

‘FACE TO FACE’:
THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN
HINDU AND CHRISTIAN
NON-DUALISM

• Stratford Caldecott •

“In the purity of that awareness of the radiance of being, purged of the constructions we normally place upon it, the doors of perception are cleansed and the things in the world may be seen as they are: infinite. This is not Christian faith, but a Christian need not deny its value, its attraction, or its integrity.”



“For now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face:
now I know in part, but then I shall know even as I am known.”
(1 Cor 13:2)

1. Introduction

As it developed, Christian theology incorporated elements from the Greek and Roman (not to mention Jewish and later Islamic) thought-worlds that surrounded it. Other elements were rejected, sometimes violently, and yet others tailored by the Church Fathers to fit the new religious perspective. This process of dialogue, critique, reaction, and creative incorporation was exceedingly complex, and has been well documented. Catholic believers regard it as no haphazard adventure through time, but rather as providentially ordered by the Holy Spirit to enable the *gestalt* of Christian

truth—the face of Christ—to emerge ever more clearly into view. An adventure perhaps, then, but hardly “haphazard,” because the *sensus fidelium*, like a homing instinct or sense of balance, enables the diversions and distractions of the journey to be integrated with the essential center of things, as revealed to the eyes of faith.

The Christian man of letters and amateur theologian G. K. Chesterton famously put it this way in his book *Orthodoxy*:

It is always simple to fall; there are an infinity of angles at which one falls, only one at which one stands. To have fallen into any one of the fads from Gnosticism to Christian Science would indeed have been obvious and tame. But to have avoided them all has been one whirling adventure; and in my vision the heavenly chariot flies thundering through the ages, the dull heresies sprawling and prostrate, the wild truth reeling but erect.¹

In our day Christians face a similar challenge, being in close contact not just with the ancient classical civilizations of the Mediterranean basin and Middle East, but with every religious or philosophical tradition from Japan to Australia and all points between. To keep our balance in this maelstrom of concepts and images and practices, while integrating what is of value within orthodox Christianity, calls for a renewed sense of the *gestalt* and much careful, intelligent discernment. The challenge is not merely an academic or intellectual one. Religious experience involves more than the appreciation of concepts, and the discernment I have in mind must involve an attempt to penetrate to the heart of that experience. This article can do no more than re-present the challenge. It does so from a Catholic perspective, but in the conviction that there is much that is true or valuable in the non-Christian religious traditions.²

The focus here will be specifically on Advaita Vedanta, a non-dualist interpretation of the Upanisads by the eighth-century Hindu sage Sankara. In fact, I am not so much concerned with the

¹G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (London: The Bodley Head, 1908), 168–69.

²“The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men” (*Nostra aetate*, 2). I am grateful for the skillful, constructive editing of Dr. Adrian Walker in preparing this article for publication.

minutiae of Sankara's teaching, let alone his disputations with other schools of interpretation and with Buddhism, but with its central insight as interpreted in the present-day by a number of scholars working in the West, who claim to recognize a similar or identical doctrine in the writings of the Sufi mystics of Islam (especially Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi) and the Christian preacher, Meister Eckhart. Boston-based Indologist and art historian Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (d. 1947), with two Western converts to Islamic Sufism, René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon, founded a school of thought known as "perennialism." Eric Gill, T. S. Eliot, Philip Sherrard, and Thomas Merton were among the Christian admirers of this group (although not all of them would have agreed with the founders of the school in every respect), and its best-known living exponent is the Muslim scholar, Seyyed Hossein Nasr. It is increasingly influential, both directly through a growing school of exponents within the academy and indirectly through popularizers and sympathizers such as Huston Smith and Karen Armstrong.

As expounded by Guénon and Schuon, perennialism claims to be an expression of the perennial wisdom (*Sophia Perennis*) always potentially accessible to the human spirit. It is in fact an exceptionally powerful and flexible tool for the interpretation of religious forms—philosophies, theologies, mythologies, and symbolism in general. Schuon summarizes its basic principles as follows:

In metaphysics, it is necessary to start from the idea that the Supreme Reality is absolute, and that being absolute it is infinite. That is absolute which allows of no augmentation or diminution, or of no repetition or division; it is therefore that which is at once solely itself and totally itself

The Infinite is so to speak the intrinsic dimension of plenitude proper to the Absolute, the one being inconceivable without the other

The distinction between the Absolute and the Infinite expresses the two fundamental aspects of the Real, that of essentiality and that of potentiality; this is the highest principial prefiguration of the masculine and feminine poles. Universal Radiation, thus *Maya* both divine and cosmic, springs from the second aspect, the Infinite, which coincides with All-Possibility³

³*Maya* he defines elsewhere as Relativity, Illusion, comprising everything except

In reality, the creation to which we belong is but one cycle of universal manifestation, this manifestation being composed of an indefinite number of cycles that are “necessary” as regards their existence but “free” as regards their particularity. The Universe is a fabric woven of necessity and freedom, of mathematical rigor and musical play; every phenomenon participates in these two principles.⁴

The first distinction to be made in a complete doctrine is between the Absolute and the relative, or between the Infinite and the finite; between *Atma* and *Maya*. The first term expresses a priori the single Essence, the Eckhartian “Godhead” (*Gotttheit*), Beyond-Being; the “personal God” already pertains to *Maya*, of which He is the “relatively absolute” summit; He encompasses the entire domain of relativity down to the extreme limit of the cosmogonic projection.⁵

He goes on to add other distinctions,⁶ but what will concern us here is primarily that between the Absolute, which he calls the “Godhead” Beyond-Being (Para Brahman), and the Relative, which he elsewhere designates as Being (Apara Brahman). The Absolute is unconditioned by and unrelated to anything other than itself. It is this primary distinction that enables Schuon to describe Christianity as just one among many “exoteric” vehicles for a universal and non-dualistic “esotericism.”⁷ In order to do so, he uses the primary

the supreme Absolute; that is, Para Brahman or Atma, as we see below. It includes the divine in the sense of the Creator and indeed the Logos, as celestial archetype and center of the World.

⁴According to Schuon, the Infinite proceeds necessarily into all-possibility, like an inexhaustible fountain that does not in any way deplete its eternal source or add anything to it. The procession is by way of knowledge rather than will; the knowledge not of an Other but of the One Self and all it contains. The non-existence of the world is therefore literally inconceivable (except in the sense of a rhythmic cycle of manifestation and return to non-manifestation, implicit in the ordered unfolding of possibility).

⁵Frithjof Schuon, *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1986), 15–19.

⁶Such as that between God, also called “the Principle” (comprising both Absolute and Relative Absolute), and the World or Manifestation, which includes the Logos as the central reflection of the Principle. Another distinction is between Heaven and Earth, in which Heaven comprises the Principle plus the Logos.

⁷The distinction introduced by Guénon is developed by Schuon in his first and

distinction to relegate the more distinctively Christian doctrines such as the Incarnation and especially the Trinity to the level of the exoteric. For Schuon the alternative is strictly absurd: “that the Trinitarian relationships belong, not to this relative absoluteness [of Being] but to the pure and intrinsic Absolute, or to the absoluteness of the Essence, amounts to asking us to accept that two and two make five or that an effect has no cause, which no religious message can do and the Christian message has certainly never done.”⁸

The overcoming of dualisms is of great interest to readers of this journal. A subsidiary question that might be addressed in this connection, therefore, is whether the exaggerated dualisms of nature and grace, of sacred and secular, of faith and reason, that we observe in our culture—a severance of relationship leading to the attempted elimination of one of the terms—is in any way connected with the dualism between Self and Other or God and World that Advaita is intended to overcome. I will suggest that a non-dualism based solely on the distinctions drawn by Schuon in the quoted passage (though not necessarily Advaita itself) fits too easily into the dialectic of modernity: that instead of solving the problem, it risks collapsing dualism into monism—and only a better grasp of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity could prevent it from doing so.

As a way of setting up the discussion, I want to refer to a book that represents an attempt to reconcile the perennialist approach with Catholic orthodoxy. Written by “a Monk of the West,” *Christianity and the Doctrine of Non-Dualism*⁹ sees a harmony or complementarity between Catholic doctrine and Advaita correctly

most seminal book, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (Wheaton, Ill.: Theosophical Publishing House, 1984). The notion of Christian “esotericism” has been subjected to a searching critique in Jean Borella, *Guénonian Esoterism and Christian Mystery* (Hillsdale, N.Y.: Sophia Perennis, 2004).

⁸Frithjof Schuon, “Evidence and Mystery” in *The Fullness of God: Frithjof Schuon on Christianity*, ed. James S. Cutsinger (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 2004), 126. Cf. his treatment of the Trinity in “Transcendence is Not Contrary to Sense,” in *From the Divine to the Human* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1982), 19–32. The Catholic writer Timothy A. Mahoney has exhaustively refuted Schuon’s position in his essay “Christian Metaphysics: Trinity, Incarnation and Creation,” *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies* 8, no. 1 (Summer 2002): 79–102 (also online at www.secondspring.co.uk).

⁹Hillsdale, N.Y.: Sophia Perennis, 2004. According to the Preface by Alvin Moore, Jr., the author’s actual name was Alphonse Levée. Having studied Vedanta under the influence of René Guénon, he became a monk of La Trappe in 1951.

understood. The Monk writes not as an academic but as a man of prayer and Christian faith who has meditated deeply on his religious experience.

The two points of view that the Monk hopes to bring into accord appear on the surface completely contradictory. On the one hand, we have the Christian doctrines of the creation of the world by God, with the (unique) hypostatic union of divine and human natures in Christ. On the other, we have the "Supreme Identity" (*tat tvam asi*) of the Upanisads—roughly speaking, the universal identity of the Self with God.¹⁰ The Monk claims that "since they do not pertain to the same order of Reality, hypostatic union and Supreme Identity do not in themselves exclude one another, or stated otherwise, they are not metaphysically incompatible" (116). However, he also speculates that it is the former (the unique Incarnation of God in Christ) that alone permits the realization of the identity of Atman and Brahman in those who eventually transcend the point of view of creation, giving this precise sense to the following sentence of John Paul II, "[Man] must, so to speak, enter into Christ with all his being, he must 'appropriate' to himself and assimilate all the reality of the Incarnation and Redemption *in order to find himself*" (117).¹¹ More precisely, he proposes that while Christ's realization of the Supreme Identity depends simply on the hypostatic union of his human and divine natures in the Person of the Son, our own realization of the Supreme Identity is dependent upon our incorporation in Christ.

This proposal is probably equally offensive to both sides in the dialogue. Orthodox Christians will most likely protest against the claim that "to find himself" must ultimately mean for man to dissolve himself into the supreme (non-dual) identity. Christianity is surely the religion of creation *ex nihilo* and of the human person loved forever by a God who is different from himself. Advaitins or perennialist non-dualists, for their part, will find it hard to comprehend how the attainment of supreme realization might be made to depend on the incarnation of God at one particular point in history. As the author himself points out, the Supreme Identity is "not an

¹⁰Not, of course, the self of everyday consciousness, but the higher and innermost self, the "Atman."

¹¹John Paul II, *Redemptor hominis* (1978), 10. The emphasis here is the Monk's. He quotes a larger portion of this passage at 35–36.

event or a fact, but the permanent and immutable Truth (and so *uncreated*), of all that exists” (116). If it is true that “I am *that*,” it will be true at any time and under any historical conditions whatsoever. Christ’s birth in time makes no difference to this, just as it makes no difference to the truth of the Bhagavad Gita whether Krisna was an historical or an entirely mythological figure.

The Monk’s position seems in this respect to be different from the typical perennialist. He believes that while the Upanisads are fundamentally correct about the supreme identity, nevertheless our *realization* of this immutable truth is entirely dependent on a relationship with the historical Incarnation of the Son of God (whether we know this or not). In other words, he proposes a christological re-reading of the supreme identity—though unfortunately he leaves the proposal undeveloped at the conclusion of his book. It is an important step to take, but in my view not sufficient. I will not be able to examine the Monk’s theory of hypostatic union in more detail in this article: there is more to say on the subject which will have to be postponed till later. What I want to do here is to concentrate—with a little help from Meister Eckhart, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and others—on the meaning of the term “person,” which the Monk describes as central in this whole debate, and to do so in a way that might strengthen his proposal. There are important differences in the way “person” is used in the two religious perspectives, differences that affect the way we understand what is meant by non-dualism. In what follows, I suggest that a discussion of the person in the context of the Trinity may lead to a greater appreciation both of Asian non-dualism and of Christian (trinitarian) non-dualism, as well as the differences between them.

2. Eckhart, Thomas, and divine knowledge

The thirteenth-century Dominican preacher, Meister Eckhart, plays a key role in the perennialist interpretation of Christianity. He is invariably produced as the prime example of a Christian thinker who penetrated metaphysically to the heart of the Church’s doctrine and found there a non-dualism akin to that of Sankara and Ibn Arabi. (In fact the term “Christian non-dualism” was, according to the Monk of the West, first used by Vladimir Lossky in reference to Eckhart’s teaching.) Some who use Eckhart

in this way argue that his teaching puts the doctrine of the Trinity in its place as only “relatively” and not “absolutely” true. As we saw in the case of Schuon, this involves identifying his distinction between God and “Godhead” with the distinction between Being and Beyond-Being. Thus, according to the perennialist scholar Reza Shah-Kazemi, author of a detailed comparative study of Eckhart, Sankara, and Ibn Arabi:

God *qua* Godhead is thus neither Father nor Son, taking these in their aspect of personal affirmation; but in His first outpouring, God becomes intelligible as the Principle of all subsequent manifestation—divine and creaturely; here, the Godhead can be referred to as “Beyond-Being,” Father as the Principle is the level of Being, and Son as the immediate source of universal manifestation, is the Logos “by which was made all that was made.” . . . At the plane of Being—“where God is” [according to Eckhart]—the Word is spoken, whilst on the plane of Beyond-Being—“where He is not” [again, Eckhart]—there is silence, no-thing. That this does not mean “nothing” in the sense of the negation of Being, but rather nothing as That which surpasses and comprises all “things” as well as Being itself, is clear from the fact that Eckhart says: “God is spoken *and* unspoken.”¹²

However, even here things may not be all they appear, for Shah-Kazemi admits that that the notion of Beyond-Being, so clear in Sankara, “is not found explicitly in Ibn Arabi’s perspective” (195), and claims that his notion of Being “opens out onto the Essence” without being “‘tainted’ with the relativity implied by being the immediate principle of universal manifestation” (78). Though he does not see the same nuance in Eckhart, the qualification becomes significant when we are considering the actual meaning of Christian revelation. In a previous article I tried to refute the interpretation of Eckhart that sees him placing a (non-trinitarian) Godhead on a higher ontological level than the Trinity.¹³ Despite appearances to the contrary, I am convinced he is a fundamentally trinitarian thinker: his Godhead and Trinity are on the

¹²Reza Shah-Kazemi, *Paths to Transcendence: Shankara, Ibn Arabi, and Meister Eckhart* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 2006), 135.

¹³“Trinity and Creation: An Eckhartian Perspective,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 30, no. 4 (Winter 2003).

same level, the former referring to the divine Essence that is common to all three Persons.¹⁴

We find the same in John Ruysbroeck and Nicholas of Cusa (and, as the Monk of the West argues, in St. Bernard of Clairvaux). Ruysbroeck speaks just as boldly as Eckhart about a “union without difference” in which “all light is turned into darkness and the three Persons give way before the essential Unity, where without distinction they enjoy eternal bliss,” but unlike Eckhart he is careful to explain in the same place that he is speaking of the beatitude in which self-awareness (as normally understood) is lost, but not the creature’s ontological identity.¹⁵ One wonders whether Advaita itself (if not Schuon’s interpretation of it) is not gesturing toward a similar point through the method of negation. In any case, we shall see that Eckhart helps us appropriate Advaita in this sense.

In order to root Eckhart’s approach even more firmly in the tradition, it may help to trace it back further to a predecessor of unimpeachable orthodoxy, St. Thomas Aquinas. I will discuss first his doctrine of divine knowledge, and then relate this to the Trinity.

Before Eckhart, then, Aquinas raises the question, what must the world look like from God’s point of view? Normally we think about things from the point of view of the creature, since that is what we are. But in *De veritate* (q. 2, a. 1, 2), Aquinas writes that God’s knowledge of created things can be thought of in two ways: from the point of view of the thing known, or from that of the knower. From the first of these, God knows the act of being which

¹⁴It is true that Eckhart makes statements such as this: “Unsophisticated teachers say that God is pure being. He is as high above being as the highest angel is above a gnat.” Yet a few sentences later he explains, “in saying that God is not a being and is above being, I have not denied being to God; rather, I have elevated it in him” (*Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, ed. Bernard McGinn [New York: Paulist Press, 1986], 256). Eckhart also prioritizes knowledge over being in God, but he means by this that being transcends duality as the supreme act of knowing—which is trinitarian in the sense I have tried to explain below. See C. F. Kelley, *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge* (Yale University Press, 1977), 116–19, 172–78. Balthasar would probably say that I am reading Eckhart in the light of the subtle adjustments to his doctrine introduced by followers such as Tauler, Suso, and Ruysbroeck—on this, see his *Theo-Drama. Theological Dramatic Theory (=TD)*, vol. 5: *The Last Act*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 434–62.

¹⁵*John Ruusbroec: The Spiritual Espousals and Other Works*, trans. James A. Wiseman, O.S.B. (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 265.

distinguishes each created thing from himself. But from his own point of view, as the *knower* of the thing, "God knows things only inasmuch as they are in him; for he knows them from their likeness, which is identical in reality with himself." So he knows creatures "by their existence within himself." (Thus the ideas of things as representing creatures are rationally distinguishable from his own Essence, though they are in reality identical with it.) Similarly, in book one of *Summa contra gentiles*, Aquinas argues in chapters 48–55 that "primarily and essentially God knows only himself," and so knows other things (as beings distinct from each other and from himself, as caused by himself, and so on) only through the undivided divine Essence as the one "intelligible species" of which all things are the likeness.¹⁶

This is all quite difficult, no doubt, but it helps us understand Eckhart, much of whose speaking and writing is done as if from God's point of view. He writes: "In God creatures are identical in the One, they are God in God. In themselves they are nothing."¹⁷ "All creatures [as such] are a mere nothing. I do not say that they are small or something; they are a mere nothing. What is really without pure isness [as its sufficient reason in itself] really is not," and the creature "*is not, only God is.*" This is also the insight that Asian non-dualism is trying to express, it seems to me—a truth that we need to situate in relation to orthodox Christianity. It is reminiscent of Aquinas, who tells us that "The term *to be*, taken simply and

¹⁶In the *Summa's* various articles on God's knowledge and on Ideas, and also in *De Veritate*, Aquinas argues that God cannot be called "ignorant of singulars," as though he knew individual things only by knowing some singular universal form, because (unlike us) he knows matter as well as form, and therefore things as individualized by matter. On the other hand, this does not introduce multiplicity into God, because the act of divine knowledge is not anything other than his Essence, which is his act of existence. Thus, if we are thinking of the Essence, God has only one "Idea" for all things, but if we are thinking of the many ways individual creatures imitate that Essence and fall short of it, there is a plurality of divine ideas. Thus God understands himself, but he also understands the relations things have to his Essence (the ideas). But in God both are *one undivided act of understanding*.

¹⁷Cited in Kelley, *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge*, 169. Kelley's fine study of Eckhart is one of the few to interpret him as writing from this unusual vantage-point, from "inside the Trinity"—a strategy which caused the Meister to be widely misunderstood and suspected of heresy. That this accusation is unjust is increasingly widely accepted within the Church.

absolutely, is understood only of the divine existence.”¹⁸ As Frederick Copleston, S. J., says, there is

nothing unorthodox in maintaining that finite things, apart from God, are nothing. It is a way of saying that they are utterly dependent on him for existence. “Being is itself divided into that which has being in itself, and that which derives its being from not-itself. The being of this latter is borrowed, having no existence by itself. Nay, if it is regarded in and by itself, it is pure not-being.”¹⁹

According to Eckhart’s way of talking, creatures are nothing in themselves; but when he says this he is considering them *as they are in God*, and in God they are indeed nothing other than the divine essence, in the sense of being only rationally distinct from it, as Aquinas teaches. This does not contradict the distinctness of things from God, except in the way we normally imagine distinctness; that is, as a kind of “standing alongside.” Nothing can stand alongside God in that sense. The deeper sense of distinction is a function of the trinitarian doctrine that both Aquinas and Eckhart accept in faith, as we shall see in more detail in the next section.

In this respect, then, the Christian and the non-dualist may be saying the same thing, and here my conclusions are similar to those of the Monk, for whom “the doctrine of non-dualism does not annihilate the creature as such anymore than it deifies him,” since “the illusory nature of the world lies [only] in this, that it presents itself to our awareness as an *absolute* reality,” whereas “in and of itself” (apart from God) it is nothing.²⁰ The world is normally taken for much more than it really is—and to that extent we might call it an illusion; that is to say, it is something that exists but is not what it seems when we look at it, as we almost inevitably tend to do, as separate from God. On the other hand, while creation is in one sense

¹⁸*De Veritate*, q. 2, a. 3, 16.

¹⁹Copleston is writing about Al-Ghazali in *Religion and the One: Philosophies East and West* (London: Search Press, 1982), 101.

²⁰*Christianity and the Doctrine of Non-Dualism*, 57. Correlatively, it could be said that God is also an illusion, although only insofar as “God” is defined by his relation to creation. As the Monk explains, in line with St. Thomas, the “relation of creation is non-reciprocal, that is to say that it is real only from the side of the creature. The *Divine Essence is not itself relative to anything*, for in God there is relationship only *ad intra*, and these are the Trinitarian relationships” (22).

nothing, it is also very definitely something: this is the point of the thomistic account of created *esse* as complete and simple, but not subsistent,²¹ and of the doctrine of divine knowledge of creatures as articulated above. And this raises the following question.

If we view things *as they are in God*, then they are indeed real, but to what extent are they then *other than God*? I want to argue, more strongly than the Monk, that it is the (trinitarian) unity of God that makes the distinctness of the creature real without its being “other,” just as the Father is the unoriginate origin of the Son and Spirit without ever being anything other than the same Essence. That is, the Trinity allows us to distinguish between *otherness*, by which one finite thing differs from another according to its essence, and *distinction*, which, in the Trinity, is a difference of a higher kind that does not involve finite, quidditative otherness. And the point is that, while creatures in God—the divine ideas—are not other than God in a dualistic sense, they are distinct from him by participation in the trinitarian relations. It is here, in the Trinity, that we must look for a way in which things can be themselves in God *non-dualistically*. I hope to show this in the next section.

3. Reality in relation

Balthasar rightly says: “A *theologia viatorum* may not attempt to give a complete account of the *theologia comprehensorum*. For the most part, if it attempts to do so, it gets stuck in unproductive abstractions or in empty, embarrassing enthusiasms.”²² Nevertheless,

²¹For an account of this see Nicholas J. Healy, “The World as Gift,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 32, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 395–406. It is worth noting that Sara Grant, in *Towards an Alternative Theology: Confessions of a Non-Dualist Christian* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), concludes from her study of Sankara that his doctrine—as distinct from that of some of his interpreters—is very close to that of Aquinas. “Both were non-dualists, understanding the relation of the universe, including individual selves, to uncreated Being in terms of a non-reciprocal relation of dependence which, far from diminishing the uniqueness and lawful autonomy of a created being within its own sphere, was their necessary Ground and condition, while apart from that relation of total dependence no created being would *be* at all” (52). Grant’s conclusions tend in the direction of the present essay, though she ends with questions that I have tried to answer with reference to the Trinity.

²²Balthasar, *TD* 5, 373.

one is obliged when dealing with Eckhart, and when preparing to enter into dialogue with Vedanta or Sufism, to recognize that a partial account of the *theologia comprehensorum* must sometimes be attempted, even at the risk of failure and incomprehension. Balthasar himself is one of those who occasionally crosses the line, not just (notoriously) when he considers the possibility that all human souls might be saved from the fires of hell, but also when he considers (in the final pages of his work *Theo-Drama*) what it is that the world can be said to add to God. He suggests there that “the infinite possibilities of divine freedom all lie *within* the trinitarian distinctions and are thus free possibilities within the eternal life of love in God that *has always been realized*.”²³

It is easy to misunderstand Eckhart, too, because we approach him with a static view both of knowledge and of divinity. His own view was intensely dynamic, with the Persons of the Trinity continually melting or “boiling” into each other (*bullitio*), and creation analogously flowing out of the Trinity and back (*ebullitio*). He talks about “a reflexive turning back of his existence into itself and upon itself and its dwelling and remaining fixed in itself,” and

a “boiling” or giving birth to itself—glowing in itself, and melting and boiling in and into itself, light that totally forces its whole being in light and into light and that is everywhere totally turned back and reflected upon itself, according to that saying of the sage, “The monad gives birth to” (or gave birth to) “the monad, and reflected love or ardent desire back upon itself.”²⁴

Of course, God is outside time and these terms involve temporal images, but we must make allowances for that in theological discourse. These images are the way Eckhart chooses to describe the self-giving that is both love and knowledge in God. His references to the divine *Ungrund* “into which distinction [between Father, Son, and Spirit] never gazed,”²⁵ as I have mentioned, is an attempt to

²³Ibid., 508.

²⁴*Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 46, from his commentary on “I am who am.”

²⁵*Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, trans. Edmund Colledge, O.S.A., and Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 198, from German Sermon 48. For more on this, see my essay mentioned above.

overcome the limitations of the dynamic model by considering God from the point of view of the Essence, with the Persons eternally "resting" in one another. This *Ungrund* or abyss of unity cannot be in any real sense *prior* to the Trinity, since it is identical with the Father as unoriginate origin of the Son and the Spirit. As Balthasar's muse and collaborator, the mystical theologian Adrienne von Speyr, writes in her commentary on John's Gospel,

God in his essence is Trinity. It is not true to say that the Father comes first, that the Son then comes into being and that finally the Spirit proceeds from the relation between them; and consequently God's love is merely the result of relation between Persons, that the essence of God comes before the Persons, and the Persons before their love. The essence of God, rather, is trinitarian and consists essentially in love God is not a lover; God is love, and this love has a threefold form.²⁶

What does all this imply for our question? Two things. First, it preserves the truth of Advaita in a Christian form. There is indeed a sense in which the multiplicity and complexity of creation has no existence outside the unity of the divine Essence. But second, Eckhart preserves this truth by grounding it in the Trinity. Thanks to the Trinity, the plurality of creatures does have existence in the unity of the divine Essence, although, when we see this fact from God's point of view, as we will do in the next life, it will surely look quite different.

The Trinity is creation's eternal home, for the universe is "produced in the Son."²⁷ And just as the oneness of the Trinitarian Persons with and in the divine Essence presumes their mutual distinctness, so when we say that creatures pre-exist in God as God we are indeed denying that they lie alongside God as one finite thing does another. That is, we are denying their otherness from God. Far from denying their distinctness from God, though, we are actually establishing it, for like Aquinas in *De Trinitate*, Eckhart insists that distinction, not otherness, is the principle of plurality. As he says, "the distinction in the Trinity comes from the unity. The unity is

²⁶Adrienne von Speyr, *John*, vol. 1, *The Word Becomes Flesh* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 26.

²⁷See the commentary on John's Prologue in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, 143.

the distinction, and the distinction *is* the unity. The greater the distinction the greater the unity”²⁸ For the unity is nothing other than Father, Son, and Spirit.

4. *Trinity: being beyond (created) being*

Let us now try to see how all this affects the relationship between Christianity and other religions, and how the trinitarian doctrine of Christianity, properly understood as the relations of the supreme Principle to itself, can give us a different way of understanding the distinction perennialists find in Sankara—how the understanding of Eckhart’s “Godhead” as trinitarian coinherence illuminates “Para Brahman.”

As I have argued, in one subtle but important way Christianity appears to break with the universal non-dualist metaphysics that, for the perennialists, represents the esoteric core of every great religious tradition. For Christianity regards the Trinity as identical with the Essence of God, which according to the perennialist philosophy must be beyond all multiplicity, even multiplicity *in divinis*. Schuon places the Trinity only at the level of Being, whereas God in himself (prior to any relationship between Self and Other or between Creator and World) is identified with Beyond-Being. For authentic Christianity, by contrast, there is no such dual level or dialectic within God: the act of Being which is the divine Essence is itself the Infinite, or (as with Ibn Arabi, perhaps) “opens out onto” the Infinite. Being is act, and the primordial act is self-gift (=knowledge, =love). Once it was clear that the self-gift of Being could be perfect within itself as Trinity, and therefore also “at rest” within itself, it was not necessary to posit a higher absolute than Being. The utter transcendence of the Essence is attained not by withdrawing it from all relationship (as “Beyond-Being”), but by recognizing that its very transcendence consists in relationship or manifestation *to itself*; that God is, *in himself*, trinitarian love.

The Trinity (as Eckhart among others emphasizes) is not a numerical triad—is not, in fact, numerable at all. The divine nature is absolute infinity, and when the Father gives it to the Son, he does

²⁸From Sermon 66, in *Meister Eckhart: Sermons and Treatises*, vol. 2, trans. M. O’C. Walshe (Boston: Element Books, 1989), 145.

not create a second infinity, or in the Spirit a third. Infinity is beyond every quantity: in quantitative terms, therefore, even the addition of a divine person adds nothing to the divine nature as such. The Son and the Spirit add nothing to the Father, and take nothing away. Nor is it that the Trinity consists of three “selves” or centers of consciousness. Each Person, eternally distinct from each other, is identical with the one God who is beyond the opposition of self and other—the God who is person and community in one act of being. The multiplicity of selves in creation is a dim reflection of this unity; thus every one of us seems to ourselves to exist at the center of the universe. The threeness of the Trinity must therefore be a very peculiar kind of unity. It is in fact the unity of love,²⁹ which is more intense than the numerical unity of simple identity (1=1). In this intensive unity is anchored the distinctness of creatures from God.

Some perennialists seem to regard Eastern Orthodoxy as a more authentic form of Christianity than Catholicism, perhaps because the closest Christianity comes to this duality is in the Palamite distinction between the unknowable Essence and the knowable Energies of God. However, one of the most telling critiques of Guénon’s subordination of Revelation to monadic logic ending in the complete suppression of the personal can be found in a book of essays by the Greek Orthodox writer Philip Sherrard called *Christianity: Lineaments of a Sacred Tradition*.³⁰ He writes, for example, that for the Orthodox, “each Person of the Trinity, although distinct from the other Persons, is as real and as absolute as each of the other Persons, and the reality and absoluteness and infinitude possessed by each Person are those of Reality itself, and the Absolute and Infinite Itself, in the fullest sense of the words” (83).

Another Greek Orthodox theologian, Metropolitan John Zizioulas, draws this doctrine out of the writings of Maximus the Confessor and the Cappadocian fathers, where “the three persons of the Trinity do not share a pre-existing or logically prior to them divine nature, but coincide with it.” As he points out, “the philosophical scandal of the Trinity can be resolved or accepted only if substance gives way to personhood as the causing principle or *arche* in ontology.” Thus the (logical) origin of the Trinity is not an

²⁹Or as Eckhart would say, the unity of knowledge.

³⁰Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1998, 76–113.

abstracted divine nature or Essence, but the Father, who is of course only “Father” in relation to the Son and the Spirit.³¹ Zizioulas explores the anthropological consequences of this insight in terms of the divine image in man, who is fully human only insofar as he transcends his own nature in personhood; that is, in “the identity created freely by love and not by the necessity of its self-existence” (167).

We have seen that what the mystics perceive to be the unreality or fluidity of the world separate from God, its seeming disappearance in the face of the Absolute, can be known by a universal metaphysical insight evidenced in every religion, though it is understood and expressed somewhat differently in each. The reality of the creature in the Trinity, on the other hand, is not something knowable simply by metaphysics, by observing and meditating on the world and on ourselves, without the help of a revelation (except in the sense that we know in a theoretical way that the Infinite must include everything of positive value to be found in creation, including human personality).

A Christian thinker, therefore, cannot be simply an Advaitin. But we can preserve the Advaitin intuition of non-dualism by reinterpreting it as the other side of the coin of the Christian intuition that the reality of the creature is grounded *in relation to the Trinitarian Persons*, that is to say, that creation happens “in the Trinity.” A Christian, to whom the reality of the Trinity has been revealed, can say that the creature made by God exists *in relation to the Persons*; that is, by participating in the self-giving love that God is. (Though, as we shall see later, it might be more accurate to say it *will* exist than that it does already do so.) Thus the Persons are the ground of the distinction of creatures—from God and from each other.

Christianity, because it believes in the Incarnation and the Trinity, which are revealed truths and unknowable except in faith, has a soteriology and not just a gnosis; that is, a doctrine of salvation, not just one of enlightenment. For those who are “saved” there are two births. We are born first as children destined to grow old and die. The *second* birth, the subject of Nicodemus’s night conversation with Jesus, takes place through baptism (whether explicit or

³¹John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness* (London: Continuum, 2006), 159, 162–63.

implicit), and this incorporates us into the body of Christ.³² It inserts us within the Son's relationship with the Father by making us a gift to him. We enter into the loving exchange that is the life of the Blessed Trinity. That is, we become part of that human nature that the Son is giving to the Father, and we do so in the Holy Spirit who is himself the supreme "Person-Gift." Thus in the Third Eucharistic Prayer the priest addresses the Father in these terms: "Grant that we who are nourished by his body and blood may be filled with his Holy Spirit, and become one body, one spirit in Christ. *May he make us an everlasting gift to you*, and enable us to share in the inheritance of your saints."

By contrast with divine love, human love hardly deserves the name. It is pitifully selfish, normally motivated by desire for approval or desire to get something in return. The love of God—the love that is God—is given to us like a new heart or a new capacity for action once we accept the offer of grace implicit in the divine call. The "newness" of Christianity is felt most strongly by those who do so respond, and who sense within themselves this new capacity, or birth of real freedom in the soul.

It is through the Incarnation, in fact, that created persons transcend the "unreality" of the correlative pair "God-and-creation" and discover their place among the *ad intra* relationships of the divine reality. The dualism of "I and Thou" is transcended, indeed, but then the person receives a "new name," which is the birth of the Son in the soul. "I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the New Jerusalem which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name" (Rev 3:12). Thus the "salvation" of the world, according to Christianity and in the Christian sense of this word, is accomplished by bringing it into the relation of Sonship with the Father in the Holy Spirit. All who enter into the loving relation of Father to Son, by giving themselves to the Father revealed in the Son (that is, by uniting themselves to Jesus in the Spirit as Bride to Bridegroom, so that the Father's will may be done "on earth as it is in heaven") become *theological persons*. This unique *missio* within the mission of the Son, this personal relation to the Father, is not subject to death. The trinitarian

³²It is clearly taught in the tradition that only those who deliberately and finally reject the grace of this incorporation, in whatever suitable form it is presented to them, will be excluded from it.

relations, by allowing an eternal distinction within God without dividing the divine nature, provide a home for our own eternal existence.

We are “divinized,” being God by grace rather than nature; united with him in the Son. The old heavens and the old earth pass away, but the loving relations established between us and God will never pass away. Through them, whatever we have been in this temporal life is purified, rendered eternal, transfigured, divinized by grace. It becomes the seed of a “celestial body,” for “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable” (1 Cor 15:50).

John Zizioulas speaks in this connection in terms of an “eschatological ontology,” because while nothing that can be swallowed up by death is ultimately “true,” things do acquire truth *from the future*, from the final goal of creation which is the “recapitulation in the Son” and *theosis*.³³ This means that ultimately it is only the Resurrection that can show us the reality of creation in the Trinity. Through Christ and through the Church the whole world becomes “real” in the end, by being “hypostasized.”

5. *The radiance of being*

In the act of abstracting himself from time, a non-dualist may miss something important (to say the least!), namely the reality of the world, the reality of the created person, and the reality of creaturely love. All of these are rescued and incorporated within the Trinity by the Incarnation of the Word, including most importantly the culmination of that Incarnation in the resurrection and ascension to the Father. The Trinity is revealed by the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in space and time. Now, these realities are seen by some as a *merely symbolic* expression of this insight into the paradoxical nature of reality and its eternal ground in the Trinity. The Self must pass through death in order to arrive at its true, non-dual identity in God. But for an orthodox Christian it is not enough

³³Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 66–68. See also St. Maximus the Confessor, “Ambiguum 7,” in *On the Cosmic Mystery of Christ*, trans. Paul M. Blowers and Robert Louis Wilken (Crestwood, N.Y.: Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003).

to view Christ as a symbol, or even as one teacher of the supreme identity among many—hence the Monk's suggestion that our very realization of "non-duality" depends in some way upon the historicity of the Incarnation. With Henri Le Saux (Abhishiktananda) we can say that "In the Son's awakening the whole of creation awakes to being, at the dawn of eternity of which the Easter dawn is the manifestation in time."³⁴

And so, while God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, this does not mean that nothing at all happens for God. History is the process of finding out what that is. And yet, as I earlier quoted Balthasar saying in the very important concluding section of *Theo-Drama*, in God himself the possibilities of the creation *have always been realized*. That is, the incorporation of the temporal into the eternal through Christ, who is resurrected and ascends to eternity with his wounds still visible and in a body of flesh (drawing the saints in his wake), makes history "always already to have been," even if it is "not yet" from our point of view. This is not the same as saying with the perennialists that "all-possibility is included in the unmanifest," for the possibilities we are talking of here are those of a real creation that possesses this truth "from the future," thanks to the resurrection of Christ. As Pope Benedict writes, Christian faith "draws the future into the present, so that it is no longer simply a 'not yet.' The fact that this future exists changes the present; the present is touched by the future reality, and thus the things of the future spill over into those of the present and those of the present into those of the future."³⁵

In a sense (though for reasons of which he seems unaware) the Monk of the West is correct that *Christianity alone makes it possible to sustain the truth of non-dualism*. Asian non-dualism, as interpreted by the perennialists, always risks collapsing into monism, which boils down to the mere suppression of one half of a dualism. Christianity offers supreme unity without monism. God in his essence is beyond the dichotomy of self and other, subject and object, Being and Beyond-Being, but not in the monistic manner, by being "less" than

³⁴Abhishiktananda (Dom Henri Le Saux), *Hindu-Christian Meeting Point: Within the Cave of the Heart* (ISPCK, 1976), 92.

³⁵Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi* (30 November 2007), section 7. In the next section the pope speaks of this as a new "substance" or basis for our existence: "a basis that abides, that no one can take away."

two. The divine essence never exists but as Father, Son, and Spirit. It is not even that the Father is self, the Son other, and the Spirit their (non-dualistic) unity, for each is both self and other. Rather, the Father and Son loving each other in the Spirit is what it means to be God as beyond the dichotomies just mentioned. Thus we may agree with Henri Le Saux:

For the believer all that was said in the Upanishads was in reality said of Christ. But in the clear light of the Gospels all apparent contradictions are resolved. Within the glory of the One, the believer, his eyes unsealed by faith, perceives the Son who eternally proceeds from that One, and in the Son he beholds himself, in his own unique and irreplaceable vocation.³⁶

If love in its highest sense is self-gift, constituting a trinitarian relationship in which the divine nature or essence is simultaneously possessed, given, and received, then the taking-place of creation and its historical unfolding through time before the eschaton must be understood by a Christian as eternally situated within such an exchange. The intensive unity of the Trinity is due to the fact that it is brought about by self-giving love, by complete self-donation, rather than mere mechanical or numerical identity. But from the point of view of those in time, such as ourselves, there are distinct “moments” in such an exchange. The gift must be *first* owned, *then* handed over, *then* received. Only after receiving is the one who has received capable of giving anything in return.

This suggests another way of expressing the difference between the two types of non-dualism. It seems to me that Christians, by virtue of the incarnation, passion, and resurrection of Christ, are located at the point or moment of “giving back.” The Passion (represented and made present in the Mass or Divine Liturgy) is precisely this conscious return of self to the Father, in which creation is called to participate through the Spirit. On the other hand, the spiritual perspective of Asian non-dualism is located earlier in the process: it pertains to the moment of receiving the gift.

But in order to place the Asian experience in Christian terms more precisely, it is important to note that the reception of a gift can itself be broken down into two distinct moments. These are the

³⁶Abhishiktananda (Dom Henri Le Saux), *Hindu-Christian Meeting Point: Within the Cave of the Heart*, 80–81.

laying of the gift in the hand, so to speak, which is the moment of becoming aware of the gift, and secondarily its actual appropriation by the recipient. The first moment is the perception of sheer gratuitous suchness, of wondering surprise, which may be tinged with a kind of sadness or poignancy given the awareness that the gift is of a moment that is passing even as we receive it. (Of course, this is a feeling or mood or perception that is not entirely foreign to Christianity either.)

The second stage, the "taking unto myself," or acceptance, only makes sense if there is a "self" to take possession. Part of the integrity of some forms of non-dualism is the refusal to admit the real existence of that self, a self capable of appropriating the gift. Buddhism indeed makes this the core of its religious method. This can be seen as a good thing because of the universal tendency to construct for ourselves a false or illusory self, capable of "grabbing" at reality, whereas the only ultimately *true* self is the one that is received from God in every moment, a function not of our own will or imagination but of the relationship that is experienced through faith in God's self-revelation. The purification of our human consciousness from the construction of an illusion is perfectly legitimate. Nor can the gift be recognized *as* gift unless there is present some degree of faith in a Giver. The integrity of Buddhist spirituality in particular lies not only in the refusal to invent a self, but in the associated refusal to invent a Giver who has not (yet) revealed himself to eyes of faith, and who would (if posited in the absence of faith) be entirely mythological. In other words, Buddhist meditation functions as a medicine against idolatry.

The danger, however, lies in a premature closure against the possibility that a Giver might still reveal himself—a kind of absolutization of the relativity of things. We see a tendency, not so much in the great texts and masters of non-dualism (the Upanisads, Gautama Buddha, Sankara), but in the commentators and followers, especially in some perennialists, a tendency in the name of metaphysical rigor to close ranks against the Christian Trinity. If the Trinity is to be understood according to the faith of the Church, it must be accepted as a first principle of metaphysical thought, which is precisely inconceivable without a Christian faith (and this is why it can appear absurd).

Yet it is not that Christians have nothing to learn. Westerners generally may be accused of neglecting the gift of being, and lacking an awareness at the basic level of that which is presented to

our consciousness. We take experience for granted and rush to do something with it, to appropriate it, make use of it, and in the case of the best of us, to turn it hastily back into a gift for God and neighbor. One of the things we may learn from the East—and it is the source of the aesthetic sensibility that we see in Chinese and Japanese landscape painting, or Haiku poetry, whose piercing beauty is surely a clear enough indication that something true is present—is to attend to the gift itself, to appreciate it as it emerges from the mountain mists in all its fragility and beauty. In the purity of that awareness of the *radiance of being*, purged of the constructions we normally place upon it, the doors of perception are cleansed and the things in the world may be seen as they are: infinite. This is not Christian faith, but a Christian need not deny its value, its attraction, or its integrity. And if grace perfects nature, this natural piety will find itself again within a consciousness transformed by supernatural faith.

The Christian's awareness of the world can be purified by contact with the Asian spirit that sees the fragility, delicacy, and relativity—the gratuitous “suchness”—of things (and which attains its most rigorous philosophical expression in non-dualism). On the other hand, this purification only intensifies the distinctively Christian experience of a world *beginning to exist* in Christ, which includes in its fullness the experience of gratuitous suchness. Thus we find ourselves, as Christians, not only able to appreciate the Asian experience, and be enriched by it, but able to understand it better in the light of our faith. Christian non-dualism is trinitarian. The world is dying and passing away, which proves its “insubstantiality.” But in Christ the world is rising from death and ascending to the Father, since God loves it. What looks like “insubstantiality” is really the fact that God's act of creation is only half completed (from our point of view, in time). In faith we see that it has an eternal destiny in God: that is, not in relation to God, but in God, whose otherwise unknowable interior has been revealed to us in the love of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

David Bentley Hart encapsulates the Christian vision of creation—that is, of trinitarian non-dualism in contrast to monistic non-dualism—in the following luminous passage.

All things—all the words of being—speak of God because they shine within his eternal Word. This Trinitarian distance is that “open” in which the tree springs up from the earth, the stars turn

in the sky, the sea swells, all living things are born and grow, angels raise their everlasting hymnody; because this is the true interval of difference, every metaphysics that does not grasp the analogy of being is a tower of Babel, attempting to mount up to the supreme principle rather than dwelling in and giving voice to the prodigality of the gift. It is the simple, infinite movement of analogy that constitutes everything that is as a being, oscillating between essence and existence and receiving both from beyond itself, and that makes everything already participate in the return of the gift, the offering of all things by the Spirit up into the Father's plenitude of being, in the Son. By the analogy, each thing comes to be as pure event, owning no substance, made free from nothingness by the unmerited grace of *being* other than God, participating in the mystery of God's power to receive all in giving all away—the mystery, that is, of the truth that God is love.³⁷

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³⁷David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 248–9.