

Metaphysics, Theology and Philosophy

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...truth is the ultimate goal of the whole universe and the contemplation of truth is the essential activity of wisdom...

*St Thomas Aquinas*¹

The proof of the sun is the sun: if thou require the proof, do not avert thy face

*Rumi*²

The possession of all the sciences, if unaccompanied by the knowledge of the best, will more often than not injure the possessor

*Plato*³

The Infinite is what it is; one may understand it or not understand it. Metaphysics cannot be taught to everyone but, if it could be, there would be no atheism

*Frithjof Schuon*⁴

"Metaphysics is the finding of bad reasons for what we believe upon instinct."⁵ This Bradleian formulation, perhaps only half-serious, signposts a modern conception of metaphysics shared by a good many people, philosophers and otherwise. There is, of course, no single modern philosophical posture on the nature and significance of metaphysics. Some see it as a kind of residual blight on the tree of philosophy, a feeding-ground for obscurantists and lovers of mumbo-jumbo. Others grant it a more dignified status.⁶ It is one of those words, like "dogma" or "mystical", which has been pejorated by careless and ignorant usage. The word "metaphysics" is so fraught with hazards, so hedged about with philosophical disputation, and so sullied by popular usage that we shall have to take some care if the proper sense in which the traditionalists use the word is to become clear. Some operational definitions of several crucial terms will provide the starting-point. The elucidation of the traditionalist conception of metaphysics will be structured around three questions: What is metaphysics? What is its relationship, in terms of procedures, criteria and ends, to philosophy? And to theology? Subsequently a subordinate question will come into focus: Why have the traditionalists seen fit to expose to the public gaze certain metaphysical principles and esoteric insights previously the exclusive preserve of those spiritually qualified to understand them?

Without a clear definition of terms certain misunderstandings will be more or less inevitable. The following words in the traditionalist vocabulary must be understood precisely: tradition, Revelation, inspiration, Intellect, gnosis, metaphysics, and mystical. The first three terms have been discussed in the two preceding chapters so let us turn to the others.

¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, quoted in *FS UI* p133fn2.

² Rumi in *WP TTW* p750.

³ Plato in *WP TTW* p731.

⁴ *FS SPHF* p50.

⁵ From F.H. Bradley *Appearance and Reality* quoted by S. Radhakrishnan: "Reply to My Critics" in P.A. Schilpp (ed) *The Philosophy of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan* Tudor, New York, 1952; p791.

⁶ For some discussion of this term by a modern philosopher see J. Hospers *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis* Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1956; pp211ff.

Intellect: Whenever the traditionalists use this word or its derivatives it is not to be understood in its modern and popular sense of "mental power". Rather, it is a precise technical term taken from the Latin *intellectus* and from mediaeval scholasticism: that faculty which perceives the transcendent.⁷ The Intellect receives intuitions and apprehends realities of a superphenomenal order. We remember Meister Eckhart's statement: "There is something in the soul which is uncreated and uncreatable...this is the Intellect".⁸ It is, in Schuon's words, "a receptive faculty and not a productive power: it does not 'create'; it receives and transmits. It is a mirror."⁹ The Intellect is an impersonal, unconditioned, receptive faculty, whence the objectivity of intellection. It is "that which participates in the divine Subject".¹⁰ Marco Pallis reminds us that the belief in this transcendent faculty, capable of a direct contact with Reality, is to be found in all traditions under various names.¹¹

Gnosis: "The word gnosis...refers to supra-rational and thus purely intellectual, knowledge of metacosmic realities."¹² It must not be confused with the historical phenomenon of gnosticism, the Graeco-Oriental syncretism of latter classical times.¹³ Its Sanskrit equivalent is *jñāna*, knowledge in its fullest sense, what Eckhart calls "divine knowledge".

Metaphysic: We shall turn to this term in some detail presently but for the moment the following capsule definition from Nasr will suffice: "Metaphysics, which in fact is one and should be named metaphysic... is the science of the Real, of the origin and end of things, of the Absolute and in its light, the relative".¹⁴ Similarly "metaphysical": "concerning universal realities considered objectively".¹⁵

Mystical: "concerning the same realities considered subjectively, that is, in relation to the contemplative soul, insofar as they enter into contact with it".¹⁶

As Guénon observed more than once, metaphysics cannot properly and strictly be defined, for to define is to limit, while the domain of metaphysics is the Real and thus limitless. Consequently, metaphysics "is truly and absolutely unlimited and cannot be confined to any formula or any system".¹⁷ Its subject, in the words of John Tauler, is "that pure knowledge that knows no form or creaturely way".¹⁸ This must always be kept in mind in any attempt at a "definition" which must needs be provisional and incomplete. Let us return to the passage in which Nasr explains the nature of metaphysics:

It is a science as strict and as exact as mathematics and with the same clarity and certitude, but one which can only be attained through intellectual intuition and not simply through ratiocination. It thus differs from philosophy as it is usually understood. Rather, it is a *theoria* of reality whose realisation means sanctity and spiritual perfection, and therefore can only be achieved within the cadre of a revealed tradition. Metaphysical intuition can occur everywhere - for the "spirit bloweth where it listeth" - but the effective realisation of metaphysical truth and its application to human life can only be achieved within a revealed tradition which gives efficacy to certain symbols and rites upon which metaphysics must rely for its realisation.

This supreme science of the Real... is the only science that can distinguish between the Absolute and the relative, appearance and reality... Moreover, this science exists, as the esoteric dimension within every orthodox and integral tradition and is united with a spiritual method derived totally from the tradition in question.¹⁹

⁷ See M. Lings *What is Sufism?* Allen & Unwin, London, 1975; p48.

⁸ Quoted in M. Lings *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century* Uni California Press, Berkeley, 19171; p27.

⁹ FS *SW* p21.

¹⁰ *ibid.*; p88.

¹¹ M. Pallis quoted in WP *TTW* p733.

¹² FS *UI* p115.

¹³ See FS *THC* pp67-68. See also FS *RHC* pp10-11.

¹⁴ S.H. Nasr *Man and Nature* Allen & Unwin, London, 1976; p81.

¹⁵ FS *L&T* p204fn9.

¹⁶ *ibid.* Schuon is, of course, not unaware of the linguistic and connotative ambiguities surrounding this term. See FS *SPHF* p86fn. See also S.H. Nasr *Sufi Essays* Allen & Unwin, London, 1972; p26 fn5. For an extended traditionalist discussion see W. Stoddart: "Mysticism" in RF *UT* pp89-95.

¹⁷ R. Guénon: "Oriental Metaphysics" in JN *SG* pp43-44.

¹⁸ Quoted in C.F. Kelley *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge* Yale Uni Press, New Haven, 1977; p4.

¹⁹ S.H. Nasr *Man and Nature* pp81-82. See also Coomaraswamy's undated letter to "M", AKC *SL* p10: "...traditional Metaphysics is as much a single and invariable science as mathematics."

This view of metaphysics accords with the traditional but not with the modern conception of philosophy - of *philo-sophia*, love of wisdom as a practical concern. In India, for example, philosophy was never only a matter of epistemology but an all-embracing science of first principles and of the true nature of Reality, and one wedded to the spiritual disciplines provided by religion. The ultimate reality of metaphysics is the Supreme Identity in which all oppositions and dualities are resolved, those of subject and object, knower and known, being and non-being; thus a Scriptural formulation such as "The things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God".²⁰ As Coomaraswamy remarks, the philosophy, or metaphysics, provided the vision, and religion the way to its effective verification and actualisation in direct experience.²¹ The cleavage between metaphysics and philosophy only appears in modern times.

The nature of metaphysics is more easily grasped through a contrast with philosophy and theology. However, several general points need to be established before we proceed. Because the metaphysical realm lies "beyond" the phenomenal plane the validity of a metaphysical principle can be neither proved nor disproved by any kind of empirical demonstration, by reference to material realities.²² The aim of metaphysics is not to prove anything whatsoever but to make doctrines intelligible and to demonstrate their consistency.

Secondly, metaphysics is concerned with a direct apprehension of reality or, to put it differently, with a recognition of the Absolute and our relationship to it. It thus takes on an imperative character for those capable of metaphysical discernment.

The requirement for us to recognise the Absolute is itself an absolute one; it concerns man as such and not man under such and such conditions. It is a fundamental aspect of human dignity, and especially of that intelligence which denoted "the state of man hard to obtain", that we accept Truth because it is true and for no other reason.²³

Furthermore, because metaphysics is attuned to the sacred and the divine it demands something of those who would unlock its mysteries:

If metaphysics is a sacred thing, that means it could not be... limited to the framework of the play of the mind. It is illogical and dangerous to talk of metaphysics without being preoccupied with the moral concomitances it requires, the criteria of which are, for man, his behaviour in relation to God and to his neighbour.²⁴

Thirdly, metaphysics assumes man's capacity for absolute and certain knowledge:

The capacity for objectivity and for absoluteness is an anticipated and existential refutation of all the ideologies of doubt: if man is able to doubt this is because certitude exists; likewise the very notion of illusion proves that man has access to reality... If doubt conformed to the real, human intelligence would be deprived of its sufficient reason and man would be less than an animal, since the intelligence of animals does not experience doubt concerning the reality to which it is proportioned.²⁵

Metaphysics, therefore, is immutable and inexorable, and the "infallible standard by which not only religions, but still more 'philosophies' and 'sciences' must be 'corrected'...and interpreted".²⁶ Metaphysics can be ignored or forgotten but not refuted "precisely because it is immutable and not related to change *qua* change".²⁷ Metaphysical principles are true and valid once and for all and not for this particular age or mentality, and could not, in any sense, "evolve". They can be validated directly in the plenary and unitive experience of the mystic. Thus Martin Lings can write of Sufism - and one could say the same of any intrinsically orthodox traditional esotericism - that it

...has the right to be inexorable because it is based on certainties and not on opinions. It has the obligation to be inexorable because mysticism is the sole repository of Truth, in the fullest sense, being above all concerned with the Absolute, the Infinite and the Eternal; and "If the salt have lost its savour,

²⁰ *I Corinthians* II.11. The Absolute may be called God, the Godhead, nirguna Brahman, the Tao, and so on, according to the vocabulary at hand. See FS *LAW* pp96-9fn1 for a commentary on the use of "God" and FS *L&T* for a similar discussion of "Allah".

²¹ A.K. Coomaraswamy: "A Lecture on Comparative Religion" quoted in RL *CLW* p275. Also see "Vedanta and Western Tradition" in AKC *SPII* p6.

²² See R. Guénon: *op.cit.*; p53.

²³ FS *ITB* p33.

²⁴ FS *SPHF* p173.

²⁵ FS *L&T* p13. See also FS *EPW* pp15ff.

²⁶ Letter to J.H. Muirhead, August 1935, in AKC *SL* p37.

²⁷ S. H. Nasr *Sufi Essays* p86. See also FS *SW* p42.

wherewith shall it be salted?" Without mysticism, Reality would have no voice in the world. There would be no record of the true hierarchy, and no witness that it is continually being violated.²⁸

One might easily substitute the word "metaphysics" for "mysticism" in this passage, the former being the formal and objective aspect of the "subjective" experience. However, this is not to lose sight of the fact that any and every metaphysical doctrine will take it as axiomatic that every formulation is "but error in the face of the Divine Reality itself; a provisional, indispensable, salutary 'error' which, however, contains and communicates the virtuality of the Truth".²⁹ With these considerations to the forefront we can turn to a comparison, firstly, of metaphysics and philosophy.

In a discussion of Shankara's *Advaita* Vedanta Coomaraswamy exposed some of the crucial differences between metaphysics and modern philosophy:

The Vedanta is not a "philosophy" in the current sense of the word, but only as the word is used in the phrase *Philosophia Perennis*... Modern philosophies are closed systems, employing the method of dialectics, and taking for granted that opposites are mutually exclusive. In modern philosophy things are either so or not so; in eternal philosophy this depends upon our point of view. Metaphysics is not a system, but a consistent doctrine; it is not merely concerned with conditioned and quantitative experience but with universal possibility.³⁰

Modern European philosophy is dialectical, which is to say analytical and rational in its modes. From a traditionalist point of view it might be said that modern philosophy is anchored in a misunderstanding of the nature and role of reason; indeed, the idolatry of reason could hardly have otherwise arisen. Schuon spotlights some of the strengths and deficiencies of the rational mode in these terms:

Reason is formal by its nature and formalistic in its operations; it proceeds by "coagulations", by alternatives and by exclusions - or, it can be said, by partial truths. It is not, like pure intellect, formless and fluid "light"; true, it derives its implacability, or its validity in general, from the intellect, but it touches on essences only through drawing conclusions, not by direct vision; it is indispensable for verbal formulations but it does not involve immediate knowledge.³¹

Titus Burckhardt likens reason to "a convex lens which steers the intelligence in a particular direction and onto a limited field".³² Like any other instrument it can be abused. Much European philosophy, adrift from its religious moorings, has surrendered to a kind of totalitarian rationalism, to what Blake called "Single Vision".³³ In so doing it has violated a principle which was respected wherever a metaphysical tradition and a religious framework for the pursuit of wisdom remained intact - the principle of adequation, articulated thus by Aquinas: "It is a sin against intelligence to want to proceed in an identical manner in typically different domains - physical, mathematical, metaphysical - of speculative knowledge."³⁴ This, it would seem, is precisely what modern philosophers are bent on. No less pertinent in this context is Plotinus's well-known maxim "knowing demands the organ fitted to the object".³⁵ The grotesqueries of modern philosophy spring, in large measure, from an indifference to this principle. The situation is exacerbated further by the fact that many philosophers have been duped by the claims of a totalitarian scientism and thus suffer from a drastically impoverished view of reality and of the avenues by which it might be apprehended. The words of the Moravian alchemist, Michael Sendivogius, seem more apposite than ever: "philosophers are men whom too much [profane] learning and thought have made mad".³⁶

The place of reason, of logic and dialectic, in metaphysics is altogether more subordinate as the following sample of quotes make clear. It is worth mobilising several quotations as this issue is so often misunderstood, with bizarre results. From Schuon:

In the intellectual order logical proof is only a quite provisional crystallisation of intuition, the modes of which... are incalculable. Metaphysical truths are by no means accepted because they are merely

28 M. Lings *What is Sufism?* p93.

29 FS *SPHF* pp162-163. Cf. A.K. Coomaraswamy: "...and every belief is a heresy if it be regarded as the truth, and not simply as a signpost of the truth." "Sri Ramakrishna and Religious Tolerance" in AKC *SPII* p38. See also FS *SVQ* p2.

30 A.K. Coomaraswamy: "Vedanta and Western Tradition" p6.

31 FS *UI* p24. See also FS *SW* pp18ff.

32 T. Burckhardt *Alchemy* Penguin, 1971; p36fn1.

33 For a discussion of Blake's critique of rationalism see T. Roszak *Where the Wasteland Ends* Doubleday, New York, 1972; pp142-177.

34 Quoted in S. H. Nasr *Man and Nature* p35.

35 Quoted in E.F. Schumacher *A Guide for the Perplexed* Jonathan Cape, London, 1977; p49.

36 per WP *TTW* p735.

logically clear, but because they are ontologically clear and their logical clarity is only a trace of this imprinted on the mind.³⁷

Or again:

Metaphysics is not held to be true - by those who understand it - because it is expressed in a logical manner, but it can be expressed in a logical manner because it is true, without - obviously - its truth ever being compromised by the possible shortcomings of human reason.³⁸

Similarly Guénon:

...for metaphysics, the use of rational argument never represents more than a mode of external expression and in no way affects metaphysical knowledge itself, for the latter must always be kept essentially distinct from its formulation...³⁹

Metaphysical discernment proceeds more through contemplative intelligence than through ratiocination. Metaphysical formulations depend more on symbol and on analogy than on logical demonstration, though it is a grave error to suppose that metaphysics has any right to irrationality.⁴⁰ What many modern philosophers apparently fail to understand is that thought can become increasingly subtle and complex without approaching any nearer to the truth. An idea can be subdivided into a thousand ramifications, fenced about with every conceivable qualification and supported with the most intricate and rigorous logic but, for all that, remain purely external and quantitative for "no virtuosity of the potter will transform clay into gold".⁴¹ Furthermore,

...that a reasoning might simply be the logical and provisional description of an intellectual evidence, and that its function might be the actualisation of this evidence, in itself supralogical, apparently never crosses the minds of pure logicians.⁴²

Analytical rationality, no matter how useful a tool, will never, in itself, generate metaphysical understanding. Metaphysicians of all ages have said nothing different. Shankara, for instance: "...the pure truth of *Atman*...can be reached by meditation, contemplation and other spiritual disciplines such as a knower of *Brahman* may prescribe - but never by subtle argument."⁴³ The Promethean arrogance The Promethean arrogance of much modernist thought, often bred by scientific ideologies, is revealed in the refusal to acknowledge the boundaries beyond which reason has no competence or utility. This has, of course, prompted some quite ludicrous claims about religion. As Schuon remarks,

The equating of the supernatural with the irrational is characteristic...it amounts to claiming that the unknown or the incomprehensible is the same as the absurd. The rationalism of a frog living at the bottom of a well is to deny the existence of mountains: this is logic of a kind but it has nothing to do with reality.⁴⁴

The intelligibility of a metaphysical doctrine may depend upon a measure of faith in the traditional Christian sense of "assent to a credible proposition". As Coomaraswamy observes

One must believe in order to understand and understand in order to believe. These are not successive, however, but simultaneous acts of the mind. In other words, there can be no knowledge of anything to which the will refuses its consent...⁴⁵

This mode of apprehension is something quite other than the philosophical thought that

...believes it can attain to an absolute contact with Reality by means of analyses, syntheses, arrangements, filtrations and polishings - thought that is mundane by the very fact of this ignorance and

³⁷ FS *SPHF* p10.

³⁸ FS *EPW* p28.

³⁹ R. Guénon quoted in FS *SW* p29fn1.

⁴⁰ See FS *EPW* p28.

⁴¹ FS *UI* p149.

⁴² FS *L&T* p37.

⁴³ *Shankara's Crest Jewel of Discrimination* tr & ed. Swami Prabhavananda & C. Isherwood, Mentor, New York, 1970; p73.

⁴⁴ FS, *L&T*, p 37.

⁴⁵ A.K. Coomaraswamy: "Vedanta and Western Tradition" p8. See also SHN *K&S* p6.

because it is a vicious circle which not merely provides no escape from illusion, but even reinforces it through the lure of a progressive knowledge which in fact is inexistent.⁴⁶

It is in this context that we can speak of modern philosophy as "the codification of an acquired infirmity".⁴⁷ Unlike modern philosophy, metaphysics has nothing to do with personal opinion, originality or creativity - quite the contrary. It is directed towards those realities which lie outside mental perimeters and which are unchanging. The most a metaphysician will ever want to do is to reformulate some timeless truth so that it becomes more intelligible in the prevailing climate.⁴⁸ A profane system of thought, on the other hand, is never more than a portrait of the person who creates it, an "involuntary memoir" as Nietzsche put it.⁴⁹

The metaphysician does not seek to invent or discover or prove a new system of thought but rather to crystallize direct apprehensions of Reality insofar as this is possible within the limited resources of human language, making use not only of logic but of symbol and analogy. Furthermore, the science of metaphysics must always proceed in the context of a revealed religion, protected by the tradition in question which also supplies the necessary supports for the full realisation or actualisation of metaphysical doctrines. The metaphysician seeks not only to formulate immutable principles and doctrines but to live by them, to conform his or her being to the truths they convey. In other words, there is nothing of the "art for art's sake" type of thinking about the pursuit of metaphysics: it engages the whole person or it is as nothing.⁵⁰ As Schuon states,

The moral exigency of metaphysical discernment means that virtue is part of wisdom; a wisdom without virtue is in fact imposture and hypocrisy... plenary knowledge of Divine Reality presupposes or demands moral conformity to this Reality, as the eye necessarily conforms to light; since the object to be known is the sovereign Good, the knowing subject must correspond to it analogically...⁵¹

A point often overlooked: metaphysics does not of necessity find its expression only in verbal forms. Metaphysics can be expressed visually and ritually as well as verbally. The Chinese and Red Indian traditions furnish pre-eminent examples of these possibilities. Moreover,

...the criterion of metaphysical truth or of its depth lies not in the complexity or difficulty of its expression, having regard to a particular capacity of understanding or style of thinking. Wisdom does not lie in any complication of words but in the profundity of the intention; assuredly the expression may according to the circumstances be subtle and difficult, or equally it may not be so.⁵²

One is irresistibly reminded of the Buddha's Flower Sermon.

By way of a digression it might be noted that because the fundamental distinction between reason and Intellect has been obscured in recent European thought, then similarly, "...the basic distinction between metaphysics as a *scientia sacra* or Divine Knowledge and philosophy as a purely human form of mental activity has been blurred or forgotten."⁵³ In the field of comparative religion this has led to a good deal of confusion. As S.H. Nasr has noted, to speak of Hindu or Chinese philosophy and rationalistic European philosophy in the same breath is a contradiction in terms unless the word "philosophy" is used in two quite different senses. A failure to draw the necessary distinctions has

...made a sham of many studies of comparative philosophy and has helped to reduce to nil the real significance of Oriental metaphysics... To say that this or that statement of Hegel resembles the Upanisads or that Hume presents ideas similar to Nagarjuna's is to fall into the worst form of error, one which prevents any type of profound understanding from being achieved, either for Westerners wanting to understand the East or vice versa.⁵⁴

Let us summarise the most significant differences between metaphysics and modern philosophy. The latter is, generally speaking, analytical, rationalistic and quantitative; it is concerned with relationships and

⁴⁶ FS *L&T* p34.

⁴⁷ FS *TM* p4.

⁴⁸ Here we are at the opposite end of the spectrum not only from the philosophical relativists but from those who hold a "personalist" or "existentialist" view of truth.

⁴⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil*, taken from *A Nietzsche Reader* Penguin 1977, ed R.J. Hollingdale; Extract 13. See also FS *L&T* p34 and FS *TM* p4. (For an illuminating passage on both the grandeur and the "dementia" of Nietzsche's work see FS *THC* p15.)

⁵⁰ See A.K. Coomaraswamy: "Vedanta and Western Tradition" p9.

⁵¹ FS *RHC* p86.

⁵² FS *UI* p111.

⁵³ S.H. Nasr: "Conditions for a meaningful comparative philosophy" *Philosophy East and West* XXII, i, 1972; p54.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*; p55 and p58.

contingencies accessible to rational inquiry, or at least to the workings of the normal mind, these including imagination which is no less a mental process than ratiocination; European philosophers tend to see the development of philosophy as progressive, driven forward by the work of this or that philosopher who creates or discovers new insights, fresh perceptions, a different vocabulary of discourse, and so on; philosophy is usually seen as self-validating, not requiring any justification outside itself. Metaphysics, by contrast, is concerned with supra-mundane, transcendent and unconditioned realities; it is qualitative, symbolical and synthetic in its modes and is rooted in certain immutable principles; it is indifferent to the question of "proofs" and the metaphysician's purpose is not the resolution of some "problem" but the demonstration of something already intellectually evident; it does not evolve or progress; it is intimately linked with spiritual disciplines and depends for its realisation on the presence of elements which could only be drawn from an integral tradition; it is a practical pursuit which has as its end gnosis, transformation and sanctification.

The relationship between metaphysics and theology is more subtle, complex and problematic. Under the traditionalist view, a Divine Revelation is always the fountainhead of any orthodox religion while metaphysical insight derives from intellection. The dichotomy here is more apparent than real, Revelation taking the place of intellection for the human collectivity in question. This is a principle not easily grasped but without it the apparent antagonisms of theology and metaphysics cannot be resolved. Schuon defines the relationship between Revelation and intellection in this way:

...in normal times we learn *a priori* of divine things through Revelation, which provides for us the symbols and the indispensable data, and we have access *a posteriori* to the truth of these things through Intellection, which reveals to us their essence beyond received formulations, but not opposing them... Revelation is an Intellection in the Macrocosm, while Intellection is a Revelation in the microcosm; the *Avatara* is the outward Intellect, and the Intellect is the inward *Avatara*.⁵⁵

It might be said, then, that intellection appears in a more "subjective" mode, but only with this qualification:

It is subjective because empirically it is within us. The term "subjective", as applied to the intellect, is as improper as the epithet "human"; in both cases the terms are used simply in order to define the way of approach.⁵⁶

The traditionalists, always alert to the dangers of a reductionist psychologism, insist that the truth to which intellection gives access is beyond all spatio-temporal determinations. As Schuon points out, Biblical formulations such as "the Kingdom of Heaven is within you" certainly do not mean that heaven, God or Truth are of a psychological order but simply that access to these realities is to be found through the centre of our being.⁵⁷

Religion itself, flowing from the Divine, must contain within itself principial or metaphysical knowledge but this will be veiled by the forms in question. For instance,

The message of Christ, like that of the Bible, is not *a priori* a teaching of metaphysical science; it is above all a message of salvation, but one that necessarily contains, in an indirect way and under cover of an appropriate symbolism, metaphysics in its entirety.⁵⁸

The metaphysical emphasis varies from one tradition to another. Buddhism, for example, is primarily a spiritual therapy rather than a metaphysical system but one which of necessity requires a metaphysics while Hinduism is, in the first place, a metaphysics which implies, under the same necessity, a spiritual therapy.⁵⁹ Doubtless there are those who will be quick to asseverate that Buddhism is indifferent to metaphysics, pointing to the Buddha's refusal to answer the indeterminate questions. The traditionalists would simply remind us of Nagarjuna's statement that the Buddha taught two levels of truth and that an understanding of the distinction, not possible without a metaphysical doctrine, is preconditional to a full understanding of the *dharma*.⁶⁰ "There is no science of the soul," says Schuon, "without a metaphysical basis to it and without spiritual remedies at its disposal."⁶¹

⁵⁵ FS *EPW* p10. See also SHN *K&S* pp148-149.

⁵⁶ FS *UI* p57fn2.

⁵⁷ F. Schuon: "Keys to the Bible" in JN *SG* pp356-358.

⁵⁸ FS *L&T* p86.

⁵⁹ See FS *SPHF* p55.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

⁶¹ FS *L&T* p14.

The relationship of theology to metaphysics is that of exotericism to esotericism. Exotericism is "unable of itself to take cognisance of the relationships whereby, at one and the same time, it is justified in its claims and limited in its scope."⁶² Theological dogmatism is characterised by its insistence on elevating a particular point of view, or aspect of reality under a specific formal guise, to an absolute value with exclusive claims. As we have seen already, what characterises a metaphysical esotericism, on the other hand, is its discernment of the universal in the particular, of the essence in the form. This distinction can be hinged on the terms "belief" and "gnosis", or similarly, "faith" and "certitude". The difference between these, writes Schuon, is

...comparable to the difference between a description of a mountain and direct vision of it; the second no more puts us on top of the mountain than the first but it does inform us about the properties of the mountain and the route to follow; let us not however forget that the blind man who walks without stopping advances more quickly than a normal man who stops at each step.⁶³

Elsewhere Schuon refers to the theologies as taking upon themselves the contradiction of being "sentimental metaphysics":

...being ignorant of the differentiation of things into aspects and standpoints they have therefore to operate on the basis of arbitrarily rigid data, the antinomies of which can only be solved by going beyond their artificial rigidity; their working has moreover a sentimental slant and this is described as "thinking piously".⁶⁴

Such remarks should not be construed as an attack on the theological perspective but only as a caution about the limits of dogmatism and the dangers of a theological totalitarianism when it enters an arena where it is inadequate. As Marco Pallis so neatly puts it,

What one always needs to remember is that traditional forms, including those bearing the now unpopular name of dogmas, are keys to unlock the gate of Unitive Truth; but they are also (since a key can close, as well as open a gate) possible obstacles to its profoundest knowledge...⁶⁵

In a felicitous metaphor Schuon compares the religions to the beads of rosary, gnosis being the cord on which they are strung. In other words, the religious orthodoxies, or more specifically theologies, are only able to fulfil their function when they remain attached to the principal knowledge which is preserved in the esoteric dimension of each tradition.

The hierarchic superiority of gnosis to all other forms of knowledge and of metaphysical doctrine to all other kinds of formulations should not be allowed to obscure the inter-dependent relationship of the esoteric and the exoteric, of the metaphysical domain and the rest of any religious tradition. Three general points need to be made in this context. They concern the ineffectiveness of intellection outside a traditional framework, the distinction between doctrinal understanding and realisation, and the relationship between metaphysical discernment and the spiritual life in general.

There are, writes Schuon,

no metaphysical or cosmological reasons why, in exceptional cases, direct intellection should not arise in men who have no link at all with revealed wisdom, but an exception, if it proves the rule, assuredly could not constitute the rule.⁶⁶

In more normal cases

Intellection has need of tradition, of a Revelation fixed in time and adapted to a society, if it is to be awakened in us and not go astray... the importance of orthodoxy, of tradition, of Revelation is that the means of realising the Absolute must come "objectively" from the Absolute; knowledge cannot spring up "subjectively" except within the framework of an "objective" divine formulation of Knowledge.⁶⁷

Thus, although intellection can occur as "an isolated miracle" anywhere, it will have neither authority nor efficacy outside tradition.⁶⁸ (In this context the case of Ramana Maharishi is not without interest,

⁶² FS *ITB* p46.

⁶³ FS *UI* p148.

⁶⁴ FS *IPP* p39.

⁶⁵ M. Pallis: "Foreword" to WP *TTW* p10.

⁶⁶ FS *SPHF* p15.

⁶⁷ FS *UI* p130.

⁶⁸ FS *SW* p57.

remembering how the sage had to cast his own mystical insight into the moulds of classical Vedanta in order to be able to communicate it.⁶⁹)

The distinction between doctrinal understanding and even intellection itself on the one hand, and realisation on the other, is a crucial one. Contemplative intelligence and metaphysical insight do not, in themselves, save, "do not prevent Titans from falling".⁷⁰ There must be a participation of the will in the intelligence, or as one scholar glossed Meister Eckhart, "The intellective center is not truly known without involving the volitive circumference."⁷¹ Here the will can be defined as "a prolongation or a complement of the intelligence"⁷² while intelligence itself refers to a contemplative receptivity rather than any mental cleverness, an intelligence which "differs as much from mental virtuosity as the soaring flight of an eagle differs from the play of a monkey".⁷³ Morality and the virtues, love, faith - these must be integrated with metaphysical insight if full realisation is to occur, which is to say there must be a merging of intellectual and volitive elements in a harmonized unity. It should also be remembered that although the Intellect is

situated beyond sentiment, imagination, memory and reason... it can at the same time enlighten and determine all of these since they are like its individualized ramifications, ordained as receptacles to receive the light from on high and to translate it according to their respective capacities.⁷⁴

The spiritual life, which can only be lived in conformity with a way provided by tradition, forms both a precondition and a complement to intellection. As Aquinas put it, "By their very nature the virtues do not necessarily form part of contemplation but they are an indispensable condition for it."⁷⁵ Moreover, sanctity itself may or may not be accompanied by metaphysical discernment: one may be a saint but no metaphysician, as history repeatedly demonstrates. To expect, as a necessity, metaphysical wisdom of the saint is to confuse different modes of spiritual perfection. As Schuon reminds us,

To say "man" is to say *bhakta*, and to say spirit is to say *jñānin*; human nature is so to speak woven of these two neighbouring but incommensurable dimensions. There is certainly a *bhakti* without *jñāna*, but there is no *jñāna* without *bhakti*.⁷⁶

The perspectives of Ramanuja and Shankara might be cited as an illustrative example of this principle.⁷⁷

If metaphysical discernment is to transform one's being then intellection alone is insufficient for "Human nature contains dark elements which no intellectual certainty could, *ipso facto*, eliminate."⁷⁸ Here the role of faith is of critical importance:

A man may possess metaphysical certainty without possessing "faith"... But, if metaphysical certainty suffices on the doctrinal ground, it is far from being sufficient on the spiritual level where it must be completed and enlivened by faith. Faith is nothing other than our whole being clinging to Truth, whether we have of truth a direct intuition or an indirect idea. It is an abuse of language to reduce "faith" to the level of "belief".⁷⁹

In another context Schuon emphasises this point in even more unequivocal terms. The following passage is, in my view, one of the most arresting in the whole Schuonian corpus, one made all the more so by the uncharacteristic personal reference:

One can meditate or speculate indefinitely on transcendent truths and their applications (that is moreover what the author of this book does, but he has valid reasons for doing it, nor does he do it for himself). One can spend a whole lifetime speculating on the suprasensorial and the transcendent, but all

⁶⁹ The best introductory account of the life of the sage is T.M.P. Mahadevan *Ramana Maharshi, The Sage of Arunacala* Allen & Unwin, London, 1977. See also FS *SPHF* p122.

⁷⁰ FS *SPHF* p138.

⁷¹ C.F. Kelley: *op.cit.* (Kelley's book clearly owes a great deal to Schuon whose aphorisms are repeated almost word for word but nowhere in the book can we find any acknowledgement of Schuon or any of the other traditionalists.)

⁷² FS *LAW* p136. See also FS *L&T* p199.

⁷³ S.H. Nasr *Ideals and Realities of Islam* p21.

⁷⁴ FS *TM* p25.

⁷⁵ Quoted in FS *UI* p133fn2.

⁷⁶ FS *EPW* p22.

⁷⁷ See FS *SPHF* pp103ff. For a European example of "*bhakti* without *jñāna*" one might cite St Theresa of Lisieux - but the history of Christianity furnishes many examples.

⁷⁸ FS *SPHF* p139.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*; p127. On the relationship of intellection and realisation see also SHN *K&S* pp310ff.

that matters is "the leap into the void" which is the fixation of spirit and soul in an unthinkable dimension of the Real... this "leap into the void" we can call... "faith"...⁸⁰

The planes on which philosophy, theology and metaphysics are situated can be identified by comparing their respective approaches to "God". For the philosopher "God" is a "problem" to be resolved and His existence or non-existence a question to be approached rationally, as if human reason could prove no matter what!; the theologian will be less concerned with proofs, the existence and reality of God being a revealed and thus axiomatic datum, than with belief and its moral concomitances; the metaphysician is concerned neither with rational argument nor with belief but with an Intellectual Evidence which brings an absolute certitude. To put it another way one might say that philosophy trades in opinions and ideas, theology focuses on beliefs and moralities, and metaphysics formulates doctrines which are the fruit of intellection. Or, again, one might say that the philosopher is intent on constructing a mental system, the theologian on discovering and living by the "will of heaven", and the metaphysician on a gnosis and transformation which will conform his being to Reality unqualified.

We can recapitulate some of the central points made in our discussion of the relationships between philosophy, theology and metaphysics through a passage from Schuon's *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*:

...intellectual or metaphysical knowledge transcends the specifically theological point of view, which is itself incomparably superior to the philosophical point of view, since, like metaphysical knowledge, it emanates from God and not from man; but whereas metaphysics proceeds wholly from intellectual intuition, religion proceeds from Revelation... 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 the Divine Principle... the theological point of view, because it is based in the minds of believers on a Revelation and not on a knowledge that is accessible to each one of them... will of necessity confuse the symbol or form with the naked and supraformal Truth while metaphysics... will be able to make use of the same symbol or form as a means of expression while at the same time being aware of its relativity... religion translates metaphysical or universal truths into dogmatic language... What essentially distinguishes the metaphysical from the philosophical proposition is that the former is symbolical and descriptive... whereas philosophy... is never anything more than what it expresses. When philosophy uses reason to resolve a doubt, this proves precisely that its starting point is a doubt it is striving to overcome, whereas... the starting point of a metaphysical formulation is always something intellectually evident or certain, which is communicated to those able to receive it, by symbolical or dialectical means designed to awaken in them the latent knowledge that they bear unconsciously, and it may even be said, eternally within them.⁸¹

Our discussion of these inter-relationships has necessarily had to gloss over some issues, skirt round others. Some fundamentally important principles and distinctions had to be expounded within a short compass. Before closing this discussion it will be as well to offer some qualifications to the argument elaborated above which has drawn heavily on Schuon's *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*. As Schuon points out in a more recent work,

In our first book... we adopted the point of view of Ghazali regarding "philosophy": that is to say, bearing in mind the great impoverishment of modern philosophy, we simplified the problem, as others have done before us, by making "philosophy" synonymous with "rationalism".⁸²

We have followed more or less the same procedure here and will only modify it with two brief points. Firstly, the term "philosophy" in itself "has nothing restrictive about it"; the restrictions which we have imposed on it in this discussion have been expedient rather than essential. Schuon has laid bare some of the issues raised by both the ancient and modern use of the term in an essay entitled "Tracing the Notion of Philosophy".⁸³ Secondly, it must also be admitted that our discussion of the relationships of philosophy, theology and metaphysics has been governed by some necessary oversimplifications. From certain points of view the distinctions we have established are not as clear-cut nor as rigid as our discussion has suggested. As Schuon himself writes

In a certain respect, the difference between philosophy, theology and gnosis is total; in another respect, it is relative. It is total when one understands by "philosophy" only rationalism; by "theology", only the explanation of religious teachings; and by "gnosis", only intuitive and intellective, and thus supra-rational, knowledge; but the difference is only relative when one understands by "philosophy" the fact of

⁸⁰ FS *L&T* p202.

⁸¹ FS *TUR* ppxxviii-xxx.

⁸² FS *SVQ* p123fn10.

⁸³ *ibid.*; p115-128. See also FS *TM* p3.

thinking, by "theology" the fact of speaking dogmatically of God and religious things, and by "gnosis" the fact of presenting pure metaphysics, for then the genres interpenetrate.⁸⁴

We live in anomalous times. Nowhere is this more graphically demonstrated than in the fact that in the most irreligious and impious period in human history the esoteric wisdoms preserved by the religious traditions are more widely and easily accessible than ever before. Sapiential truths which previously had remained extrinsically inexpressible and which had been protected by those few capable of understanding them are now on public display, as it were. The traditionalists themselves have played a significant role in bringing esoteric wisdoms within the purview of a greater number of people. This calls for some explanation.

The erosion of the protective barriers which previously enclosed traditions has, in part, been caused by historical factors which, in a sense, are "accidental". One might cite the exposure of the Upanisadic Scriptures as a case in point; here certain historical factors, such as the introduction into India of cheap printing presses, combined with a degree of imprudence on the part of some of the "reformers" of Hinduism to subvert the esoteric status of these Scriptures which became available to anyone and everyone. There are also innumerable cases where a garbled version of half-understood secret doctrines has been thoughtlessly and carelessly put into public circulation. The Biblical verse "For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed..." has sometimes been taken as a licence for all manner of excesses in the popularising of esoteric doctrines. The warnings about false prophets might often be more to the point.

In the case of the traditionalists the unveiling of some esoteric teachings has been considered and prudent. What sorts of factors have allowed this development? Firstly, there are certain cosmic and cyclic conditions now obtaining which make for an unprecedented situation. In discussing the fact that what was once hid in the darkness is now being brought into the light, Schuon writes,

there is indeed something abnormal in this, but it lies, not in the fact of the exposition of these truths, but in the general conditions of our age, which marks the end of a great cyclic period of terrestrial humanity - the end of a *maha-yuga* according to Hindu cosmology - and so must recapitulate or manifest again in one way or another everything that is included in the cycle, in conformity with the adage "extremes meet"; thus things that are in themselves abnormal may become necessary by reason of the conditions just referred to.⁸⁵

Secondly, from a more expedient point of view,

...it must be admitted that the spiritual confusion of our times has reached such a pitch that the harm that might in principle befall certain people from contact with the truths in question is compensated by the advantages that others will derive from the self-same truths.⁸⁶

Schuon reminds us of the Kabbalistic adage that "it is better to divulge Wisdom than to forget it."⁸⁷ And thirdly there is the fact already mentioned: esoteric doctrines have, in recent times, been so frequently "plagiarised and deformed" that those who are in a position to speak with authority on these matters are obliged to give some account of what "true esoterism is and what it is not".⁸⁸

From another perspective it can be said that the preservation, indeed the very survival, of the formal exotericisms may depend on the revivifying effects of an esotericism more widely understood:

exoterism is a precarious thing by reason of its limits or its exclusions: there arrives a moment in history when all kinds of experiences oblige it to modify its claims to exclusiveness, and it is then driven to a choice: escape from these limitations by the upward path, in esoterism, or by the downward path, in a worldly and suicidal liberalism.⁸⁹

At a time when "the outward and readily exaggerated incompatibility of the different religions greatly discredits, in the minds of most of our contemporaries, all religion",⁹⁰ the exposure of the underlying unity of the religions takes on a deep urgency. This task can only be achieved through esotericism. The open confrontation of different exotericisms, the extirpation of traditional civilisations, and the tyranny of secular and profane ideologies all play a part in determining the peculiar circumstances in which the most imperious needs of the age can only be answered by a recourse to traditional esotericisms. There is perhaps some small

84 *ibid.*; p125.

85 FS *TUR* pxxxii.

86 *ibid.*

87 FS *TM* p10.

88 *ibid.*

89 FS *EPW* p19.

90 FS *TUR* pxxxii.

hope that in this climate and given a properly constituted metaphysical framework in which to affirm the "profound and eternal solidarity of all spiritual forms",⁹¹ the different religions might yet "present a singular front against the floodtide of materialism and pseudo-spiritualism".⁹²

The hazards and ambiguities attending the exposure of esoteric doctrines to an audience in many respects ill-equipped to understand them have posed the same problems for representatives of traditional esotericisms the world over. Joseph Epes Brown writes of the disclosure of traditional Lakota wisdom, to choose one example, in terms very similar to those used by Schuon:

...in these days those few old wise men still living among them say that at the approach of the end of a cycle, when men everywhere have become unfit to understand and still more to realise the truths revealed to them at the origin... it is then permissible and even desirable to bring this knowledge out into the light of day, for by its own nature truth protects itself against being profaned and in this way it is possible it may reach those qualified to penetrate it deeply.⁹³

It is no accident that the few remaining holy men amongst the American Indians and traditionalists like Schuon should see this matter in the same terms.

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⁹¹ *ibid.*

⁹² FS *GDW* p12. See also WP *TTW* p22fn.

⁹³ J.E. Brown *The Sacred Pipe* Uni Oklahoma Press, 1953; pxii. (This passage was omitted from the Penguin edition.) See also Schuon's "Human Premises of a Religious Dilemma" in *SVQ* pp97-113.