

The Sacred and the Post-Modern: An Impossible Convergence

By Patrick Laude

Le sacré est la projection du Centre céleste dans la périphérie cosmique": "The sacred is the projection of the celestial Center into the cosmic periphery."¹ These words by Frithjof Schuon beautifully suggest what the sacred has represented for mankind throughout the ages, and across traditional civilizations. They remind us, first of all, that the world of the sacred is a centered world. The concept of "center," which is so profoundly at odds with contemporary trends and sensibilities, must be taken herein more symbolically than literally. This symbolic understanding does not, however, weaken in the least the significance of the term, quite the contrary, since the symbol, in the traditional view, is not essentially different from that which it symbolizes; in other words, the literal center of geometry is indeed a symbol of the metaphysical Center. Geometrically, the notion of center refers to the middle point of a circle, or a sphere, that is equidistant to all points of its periphery. It refers also, by extension, to the point of origin and direction of an action, a thinking process or a volitional impulse, or to its focal point. All of these definitions apply a *fortiori* to the capitalized Center of the universe. Thus, the Divine or Dharmic Center is evidently the origin, metaphysically and cosmologically, of the whole, and it is also, spiritually, the focus of concentration of human inner and outer endeavors in the great civilizations of the sacred. When referring to the Origin, the latter must not, moreover, be understood primarily in temporal terms, but also and above all metaphysically, in the sense that everything proceeds from the Source, in the beginning and at all times since the beginning is at all

¹ From the *Divine to the Human*, Bloomington, World Wisdom, 2013, p. 87.

times. As for the Principle as Center of attention of human endeavors it is the goal and ultimate meaning of existence, and the object of the highest aspirations of traditional mankind. The geometric meaning of the center as equidistant to the all points of the periphery provides us, in addition, with an intimation that the Principle of the universe is at the middle point of universal existence, and therefore as close to any existent as to another. As the middle point of manifestation it is the real *axis mundi*, since everything proceeds from it; but it is also “equidistant” to all points of the periphery of existence in the sense that its presence permeates everything, and is indeed the very essence of everything. Meister Eckhart has a most suggestive way to put this when he writes, in conclusion to one of his sermons: “Let us pray to God... that we may gain the truth and enjoy it eternally, there where the highest angel, the fly and the soul are equal.”² This “there” is the metaphysical Center where everything is unified and equalized.

It follows from our previous considerations that inasmuch as it is a projection of the Center the sacred does participate in the Center, while insofar as this projection lies within the periphery, it is an integrating part of the latter. Thus, the sacred is akin to what Islamic gnosis calls a *barzakh*, a point of contact between two domains of reality that it both connects and differentiates from each other. In other words, the sacred is immanent while highlighting transcendence and partaking mysteriously in the latter; it is, in Gilbert Durand’s suggestive words, akin to the symbol as the “epiphany of a mystery,” being thereby awesome and arresting. Like Moses’ burning bush it implies the kind of tremendous qualitative difference that Mircea Eliade has convincingly explored through his study of sacred space and sacred time in his classic *The Sacred and the Profane*. The sacred is a threshold of transcendence.³

As the major ideological underpinning of modernity, scientism ignores or rejects the very notions of an ontological center and an ontological

² Meister Eckhart, *The Classics of Western Spirituality*, Mahwah, New Jersey, Paulist Press, 1981, p. 200.

³ “For religious man, space is not homogeneous; he experiences interruptions, breaks in it; some parts of space are qualitatively different from others. “Draw not nigh hither,” says the Lord to Moses; “put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground” (Exodus, 3, 5). There is, then, a sacred space, and hence a strong, significant space; there are other spaces that are not sacred and so are without structure or consistency, amorphous.” Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, Harcourt, Brace and World, New York, 1959, p. 20.

periphery, since its object of inquiry, the physical universe, is qualitatively homogeneous and its experimental outlook excludes transcendence. There is, however, in the modern scientific perspective a residue of epistemological center in so far as the observation and experimentation that lie at the foundation of any generalization and deduction of laws presuppose a scientific subject that is integral to the scientific enterprise. So, in a sense, modernity does not as much negate the notion of a center as it flattens and relativizes it. It makes of the ontological periphery, i.e. the material crust of the universe, an epistemological center of focus and inquiry, and of the ontological center, i.e. the Divine realm, an insubstantial and abstract periphery in the sense of a kind of psychic epiphenomenon. It has therefore contributed to the formation of a mentality for which the abstract is concrete and the concrete abstract, to paraphrase Schuon in his essay “Abuses of the notions of the concrete and the abstract.”⁴ Whereas the principle of unity, God, is indeed the only “concrete” reality that holds the universe together, what is commonly considered as the concrete, that is the physical envelope of the universe, is but an “abstraction” in the sense of something abstracted or separated from its metaphysical source and context. In the objective domain, the scientific mentality is therefore characterized by a kind of shift from the core to the periphery in the way of a reversal of the center. From a subjective standpoint, modernity does not utterly evacuate the notion of a center either. The modern subjective center is the individual self, and this “central” agency remains endowed with identity and rationality. Thus, by and large modern scientism and modern individualism subvert, displace and relativize the notion of the center, but they do not eliminate it altogether. It could be said that, with them, a center, *any* center, replaces the Center.

Postmodern discourse goes much further: it does not only relativize the center but denies its very possibility. If modernity treats rationality and individuality as centers, post-modern deconstructionist philosophers have called into question the primacy of reason as well as that of the human self. It is precisely this postmodern critique of the notions that lie at the very core of modernity that have led some traditional commentators to speculate on the benefits of post-modern trends. The

⁴ *Logic and Transcendence: A New Translation with Selected Letters*, James Cutsinger (Editor), World Wisdom, 2009, p. 16.

Christian theological sensibilities referred to as Radical Orthodoxy have been particularly representative of such readings. In their view, postmodernity has had the benefit of calling into question the modern presumption of truth and meaning, and the epistemological arrogance that has stemmed from it. One of the main exponents of Radical Orthodoxy, John Milbank, celebrates the end of modernity as a "single system of truth based on universal reason, which tells us what reality is like"⁵ In this perspective, the postmodern opens up the field of understanding of truth by freeing the ground from the hurdles and boundaries of modern rational and scientific knowledge. There lies a sense of fluidity to offer new avenues of expression to theology. In a sense this post-modern mood may also be deemed to derive, albeit abusively, from a specifically Christian heritage of suspicion vis-à-vis the limitations of the "wisdom according to the flesh." We propose to show, however, that this subversion of modernity is also, more fundamentally, undermining the very notion of *adaequatio* that presided over the traditional outlook, and connected the ontological and the epistemological. Thus, besides its being weary and skeptical of the so-called grand narratives and ideologies of modernity the postmodern remains characteristic of inadequacy, ex-centricity, chaos, and panic, in a way that questions the very underpinnings of any Logos-centered discourse on Reality. To begin with, post-modern meaning is unstable and even undecidable. Thus, one of the foremost theorists of deconstruction, Jacques Derrida, has coined a new word to allude to this intellectual mood: the French word '*différance*' by contrast with the usual *différence*. Difference (*différence*) refers to a definite distinction, while *différance* (which could be partially rendered by "differing") is an unending process in which words and concepts are ever 'differed' by those that complement them, follow them, or accompany them. By contrast, the traditional, Platonist, understanding of difference was connected to a sense of balance, harmony, and peace. There is perhaps no clearer and more beautiful expression of this view of difference as in Ulysses' speech on degree

⁵ "Postmodern critical Augustinianism", Routledge, London and New York, 2009, *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader*, p.49.

in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*.⁶ In this passage, the notion of degree, a synonym of hierarchical difference, is considered to be the

⁶ The heavens themselves, the planets and this centre
Observe degree, priority and place,
Insisture, course, proportion, season, form,
Office and custom, in all line of order;
And therefore is the glorious planet Sol
In noble eminence enthroned and sphered
Amidst the other; whose medicinable eye
Corrects the ill aspects of planets evil,
And posts, like the commandment of a king,
Sans cheque to good and bad: but when the planets
In evil mixture to disorder wander,
What plagues and what portents! what mutiny!
What raging of the sea! shaking of earth!
Commotion in the winds! frights, changes, horrors,
Divert and crack, rend and deracinate
The unity and married calm of states
Quite from their fixure! O, when degree is shaken,
Which is the ladder to all high designs,
Then enterprise is sick! How could communities,
Degrees in schools and brotherhoods in cities,
Peaceful commerce from dividable shores,
The primogenitive and due of birth,
Prerogative of age, crowns, sceptres, laurels,
But by degree, stand in authentic place?
Take but degree away, untune that string,
And, hark, what discord follows! each thing meets
In mere oppugnancy: the bounded waters
Should lift their bosoms higher than the shores
And make a sop of all this solid globe:
Strength should be lord of imbecility,
And the rude son should strike his father dead:
Force should be right; or rather, right and wrong,
Between whose endless jar justice resides,
Should lose their names, and so should justice too.
Then every thing includes itself in power,
Power into will, will into appetite;
And appetite, an universal wolf,
So doubly seconded with will and power,
Must make perforce an universal prey,
And last eat up himself. Great Agamemnon,
This chaos, when degree is suffocate,
Follows the choking.
And this neglect of degree it is
That by a pace goes backward, with a purpose
It hath to climb. The general's disdain'd
(footnote 6 continued on next page)

epitome of civilizational protection against "mere oppugnancy." This is ontologically and epistemologically antithetical to the semiotic "discord" inherent to the production of meaning in postmodern discourse, and its correlative rejection of discerning hierarchies. Thus Jacques Derrida confesses his preference for words that have double meanings and "... situate perhaps better than others the places where discourse cannot dominate, judge, decide anymore: between the positive and the negative, the good and the bad, the true and the false."⁷ What is at stake, for Derrida, is the welcome impossibility of discerning, or discriminating. What he prizes in the ambiguities of language is the exclusion of any imposition of coherence and homogeneity in discourse. Therefore, the very idea of ontological and epistemological correspondence, which was at the root of the traditional concept of truth as *adaequatio rei et intellectus*, is being denied or evicted as absolutist, if not totalitarian. In parallel, essentialization, the reduction to essences, has from a Platonic virtue become a postmodern vice. Here, to essentialize means to betray the ever differing accident of postmodern experience, and fix it into oppressive patterns of reason and meaning. As a result, to make use of Soroush's categories, post-modern causes have been substituted to modern reasons,⁸ which amounts to saying that knowing is reduced to circumstantial factors instead of intelligible *adaequatio*. Knowledge is accidental and incidental.

Understood as an incidental process, the postmodern meaning is ever in the making, and it actually even escapes the control of the one who speaks or writes. It is as if the "father" of the utterance, the human subject,

(footnote 6 continued)

By him one step below, he by the next,
That next by him beneath; so every step,
Examined by the first pace that is sick
Of his superior, grows to an envious fever
Of pale and bloodless emulation." (Act I, Scene 3)

⁷ "Des mots de ce type situent peut-être mieux que d'autres les lieux où le discours ne peut plus dominer, juger, décider: entre le positif et le négatif, le bon et le mauvais, le vrai et le faux." Derrida, *Lettre à un ami japonais*, Editions Galilée, 1987, p. 14.

⁸ "Relativism begins by assuming that the role played by reasons in the realm of knowledge is negligible, or occasionally even zero; the genesis of knowledge, its essence and content are all attributed to things that are of the nature of factors or causes. Reasons themselves are eventually reduced to causes, such that reasons are eliminated altogether. This is the full and ultimate relativist position." Abdulkarim Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, Brill, Leiden and Boston, 2009, p. 158.

vanishes in and through the very production of his offspring. The text is an orphan, and this status evokes the postmodern deconstruction of the subject. During the sixties and the seventies the theme of the "death of man"—attributed to Michel Foucault—already announced the critique of rationalist and progressive humanism. For Foucault, man as a universal, this "invention of the nineteenth century", could be compared to foam on the surface of the "formal systems" of meaning studied by the new social sciences.⁹ The independence of structures and signs meant the disappearance of human universality as well as that of the autonomous subject. In the same postmodern mood, Julia Kristeva, commenting on the postmodern understanding of poetry, went so far as to forge the term "zerological subject": "the subject disappears (...) when the relationship of the sign to what it denotes is reduced to zero."¹⁰ Since there is no principle of correspondence and adequacy between signs and what they refer to there is no signifying subjective principle either, any coherent self is dissolved. We will return to the relationship of such postmodern themes with the Buddhist doctrine of no-self.

As we have already intimated, the postmodern mind is entirely focused on making sense of an ever differing "sense", while dismissing the "sense of being." For a Derrida, we are engaged in a constant process of producing "sense," and meaning is just its provisional trace or sedimentation. In French, the form used to refer to this process is that of a reflexive verb, *ça se déconstruit*,¹¹ often translated into English by a passive voice: "that is deconstructed." Significantly the French idiomatic expression can be read as both passive and active and substitutes an indefinite *ça* to any given subject. Derrida gleefully highlights that in the "*ça se déconstruit*", the *se* is not to be understood as a reflexive, which would imply a stable subject. Rather, the *se* "bears the whole enigma,"¹² that of a process that can never be turned into a subject or an object of meaning. This enigmatic aspect of deconstruction makes it an elusive

⁹ Cf. *Order of Things*, Routledge, 2002, pp. 330-371.

¹⁰ Julia Kristeva, 'Poésie et négativité', in: *L'Homme* 8 [1968] no. 2, p. 60.

¹¹ "Deconstruction does not go back to a subject, a self or a consciousness: it deconstructs itself, it is in the process of deconstruction." "*La déconstruction ne revient pas à un sujet, à un moi ou à une conscience: ça se déconstruit, c'est en déconstruction.*" *Psyché, Invention de l'autre*, Volume 2, Galilée, 2003, p. 12.

¹² "The *se* of *se déconstruire*, which is not the reflexivity of a self or a consciousness, bears the whole enigma" "*Et le "se" du "se déconstruire", qui n'est pas la réflexivité d'un moi ou d'une conscience, porte toute l'énigme.*" "Lettre à un ami japonais", p. 10.

reality, if this word may be used in such a context. Accordingly, the modes of utterance favored by postmodern deconstructionism formally echo the *koan*, or perplexing puns and paradoxes, of Zen Buddhism and mysticism. Thus, Derrida's destabilizing questions and statements like "what deconstruction is not? Everything in fact. What deconstruction is? Nothing in fact;" or else, "*différance*", which is "nothing", "differs from itself, defers itself and writes itself as *différance*."¹³ Deconstruction is "other than everything", a way to convey that deconstruction is not reducible to a thing among others, that it cannot be reified, turned into a thing. It is the "almost nothing" that makes everything already differ from itself. In a sense, like in Zen, the goal is to let go of the limiting hold of the rational mind. However, what is a key of awakening to an immanent totality of Being and Meaning in Zen *koan*, is none other than a radical elimination of the latter in postmodern deconstruction. The subtleties, intricacies and puzzling puns of deconstruction point to one thing, besides and beyond the preciousness of a pseudo-esoteric language: postmodern deconstruction is an utter rejection of the idea of "presence to being" and "presence of being." And it is this rejection or dismissal that lies at the core of our discussion of the sacred. The postmodern is as anti-metaphysical as it is anti-presential. Contrasting Derridean deconstruction with the Heideggerian meditation on Being Spivak states that "whereas Heidegger's Being refers to an 'inarticulable presence', Derrida's concept of the trace indicates rather 'the absence of a presence, an always already absent present.'¹⁴ And Ian Almond emphasizes further that there is "no elusive Something, forever leaving in its wake a succession of forms, but simply an 'active', moving discord of different forces."¹⁵ We are therefore very far indeed from the mystical undoing of human language as an allusion to an ineffable presence of the sacred. Postmodern deconstruction is in fact the most radical evacuation of the sacred. In a sacred understanding presence is first, it is given, or found (*wujūd*) and the sign is none other than a sacred symbol of presence. In the postmodern outlook, the sign, the utterance is first, it is the only given, and the presence of meaning is always differed and open-ended. Traditional metaphysics, by contrast, is about perceiving and

¹³ *Writing and Difference*, University of Chicago, 1978, p. 75.

¹⁴ Preface to *Of Grammatology*, Johns Hopkins, 1997, p. xviii.

¹⁵ Almond, Ian, *Sufism and Deconstruction*, Routledge, p. 36 and p. 131.

welcoming being. In Seyyed Hossein Nasr's words: "...true awareness created through the disciplining of the intellect and through spiritual vision allows the perceiver to see everything for what it really is: namely, the very act of existence, each of whose instances appears as a quiddity to which existence is added; whereas in reality it is only a particular act of existence from the limitations of which the quiddity is abstracted."¹⁶ Thus, metaphysically the presential act of being is first and foremost.

In sharp contrast to the presential ontology and epistemology of traditional and mystical teachings, the postmodern is all about signs as markers of absence, and their endless, self-referential, sequences and permutations, that is productive of what Baudrillard has called a "hyper-reality."¹⁷ The term "semiurgy" has been coined to describe this state of affairs, echoing the traditional concept of the demiurge. In many ancient cosmological narratives, the demiurge was responsible, if one may say so, for the production of the world, and thereby for evil inasmuch as the latter proceeds from the centrifugal tendencies of creation. Thus, in traditional teachings, the demiurgic was often connected to an amoral, disorderly, and even ecstatic production of reality out of an ontological overflow. This chaotic disorder was understood to result from the disproportion between the Infinite and the finite, on the one hand, and intrinsically connected to the emergence of being and meaning in creation, on the other hand. By contrast, the postmodern "semiurgic" refers to a shift from the ontological to the semiological: from being to signs. The post-modern world involves a proliferation of signs that do not refer to any transcendent object of signification, but merely to a web of exchanges, permutations and sequencing. This web is directionless and overwhelming, which accounts for the judicious characterization of the postmodern as entailing a form of panic.¹⁸ Indeed, panic is linked to a state of fear and agitation in which all rational abilities are as if suspended, referring originally to the ecstatic frenzy induced by the god Pan. It is akin, collectively, to an agitated motion without order and direction, and also a sense of impending

¹⁶ *Islamic Philosophy from its Origins to the Present*, SUNY, 2006, p. 89.

¹⁷ "Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal." Baudrillard, Jean, *Simulacra and Stimulation*, University of Michigan, 1994, p. 1.

¹⁸ *Panic Encyclopedia: The Definitive Guide to the Postmodern Scene*. Arthur Kroker, Marilouise Kroker, David Cook. St. Martin's Press, 1989.

catastrophe. Interestingly Pan is also the only of the Greek gods who dies, thereby highlighting his connection with finitude and relativity.

The postmodern inflation of signs and their exponential relaying through media and virtual communication produce an autonomous matrix, a matrix that has no center and no boundaries. It would be fitting here to quote Derrida himself: "The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality has its center elsewhere. The center is not the center."¹⁹ If we replace the word center by the word Principle or Reality, we can perceive why some have claimed that there is a parallel between deconstruction and traditional metaphysics, but we can also see plainly how the two points of view are in fact radically divergent. To state that the Principle is not the Principle of the universe because it is not part of the universe is both true and false, depending on whether one understands the Principle as the Divine Essence, Beyond-Being or as the Divine Creator, the Divine Being. No doubt, there is an absolute disproportion between the Principle-Essence and the Manifestation, and it is paradoxically this disproportion that abolishes the very distinction between the two since it negates the ultimate reality of manifestation before the Principle. To put it differently, the Principle is the One without a second and it cannot be—therefore—the Principle since—to paraphrase Ibn 'Arabi and others—of what else could it be the Principle since He or It only is? In this sense, the Center is not the Center because there is none other than the Center. But it is quite clear, from the point of view of Being, or the first Divine Determination, that the Principle is indeed the Principle of the Universe, like one is the principle of all numbers from which they derive. Thus it could be said that the Center is not the Center absolutely speaking or from its own point of view as Center, but that it is indeed the Center relatively speaking, which is all that matters for us as human beings. The postmodern outlook seems to conflate these two levels of reality precisely because it denies or ignores the transcendence and absoluteness of the Essence.

As intimated in the preceding, postmodern language may certainly be deemed to present some structural and formal analogies with mystical discourse, particularly in the domain of negative theology. In this connection, what Derrida highlights as the "impossible homogeneity of a

¹⁹ *Writing and Difference*, University of Chicago, 1978, p. 279.

discourse," for example, could amount to a critique of any conceptual system that claims to exclude any formal ambiguity and exhaust meaning, if not being. Traditional metaphysics, particularly in its apophatic strands, does point to the porosity and limitations of concepts and words, which it tends to contemplate as intellectual symbols, or icons, of transcendent realities, thereby averting their being treated as mental idols. Taking stock of such undoing of language and concepts, some commentators have not hesitated to establish correspondences between the postmodern fragmentation of meaning and the negative discourses of mysticism. For instance, Ibn 'Arabi's concept of "station of no station"—*maqām bilā maqām*—has been connected to the postmodern theme of the dissemination of meaning. Similarly, the postmodern disappearance of the subject has been read as an insight that converges with the mystical—and more particularly Buddhist—orientations of the *anatta*, the non-self, or even of *fanā'*, the Sufi 'extinction'. Now, can it be seriously entertained that the postmodern dissemination of truths and meanings could echo the indefinite motion of the station of no station as understood by Ibn 'Arabi, or the potentially infinite horizon of hermeneutics and radical de-centering inherent to his esoteric outlook? The fact is that for Ibn 'Arabi the "God of imagination" is a determination of the Reality proportionate to the form and capacity of a given human subject. In this sense, the Absolute which is in itself beyond all determinations and limitations "determines itself" in function of human receptacles. Consequently, there are as many "gods" or "realities" as there are limited perspectives on Reality, while this Reality as such always escapes the understanding resulting from these limited perspectives. Man cannot reach beyond his own "measure" to grasp the Real in all its plenitude: "The Real becomes manifest to His servants in the measure of their knowledge of Him";²⁰ and "The servant sees nothing of the Real save his own form."²¹ This explains why, according to Ibn 'Arabi, the most eminent spiritual station is the "station of no station" (*maqām bilā maqām*) which is "the most all-inclusive specification [in which a] person [is] not distinguished by a station whereby he is distinguished".²²

²⁰ *Futūbāt*, III 215.32, see William C. Chittick, *Imaginal worlds: Ibn al-'Arabi and the problem of religious diversity*, Albany (NY): State University of New York Press, 1994, 163.

²¹ *Futūbāt*, III 254.21, see Chittick, *Imaginal worlds*, 163.

²² *Futūbāt*, IV 76.31, *ibid.*, 170.

This paradox refers to the realization of the Infinite in and by the finite. In other words, in the "station of no station" one does not stop at any station which would limit the Real; it is in a sense an ever-moving interpretation and a never-ending voyage. But this capacity to recognize God in everything, or to welcome the ever-changing multiplicity of the forms in which He manifests Himself, presupposes an extinction of the human subject into a state of "servanthood" in relation to the Real. Thus, the highest human perfection amounts to becoming "nothing" in a manner analogous to that in which the Real is not "something" that is, not limited. There is, therefore, a subjective "zero", as it were, which "responds" to the infinity of the determinations of the Divine Possibility. This is the pure receptivity of the heart defined in *The Interpreter of Yearnings* as *qābilan kulla sūratin* or "receptive to all the forms". It is therefore no longer the limitation of the human subject that delimits and gives meaning to the world but rather the world, that is, the divine Self-unveilings which "signifies" in the soul, to use Henry Corbin's phrase. So it is clear that the foundation of the station of no-station is the very Infinity of the Origin, God. This is altogether different from Derrida's view of what he calls "dissemination" of meaning, which adamantly rejects any idea of origin and unity of meaning and affirms what he calls "the always already divided generation of meaning."²³ Postmodern deconstruction denies the very idea of an original totality of meaning, an Infinite source of Unity beyond the fragmentation of meaning.

Similarly the concept of "semiurgy", the idea that everything in the postmodern system is purely relational and that there is nothing outside of this system that would allow one to access being as such, shows some formal affinity with the Buddhist concept of "co-dependent origination" that calls into question the very existence of substances and the validity of conventional language. However, the crux of the matter is that Buddhist "co-dependent origination" is functional or methodical and, consequently, opens onto a state of being or consciousness that is free from conditioning. Even if *nirvāna* is none other than *samsāra*, the very realization of this "non-difference" is a deconditioning from both *samsāra* and the delimited awareness of *nirvāna*, therefore a mode of being and consciousness that transcends the realm of signs. It is only quite externally and functionally that deconstruction could be compared,

²³ Derrida, *Dissemination*, Bloomsbury, 2004, p. 268.

for example, to Nāgārjuna's image of the arrow and the way it must be sustained into the air by other arrows in order not to fall back.²⁴ For Nāgārjuna the matter is not to let any state of consciousness or any concept or word be fixed into a substance that would separate it from other than itself. Thus the highest state of consciousness is one which, like the arrow constantly upheld in the air by an ever new shooting, does not fall back into the state of a static substance that would betray its very reality as *nirvāna*.

In light of the above, the structural and thematic analogies between postmodern themes and mystical concepts suggested earlier should in no case prevent one from recognizing the profound and indeed irreducible divergence between the traditional metaphysical universe and postmodern reality. Certainly, these two perspectives dismiss the modern figures of rationalist humanism, while also revoking the facile ideological optimism of an obsolete modernity. One must however point out that mystical perspectives are at once metaphysical and spiritual, unlike the postmodern point of view which could be defined as purely semiotic. The postmodern universe is, radically, a semiotic network of "produced" traces, whereas the mystical universe is an ontologically meaningful universe. Since postmodern "reality", if this word is still adequate, turns away from a system of coherent and meaningful signs emanating from a subjective center of signification and symbolic "reading", the subject fades or disappears on the margin or below the self-producing web of meanings. There is no ontological or epistemological "depth" of meaning, but rather a mere "clash of meanings". By contrast, the "void" of the mystical subject constitutes an absence of egotistic projection which delivers the immanent "truth" to those involved in the path of spiritual knowledge instead of imprisoning them in their own distorting delimitations. The traditional notion of symbolism presupposes an *adaequatio* between the divine Source, the symbols which manifest the infinity of meanings therein, and the human intellect which actualizes these meanings. The world of postmodern meaning is thus fundamentally alien to the traditional conception of a meaningful metaphysical

²⁴ This is an echo of Nāgārjuna's account of the activity of the *bodhisattva* "whose arrows are continuously held aloft, so none are allowed to fall back down into *nirvāna*." Nāgārjuna's *Guide to The Bodhisattva Path - Treatise On The Provisions for Enlightenment - The Bodhisambhāra Śāstra* by Ārya Nāgārjuna. Translation, Commentary Abridgment & Notes by Bhikshu Dharmamitra (Seattle WA: Kalavinka Press, 2008, p. 43.)

order, a meaningful world with which humanity is consubstantial. Even though postmodern concepts shatter the shell of the solidified universe of the modern world, this is solely to make room for a purely negative and hollow 'non-subject' on the surface of which there floats a dust of differing, fragmented, and provisory "traces."

Finally, it must be noted that, differently from the post-modern the metaphysical or mystical transcendence or negation of reason and the self is ultimately connected to a re-establishment of their being and zone of legitimacy. In other words, when an Ibn 'Arabi revokes the supremacy of reason he does so in order to highlight the limitations of the latter. In fact, William Chittick has shown how, for Ibn 'Arabi, epistemological perfection stems from a balance between *tanzih* and *tashbih*,²⁵ discerning reason and unitive imagination. Analogically the negation of the self is, in traditional mysticism, only a negative phase that is inseparable from its reaffirmation in God, like in the Sufi *fanā'* and *baqā'*.

The above distinctions and divergences being highlighted, one may still wonder what is the relevance of postmodernity upon religion. The first point to stress is that contemporary religion and spirituality tend to think of themselves as unmediated, which means that they shun intermediaries such as institutions, traditions and rituals in order to reach an experience of non-mediated presence or a non-mediated truth. Now this may sound contrary to postmodern deconstruction since in a sense deconstruction denies the very reality of unmediated presence. But it must be borne in mind that deconstruction contributed to subvert religious and sacred mediations and symbols by questioning the coherence of signs in general, while also highlighting their relationship with power. Thus, it has created a need for a meaning and a presence freed from mediating signs and reaching to an unmoving, uninterpretable, unalienable core. There is a growing neo-evangelical, as also quite differently, a New Age discourse of presence that claim to by-pass the sacred to access an unmediated presence through faith, in the first case, or attentive mindfulness, in the second. There is also a literalist discourse, in Islam primarily, that neglects considerations of presence, at least theoretically, to focus on the form of the sacred, not so much *qua* sacred, because in such views nothing is really sacred, but as ultimate and irreducible element of orthopraxy. Let us note that, in

²⁵ Cf. *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, "Seeing with two eyes", SUNY Press, 1989, pp. 356-381.

all cases, the sacred is marginalized or expelled.

On the one hand, informal neo-spirituality eliminates the sign because it holds it in suspicion: it aims at a spirituality of pure presence without sign. Sign here means traditions, dogmas, rituals and the like, that is sacred symbols. But such an informal eviction of sacred signs is not possible without individualizing and psychologizing spirituality. Why so? Because the universal and the Divine cannot encounter the individual and particular without a mediating, universalizing and reintegrating element that transcends the individual as such, and that is precisely the sacred symbol that actualizes the Spirit within and beyond the soul. In the absence of this sacred mediation the individual psyche remains prisoner of its own limitations and illusions. This is to be observed in New Age neo-spirituality, as also in many forms of neo-evangelicalism: hence the affinities of these trends with a de-intellectualized and de-ritualized neo-Buddhism, on the one hand, and an unmediated, individualist Christian experience of subjective faith free from any dogmatic and sacramental media, on the other hand. At the other end of the spectrum, fundamentalism absolutizes the religious signs by fear of the dissolution of meanings. It has therefore to conflate the Absolute with the forms of the tradition, and deny or belittle everything that comes in between. Hence the rejection of all but the literalist understanding of scripture, and the attempt at eliminating sacred hermeneutics and holy mediators. This tendency is plain to see in the many brands of Salafi Islam and Bible-based Christian fundamentalism. By contrast with these post-modern reductions, the sacred implies both an affirmation of the sign as a messenger of the Absolute, and an intuition of its relativity since it is not the Absolute. The unmediated religion of today tends to be disconnected from the sacred, or even weary of it, precisely because the sacred is mediation, or emergence of the beyond in the here-below, the transcendent in the immanent, while never being reducible to either one.

What are the practical lessons of this incompatibility of the post-modern and the sacred? Obviously, one may scoff at the recondite and elusive essays of post-modern authors and claim that they have no bearing on the daily life of most contemporaries, being mere mental exercises and verbal plays. However, one would be mistaken to ignore the influence of post-modern deconstructionism in some sectors of the West, particularly in North American academia, and more generally its subtle but pervasive

role in the diffusion of a cultural mood characterized by a sense of disorder, disjunction, and disruption. Postmodern ideas feed a pervasive ambience of discontinuity, incoherence, heterogeneity, and disorder that permeates nearly all areas of contemporary life from lifestyles to psychology and from theology to the arts. Significantly, technology alone seems to escape this mood, at least when considered from the point of view of its objective functionality, although from another point of view it may be deemed to be a major contributor to the postmodern disorientation by its power of dispersion and its levelling down of all hierarchies of meaning. The internet, for example, links everything to everything within its web, but it has no center, nor does it recognize degrees of reality and criteria of qualitative validation. In this universal network of data, everything is in a sense the equivalent of everything else, and all qualitative differences are reduced to matters of link and connection. Thus, one thing leads to the next in a directionless and open-ended maze of data.

With respect to the sacred, it is important to note that the post-modern outlook involves more deadly risks than fertile opportunities. This is so because the post-modern outlook flies in the face of Schuon's image of the projection of the Center into the periphery with which we started our presentation. First, because it radically denies any center, secondly because it negates presence, and finally because it abolishes the self. The sacred is a projection of the Center, the sacred is the vehicle of presence, the sacred awakens us to the true Self. The rediscovery of the sacred means first of all centering, against the semiurgic grain of postmodernity—of which the virtual world is the main manifestation and agent. Secondly, it means actualization of presence, receptivity to Divine presence, it affirms—for example—sacred places over purely functional places which are “non-places”²⁶ and are therefore devoid of spiritual energy, like cold and sterile offices and convention halls in which prayer and recollection are out of place. Finally, rediscovering the sacred means awakening to the deepest layers of one's being, those that are not only accidental and trivial, and steeping ourselves into Divine Consciousness. The postmodern suspicion toward meaning, its panic dispersion and vacuous selfhood need be overcome to gain access to the

²⁶ Cf. Marc Augé, *Non-Places - Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, Verso, 1995.

sacred, to grasp the invisible in the visible, the center in the periphery. The perception, nurturing and assimilation of the sacred require a recognition of the essential through and beyond the accidental: it is therefore at the antipode of the postmodern fascination for traces and debris. In this sense rediscovering the sacred means recovering the world in God's intention, therefore in all its meaningful and centering beauty.