

The Problematic of the Unity of Religions

(Afterword to Bruno Bérard, *Introduction à une métaphysique des mystères chrétiens*, imprimatur by the Archbishop of Paris, num. 20 [2002], L'Harmattan, 2005.)

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Bruno Bérard's book is, in a certain manner, unprecedented. I do not think the works collected here were ever the object of such an overall presentation as this one. The study in this respect is a 'first'. However, the author's intention was not to offer a series of monographs, nor to relate the history of an intellectual current, for which traditional metaphysics, as formulated by René Guénon, would be the pole of reference. No, this project was different. It involved explaining, in a manner somewhat timeless and for its own sake, a doctrinal synthesis for which the works brought together here are only modes of expression. From this point of view, individualities do not count. The writers' names mentioned stand only as a formal identification, not as any real differentiation. Basically, they are almost interchangeable. Integrated into this synthesis, they are as if stripped of their own personalities.

For all that, neither are they made to serve in an original construction with Bruno Bérard the chief architect. As with the thinkers cited, he insists on relative impersonality for himself as well. This is at least his conviction. There is, in a way, nothing written for this book; the texts we read do not belong to it. These are pieces borrowed from contemporary authors out of which he composes a mosaic where the countenance of what might be called a Christian gnosis is depicted.

But, however absent, Bruno Bérard remains none the less quite present by the intention that pervades this work from end to end. This intention is to bring a response to questions, and more often objections, with which modern unbelief opposes the propositions of faith. Bruno Bérard is animated by the conviction that many difficulties find their solution,

not in a line of argument defending dogmatic formulations—formulations which do not involve a calling into question of legitimacy and authority, since they are the work of the Holy Spirit—but a change in point of view, by appeal to the resources of a metaphysic, or, if you like, a sacred intellectuality, to which a theologian hardly has recourse, or may even hold suspect. What is, in fact, at stake in the proclamation of the Christian faith today is its ability to be ‘received’. All the efforts of its spokesmen are neutralized *a priori*, not because this Word is deliberately rejected, but because, literally, it is no longer heard. The language that it speaks has become perfectly foreign to the ears of our contemporaries: it no longer says anything to them. Everything transpires as if a sense, with which humanity had been endowed until now, and which I have called the sense of the supernatural, had disappeared, or, at least, is no longer exercised. For, to suppose that the people of today have been the object of a true anthropological mutation, of an irreversible change in their nature, this is obviously to preclude any possibility of a solution, and this is also to consider the language of faith decidedly *passé*, thus denying faith itself its continued actuality: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (Matt. 24:35). If the words of faith will not pass away, that also implies, from the human side, a permanent capacity to hear them. Deafness can only be partial and momentary, of the cultural and not the natural order. Our reason and intelligence, in their profound nature, are today what they have always been, and are still endowed with this sense of the supernatural, with this metaphysical ear capable of perceiving the message of transcendent realities. The metaphysical language used here by the authors gathered together by Bruno Bérard, which in no way excludes the use of the language of traditional theology, aims at awakening in the reader the intellectual sense of the Transcendent, at reactualizing his capacity for spiritual listening, and basically at showing him how, in this light, faith’s propositions are no longer completely impossible.

Such an undertaking includes, however, a risk, a risk heightened by the resolutely impersonal mode of expression adopted by its editor-in-chief, and which imbues the various writings of this gathering with a kind of anonymity. Assuredly I have said, with respect to truth, individualities do not count. This is even a favorite formula of René Guénon and his followers. But it is not enough to repeat it for this to be actually

realized. The obliteration of individual traces in a given text does not constitute a guarantee of its truth: being *apparently* impersonal is not equivalent to being true. Conversely, a very personal language, like that of St Francis of Assisi or St Augustine, can express the purest truths. As Aristotle teaches, it is not the intellect that knows, it is the man (*On the Soul*, I, 4, 408b, 15). In other words, as paltry as an individual's share in a speculative formulation might be, it is never nothing. To deny this share is to consign oneself to ignoring it, and therefore, completely unawares, giving it free rein. In this respect, a frank declaration of subjectivity is more objective than its unacknowledged concealment.

Besides, and this is the risk about which I would like to speak, by presenting this metaphysical discourse as the universal key that opens to us faith's intelligibility, which it is in many respects, the inevitable tendency is to situate it above faith, since it shows faith's truth, or, at the very least, enables faith to be credible. Since such a discourse is the work of the intelligence, this means that intellection is superior to revelation and ultimately has no need of it. More especially, Bruno Bérard does not hesitate to borrow illustrations of this sacred science from the earth's great religions, clarifying the formulations of some by those of others. We are thus led to posit, above all the divine messages, above all the 'sacred forms', a 'transcendent unity', to speak in Frithjof Schuon's terms, wherein all religions are rejoined and surpassed in their universal and supraformal truth. Doubtless, Bruno Bérard does not go so far as to define, like Frithjof Schuon, a *Religio Perennis*, a 'universal and perennial metareligion', the contents of which would be none other than pure metaphysical doctrine; but Schuon's followers would undoubtedly be tempted to reproach him for this, deeming that he does not go right to the end.

The question may be posed however: should he go right to the end? In this domain, very rare are those who have truly questioned themselves over the implications of thinking about 'transcendent unity'. One usually perceives the object of this doctrine quite clearly: it is seen as the surpassing of religious particularisms proper to exoterisms, particularisms unable to imagine another form of the divine than the one coloring its own confessional horizon, a horizon to which is naturally tied a feeling for the absolute. Among the uprooted Christians that we are, this surpassing readily benefits from a favorable presumption: it breaks with

the spontaneous egocentrism of believers and the well-known intolerance of the Catholic Church, its worldly imperialism, and even a certain racism of which it is hard to rid itself. These are, however, only moral considerations having but an indirect relationship with the truth. A more intellectual point of view would consist in comparing religions with each other so to show their profound unity. Often followed, this way leads to some results. But what is the value of these results with respect to the divine unity of the revelations? This comparatism can be employed by historians of religion or philosophers, and this in several ways. The historian who identifies analogies between religious phenomena diverse in origin, if he wants to go further than a simple observation and give a set meaning to these analogies, should still take them into account. And then he is doing the work of philosophy. As is the case with Mircea Eliade, he will see a manifestation of the unity of a religious consciousness which, under varied forms, reacts in a more or less identical manner through time and space. To speak like Gilbert Durand, there are 'anthropological structures of the imagination'; the imagination is structured according to symbolic categories to be discovered everywhere. But this is not the doctrine of the unity of revelations. The philosophical point of view can go further in its analysis of religious consciousness, further than a phenomenology of the concrete forms of the religions, always taken in a set cultural context. The philosopher's aim will be, then, to identify, dare I say, the general (and therefore abstract) form of every possible religious consciousness: Hegel, declaring that religion is the symbolic form assumed by a consciousness of the Absolute, illustrates this point of view remarkably well. But is this the unity of revelations? Certainly not, at least not yet. The Guénon-Schuon perspective adds something else which consists in positing this unity as a divine work, as an effect willed by God, or, if 'God' seems too 'Abrahamic' a notion, let us say by 'Heaven' or the 'Supreme Principle'. The truth of unity is no longer of the psychological or philosophical order; it is of the 'theological' order; it is a sacred truth. Eliade's or Hegel's theses are a-religious by nature, or, in any case, wish to be independent of every *Credo*. The Guénon-Schuon thesis is fundamentally 'religious', if we at least accept (in opposition to Guénon) giving this adjective its most general sense.

This means that it is not the fruit of a neutral *a posteriori* observation, but corresponds to a kind of faith. Of course, it will be objected that not

faith, but metaphysical evidence and, therefore, an intellectual certitude is involved here, which is possible; but what should be undeniable is that such a certitude and evidence are quite unusual, since, as far as I know, this doctrine, in all its strength and precision, was formulated only very recently in the history of humanity, and therefore that it goes beyond conclusions sanctioned by ordinary reason. In other words, there is nothing in phenomenological comparatism or philosophical analysis that necessarily imposes the conclusion of a unity of revelations *willed by God*, even if many sacred facts or epistemological reasoning suggests it. Something more is needed, a leap by which the spirit situates itself from the outset in the depths of Divine Wisdom and considers the various revelations from their supreme Cause, and therefore *a priori*. Man's attitude with respect to revelation is a receptive one. About what transpires this side of the revelatory act, 'from the side of God', man knows nothing: why has God assumed such a form? why at such a moment? why in such a place?—these are so many unanswerable questions, or questions which do not concern us. But the doctrine of unity oversteps this boundary, establishes itself in the secret of God, and views the religions from top to bottom.

This attitude can seem to be one of unlimited pretension. And yet it feels itself justified, first, because it thinks to go right to the end of its logic, right to the end of the metaphysical understanding's needs, and second, because having done this it sides with God. The plurality of religions, which is an incontestable fact, is in fact a test for the believer. If only my religion is true, why has God allowed there to be others? The doctrine of unity attenuates this scandal or, at least, enables us to believe that there is a science that perfectly accounts for it: all religions say the same thing under different forms. To tell the truth, to prove that this is indeed the case is a rightly gargantuan task which has never been and will never be undertaken. In this respect, we must content ourselves with some connections either on essential or secondary points, or at least judged to be such in both cases by those who make them. Notice, however, that in Christianity there are also some altogether central elements, which Guénon himself indicates as having no equivalent in the other religions, as when he shows in *The Grand Triad* (chap. 1) that the Christian Trinity does not exactly correspond to any other traditional ternary, or again, when he states that the Christian sacraments

are “something the exact equivalent of which is not found elsewhere” (*Perspectives on Initiation*, Chap. 23, p. 153). But finally, despite these difficulties, the thesis of unity will be admitted *with confidence*. What remains, however, is to ask oneself why God has willed this diversity. That it is not just a pure and irreducible plurality and presents itself rather as multiple visages of one same Reality, this constitutes, in many respects, a considerable gain in intelligibility, at least in principle. But why could not God reveal Himself under a single form, or in accordance with a single founding event, which would then be diversified but with reference to the founding unicity?

Here we need to differentiate between the responses that Guénon and Schuon bring to these questions. To tell the truth, Guénon does not seem to provide metaphysical reasons for the plurality of religions, or, to respect his formulations, the plurality of ‘traditional forms’: for him this is a fact, and it is nothing but a consequence of the diverse human settings to which the Primordial Tradition (the primal revelation) should necessarily adapt itself. There are, then, cosmological causes to explain this plurality. But in such a case we need to ask: why are there culturally different humanities? Are there differing cultures that impose the different revelatory forms—the divine message embracing the form of its receptacle—or are there rather diverse revelations that communicate their forms to the human groups to whom they are addressed, in such a way that cultural diversity would be an effect of the diversity of revelatory forms? However that might be, I will say that, for Guénon, the diversity is secondary and the unity primordial. And so he is less interested in what might be the metaphysical reason for religious pluralism, in its ‘why’, than in its ‘how’, that is in the manner in which its historical manifestation should be understood. To answer this question, Guénon formulates a most extraordinary theory, the theory of the King of the World. This theory realizes to perfection an ‘administrative’ concept of the unity of religions. All religions are secondary modifications of a primordial Tradition, the deposit of which is entrusted to a mysterious individual, the King of the World, surrounded by a whole ensemble of sacred ‘functionaries’ who secure the relationship of the primordial Center, situated somewhere underground in Asia, with the various traditional forms. In this truly mythological model, a key component of the Guénonian edifice, traditional, horizontal continuity prevails

over the revelatory, vertical discontinuities. This is why the concept of 'tradition' (and traditional regularity) is so important to Guénon. The advent of a new revelation supposes, however, a divine intervention in the cultural tissue of such or such a humanity, a tissue that cannot but be torn apart in some respects; but, in Guénon's theory, everything transpires as if the divine initiative should be in conformity with the rules regulating the universal revelatory economy, the administrator of which is the King of the World. It is to the point that revelations like Christianity or Buddhism which, not seeming to be obedient to the *Dharma*, to the universal Norm, are considered by some of the most faithful and most knowledgeable Guénonians as "a formal heresy from the point of view of Tradition" (Charles-André Gillis, *Introduction à l'enseignement et au mystère de René Guénon*, p. 87). This surprising conclusion, which formally excludes from traditional, 'unanimous and universal' orthodoxy two major religions, is however governed by a rigorous logic. Certainly Guénon himself has not drawn this conclusion, at least not explicitly with respect to Christianity, although it might be asked, from the Guénonian point of view, what remains of traditional regularity in a religion that has lost its esoteric part and broken off all connection with the King of the World. Conversely, it would be right to ask: if such a conclusion can be deduced from the system, does this not disqualify the system? I will leave aside this question and simply say that the doctrine of the King of the World in some fashion realizes the second hypothesis that I previously envisaged: a unique founding event (the descent to earth of the primordial Tradition) and multiple modulations of this unique Tradition.

Now there remains to be asked: how does Guénon know all that? Since he is the only one, by his own admission (*King of the World*, chap. 1), to have spoken about it with such precision, we must suppose that he was in more or less direct contact with the supreme Center which had commissioned him as its spokesman, unless he himself, in one manner or another, is identical to the King of this mysterious Center. By this we see where the doctrine of the unity of revelations can lead when one intends to examine the possible conditions of its formulation. To justify Guénon, some will say that everything concerning the King of the World is of the mythic order. But there is no doubt that Guénon has presented all this symbolism as being all too real.

Quite different is the form assumed by the doctrine of unity for Schuon. If the horizontal continuity of the Tradition prevails with Guénon over the vertical discontinuities, it is just the opposite with Schuon, who rejects, moreover, the administrative conception of this unity under the form of the jurisdiction of a King of the World in whose existence he does not believe. In a general manner, he is more attentive to the qualitative, 'phenomenological' diversity of the religions, as well as to the direct relationship each maintains with its divine origin. Each religion is the fruit of a divine initiative which, in a certain manner, breaks with the web of prior traditions and therefore has no need of any jurisdiction whatsoever to sanction it: God knows what he is doing. And even when this involves, not a new revelation, but a new interpretation of an existing religion, Lutheranism with respect to Catholicism for example, the same principle is called upon: Lutheran evangelism is recognized and blessed by heaven to the extent that it corresponds to an archetypal possibility included in Christianity's essence. The jurisdiction of the principle of apostolic transmission ceases where the principle of an archetypal correspondence intervenes (*Christianity/Islam* [Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1985], pp. 15-16).

Let us now examine the arguments that assist Schuon in establishing *a priori* the necessity for a plurality of religious forms (*The Transcendent Unity of Religions* [Wheaton, Ill.: Theosophical Publishing House, 1984], pp. 19-20). They might be summarized in this way: no form is unique for, being a limited manifestation, every form implies a plurality of analogous forms. This dialectic seems somewhat approximate and not always conclusive. To view religions as varied forms of one same species (the species 'religion'), is the viewpoint of the science of religions or of philosophy. This supposes one to be in possession of the general concept of religion abstracted from a real knowledge of existing religions; but, conversely, to recognize such a manifestation as belonging to the species 'religion', it is necessary to be already in possession of its general concept. Now such a concept appeared only late in the history of ideas (around the third century after Christ): the ancient languages (Hebrew, Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, etc.) were unaware of it (the Latin *religio* signified only 'piety'). Therefore, from the point of view of a given religion, there is no 'religious form'. Hence, to speak of 'religious form' is to already situate oneself outside the religions and presuppose their multiplicity.

This does not demonstrate its necessity.

I will leave aside the fact that Schuon has also brought in, to account for this multiplicity, the cultural diversity of human groups, but will only ask: where is Schuon actually situating himself when speaking of religious forms? Is it at the conceptual level, as is done by science and philosophy? This is not impossible, but this says nothing about the divine unity of these forms: an unbeliever might be quite interested in the science or philosophy of religions, and find their unity, for example, in the identity of the human imagination or unconscious of which they are the expression; a theory of religion is not necessarily religious. Still more, it must be conceded, to the contrary, that, by itself, a theory should be religiously neutral insofar as it remains on the conceptual level. Undoubtedly there is the case of a religious theory developed from the vantage point of a set religion: for example Maritain's theory of 'natural religion' as opposed to revealed religion (Judaism and Christianity): this is clearly a religious theory, but not of *all* religions, since it does not encompass Judaism and Christianity. A religious theory of religions implies that it is situated beyond *all* religions, and situated there *religiously*. In short, theory here necessarily becomes religion: it becomes the *Religio perennis* (*Light on the Ancient Worlds* [Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1984] pp. 136-144), which Schuon will later call *Sophia perennis*. To speak of a 'transcendent unity' (and not of an immanent unity) is either to say that the unity of religions is in God, in the divine Word—which is self-evident and nothing original—, or is to posit a supreme Religion, a Religion of the religions beyond religions. And to posit it as such by explaining its fundamental axioms (distinction of the Absolute from the relative, concentration on the Absolute, etc.), this is to prove that one has access to this *Sophia perennis*, and hence one is its prophet, or even revealer. Such is the strict logic of the Schuonian course, and I think Schuon took upon himself all of its consequences.

It might now be asked: what is there of the religious in this *Religio perennis*? What is its content? Surely the few principles out of which Schuon has composed it (discernment of the Real from the illusory, and concentration on the only Real) have great powers of synthesis. But they are also quite close to an abstract diagram of all religion, in short its concept. When Hegel defines religion as 'consciousness of the Absolute', he is saying exactly the same thing, even if, on many points the religious

thought of the two thinkers differs considerably and doubtless not to Hegel's advantage: Schuon possesses a knowledge of religions that Hegel did not have, and remains fundamentally religious and 'mystical'. But, as a matter of fact, the intensely spiritual *climate* of Schuon's doctrine is attributable less, it seems to me, to the very nature of the *Religio perennis*, such as he has framed this notion—and he is the first to have done so—than to already existing religions (Christianity, Islam, and the Native American tradition as far as his own subjectivity is concerned), from which he borrows this climate, tonality, or atmosphere, and which he transposes esthetically onto the level of a (re)constituted *Sophia perennis*, and therefore onto the level of an abstraction. And that is the difficulty and the ambiguity of his project: by its sacred appearance it promises more than it can give. For what is truly religious in a religion is only that which truly descends from heaven, in other words, what is revealed by God. This whole question comes down then to the following point: one either concedes that the *Religio perennis* is revealed—and what a revelation! that of the transcendent unity of all revelations, which would lead, in certain respects, to making Schuon equal or even superior to other religious revealers (but Schuon does not go so far)—and then it indeed possesses a religious character, or not, and in that case it has only the 'perfume' of religion, not its substance.

For all these reasons, it seems then necessary to renounce the thesis of a transcendent unity of religions, whether this unity is that of a primordial Tradition entrusted in deposit to the King of the World, or whether it is formulated with the attributes of the Schuonian *Religio perennis* and identified with so-called 'absolute' or quintessential esoterism, to be distinguished from relative or confessional esoterism (such as Sufism or the Kabbalah) which only prolongs such or such a religion inwardly. This thesis must be renounced because, in its Guénonian as well as its Schuonian form, it leads to extravagant and excessive consequences.

That does not mean that God or an angel are not at the source of the Earth's great religions, and that these religions are not a means to salvation for their faithful, for it is truly 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. To these religions, simple works of religious instinct or perhaps even demonic, with their beliefs and their cultic practices,

these millions have devoted all their faith, efforts, love, and hopes at almost every moment of their lives, without any means of knowing that they were being deceived, that all this was being accomplished at best in vain, at worst by subjection to the devil, despite the sincerity of their hearts. And God regards this endless straying of humanity (with the exception of a few dozen or a few thousand Israelites) at best with indulgence, at worst as a wrathful Judge who condemns for eternity. Against this argument the objection is raised—Schuon too makes use of it—that it is sentimental in nature. Undoubtedly, but it also stems from taking into account an absurdity, the absurdity that there is in admitting that a human behavior is totally bereft of the goal that it nevertheless commits itself to in all honesty, which constitutes a universal, continual, and perfectly undetectable deception. Now man, such as he has been created by God, has no other means of assuring himself of something's truth than his intelligence and reason working on the (natural or supernatural) data of his experience. That intelligence and reason can be totally misled, not sometimes but always and without the least possibility of perceiving it, this is to inflict a contradiction on God's creation, this is to doom to failure, always and everywhere, the rightful goal of the intellectual power with which God has endowed the human species, and that in its loftiest dimension. This is then, at least indirectly, to deny God, which stems not from sentiment but from metaphysical reasoning. The unsearchable character of the divine decrees and God's good pleasure might be appealed to here. This principle is beyond dispute: God's thoughts are not our thoughts. But should it be applied in this case? From a completely indeterminate premise (the divine reasons are totally unknown to us), can we deduce the *raison d'être* of a determinate fact (the exclusive unicity of the Abrahamic revelation)? I do not think so. This is not then an argument, and does not constitute by itself a refutation of the previous considerations; it is simply an admission of ignorance. In other words, we do not know why this is so, but it is. Besides, an opposite conclusion can be drawn from an appeal to the principle of the unsearchable character of the divine decrees: who knows if God has willed that we should remain wholly ignorant of the divine origin of other religions?

However, just because one accepts the possibility of a divine origin—according to various modalities—of the great religions, it does not

follow that they are all equivalent and equally 'divine'. For, to the Schuon argument according to which the manifestation of the Infinite in the finite demands a multiplicity of manifesting forms, and excludes any unique form of manifestation, it should be added that it is no less necessary that the absolute unicity of the One God manifest itself, in a certain manner, and this at the very level of the plurality of religious forms. True, it could be maintained that the unicity of the One God manifests itself sufficiently in the fact that each religion believes itself the only true one. But the sense of the absolute at the core of each religion isolates it from all the others, and renders it unique in an absolute and non-comparative sense, that is in the sense that, by this, the plurality of religious forms (still judged necessary) is denied. It follows that, if the plurality of religions is necessary, it is in the very zone of this plurality that unicity should also be manifested. A *relative* unicity would be involved then, that is not the unicity in itself of a religion with respect to itself, but its unicity *relative* to other religions.

Despite its technicality, philosophic language would be useful here. The question is, then, what kind of unity can there be between religions, for there are in fact several kinds of unity? The first to be mentioned is *generic* unity in which a unique *genus* common to several species is encountered. Thus the genus 'animal' is really common to oxen and humans; a man is not less animal than an ox, but to this common genus he adds a *specific* difference of 'reason'. According to this type of unity, the term 'religion' would designate a common genus of which each religion would be a species, no religion being more or less a religion than any other one, no more than any animal is more an animal than any other. Here the term 'religion' has a univocal sense. Next we can envisage the case of a purely nominal unity. Thus there is no genus in common between the animal 'dog' and the constellation of the dog, *Canis Major*: here the term 'dog' has an equivocal sense, it is simply a homonym. Do we have only the choice between univocal and equivocal? In the absence of a common genus for several realities, are we condemned to a simply nominal unity, in such a manner that the term religion would designate, then, no community of nature among the various forms to which this term is applied? No, for there is a third type of unity (neither univocal as in a generic unity, nor equivocal as in a nominal unity) when one same designation is applied to different realities, not because these realities

share a common genus, but because they maintain a set relationship with a first reality wherein is manifested, in a more appropriate and more perfect manner, the essence signified by the designation: for example, an animal is rightly and preeminently said to be 'healthy', but, indirectly, this is also said of the remedy or medicine that secures one's health, or of the urine that is a sign of it. This unity can be called *analogical*—so named in medieval times—in the sense of an attributive analogy: one same term is attributed to different realities in a manner neither univocal (no identity or *generic* equivalence between these realities), nor yet equivocal, for here "the community of name has its *raison d'être* in that a certain nature is manifested in all [the] acceptations" of this term (L. Robin, *La théorie platonicienne des Idées et des Nombres d'après Aristote*, p. 151). But this community of nature is manifested more or less perfectly, and therefore this nature will be named only according to the reality within which it is most visibly made known and to which it most properly belongs. It will therefore be attributed to other realities "by reference to a first reality", says Aristotle. This type of unity is encountered when realities designated by a common name form a series (numbers for example), or can be ranked according to a hierarchical order of perfection (the soul in this case). The nutritive, animal, and intellectual souls are not different species of a common genus that is called 'soul', but each of these souls is *as if* an 'indivisible species', the presence of which is implied in the 'indivisible species' immediately superior to it: thus the animal soul implies, in order to exist, the nutritive soul, and the intellectual soul implies, in man, the animal soul. It is the same for geometric figures: there is no generic figure of which the triangle, square, and polygons are species, but these figures form a series in which "the successive term always implies its predecessor both in the case of figures and living beings" (Aristotle, *On the Soul*, II, 3, 414b-415a). Wherever there is a plurality ordered according to anterior and posterior, a non-generic unity is to be encountered.

Lastly, it must be added that (temporal) anteriority is not necessarily synonymous with superiority or perfection. Although, in the series just mentioned, the successive depends for its existence on its predecessor, nevertheless the successive can exhibit, with respect to the essence understood as principle of seriation, more perfection than the predecessor, a greater proximity to this essence or nature: the intellectual soul

is more perfect than the nutritive because closer to what is the soul's essence and more visibly manifests it. This case is most often realized in the embryogenetic processes, whether natural or cultural. Thus the different phases of a tree's growth reveal their true nature only at maturity: at seed-time nearly all seeds are similar. Likewise, in cultural processes, the first manifestations of an art, a literary 'genre', etc., are rarely the most perfect. The end is certainly in the beginning, but it often reveals its truth only at the end of a growth period.

I have asked myself, then, if these principles might not be applied in the case of religions. What has induced me to do this is, first, the theoretical difficulties present in Schuon's thesis of the *Religio perennis*, and, second, the fact that humanity was ignorant of the general idea of religion before the advent of Christianity. And this seems to be a decisive fact. "It is important to recall," writes Angelo Brelich, "that no language of a primitive people, no higher archaic civilization, not even the Greek and Latin closer to us, possessed a term corresponding to this concept [of religion] which was historically defined at a particular time and in a particular milieu" (*Encyclopédie de la Pléiade, Histoire des Religions*, tome I, 'Prolégomènes à une histoire des religions', p. 7). This time and milieu were those of Christianity's first centuries, as the works of Tertullian, Lactantius, and Augustine attest. This period is witness to the progressive elaboration of a concept to which will be given, through several variations in usage, the name 'religion', a term which will designate 'something' distinct from every other social or cultural form, and the presence of which will be ascertained in all peoples and civilizations. The very notion of 'true religion' as applied to Christianity presupposes the elaboration of such a concept, since I can only define true religion by comparing it to everything that falsely bears this same name, and therefore only on condition of having at one's disposal a concept of religion as a universal cultural form.

But the semantic effect of Christianity's advent in the Mediterranean world of the first and second century is not confined to endowing human thought with the concept of religion 'in general'; it also extends, quite logically, to the naming of each religion in particular. For, if the discovery of the notion of religion (and therefore of religions) has occurred neither in China or India, nor in Buddhism or Egypt, nor in Israel, Greece, or Rome, it must still be added that prior to Christianity

none of these religions had a name to designate itself. The labels that we use, such as Taoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and even Judaism are all post-Christian, and some (Hinduism for example) are quite recent. To the contrary, the adjective 'Christian', as we learn in the *Acts of the Apostles* (11:26), appeared at Antioch around the year 45, and the noun 'Christianity' (*christianismos* as opposed to *ioudaïsmos*), attested for the first time with St Ignatius of Antioch (Letter to the Magnesians, X, 1, 3; to the Romans, III, 3, and to the Philadelphians, VI, 1), seems to be already in everyday use at the end of the first century.

These facts are incontestable. Again, we must ask what they signify and what made them possible. Undoubtedly, the naming process might be seen as regrettable in some respects: the pre-name state, when a religion has no name and is distinguished neither from other religious forms, nor other manifestations of social life with which it is entirely mingled, might be held to be a state of blessed innocence. Paradise, however, does not exclude every naming: Adam names the animals and gives Eve her name, causing all things to rise out of their original indistinctness. And God himself created all the world's realities by calling them by their names. The naming process includes then a positive aspect and leads beings to the perfection of their created nature. Every naming distinguishes and separates, but, having done this, it also completes the truth of the multiple by revealing each being's peculiar identity. God alone is ineffable: everything created is basically nameable. As a consequence there is, in the (relative) namelessness of pre-Christian religions at once a memory of the indistinctness of the divine Principle from which they spring, but also a certain 'illusion' about their true nature, a basic incompleteness which prevents them from seeing their own limits, which causes them to live in a kind of infinitude and keeps them from perceiving clearly what is beyond them. To gain access to self-awareness and, through this, to an awareness of religion as such, Christian thinkers had to have, along with the Christic message, the experience of something that surpassed all that could be known in the realm of the sacred, that is not only Greek, Roman, or Jewish, but also Hindu, Egyptian, or Celtic sacralty. For the other religious forms to be set in their own formality, ceasing to be spontaneous modes of living, blind to themselves, just like Moliere's Monsieur Jourdain who made prose without knowing it, they had to be defined by what limited them in their own order, in other words

by what transcended them. This transcendence is at once like these forms, but eludes them: a verticality with respect to which alone the (relative) horizontality of all the rest is revealed. And so Christianity is, just by its advent, the revealer of all religions insofar as religions. In its light, or rather in the light of Christ, the religious nature of the other forms has effectively appeared, whether they know it or not. This in no way means that it is *the* religion as such, for the simple reason that this quintessential Religion does not exist. Moreover few religions have as intimate an awareness of their *formal* imperfection as the Christian: what there is of the most transcendent within it—Christ—does not and will never belong to it. And if the Church has happened to forget the weakness and even the poverty of its condition, it has nevertheless remembered, all through the ages, that it was always to be reformed: *Ecclesia semper reformanda*, being a 'useless servant'. But, at the same time, this precarious, ill-defined religion, a religion which can even contemplate with some 'envy' the formal splendor, the vigorous simplicity, or the perfume of serenity of the sacred's manifestations across the face of the earth, also knows itself to be the depository of a unique message which consists simply in the coming of God in our flesh, not a coming of the divine, but of God in person, not the 'descent' upon the earth of a divine aspect (*Avatara*), but the assumption of human nature by the *hypostasis* of the Word. In a certain manner it could be said that, before the reality of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, every religion is abolished, before the figure of Christ every figure of the sacred is obliterated. And here we have the reason for the secret weakness of the Christian form. Within it has appeared most powerfully pure Religion, "in spirit and in truth", because the Christian form is as if the epiphany of every form's obliteration. Less than a religion, it is also more than a religion, and this is why it is revelatory of the form 'religion' as such: to complete is always to surpass.

Certainly this Christic message, entering into human history, could not but clothe itself with forms, like every other religion, and it is this which has been, from its origins right down to our own day, the great problem of Christianity: forms Jewish, pagan, modern, post-modern, etc. To always be reforming itself is to be always in quest of new forms and to settle on none. Stable in space, Christianity wanders perpetually through time. But it is also by this that it retains the power to reveal the formal nature

of the sacred's manifestations. As we see, it is not easy to be Christian, or even to think about Christianity in itself. And I am not speaking here about the sublimity of Christ's commandments as summarized in: "Be you perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48), I am speaking about existing *as a Christian* at the most elementary level. A Jew or Muslim feels himself Jewish or Muslim when he accomplishes the rites of his religion, even if he is not a saint. A Christian always lives with an extreme uncertainty as to the truth of his conduct. And now, it being a question of 'thinking Christianity', the error of Guénon and Schuon was to think about it on the model of other religions, which is surely not absolutely impossible, far from it, but lets what is essential escape, that is not only the unique character of the Christic manifestation, which is all too obvious, but also the consequences that this manifestation on the very plane of religious form entails, even though in this respect Guénon's lack of understanding is notably more accentuated than Schuon's. In any case, we should strive to think about other religions starting from Christian revelation, since only with the advent of Christianity is it possible to think about something like *the* religion. And this is actually what Guénon and Schuon have done, although without knowing it. In other words, if they had not been first the heirs of Christian culture wherein the very concept of religion was elaborated, neither one could have elaborated a theory on the unity (whether transcendent or not) of 'traditional forms'. Christianity is certainly not the unity of religions, it is not the *Religio perennis*, which, once again, is only the mythological and illusory projection of a concept. But it is historically the first form by reference to which alone the other forms could be named according to the truth of their nature. This is why it can indeed be said that the unity of religions is an analogical unity, the first analogue of which is the religion of Christ.

Undoubtedly it will be objected that the point of view set out here is only conveying a certain inability to accept the relativisation of Christian revelation implied by the thesis of the generic unity of religions, whether this unity is realized under the form of the primordial Tradition (Guénon) or the *Religio perennis* (Schuon). By no means does this objection correspond to the arguments that I have put forward, and deliberately ignores the new manner that I have proposed for approaching the plurality of revelations problem; it remains a prisoner to the outline:

one primordial and perennial Revelation facing a set of secondary and equivalent religions. However, I will accept this in principle and pose the following question: upon what does the relativisation entailed by a generic unity of religions thesis rest? If it rests upon what is essential in the revelation being considered, the thesis should be rejected, since it would unite then only what is the more exterior in religions: this would not be a true unity. It can therefore only rest upon what is accidental, relatively contingent, in other words, on the spatio-temporal unicity of religious manifestations, on religion as fact, not on the central message. For all that it cannot rest on anything else, since only the fact is unique, in the sense that unicity designates what occurs once at a point in space, which might be called circumstantial unicity, and therefore this unicity alone can be attained: the messenger, in his spatio-temporal distinctness, is relativized, he is no longer the only one to have said what he says, but the central message retains its absolute value. Lao Tzu, Buddha, Rama, Krishna, Abraham, and Mohammed, one no more than another is revelation's unique messenger. But the Tao, Nirvana, Brahma, IHVH, and Allah, in light of the unitary thesis, become expressive forms of an identical message, and are subject then to no modification. If we turn now to Christianity, something obvious leaps into view: here the content of the message is the messenger himself. St John expresses this perfectly: he has written his gospel "that you may believe that Jesus is the messiah, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (20:31). Undoubtedly, in many of Christ's teachings, the message can be distinguished from the fact of the messenger. This content does not then constitute, however, the very center of Christic revelation; often only a recalling of the Torah, the Law, and the prophets is involved. But the essential, the heart at the heart of Christian revelation, what there is of the absolutely and definitively irreducible within it, is the *fact of Jesus Christ himself*, in his distinct unicity. It is certainly required to believe in the words of the Son of God, even though we can, in some respects, find their equivalent elsewhere. But Jesus Christ is not such or such a word, he is the Word incarnate: *et Verbum caro factum est*. And it is this which constitutes the quintessential message. What Christ gives is himself, as such, in the unicity of his incarnation. In a certain manner the theoretical message can be relativized, not the messenger: "For if you do not believe that *I am*, you will die in your sins" (John 8:24). Not:

I am this or that, such or such, but absolutely: I am, *ego eimi*, the Name that God reveals to Moses. This fact as such, in its circumstantial unicity, that is what the Christian is asked to believe, that is what should not be relativized since its *raison d'être* is precisely its unicity: to relativize it is to deny it, and as a consequence this is what cannot be integrated into a theory of the generic unity of revelations. But this is also why the gospels take so much care in historically and geographically situating the incarnation of Christ, with such an insistence that there is not another example of this in the sacred scriptures of humanity, which should even be significant.

Schuon was perfectly aware that the unicity of the fact 'Jesus Christ' is a stumbling block for the unitary thesis (as was that unmitigated Guénonian Brother Elias of the Grande Trappe of Soligny: "it must be acknowledged that what might be called the 'Jesus case' poses an especially difficult problem for ecumenism in the broadest sense of the word." *Seul avec le monde entier*, p. 149). This is why, in *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (pp. 18-21), he devotes several pages to critiquing the idea of unicity ("there is no such thing in existence as a unique fact", "unicity alone [is] unique", etc.) without perceiving that this term has several meanings, and that in particular, as to its existential distinctness, every fact is unique, which is metaphysically self-evident and even constitutes the chief argument by which Guénon refutes the possibility of reincarnation: *Brahma* does not stutter. He closes this critique with the following declaration which shows that, by having to do with unicity, it is chiefly Jesus Christ that is involved here: "If Christ had been the only manifestation of the Word, supposing such a uniqueness [*unicité*] of manifestation to be possible, the effect of His birth would have been the instantaneous reduction of the universe to ashes." This assertion, well within Schuon's style with its dazzling logic, nevertheless betrays a misunderstanding of the Christic manifestation.

First of all the Christian religion does not maintain that the Word is only manifested in Jesus Christ. St John tells us that he is "the true light that enlightens *every* man" (1:9), and St Paul informs us that "in many and various ways God spoke of old" (Heb. 1:1). St Thomas Aquinas even considers the possibility, in principle, of a plurality of incarnations in a text which undoubtedly has surprised more than one reader. To the question: "Whether one Divine Person can assume two human natures?",

St Thomas replies: "What has power for one thing, and no more, has a power limited to one. Now the power of a Divine Person is infinite, nor can it be limited by any created thing. Hence it may not be said that a Divine Person so assumed one human nature as to be unable to assume another. For it would seem to follow from this that the Personality of the Divine Nature was so comprehended by one human nature as to be unable to assume another to its Personality; and this is impossible, for the Uncreated cannot be comprehended by any creature" (*Summa Theologiae*, III, Q. 3, a. 7). On the other hand Schuon's objection seems hard to imagine. Its obvious aim is to stress the lack of awareness among exoterists who do not recognize the consequences implied by the unicity of the Word's manifestation. But how are we to imagine, if only as a hypothesis, that God has at once the will to manifest himself and to destroy all creation, and therefore to will at the same time *both* the possibility of his manifestation *and* the impossibility of all manifestation. Even 'ad absurdum', a reasoning remains a reasoning and cannot, in principle, be composed of a contradictory statement. After all, if we admit the idea of a primordial revelation, God's revelation in the earthly paradise, we are obliged to suppose that there was then a unique manifestation of the Word to the primordial couple Adam and Eve. Was the universe reduced to ashes? Finally, seeing that there should be no common measure between the finite and the infinite, one does not see very clearly how a plurality of manifestations of the infinite would preserve the universe from its destruction. If it is in fact true that the infinite cannot be contained in a unique form without causing the universe to explode, how would a plurality of finite forms, still strictly null with respect to the Principle, avoid this catastrophe? Would it be because then the infinite would restrain its infinity by sharing it among its various manifesting forms? But the infinite is necessarily one and indivisible, there are no 'parts' within it, and, precisely because it is infinite, it should not enter into contradiction with anything finite; to the contrary, as I have shown elsewhere (*Penser l'analogie*, chap. 10), it is its possibility. To conceive of a manifestation of the infinite is not to suppose that the infinite inexplicably abides in the finite, as if someone wanted to put the more in the less. To pursue such an idea, whether this involves one or several revelatory forms, one will of course only end up with the impossibility of any manifestation of the divine.

The relationship between the infinite and the form that manifests it is not that of contents to container. This representational image must be banished: the relationship is of the *hypostatic* order. Whether unique or multiple, a theophany is not evaluated from without for the grandeur and cosmic power of its manifestation: it is known through faith alone which discerns in the theophanic form the ontological presence of the divine person. This divine person is no more *visible* in the theophanic form than the human person in the body of a man. In any case, the divine as such is unmanifestable: it is the universe that is within it and not it in the universe. To speak of a manifestation of the *divine*, according to an avatic mode for example, is obviously not devoid of meaning, but this is to stay with a mythological idea of it; it has its value and interest, and accounts for certain aspects of theophanies. But it does not go as far as the ontological reason for the divine person (or hypostasis), and does not permit a response to the intellect's questioning, except in a rather vague manner. In short, it seems to me that the only way to speculatively approach the theophanic mystery with some rigor is to view it according to the mode of the hypostatic union of the two divine and human natures. Without this third term, the person or hypostasis, in which, through which, and according to which the two natures are united, I do not think one can escape the illusory accessibility offered by eastern representations ultimately cosmological in nature. Now, as we know, meditation on the Christic theophany has alone led theology to so profoundly metaphysical a concept.

Finally, a last point needs to be stressed. Alongside his magisterial remarks, Schuon betrays an inability to truly enter into the Christian perspective as revealed in Scripture. He seems, at least in the text analyzed here, to be able to imagine the earthly presence of God only in the glory of his power and grandeur, in the flash of a majesty that reduces, or threatens to reduce, to nothing everything not *itself*. Now this is exactly opposite to what St Paul teaches. Surely the Old Testament has informed us that God can manifest himself in the midst of thunder and lightning (on Mount Sinai), or again that Elijah finds him only in a light breeze and not in the breaking of mountains, or in the shaking of the earth, or in the fire (1 Kings 19:11-12). But with Jesus Christ something else is involved. As previously seen—and this is what a certain 'eastern' way of thinking does not succeed in understanding—we are no longer dealing

with the perspective of natures here, but of hypostasis. The thinking that I have called 'eastern', for want of a better term, the thinking of Guénon and Schuon, sees in the *avatara* a certain earthly nature (human being, or possibly animal, vegetable, or mineral) inhabited by a certain divine nature. And therefore, in one manner or another, the divine makes itself known according to manifestations naturally suitable for the divine, those that our imagination spontaneously attributes to the divine, those that attest to the power, immensity, or omniscience of the divine. This is why I say that in this case one stays with a cosmological conception of it. This conception is not false: it sheds light on the reality of natural symbolism and as such cannot be rejected. However it also implies, in certain respects, a kind of conflict of natures, a conflict between the divine and the human. Hence Schuon's remark in connection with the unicity of the manifestation of the Word, who, if this were possible, would reduce the world to ashes. I do not deny that the avatic conception might be applicable, to a certain extent, in the case of Jesus Christ, but it lets what is essential escape. What is first and essential in the Christic incarnation is not the divine nature, it is the person or hypostasis of the Son, who is most certainly divine, but neither more nor less than the Father and the Holy Spirit, and who does not, then, constitute this incarnation in its singularity. To consider only the divine nature, this incarnation could just as well be that of the Father or the Spirit. Perhaps it is better understood now what I mean when I declare it to be of the hypostatic order, and why I think that Jesus Christ is not an *avatara* in the sense that Rama and Krishna are.

This is also why we should turn now to the solemn declaration of St Paul in his letter to the Philippians (2:5-7), a declaration which is one of the chief texts of the New Testament, and about which it could be said that it was written to refute in advance the conclusion of Schuon: "...Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross." Thus Christ's manifestation is basically a *kenosis*, that is to say an emptying or annihilation. This emptying or annihilation is not the effect of cosmic nature reacting to its investing by divine nature, according to the dialectical pattern of concordant

actions and reactions: it is perfectly voluntary and free, the work of a divine *person*, accomplished through love. To enter into the thinking or mind of Christ—this is exactly what St Paul says in the passage that immediately precedes the text cited: “Have this mind among yourselves, which was in Christ Jesus”—is to understand then what Christ has willed: not that the universe be possibly reduced to ashes by the Word manifesting itself one single time, but that the manifested Word be voluntarily annihilated by death on a cross. Here we are at the antipodes of the Schonian conception. But let us be careful. If, according to this conception, the unicity of the Word’s manifestation had, were it possible, the effect of reducing the universe to ashes, then, and according to the same ‘logic’, we must grant that the very real annihilation of Christ on the cross is truly the hallmark of the unicity of the Word’s manifestation in hypostatic mode. And, in fact, this is a phenomenon unique in the history of religions.

To conclude I would like to return to the questions of the *Religio perennis* and the primordial Tradition. As for the first, it seems that Scripture provides a formal teaching, but, to my knowledge, one that is never taken into consideration. It involves the sign of the covenant given by God to Noah (Genesis 9:12-17): “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant which is between me and you... the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth.” Everyone will agree that, if there is one scripture text which explicitly has the idea of revelation and even more religion as its theme, it is clearly this one. In Hebrew there is no term to designate religion in the broad sense that we understand it. But insofar as religion is, under one of this aspects, that which connects us to God (although this etymology is far from certain), it is clear that it can be identified with a covenant that God, *on his own initiative*, establishes with men. The sign of the covenant is therefore the declarative symbol attesting to the divine will to institute a pact of union between God and humanity. What are the characteristic marks of this covenant? It is universal (“of all flesh that is upon the earth”), it is ‘everlasting’, it will be renewed, for

each time “the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant which is between me and you.”

These are so many marks that agree rather exactly with what is understood by *Religio perennis*. Thus the Noachian covenant is not the primordial or Adamic Tradition, but it synthetically represents the principle of all covenants that God will establish with mankind, each one being a ‘memorial’, the form of a remembrance of the earth by Heaven. Now, if we meditate on the sign of the covenant, what does it teach? The rainbow appears when the sun, being behind the observer, casts its rays upon a rain cloud, the water droplets of which reflect these rays back to the observer, making them iridescent and splitting up the solar spectrum according to its various colors. To perceive the sign of the covenant is necessarily, then, to turn one’s back to the white light of the sun, which no one can look at directly. We can only perceive this light refracted through the merciful veil of the rain and as a color gradient spread out from infrared to ultraviolet. The cloud, as we know, is a symbol of the divine presence; its dissolving into rain is a symbol of this presence becoming grace and descending on mankind. The sun’s white light symbolizes God’s self-revelation, God revealing himself to himself in the Word, knowledge of the Father. Man can perceive of this revelation only what emanates from it and is refracted through the Holy Spirit’s rain of love, and which only reveals the existence of this pure light according to the diversity of the spectrum’s colors. In other words, at the moment when he are expecting God to give us a visible symbol of the unity of covenants, he give us a symbol of their diversity. Their unity is presupposed, since the diversity of colors has a unique source, but it is not *posited in itself*, not objectivized in a figure which visibly represents this transcendent unity and which might be designated as the symbol of the *Religio perennis*. It remains hidden, it is the secret God who lets us contemplate this unity only under the form of the multicolored scarf of Iris. In short, there is no *Religio perennis*, but a *Religio essentialis*. This supreme Religion, this eternal Covenant, is the one that the Father establishes with the Son in the unity of the Spirit, the one that the trinitary relationships form at the core of the divine Essence.

Many other considerations could be developed, especially on the correspondence between the six or seven (conventional) colors of the

rainbow and the great religions. But these correspondences are often questionable, insofar as the order of the succession of colors can vary according to the meteorological nature of a phenomenon. I will keep to my intention then and turn to the second question, that of the primordial Tradition. For Guénon, and for all Guénonians, this Tradition is the universal and primary center of which all traditional forms, that is existing religions, are partial and secondary adaptations. This primordial Tradition is therefore the plenary manifestation of the truth, superior to every other traditional form. Well and good. But, in conformity with the previously followed method, I have asked myself if Christian scripture contains a teaching on this subject. The answer is beyond doubt. If it is conceded that Guénon's primordial Tradition corresponds, in certain respects, to the revelation received by Adam in the earthly paradise, Adam being at that time the equivalent of the Hindu Manu, the primordial regent of the human cycle, we must apply to this *Religio adamica* what St Paul says of the first Adam with respect to the second, and this cannot but be related to the nature of the revelations for which each of them had been the origin: "The first man Adam became a living being; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual which is first, but the psychic [ψυχικόν, *psukikon*], and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven" (1 Cor. 15:45-49). Moreover, to suppose that the 'King of the World' is to be seen in the personage of Melchizedek to whom, as René Guénon points out, Abraham paid homage as an inferior to his superior by offering the tithe to this priest of the Most High God, a priest who was not however of the priestly Jewish line. By Abraham receiving his blessing, it also needs to be noted that, for the letter to the Hebrews, it is Melchizedek who "resembles the Son of God" (7:3) and not the reverse, it is Melchizedek who is the figure of which Christ is the model and the perfect reality. Such are at the very least the teachings of the word of God which seem opportune for those who will read this book to hear, words which are, for me, authoritative.

This does not involve denying all interest in Guénon's work, which in many respects remains astonishingly rich. Besides, this work is defended

by its own strength. But this does involve consenting to the Christian message speaking its own language, which, to be understood, does not have to be retranslated into Guénonian language, and which can even, if one has ears to hear, tell us something not to be read in any of the world's books.

This essay was first published in Volume 17 (2006) of the journal, *Sacred Web* (www.sacredweb.com), and is reproduced here with the kind permission of Sacred Web Publishing.

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