Towards a Deeper Ecumenism: Catholicism and Tradition

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> Wherever men and women discover a call to the absolute and transcendent, the metaphysical dimension of reality opens up before them: in truth, in beauty, in moral values, in other persons, in being itself, in God. We face a great challenge at the end of this millennium to move from phenomenon to foundation, a step as necessary as it is urgent. We cannot stop short at experience alone; even if experience does reveal the human being's interiority and spirituality, speculative thinking must penetrate to the spiritual core and the ground from which it rises. Therefore, a philosophy which shuns metaphysics would be radically unsuited to the task of mediation in the understanding of Revelation. [1]

With such words as these, Pope John Paul II, in his 1998 encyclical letter on Faith and Reason addressed to the bishops of the Catholic Church, calls for a renewal of metaphysics, "because I am convinced that it is the path to be taken in order to move beyond the crisis pervading large sectors of philosophy at the moment, and thus to correct certain mistaken modes of behaviour now widespread in our society." He goes on, "Such a ground for understanding and dialogue is all the more vital nowadays, since the most pressing issues facing humanity—ecology, peace and the co-existence of different races and cultures, for instance—may possibly find a solution if there is a clear and honest collaboration between Christians and the followers of other religions and all those who, while not sharing a religious belief, have at heart the renewal of humanity" *[section 104]*.

The encyclical itself, which exposes many of the philosophical and spiritual errors of modernity—including scientism, relativism and nihilism—does not claim to be an exposition of metaphysics. It is merely an invitation and a challenge to seek metaphysical Wisdom where she may be found; a challenge which nevertheless, coming as it does at the end of the Pope's careful preparations for the end of one millennium and the beginning of another (the "hermeneutical key of my pontificate" as he writes in *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*), suggests that the rebirth of metaphysics forms part of the foundations of the new historical era that he believes is now close upon us.

In one sense the dialogue of which the Pope speaks is already well underway, although it can hardly be said to have achieved a very high profile. Seyyed Hossein Nasr argued as long ago as 1968 that the degradation brought about by the prostitution of nature can only ultimately be reversed by a revitalization of theology and philosophy through metaphysical knowledge.[2]

Decades earlier, Ananda Coomaraswamy had exerted a strong influence on, among other Catholics, the craftsman and writer Eric Gill. Coomaraswamy, a remarkable Hindu scholar who worked as Research Fellow at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in the 30s and 40s, was one of three writers sometimes referred to as the leaders of the *"Traditionalist school"* (of which Nasr is the most eminent living representative), the others being the Frenchman René Guénon and the Swiss Frithjof Schuon. Traditionalism crosses religious boundaries but (it claims) without eroding them. It insists that truth can only be attained through the practice and mediation of a religious tradition. Such forms can be transcended only from within: each revealed religion remains unique and precious in all its details, and must be accepted and practised as the condition for spiritual realization.

The Thomist writer Bernard Kelly, a contemporary of Gill's, wrote of one work by Schuon (Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts), "The book has a fullness of light which we have no right to find in the twentieth century, or perhaps any other century." To Kelly and other Catholics (including the Catholic Anglican, T.S. Eliot), Schuon's achievement seemed to hold out the hope of a genuine dialogue with the Oriental cultures at their most profound level. As Kelly put it:

> Neither the nineteenth century nor our own possesses a philosophical language able to render metaphysical truth with precision. The attempt to find words for exact metaphysical terms has baffled the translators of St Thomas no less than of the Upanishads. There is however a difference, for while the translators of St Thomas may be presumed to have one traditional intellectual discipline at their fingertips, the translators of the Upanishads who needed to have two generally had neither. It has been said, with some justice, that they appear to have taken their philosophical language from the newspapers. The Hindu texts are not the cause of confusion, but the occasion for its display.

He goes on to say that while this fact was demonstrated in an incomparable way by Coomaraswamy, the necessary "common metaphysical language" was developed primarily by Guénon and Schuon. The three figures taken together—and notwithstanding what Kelly already perceived as their failure to appreciate certain key teachings of Christianity (a point I will touch on below)—have played a key role in reopening the "luminous eye" of each tradition "towards the source of its light." They are "situated far above the syncretism of an Aldous Huxley or a Gerald Heard."[3]

But the fact that the call for a dialogue between the religions on the basis of a renewed metaphysics has been taken up again by a Pope of the "Vatican II Church" must be regarded as a striking event by those who believe that the Council effectively ended access to Tradition for those who remained faithful to Rome. It raises hopes once more of what Guénon (himself a former Catholic) in the early years of the twentieth century referred to as the *redressement*, a restoration in the West of the *sophia perennis*. In this article, I want to try to establish what might be meant by the renewal of metaphysics in our present cultural situation within the Catholic Church, but at the same time to raise certain questions about the nature of the Christian tradition as understood by the Traditionalist authors.[4]

The Degrees of Reality and Christian Anthropology

Traditionalist ontology includes a doctrine concerning the degrees of reality, in both macrocosm and microcosm. This leads to a necessary rejection of any dualistic anthropology that might deprive the human subject of access to archetypal reality. The human subject is *tripartite*, consisting of body, soul and spirit, corresponding to the three main levels of reality.

The faculty by which we know the divine Ideas, variously called *Nous, Intellectus* or *Buddhi,* constitutes a ray of the divine Sun in the heart of man. It knows the logoi by connaturality, by intuition. At the level of the soul, it may be added, these intuitions are clothed in symbols by the *imagination,* which mediates between the intellect (supplier of the "form") and the bodily senses (which provide the "matter") for human cognition. The Orientalist Henry Corbin has written a series of impressive studies on the Persian tradition of Ibn Arabi, Suhrawardi and Mulla Sadra, bringing out the role of the "creative imagination" as an organ of perception in the inner world of the soul, and the "theophanies" that these writers discovered in the *mundus imaginalis.*[5]

Though such ideas are today more closely associated with writers on Islamic than on Christian philosophy, it would not be hard to relate them (as Traditionalists often do) to Scholastic thought in the West. The Christian Scholastics were well aware of the Islamic philosophers, to whom in many cases they owed their knowledge of the great texts of Classical philosophy, and they spent a great deal of time refuting or transforming their ideas in the light of the Christian revelation. Nevertheless, though the Christian and Islamic thinkers of the Middle Ages were in many respects opposed, they were much closer to each other than to the Nominalists of the fourteenth or the Rationalists of the seventeenth centuries. The Catholic philosopher E.I. Watkin brings out many of these commonalities in his neglected book *A Philosophy of Form,* which could stand as a model of the kind of retrieval of medieval thought that needs to take place today if a serious metaphysical dialogue between the religions is to be possible. There he points out, among other things, that the Christian Scholastics (preeminently, of course, Aquinas and Bonaventure) were first of all contemplatives, rather than philosophers or theologians in the modern sense. Yet they stand at the very end of medieval thought, and the method they adopted for disputation was exploited by the less contemplative men that came after in the interests of Rationalism. Watkin defends the existence of what he calls "unimaged thought" or "metaphysical intuition" against orthodox Thomism. He adds that the Thomistic principle nihil in intellectu quod non prius in sensu ("there is nothing in the understanding which was not first in the senses"):

> may be understood, and unfortunately has been understood, to mean that our perceptions of external objects are wholly sensible and our senses alone produce such perception. On the contrary, so-called sense perception is possible only because, in a confused medley of atomic sense data, the mind directly intuits the forms which give these data significance. Perception involves a factor of intellection. The denial of this truth has led directly to the *proton pseudos* of modern philosophical error—the positivist and sensationalist empiricism which admits only evidence derived from sense perception wrongly taken to be such. [6]

Cardinal Henri de Lubac has devoted a long essay to the development and subsequent neglect of Pauline tripartite anthropology (see *1 Thess. 5:23*) in the Christian West[7]. In the first part of this he establishes that St Paul's references to this anthropology have deep roots in Scripture as well as in human experience. They were not simply imported from an alien Greek philosophy (de Lubac notes the existence of "Plato phobia" among many Christian scholars, especially in the modern period). But the term for "spirit" *(pneuma)* remains deliberately ambiguous in Paul. On the one hand it may refer to the Holy Spirit or divine life implanted in man by baptism; on the other, it may refer to a part of man, and specifically to that "breath of life" which God breathed into his nostrils at the very beginning *(Gen. 2:7).* It becomes clear as he proceeds that we are talking of the "highest point of the soul," and that the ambiguity in question is precisely due to the paradoxical relationship of nature to grace in

our human destiny.[8] We are created to share in the life of God, but we are not compelled to do so: we can attain that life only through the exercise of freedom.

The Fourth Council of Constantinople (870) is sometimes said to have demolished this paradoxical, tripartite anthropology within orthodox Catholicism, replacing it with a dualistic understanding of man. However, that Council took the position it did precisely in order to *oppose* an incipient dualism. It was concerned to ensure that the distinction of the spirit from the soul of man would not introduce a "Gnostic" duality into the human subject of salvation.[9] St Thomas, similarly, four centuries later, was concerned to defend the immortality of the soul by resisting the teaching of the Arabian Peripatetics who made a single angel the common source of intellectual illumination for all men. For Thomas, the light flows directly from God to the human spirit, and belongs to the essence of the soul, though it may be "strengthened" by an angel's light. St John of the Cross (in his "Counsels of Light and Love") seems to imply actual angelic transmission: "Consider that your guardian angel does not always move the desire to act, though he ever illumines the reason."

De Lubac, at any rate, does not judge the decision of 870 worthy of mention, but sees the tripartite tradition continuing without interruption right through the early Scholastic period. In St Thomas, the distinction takes a slightly different form: that between action and contemplation, or the moral and the mystical life, or *ratio* and *intellectus*. It re-emerges fully in the Renaissance with Nicholas of Cusa and Ficino. Despite the triumph of the new Cartesian dualism in the universities, the authentic Christian tradition shines through in a continuous chain of authors up to and beyond Paul Claudel (who speaks of "this sacred point in us that says *Pater noster*"). How could it not, when the experience of every spiritual master confirms the existence in us of a place where we encounter God—the spirit, or "soul of the soul"?

Another important reference-point for the contemporary dialogue on metaphysics is the work of Jean Borella, a Catholic Traditionalist who has in recent years distanced himself from Schuon and Guénon. His book *The Sense of the Supernatural*, building on the achievement of de Lubac, is an attempt to wrestle with the question of what went wrong in the Church that led to the modern loss of the sense of the sacred, and to formulate a valid ontology and epistemology that will be acceptable within present-day Catholicism. He recognizes the "new evangelization" of John Paul II as "a project of vast proportions," undermining the recent tension with the Catholic Traditionalists. "By calling them to the task of recovery in which he has been involved, he is showing that henceforth it is not absurd to carry on this struggle from within the Church."[10]

Borella is particularly concerned, in the last part of his book, with the key concept of "deification" and its implications. He argues that the loss of the sense of the sacred and the supernatural in the modern world (and among the Modernists in the Church) is linked, as de Lubac showed in the 1940s, with the loss of a sense of human *transcendence*—the possibility of "transformation into God" as taught by Scripture, the Church Fathers and the great mystics.[11] Once again, he insists on the tripartite nature of the human being, with the spirit or "soul of the soul" as the actual *place* of our union with God. It is in the heart and centre of the soul that "the divine Essence unites with created being and becomes the very act of its intellect;" in other words, where the knowledge and will of the creature become one, in perfect receptivity to the actus purus which is God. Borella adds:

“Does all this involve the literal identification of the creature’s substantial being with God? Certainly not. The created being as such remains a created being, and never ‘becomes’ the Creator… Far from effacing the creature, deification alone makes it possible for it to exist in its integral truth. If deification were equivalent to a negation of the creature, it would be a sheer contradiction, since to negate the creature is to negate the creative Will of God and therefore God himself. Deification is, to the contrary, the only possible affirmation of the creature” [pp.130-40].

It is, in fact, the completion of that process which the Christian tradition calls “creation.” (By which I mean that no created reality can truly be regarded as substantial unless it is eternal; and it can become eternal only by sharing directly in the eternity of God that is, through “deification.”)

One of the greatest Catholic mystics—the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*—writes most beautifully of this union with God that does not destroy the soul, alluding to what has sometimes been called the “gift of tears”:

“All men have reason for sorrow; but he who knows and feels that he exists has a very special experience of sorrow. In comparison to this, all other sorrows seem to be a sort of pretence… But he who has no experience of this sorrow, let him begin to make sorrow, because he is not yet experienced in perfect sorrow. This sorrow and the possession of it purifies a man’s soul, not only of sin, but also of the punishment that he has deserved because of his sin. It thus makes it possible for the soul to receive that joy which takes away all a man’s awareness and experience of his own being.... At the same time, in all this sorrow *he has no desire not to be*, because that would be the devil’s madness and contempt for God. Rather he is very glad to be, and he is sincere in his heartfelt thanks to God for the noble gift of his being, although he desires without seeking to lose the awareness and experience of his being.” [12]

Thus is the distinction between Christianity and Buddhism clearly drawn, but in such a way that the truth within Buddhism is fully integrated.

“Transcendental Unity” and Christian Gnosis

I have suggested that there is considerable scope for agreement between Catholic and non-Catholic Traditionalist; that is to say, agreement not just on the need for metaphysics, but to some extent on metaphysical doctrine itself, and even on its implications for cosmology and anthropology. But how far can this agreement extend before it runs aground on the Christian claim that *Christ alone saves,* let alone the claim that *outside the Church there is no salvation?* For Schuon, such dogmas belong to the “human margin”; in fact, not just Christianity but each religious tradition has a perfectly valid claim to be unique and central, superior to all others.

“Revelation means, God has said ‘I’, has revealed Himself to some human receptacle, to some section of humanity; every religion therefore presents itself as something absolute, and this is strictly comparable with our empirical subjectivity, the unique, exclusive and irreplaceable -though logically contradictory—character of the ego… All relative subjectivity is contradictory, since it is ‘objectivity’ in relation to the pure Subject; the latter— the divine Self—‘contains’ all particular subjects while infinitely transcending them. It alone is without contradiction and therefore without illusion.” [13]

Here, in essence, is the basis for Schuon's doctrine of the "transcendent unity of religions" (the title of his first book, so admired by T.S. Eliot).

Traditionalist metaphysics rests on the self-evidence of the One as its first principle. S.H. Nasr, for his part, is "aware of the necessity, on its own level, of the theological formulations which insist on the hiatus between God and man or the Creator and the world." However, he believes the metaphysical knowledge of Unity "comprehends the theological one in both a figurative and literal sense, while the reverse is not true."[14] For Schuon similarly, theology (based on revelation) transcends philosophy (based on reason), but equally *metaphysics must transcend theology.* "The latter is the Word of God spoken to his creatures, whereas intellectual intuition is a direct and active participation in divine knowledge and not an indirect and passive participation, as is faith. In other words, in the case of intellectual intuition, knowledge is not possessed by the individual insofar as he is an individual, but insofar as in his innermost essence he is not distinct from his Divine Principle."[15]

As we have already begun to see, the idea that in our inmost essence we are "not distinct" from the Divine Principle is incompatible with Christianity, and even with Christian mysticism. (Nor, as we shall see later on, is it necessarily the case that faith is *passive* in comparison to intellectual intuition.) It is in fact the revealed doctrine of the Trinity that enables Christianity to maintain this ultimate distinction between creature and Creator, a distinction which is paradoxically deepened the more intimate the unity between them. We are speaking of the core mystery of Christianity: the love of which human affection and *eros* is a remote image, but into which it may be assumed and transformed. But all this is precluded by Schuon's approach in *Logic and Transcendence,* where the Trinity has become merely an *upaya*—a provisional or skillful means, in the Buddhist sense, more or less effective as an aid to devotion but not finally "true." "Whatever may be the necessity or the expediency of the Trinitarian theology," he writes, "from the standpoint of pure metaphysic it appears to confer the quality of absoluteness on relativities." For Schuon, Christian theology must almost inevitably confuse three distinct planes of reality—the undifferentiated Essence, the divine relativity or Personality, and cosmic Relativity.[16]

It is noticeable in this connection that while Schuon writes a great deal on love, he generally refers only to our love for God (or for each other), and rarely to God's love for us. In fact he regards love as an "aspect" of God which for Christians becomes primary only because they are considering the Absolute at a relative level, having been forced by their interpretation of the Incarnation to introduce the distinction of Persons (thus "relativity") into the Absolute. This is because he assumes that Christians are reading the Trinitarian relations into God "from below." For the Church Fathers, on the other hand, they are revealed "from above." They therefore cannot be "understood" (in the literal sense of that word), or rationalized (although this is a constant temptation in Western theology), but can only be *known by being lived.*[17]

Among Christian writers, we find the closest approach to Schuon's view of the Trinity in Meister Eckhart, whose Christian orthodoxy has of course often been called into question (notably, of course, by the Pope in his own lifetime). It is not clear, however, that Eckhart's perspective is straightforwardly heretical, or even incompatible with the more mainstream Dominican tradition represented by St Thomas. It has been argued, for example, that Eckhart accepted and assumed everything the Church and St Thomas had taught, but was trying to write and speak from the point of view of divine knowledge—from God's point of view, rather than that of the creature. This makes him appear to be elevating a "Godhead" above the

Trinity, when he might have been intending to do nothing of the sort.[18] The Catholic theologian and cultural historian Hans Urs von Balthasar is critical of him for doing so—just as he is critical of Jacob Boehme and (in a different way) St Gregory Palamas for doing the same.[19] But he does make a useful distinction. He writes that "ideas have their own historical dynamic; they are governed by and obey their own laws, regardless of the meaning they had for their originator." (In fact, it is precisely the purpose of Balthasar's remarkable series *The Glory of the Lord* to explore this historical dynamic, and so unravel the knot of modernity.) Consequently, he is able to view Eckhart's experience of God as "authentically Christian," "wholly limpid and shadowless," even though clothed in "ill-fitting garments" which bequeathed innumerable problems to his successors. The future "will not think, as he does, with a worshipping heart, and so will misuse his words and insights for the purposes of its Titanic Idealism." It was in this way that Eckhart unwittingly opened a way for Luther and Hegel, and even for modern atheism.[20]

Balthasar regards Eckhart's successor John Ruysbroeck as having successfully purified his thought of all these tendencies, and in particular the tendency to separate the Trinitarian process from a dark primal Ground or *Ungrund* (which is Christianity's closest approach to Vedantic and Islamic mysticism). For Ruysbroeck it is always the Father, not a "Godhead," who is the "unilluminable primal Ground" of the divine Unity, "utterly light, manifest to itself, in the reciprocal love that is effulgent in the Son." "The Son and the Spirit 'flow back' into the Father: this both the self-transcendence of the Persons into the simple identity of essence and the highest bliss of love of the Persons, who are perfected as such in this very self-transcendence. Thus God remains eternal event, yet without temporal becoming" [*T-D,* V, p. 459]. "Looking into his own ground," Balthasar writes, Ruysbroeck "sees beyond it into the eternal I, which for man is both the source of his own I as well as his eternal Thou, and in the final analysis this is because the eternal I is already in itself *I and Thou* in the unity of the Holy Spirit" [*GL,* V, p. 70]. The encounter with God in this Place is a nuptial encounter, a spiritual marriage. Thus Ruysbroeck integrates the feminine, and the creature, in a way that Eckhart fails to do.

Even if we assume there is more to Eckhart than simple heresy—and even if we go further than Balthasar does in recognizing the validity of his metaphysical insight—it remains true for those of us who lack Eckhart's evident moral purity that to neglect the fact that we are still *creatures* would be to risk falling into Luciferian intellectual pride. This is surely the spiritual danger, the "final temptation," that lies in wait for Traditionalism when it separates metaphysics too self-confidently from theology, in effect dispensing with the humble submission to revealed truth which is proper to the creature as such. It should be remembered that Lucifer—that purest and highest of created intellectual substances—was, and *knew himself to be,* an Angel of light.[21] Humble faith, on the other hand, is a sure path that leads through hope to love, and in love to the most complete and active participation in divine knowledge, through the indwelling grace of the Holy Spirit. In this way theology, or at least *authentic* theology—an expression of what Balthasar calls the "esotericism of the saints"—will always overtake metaphysics.

It is along these lines that Balthasar intends to "secure for gnosis the place which belongs to it in virtue of its outstanding importance and certainty" [*GL,* I, p. 136]. Pauline and Alexandrian gnosis (which must be distinguished from the heresies which claimed that title) is not merely a "preamble" to faith, but "the interior understanding of faith, the insight into the mystery of faith itself." In the interior appropriation of faith, its content unfolds before the "spiritual senses." Thus the gnostic Christian "does not outgrow the proclamation of the Church, but in

the kerygma he finds, revealing himself, the Logos, who, in the most comprehensive sense, 'enlightens' the believer ever more clearly and, indeed, draws him, as John was drawn, to his breast ever more intimately and unites him interiorly with himself" [*GL,* I, p. 137]—that is, on the Cross and in the Resurrection. Ultimately it is only love that enables the spiritual senses to blossom in this way. "Love is the creative power of God himself which has been infused into man by virtue of God's Incarnation. This is why, in the light of the divine ideas, love can read the world of forms and, in particular, man correctly" [*GL,* I, p. 424]. So Balthasar can say (in the same passage) that it is in *love for his neighbour* that the Christian "definitively receives his Christian senses, which, of course, are none other than his bodily senses, but these senses in so far as they have been formed according to the form of Christ" and the form of Christ is the *form of love.*

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." The world of Christian gnosis is the world of the "pure in heart," where the Virgin Mary ponders the words and deeds of God, and where she first conceives the Word in humble obedience to the great Angel. Thus from the gnosis of faith, hope and love, infused into the human soul by the Holy Spirit, we have moved easily to the "feminine": the Church or Bride of Christ, with Mary his Mother the unblemished, esoteric heart mediating all his graces, radiating him into the world. The recovery of the feminine, of "Marian esoterism," becomes in this perspective the great challenge of our time. Balthasar notes:

> The terrible havoc which the 'historical-critical method' is today wreaking in the world of faith is possible only in a spiritual sphere from which the Church's Marian dimension has been banished and which has, therefore, forsaken all spiritual senses and their ecclesial communication. This devastation is spreading not only over the whole theological realm [he wrote this in 1961]; it is penetrating even the area of philosophy. Here the world is becoming imageless and valueless; it is a heap of 'facts' which no longer say anything and in which an equally imageless and formless naked existence is freezing and anguishing unto death. The philosophy and the theology of the image stand and fall together, and when the *image* of woman has vanished from the theological realm, and exclusively masculine, imageless conceptuality and thought-technique takes over, and then faith finds itself banished from the world and confined to the realm of the paradoxical and the absurd [*GL,* I, p. 423]

A Theological Metaphysics?

The passage I have just quoted prepares the way for much in Balthasar's later series, *Theo-Drama,* concerning the mediation of divine Glory by the feminine—as does his section on Vladimir Solovyev, whom he praises for having successfully synthesized and purified the whole history of Western Sophiology: he "integrates gnosis into Christianity" [*GL,* III, p. 285]. But what I want to concentrate upon here is the way in the second series Balthasar develops the idea of (feminine) *receptivity* as a function of personal relationship and communion at every level, including the divine, and as an intrinsic part of his account of divine and human freedom— especially the freedom of God to create, and the freedom of man to choose eternal damnation (thus raising two of the most fundamental questions for Christian esotericism).

One implication of Christian Trinitarian doctrine is that God, who is according to St Thomas the supreme Act of existing, is also the supreme act of *giving.* Even before giving existence to creation, the Father eternally and completely gives himself to the Son in the Spirit. This giving is in fact what constitutes both the Son and the Spirit (as being eternally "from" the Father, each in a different way). But if there is giving in God, there must equally be

receiving—on the part of the Father too, who lovingly receives back the Son's gift of himself in the Spirit. Therefore, instead of rejecting the idea of receptivity or "passivity" in God as many Thomists have done because it seems incompatible with divine perfection, Balthasar argues that any imperfection in receiving can apply only to a being who is receptive *because needy*. (The finite, of course, can add nothing to the Infinite; but not because it is strictly "nothing," only because the Infinite has always-already received it, always-already transcended it.) Thus he builds upon the Aristotelian distinction between Act and Potency, and the Thomistic distinction between Existence and Essence; but within the Act which is God's nature he sees a further distinction, between the *kenosis* (self-giving) and receptivity that properly belong to love.[22]

The distinction is a function of the "otherness" of the divine Persons one from another, within the self-same nature and unity of love. This intra-Trinitarian "distance" (the Son is not the Father or the Spirit) provides Balthasar with the key to overcoming the cosmological problem noted by the (Orthodox) Traditionalist author Philip Sherrard: the conventional interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo,* which sets up the created world as an "other"—and virtually a rival—to God.[23] If there is this distance within God, because God is a Trinity, then there is a "space" within God for the act of creation, which takes place *ab intra,* not *ad extra* (to use Sherrard's terms). Balthasar's focus, however, is on the implications for divine freedom. According to Schuon, "Divine freedom means that God is free not to create a particular world; it cannot mean that He is free not to create at all."[24] For both St Thomas and for Balthasar, of course, the creation must be a free act on God's part, simply because its Existence is distinct from its Essence. It cannot be "necessary being."[25] But the creation is also not required even as an expression of God's goodness, because the need of goodness to communicate itself (the old Platonic principle) is forever already satisfied in the generation of the Son by the Father.

The fact of the Trinitarian processions thus opens up a new horizon of freedom within the Absolute. (Of course, no more than Schuon does Balthasar place this at the same level as that of man. In God, freedom and necessity coincide perfectly, and this is true preeminently of the "must" of love.) It also implies a new dimension of glory for the creature, if God's only motivation in creating is love. For love has a quality of superabundant delight in doing the unnecessary, in "surprising" the Beloved with an unlooked-for gift. "It is one of the laws of love that the lover cannot completely fathom the essence of the beloved.... He must always disclose and surrender himself afresh, continually surprising and overwhelming the lover. If ever this movement were to stop, to be replaced by a conclusive knowledge of each other, love would come to an end. What seemed to be complete knowledge would be the sign of a real finitude. But in God nothing is finite."[26]

In the very last pages of *Theo-Drama,* Balthasar confronts the question, "What does God gain from the world?" This connects two of his major themes: not only that of God's freedom in creating, but also the relationship of God's freedom to that of man: in particular, the possibility that some creatures may through the use of their freedom be damned forever and therefore lost to God. The question then becomes: what does God lose in losing man? Balthasar had earlier written a controversial book entitled *Dare We Hope (That All May be Saved)?* arguing that we may indeed so hope, both on the basis of Scripture and on the basis of visions and insights granted to the mystics. Schuon, of course, regards the doctrine of an eternal hell as pertaining to "exoteric" truth, not to esotericism, because the eternity of such a state cannot be located on the same *level of reality* as the eternity of God.[27] While Balthasar does not question the doctrine of hell, he stresses the *defeat for God* that the damnation of any person would in fact represent, and sees the separation of the sinner from God as

encompassed and contained by the separation of Son from Father in the abandonment of the Cross. The otherness of the divine Persons from each other within the Trinitarian Act, which is the "result" of their unlimited self-giving, is the basis for the free act of creation (since if "otherness" from God is founded in the divine nature, then God is eternally free to create something that is genuinely other than himself without its having to be impossibly "outside"). It is also the basis for the redemption of that creation once it has fallen through the misuse of its own freedom into the depths of sin.

Conclusion

If Balthasar is right, what Christians have to say is not something less than Vedanta or Sufism, but in crucial ways more. Christianity is unique, and cannot be assimilated to the transcendental unity of religions, in that it does not reveal merely the relationship of the One to the Many or the Absolute to the world, but tells us something new about the relationship of the *One to Itself.* If this is so, then the divine Fatherhood to which Christianity bears witness is a reality that goes beyond any "fatherhood" belonging to the Absolute per se—for this is already revealed in the various religions and in the Intellect of man. The divine Sonship, similarly, is more than any "natural" deiformity of the human image apparent to the eyes of Intellect when contemplating the form of man and his place in the creation. Finally, then, the "deification" of which Christian masters speak has to be more than the realization of a universal truth (that in essence we are already one with God). It is the accomplishment or making true of something that was not, indeed *could* not, have been true "before" the Incarnation; a sharing in the life of the Absolute.

This is not, however, simply to resurrect the old distinction between "natural" and "supernatural" or "revealed" religion—which would not allow for any element of supernatural revelation outside of Christianity. The true situation may be closer to that suggested by Romano Guardini, when he wrote: "Perhaps Christ had not only one precursor, John, last of the prophets, but three: John the Baptist for the Chosen People, Socrates from the heart of antiquity, and Buddha, who spoke the ultimate word in Eastern religious cognition."[28] Even Balthasar, whose at times harsh view of Asian religions (and Platonism) may have owed something to the intensity of his lifelong struggle with European Idealism, wrote towards the end of his life concerning the encounter with Asia: "The question is: does selflessness mean emptiness or Trinitarian love. The dialogue is possible."[29] Certainly Love—the Holy Spirit—is omni-present in the religions, "blowing where it wills," and saving multitudes by making them invisibly a part of the Catholic Church. Yet Balthasar would no doubt stress that without the event of the Incarnation this would not have been the case: love is only possible in view of the Incarnation. There is a sense in which much of what is taught by the other religions is what *would have been the case* if Christianity had *not* been true: if man had not in fact been created with only one, supernatural destiny in Christ. As long as we do not know that God is a Trinity, and that we have been created in order to participate in the eternal love of the divine Persons (these being truths that are revealed in Christ), we have to project a very different kind of future for ourselves: a future very like *Nirvana.*

Balthasar therefore believes that "the Christians of today, living in a night which is deeper than that of the later Middle Ages, are given the task of performing the act of affirming Being, unperturbed by the darkness and the distortion, in a way that is vicarious and representative for all humanity: an act which is at first theological, but *which contains within itself the whole dimension of the metaphysical act of the affirmation of Being"* [*GL,* V, 648, *my emphasis*]. A renewed metaphysical Catholicism has a place both for intellectual intuition and for the language of symbolism which has been disastrously neglected since the age of the cathedrals.

At the same time, the difference between Christianity and the other religions is irreducible. "It is not that an eternally present cosmic law is now brought to consciousness in a new way by Christ; rather, out of the freedom of God's love *a mode of salvation is created* by which all is safeguarded in God" [*GL*, I, p. 507, *my emphasis*]. The "Christian is called to be the guardian of metaphysics for our time" [*GL*, I, p. 656]. On the face of it, what could seem more absurd? In the last few centuries, and particularly in the last fifty years, Christians have become the least metaphysical people on earth. It was Christianity that opened the door to modernity, which is virtually founded on the destruction of metaphysics. On the other hand, does not this very fact imply the role that Balthasar gives Christianity, for only something quite unique among world religions could possess such an unprecedentedly destructive power *(corruptio optimi pessima)?* The reader will have to decide. One thing is clear. If such a transformation of Christians into "guardians of metaphysics" on a world scale is to take place—or even a much less ambitious recovery of a *sense of the supernatural*, and thus of the true meaning of their own sacraments and liturgy—Christians must look to the deepest springs of their tradition. Like Borella and Balthasar, they must become aware both of its distinctive character, as the revelation of a mystery within God, a "mystery hidden from all ages" (*1 Cor. 2:7*), the mystery of Christ—and also, increasingly, of all the elements of universal truth in its manifold symbolic and intellectual expressions, which Christian theology seeks (successfully or unsuccessfully) to integrate around that unique centre.

* Also see **From Phenomenon to Foundation: *A Response to Stratford Caldecott*** *by Lynn C. Bauman*

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1 John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, Vatican: 1998, section 83.

2 *The Encounter of Man and Nature*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1968.

3 These quotations are from B. Kelly, "Notes on the Light of the Eastern Religions," *Blackfriars*, Vol. 7, 1954.

4 In such a short essay, it is not possible to develop every point at length, so the treatment will be somewhat schematic. Footnotes are intended to direct the reader to important sources where these points may be pursued. A systematic exposition of the Traditionalist viewpoint may be found in S.H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Gifford Lectures), Edinburgh University Press, 1981.

5 For example, H. Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi*, Princeton University Press, 1969. See also William C. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-Arabi and the problem of Religious Diversity*, State University of New York Press, 1994. Unless we take account of the nature of the imagination we cannot make much sense of the way visions and apparitions convey truth, but in a form conditioned by culture and presupposition. Corbin, who was originally a Christian, is unfortunately so carried away by the attractions of the Interworld that he can no longer conceive of a material Incarnation, and thus falls into a Docetic christology.

6 E.I. Watkin, *A Philosophy of Form*, London: Sheed & Ward, 1950, p. 110.

7 H. de Lubac, S.J., in *Theology in History*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996.

8 In fact H.U. von Balthasar—who was a pupil of de Lubac's—describes the "trichotomism" of St Irenaeus as an early attempt at formulating the relationship of nature and grace: "the call to grace and the life of grace belong to the concrete integrity of man." The spirit is the thing in man that "comes down from above." See *The Scandal of the Incarnation: Irenaeus Against the Heresies,* San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990, p. 94.

9 See *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* Para 367.

10 J. Borella, *The Sense of the Supernatural,* Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998, p. 43.

11 Like E.I. Watkin on pp. 389-90 of *A Philosophy of Form,* he objects to Jacques Maritain's denial of substantial or "entitative" contact of the human soul with God, contrasting this with the statement of St John of the Cross.

12 *Cloud of Unknowing,* ed. James Walsh SJ, London: SPCK, 1981, pp. 203-5. *(My emphasis.)*

13 F. Schuon, Stations of Wisdom, London: John Murray, 1961, p. 91.

14 S.H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred,* Edinburgh University Press, 1981, pp. 136-8.

15 F. Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions,* San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1975, p. xviii. See also Kenneth Oldmeadow, "Metaphysics, Theology and Philosophy," *Sacred Web 1* (1998).

16 F. Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence,* New York: Harper & Row, 1975, pp. 96-109. A similar apparent lack of comprehension characterizes Schuon's remarks (patronizing in tone) on the doctrine of Transubstantiation in the same chapter, as also in *Christianity/Islam: Essays on Esoteric Ecumenism,* Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1985, p. 56. In the latter he argues that the continued existence of the substance of bread in the eucharistic species is implied by the fact of the two natures in Christ, as if the two unities in question were somehow situated at the same level (true God/ man, true God/ bread).

17 Of course, Schuon is familiar with what he calls the "polemics" of love against knowledge, which he describes as wanting to put out the light of a fire by means of its heat (*Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts,* London: Perennial Books, 1969, p. 144). "For love man is subject and God Object. For knowledge it is God who is Subject and man object," he adds. But for Christianity it is God who loves first; God who is the Subject and Object of love: this is precisely the mystery of the Trinity (as Schuon almost implies when he states, in p. 149 of the same chapter, "God is Love, for by His Essence, He is 'union' and 'gift of Self'.")

18 C.F. Kelley, *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge,* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977, p. 37; Cyprian Smith, O.S.B., *The Way of Paradox,* London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1987, p. 65; Joseph Milne, "Eckhart and the Problem of Christian Non- Dualism," *Eckhart Review,* March 1993.

19 The following abbreviations will be used for texts by Hans Urs von Balthasar. *GL = The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics,* Edinburgh and San Francisco: T&T Clark and Ignatius Press, 1982-91, seven volumes. *T-D = Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory,* San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988-98, five volumes. For an overview of Balthasar's work

and guidance in further study of the topics raised in the present essay, see R. Gawronski SJ, *Word and Silence: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Spiritual Encounter between East and West,* Edinburgh and Grand Rapids: T&T Clark and Eerdmans, 1995.

20 The quotations from Balthasar in this paragraph come from *GL,* V, pp. 16-47.

21 "As St Thomas points out so clearly, the fallen spirits have lost none of their intellectual privileges; there is not the slightest obscurity in their mind… The incorruptibility of mind of the fallen angels is absolute, and to such an extent is this true, according to St Thomas, that neither God not the good Angels have ceased to communicate to them those lights which belong to the angelic nature. God still enlightens their intellects in all matters that belong to the natural state of the spirit. The only things about which they are kept in ignorance are the mysteries of divine grace. Those mysteries are communicated to the good Angels; their brightness is such that the bad spirits may be said to be in darkness." This is from Dom Anscar Vonier, *The Collected Works of Abbot Vonier,* Vol. III, London: Burns Oates, 1953, pp. 181-3.

22 See G.F. O'Hanlon, *The Immutability of God in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar,* Cambridge University Press, 1990. One might make comparisons here with the work of several important Orthodox theologians, including Sergei Bulgakov, John Zizioulas and Dmitru Staniloae. I have touched on some of the cosmological implications of this in "A Science of the Real: The Renewal of Christian Cosmology," *Communio* (Fall, 1998).

23 P. Sherrard, *Christianity: Lineaments of a Sacred Tradition,* Brookline and Edinburgh: Holy Cross press and T&T Clark, 1998, ch. 10. Sherrard sees this interpretation as lying at the root of secularization and also of the present ecological crisis.

24 F. Schuon, *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy,* London: World of Islam Publishing Co., 1976, p. 173.

25 No Essence can exist unless "actualized": that is, only the act of existing makes it something rather than nothing. Here Balthasar sides in his interpretation with the socalled "existential Thomists," such as Etienne Gilson, for whom Existence reigns supreme, and God's Essence is infinite precisely because it is identical with his Existence. It should be noted for the sake of further dialogue between Catholic philosophers and the representatives of "Tradition" that a more Platonic interpretation has been developed by the Catholic philosopher Josef Seifert and his colleagues at the International Academy of Philosophy, which still accepts the "real distinction" in St Thomas, but criticizes the view of the divine infinity and the exclusive priority of Existence over Essence on the grounds that not every essence is necessarily a limitation. See J. Seifert, "Essence and Existence," *Aletheia,* I and I.2, University of Dallas Press, 1977.

26 Adrienne von Speyr, *The World of Prayer,* San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985, p. 42. See also H.U.von Balthasar, *T-D,* II, pp. 258-9.

27 F. Schuon, *Understanding Islam,* London: Allen & Unwin, 1963, pp. 71-83. This provides another example of the clash between Christian doctrine and Schuonian orthodoxy. Schuon's "solution" is not open to Balthasar precisely because of the seriousness with which the latter treats not only the Gospels, where the doctrine of possible damnation is clearly taught by

Christ himself, but also the Christian understanding of human deification (creaturely participation in God's eternity through the Blessed Trinity).

28 R. Guardini, *The Lord*, Chicago: Regnery Gateway, 1954, p. 305.

29 Cited in Gawronski, *Word and Silence*, Edinburgh and Grand Rapids: T&T Clark and Eerdmans, 1995, p. 221.