, but a summary or revisiting, as the latin *retractationes* makes clear. In this work, composed four years before his death, Augustine looks back over his life’s work and presents an overview and ‘fine tuning’ of his works and their teachings. 1.13 summarises his work *de vera religione* (On True Religion) and the passage here, 1.13.3, rearticulates and clarifies *de ver. relig.*, 10.19. Far from a “retraction” in the English sense, it is a reaffirmation!

123 Both, of course, Roman Catholic councils rather than ecumenical councils.
In Defiance of Natural Order:
The origins of “transhuman” techno-utopia

David Catherine

The notion that human beings are themselves getting better is quite obviously wrong. The quality of human beings is declining, even while the web of man’s infrastructure grows around him. Modern man is a Wizard of Oz, a shrunken soul in a mighty machine. Thus modern man has multiplied his means of communication with mobile phones, satellites, email, SMS—a whole array of devices—but then finds he has nothing to say or no one to whom to say it. He has a diminishing capacity to make any real contacts. He has prolific external means but no inner reality to share. Ours is the age of the space tourist: truly awesome technology devoted to truly trivial human beings.¹

Introduction

Traditional metaphysics asserts a divine order of reality that, at its unified origin (i.e. the qualified Absolute), is the supreme principle of cosmological order. In this context, terms such as transcendence and transformation refer to an ontological unveiling of the divine reality, a human “awakening” within the vertical metaphysic (axis mundi). This pre-eminent axis, permeating the entire seen and unseen cosmos, is marked by divine presence (al-hadhrat al-ilāhiya). The higher or principal orders of reality (and thus consciousness) are accordingly and appropriately described as “trans-personal,” or “supra-physical,” etc. These should not be confused with the phenomena of twenty-first century Trans-humanism.² This movement promotes bio-genetic and neurological transfiguration (e.g. life-extension, “mind-uploading,” artificial intelligence [A.I.], nanotechnology, cryonics, etc.) marketed under anchorless terms such as “enhancement” or

² The term “transhumanism” originated with Fereidoun M. Esfandiary (1930 – 2000 CE). Transhumanism has given rise to organizations such as the World Transhumanist Association.
“modification.” In a sense one might say that traditional “transformation” alludes to becoming fully “human,” whereas transhumanism aims at leaving the human state behind, an idea expressed in the origins of this term, which is shorthand for “transitory human.”

Traditional metaphysics views the transcendent divinity as pre-existent and primary; however it does not deny the integrity of the immanent level of being, including the natural order. To emphasize the essential reality of the divine order it becomes necessary to use terms such as “supra-sensory,” “meta-historical,” “supra-rational” or “trans-personal.” This is not an attempt to repudiate the senses, historical record, the rational mind, or the personal self; neither do these imply that the divine order is a distant or disconnected state. On the contrary, prophetic tradition speaks of divine Presence (al-Hadrah) and has indicated that the “Ground of Being” is ‘nearer to [us] than [our] jugular vein’ (Qur’an 50:16). The perceived distancing factor between the conditioned consciousness of the self (the temporal-relative nafs) and the unconditioned pure consciousness (the eternal-absolute Rūḥ) is considered proportionate to the degree of egotism of the self.³ If an image in a mirror appears vague or impossible to discern, this may be due to the extent of the layers of dust obscuring the mirror. To polish the mirror or to clarify the lens of perception is to bring into view, and into proximity, that which was thought to be far. Human proximity or remoteness to the divine reality must be considered from a qualitative perspective and not reduced to a quantitative “distance.”

Divine immanence implies that the sacred can be known in this world as theophany. Seyyed Hossein Nasr describes ‘the reflection of the Divinity in the mirror of created forms’ as a symbolic “showing” of God (viz. the divine attributes).⁴ Nasr continues,

To behold the cosmos as theophany is not to deny either the laws or the chain of cause and effect which pervade the cosmos but to view the cosmos and the forms it displays, with such diversity and regularity, as

³ By “egotism” I am not referring to the ego of formal psychological definition (i.e. the development of self); I am specifically referring to the narcissistic and divine-denying “commanding” self (i.e. nafs al-ammara).

reflections of Divine Qualities and ontological categories rather than a veil which would hide the splendour of the face of the Beloved.⁵

The Qur’an relates the following:

On the earth are Signs for those of assured faith, as also in yourself. Will you not then see? (51:20-21)

We will show them Our Signs upon the horizons and in themselves until it is quite clear to them that it is the truth. (41:53)

And among His Signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variations in your languages and your colours: verily, in that are Signs for those who know. (30:22)

As Frithjof Schuon says,

On the one hand, one must see God in Himself, beyond the world, in the Emptiness of Transcendence; on the other hand and ipso facto, one must see God everywhere: first of all in the miraculous existence of things and then in their positive and theomorphic qualities; once Transcendence is understood, Immanence reveals itself of itself.⁶

Similarly Rama Coomaraswamy remarks,

Both [Transcendence and Immanence] are realities. Transcendence without immanence cuts us off from the Divine; Immanence without transcendence cuts the Divine off from us. Both the Transcendent and the Immanent must go together because of the duality “Principle and Manifestation.” While the Supreme Principle in itself is neither transcendent nor immanent, but “That which It is,” from the perspective of the plane of manifestation, there must needs be a transcendent Creator, and the resulting creation must needs be embraced by immanence for its very existence.⁷

⁵ Ibid., p.197.
The natural or cosmological orders represent an “earthly” reflection of divine order. As Kenneth Oldmeadow notes,

The traditional mind perceives the natural world as a hierophany, a theophany, a revelation—in short, as a teaching about the Divine Order. It is so by way of its analogical participation in the Divine qualities, which is to say that natural phenomena are themselves symbols of higher realities. A symbol, properly defined, is a reality of a lower order which participates analogically in a reality of a higher order of being.8

Quoting Coleridge, Oldmeadow goes on to say,

Nature, then, is a teaching, a primordial Scripture. To “read” this Scripture, to take it to heart, is ‘to see God everywhere,’ to be aware of the transcendent dimension which is present in every cosmic situation, to see ‘the translucence of the Eternal through and in the temporal.’9

Through contemplation and understanding of the cosmological order we can come to an understanding of the divine order. In a process analogous to sympathetic resonance, this living primordial “language” gives valuable expression to supra-rational structures or influences inherent within human consciousness, which otherwise evade empirical method and are exceedingly difficult to comprehend or connect with due to the ontological limitations of the rational mind and its discursive logic. It is asserted that the ecosystemic or harmonic symbol is capable of conveying transformative meaning—for example, bringing understanding to the realities of balance/equilibrium (al-mīzan), cohesion (al-jāmi’) and unity (tawḥīd)—because human consciousness is considered interconnected and interdependent with natural order and consequently responds to ecological integrity, itself a theophanic reflection of harmonic principle (al-bāri).

Theophanic contemplation and understanding of the natural order brings these underlying interrelationships of human and nature into harmonic resonance, which in turn brings transformative meaning. To receive and integrate this theophany is to experience the divine harmonic composition as a vision of beauty. In true Platonic sense, this beauty is not only

9 Ibid., p.21.
expressed as immanent aesthesis but also participates in the transcendent reality of the divine, in that it cultivates a yearning for union with the divine Origin (viz. rūḥ al-quddūs): the pure consciousness gathered in a state of “oneness” (wahdaniya).

By extension we come to realise that the natural order—and the fact that humans exist in interconnected-interdependent relation with nature—demands recognition of manifest laws and an appropriate adherence to those laws. Regarding our response to this greater cosmology, Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri remarks,

The key issue is what is appropriate and to what end. If it is to realise, both individually and socially, the importance of balancing inner and outer realities and needs, then we are heading towards a healthy and fruitful evolvement. Otherwise, we will collectively suffer from a diminished world of suffocating brutality: a materially-efficient global village without the open spaces, village green and celebration of life; an industrial park with plastic flowers and plants visited by unhappy and overstressed grey people, pretending to be smart.  

The one who seeks a state of health and equilibrium places himself in the middle of the spectrum of opposites. One’s experiences of the outer, sensory, terrestrial will be balanced by the inner, meaning, and celestial. If any one of these aspects is not met with its opposite in any given act or situation, one experiences imbalance.

In the words of Imam Malik (c. 715-796 CE),

Whoever has the outer law without the inner reality has left the right way; whoever has the inner reality without the outer law is a heretic; whoever unites the two of them has realisation.

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Sethian gnosticism, utopianism, and transhuman extropianism

Sethian gnosticism was one of many diverse gnostic trends in the first to third centuries of our Common Era. As in most gnostic systems, the Sethians regarded creation as a “prison-house,” governed by an inferior god, the Demiurge, and his wicked angels or archons, cosmologically rendered as aeons. Popular Hellenistic Sethianism was an antinomian doctrine demonstrating a deep ambiguity towards physical existence, choosing to transcend the flesh, and the related religious “law,” by indulging in either the extravagances of the senses or else the personal psyche (cf. the Borborites, the Carpocrations, and the so-called Cainites as described by Philo of Alexandria). Third century Manichean gnostics went to the opposite extreme: practicing severe asceticism, mortification of the flesh, and viewing nature and women as “void of goodness,” subject to “darkness” and inherently “evil.”

Despite their differences the doctrines of the Sethians and the Manicheans suffered similar imbalance as a consequence of a loss of grounding in prophetic tradition, a severance of esoteric principle from

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13 According to Max More, Chairman of the Extropy Institute: ‘Extropianism is a transhumanist philosophy. The Extropian Principles define a specific version or “brand” of transhumanist thinking. Like humanists, transhumanists favour reason, progress, and values centred on our well being rather than on an external religious authority. Transhumanists take humanism further by challenging human limits by means of science and technology combined with critical and creative thinking. We challenge the inevitability of aging and death, and we seek continuing enhancements to our intellectual abilities, our physical capacities, and our emotional development. We see humanity as a transitory stage in the evolutionary development of intelligence. We advocate using science to accelerate our move from human to a transhuman or posthuman condition’ (www.maxmore.com/extprn3.htm; see also http://www.extropy.org).

14 “Sethian gnosticism” appears to have originated, in part, in the Mandaeian tradition, which was pre-Christian and pre-first century. Seth is named Sitil and is considered not only as the son of Adam but is also allegorically conceived as the “awakened soul” of Adam. In the Alf Trisar Suialia text of the Mandaeans, it is stated: ‘When [the cosmic pair] beheld children by divining [or testing] mysteries, Adam and Sitil [Seth] came into being, and yonder they called Seth “the mysteries of the soul” and they called Adam “the body,” because in that Place Adam was the blood and Seth was the soul. And in another sense, Adam was darkness of the eyes and Seth was vision, and Adam was Earth whilst in all the mysteries Seth is the Jordan, for all of them are connected with the Jordan’ (quoted in E. S. Drower, The Secret Adam: A Study of Nasoraean Gnosis, London: Oxford University Press, 1960, p.23).

15 Cf. Contemporary society’s “extreme sports” philosophy, as well as the “extreme entertainment” field in general. The innate drive towards the supra-physical—and the human desire to awaken into the timelessness of pure consciousness—have collapsed seemingly entirely into physical or sensory adrenalin-rush events.
authentic exoteric religious frameworks, and a progressive depreciation of principle and practice. These particular gnostic groups were arguably fringe offshoots of the more sober doctrines of the Alexandrian Therapeutae / Hermeticists, the Palestinian Essenes, the Nasurai-Sabi’un, the Buddhists and the Shiva-Shakti tradition (cf. Tantric philosophy). The Zadokite-Essenes (c. 4 BCE - 68 CE) actually expressed disdain for the Sethians, as encountered in Qumranic literature such as the Damascus Document.16 A similar disapproval of Sethian antinomianism was expressed by the Nazorai-Ebionite and Nasurai-Mandaean communities of Ya’qob (James the Righteous) and Yahya-Yohana (John the Baptist) respectively. In the Letter of James we read, ‘Do you not realise, you vain man, that faith without works is useless?’ and, ‘As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.’17

In this paper I assert that transhuman ideology resembles key aspects and attitudes of Sethian philosophy, though it must be understood that this is—psychologically speaking—an unconscious relationship (inversely manifested) and not the result of any direct doctrinal or traditional lineage. Sethian gnosticism, always at odds with the orthodox religious establishment, was attempting to restore (return to) the “paradisiacal” transcendent reality (pleroma or “fullness”) and thus escape cosmological conditioning, which it viewed as inherently defective and hostile to the liberty of Spirit.

By the time of the Renaissance and following New World trends in the wake of a declining religious authority, many emerging socio-political movements in pursuit of “liberty” ironically rejected the transcendent principle, while promoting the establishment and “fulfilment” of a utopian secular society. This approach to human development, social progress and geographic conquest was buffered by the philosophical implications of Cartesian dualism and the proto-positivist ideas of early secular humanism—effectively paving the way for the European colonisation of so-

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18 Positivism (proper) was a mid-nineteenth century philosophy developed by sociologist Auguste Comte (c. 1798-1857 CE). Comte asserted that scientific knowledge—“positively affirmed” through rigid scientific study of the data of sense experience (empiricism)—was the sole source of authentic knowledge. Proto-positivist ideas (though yet to be systematically theorised in a formal philosophical framework) appeared common to many thinkers of the Scientific and Enlightenment eras.
called “lesser” foreign societies, the industrialisation of the nineteenth century and the institutionalisation of environmental degradation.\(^{19}\)

It was in the wake of the Industrial Revolution and the neoclassical economic system—resulting in the radical displacement of human society from the natural world and from natural order—that a deeply anomic outlook emerged. From within this psycho-social despair arose the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900 CE). The philosophy of Nihilism and the “Will to Power” subsequently held great influence over many modern philosophers. Nietzsche’s concept of the Übermenschen, which we might well compare with the Sethian “unshakeable race,”\(^{20}\) not only influenced elitist aspects of fascism and Nazism, but was also part-inspiration for the transhuman movements of our twenty-first century.

While (arguably) not indulging in the conventional gratification of the senses, transhumanist philosophy is clearly susceptible to conceptual or ideological obesity. If “God is dead” (as Nietzsche would have it) and the metaphysical orders denied (as positivist philosophy would have it) then ‘the Word, becoming flesh’ collapses into a state whereby intellectual abstraction rules supreme and is “freed”—seemingly “absolutely”—to manifest as “innovative concept,” “exploitable raw-materials” and “the manufacturing process.”\(^{21}\) This metaphysical collapse feeds back into the world at large (as the term “techno-utopia” suggests), resulting in the ongoing depreciation of natural order and a corresponding loss of the sacred. As Tom Cheetham remarks,

> ...Vattimo’s point, and Heidegger’s too, is, I think, that when everything has become “objective,” when all things are reduced to objects for manipulation, then anything goes. There are no more natural boundaries to be respected, nothing has an inside or an outside, no

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individual can have more than an evanescent coherence, everything is understood as cobbled together from parts that are subject to recombination by nature or by technology. Permanence and stability have been replaced by perpetual metamorphoses... What this suggests is that all boundaries are in some sense arbitrary, capable of dissolution and restructuring...

Nihilism as the ungrounding of all facts and the dissolution of all boundaries is expressed through the corrosive dissolving power of technology and of modern economics as its inevitable extension.²²

Ibrahim Kalin contrasts this with the traditional view:

In sharp contrast to the modern view of nature which reduces the order of nature to everlasting change and impermanence, the traditional sciences look upon nature as the abode of both change and permanence. Although the common-sense experience tends to see nature as a perennially changing structure, the world of nature displays also a remarkable continuity, perseverance and harmony as we see it in the preservation of the species and the endurance of natural forms. For Nasr, this double-aspect of nature proves beyond any doubt the Divine quality in nature: the world of nature has not been left to the infinite succession of haphazard and senseless changes which admit no telos in the cosmos. On the contrary, nature contains in itself the principles of change and permanence simultaneously and points to a “big picture” in which all of its parts are recognised as forming a meaningful unity and harmony. As Titus Burckhardt reminds us, ‘the Greek word cosmos means “order,” implying the ideas of unity and totality. Cosmology is thus the science of the world inasmuch as this reflects its unique cause, Being.’ Defined as such, the order of nature or the cosmos cannot be other than the reflection of a higher principle on the level of relative existence.²³

The association of transhumanism with Sethianism might appear contrived; yet we would do well to consider the following parallelisms. Each has antinomian inclinations; both depreciate the natural order; and both project an ideology of a supreme “being” (though ill-conceived as a

creaturely existence in transhumanism) which appears as a humanist
inversion of the various traditional understandings of the Perfect Man (e.g.
the Nasurai-Sabi’un doctrine of the “Perfect Man,” the “Standing One,” the
“Man of Light” (*Enosh Uthra*). I contend that the ideologies of the humanist
utopian movements and the twenty-first century extropians (i.e. “techno-
utopian” transhumanists) stem from the same underlying psychological
tendency to confuse what is secondary, relative, temporal, limited and
conditioned (hence diverse, plural and subject to duality), with that which
is primary, absolute, eternal, unlimited and unconditioned (unified, unique
and primary Origin). There is a projection of what is essentially inner
psychological issues (e.g. hyper-addictions, personal insecurities, obsessions
with aging, physical limitation, death, boredom, etc.) onto material
existence, which is inherently relative and temporal.

For the ideologies we are considering, the world or the natural order is a
“prison-house” imposing limits on their “commanding self’s” (*nafs al-
ammara*) personal ambition. The result is a seemingly irressible and
ultimately destructive urge to alter the very fabric of reality in order to suit
one’s personal tastes. This can be ascertained in Sethian antinomanism,
twentieth century techno-industrialism and in the modification technologies
of the transhumanists. One need only consider the current state of the
world in terms of a fragmenting human consciousness and a declining
ecological order to realise that these ideologies have resulted in very little
authentic development of self, but have exceeded themselves in the areas of
materialism, licentiousness and mythic inflation.24 This is all too predictable
given these paradigms are not grounded in Reality. As Ali Lakhani notes,

The authentic Self in tradition is spiritual, which is to say that it is one
with the substance of all reality. All spiritual questing is at once a search
for an Origin (to which one returns) and a Center (in which one
reposes), which are in substance identical. These correspond to the
Heart of oneself, the genuine Self which is in essence the One Spirit that
subsists in all reality. It is this Self that must be understood as the
Urbemensch (the Nietzschean “Superman”), as Ananda K.

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24 See T. Roszak, *Where the Wasteland Ends: Politics and Transcendence in Post-Industrial
Resource Addiction in the Technological Age’ (term paper submitted for Environmental
Management and Policy class, *Energy and Society*, University of North Carolina, April
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Coomarswamy noted in his essay on Nietzsche, not the psychic or sensational self of common parlance or of the ill-termed “Nazi gnosis.” The Nietzschean “Will to Power” or its Blakean equivalent of “Energy” (symbolised by the “Tyger” whose “immortal symmetry” cannot be framed) are thus to be understood strictly as faculties of the authentic Self or the “Inner Man,” and not as the personal cravings or lower impulses of the “Outer Man.” Mistake the source and it is easy then to misunderstand the impulse emanating from it. It is this misreading that informs the view of those who mistake licentiousness for freedom and amorality for virtue.25

This confusion is also at the heart of misunderstandings about the nature of “freedom.” As Timothy Scott observes,

To say Relative is to say Manifestation, which, in turn, is to say limitation. Thus, paradoxically, the limitation of the Relative satisfies the achievement of the All-Possibility, and with it Divine or Absolute Freedom, is maintained. From the exoteric perspective Divine Freedom comes at the cost of human freedom. However, this point of view rests on a confusion of the two levels of Relative and Absolute, or Being and Beyond-Being. Thus the exoterist mistakenly places the Divine Foreknowledge—itself beyond Time in virtue of being at the principal level—within the realm of Being. Divine Freedom relates to the Absolute. Human freedom, at least exoterically, relates to the Relative.26

Divine “freedom,” the unbounded or the unlimited is absolute only at the supra-sensory or trans-personal level. Yet when transhumanism speaks of the freedom of “transcending” so-called limitations and defects, it is not

25 A. Lakhani, ‘Umberto Eco, Fascism and Tradition’, Sacred Web: A Journal of Tradition and Modernity 11, 2003, pp.10-11. It is important to clarify what the Sophia Perennis identifies as the “authentic Self” (i.e. Rūḥ / Atman), and what Tasawwuf identifies as the “essential self” (i.e. nafs al-kamīla). In the tradition of Tasawwūf the nafs (“conditioned self”) is considered temporal, relative and subject to duality, whereas the Rūḥ (“unconditioned Self”) is considered eternal, absolute and unified (i.e. beyond subject-object polarity). For a relevant contemporary presentation of the cosmology, nature and role of the nafs and Rūḥ, see Haeri, The Journey of the Self: A Sufi Guide To Personality and Witnessing Perfection: A Sufi Guide.
referring to a vertical unveiling of the unconditioned, unbounded and ever-
perfect pure consciousness—an order of consciousness implicitly denied in
transhumanism; instead it is referring solely to the transfiguration of the
existential, or conditioned, horizontal plane of existence. Transhumanism
should therefore be considered a neo-utopian and quasi-Darwinian
philosophy filtered through techno-idealism.27

The World Transhumanist Association has given the following two
formal definitions for transhumanism [my comments are italicized in
brackets].28

1. The intellectual and cultural movement that affirms the possibility and
desirability of fundamentally improving the human condition through
applied reason, especially by developing and making widely available
technologies to eliminate aging [and why not—the “Trojan Horse”
strategically relied on the vanity of Troy] and to greatly enhance human
intellectual, physical, and psychological capacities [i.e. this is not a trans-
personal or trans-egoist “transformation” but clearly a “self” centred
affirmation].

2. The study of the ramifications, promises, and potential dangers of
technologies that will enable us to overcome fundamental human
limitations [does this include the ramifications of neo-positivism, scientific
reductionism, the conceptual collapse of the metaphysic, and a loss of the
sacred?], and the related study of the ethical matters involved in
developing and using such technologies [but not from those groups they
classify as “bioconservatives” or “bioluddites”].

Although enjoying a loose and somewhat convenient affiliation with
post-structuralism (making absolute the concept of “loop-hole”),29 the telos
of transhumanism is to be able to re-engineer or re-configure the natural

27 Transhumanism (like posthumanism) views itself as a “post-evolutionary” movement; it
desires to control its own evolution whereby “natural selection” would give way to
“deliberate change,” referred to as “participant evolution” (see N. Bostrom, The
29 Cf. Post-structuralism’s aversion to any fixed ontological/epistemological framework;
compare also Sethian antinomian rhetoric.
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order (viz. human bio-genetics and neuro-programming) so as to create “the perfect transhuman entity” (cf. the Nietzschian Übermensch; the Sethian “unshakeable race”). This ultimate transhuman entity is hoped to be an immortal of technologically enhanced physiology (via software-hardware interfacing) who is effectively “god” of his/her own evolutionary development, susceptible neither to “sickness” nor “suffering,” which transhumanism views as a result of innate bio-neurological defect or inefficiency. Transhumanism goes on to fantasize of a “non-stupid” society of genetically and neurologically perfected beings that are finally able to co-exist on this planet (or perhaps, more enticingly, in outer-space) where “happiness” and “satisfaction” (according to the transhuman paradigm) are to be attained “absolutely.” Running parallel to these philosophies are trends relating to “robotic entertainment” and “artificial intelligence,” which anticipate the development not only of “perfected” transhumans but also of entities that are simultaneously considered to be completely “entertained” or “entertaining” (i.e. never suffering boredom or being boring). As Cheetham observes, ‘all of this points to the dominance of “one, absolute, total, all-encompassing God—the God of technology”.’

The transhumanist desire to annihilate the human being into a technocentric utopian society, where technology is paradigmatic, all-encompassing and all-powerful—a “technological singularity”—inverts (and thus inversely affirms) the perennial truth that the human being was created to ultimately attain trans-personal “union” (wahidiya/ahadiya) with the divine Absolute at the level of pure Consciousness, which is the only real, truly all-encompassing, primary power, origin and sustainer. La ilaha illa ‘llah: Nothing exists absolutely, save for the Divine Absolute. Accordingly, Cheetham responds,

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30 The transhumanist’s desire to live in outer-space reflects how a denial or repression (i.e. “collapse”) of the meta-physics invariably manifests as some obsession with the extra-terrestrial.
32 The “divine Absolute” here refers to pure Being, which is to say, the “qualified Absolute.” “Trans-personal union” refers to union in the sense of identification with, and hence knowledge of, the qualified Absolute; there is also the non-qualified Absolute, the unattainable or unknowable Essence, Beyond-Being (al-Dhāt, nirguna-Brahman, Ayn, supra-esse, Deus absconditus). Pure Consciousness is considered “absolute” in relation to creation, existence and the self, but is conceptually “relative” to the unmanifest non-qualified Absolute.
The “open sea” that Nietzsche celebrates is not the “ocean without a shore” that Ibn ‘Arabi finds at the end of the mystical quest. There is a world of difference between hubris and mystical poverty, between übermensch and the darwish.33

Transhumanism conceptually collapses the supra-physical absolute into a physical or material “absolutism.” The aim is to be able to transmute physical matter in order to transform society for the better. However, with this transformation we find such problematic issues as mono-culture, mythic inflation of the (relative) personal self or commercial brand, corporate genetic manipulation, epistemological fascism, fundamentalist scientism, rampant techno-industrialism, ecological degradation, theophanic depreciation, a loss of the sacred, and (significantly) a loss of the true human depth that harmonizes with the supra-physical divine attributes. As I have written elsewhere,

One of the many disastrous consequences of an ongoing repression of [the] trans-personal Ground of Being—and the mistaken assumption of the Absolute by a relative entity or self—is epitomized in our techno-industrial pursuit to convert the earth into one large global factory—reinforced by multinational monopoly... This apparent narrowing of human perspective is the logical result of paradigmatic trends linking back to the so-called Age of Enlightenment. With the advent of Cartesian dualism, positivist philosophy and a corresponding scientific reductionism—hence an increased denial of all metaphysical realities—these paradigmatic trends were naturally followed by a human failure to correctly grasp the reality of the divine Absolute and a corresponding inability to perceive nature and cosmos as sacred theophany. These misperceptions and repressions consequently and inevitably created destructive inversions of essential timeless truths, and these distortions now find projection in society as inflated “absolutisms”—psychologically and ideologically perpetuated by the materialist self as it wanders in narcissistic ignorance.34

The prophetically recognised divine attributes, such as the All-Pure, All-Powerful, the Exalted, All-Knowing, Most-Beautiful, the Unique-One, the

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Unconditioned, Unbounded, Unlimited, Absolute, Ever-Living, Ever-Perfect, etc., are being collapsed and conveniently misappropriated by the conceptually-obese self (nafs),\(^35\) which can never become absolute, eternal or unlimited because its very existence is relative, temporal and thus limited.\(^36\) Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri notes,

The great [human] paradox will dissolve by the discovery that human nature comprises two divergent entities belonging to two different... domains. One entity is the self [nafs], which is worldly and has physical and outwardly definable aspects; the other is the soul [Rūḥ], which is the seat of consciousness and the source of life; it is “heavenly,” unseen and intangible.

The self can take on the negative attributes of meanness, arrogance and other egotistic traits when it faces the black hole of self assertion. The self will only stop mimicking and being a parody of the soul when it realises its total dependency upon it and gives up its pretences of deserving to be acknowledged and honoured.\(^37\)

Keeping in mind the characteristics of the self, as a relative, conditioned, limited and temporal entity, it is important to grasp the fact that the space-time cosmos the self inhabits does not simply express concepts of duality; rather, it is manifest as duality. The keys to cosmological duality are balance, equilibrium and harmony within a system of interconnected and interdependent relations, fostered through knowledge of, and real-time access to, the supreme principle, which is also our Ground of Being—

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\(^35\) E.g. Attempts to eliminate aging or desiring physical immortality.
\(^36\) The evolved, transformed or “essential” self (nafs al-kamila) is capable of reflecting the divine attributes, but it does so by virtue of the fact that it has cognition of, or is aligned with, the trans-personal Spirit (Rūḥ). Spirit is not only the source of one particular human (or group’s) existence but is simultaneously this very moment (and moment after moment) the absolute source and sustainer of all humanity, as well as all creation. If the divine attributes are incorrectly or absolutely assumed (out of context) by the lower egocentric self (nafs al-ammara), they become negatively inverted and oppressively projected into the world through the agency of vice. Those who have little concept of, or aspiration towards, the inner delights and sanities of their religion but are driven by their own fear, hate and anger are often the ones who aspire towards terrorism and torture as a means by which to “purify” the world. This is simply the projection of lower tendencies, confusion and inner fragmentation onto the outside world. As the great saint-poet Jalal al-Dīn Rumi once remarked: “Ill-disciplined people set fire to the landscape.”
“nearer to us than nearness itself.” It is this metaphysical balance or equilibrium, within the greater context of interconnectedness and interdependence, that is seemingly lost to Sethian gnosticism, utopianism and transhuman extropianism.

It is self-delusion to think that we can bio-genetically or neurologically alter human beings—thus subverting ontological order—and not have this adversely affect the greater ecological or natural order. What is essentially required is not a technological “enhancement” of the human being, but instead an actual rehabilitation of the human consciousness, which is currently radically dispersed and susceptible to fragmentation. According to Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee,

The arrival of human consciousness was a big step in planetary evolution, and the development of human consciousness has been central to the development of the planet. With our narrow cultural focus on the outer material world, we are unaware of this; we tend to see progress in material terms. But the true measure of a civilization are not the monuments it leaves behind, its sciences or the sophistication of its weapons or the standard of living its citizens enjoy, but the quality of the consciousness it fosters. The real evolution is the evolution of consciousness. And the next step in planetary evolution requires that we wake up to the central role that consciousness plays in it, and that we recognise our consciousness as part of the consciousness of the whole and step into the awareness and responsibility that brings.

38 It is important to note that by stating physicality—and, by extension, a physical world in time and space (subject to duality and plurality)—we are simultaneously acknowledging, to a certain degree, the reality of dispersion (viz. a dispersed consciousness). The manifest world is not an absolute solid/permanent order of reality and is thus continually subject to varying degrees and states of dissolution and re-creation, and hence movement and dynamism. Dispersal through a process of involution into time, space and physicality is thus an inevitable factor in the physical, manifest or created realms. However, integral to our understanding of these space-time domains, and the health thereof, is a dynamic state of equilibrium, which ensures and maintains order (i.e. kosmos) within the seen and unseen domains. To acknowledge, in the Platonic sense, that “Beauty is the Splendour of the True,” is to inevitably acknowledge harmony and equilibrium (both reflective of permanent divine attributes) as being desirable states in a multidimensional and multifaceted cosmos. Therefore, equilibrium and cosmological order are considered essential to the “rehabilitation” of human consciousness due to them being interconnected and interdependent.
Our collective myths are more than a story we tell ourselves about the world—they shape the way we live in it, and even more fundamentally affect how the energy of life itself can flow. The myth of the past era gave rise to the idea of science as a purely objective pursuit and allowed us to believe we could impose our will upon the natural world. This has become such a dominant view of our world that we have even forgotten that it is a myth, a product of our consciousness. As a result, though we may see the connection between our actions and the pollution and ecological imbalance that are sickening the world, we fail to see the underlying cause, the myth that has made those actions appear logical and acceptable, and so we cannot trace our situation to its real source: our consciousness. It is our consciousness that has created this ailing world.39

Although transhumanism promotes and embraces the ethic of clean(er) technologies, which will be less harmful to the natural environment, it fails to see that its primary aspiration to bio-genetically or neurologically enhance or modify the human being (i.e. the microcosm) will inevitably impinge upon the outer macrocosm. Oldmeadow explains,

The peculiar position of the human being can also be illuminated by recourse to the traditional cosmological principle of the microcosm/macrocosm, expressed most succinctly perhaps in the Hermetic maxim, “as above, so below.” In brief, man is not only in the universe but the universe is in man: ‘there is nothing in heaven or earth that is not also in man.’40

This is an immutable metaphysical law and it is critical that we grasp its implications. To reconfigure the neurological or bio-genetic structures of humans is to manipulate human consciousness according to the dictates of a reductionist technocratic mindset that explicitly denies the supra-physical divine Principle sustaining cosmological order. As a consequence, human life, purpose, cognition, the supra-rational intellect and, in effect, the entire interconnected and interdependent spectrum of consciousness (both inner and outer) are “absolutely” reduced to the sole concerns of only one

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(contextually minor) zone of consciousness within the greater spectrum or whole. Transhumanism perceives this as a most healthy rationalisation; an exalted display of “reason.” Yet pure “rationalism,” according to the logic of the supra-rational Intellect, appears quite irrational.

Interconnectedness, interdependence, and the required balance
If natural order forms part of the theophany of the greater whole and if human consciousness is to be considered interconnected and interdependent with natural order, then it would be impossible for transhuman ideals not to disrupt, in one way or another, the ecological and theophanic orders. Accordingly Cheetham remarks,

The “real work” for us is simultaneously a spiritual, ethical and physical struggle. “Like” can only be known by “like”: this means that thought and being are inseparable, that ethics and perception are complementary. The form of the soul is the form of your world. This fundamental unity of the faculties of human cognition and the world to which they give access is that eternal pagan substrate of all religion... This sympathy is at once perceptual and cognitive and requires an attitude towards reality that the modern world has nearly completely forgotten. It is a stance towards reality that gives weight to the display of the image, denying the schism between the inner and the outer, the subjective and the objective.41

As I have noted elsewhere, ‘When we think or speak of cosmos or nature, we tend to perceive or portray it as an environmental form and substance existing in the world “out-there” somewhere’.42 However, the human mind is inextricably intertwined with the natural world and therefore responds to ecological integrity, as well as affects it.

There are essentially two types of ecology: mainstream or “Shallow Ecology” and “Deep Ecology.” An ecosystem is commonly defined as a dynamic complex of plant, animal and micro-organism communities and the so-termed “non-living” environment, all interacting as a functional unit. Despite this “shallow” ecological definition, humans do form an integral part of the planetary ecosystem and its various sub-systems. Deep Ecology

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42 Catherine, Nature, Theophany and the Rehabilitation of Consciousness, p.50. The following paragraphs revisit some key ideas from this paper.
developed out of the recognition that humans are invariably connected to all living entities and ecosystemic processes (hence the terms *interconnectedness* and *interdependence*). Deep Ecology sees the ecological predicament as a crisis of anthropologic consciousness whereby ecological functioning and health is affected by the human self’s perception of itself, the world and our value systems. Similarly, ecopsychology—the term is credited to Theodore Roszak from his book *The Voice of the Earth*—attempts to understand the often ignored or misunderstood reality of consciousness, and its interconnected-interdependent relationship with the physical/material world, within the context of the present ecological crisis.

The natural world is an integral part of the spectrum of consciousness and intimately linked to human consciousness and its health. Not only have millennia of shamanism and metaphysical studies made this shared reality abundantly clear but also the secular fields of ecopsychology and quantum physics have discovered interconnectivity and interdependence between consciousness and the so-called material universe—to the point that we now need to collectively re-evaluate the perceived (Cartesian) schism between the two. If, according to the most progressive fields of study, human consciousness is shown to be interconnected and interdependent with the natural world and thus natural order, then a significant cause of the ecological crisis rests on the way that humanity views itself and its relation to the natural environment; how we perceive of, or ascribe value to self, nature and cosmos. Ecological stability is invariably related to the degree of ontological stability and integration within human consciousness.

It is precisely as a result of a human crisis of consciousness that destructive attitudes, desires and perceptions are formed and projected outwardly, thereby exacerbating the crisis of ecosystem, social-system and signalling a disruption in human consciousness that interacts with these systems. A mirror cannot help but reflect: fragmentation of consciousness will eventually manifest in some form of depression, neurosis, psychosis or identity disorder, which in turn will lead to instances of abuse, fragmentation of self, of family, of community, of society, and of the natural or ecological order. “As within, so without,” means that the outer world will inevitably reflect the human condition, and *vice versa*, resulting in a feedback-loop with serious consequences for all life on earth.\(^{43}\)

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\(^{43}\) Alternatively: “as above, so below.” Nasr remarks: “The Earth is bleeding from wounds inflicted upon it by a humanity no longer in harmony with Heaven and therefore in constant
Transhumanism, despite its intellectual claims and its apparent concern for ethics, profoundly misunderstands the greater cosmological unfolding, including the purpose of human existence within this larger metaphysical framework. As Rodney Blackhirst remarks,

...the great productive surge of the modern revolution inevitably involves the further deterioration of man’s primal integrity—machines exteriorize human faculties, technological man is hell-bent on a strangely misconceived quest to make himself redundant, thinking that this somehow fulfils all human dreams. But “transhuman” is really sub-human. “Robo-buddies” are the proposed solution to the biosocial loneliness of an advanced, atomized ultra-selfish society, but there is no technological solution yet—other than sedatives—for metaphysical longing.44

The utopian or extropian transhumanist goal is a metaphysical absurdity, and a dangerous one at that, since the very reality and nature of cosmological existence is that of (dynamic) interplay and equilibrium between complementary opposites, e.g. light/shadow; heat/cold; birth/death, joy/sadness; etc. In recognition of the nature and dynamics of cosmological order, both seen and unseen, the Qur’an relates,

The sun and moon both run with precision. The stars and the trees all bow down in adoring prostration. He erected heaven and established the balance [emphasis mine]. (55:1-5)

And among His Signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variations in your languages and your colours: verily, in that are Signs for those who know. (30:22)

The attempt to raise one or the other relativity to absolute status will inevitably result in a severe backlash by the respective repressed complementary-opposite. The only way to move beyond the interplay of this duality is to transcend (metaphysically-speaking) these opposites. Real “transcendence” or “qualified non-dualism” or “non-qualified (pure) non-

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dualism” belong to an entirely different order of consciousness and have precious little to do with techno-idealism, arrogant scientism or “reason.” Nothing of what we commonly perceive as “mind” or “existential affairs” can perceive of, or contain, this Reality. Only pure Being (pure Consciousness) is able to attain cognition/gnosis of this Reality, since they are ultimately consubstantial—“one without a second,” beyond subject-object polarity. This pure Consciousness is innate, primary and need not be outwardly “acquired”; it just needs to be recognised and realised within the very core, so-to-speak, of the human Being.

There is no need to subject the natural environment, including human biology, genetics, and neurology, to techno-industrial “enhancement,” quite simply because the existential remedy—and metaphysical technique—is innate to humanity and has been so since the dawn of human consciousness. As we are told,

We offered the Trust to the heavens, the earth and the mountains. They refused it and were afraid, and man accepted it. (Qur’an 33:72)

And He taught Adam the Names of all things. (2:31)

And certainly We created man—and We know what his mind suggests to him—and We are nearer to him than his jugular vein. (59:16)

And according to Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib,

Your sickness is from you—but you do not perceive it; your remedy is within you—but you do not sense it; you presume that you are a small entity—whereas within you is enfolded the entire universe. You are indeed the evident book, by whose alphabet the hidden becomes manifest; therefore you have no need to look beyond yourself, what you seek is within you, if only you reflect.

The divine truth (haqiqah) and gnosis (ma’rifah) refer to insight and unveiling; they are not “products” that are going to be designed, engineered, programmed, manufactured, patented or uploaded by an “intellectually enhanced” transhumanist sometime in the idealized techno-aware future.

45 The “adamic” consciousness and the meta-historical divine attributes (asmā al-hūsna).
Unfortunately, far from a remembrance, realization and return to pure Being, it appears as though we suffer from a catastrophic amnesia and have inherited millennia-long fixations with materiality and sensory appeasement, often at the expense of the many other subtle or more essential faculties, states or stations of self. Sadly, the transformation of the lower, egocentric self (nafs al-ammara) into a more evolved or integrated self (nafs al-kamila)—in unison with pure consciousness—is becoming stagnant in an endless soap-opera adaptation of the “fall” of Adam.47 “Adam” or the “adamic consciousness,” mythopoetically represents the human archetype and prototype; his “forgetfulness” and dispersal of consciousness are our daily inheritance.

The adamic myth is neither complete nor the archetypal journey fulfilled without the revelation that a realised awakening into pure consciousness (ruh al-quddus) is divinely programmed within us, for:

I was a hidden treasure,
and out of love to become known
I created the worlds (hadith qudsi)

The significance and irony of this prophetic life-transaction become clear when we refer to the phenomenon of artificial intelligence and the parallel quest for an obediently serving robot. Both can be said to be the sum of our own artificiality, animated by a pale projection of the “illumination” we deny within our own consciousness: a denial of the “Light of lights.”48 This primary unified consciousness has also been referred to as the “redeemed adamic consciousness” and, mythopoetically speaking, the “light” or “flaming gold” of the Holy Grail.

47 From a unified consciousness into a space-time dimension of duality, and the resulting “worldly” dispersal to be endured. Shaykh Fadhlla Haeri explains: “Although Adam was in the garden he did not realise its perpetual blissfulness. The descent to earth and the experiences of pain and pleasure, good and bad, light and darkness are necessary foundations to understanding the nature of harmony and unity. Thus, our experience of distance from the original divine “gatheredness” and restless worldly dispersion is in order to ascend back to the original oneness, which is encoded within every human soul’ (Haeri, Witnessing Perfection: A Sufi Guide, p.9). Haeri continues: ‘We had to descend to the world of multiplicity so as to climb the ladders of consciousness to unity’ (ibid., p.26).
48 In the tradition of Tasawwuf this supreme prophetic Light is referred to as an-Nūr Mohammedi.
If we cannot turn with awareness, love, knowledge and gratitude towards the Ground of Being, then predictably (but for the most part unconsciously) we will obsess about infusing a technological product with consciousness in order that it will come to know, love, praise and serve us! This is a distorted inversion of the need for divine awakening, reflected in our ongoing quest to replicate consciousness, accrue fame and find social acceptance—currently being projected onto commercial products and technological inventions. This may be considered a projection of a repressed archetype.

If the supra-physical and trans-personal Absolute is (conceptually) collapsed into an “absolute” transfiguration of material substance, including neural pathways and genetic mapping, this will only mark the beginning of a torturous future for those awake to what it truly means to be human, including those sensitive to theophany. The only remedy for “transhuman” reductionism is the trans-personal or trans-egoic approach, that is, a transformation of subjective self-consciousness.

Are we, yet again—much like the Holy Grail extravaganzas in recent years—witnessing a profound misinterpretation of the (metaphysical) alchemical way?

Someone said, “There is something I have forgotten.” There is one thing in the world that should not be forgotten. You may forget everything except that one thing, without there being any cause for concern. If you remember everything else but forget that one thing, you will have accomplished nothing. It would be as if a king sent you to a village on a specific mission. If you went and performed a hundred other tasks, but neglected to accomplish the task for which you were sent, it would be as though you had done nothing. The human being therefore has come into the world for a specific purpose and aim. If one does not fulfil that purpose, one has done nothing. We proposed the faith unto the heavens, and the earth, and the mountains; and they refused to undertake it, and were afraid of it; but the human being undertook it: and yet truly, he was unjust to himself, and foolish [Qur’an 33:72].

Voices of the Fire:
Understanding theurgy

Algis Uždavinys

It is a sacrilege not to preserve the immortality of the soul, raising it to the
level of the holy and uniting it to the divine with bonds which cannot be
broken or loosened, but by contrast to pull and drag downwards the divine
which is within us, confining it to the earthly, sinful and Giant- or Titan-
like prison. (Damascius, *Phil.Hist.* 19 Athanassiadi)

Let us become fire, let us travel through fire. We have a free way to the
ascent. The Father will guide us, unfolding the ways of fire; let us not
flow with the lowly stream from forgetfulness. (Proclus, *De philosophia
Chaldaica*, fr.2)

Defining theurgy

Contemporary Western scholars habitually repeat the assumption that the
term *theourgia* was coined in the exotic circles of those misguided semi-
Oriental (and, therefore, “marginal”) miracle-workers who imagined that
the road to salvation lies not in the bright palace of “reason” à la Sextus
Empiricus, but in the pious hieratic rites. Consequently it is argued that on
analogy with the term *theologia* (“speaking of the divine thing”) these
miracle-workers invented *theourgia*, namely, doing divine things, performing
sacramental works.

Many modern scholars too straightforwardly affirm this rather artificial
dichotomy. However, from a traditional perspective, rites may also be said
to “speak” and may include all kinds of *logoi*. For example, in ancient
Egyptian ritual, speech not only makes the archetypal realm of noetic
realities manifest in the liturgical realm of visible symbolic tokens and
actions, but also performatively accomplishes theurgical transition and
transposition of the cultic events into the divine realm, thereby establishing
a relationship between the domain of noetic (*akhu*) Forms and the series of
manifestation (*kheperu, bau*).\(^1\) In this hieratic context, the term *akhu* means “radiant power,” “noetic light,” “solar intelligence,” and is closely related with the conception of eidetic and demiurgic name (*ran*, or *ren*). Only the gods (*neteru*) at the level of intelligible and intellective principles, iconographically depicted by the great Ennead (*pesedjet*), are able to use the “radiant power of words” (*akhu typyw-ra*) in their truly creative ontological sense. As Jan Assmann remarks,

Sacred, radiantly powerful words report an otherworldly, divine sphere of meaning that is imposed on the reality of this world in a manner that explains and thus makes sense of it. Instead of supplying definitions, Egyptians would state names, that is, the sacred and secret names of things and actions that the priests had to know to exercise the radiant power of the words.\(^2\)

Scholars of the likes of E. R. Dodds and his predecessors take it as dogma that *theourgia* is an invention of Chaldean Platonists. Admittedly, there is little doubt that the practice of pseudonymity is evident in Neo-Platonism, but pseudonymity itself does not necessarily diminish the intrinsic veracity of the content of a particular tradition. Yet the language used by Dodd’s and others is uncomfortably dismissive. They talk of *theourgia* as a dubious creation of those Chaldean philosophers who they accuse of “forging” the so-called *Chaldean Oracles*. Similarly such scholars appear to almost take pleasure in ridiculing the Ephesian theurgist Maximus and in mocking those who, instead of talking about the distant transcendent gods, allegedly “create” them, following “the superstitions of the time.”\(^3\) This almost scandalous “creation of gods” through the methods provided by certain telestic science (*hē telestikē epistēmē*) is often deliberately misunderstood.

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1 I have considered the Egyptian theory of divine speech/names, including the specifics of transmission and questions of historical context in my forthcoming paper, ‘Metaphysical symbols and their function in theurgy.’ It is worth recognising here that, as Gregory Shaw points out, ‘Neither Iamblichus nor any of his Platonic successors provide concrete examples of how names, sounds, or musical incantations were used in theurgic rites. There is a great wealth of evidence from nontheurgical circles, however, to suggest that theurgists used the *asema onomata* (“meaningless words”) according to Pythagorean cosmological theories and a spiritualisation of the rules of grammar’ (*Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus*, University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995, p.183).


For Dodds, it is an ‘animation of magic statues in order to obtain oracles from them’. This sounds like a reinterpretation (employing “magic” in a derogatory sense) of Proclus, who says that the telestic art, by using certain symbols (*dia tinōn sumbolon*), establishes on earth places fitted for oracles and statues of the gods (*kai chrēstēria kai agalmata theon hidrushthai epi gēs*). The term *telestikē* is derived from the verb *telein* (to consecrate, to initiate, to make perfect). It is distinct from any idea of a kind of rustic sorcery (*goēteia*). Rather it is a means to share or participate in the creative energies of the gods by constructing and consecrating their material receptacles, their cultic vehicles, which then function as the anagogic tokens, as *sumbola* and *sunthēmata* (symbol and sign).

We might wonder if the Greek term *theourgia* is not simply a rendering of some now forgotten Egyptian, Akkadian, or Aramaic term related to the complicated vocabulary of temple rites and festivals. These hermeneutical performances followed the paradigms of cosmogony and served as vehicles of ascent conducted by the divine powers (*sekhemu, bau*) themselves. If this is the origin of *theourgia* then it is obviously incorrect to think that the Chaldean Platonists of Roman Syria, who allegedly created and promoted the term *theourgia*, also invented the thing itself, that is, the tradition of hieratic arts and of their secret, theurgical understanding.

Our purpose in this essay is to consider the understanding of *theourgia* presented to us by the likes of Iamblichus, Damascius and Proclus. For them *theourgia* is of Egyptian origin, and this is satisfactory for our purposes; that is to say, we are less concerned with historical context and chiefly interested in the metaphysics of *theourgia* as it was conceived of in the Neo-Platonic tradition. What is at issue is an understanding of *theourgia* in the context of a real and precise metaphysics, which is its proper domain, as opposed to viewing *theourgia* as simply part of “the superstitions of the time.”

**Theurgy**
The word “theurgy” is not that which is most frequently used by the ancient Neoplatonists when they discuss cosmological, soteriological or liturgical issues. As A. Louth remarks,

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4 Ibid., p.292.  
5 Proclus, *In Tim.* III.155.18.  
6 Neoplatonic tradition emphasises this distinction between *goēteia* and *theourgia*  
7 This understanding of Egyptian rites is considered in detail throughout the works of Jan Assmann.
In Iamblichus theourgia refers to the religious rituals—prayers, sacrifices, divinations—performed by the theurgist: it is one of a number of words—theourgia, mustagōgia, hiera hagisteia, thrēskeia, hieratikē technē, theosophia, hē theia epistēmē—which have all more or less the same meaning and which are frequently simply translated théurgie by É.des Places...8

Damascius often prefers the terms hiera hagisteia, hierourgia (hierurgy, holy work, cultic operation) instead, or speaks of ‘theosophy which comes from the gods’9 and of the ancient traditions (ta archaia nomina) which contain the rules of divine worship.10 The Greek terms hieratikē and hieratikē technē (hieratic art, sacred method) are also rendered simply as “theurgy” by modern scholars.

For Damascius, hieratike is “the worship of the gods” (theōn therapeia) which ‘ties the ropes of heavenbound salvation,’11 that is, raises the soul to the noetic cosmos by means of the ropes of worship, like in the Vedic and ancient Egyptian hieratic rites, or like in the anagogic recitations of the Qur’an. This hieratikē technē is designated as the “Egyptian philosophy” which deals with certain spiritual alchemy consisting in gnostic paideia (instruction) as well as in transformation, elevation, and immortalisation of the soul (the winged ba of the true philosopher or the initiate).

The return of our souls to God presupposes either the fusion with the divine (theokrasia), or perfect union (henōsis pantelēs).12 This hieratic method of spiritual “homecoming” is praised as the higher wisdom, namely, the Orphic and Chaldean lore which transcends philosophical common sense (tēn orphikēn te kai chaldaikēn tēn hupsēloteron sophian).13

For the late Neoplatonists, theurgy (including all traditional liturgies, rites, and sacrifices which are ordained, revealed, and, in fact, performed by the gods themselves) is essential if the initiate priest is to attain the divine through the ineffable acts that transcend all intellection (hē tōn ergōn tōn

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9 Damascius, Phil.Hist. 46D.
10 Ibid., 42F.
11 Ibid., 4A.
12 Ibid., 4A-C.
13 Ibid., 85A.
arrhēton kai huper pasan noēsin).\textsuperscript{14} Thus, a theurgic union with the gods is the accomplishment (telesiourgia) of the gods themselves acting through their sacramental tokens, ta sunthēmata. The awakened divine symbols by themselves perform their holy work, thereby elevating the initiate to the gods whose ineffable power (dunamis) recognises by itself its own images (eikones).

Dionysius the Areopagite borrows the term theourgia from Iamblichus and Proclus, but uses it not in the sense of religious rituals which have the purificatory, elevating, and unifying divine force. Now this term designates certain divine works or actions, such as the divine activity of Jesus Christ (andrikēs tou Iēsou theourgias).\textsuperscript{15} Dionysius the Areopagite also speaks of one’s deification and koinōnia (communion, participation) with God; assimilation to God effected through participation in the sacraments.\textsuperscript{16} This is henōsis (union) accomplished by partaking the most sacred symbols of the thearchic communion and of “divine birth” achieved through the hermeneutical anagōgē (ascent) and epistrophē (return to the Cause of All). However, as P. E. Rorem remarks,

...the uplifting does not occur by virtue of rites and symbols by themselves but rather by their interpretation, in the upward movement through the perceptible to the intelligible.\textsuperscript{17}

Arguing that theurgical action directed by the gods and aimed at theourgikē henōsis, theurgical union, has nothing to do with “wonder working” (thaumatourgia), Iamblichus regards theurgy as the cultic working of the gods (theōn erga) or as divine acts (theia erga) in the metaphysical and ontological sense, which reveal the hidden henadic foundation of all manifested series of being, thereby re-affirming or re-collecting the ultimate divine presence in everything. As G. Shaw observes:

That presence was ineffable, but what lay beyond man’s intellectual grasp could nevertheless be entered and achieved through ritual action,

\textsuperscript{14} Iamblichus, \textit{De mysteriis} 96.43-14.
\textsuperscript{15} Pseudo-Dionysius, \textit{The Celestial Hierarchy} 181B.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 161D 1-5.
which is why Iamblichus argued that theurgy transcended all intellectual endeavours.¹⁸

If regarded as a designation of divine actions performed at different levels of manifested reality, which itself is nothing but the multi-dimensional fabric of theōn erga, disclosed following the noetic paradigms of procession and reversion (proodos and epistrophē), then theurgy cannot be viewed simply as a ritualistic appendix of Platonism, but rather as its innermost core and its hidden essence. Consequently, not only the Neoplatonic-Chaldean hieratic mystagogy may be designated as “theurgy,” but all hierurgical procedures (liturgies, invocations, visualisations, contemplations, prayers, sacramental actions, textual investigations, interpretations of symbols) which involve the direct assistance of the superior classes (angels and semi-mythic teachers) and which activate the self-revelatory illumination in one’s re-ascending from the inferior to the prior. All of them may be regarded as “theurgical.”

Hence, theurgical, as universal and divine, is opposite to anything particular and individualistic, anything based on one’s own subjective whims and egocentric drives. Without the fundamental realisation of our own nothingness (sunaisthēsis tēn peri heauton oudeneias),¹⁹ nobody can be saved, because in theurgical union gods are united with gods themselves or rather “the divine is literally united with itself” (auto to theion pros heauto sunesti).²⁰ This is in no way communication between the mortal man and the immortal divinity (as one person addressing another), but rather communication of the divine in us with the divine in the universe. According to Iamblichus:

It is plain, indeed, from the rites (ergōn) themselves, that what we are speaking of just now is a method of salvation for the soul; for in the contemplation of the “blessed visions” (ta makaria theamata) the soul exchanges one life for another and exerts a different activity, and considers itself then to be no longer human—and quite rightly so: for often, having abandoned its own life, it has gained in exchange the most

¹⁹ Iamblichus, De mysteriis 47.13-14.
²⁰ Ibid., 47.7-8.
blessed activity of the gods. If, then, it is purification from passions and freedom from the toils of generation and unification with the divine first principle that the ascent through invocations procures for the priests (henōsin te pros tēn theian archēn he dia tōn klēseōn anodos parechei tois hiereuσ), how on earth one can attach the notion of passions to this process?21

Descending lights and animated cult images
The Egyptian temple rites, from which the Neoplatonic hieratikē at least partly stems, may be called theurgical in the etymological sense of this word, because the Egyptian cult activity (itself staged as an interplay of divine masks) is based on a genuine encounter with the divine presence, with the immanent “indwelling” of God’s transcendent energies. The gods (neteru) do not literally dwell on earth in their cultic receptacles (statues, temples, human bodies, animals, plants), but rather install themselves there, thereby “animating” images and symbols. A deity’s ba (manifestation, noetic and life-giving power, descending “soul”) is somewhat united with the cult statues, processional barques, shrines, reliefs on the walls, sacred texts and the entire temple or the temple-like tomb.

The statue as a proper receptacle (hupodochē) for the divine irradiation is analogous to the purified human body of the royal person or of the “dead” initiate, and the descent of a deity’s ba resembles the approach of an active Platonic Form which informs the passive womb of matter and, consequently, establishes the manifested theatre of articulated and animated shapes. So the divine ba descends from the sky (or rather appears from the atemporal inwardness, since theophanies a priori constitute all manifested reality) onto his cult images (sekhemu) and god’s heart is united with his cult images.

Sekhem usually means “power,” but in this context it designates sign or symbol of power, as well as image or sacred icon. As Iamblichus remarks, ‘the light of the gods illuminates its subject transcendently’ (kai tōn theōn to phōs ellampei choristos),22 since even visible light (or heliophany of Ra at the level of his shining Disk, Aten) proceeds throughout the visible cosmos:

On the same principle, then, the world as a whole, spatially divided as it is, brings about division throughout itself of the single, indivisible light

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21 Ibid., 41.9-42.1.
22 Ibid., 31.4.
of the gods (to hen kai ameriston tôn theōn phōs). This light is one and
the same in its entirety everywhere, is present indivisibly to all things
that are capable of participating in it, an has filled everything with its
perfect power; by virtue of its unlimited causal superiority it brings to
completion all things within itself, and, while remaining everywhere
united to itself, brings together extremities with starting points. It is,
indeed, in imitation of it that the whole heaven and cosmos performs its
circular revolution, is united with itself, and leads the elements round in
their cyclic dance... 23

When the animating ba comes from the sky and descends (hai) on his
image (sekhem), this metaphysical action (or divine work, ergōn) simply
means the special ritualistic re-actualisation, re-affirmation, and re-petition
of the cosmogonic scenario at the level of both cult images and purified
human bodies who need to be re-assembled by the unifying divine spirit.
This accomplishment (telesiourgia) is tantamount to the restoration of the
Eye of Horus, which is equated with “offering” (hetep, or hotep),
simultaneously meaning harmonious reintegration of parts (parts of the
scattered Osirian eidos, restored in accordance to the whole truth, maat)
and noetic satisfaction.

The cult statues presumably have two natures, one divine (when
permeated by the bau of the gods, like the house of Ra is irradiated by his
miraculous unifying rays) and one inanimate and material which must be
consecrated in order to reveal the inner divine presence both in its perennial
theophanic and specialised cultic sense. Therefore Assmann says: ‘As
creators of these statues, humans are reminded of their own divine origin,
and by piously tending and worshiping them, they make the divine at home
on earth.’24

However, the daily rituals which consist in awakening, greeting,
purifying, anointing, dressing, feeding, and worshiping the cult statue as well
as the process of sacrificial offerings (which are symbolically designated as
the restored Eye of Horus and around which the ritual revolves) are not to
be conceived ‘as a communication between the human and the divine, but
rather as an interaction between deities,’25 that is, as a real divine ergōn, the
holy “work” performed by the gods and all superior classes.

23 Ibid., 31.9-32.2.
24 Assmann, The Search for God in Ancient Egypt, p.41.
25 Ibid., p.49
According to the late Neoplatonists, the gods (like the Egyptian neteru) are present immaterially in the material things, therefore ta sunthēmata (the theurgic seats of elevating power) are regarded as receptacles for the invisible divine irradiations (ellampseis) involved in the cosmic liturgy of descent and ascent. Since the body is an integral part of demiurgic work, in its perfect primordial form serving as an image (eikōn) of divine self-disclosure, the condition and quality of embodied matter indicate the soul’s internal condition. The human body as a fixed eidetic statue or as an iconographically established sequence of dynamic hieroglyphic script (analogous to a series of Tantric mudras) is an instrument of divine presence, because this presence may be either concealed, or revealed. Therefore telestikē is not to be thought as inducing the presence of a god (or of his representative daimon) in the artificially constructed receptacle (hupodochē) only. The divine ba can permeate the human body as well, thereby confirming the latter’s ability to participate in the superior principles. When such “incarnation” becomes permanent, the human body itself is transformed and turned into the spiritual “golden statue.”

The incantations (epōdai) are also to be viewed as the anagogic sunthēmata (signs) which function as a means of maintaining the providential link between the ineffable henadic essences and their symbolic expressions, or between the noetic archetypes and their existential images, in order to complete the soul’s divine measures and reveal its re-assembled immortal body (sah, which is symbolised by the Egyptian royal mummy). Since the body is an index (deigma) of the soul’s capacity to receive a divine presence, separation from the lower somatic identifications and false identities requires, as Shaw constantly argues,

...to determine the appropriate measures for that soul to engage the powers bestowed upon it by the Demiurge, and then to accelerate its growth into those measures by means of theurgic rites.26

The above mentioned measures suggest the ratios of the soul described in Plato’s Timaeus (35b-36b; 43D-E), therefore through the correct performance of measured theurgic rites the initiate imitates the activity of

the Demiurge, conjoining parts to wholes and integrating the psychosomatic multiplicity into the presiding noetic unity.

**Figures, names, and tokens of the divine speech**

Arguing that as the soul’s descent took place through many intermediary levels, so also its ascent, which includes dispensing with thinking through images and dissolving “the structure of life which it has compounded for itself,” Proclus compares *phantasia* (imagination) with ‘those Stymphalian birds which fly about within us, inasmuch as they present to us evils of form and shape, not being able at all to grasp the non-figurative and partless Form’27. The Platonic philosopher, like the bird-shaped *ba* of the Egyptian initiate, indeed must re-grow his wings in order to fly up to the stars (visible symbols of the eternal noetic archetypes) and, standing on the back of the ouroboric universe, like on the back of the Egyptian goddess Nut, to contemplate what lies beyond and what is, therefore, formless and colourless.

In spite of this deconstructive rhetoric which makes a sharp division between the things divine, directly perceived through intellection (*noēsis*) and those presented through verbally expressed imagination (*lektikē phantasia*), Proclus recognises a task for one living on the level of intellect (*nous*) to act by means of discursive reason and imagination. This is so partly because all manifested realities, being just a plaything of the gods—as Plato explicitly states28—appear as the demiurgic dream of the Creator. The entire animated cosmos is like the miraculous ship constructed by the Egyptian initiate in the Duat (the Netherworld), using the secret names and words of demiurgic, and therefore “magic,” power (*hekau*).

In this way both the Egyptian initiate, one who enters Duat before his physical death, and the Platonic philosopher follow the divine Intellect (the solar Atum-Ra) who produces all things and “in his bottomless thoughts” contains causally and in single simplicity the unified knowledge of all things and all divine works (*theia erga*) which are accomplished by the very fact of conceiving and noetically beholding them. It is, as Proclus says,

> as if by the very fact of imagining all these things in this way, he were to produce the external existence of all the things which he possessed

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within himself in his imagination. It is obvious that he himself, then, would be the cause of all those things which would befall the ship by reason of the winds on the sea, and thus, by contemplating his own thoughts, he would both create and know what is external, not requiring any effort of attention towards them.29

Though the gods are without any visible shape or figure, they may be viewed with a figure in the psychic realm of imagination (say, in the microcosmic Duat, the Hathorian or Osirian Netherworld of the soul), since each soul is the pleroma of reality (pantōn plērōma esti tōn eidon).30 So within the soul, like on the magic screen, all things are contained inwardly in a psychic mode. As Sara Rappe reminds us:

At the borderland between the material world and the purely immaterial world of intellect, this space of imagination offers a transitional domain that the mind can come to inhabit. This visionary space does not contain external objects nor illusions nor hallucinations. Rather, it is above all a realm of self-illumination... 31

Therefore, in this “Osirian” mode, the soul is capable to see and to know all things, including figures of the gods who essentially are without any shape and figure, by entering into itself and awakening the inner powers which reveal the images (eikones) and symbols of the universal reality. Neither the outward, nor the inward psychic seer is capable of seeing without images. Thus, the nature of the things seen, in each case, corresponds to the nature and preparedness of the seer himself, that is, to the particular archetypal measures or configurations (those initially written on by Nous, the demiurgical Intellect) and to the actual contents of his existential and culturally shaped consciousness.

The Demiurge is the first and the only real seer and real speaker, whose “speech” is tantamount to the creative contemplation through the transcendent mirrors of imagination. Hence, his seeing and his speaking constitute the manifestation itself. Therefore creation of all things and the act of their naming are one and the same.

29 Ibid., 959.
30 Proclus, In Parm. 896.
The theurgic ascent (the reversion of creation, now assuming the form of sacramental deconstruction) is also regarded as a rite of divine invocation. In a certain sense, invocation, incantation, and psalmody show the sacred road (hodos) to the divine world, leading the initiate singer into the Netherworld. This knowledge of incantation constitutes the theurgic core of the Orphic way and provides the cosmological setting for the Egyptian temple liturgies, based on the luminous interplay of heka powers.

Likewise, in the context of ancient Greek epic poetry, the poet’s (who simultaneously is regarded as an inspired prophet-like theologos) song itself is ‘quite simply a journey into another world: a world where the past and future are as accessible and real as the present.’\(^{32}\) The journey of these divinely inspired poets is their song. As Peter Kingsley says: ‘The poems they sing don’t only describe their journeys; they’re what makes the journey happen.’\(^{33}\)

For the late Hellenic Neoplatonists, even to read the philosophical or hieratic text (somewhat analogous to the cosmic text of stars and celestial omens, regarded as a display of divine hieroglyphs) is to take part in a theurgic ritual. Rappe explains this as follows:

The soul, as the channel of cosmic manifestation, reads the world under one of two signs: the world is “other” than or outside the soul when it is engaged in the process of descent, whereas it is “the same” as and within the ascending or returning soul. Both of these great names are thus pronounced and understood by the soul, while in the moment of its pronouncement, the world itself is expressed. In fact, the world as a whole is just such a system of signs, due again to the activity of the Demiurge.\(^{34}\)

Hence, in the Neoplatonic view, all manifested reality consists of different modes of divine speech, or different levels of revelation which operates with a system of signs and symbols that simultaneously manifest and conceal the One. Proclus: ‘Heaven and Earth are therefore signifiers, the one signifies the procession from there and other the return.’\(^{35}\)

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\(^{33}\) Ibid., p.123.

\(^{34}\) Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism*, p.181.

The name is an image (εἰκόν) of a paradeigma, a copy of a model which is established at the noetic level. The Greek onomata means both “names” and “words,” and these onomata are viewed as agalmata by Proclus. The cosmos as an agalma, an image, shrine, or statue of the everlasting gods (τὸν αἰδιὸν θεον γιγόνος αγαλμα),\(^{36}\) consists in the mysterious circularity of the great divine Name. Consequently, procession (προόδος) and return (ἐπιστροφὴ) are the great names of the unspeakable Principle.

The ouroboric cosmos (ouroboric, because it resembles the circle-like body of the noetic Snake whose beginning and end are tied together) is to be viewed as the ontologically displayed divine text, the luminous golden globe full of animated hieroglyphs inside. The hieroglyphs are medu neter, “divine words” (or modes of divine speech), to say it in the Egyptian terms. This living agalma, or rather the entire constellation of onomata, agalmata, and sunthemata, is like a macrocosmic cult statue, a living embodiment of the divine Ideas, of the archetypal contents which constitute the plenitude of Atum.

While maintaining that agalma contains no implication of likeness and, therefore, is not a synonym of εἰκόν, Francis Cornford describes Proclus’ attitude towards the cosmos as the holiest of shrines in the following way. Plato, according to Proclus,

speaks of the cosmos as an agalma of the everlasting gods because it is filled with the divinity of the intelligible gods, although it does not receive those gods themselves into itself any more than cult images (agalmata) receive the transcendent essences of the gods. The gods in the cosmos (the heavenly bodies) are, as it were, channels conveying a radiance emanating from the intelligible gods. Proclus calls the Demiurge the agalmatopoios tou kosmou, who makes the cosmos as an agalma and sets up within it the agalmata of the individual gods.\(^{37}\)

The names of the gods are an objective eidetic expression of their henadic essence, therefore deity is actually present in its name. Likewise, the supreme Principle is in his great names that constitute the manifested cosmos, since the One is the name of procession of the universe, and the Good is the name of its reversion. This means that the universe, to pan, is a

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\(^{36}\) Plato, *Tim*. 37C.

set of demiurgic and theurgic tokens, like a hieratic statue having its body animated by soul. For example, the stars are agalmata made by gods for their own habitation, and ‘the cosmos with its eight moving circles is thought of as an agalma which awaits the presence of the divine beings who are to possess the motion symbolised.’  

In Neoplatonism, names are likened to “divine images” that are essentially symbolic and theurgic. They function within the metaphysical triad of remaining, procession, and reversion (monē, proodos, epistrophē), leading to the first principles and causes through their effects and traces. In addition, the divine names are regarded as “vocal images” or “spoken statues” (agalma phōnēenta) of the gods, according to the otherwise unknown Democritus the Platonist.  

Within the frame of the eternal demiurgic and theurgic work (ergōn), there is no difference whether names are treated as being natural or conventional, phusei or thesei, because this opposition is too human, discursive, and partly illusory. For Proclus, at the level of human perception, things are “natural” in four senses: like animals and their parts, like faculties and activities of natural things, like shadows and reflections in mirrors, and like images fashioned by art (technētai eikones), those which resemble their archetypes. Names are regarded as being “natural” in the fourth sense. Therefore as Anne Sheppard says:

The view that names are naturally appropriate, like images fashioned by the painter’s art which reflect the form of the object, accords with the Neoplatonist view that artistic images reflect the Platonic Forms rather than objects of the sensible world. It is also quite consistent with the view that names are agalmata espoused by Proclus in the In Crat. and also in the Alexandrian Neoplatonist Hierocles.

38 Ibid., p.102.
39 Damascius, In Phileb. 24.3.
Remarks on the universal symbolism of the number 72

Timothy Scott

Introduction

In After Babel, George Steiner’s influential work on language and translation, the author has occasion to reflect that ‘Almost all linguistic mythologies, from Brahmin wisdom to Celtic and North African lore, concurred in believing that original speech had shivered into 72 shards, or into a number which was a simple multiple of 72.’1 He remarks that the origins of this particular number remain obscure, despite Arno Borst’s “exhaustive inquiries,” and suggests an astronomical or seasonal correlation from the 6 × 12 component.2 No doubt such a component exists but, with due respect to Steiner who, of course, is writing on linguistics and not symbolism as such, it is over hasty to reduce the meaning of this number to a purely naturalistic interpretation. In the Judaic tradition this number is intimately associated with nothing less than the Name of God Itself. Annemarie Schimmel observes that ‘the number 72 appears everywhere ... to denote fullness composed of different elements’;3 she recognises its meaning as that of “plenitude.” In their Dictionary of Symbolism, Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, recognise the relationship of 72 to 70, noting that ‘All derivatives or multiples of seven carry with them the idea of wholeness.’4 It is this deeper significance of 72 that we seek to explore, recognizing the occurrence of this number in a range of religious traditions and asking if its ubiquity reveals a consistent thread of meaning.

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Numerology: some cautionary remarks
This investigation should be prefaced with a few cautionary words about the study of number symbolism. There is no denying that the science of numbers plays a fundamental role in many religious and philosophical traditions; one thinks immediately of the Pythagorean tradition. Forms of numerology are found in nearly every tradition of the world. Plato is attributed with referring to numerology as the highest of the sciences. Jean Cooper observes that, ‘In many traditions, notably the Babylonian, Hindu and Pythagorean, number is a fundamental principle from which the whole objective world proceeds; it is the origin of all things and the harmony of the universe.’ In the kabbalistic practices of gematria, notariqon, and temura the relationships of number, letter, word and meaning are of the deepest mystical significance, while also being treated with systematic rigour. At the same time there is no doubt that a mixture of ignorance, sentimentality and gullibility has often reduced this type of symbolism to the level of fortune telling and fantasy. In the modern mind, numerology, like astrology, appears as little more than a fanciful game, if not a delusion. Part of the problem is the degree to which numerology is open to contrivance. Umberto Eco parodied this deliciously in his novel, Foucault’s Pendulum: ‘With numbers’ says the mysterious Agliè, ‘you can do anything you like.’ He continues,

“Suppose I have the sacred number 9 and I want to get the number 1314, date of the execution of Jacques de Molay—a date dear to anyone who, like me professes devotion to the Templar tradition of knighthood. What do I do? I multiply nine by one hundred and forty-six, the fateful day of the destruction of Carthage. How did I arrive at this? I divided thirteen hundred and fourteen by two, by three, et cetera, until I found a satisfying date. I could also have divided thirteen

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5 Epinomis 976E. It is generally accepted that Plato was not in fact the author of this appendix to the Laws; still, even if this is so it nevertheless represents one of the first “Platonisms.” Plato does, however, talk of the “invention of number” as coming from the “supremely beneficial function” of sight, which was a gift from the gods (Timaeus 47A-B).

6 J. C. Cooper, An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols, London: Thames and Hudson, 1978, p.113. In the enigmatic words of the Islamic mystic Ibn al-‘Arabi: ‘The One brought number into being, and number analysed the one, and the relation of number was produced by the object of numeration’ (Fusûs cited in W. Perry ed., Treasury of Traditional Wisdom, Louiseville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2000, p.779. Ralph Austin’s translation has ‘The number one makes number possible, and number deploys the one’ (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1980, p.86).
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hundred and fourteen by 6.28, the double of 3.14, and I would have got
two hundred and nine. That is the year Attalus I, king of Pergamon,
ascended the throne. You see?”

Yet this apparent dismissal of numerology serves to offer a deeper
appreciation of the place of numbers in the cosmos.

“Then you don’t believe in numerologies of any kind,” Diotallevi said,
disappointed.
“On the contrary, I believe firmly. I believe the universe is a great
symphony of numerical correspondences, I believe that numbers and
their symbolisms provide a path to special knowledge. But if the world,
below and above, is a system of correspondences where tout se tient,
it’s natural for the kiosk and the pyramid, both works of man, to
reproduce in their structure, unconsciously, the harmonies of the
cosmos…”

For the sceptic, practices such as *gematria* appear to manipulate numbers to
contrive capricious meanings. From a traditional perspective, *gematria* is an
expression of a hermeneutic recognition of the interconnectedness of all
things.

Let us consider a greatly simplified illustration of the type of thing being
discussed. The number 318, which happens to be the number of
Abraham’s servants (Gen.14.14), can be reduced by addition to the number
12 (3 + 1 + 8 = 12), producing an obvious astrological symbolism, which one
might then attribute to the *Genesis* account. One can further derive a
triadic or even a Trinitarian symbolism from the number 12 (1 + 2 = 3), if one
were so inclined. The development of a triadic symbolism may or may not
be justified, but in the case of developing a Trinitarian symbolism from the
story of Abraham there is a transition between traditions—Judaic to
Christian—that raises serious questions about syncretism. This issue is more
complicated than it might first appear. To suggest a “Judaic Trinity” from a
symbolic occurrence of the number three, as might be found in the Hebraic
Scriptures, is on the whole unjustifiable; while Judaism may have a

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8 An astrological reading is justified with *Genesis* 14, without limiting this extremely potent
passage to this type of interpretation. I hope to consider this episode in detail on another
occasion.
conception of God as Father and even of Israel as the “children of God,” it
does not have a conception of an incarnate “Son.” However, for a Christian
to recognise the Trinity in the Old Testament, as for example many of the
Church Fathers did with the three angels at Mamre (Gen.18:2), is entirely
normative of the Christian reading of Hebraic scripture. This is a matter of
sufficient spiritual economy.

It is not my intention to elaborate the pitfalls of practices such as
gematria; in my opinion, there is value in such practices within a traditional
framework. In a scholarly study, it is best that these types of practices, if
they are to be used, are employed judiciously, as to complement
conclusions about symbolisms that have already been drawn through other,
less “perilous” means.

Having at least alerted the reader to the “danger” of number symbolism
let us balance this by noting that traditional numerology, like all scientia
sacra, is precise and intelligible.9 As Frithjof Schuon remarks,

The symbolic language of the great traditions of mankind may indeed
seem arduous and baffling to some minds, but it is nevertheless
perfectly intelligible in the light of the orthodox commentaries;
symbolism—this point must be stressed—is a real and rigorous science,
and nothing can be more naive than to suppose that its apparent naïveté
springs from an immature and “prelogical” mentality. This science,
which can properly be described as “sacred,” quite plainly does not have
to adjust itself to the modern experimental approach; the realm of
revelation, of symbolism, of pure and direct intellection, stands in fact
above both the physical and psychological realms, and consequently it
lies beyond the scope of so-called scientific methods.10

Ananda Coomaraswamy observes that symbolism ‘is a language and a
precise form of thought; a hieratic and a metaphysical language and not a
language determined by somatic or psychological categories.’11 Similarly,

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Seyyed Hossein Nasr says that the ‘symbol is not based on man-made conventions. It is an aspect of the ontological reality of things and as such is independent of man’s perception of it.’

Against the type of contrivance to which Eco alerts us there are serious scholars of scientia sacra who defend their conclusions according to established laws of symbolism, the same way that the physicist works within certain natural laws. Thus it is worth noting that within numerology there is definite and precise meaning to both addition and multiplication. René Guénon, who has offered some of the most insightful explanations of traditional symbols in the modern era, remarks that in both the Chinese tradition of the Far-East and the Pythagorean tradition of the West, odd numbers are said to be masculine or active (yang), while even numbers are feminine or passive (yin). Because they are yang, odd numbers can be termed “celestial,” and for the simple reason that the action of Heaven is strictly “actionless” (wei wu wei, “actionless action”) the effect of these celestial numbers upon other numbers can be described as an “action of presence,” which is expressed by addition. Even numbers, because they are yin, can be described as “terrestrial”; as Guénon observes, the reaction of Earth with regard to Heaven, ‘gives rise to multiplication of the celestial number 3 by the terrestrial number 2, because the potentiality inherent in substance (Earth) is the very root of multiplicity.’ Whereas three and two are respectively expressions of the intrinsic natures of Heaven and Earth, six and five are expressions of the relationships between Heaven and Earth.

Here six becomes associated with Heaven and five with Earth; this appears to contradict the attribution of odd numbers as being celestial and even numbers as being terrestrial, however, this inversion accords with what Guénon calls the “law of inverse analogy,” whereby ‘Whatever is at the lowest level corresponds, by inverse analogy, to what is at the highest level.’ Schuon expands this when he notes the two-fold nature of analogy:

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13 Guénon, The Great Triad, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1994, p.58. What follows is essentially a paraphrase of Ch.8 of this work.
15 Chevalier & Gheerbrant, Dictionary of Symbols, p.867.
16 R. Guénon, The Reign of Quantity & The Signs of the Times, New York: Sophia Perennis et Universalis, 1995, p.186, see also Ch.25 and Fundamental Symbols, Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1995, Chs.52 & 53; The Great Triad, Ch.7. This law follows the oft quoted
If between one level of reality and another there is a parallel analogy in respect of positive content, there is on the other hand an inverse analogy in respect of relationship: for example, there is a parallel analogy between earthly and heavenly beauty, but there is an inverse analogy as regards their respective situations, in the sense that earthly beauty is “outward” and divine Beauty “inward”; or again, to illustrate this law by symbols: according to certain Sufic teachings, earthly trees are reflections of heavenly trees, and earthly women are reflections of heavenly women (parallel analogy); but heavenly trees have their roots above and heavenly women are naked (inverse analogy, what is “below” becoming “above”, and what is “inward” becoming “outward”).

As we have noted elsewhere, ‘to appreciate number symbolism one must be aware of two basic, yet seemingly contradictory, guidelines: on the one hand, symbolism is a precise science which demands contextual understanding; on the other hand, symbols are homogeneous and hermeneutically dynamic.’

**Universal occurrences of the number 72**

The number 72 cannot be seen apart from a host of other numbers, principally: 7, 70, 71, 72 and 73—of these we will have more to say in due course. Chevalier and Gheerbrant recognise the following pertinent relationships:

70 is ten times seven—a superlative equal to two-fold perfection—and 72 may be divided by nine numbers – 2, 3, 6, 8, 9, 12, 18, 24 and 36. It is also eight times nine and, above all one fifth of 360, that is to say one fifth of the Zodiac. Seventy-seven and seven times seven are self explanatory as well as 700, 7000, 70,000, 700,000. In short, this is an incidence of all the perfect numbers.

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Hermetic aphorism, ‘As Above So Below,’ taken from Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus: ‘It is true without lie, certain and most veritable, that what is below is like what is above and that what is above is like what is below, to perpetrate the miracles of one thing.’


19 Chevalier & Gheerbrant, Dictionary of Symbols, p.859.
Schimmel recognises the importance of 70 as the tenfold of the sacred seven, ‘and thus, as it were, its “great form.”’\textsuperscript{20} However, as she notes, 72 is much more important than 70.

As \( \frac{1}{5} \) of the circle’s circumference, it is related to the sacred 5, and because of its links to 5, 6, and 12, and also 8, 72 became a favourite number in ancient times. Already in antiquity it was known that the vernal point of the sun advances by 1 degree of the zodiac every 72 years.\textsuperscript{21}

The sense of perfection attributed to the number seven can be recognised at various levels but is most evident in seven’s cosmogonic symbolism, all other examples reflecting this according to the relationship between the microcosm and the macrocosm. Seven is commonly recognised as the number of cosmic perfection, the most immediate example being the biblical account of the creation of the cosmos in “six days.” Chevalier and Gheerbrant note that seven is also the devil’s number, ‘since Satan “the ape of God,” always tries to imitate God’\textsuperscript{22}. This, in a sense, is to consider Creation in terms of its malefic symbolism, the \textit{contemptus mundi} of the Christian tradition. An adequate symbolic description of the cosmogonic process is provided by the image of the spatial point, which in turn is “realised” by the sphere.\textsuperscript{23} The sphere is adequately expressed by the six spatial directions, being the four directions of the compass on the horizontal plane and the directions of the zenith and nadir along the vertical axis. The seventh direction is then the return to the centre. The six directions refer to spatio-temporal manifestation, which is to say the domain of distinction or difference, and in turn, movement. The seventh direction—the centre—is beyond movement, and is thus described as being at “rest”—‘And on the seventh day God rested’ (Gen.2:2). The number seven ‘through being a return to the centre, to the First cause, derives from the group of six and perfects the whole.’\textsuperscript{24}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Schimmel, \textit{The Mystery of Numbers}, p.263.
\item Ibid., p.263.
\item Chevalier & Gheerbrant, \textit{Dictionary of Symbols}, p.862.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
The number 72 is ubiquitous in the various traditions of the world; in many cases it is treated as effectively interchangeable with the number 70, although there are important differences. The following survey focuses, to a degree, on the appearance of these numbers in the Abrahamic traditions. We then move to consider examples of this number in other traditions. The survey is far from exhaustive. We might equally produce similar lists for a variety of numbers, and in this sense 72 is not unique. The number 72 is, however, conspicuous by its universality and homogeneity, and its key association with the “creative power” of God.

The Abrahamic traditions refer to 70 or 72 languages born of the destruction of the tower of Babel. This number is not mentioned in Genesis 11 but rather derived, according to haggadic tradition, from the ethnological table given in Genesis 10. Here 70 grandsons of Noah are enumerated, each of whom, it is said, became the ancestor of a nation and the founder of a language. These 70 languages become the expression for the totality of humanity. This idea is developed through a connection between the number of “faces” of the Torah and the number of builders of the tower of Babel. The Torah, remarks Gershom Scholem, is said to have “70 faces” shining forth to the initiate; the sixteenth century kabbalist, Isaac Luria, spoke of 600,000 “faces” of the Torah, as many as there were souls in Israel at the time of the Revelation, that is, the number of Israelites that left Egypt with Moses (Ex.13:37). Luria’s 600,000 faces accords with the number of men that the Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer (c. 833 CE) records as being used to build the tower of Babel. In both cases the number is an expression of the totality of peoples (Israelites) that constitute human existence, which, from a deeper perspective, is to say Existence per se. Again, Judaism talks of “the 70 modes of exposition of the Torah,” this being the classical expression for the many senses that may be attributed to the words of Holy Writ; this, in turn, is connected with the haggadic idea.

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that the Revelation on Sinai was divided into the 70 languages, so as to be for all the peoples of the earth.²⁸

Scholem observes that the author of the Zohar often stresses that the whole of the Torah is ‘nothing but the one great and holy Name of God.’²⁹ The number 72 is in turn intimately connected with the Divine Name.³⁰ The medieval kabbalists derived the Shemhamphorasch [“the unpronounceable name”; the 72 lettered name of God] from Exodus 14:19-21. Schimmel notes that this is ‘the knotted numerological sum of all 72 mystical names of God.’³¹ In the apocalyptic literature of Enoch we find “the 70 Names of God” (3Enoch 48B) and “the 70 names of Metatron”—alternatively given as 72—(3Enoch 48D), where Metatron is the angel with the same name as his Master.³² According to Josephus, the Septuagint is translated by 72 translators in exactly 72 days.³³ Here again the number 72 is being associated with the “production” of the divine “Word.” The Septuagint, counts 72 grandsons of Noah, hence 72 nations and languages. The interchange between 70 and 72 should not be seen as a matter of “error.” Rather, this shift can be attributed to distinct but complementary meanings. In the notes to his translation of 3Enoch, P. Alexander remarks upon the interchange between 70 and 72 names while noting that the actual list has in fact upwards to 93 names according to the manuscript consulted. Nevertheless, and regardless of the question of validity of each name, it is important to note that there are always considered to be either 70 or 72 names, which highlights the qualitative rather than quantitative nature of this figure.³⁴

St. Augustine prolongs the use of the number 72;³⁵ it is in turn repeated by the venerable Bede³⁶ and Remigius.³⁷ In the Christian tradition Christ

³⁰ There are other forms, such as the forty-two letter Name, the twelve letter Name and, of course, the Tetragrammaton.
³¹ Schimmel, The Mystery of Numbers, p.264.
³² Babylonian Talmud: Sanhedrin 38a, from Exodus 23:21: ‘My name is in him.’
³³ Antiquities 12. ii passim. ascribes to Aristeas a letter, written to Philocrates, describing the Greek translation of the Hebrew Law by 72 interpreters sent into Egypt from Jerusalem at the request of the librarian of Alexandria, resulting in the Septuagint translation.
³⁵ Augustine, De Civitate Dei 16.3 (527-28).
³⁷ Remigius, Commentary on Genesis: Patrologia Latina ed. Minge 131, 81c.
himself is the “Word”; his word is then dispersed throughout the world by 72 personally appointed disciples (Lk.10.1), whose names are, as it were, ‘written in heaven’ (Lk.10.20). The connection between Christ and the number 72 is further developed through the identification of the Christological priesthood with the line of Melchizedek (Heb.7:17), for, as Alexander observes, the presentation of the heavenly Melchizedek of Qumran suggests a clear parallel with the Metatron of 3Enoch. Melchizedek is again identified with Noah’s son, Shem, whose name means “name” and connotes the “Name of God.” The divine Name and divine Word are, with the divine Sound, three expressions of the same reality. The Word is “with God” and “is the same as God” (Jn.1:1) and through the Word are all things made (Jn.1:3).

The association of 72 with the creative Sound is suggested again in Christian exegesis, where it is said that 72 was the number of bells on the priest’s breastplate (Ex.28:17-21), which is then said to have pointed to the 72 disciples of Christ sent to spread the Gospel in the 72 languages of the world, each one of which stands for one Divine Name. As Chevalier & Gheerbrant note, ‘The symbolism of the bell is governed by the different perceptions of the sound which it makes’; however, in general one can say that this symbolism is usually associated with the echo of the primordial vibration, which is the very “stuff” of creation. Cooper observes that, in the Hebrew tradition, the bells and pomegranates of the Ephod symbolise the Quintessence and the four elements respectively. In Islamic tradition the “Ringing of the Bell” (salsalat al-jaras) expresses the creative Sound, as heard by the Prophet at the time of the revelation of the Qur’an.

Islamic tradition is resplendent with references to both 70 and 72. In the History of the Prophets and Kings, by the 9th century Muslim historian al-Tabari, Allah destroys the tower of Babil and then confuses the language of mankind, formerly Syriac, into 72 languages. According to a hadith, ‘The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: “The Jews were split up into 71 or 72 sects; and the Christians were split up into 71 or 72 sects; and my

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40 Schimmel, The Mystery of Numbers, p.266.
41 Chevalier & Gheerbrant, Dictionary of Symbols, p.860.
42 Cooper, An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols, p.20.
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community will be split up into 73 sects.”43 The relationship between these three numbers is discussed below.

Another hadith talks of 72 houri in Paradise.44 Misconceptions aside, the idea of the houri refers to an aspect of paradise. In this context the 72 houri appear to accord with the idea of there being 72 heavenly kingdoms (3Enoch 17:8), each under the supervision of an angel who acts to control the cycles of the constellations (17:6).45 The word houri (ḥūrīyah) is comprised of hur and in, where hur is the plural of both ahwar (masculine) and hawra (feminine). In general, hur implies “most beautiful eye” irrespective of the person’s gender. Symbolically, there is the sense that the houri are androgynous allowing for both senses of this term, that is to say, the combination of the sexes and the transcending of sex, according to the perspective adopted. The same idea is found with most conceptions of angels. In both cases paradise or heaven is being recognised in terms of the symbolism of the coincidentia oppositorum.46

The 72 houri and the 72 celestial kingdoms relate this number to the positive symbolism of heaven; it is interesting then to note that the Qur’an uses this number to describe one of the punishments of Hell, describing the sinner as bound by a chain of length 70 cubits (al-Hāqqah 69:32). This implies something of the dual nature of this symbolism, as we alluded to when we recognised the relationship of the number seven to the contemptus mundi. This sense is also suggested by the association of the number 72 with various “evil” forces. Chevalier and Gheerbrant note there being 72 diseases in Islamic tradition.47 Similarly, there are 72 malignant spirits in Chinese folk medicine.48 In the Chuang-tzu we find 72 treacherous rulers.49 The legendary Chinese ruler, Shen Nong, is said to have discovered tea as an antidote to the 72 poisons he encountered in the development of traditional

43 Sunan Abu Dawud, Bk.40, hadith 4579.
44 Sunan al-Tirmidhi Vol. IV, Ch. 2, hadith 2687.
45 The 72 angels are identified with the 70 “shepherds” given control of the exiled “sheep” (1Enoch 89:59).
47 Chevalier & Gheerbrant, Dictionary of Symbols, p.867.
Chinese medicine. This association with disease is again noted by Kypros Chrysanthis who observes the prevalent use of the number 72 in the folk medicine of Greece.

This duality is again suggested by the connection of this number with the tower of Babel conceived as *axis mundi*, for axial symbolism precisely entails both upward and downward movement. According to the *Sefer al-Jashar* and *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* the workers who carried the bricks up the tower of Babel ascended on the east side, while those who descended had to go down on the west side. This in turn suggests the rise and fall of the Sun indicating a temporal aspect to this symbolism. In this context, *hadithic* literature records the Prophet as explaining that ‘the distance between Heaven and Earth is 71, 72, or 73 years.’ This idea of the “distance” between heaven and earth suggests a parallel with the axial symbolism of the tower of Babel; the measure of this in “years” suggests the interconnectedness of time and space in the process of cosmological manifestation.

In the mythology of the ancient Egyptians we find Osiris imprisoned and murdered by his brother Set with the aid of 72 companions. This idea of 72 “companions” is also found in the Chinese tradition. Sima Qian, in his *Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji)*, wrote that, ‘Those who, in their own person, became conversant with the Six Disciplines (taught by Confucius), numbered 72’; *Mencius* gives their number as 70. Schimmel observes that Confucius is also said to have lived for 72 years. We have already noted the 70 languages that indicate 70 peoples of Israel, the 72 disciples who spread the word of Christ, and the 71 / 72 / 73 sects mentioned by the Prophet. Similarly,

53 *Sunan Abu Dawud*, Bk.40, hadith 4705.
56 Schimmel, *The Mystery of Numbers*, p.266.
in Vaishnava Hinduism there are 72 *Maheshwari khanp* (sub clans; last names) originating from the tale of King Sujansen and his 72 soldiers, who were turned to stone by *rishis* before being returned to life by Shiva.\(^5^7\) The association of this number with these groupings seems to have much less to do with a question of quality than with a symbolic description of a certain quality involved in each case.

In the Egyptian story Osiris was imprisoned in a chest and set adrift on the Nile, while Isis’ searched for him throughout the world. This myth bares striking similarities with the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, in each case both agrarian and astrological symbolism is evident. In noting this I want to emphasise that these levels of symbolism are both valid and necessary at their particular level; still, in the final analysis these simply express, at the appropriate level of manifestation and by analogy, a principial metaphysical symbolism.

Another instance of this figure in the Egyptian tradition is most revealing. According to Herodotus, the Egyptian mummification process involved being ‘placed in natrum [a form of salt mixture], covered entirely over, for 70 days—never longer.’\(^5^8\) Some suggest that the mummification period totalled 70 days; however, an inscription on the tomb of Meresankh III suggests a period of 200 days. Setting aside the technicalities of the mummification process there is little doubt the number 70 had a key significance in this process. This is confirmed in the Bible were we read that the Egyptians mourned Jacob for 70 days (Gen.50:3). It has been suggested that this figure follows an astrological basis: there being a duration of 70 days during which the dog star, Sirius, disappeared from the sky until it reappeared marking the Egyptian New Year. This astrological passage adequately describes a passage through darkness, or the underworld, before a rebirth. Similar symbolism is alluded to by the duration Jonah remained in the belly of the great fish, being three days and three nights, (Jon.2:1) and the time Christ was in the heart of the earth (Matt.12:40); in both cases a period of 72 hours is suggested.\(^5^9\) This association of the number 70 or 72


\(^{59}\) There is some confusion and debate about this timeframe give that Jesus is said to have died in Friday and been resurrected on Sunday, which some argue cannot allow for an exact period of 72 hours. This type of literalistic nitpicking misses the point of the rich symbolism of the number 72 and is far from in keeping with the mindset of the people for whom this tradition was first recorded.
with rebirth is again found in the one of the accounts of the birth of Osiris. Plutarch tells the story of how Hermes (Thoth) won a seventieth part of each day of the year from Selene, thereby creating five days during which Osiris might be born. In death or birth the number 70 indicates a transformative period or power.

In the classic Chinese story, the *His-yu Chi (The Journey West)*, Sun Wu-k’ung (the Monkey King) learns the 72 transformations of the Art of the Earthly Multitude from the immortal, Subodhi. He is, in fact, offered the chance to learn the Art of the Heavenly Ladle, which number 36 transformations, but chooses the Art of the Earthly Multitude. According to Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 36 is ‘the number of cosmic solidarity, where the elements meet and from which cycles evolve’; again, 36 ‘is the number of Heaven, 72 of Earth and 108 mankind.’ This relationship is effectively an account of the totality of manifestation: 36 expresses the principle, 72, the expression, and 108 the complete realisation. Sun Wu-k’ung also battles and defeats the monster kings of the 72 caves. There is an explicit astrological symbolism at work here for he also battles the 28 Constellations.

According to Boris Riftin, the number 72 appears often in Chinese folklore; Riftin refers to ‘72 halls in an underwater palace, 72 merits of a hero and 72 stars in the sky.’ Architectural symbolism involving 72 is common: the temple of the Holy Grail had 72 chapels, just as the big reception hall in Persepolis had 72 pillars. The relationship between the 72 underwater halls and the 72 stars is interesting. The realm of the stars is universally recognised as “heaven” or the principial realm. In many traditions the sky is understood as a vast “sea,” even described as the upper waters. Water is a well known symbol of cosmic potentiality. In a sense one might well say that the lower waters of earth mirror the upper waters of heaven; the underwater halls mirror the stars.

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60 Budge, *The Book of the Dead*, p.53.
63 *His-yu Chi (The Journey West)*, p.147.
The “distance” between earth and heaven is described by the *axis mundi*, of which there are several well known universal symbols. One of the most obvious is the tree. It may be of little surprise that the *Greater Holy Assembly* of the *Zohar* talks of the “Tree of Life” as having 70 branches. In the Jewish tradition the image of the Tree of Life is also found in the *menorah*, which properly symbolises the burning bush (Ex.25). So it is that Josephus remarks on the 70 parts of the Temple *menorah*, relating these, in fact, to the astrological *decani* (the 70 divisions of the planets). Another well known symbol of the *axis mundi* is the ladder, and according to *Midrash*, Jacob’s ladder had 70 rungs, upon which angels of each nation descended and ascended. This symbolism is repeated in the steps of Solomon’s Throne, which, as described in the *Second Targum of Esther*, had 72 golden lions set out upon them. Mayan tradition offers a similar image in the 72 stone steps of the Hieroglyphic Stairway of Copán.

A definitive comparison of all mythological occurrences of the number 72 would require in-depth analysis of each episode, a task that is unfeasible. Instead we are looking for commonalities and themes. I do not wish to argue from generalities to conclusions for specific instances; rather it is hoped that these generalities may suggest patterns, of which we may then be at least mindful in further considerations. From the few examples we have here the following motifs arise: languages (word, name), social groups, durations, architectural forms (on the one hand: rooms, caves, halls; on the other hand: levels, steps), companions, malignant forms (poisons, treacherous men, malignant spirits) and meritorious forms (cures, magic transformations).

Common themes may not be immediately apparent; however, in the context of spiritual symbolism a theme does emerge. The first thing to

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67 *Antiquities*, 3.7.7 (180).
68 *Midrash Tanhuma, Vayetze* 2: “Said Rabbi Shmuel ben Nahman: “These are the princes of the nations of the world...which the Holy Blessed One showed to Jacob our father. The Prince of Babylon ascended 70 rungs and descended. Of Medea, 52 steps and descended. Of Greece, 100 steps and descended. Of Edom, it ascended and it is not known how many...”.”
69 *Second Targum of Esther*, cited in *Ancient Israel Vol.3*, p.237; see 1Kgs.10:20; 2Ch.9:17.
remark is that the divine Name or Sound is a universal symbol of the
creative Act; the idea of social groupings is in turn based on the idea of 72
languages; these are, so to speak, the manifestations of the principle.
Creation is universally symbolised by the architectural form, principally the
Temple or Palace. As Adrian Snodgrass remarks, ‘the architectural form is
an image of the cosmos, not in stasis, but in dynamic procedure from Unity
by way of the cosmogenetic diremption of the conjoint principles [Essence
and Substance]; it is a likeness of the cosmos in the manner of its
production from Principle.’ In this sense, one can talk of either a
horizontal symbolism (chambers) or a vertical symbolism (levels, floors).
This architectural symbolism is complemented by the symbolism of
Man. Snodgrass again:

The building is an image of the macrocosm; but it also images the
microcosm, the smaller cosmos made up by man. The centre of the
architectural form, homologue of the unitary centre of the universe, is
also the innermost centre of each being; the body of the temple equates
both the body of the cosmos and the body of man; and in return the
body of man is a temple, enshrining the Real.

The meaning of man is prefigured in the symbolism of Universal Man. Titus
Burckhardt observes that the cosmos is ‘like a single being ... If one calls
him the “Universal Man,” it is not by reason of an anthropomorphic
conception of the universe, but because man represents, on earth, its most
perfect image’. And just as the universe is comprised of diverse elements
so too the divine attributes of Universal Man may be symbolised by His
divine Names and also His “companions.”

This type of symbolism is both cosmogonic and cosylotic, both
descending and ascending: into creation from the Divine and back to the
Divine from creation, or again, into imperfection from Perfection and back
to Perfection from imperfection. Thus, from a certain point of view, these
corresponding movements are respectively maleficent and beneficent, or
malignant and meritorious. All of this is by way of suggesting that the

72 Burckhardt, Introduction to ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Jīlī, al-īnsān al-kāmil (Universal Man), tr. T.
number 72 can be associated, at least in the cases we have considered, with the symbolism of the transformative processes of creation and return.

This suggestion does not preclude an astrological reading of the type that Steiner suggests, which is to recognise the use of 72 in terms of duration. Of course, to say duration is to say time, where to say creation is simultaneously to say space and time. The year is a temporal expression of the transformation from potency to actuality. Equally, to say space is to say form and this is expressed in geometry. The particular geometric form at issue here is the pentagon, in which all five angles are 72 degrees. The pentagon is the form of Man. According to Plato the dodecahedron is the geometric form of the “receptacle of becoming,” which is to say creation. The dodecahedron is underpinned by the 72 degrees of each angle of the pentagon, which, in turn, is multiplied by twelve (the fundamental spatial-temporal number). It is worth flagging that this geometric form then allows the 360 degrees of a perfect circle to be multiplied by 12, giving rise to 4320, where the number 432 is a key figure in many and varied traditional doctrines concerned with the extent of Manifestation, both temporally and spatially.

According to traditional understanding each of the twelve zodiacal signs was divided into three parts. Hence the Zodiac was divided into 36 parts. These were again variously subdivided. Considered with respect to the “perfect circle,” they were divided by ten. The number ten expresses the perfect cycle from zero through one to the return of one to zero in the form of ten. It is this perfection of cycle that both the circle and the number ten share that accounts for its use in this division. Each division of ten is a decan. This subdivision into decans produces the following result: 36 × 10 = 360. This figure of 360 is both the number of degrees in a circle and the number of days in the sacred year.

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73 In the Phaedo Socrates implies the dodecahedron in describing the earth as like one of ‘those spherical balls made up of twelve pieces of leather’ (110b); the Timaeus offers a description of the four Platonic Solids adding a fifth construction, ‘which the god used for embroidering the constellations on the whole heaven’ (56c). This is commonly taken as the fifth regular solid, the dodecahedron.

74 Mircea Eliade observes that the majority of historical cultures had ‘a year, at once lunar and solar, of 360 days (that is, 12 months of 30 days each), to which five intercalary days
Considered with respect to the spatio-temporal cycle, each of the 36 divisions was divided by twelve. Each division of twelve applied to the 36 divisions of the Zodiac is called a *dodecan*. The number twelve apart from being recognised in the expression of the Zodiac itself is symbolically tied to manifest existence through its relationship to the numbers four and three. Four represents the directions of each plane of manifest existence, while three represents the ternary function required to express the state of manifestation. Corresponding to and reflecting this ternary nature in creation there are three recognizable “worlds” or states, variously called heaven–misplace–earth, or heaven–earth–underworld. Each of these states can be envisaged as a plane of existence, which is then expressed by four directions, hence we find manifestation represented by the number twelve, i.e. $3 \times 4 = 12$. Furthermore, $4 + 3 = 7$, thus on the level of three-dimensional spatiality that expresses the plane of manifestation there are seven directions, i.e. the six global directions and the seventh centre point. The subdivision into *dodecans* produces the following result: $36 \times 12 = 432$.

A perfect circle—alluding to the a-temporal and non-spatial Principle—may be expressed numerically by the number 360. Spatio-temporal manifestation is then expressed in its fullness by the number 432. To put this another way: the ontological Principle may be adequately described by the number 360; onto-cosmological Manifestation is expressed by 432. If we then consider the relationship between the Principle and the manifest mode of spatial and temporal existence—which is expressed by the Zodiac—we will note that the “difference” between 360 and 432 is 72.

The act of manifestation is achieved through the concentration of the Divine Potential. This concentrates a point of positive existence which then radiates “outwards”—or “inwards” to use a complementary symbolism—in the fashion of a beam of light illuminating Manifestation. This original point is itself both created, in so much as it is the heart of manifestation itself, and uncreated, in so much as it resides in Transcendence. It is the heart of all contraries and complimentary, the beginning of all manifestation and the point of return; all manifestation is contained in this point. In principle the Point is a circle of infinite diameter; in its manifest realisation, it is a circle

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of indefinite diameter. Thus, this Point is symbolically representable by a perfect circle and numerically by the number 360. As we have seen, 432 represents the mode of existence, both spatial and temporal, which we experience as the “created world.” Hence, 72 expresses the “progression” or transmission from the creative Principle to creation itself.

The number 72 is symbolic of the metaphysical act of creation. In turn this metaphysical act is manifest in the decidedly physical (physic = “becoming”) domain of spatio-temporal existence. We have already seen this to be so in the construction of the year. However, temporal existence is manifest existence and as such is inherently subject to the imperfection manifestation engenders through its very nature. Following this it is an observable fact that the spring equinox (March 21st) are never in the exact position in which they were in the year before. There is an annual lag of 50 seconds. In the course of 72 years this amounts to 1 degree (50” × 72 = 3600” = 60’ = 1°). Consider the following:

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\begin{align*}
1 \text{ year} & = 50” \\
72 \text{ years} & = 1° \\
2160 \text{ years} & = 30° \quad (1 \text{ sign of the zodiac}) \\
25,920 \text{ years} & = 360° \quad (1 \text{ Great or Platonic Year})
\end{align*}
\]

From this we can see that the sum of actual years it takes to complete one equinoctial cycle of the zodiac (25,920 years) is equivalent to 360 × 72. This demonstrates the relationship between 72 and the perfect cycle, as it is expressed in the temporal domain. Similarly, Schimmel observes,

...the division of the circle into 5 times 72 degrees does not produce the complete synodic orbit of Venus, but rather falls 2.41 degrees short of 8 complete circles. Thus, when exactly computed, the Ithar pentagram is not completely closed. It is precisely this minute opening that, as Goethe has shown in Faust, enabled the powers of evil, Mephistopheles, to enter Faust’s study.75

With the first appearance of written tables there have been employed two systems of numeration, the decimal and the sexigesimal. These correspond to our earlier discussion of the numbers ten and twelve. The

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sexigesimal system was based on the *soss* (60), by which both circles and time are measured. Now if one complete cycle of manifest temporal existence (i.e. 25,920 years) is divided by one soss (i.e. the measure of spatial and temporal existence) the result is 432, the number we have already seen to represent this very mode of existence.

There are certain mythological occurrences of the figure of 432 that may be helpful to consider here. According to the Hindu doctrine of *Manvantāra* each *Mahāyuga* comprises 12,000 years. Each of these “years” is considered a divine Year, lasting 360 actual years. Hence, the life of a single cosmic cycle is 4,320,000 years (12,000 × 360). The *Kali Yuga*, which is to bring the *Manvantāra* to a close, is one-tenth this sum. Again, in the Icelandic Poetic Edda we learn that Odin’s heavenly warrior hall has 540 doors:

Five hundred doors and forty there are,  
I ween, in Valhall’s walls;  
Eight hundred fighters through each door fare  
when to war with the Wolf they go.76

The “war with the Wolf” here refers to the battle which signifies the end of each cosmic round. It will be noted that $540 \times 800 = 432,000$.

According to the Babylonian priest Berossos (c.280 B.C.) the sum of the ages of the Sumerian antediluvian kings is 432,000. This sets up an interesting comparison. The sum of the ages of the antediluvian patriarchs, in *Genesis* 5, is 1656 years. This appears at the outset to bear little relation to the number 432. However, the distinguished Jewish scholar, Julius Oppert (1825–1905), notes that both the figures 432,000 and 1656 contain 72 as a factor: $432,000 ÷ 72 = 6000$, and $1656 ÷ 72 = 23$. As such, he suggests a relationship between 6000 to 23. Oppert then explains that the Jewish calendar year is reckoned as 365 days, which in 23 years, plus the 5 leap-year days contained in such a period, amounts to 8400 days, or 1200 seven day weeks ($[365 \times 23] + 5 = 8400$; $8400 ÷ 7 = 1200$). The number of Jewish seven day weeks in 1656 years is then $1200 \times 72 = 86,400$. Now the Babylonian calendar year consists of $72 \times 5$ day weeks. In traditional calculations of this kind it was common practice to interchange references to both years and days. Following this practice, and if we count each

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Babylonian year as one day, then the number of Babylonian five day weeks in 432,000 days is 86,400 (432,000 ÷ 5). Hence there is established a relationship linking the five day week, the seven day week, and the completed cycle of spatial and temporal existence represented by the number 432. The number 72 is the basis of these relationships.

It remains to consider the relationship between the numbers 72 and 70, 71, and 73. As noted, the traditional understanding of time and space is cyclic. Now, the sacred or perfect year is comprised of 72 × 5 day weeks (36 × 10; 360) plus five intercalated “festival” days, epagomeneia, which belong neither to the old, nor the new, year. These five days, which exist outside time and space, indicate the return to the uncreated potential from whence a regenerated new creation is to be born. This period of five days represents a traditional understanding that recognises the first and last terms of a period as unit. This idea of the “unit-y” of the first and last periods of a cycle is expressed through the traditional hieroglyph of the ouroboros.

If we apply this logic to the Zodiac the first dodecan or decan of Aries coincides with the last dodecan or decan of Pisces; consequently instead of counting 36 decans or dodecans in the Zodiacal circle, there are 35. The first and last degree of the 36 dodecans in a single sign could also be counted as unit, in which case there are 35 degrees in each zodiacal sign. This shifts the emphasis of the symbolic calculations we considered above from 72 to 70 (35 × 10 = 350; 35 × 12 = 420; 420 – 350 = 70). Now, 72 represents the cycle, or process, of manifestation. It appears that 70 expresses this cycle with the recognition, and emphasis, on the prefigurement of this cycle within the point which is both its beginning and end (unit). Hence the number 70 symbolises the creative act from the point of view of the perfection of its potential. Let us further note that 70 × 5 = 350, 71 × 5 = 355, 72 × 5 = 360, and 73 × 5 = 365. The figure 71 provides the mean, or balance, between 70 (the point of manifestation embracing both the beginning and the end) and 72 (the extension of manifestation). If we consider the number 355 (71 × 5) in the form of a circle and apply the hieroglyph of the serpent swallowing one unit of its tail, then the resulting value is 354, which was the anciently accepted value of the lunar year. The number 365 (73 × 5) is the round value of the solar year. Note that 360 is the mean between 355 and 365 (355 : 360 : 365). The perfection of 360, or
the complete circle, indicates the perfection and balance between the lunar and the solar years. Hence, the numbers 70, 71, 72, and 73 are symbolic of the creative capacity in both its principle and all manifest expressions thereof.
The Symbolism of Letters and Language in the Work of Ibn ʿArabī*

Pierre Lory

To readers familiar with Ibn ʿArabī’s thinking, the title of this paper may seem over-ambitious. His conception of language and the mystical science of the letters that is its corollary are certainly one of the central, and at the same time the most synthetic and abstruse, parts of the Shaykh al-Akbar’s work and several volumes of analytical study could justifiably be devoted to them. It is therefore not my intention to deal with this huge topic in an exhaustive fashion but simply to present an outline of it and make some modest contributions to our understanding. I shall examine the question of language first of all in relation to the origins of existence, then in relation to the Revelation, and finally in relation to the spiritual role of man.

The vision of the origin of the world that emerges from the writings of Ibn ʿArabī is inseparable from his conception of language. For him, God’s act of creation is indistinguishable from his act of speech and these two modes of being are organically interconnected. With a word, God brings into being an indeterminate multitude of creatures and these creatures become “words” in the immense divine discourse that is the universe. This is onto-logy in its strictest sense since being and the logos are one and the same. Let us recall briefly the principal terms used in akbarian cosmology.

The letters as the origins of existence
I will not dwell on this point, which is well known and has been discussed in detail by some of the most able scholars.¹ It will be recalled that, according to Ibn ʿArabī, the One, Solitary and Impenetrable Divine Essence creates beings from the Cloud (ʿamaʾ). At this level, beings only exist in a

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state of pure possibility, as mere thoughts in the mind of God, in the state known as “the immutable essences” (a’yān thābita). What is it that brings beings out of this Cloud, from this state of possibility into a state of manifestation? It is the Divine Word calling things into existence. According to Ibn ‘Arabī, it is through the agency of what he calls the “Divine Names” that manifested beings are organised and arranged. “Names” here should not be taken to mean the specific terms (e.g. the “Merciful” or the “Almighty”) which we utter in human language. Rather, they are the “names of these names” (asmāʾ al-asmāʾ), the various modalities through which God impels and organises existence in the universe. These names provide both the energy necessary to bring the being into existence, and the general structure that imposes order and harmony between beings.2

In individual terms, the Name of each being corresponds to the Divine Intention which brought that particular being into existence and to the relationship which connects the Essence to every individual concrete existence. Ibn ‘Arabī refers to the Name as the father, and the immutable essence as the mother of each being.3 This name is the root of its individual act of being, its “Lord” whom it will have to serve and follow throughout its terrestrial journey, and its individual destiny is to realise in this way the potentialities contained in its essence. ‘For every reality in this world there is a corresponding Name which is specific to it and which is its Lord.’4 This point is cardinal: ‘It must be concluded ... that the divine names are the single most important concept to be found in Ibn al-ʿArabī’s works. Everything, divine or cosmic, is related back to them. Neither the Divine Essence nor the most insignificant creature in the cosmos can be understood without reference to them.’5

Each constantly evolving being constitutes a letter in the composition of the great cosmic discourse. The passage of the Letter from potential entity to entity manifested in the visible world takes place through the action of the turning of the spheres.6 Ibn ʿArabī explicitly equates this process with

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3 Fut., I, 138 et seq.
4 Ibid., 99.
5 Chittick, p.10.
6 Fut., I, 52; Illuminations, 387 and 439.
the process of speech and this “divine phonation” is not merely an allegorical phrase. The correspondence between divine creation and human speech is constantly reiterated. God creates through the “divine exhalation” known as the “breath of mercy”—nafas al-Rahmān—which continually maintains the existence of the universe. It is this exhalation that makes the “articulation” of the divine words possible:

The essences of the Divine Words, twenty-eight in number (i.e. the number of letters in the Arabic alphabet) and endowed with multiple aspects, emanate from the Breath of Mercy, which is the Cloud where our Lord stood at the time when He created the world. The Cloud corresponds to the human breath and the manifestation of the world out of the void and into the various levels of being is like the human breath emanating from the heart, spreading out through the mouth and forming letters on the way. These letters are like the manifestation of the world from the Cloud, which is the breath of God the Real and Merciful spreading into the specific levels [of existence] out of a potential and non-physical expanse, that is from the void filled by the creation.7

This correspondence between creation and speech is dynamic, since creation is impermanent and mutable, like a discourse that unfolds phrase by phrase.

From this perspective, it is easier to understand the ideas that Ibn `Arabī puts forward about the letters, particularly in the second chapter of the Futūḥat al-Makkiya, which has been partially translated by Denis Gril with a very helpful commentary.8 In this chapter, the Shaykh al-Akbar lists for us a wealth of ways in which the letters correspond to the levels of existence and to the levels of action of the cosmos, but which have no correspondence with each other. This is because language has the role of a kind of cosmic algebra. ‘The science of the letters could thus be defined as a metalinguistic and metaphysical formulation of the principle of the science of language and of the physical world’, writes Gril.9 The same letters can be used to explain processes that are completely unconnected—just as the

7 Fut., II, 395.
8 In Illuminations, 385 et seq. [As noted these translations are now available in The Meccan Revelations Vol.2, ed. M. Chodkiewicz – ED.]
9 Ibid., 410.
same number can appear in an unlimited variety of operations. There is no such thing as a “science of the letters” in the sense of the letters forming the subject of a specific body of knowledge. Rather, the letters are a means of accessing a whole range of esoteric knowledge because of the semantic and symbolic meanings that they bear. In fact,

Each name has two forms. One of them is ours and is formed by our breath from the letters that we assemble: it is through (these Names) that we invoke Him, and they are the names of the Divine Names, like cloaks that they put on. Through the form of these names, we describe the Divine Names. The forms of the latter are close to the Most Merciful in so far as He speaks and is qualified by speech. Behind these forms, there are meanings (maʿāni) which are like the spirits of the forms. The forms of these Divine Names by which God refers to Himself in His discourse (i.e. the Qur’an) have their existence in the Breath of the Most Merciful.¹⁰

So, having set out Ibn ‘Arabī’s doctrine of the letters, what can we do with this information? How does it provide a key for the believer, to help him in his spiritual growth and in his understanding of his personal destiny? The first place to look for an answer must be in that part of the Divine Word that is accessible to man: the Qur’anic word.

**Applications to the interpretation of the Qur’an**

How are the divine cosmic discourse and the Qur’anic word linked? Through allusion (ishārāt), Ibn ‘Arabī gives us a number of examples of this mystical science of the letters. A “metaphysics of grammar” is outlined in the second section of the second chapter of the *Futūhāt.*¹¹ In Chapter 198 there is a profound and detailed study of the enunciation of the two letters hā (ฮ) and waw (ו).¹²

Ibn ‘Arabī also provides us with some very coherent analyses of the esoteric significance of certain letters. For example, the “solitary letters.”¹³ Or again, the relationship between *Alif* and *Lām.*¹⁴

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¹¹ *Fut.*, I, 84 et seq.; *Illuminations*, 402 et seq.
¹² *Fut.*, II, 390; *Illuminations*, 402 et seq.
If it seems that Ibn ʿArabī’s speculations on the spiritual meaning of the letters have a particular significance in his writings, and indeed they are even placed at the beginning of the Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya as an extensive introduction to the rest of the work, it is because they play a key role in the process of spiritual transformation—which, when all is said and done, is the ultimate objective of all of the Shaykh al-Akbar’s work—and are not merely a speculative formulation of doctrine. Ontologically, every man is a Divine Word; in this sense, the unveiling of the esoteric meaning of a term, or of a verse, can enable the Sufi to understand an aspect of his own esoteric dimension. This is particularly true as regards the text of the Qurʾān. The Qurʾān, as the all-encompassing Divine Word, containing potentially all universal Wisdom, is the counterpart of the human being. Man is in fact a microcosm containing within him the totality of forms manifested in the universe. God created all that exists according to a perfect and complete form, the first being to be brought into existence, sometimes called “the Muhammadian Reality” or “Universal Man”. It can be seen therefore that, in the final analysis, the Qurʾān and Universal Man refer to the same all-encompassing Divine Wisdom. As Ibn ʿArabī writes:

The Total (Universal) Man, according to the essential reality, is the incomparable Qurʾān descended from the Presence of Itself into the Presence of the One who gives existence ... In the nearest heaven, it became “differentiation” (furqān) and came down in a divided form, in accordance with the Divine Realities, for their authority is exerted in many ways and that is why Man also became divided into separate forms ... The Qurʾān which descended is Truth as God has so designated it, thus all immediate truth “comprises an ultimate truth,” and the ultimate truth of the Qurʾān is Man.¹⁵

Since human structure is the equivalent of that of the word of God, the objective of the Sufi is to conform as far as he is able to this Divine Word. He is invited to become Qurʾān. And, in becoming the Divine Word, he also conforms to the figure of Perfect Man, thus realising his own individual perfection, the Name that is specific to him. It can therefore be seen that the esoteric science of the Qurʾān, and in particular that of the letters of which it is composed, is not a matter of simple deductive or inductive

speculation: it involves the gnostic in his own process of personal transformation. This perception of individual reality as both human and as the word of God accounts for the emphasis placed on ceremonial practices involving the ritual recital of words (i.e. the recitation of the Qur’an and the various forms of dhikr) in the Islamic religion. It explains why the science of the letters has no real connection with the magical significance of letters, which Ibn ʿArabī recognises as effective although at the same time warning of the dangers that it can entail. But it also leads to a real philosophy of Man as a being endowed with the power of speech.

For the study of the Qur’an is not the sole exegesis open to the believer. Since language shapes us, organises us and passes through us, we can also interpret and experience the truth that is expressing itself at every moment in our own person. And our own human language can therefore translate into truth what we are. But this translation cannot really take place through everyday, profane, language, which is capable only of describing the terrestrial dimension and not the “vertical” dimension that is present in every being. It will of necessity occur through the medium of metaphor, poetry, or more often through paradox. The Sufis of the first centuries used the term shath to describe what they regarded as inspired paradoxes, uttered in a state of ecstasy, at a time when the mystic was not in control of what he was saying, so that the extravagance of his language was excused. But out of the hundreds of such utterances that have been handed down to us by tradition, the majority were clearly delivered in a deliberate manner and in all probability should be regarded as spiritual teachings. Abū Yazīd writes:

On one occasion, God lifted me up, placed me before Him and said to me: ‘Oh Abū Yazīd, my creatures would like to see you!’ I said: ‘Adorn me with your Oneness (wahdāniyya), clothe me with your I-ness (anāniyya), raise me up to your Unity (ahadiyya), that your creatures say when they see me: “we see you!” and that it is You (that they see) and that I am not there!’ Or again: ‘At the start of my journey towards His Oneness, I became a bird whose body was Unity and whose two wings were Perpetuity (daymūma). I flew continuously for ten years in the atmosphere of quality (kayfiyya) only to arrive in a similar

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16 Fut., I, 57.
atmosphere time after time after time. I continued to fly without stopping until I reached the esplanade of Eternity without beginning (azaliyya); there I saw the Tree of Unity [Sarrāj: then he described the ground where it stood, its base, its branches and its fruit and said]: so I considered this and knew that all of this was illusion (khudā).\(^\text{18}\)

The reader will appreciate here that Abū Yazīd is describing an experience that is incapable of expression in everyday language and that he is using that language in a novel way, conveying his meaning through poetry and paradox, whose boldness is at times reminiscent of the immediacy of the koans of Zen Buddhism.

The Shaykh al-Akbar is explicit yet at the same time circumspect on the subject of paradox and of \textit{shaths}. He condemns \textit{shaths} quite harshly, regarding them as linguistically over-extravagant and deplorably pretentious from a spiritual point of view, and liable to mislead ordinary believers. But he does not see them as utterances that are inherently false. What he condemns is that they risk being misunderstood by those who are not Sufis. He himself recounts numerous \textit{shaths} pronounced by his distinguished predecessors, and incorporates the intended purpose of these \textit{shaths} into his own doctrinal vision. So, for example, he gives a lengthy commentary on the reply made by Abū Yazīd Bastāmī when he was asked how he was that morning: ‘[I have] no morning and no evening; the morning and the evening belong to those who have attributes, and I have no attributes!’\(^\text{19}\) He also wrote detailed explanations of the “theopathic” \textit{shaths} attributed to Abū Yazīd, such as “I am God!” or “Glory be to me!”\(^\text{20}\) Moreover, he made use of paradoxical statements himself in exactly the same way as his predecessors Abū Yazīd, Hallāj or Shiblī. The following verses, which are set out as an introduction to the \textit{Futūhāt}, are among those most often cited:

\begin{quote}
The Lord is Reality (\textit{haqq}) and the servant is Reality
May God grant that I may know who is subject to legal obligation!
If you say: it is the servant, the servant is without life
If you say: it is the Lord, from where does His obligation come?\(^\text{21}\)
\end{quote}


\(^{19}\) \textit{Fut.}, II, 646 et seq.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., I, 272 and 618; II, 479; IV, 57 and 90.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., I, 2.
And this other verse, which is so fitting to our discussion of the “logomorphosis” of man:

I am the Qur’an and the seven Oft-reduplicated
the spirit of the spirit, not the spirit of the instants
My heart resides with Him whom I know
and Whom I contemplate, even while I am speaking to you.22

Ibn ‘Arabī’s attitude to shathṣ is somewhat different from that of other more ecstatic Sufis, such as Abū Yazīd and Rūzbehān. The latter maintain a distinction between the ordinary vocabulary of the mortal world and the language of those who have perceived eternity and for whom time and space have been turned upside down for good. For them, the shathṣ is the mark of a mental breaking away—a leap or a taking-off depending on the imagery—from which it is not possible to hold back. Ibn ‘Arabī, on the other hand, seeks to integrate the two dimensions of language—terrestrial and eternalised—into a doctrinal and exegetical structure which is versatile and subtle but which has neither flaws nor divisions in it.

**Man as intermediary**

The man who is a believer and a monotheist is put in a delicate position, for he is instructed to speak of God using words and expressions that belong to the material, social world, which may seem ill-suited to describing the very subject-matter of metaphysics. If God is incorporeal, beyond all bodily form and all concept, how can one speak of Him and describe Him? Islamic theology has to battle against this problem of the anthropomorphism of language. To be sure, the Qur’an gives men words, Names (such as “the Merciful,” “the Forgiving”) which enable them to speak of God, and to speak to Him in the act of worship. But is it possible to go beyond that and use language as a whole to sustain the connection between God and the creature He is addressing? The Hanbalis do not accept this; the believer may reproduce the words of the Qur’an but may not add to it any concept which is not found there, even if derived from it linguistically or by analogy.

As we have seen, Ibn ‘Arabī does not allow himself to be confined by such objections. For him, language is not unequivocal and its use is not limited by the rules of syntax or to dictionary meanings. Rather, it has a

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22 Ibid., I, 9.
vertical dimension that goes right back to the origin of things. He is able to convey the experience of the divine through paradox without destroying the proper coherence of the language, which goes back to the very harmony of the creation. It enables man to name things and at the same time take them back to the Divine Names that are their roots, in short to play the role of universal intermediary with which Adam was invested from the beginning (Qur’an 2:31–3). Through inner meditation on the esoteric significance of the letters, the Sufi can in fact apply letters and words to all those things that share the characteristics of the macrocosm and can even make himself master of them. He begins to understand the phrases of this universal language that animates the creation, that passes through him, as it does through all beings in the universe, which is where the concept of “the language of the birds,” and even of the intelligence of the minerals, comes from. The superiority of human language over other languages of the world is analogous to the superiority of man over other creatures. Just as man is a microcosm in which the universe is reflected, so human language provides the key to all that can be spoken, whispered or muttered beneath the nine heavens. At this level, human language becomes a sending back of the Divine Word that initiates and organises existence to its origin.

Conclusion
From this perspective, the meaning of the vision which Ibn ‘Arabī relates of his nuptial union with the letters of the alphabet becomes clearer:

I was at Bougia during Ramadan in 597, when I saw myself (in a dream) having carnal union with every single star in the sky, and deriving immense pleasure from it. When I had finished, the letters were presented to me and I had union with all of them individually and collectively.

To unite physically with the letters of the alphabet is tantamount to identifying oneself with the Divine act of creation itself, and becoming one of those perfect men whose individual will becomes simply an extension of the Divine Will.

23 Fut., I, 381-2; Illuminations, 52.
24 Kitāb al-Bāʾ, Cairo,1954, 11.
It is also in this sense that the science of the letters is a science of Christ, as is asserted in the twentieth chapter of the *Futūhāt*. Jesus is himself, from the outset, the Word of God. The Sufi is, as it were, asked to become through practice and effort that which Jesus was by nature (Qur’an 4:171). Jesus is moreover an eschatological figure, marking the fulfilment of the destiny of Mankind. Likewise, the science of the letters, whilst it takes Man back to the origin of his existence as a created being, also signifies its end, since every word that is uttered is essentially ephemeral. Through His creation, God unfolds His discourse; the Resurrection will mark the conclusion of this great Book, the Book of the Universe.

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25 *Fut.*, I, 167 et seq.
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Ananda Coomaraswamy Essay Prize

Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), was the curator in the Department of Asiatic Art of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. He is recognised as one of the great art historians of the twentieth century. His writings on traditional symbols are some of the most enriching of their kind. No less a scholar than Heinrich Zimmer described Coomaraswamy as “that noble scholar upon whose shoulders we are still standing.”

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