

Form and Substance in the Religions

by
Frithjof Schuon

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For a religion to be considered intrinsically orthodox—extrinsic orthodoxy depending on specific formal factors that cannot be applied literally outside of the perspective to which they belong—it must be founded on a doctrine of the Absolute which, taken as a whole, is adequate;^[1] this religion must then advocate and achieve a spirituality that is proportioned to this doctrine, which is to say that it must comprise sanctity both in notion and in fact. Therefore, the religion must be of divine and not of philosophical origin, and consequently it must be the vessel for a sacramental or theurgic presence made manifest notably in miracles and also—though this may be surprising to some—in sacred art. Specific formal elements, such as apostolic personages and sacred events, are subordinated inasmuch as they are forms to the principal elements just mentioned; their meaning or value can therefore change from one religion to another—human diversity making such fluctuations inevitable—without this constituting any contradiction with regard to the essential criteriology that concerns both metaphysical truth and salvific efficacy, and secondarily—and on that basis—human stability; this stability can make demands that seem paradoxical at first sight given that it necessarily entails a certain compromise between earth and Heaven. Islam may appear markedly problematical from the Christian point of view, but it answers unquestionably to the overall description given above; it is intrinsically orthodox while differing extrinsically from the other orthodox monotheistic forms, and it is bound to differ most particularly from Christianity owing to a kind of regression—according to appearances—to an Abrahamic and as it were timeless equilibrium.

Every religion has a form and a substance; Islam spread like lightning by virtue of its substance; but its expansion was brought to a halt on account of its form. Substance possesses every right; it derives from the Absolute; form is relative; its rights are therefore limited.^[2] One cannot, in full knowledge of these facts, close one's eyes to this: first, there can be no absolute credibility on the plane of mere phenomena; and then, the literalist and exclusivist interpretation of religious messages is contradicted by their relative ineffectiveness, not of course within their own area of providential

expansion, but with regard to believers in other religions: “Had God truly wished to save the world,” a Chinese emperor replied to some missionaries, “why did He leave China in darkness for endless centuries?” The irrefutable logic of this argument in no wise proves that a given religious message is false, but it does prove that it is outwardly limited by its form, exactly in the same way that a particular geometric form cannot, by itself, take account of the possibilities of space. Quite evidently, such a principial argument has other aspects or other applications: for instance, had God truly wished to save the world by means of the Christian religion and by no other, how would one then explain that several centuries later, and when Christianity had not yet even established itself in Europe, He permitted another religion, both lightning-like and monolithic, to establish itself in those very regions where Christianity’s influence was meant to penetrate, thus closing once and for all, as with an iron bolt, any spread of Christianity toward the East. [3] Inversely, if the advent of Islam meant that the whole world was to embrace this religion, one could not explain why God would provide it with a human imagery that clashes with Christian sensibility and renders the West irremediably refractory to the Muhammadan message; if one objects that man is free—that consequently God grants him the freedom to create, in any place and at any time, a false religion—words then become meaningless: for an effective divine intervention had to take into consideration the freedom of man to oppose it; it had to do so at least in a measure that safeguards what is essential in this intervention and allows the message to be universally intelligible and heard by all men of good will. One might well respond that God’s will is unfathomable; however, if it is so and to such an extent, then religious argumentation itself loses much of its force. It is true that the relative failure of religious expansion has never troubled the minds of the faithful, but the question clearly could not have arisen in times when man’s outlook on the world was still limited and when, precisely, the halt to the expansion had not yet been experienced; and if the attitude of the faithful did not change later, once this halt became perceptible, this proves positively that religions offer intrinsic values that no terrestrial contingency can impair, and negatively that partisanship and lack of imagination are part of human nature and that in fact these two traits constitute a protective screen without which most men would be unable to live.

To convert from one religion to another is not only to change concepts and means; it is also to replace one sentimentality with another. To speak of sentimentality is to speak of limitation: the margin of sentiment that envelops each one of the religions proves in its fashion the limit of all exoterism and, as a result, the limits of exoteric claims. Inwardly or substantially, the claims a religion makes are absolute, but outwardly or formally, namely on the plane of human contingency, they are necessarily relative; if metaphysics did not suffice to prove this, the facts themselves would prove it.

Let us place ourselves now, by way of example, in the position of exoteric—hence totalitarian—Islam: at the beginning of the Muslim expansion, circumstances were such that Islam’s doctrinal claims compelled acceptance in an absolute manner; later, however, the relativity that is part of every formal expression was bound to appear. If Islam’s exoteric—that is, non-esoteric—claims were absolute and not relative, no man of good will could resist such claims or such a “categorical imperative”: any man who held out against it would be fundamentally bad, as was the case in the first days of

Islam, when one could not without perversity prefer magical idols to the pure God of Abraham. St John Damascene held a high office in the court of the Caliph in Damascus; [4] he did not, however, convert to Islam, any more than did St Francis of Assisi in Tunisia, or St Louis in Egypt, or St Gregory Palamas in Turkey.[5] Now this leads to one of two inescapable conclusions: either these saints were fundamentally bad men—an absurd supposition since they were saints—or Islam’s claims contain, as do those of any religion, an aspect of relativity; and this is metaphysically evident since every form has limits, and since each religion is outwardly a form, the quality of absoluteness belonging to it only in its intrinsic and supra-formal essence. Tradition relates that the Sufi Ibrahim bin Adam had as his occasional master a Christian hermit without either of them converting to the religion of the other; likewise, tradition relates that Sayyid Ali Hamadani, who played a decisive role in the conversion of Kashmir to Islam, knew Lalla Yogishwari, the naked *yoginî* of the valley, and that, in spite of the differences in religion, the two saints held the deepest respect for each other, to such a degree that one speaks of there being reciprocal influences.[6] All of this shows that the absoluteness of each religion lies in its inner dimension, and that the relativity of the outer dimension becomes necessarily apparent on contact with other great religions or with their saints.

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Christianity superimposes on man’s post-Edenic misery the saving person of Christ; Islam takes its point of support in the incorruptible nature of man—by virtue of which he cannot cease to be what he is—and saves man, not in conferring upon him a new nature, but in restoring him to his original perfection by means of the normal contents of his immutable nature. In Islam, the Message—the pure and absolute Truth—reflects upon the Messenger: he is perfect in the measure the Message is so, or since the Message is perfect. Christians are very sensitive—in a negative sense—to the extra-divine and socially human character in which the Prophet of Islam manifests himself, and find this character unpardonable in a founder of a religion that came after Christ; Muslims, for their part, are likely to see a certain unilateral character in the doctrine of the Gospels, and in fact share this feeling with Hindus and Buddhists. This is, quite clearly, a mere matter of form since every religion is by definition a totality; but it is precisely such formal particularities that separate religions and not the limitlessness implicit in their content.

“Judge not that ye be not judged”; “All they that take the sword shall perish by the sword”; “Whichsoever of you is without sin, let him cast the first stone”. These sayings become fully meaningful only when one takes into account their characteristic intent, namely that they address, not man as such, but passional man, or else the passional side in man: for it is only too obvious that it can and must happen that one man legitimately pass judgment on another— otherwise there would be no “discerning of spirits” and no justice; or that men may rightly draw their swords without thereby having to perish by the sword; or again, that men may cast stones with good reason and without having to ask themselves whether they are sinners or not, for it goes without saying that neither judges nor executioners are called upon to ask this question when

exercising their function. To contrast the laws of Sinai or those of the Koran and the *Sunnah* with those of Christ is not to establish a contradiction, but simply to speak of things that are different.

The same remark applies to the divergences in sexual moralities or conceptions of sexuality: whereas Semites, like most other Orientals, define marriage in terms of physical union and its religious conditioning, Christian theologians define it in terms of what comes “before” and “after” this union or what comes “beside” it. “Before”: by the pact which makes spouses of the betrothed; “after”: by the children who make parents and religious educators of the spouses; “beside”: by the fidelity of the spouses, which gives them the courage to face life while guaranteeing the social order. According to St Thomas Aquinas, marriage is made “holier *sine carnali commixtione*,” which is true from a certain ascetico-mystical point of view, but not when meant in an absolute fashion. Be that as it may, this opinion leaves no doubt as to Christianity’s fundamental tendency in these matters. And since this tendency rests on an aspect found in the nature of things, it goes without saying that it is to be encountered to one degree or another in every religious climate, including that of Islam, just as, conversely, sexual alchemy could not have been totally absent from the Christian esoterism of the Middle Ages, nor from Christianity as such.

Christianity makes a distinction between the carnal as such and the spiritual as such, and this is logical when maintaining this alternative in the hereafter: Paradise is by definition spiritual; therefore it excludes what is carnal. Islam, which makes a distinction between carnality in its crude state and a carnality that is sanctified, is equally logical in admitting in its Paradise the second possibility: to reproach the garden of the houris for being too sensual—according to this word’s current and earthly acceptance^[7]—is as unjust as to reproach the Christian Paradise for being too abstract. Christian symbolism takes account of the opposition between the cosmic degrees, whereas Islamic symbolism has in view their essential analogy; but the issue is the same.^[8] It would be an error to think that authentic Christianity is hostile to the body as such; ^[9] the concept of the “Word made flesh” and the glory of Mary’s virginal body forbid from the outset any possibility of Manichaeism.

A consideration that calls for mention here, since we are speaking of parallels and oppositions, is the following: the Koran has been reproached for bringing the Blessed Virgin into the Christian Trinity; we want to respond to this objection here, not only in order to explain what the Koranic intention is, but also by the same token to clarify the problem of the Trinity through a specific metaphysical accentuation. According to an interpretation which is not theological in fact but is so by right, and which finds support in the Scriptures, the “Father” is God as such, that is as metacosm; the “Son” is God insofar as He manifests Himself in the world, hence in the macrocosm; and the “Holy Spirit” is God insofar as He manifests Himself in the soul, hence in the microcosm. From another point of view, the macrocosm itself is the “Son”, and the microcosm itself—in its primordial perfection—is identified with the “Holy Spirit”; Jesus corresponds to the macrocosm, to the entire creation as divine manifestation, and Mary corresponds to the “pneumatic” microcosm; and let us recall in this respect the equation that has been

made sometimes between the Holy Spirit and the Divine Virgin, an equation that is linked, in some ancient texts, to the feminization of the Divine *Pneuma*.[\[10\]](#)

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There is no bridge from Christian theology to Islam just as there is no bridge from Jewish theology to Christianity. In order to make itself legitimate, Christianity must change planes; and this, precisely, is an unprecedented possibility which enters into none of the ordinary categories of Judaism. The great novelty of Christ, within the framework of the Judaic world, was therefore the possibility of an inward and hence supra-formal dimension: to worship God “in spirit and in truth”, and to do so even to the point of the possible abolishing of forms; as a result, the passage from Judaism to Christianity takes place, not on the plane of theology as Christian polemicists paradoxically imagine, but by a return to a mystery of inwardness, of holiness, of Divine Life, from which a new theology will spring forth. The weakness of Judaism, from the Christian point of view, lies in having to accept the assertion that one must descend from Jacob in order to belong to God, and that accomplishing prescribed actions is all that God asks of us; whether such an interpretation is exaggerated or not, Christ shattered the frontiers of ethnic Israel in order to replace it with a purely spiritual Israel; and he placed the love of God before the prescribed act, and in a certain manner replaced the one with the other, even while introducing in turn, and of necessity, new forms. Now this extra-theological passage from the “ancient Law” to the “new Law” quite logically forbids Christians from applying to Islam the narrowly theological argumentation which they do not accept on the part of the Jews; and it obliges them in principle to admit at least the possibility—in favor of Islam—of a legitimacy based on a new dimension that cannot be grasped word-for-word in their own theology.

We have seen that, from the point of view of Islam, the limitation of Christianity is in having to accept the notion, first, that man is totally corrupted by sin and, second, that none but Christ can deliver him from it; and, as we have likewise mentioned, Islam bases itself upon the axiom of the unalterable deformity of man: there is in him something which, participating as it does in the Absolute—otherwise man would not be man—permits salvation provided he possesses the necessary knowledge, and this is precisely what is provided by Revelation; what man stands in absolute need of is not therefore a specific Revealer, but Revelation as such, that is, Revelation considered from the point of view of its essential and invariable content. And this crucial point could also be brought up: what Islam blames Christianity for—but not the Gospels—is not that it should admit a trinity within God, but that it should place this trinity on the same level as the Divine Unity; not that it should attribute to God a ternary aspect, but that it should define God as triune, which amounts to saying either that the Absolute is triple or else that God is not the Absolute.[\[11\]](#)

A point which was mentioned above, and upon which we wish to insist further before proceeding, is the following: according to the usual Christian perspective,[\[12\]](#) nature in its entirety is corrupted and more or less accursed as a result of the fall of man and the resulting corruption. As a consequence, sensory pleasures are justified only in the

measure required for the physical preservation of the individual and of the human species. In the Islamic perspective, pleasure, if it remains within the limits allowed by nature and within the framework of religion, contains in addition a contemplative quality, a *barakah* or blessing, which is related to celestial archetypes[13] and which, therefore, is of benefit to virtue and contemplation;[14] the question that presents itself to Islam is that of knowing, not the worth or meaning of a given pleasure for a given individual, but the meaning of pleasures that are normal and noble within the measure of their possibilities, for man ennobled by faith and by the practices and virtues this faith requires. For Christians, the distinction between the “flesh” and the “spirit” presents itself readily as an irreducible alternative that is mitigated only on the aesthetic plane by the superficial and expeditious notion of “sensory consolations”; the Islamic perspective adds to this alternative, whose relative legitimacy it would never deny, two compensatory aspects: the spirit manifesting itself in the flesh, and the flesh manifesting itself in the spirit—an intertwined complementarity that recalls, once again, the *Yin-Yang* of Taoism. In summary, Christians insist on renunciation and sacrifice, Muslims on nobility and blessing; one might say also that Christians place the emphasis on the accidental container or on the level of manifestation, whereas Muslims place the emphasis on the essential content and the operative symbolism. Gnosis both embraces and transcends the two attitudes.[15]

Seen from the literal interpretation of Christian theology, Islam appears as a painful scandal;[16] and, from the perspective of the most impeccable rabbinical logic, the case of Christianity is analogous.[17] Each of these Messages must be understood from its own standpoint and according to its profound intention; a reasoning that stems from axioms that are foreign to these Messages cannot grasp their intrinsic truth. And this brings us to the following point: the phenomena which are characteristic of a given religion are not criteria proving that it alone is legitimate; they result from a Divine intention meant to offer a spiritual perspective and a way of salvation. In the Christian “system of salvation”—in the sense of the Buddhist term *upâya*—Christ “has” to be born from a Virgin, barring which he cannot appear as God manifested; and being Divine Manifestation—this expression constituting the very definition of Christianity as a “divine means” or *upâya*—Christ “has” to be unique and there is thus no salvation except through him; the universal and hence timeless role of the *Logos* coincides here, for obvious reasons, with the historical person of Jesus. In the case of Islam, the *upâya* is founded on the idea that there is nothing save the Unique Real, whether understood exoterically and separatively or esoterically and unitively, whether through transcendence or through immanence; consequently there is no “need” for the Prophet to be more than a man, and there is no reason why he should be unique, other Prophets having preceded him. In the case of Judaism, the *upâya* testifies to the possibility of a Pact between God and a consecrated society, hence one that is collectively sacerdotal, similar examples of which are offered by Brahmanism and Shintoism; therefore Israel “has” to hold the role as the only “chosen people”—since it embodies this fundamental possibility of a Heavenly Pact—even though the need of the monotheistic influence to spread could find a solution only through subsequent forms of Monotheism.[18]

Since it was not necessary for Muhammad to present himself—any more than Abraham and Moses—as the Manifestation of the Absolute, he could, like them, remain wholly Semitic in style, a style which attaches itself meticulously to human things, not scanting even the smallest; whereas in Christ—paradoxically and providentially—there is an element that brings him closer to the Aryan world, that is, a tendency in his nature toward the idealistic simplification of earthly contingencies.^[19] The fact that Christ is Manifestation of the Absolute has suggested to Westerners—with the inducement of Greco-Roman cosmolatry—that the Absolute is of this world; and this is what is expressly denied by Islam, which clothes everything terrestrial with a maximum of relativity—fire does not burn, “God alone” makes it burn, and so on. This same fact has contributed through many a twist and turn, and by being combined much later with a Jewish messianism become irreligious, to the pursuit of a horde of earthly pseudo-absolutes that can never be realized and are of an increasingly explosive character. The fact that Islam is accused of naiveté, sterility, and inertia betrays an error in outlook, the reason for which is to be found in a faith in the absoluteness of earthly values and human enterprises; but when seen objectively and positively, the traits which provoke these reproaches indicate an intention of Biblical equilibrium before the real and sole Absolute. For Muslims, time is a rotation round a motionless center, and it would even be reversible “if God so willed it”; history is of interest only insofar as it turns back toward the Origin or, on the other hand, sweeps on toward the “Last Day”. For God is “the First and the Last”.

Islam seeks to combine the sense of the Absolute with the quality of Equilibrium: the idea of the Absolute determining Equilibrium, and the realization of Equilibrium in view of the Absolute. This Equilibrium includes all that we are, thus collective man as well as individual man; with respect to the Absolute, we are entitled as men to all that is normal for humans, without this right excluding particular vocations of withdrawal. Christianity, for its part, has a dramatic quality about it: it has the sense of the Sublime rather than that of the Absolute, and the sense of Sacrifice rather than that of Equilibrium; on the basis of this second aspect, it extends a vocation that is specifically ascetic to a whole society—in the Latin Church more particularly—which is certainly its right according to its particular *upâya*, but which has nonetheless provoked historical disruptions of equilibrium which have been both fatal and providential.^[20]

From the point of view of Muslims, Christians have “Christified” God: since the advent of Christ, God can no longer be conceived of or worshiped apart from the God-man, so that whoever conceives of God in a pre-Christian way is accused of not knowing God; to worship God apart from Jesus—or not to admit that Jesus is God—is to be the enemy of Jesus, and so the enemy of God, even if one combines the worship of the One God with love of Jesus and of Mary, as indeed Muslims do. In short, Muslims see Christians as having, so to speak, “confiscated” the worship of God for the sake of the exclusive and absolute worship of a specific Divine Manifestation, to the point of disowning all preceding religions, whereas Islam, on the contrary, recognizes the validity of pre-Christian monotheistic cults, while adopting in its turn an exclusive attitude as far as the last cycle of humanity is concerned, to which it corresponds. And this is important: the dazzling evidence of the “rights” of the Absolute—thus of God-as-Unity—seems to

necessitate a distinctly human character in the Muhammadan manifestation, in the sense that this evidence is sufficient unto itself and must be understood as being sufficient, so that a super-human messenger would not add anything to it.

By starting from the idea that each religion is founded on a Revelation emanating from the sole and same Infinite Consciousness, or from the same Celestial Will of attraction and equilibrium, one can specify—as we have done more than once—that Christianity is founded on the Saving Marvel of God, and Islam, on the saving Truth: that is to say, from the Christian point of view—very summarily speaking—the virgin birth of Jesus proves that the Christian religion alone is true,^[21] whereas from the Muslim point of view, this same miracle simply proves that the Divine Power had a sufficient reason for producing it, but not that it is—or ever could be—the sole criterion of Divine Authority or the sole guarantor of Absolute Truth and could thus take precedence over a given aspect of metaphysical Evidence. In short, Islam seeks to avoid the impression that this Truth or this Evidence results from the superhuman nature of its bearer:^[22] it is as though God were “jealous”—in the Biblical and metaphorical meaning of the word—of His earthly vicars, and mindful of manifesting, or recalling, His absolute pre-eminence and His indivisible essentiality. This “jealousy” is strictly logical or ontological, for it is based on the nature of things—from which nothing can escape in the end—as well as on Mercy, since Divine Truth possesses essentially a saving quality that compensates in a certain sense for its lofty or majestic character. This saving quality of Pure Truth is the great thesis of Islam, along with that of the Unity of God.

Muslims *a priori* raise the question of knowing, not whether Jesus is God, but whether God can make Himself man in the sense in which Christians understand this; if one envisages God as Muslims do, that is to say from the point of view of absoluteness, God as such cannot become man because the Absolute as such cannot become contingent. In the Trinitarian doctrine, God can become man because Manifestation is already anticipated in the Principle, which is considered in terms that are already relative; the same applies to the Hindu doctrine of the *Avatâras*, but not to that of *Âtmâ* insofar as It transcends and excludes *Mâyâ*. When Manifestation is found to be prefigured in the Principle, then it is precisely because the Principle is not considered with regard to its absoluteness; now the reason for the existence of Islam is that it should place dogmatic stress on this aspect of absoluteness and thus be the message of the essence and the timeless. This truth had to take form in the monotheistic cycle, whatever might be the legitimacy and merits of other equally possible perspectives.

Dogmatically speaking, the divergence between Christianity and Islam is irreducible; but metaphysically and mystically, it is no more than relative, just as two points that are opposite each other become complementary in virtue of the circle upon which they are situated and which coordinates and unifies them once it is perceived. One should never lose sight of the fact that dogmas are key-coagulations of supra-formal light; to acknowledge a coagulation is to acknowledge a form and hence a limitation and exclusion. The Spirit can be manifested, but It cannot be enclosed; *Spiritus autem ubi vult spirat*.

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Certain clarifications about Sufism would seem opportune at this point. It has been claimed, with rather surprising assurance, that original Sufism knew only fear; that the Sufism of love came later, and that of gnosis later still; and this succession has inevitably been described as an evolution whose phases have been attributed to foreign influences. But this unfolding in three phases corresponds in fact to a normal cyclical projection of the spiritual virtualities contained in Islam; what in principle is of the highest order must manifest itself—from the point of view of the general accentuation—in the last instance, and this obviously can give the illusion of progress if one does not understand the deeper reasons for the phenomenon, and also if one ignores that the three elements—fear, love, knowledge—necessarily existed from the beginning and above all in the very person of the Prophet, as is attested in the Koran and the *Sunnah*; otherwise they could not have flowered later in specific forms of doctrine and method.

One finds here two parallel and compensatory movements: on the one hand, the collectivity declines as it moves further away from the origin; but on the other hand, there are successive flowerings in the ascending order just described, though clearly without an overall increase in spirituality, in the sense that values implicit at the origin deploy themselves in the doctrinal domain and become explicit so that one could say that there is a sort of compensatory progressive unfolding that occurs within the very framework of the general decay. This is a phenomenon that can be observed in all religious cycles, notably also in that of Buddhism;[\[23\]](#) and this is why, in the heart of each religion, “renewers” (*mujaddid*) appear, who are “prophets” in a derivative and secondary sense.[\[24\]](#) In Islam, Rabiah Adawiyah, Dhun-Nun al-Misri, Niffari, Ghazzali, Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, Ibn Arabi, the Imam Shadhili, and Rumi are among their number.

A paradoxical reason for this phenomenon is that the blossoming forth of the perspective of love presupposes a human milieu molded by the perspective of fear,[\[25\]](#) and the emergence of the perspective of gnosis presupposes a milieu steeped in that of love. This is to say that a religion must have the time to form its humanity so that it can project, with the benefit of this ambiance, different types of spiritual accentuations; the case is altogether the same for sacred art or for liturgy in general.

The Sufi ternary of “fear” (*makhâfah*), “love” (*mahabbah*), and “knowledge” (*ma’rifah*) is manifested, on the scale of integral Monotheism, in the forms of the three Semitic religions respectively, each one comprising in its turn and in its way, with either greater or less emphasis, the three modes under discussion. Christianity begins with the rough Desert Fathers; it flowers again more gently in the Middle Ages under the sign of the Virgin-Mother, and gives rise afterwards, though in a rather precarious way since the whole emphasis is placed on charity, to manifestations of gnosis, which are discernible, in varying degrees, particularly among the Rhineland mystics and in scholasticism, not omitting the German theosophists—in a kind of traditional exile—and other more or less isolated groups.

Nor, in Judaism, could the period of the Psalms and of the Song of Songs be that of the Pentateuch, and the Cabalists could not manifest or flower before the Middle Ages.[\[26\]](#) And it should be remembered in this context that Judaism, which emphasizes the

relationship between God and Israel, is on the whole a perspective of faith and fear; the fear of God is the framework for the perspectives of love and knowledge, neither of which could be absent,^[27] love being closely bound here to hope.

For its part, Christianity places the emphasis not *a priori* on the Divine Nature, but on the Divine and redemptive Manifestation; it is a perspective of love which, in its own fashion, provides the framework for the perspective of fear and that of gnosis. Finally, Islam places emphasis on the Divine Unity and on the human consequences it entails; it represents a perspective of faith and knowledge, with fear and love depending in this case on faith.^[28] We mention these things here, not in order to define once again what the religious perspectives are, but to underline the fact that they contain each other.

NOTES

[1] Whether it is conceived *a priori* in a mode that is personal or impersonal, theistic or nirvanic.

[2] Heresy is a form severed from its substance, hence its illegitimacy, whereas wisdom on the contrary is substance considered independently of forms, hence its universality and its imprescriptible nature. The success of heresy is due, not to an inner worth which is in fact largely absent, but to external and more or less negative causes, unless the determining factor in a given setting is a specific traditional element that has remained intact.

[3] When speaking of Muslims, St Bernard said that God “will scatter the princes of darkness” and that “the swords of the brave will soon complete the extermination of the last of their satellites” (*Praise of the New Militia*, 5). He was compelled finally to admit that “the children of the Church and all those who bear the name Christian lie fallen in the desert, victims of battles and of famine,” and that “the leaders of the expedition quarrel among themselves”; and that “the judgment God has just pronounced upon us is such an abyss of mystery that to find in it no occasion for scandal is, in our eyes, already sanctity and beatitude” (*Considerations* 2:1). Sufis recall that, beyond all oppositions, the diversity of Revelations are the rays of the same Divine Sun: “The man of God,” Rumi sings in his *Dîwân*, “is beyond infidelity and religion.... I have looked into my own heart: it is there that I beheld Him (*Allâh*); He was not to be found elsewhere... I am neither Christian, nor Jew, nor Parsee, nor Muslim; I am neither of the East nor of the West, neither of the land nor of the sea.... I have put duality aside, I beheld that the two worlds are but one; One alone I seek, One alone I know, One alone I see, One alone I call.”

[4] This is where the saint wrote and published, with the caliph’s consent, his famous treatise in defense of images, which had been prohibited by the iconoclast Emperor Leo III.

[5] While a prisoner of the Turks for a year, St Gregory carried on friendly discussions with the Emir's son and yet did not convert, nor did the Turkish prince become a Christian.

[6] In our day, Kashmir Muslims still venerate Lalla, the dancing Shaivite, as they would a saint of Islam, and side by side with Sayyid Ali; Hindus share in this dual cult. The doctrine of this woman saint is condensed in one of her songs: "My guru gave me but a single precept. He told me: from without enter thou into thy most inward part. This for me became a rule: and this is why, naked, I dance" (*Lalla Vakyanī*, 94).

[7] Traditional polygamy depersonalizes woman in view of Femininity as such, the Divine *Rahmah*. But this polygamy, possessing a contemplative foundation, can also, as in the case of David, be combined with the monogamous perspective: Bathsheba was the one and only Wife given that, precisely, she "personified" the "impersonal" Femininity.

[8] There is opposition between the body and the soul, or between earth and heaven, but not in the case of Enoch, Elijah, Jesus, and Mary, who ascended bodily into the celestial world; in the same way, the resurrection of the body manifests or actualizes a reality that abolishes this opposition. Meister Eckhart rightly specifies that in ascending to heaven these holy bodies were reduced to their essence, which in no wise contradicts the idea of bodily ascension.

[9] St John Climacus relates that St Nonos, when baptizing St Pelagia who had entered the pool naked, "having seen a person of great beauty began greatly to praise the Creator, and was so transported in the love of God through this contemplation that he wept"; and he adds: "Is it not extraordinary to see that what is the cause of a fall for others becomes, for this man, a reward beyond the bounds of nature? He who through his efforts attains to the same sentiments in similar circumstances is already resuscitated incorrupt before the general resurrection. The same may be said of melodies, either sacred or profane: those who love God are led by them to divine joy and love and are moved even to tears" (*The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 15).

[10] The Hebrew word *Ruach*, "Spirit," is feminine. And let us also point out that one finds in the Gospel of the Hebrews the expression "My Mother the Holy Spirit" (*Mater mou to Hagion Pneuma*)—Homily 15.

[11] It is true that God as creator, revealer, and savior is not to be identified with the Absolute as such; it is likewise true that God in Himself, in the full depth of His reality, is not to be reduced to the creative Function.

[12] A traditional perspective can never be equated with a total limitation; this is *a priori* evident and is proven by numerous examples.

[13] In Paradise: "As often as they are regaled with food of the fruit thereof, they say: This is what was given us aforetime [= on earth].... There for them are pure companions [= free from earthly stains]" (*Surah Al-Baqarah* ["The Cow"], 25).

[14] The hedonism of the Vishnuite school of Vallabha seems to be a deviation of this perspective. As for Greek hedonism, that of an Aristippus or an Epicurus, it rests on a philosophy of man and not on the metaphysical nature of sensations; nonetheless, at its origin, it was a measured and serene hedonism, not gross as is the case with the 18th century materialists.

[15] In fact, both attitudes are encountered in all traditional spirituality.

[16] Nonetheless, in favor of Islam, there is the following argument adduced by Massignon: “And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great...and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed” (Gen. 12:2-3). This divine promise encompasses all of the descendants of Abraham, including the Arabs, thus including Islam as well, all the more so since it is Islam and Christianity—not Judaism—which reach out to “all the families of the earth”; in other words, a false religion could not be covered by the promises made by God to Abraham.

[17] The Testimony that God bore on Sinai concerning His own nature was not a half-truth; it was an affirmation—of unsurpassable gravity—concerning the unicity and indivisibility of the Absolute. Admittedly, this Testimony does not mean that there is not a mystery in God such as the Trinity; but it means that on the level on which Unity affirms Itself, there is nothing other than It and that, therefore, there is nothing that can be added to It.

[18] For analogous reasons—or even, in a certain sense, for the same reason—Buddhism had to leave the closed world of Brahmanism.

[19] We hope that our way of expressing things gives a sufficiently clear account of our intentions, for we are obliged to condense matters with a few key words that may strike some as “ill-sounding”. Thus, on the basis of this caveat, we shall say that Christ, who was destined to be an “Aryan god”, has himself, by way of anticipation, a certain Aryan quality, which shows itself in his independence—seemingly “Greek” or “Hindu”—toward forms; and likewise the Buddha, destined to be a “Mongol god”, has something that is providentially Mongol apparent in the horizontal monotony and the static depth of his manifestation. As for the “independence” of the Aryan spirit, it must be specified that this can be a quality or a defect, depending on the case, exactly as Semitic formalism can be; all told the whole question is relative, and each thing must be put in its proper place.

[20] European humanity has something promethean and tragic about it; as a consequence, it needed a religion that could surpass and sublimate the dramatic nature of the Greek and Germanic gods and heroes. Moreover, the creative genius of Europeans implies a need to “burn what one has worshiped”, and from this comes a prodigious propensity for repudiation and change; the Renaissance offers the plainest proof and the most astonishing example of this, not to mention what is taking place in our own times and on a level that is incomparably graver. What is at stake is always “Man”, but with totally different accentuations.

[21] The reasoning implicit in this affirmation is really the following: the Vedantin doctrine is false since Christ, who is born of a virgin, did not teach it, and since Badarayana, who taught it, is not born of a virgin. It must in any case be added, on the one hand, that Vedantin postulates are sporadically encountered in Christian metaphysics and mysticism and, on the other, that the truth of such and such an Aristotelian or Platonic thesis has brought Christians who understand it to Christianize it, which amounts to saying that all truth derives from the Eternal Word.

[22] It goes without saying that it is not a question here of challenging the soundness of the Christian *upâya* as such, but of taking account of an aspect, or underlying argument, of the Islamic phenomenon, which taken as a whole appears as a corrective that re-establishes a certain equilibrium with respect to voluntaristic Christocentrism.

[23] Five hundred years after the Buddha, the tradition was in danger, if not of extinction, at least of becoming increasingly reduced to a monastic community with no possibility of world-wide diffusion; all efforts converged upon the *Pratyeka-buddha*, the silent and solitary contemplative. It was then that the *Mahâyâna* intervened with its ideal of the *Bodhisattva*, the personification not only of heroic detachment but also of active compassion. Mention can be made in this context that Buddhist “pity” means that total Knowledge essentially implies, not a specific outward activity, of course, but participatory consciousness in a dimension of Being, namely, Beauty or Benevolence; and this is precisely an aspect of the Divine Essence, according to Ibn Arabi.

[24] It would be a rather poor joke to identify them with “reformers”, whose function is exactly the reverse. We have heard it said that if St Francis had not come, Christ would have had to return, a symbolic formulation that suggests very clearly what kind of function is at issue here.

[25] For reasons already alluded to, one would have no grounds to object here that many of the *ahâdîth* treat of Love and that it could not have been absent at the beginning of Islam. Love does not enter explicitly at the origin into the postulates of Sufism, which is based—as mentioned earlier—upon active “conversion” (*tawbah*) and upon journeying through the “stations” (*maqâmât*). “Islam is the religion of Love”, said Ibn Arabi: as to the results yes, but not as regards the general premises; yes with respect to the essence but not with respect to the methodical postulates. The “Wine” (*khamr*) and the “Night” (*Laylah*), or contemplative drunkenness and quasi-divine inward femininity, enter into play only in esoterism.

[26] Philo of Alexandria was a Platonist, not a Cabalist.

[27] Such near-definitions are both exact and approximate, for it is hardly possible to do justice to all necessary shades of meaning in so few words.

[28] Indeed, many *ahâdîth* see in the love of God and in the fear of sin or of the world criteria of a sincere faith which as such is always stressed. One may note this saying of Hassan al-Basri, an eminent spokesman for nascent Sufism: “He who knows God, loves Him, and he who knows the world, turns away from it.”