

The Two Paradises

by

Frithjof Schuon

Studies in Comparative Religion, Vol. 6, No. 3. (Summer, 1972) © World Wisdom, Inc.
www.studiesincomparativereligion.com

Editor's note: The following is from an updated translation of the essay, approved by the estate of Frithjof Schuon.

The Vedantin notion of “Deliverance” (*moksha*, *mukti*) evokes, whether rightly or wrongly, the paradoxical image of a refusal of Paradise and a choice of the Supreme Union, which seems to imply, according to some formulations, the dissolution of the individual and the identification of the Intellect-kernel with the Self. If such an end is presented as the object of a strictly human option, one will rightly object that the individual could have no motive for choosing anything other than his own survival and his own happiness; the rest is pretension and bookish speculation, and thus has no connection to the Vedantin notion in question.

To begin with, the following two points must be considered: first, the idea of “Deliverance” or of “Union” corresponds to a metaphysical evidence, whatever pedantic or extravagant interpretations may do, depending on the case, to alter its meaning; next, there are in man two subjects—or two subjectivities—with no common measure and with opposite tendencies, though there is also, in some respect, coincidence between the two. On the one hand, there is the *anima* or empirical ego, woven out of objective as well as subjective contingencies, such as memories and desires; on the other hand, there is the *spiritus* or pure Intelligence, whose subjectivity is rooted in the Absolute, so that it sees the empirical ego as being no more than a husk, that is, something outward and foreign to the true “my-self”, or rather “One-self”, at once transcendent and immanent.¹

Now if it is incontestable that the human ego normally desires happiness and survival in happiness, to the point of having no motive for desiring more than this, it is equally true that pure Intelligence exists and that its nature is to tend toward its own source; the whole question is to know, spiritually speaking, which of these two subjectivities

¹ Although “every thing” is *Âtmâ*, this is so in an altogether different and in some way opposite respect.

predominates in a human being. It can be rightly denied that the choice of the supra-individual has any meaning for the individual as such, but it cannot be denied that there is something in man that surpasses individuality and can take precedence over the latter's aspirations, in order to tend toward the plenitude of its own transcendent nature.

We speak of taking precedence over the aspirations of individuality, but not of abolishing them; here we touch on another aspect of the problem, and by no means the least. When one speaks traditionally of a "dissolution" or of an "extinction" of individuality, one has in view the privative limitations of the ego, but not its very existence; if there is no common measure between the ego of the one who is "freed in this life" (*jīvan-mukta*) and his spiritual reality—so that it can be said of him that he "is *Brahman*" without having to deny that he is this particular man—the same incommensurability and, along with it, the same compatibility, or the same parallelism, present themselves in the hereafter; if this were not the case, one would have to conclude that the *Avatâras* had completely vanished from the cosmos, and this has never been traditionally admitted. Christ "is God", which in no wise prevents him from saying: "Today shalt thou be with me in paradise", nor from predicting his return at the end of the cycle.

The world is the plane of phenomena or of contingencies; the ordinary ego, the *anima*, is thus part of the world and is situated "outside" for him who is able to envisage it from the *spiritus*, which by definition derives from the *Spiritus Sanctus*; and this could never be a matter of ambition or affectation: it is a matter of true understanding and of innate perspective. This means that subjectivity can be conceived, or realized, according to three degrees, which correspond precisely to the ternary of *corpus, anima, spiritus*: the first degree is that of animality, be it human; the second is that of the microcosm of dream, in which the subject is no longer identified with the body alone, but with this ever increasing mirage that is imaginative and sentimental experience; the third degree is that of pure Intelligence, which is the trace in man of the unique and "transcendentally immanent" Subject. The soul is the inner witness of the body, as the spirit is the inner witness of the soul.

The nature of Intelligence is not to identify itself passively and quasi-blindly with the phenomena it registers, but on the contrary, by reducing phenomena to their essences, to know ultimately That which knows; by the same stroke, the sage—precisely because his subjectivity is determined by Intelligence—will tend "to be That which is" and "to enjoy That which enjoys"; and this brings us back to the Vedantin ternary "Being, Consciousness, Bliss" (*Sat, Chit, Ānanda*). In reality there is but a single Beatitude, just as there is but a single Subject and a single Object; the three poles are united in the Absolute, but are separated insofar as the Absolute enters into Relativity, according to the

mystery of *Mâyâ*; the conclusion of this descent is precisely the diversification of subjects, objects, and experiences. Object, Subject, Happiness: our whole existence is woven out of these three elements, but in illusory mode; the sage does nothing other than the ignorant, that is, he lives from these three elements, but he does so in the direction of the Real, which alone is the Object, the Subject, and Happiness.

*

* *

When it is said in Sufism that “Paradise is inhabited by fools”,² one must understand this to mean subjects who are attached to phenomena rather than to the unique Subject, who is His own Object and His own Beatitude. All paradoxical sayings referring to the distinction between the “saved” and the “elect” must be interpreted above all as metaphors affirming such a principle or such a tendency; the paradox results from the fact that the image is naively human, and thus psychological, when in fact the principle involved shares no common measure with psychology. Two subjectivities, two languages: the whole enigma of esoterism is to be found in this. A doctrine is esoteric inasmuch as it appeals to the “inward subjectivity” and thus puts aside the “outward subjectivity”; conversely, a doctrine is exoteric inasmuch as it accepts the empirical ego as a closed system and an absolute reality, and thus confines itself to subjecting the ego to prescriptions that are equally absolute. For the Sufis, the attestation that there is no divinity if not the sole Divinity is esoteric owing to the fact that in the end it excludes the outward egoity; “in the end”, that is to say, when this attestation is understood “sincerely” (*mukhlisan*), hence totally. The traditional expression “knowing through God” (*‘ârif bi-’Llâh*)—and not “knowing God”—is characteristic in this respect, the preposition “through” serving precisely to indicate the quasi-divine subjectivity within pure intellection.

The outward ego by definition nourishes itself with phenomena and is in consequence fundamentally dualistic; to it corresponds the revealed and objective religion, whose Messenger is a particular historical person. The inward ego looks toward its own Source, which is at once transcendent and immanent; to it corresponds the innate and subjective religion,³ whose *Avatâra* is the heart; wisdom is in fact inaccessible

² This idea is plainly inspired by the following *hadîth*: “Most of the dwellers in Paradise are simple-minded” (*al-bulh*), that is, without guile or malice. The meaning is thus positive, whereas it is pejorative in the interpretation just mentioned, which aims at marking an opposition between two attitudes or two categories.

³ “Know”—God reveals to Niffari—“that I shall accept from thee nothing of the *Sunnah*, but only that which My Gnosis bringeth thee, for thou art one of those to whom I speak.” Not everyone holds this

without the concurrence of objective and revealed religion, just as the inward ego is inaccessible without the concurrence of the sanctified outward ego.

The crystallization of metaphysical truth into a religious, and thus dogmatic, phenomenon results from the principle of individuation: in falling into the human atmosphere, the Divine Truth is coagulated and becomes individualized; it becomes a point of view and is personified, such that it is impossible to reconcile one particular religious form with another on the plane itself of this personification; this is as impossible as to change from one human ego to another, even though we know perfectly well that the ego of others is not more illogical nor less legitimate than our own. In compensation, the passage from one form to another—in other words, from one metaphysico-mystical subjectivity to another—is always possible by returning to the source of the religious coagulations, for this source pertains precisely to the universal Subjectivity or, if one prefers, to Intelligence in Itself; man has access to this source, in principle or even in fact, through pure intellection; and this is the subjectivity that is concerned with “Deliverance” in the Vedantin sense of the term.

When Sufis disdain Paradise out of their desire for God alone, it goes without saying that in this case they are envisaging Paradise inasmuch as it is created, that is, inasmuch as it is “other than God”, and not inasmuch as it is divine in its substance and content—notwithstanding its existential degree; this is so true that Sufis speak completely logically of a “Paradise of the Essence”, which precisely is situated beyond creation. Analogously, when Sufis seem sometimes to reject works or even virtues, what they mean is these values inasmuch as they appear as “mine”, and not inasmuch as they belong to God; or again, when a Sufi affirms that for him good and evil are equally a matter of indifference, this means that he is envisaging them in relation to their common contingency, which in its turn plays the role of “evil” with respect to the sole “good” that is absoluteness. If we compare good to light and evil to an opaque stone, the fact of whitening the stone does not transform it into light; the stone can be streaked with white and black by way of depicting “good” and “evil”, but because of its opacity and heaviness, it will nonetheless remain a kind of “evil” in relation to the luminous ray.

The two human subjects, the outward or empirical and the inward or intellective, correspond analogically to the two aspects of the Divine Subject, the ontological or personal and the supra-ontological or impersonal; in man, as *in divinis*, duality is

station, to say the least, and to attribute it to oneself is to risk an irremediable fall; if we bring it up here, it is for the sake of doctrine.

perceptible, or is actualized, only in relation to the element *Mâyâ*.⁴ Or again, to return to the ternary *corpus, anima, spiritus*: these three subjectivities respectively reflect the three *hypostases*—if indeed this term applies here—Existence, Being, Beyond-Being; just as God is not “absolutely Absolute” except as Beyond-Being, so man is not absolutely himself except in the Intellect; whereas the empirical ego nourishes itself with phenomena, the intellectual ego burns them and tends toward the Essence. However, this difference of principle does not imply an alternative of fact, precisely because there is no common measure here; the norm in this case is an equilibrium between the two planes, and not a concretely inconceivable dehumanization.

The paradoxical expression “absolutely absolute” calls for some explanations. Orthodox theologians, according to Palamas, make a distinction in God between the Essence and the Energies; this is an error, say the Catholics, for the divine nature is simple; there is no error, rejoin the Orthodox, for the laws of logic do not apply to God, who is above them. This is a dialogue between the deaf, we conclude, for logic in no way prevents one from admitting that the divine nature comprises Energies even while being simple; to understand this, it suffices to have the notion of divine Relativity, which the totalitarian sublimism of theologians excludes, precisely, since it makes it impossible to combine antinomic relationships which, in pure metaphysics, are contained in the nature of things. There could never be any symmetry between the relative and the Absolute; as a result, if there is clearly no such thing as the absolutely relative, there is nonetheless a “relatively absolute”, and this is Being as creator, revealer, and savior, who is absolute for the world, but not for the Essence: “Beyond-Being” or “Non-Being”. If God were the Absolute in every respect and without any hypostatic restriction, there could be no contact between Him and the world, and the world would not even exist; for in order to be able to create, speak, and act, it is necessary that God Himself make Himself “world” in some fashion, and He does so through the ontological self-limitation that gives rise to the “personal God”, the world itself being the most extreme and hence the most relative of self-limitations. Pantheism would be right in its own way if it could restrict itself to this aspect without denying transcendence.

Monotheist exoterism readily loses sight of the aspects of inclusiveness, but it has the advantage—and this is its reason for being—of placing man as such before this “human Absolute” that is the creator God; however, it must pay a penalty for this simplification: the theological deadlocks—which Christians justify by means of the argument of “mystery” and Muslims by means of the argument of God’s “good

⁴ In Sufism, the key-notion of *Mâyâ* is expressed through the terms *hijâb*, “veil”, and *tajallî*, “unveiling” or “revelation”.

pleasure”—testify to the need to take account in one and the same breath of both the unity of God and the antinomic complexity of the divine intervention in the world. Now this complexity cannot be explained by unity, but it can be explained, on the contrary, by relativity *in divinis*, that is to say by the hypostatic gradation in view of the creative unfolding; and this relativity does not affect unity anymore than space affects the unicity of the center-point or the homogeneity of total space, which derives from that point and which deploys it.

In the face of the paradoxical complexity of the metaphysical Real, the situation of theologies can be summarized as follows: first of all, there is the axiom that God is the Absolute since nothing can be greater than He; next, there is the logical evidence that there is in God something relative; finally, the conclusion is drawn that since God is the Absolute, what is relative in appearance cannot be other than absolute; the fact that this is contrary to logic proves that logic cannot reach God, who is “mystery” (Christianity) and who “does as He wills” (Islam). Now we have seen that the solution of the problem rests upon two points: objectively, the Absolute is susceptible of gradation, unless one wishes to cease discussing it; subjectively, it is not logic that is at fault, but the opacity of our axioms and the rigidity of our reasonings. Certainly, God “does as He wills”, but that is because we cannot discern all of His motives on the phenomenal plane; certainly, He is a “mystery”, but this is because of the inexhaustibility of His Subjectivity, the only one that is, in the last analysis, and that becomes clear to us only inasmuch as it whelms us in its light.

*

* *

It is plausible that the ego, in the measure that it is determined by objects, which are “not-myself”, is not entirely itself; the true ego, the pure Subject, bears its object within itself, like the Divine Essence, which “tends toward Its own infinite Center”—if this inadequate image is permissible—whereas Being tends toward creation, but obviously without “emerging from itself”, and without being affected by the world and its contents. In other words: the subject-intellect, in the likeness of Beyond-Being, bears its object within itself; but the empirical or psychic ego, in the manner of Being, has its object both within itself and outside itself; and just as Existence has its object outside itself, namely in existing things, so does the sensorial ego have its object in the outward and tends toward the outward. Now God can be at the same time Beyond-Being, Being, and even Existence, if we speak according to *Mâyâ*, for in the last analysis, Beyond-Being does not Itself unfold: It contains everything within Itself in a state that is undifferentiated but infinitely real; man, who is made in the image of God, nonetheless has the possibility of

being unfaithful to this image, since he is not God and is free; having committed this act of infidelity and bearing it in his inborn nature, he must, in order to become deiform, tend toward the divine Inward. The animistic subject must become free from the corporeal subject, and the intellectual subject must become free from the animistic subject, in conformity with this teaching: “Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it” (Luke 17:33). And likewise: “Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die it bringeth forth much fruit. He that loveth his life, shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal” (John 12:24-25).

The “life” or the “soul” to be sacrificed is, we repeat, the ego inasmuch as it is a passional nucleus and not inasmuch as it is simply a particular subjectivity; thus the criterion of a spiritual degree is not the absence of the consciousness of “self”, which could never occur habitually—otherwise Christ could not have moved in the world—but the abolishing of the passional entanglement founded on desire, ostentation, and optical illusion. The first spiritual phase is isolation, for the world is the ego; the summit is to “behold God everywhere”, for the world is God. In other words, there is a spiritual perfection wherein the contemplative perceives God only in the inward, in the silence of the heart; and there is another perfection, superior to the preceding one and issuing from it—for the second is conceivable only in terms of the first—wherein the contemplative perceives God also in the outward,⁵ in phenomena: in their existence, then in their general qualities, and then in their particular qualities, and even indirectly in their privative manifestations. In this realization, not only does the ego appear as extrinsic—which happens also in the first perfection—but the world appears as inward by revealing its divine substance, things becoming nearly translucent; it is to this realization, both radiant and inclusive, that Sufis allude when they say with Shibli: “I have never seen any thing save God.”⁶

⁵ This state corresponds to the station of the *Bodhisattva*, whereas the preceding state is that of the *Pratyeka-Buddha*. To surpass the need for solitude of the *Pratyeka-Buddha* and to become a *Bodhisattva* is to remain in the state of union as much in a harem as on a battlefield; and this quite apart from the active and creative function of the *Samyaksam-Buddha*, who represents, not a spiritual degree—he possesses by definition the supreme degree without being the only one to possess it—but a cosmic phenomenon of the first order of magnitude, for it belongs to the order of divine manifestations.

⁶ Tradition attributes analogous words to the four *rāshidūn* Caliphs: one beheld God before what had been created, the other after it, the third at the same time as it, and the fourth beheld nothing other than God. Likewise Hujwiri in his *Kashf al-Mahjūb*: “One saint sees the act with his corporeal eye and, in seeing, perceives the divine Agent with his spiritual eye; another saint, owing to his love for the Agent, finds himself separated from all things, so that he see only the Agent.” This is not unrelated to this saying of St Paul: “To the pure all things are pure.”

However, “to behold God everywhere” can have a more particular meaning, which in a sense coincides with understanding the “language of the birds” and at the same time brings us back to the principle whereby “extremes meet”: the intelligence that is penetrated by what is most inward may thus enjoy, charismatically, the faculty of understanding the secret intentions of outward things, and so of forms in an altogether general way.

*

* *

We have quoted above the saying of Christ about “life”: those who would save it, lose it, and those who of their own will lose it, save it for eternity. No doubt this teaching establishes a first distinction, entirely general, between worldly and spiritual men; but it also refers, since it is sacred and thus polyvalent, to the two subjectivities that concern us particularly, the phenomenal and the intellectual, or the empirical “self” and the transcendent “selfhood”. In the latter case, the notion of “perdition” must be transposed; in other words, this notion will refer merely to the ambiguous situation of the “psychic” individual: whereas the “pneumatic” is saved by his ascending nature, his subjectivity being intellectual, the “psychic” risks being lost owing to the contingent and passive character of his egoity.

It is however in the nature of things that spiritual subjectivity give rise to an intermediary solution, more sacrificial than intellectual, in which the subject, even if it is not the microcosmic prolongation of the Shankarian “Self”, is nonetheless more than the empirical “self”; and this is the heroic subjectivity of the path of Love, which tears itself free from phenomena without being able to integrate itself with the Witness who is both transcendent and immanent. In this case, a ray of Mercy enters into the subjectivity that is cut off from the world: deprived of the worldly “self”, the immortal soul lives finally from the Grace that sustains and adopts it.

*

* *

Since the distinction between the two subjectivities is essential, it cannot but arise in the midst of a spiritually integral tradition; if we did not know of a Meister Eckhart, we would nonetheless have to admit that this point of view is not absent in Christianity. Meister Eckhart, with characteristic audacity, prayed to God to free him from God, specifying that this applied to God as the origin of creatures and that our essential being is above God envisaged in this manner; “the Essence of God and the essence of the soul

are one and the same”, he would say, thus providing the key to the enigma.⁷ This expression indicates a compensatory reciprocity between the Absolute and the relative or between *Âtmâ* and *Mâyâ*: for to the mystery of incommensurability (Islam: *Lâ ilaha illâ 'Llâh*) is adjoined the compensatory mystery of reciprocity (Islam: *Muhammadun Rasûlu 'Llâh*); in other words, in *Âtmâ* there is a point that is *Mâyâ*, and this is Being or the personal God, whereas in *Mâyâ* there is a point that is *Âtmâ*, and this is Beyond-Being or the Divine Essence present in the Intellect; it is the immanent absoluteness in the human relative. Once again we rejoin here the Taoist symbolism of the *Yin-Yang*: the white part contains a black dot, and the black part a white dot. The fact that man can conceive of the limitation of Being in relation to the pure Absolute proves that he can in principle realize this Absolute and thus transcend the Legislation emanating from Being, namely formal religion; we say “in principle”, but rarely in fact, otherwise religions would not exist.

“If I were not, neither would God be,” Meister Eckhart furthermore says, which becomes clear in light of the doctrine we have just expounded,⁸ and he takes care to recommend, for those who do not understand this “naked truth issued from the very heart of God”, that they not “beat their heads against a wall”, for none can understand it except he who “is like unto it”. In other words, the doctrine of the supreme Subjectivity requires a providential predisposition to receive it; we say a “predisposition” rather than a “capacity”, for the principal cause of a lack of metaphysical understanding is not so much a fundamental intellectual incapacity as a passional attachment to concepts that are conformed to man’s natural individualism. On the one hand, transcending this individualism predisposes man to such an understanding; on the other hand, total metaphysics contributes to this transcending; every spiritual realization has two poles or two points of departure, one being situated in our thought, and the other in our being.

*

* *

The *Sûrah* of “The Merciful” (*Ar-Rahmân*) attributes to “him who feareth the station of his Lord” two celestial gardens, and then goes on to mention two further gardens; according to the commentators, the first two gardens are destined respectively for men and the jinn,⁹ or again, according to others, for each believer, but without the difference

⁷ One will note the analogy with the *Tat tvam asi* (“That art thou”) of the *Vedânta*.

⁸ We have no intention of denying the problematical character of such an expression; in other words, it is ill-sounding because it is too elliptical: the relativity of the “God” of the formula is not explained.

⁹ The jinn are the subtle or animistic beings situated between corporeal creatures and angelic creatures. Each one of these three degrees comprises peripheral states and one central state; on earth there are animal

between the two gardens being explained; it is generally considered—following Baidawi—that the two further gardens are destined for believers of lesser merit or of lesser quality.¹⁰ In any case it seems plausible to us to make a distinction, in each of the two cases mentioned, between a “horizontal” garden and a “vertical” garden—this second Paradise being none other than God Himself as He communicates or manifests Himself with respect to the degree considered; in this we have the exact equivalent of the distinction between the “celestial body” of the Buddhas and their “divine body”.¹¹

In the case of the elect or those “brought nigh” (*muqarrabûn*), the vertical garden is the state of union; we have already seen that this state could not prevent the personal presence of the bodies of glory in a created Paradise, otherwise many a passage in the Scriptures and many a sacred phenomenon would be inexplicable. As for the two lower gardens, the second of the two will be a state of beatific vision, but not a state of union; now this vision, like union, will be “vertical” in relation to a “horizontal”¹² or phenomenal and specifically human beatitude. This is one of the meanings, along with other symbolisms, of the crowns of uncreated light that the elect will wear, according to a Christian tradition; and this meaning applies with all the more reason, at an unsurpassable degree of reality, to the coronation of the Virgin.

In the famous prayer of Ibn Mashish, which is concerned with the Logos or the *Haqiqatu Muhammadiyah*, mention is made of the “radiance of Beauty” and of the “overflowing of Glory”: apart from other meanings, this can refer to the two heavenly degrees that we have just spoken of. In erotic symbolism, this is the difference between the vision of the beloved and union with him: in the second case, form is extinguished, just as the accidents are resorbed into the Substance and just as the divine Qualities lose their differentiation in the Essence. This extinction or this resorption, or again this indifferentiation, pertains to what we have previously called the perspective of centripetal rays, as opposed to the perspective of concentric circles:¹³ according to the first mystery,

species and there is man, as in Heaven there are angels and archangels; the latter are identified with the “Spirit of God” (*ar-Rûh*). Likewise, there are two kinds of jinn: those belonging to the central state can be believers and win Paradise; they are the ones the *Sûrah* of “The Jinn” speaks of.

¹⁰ According to other commentators—Qashani foremost—the two other gardens are on the contrary higher than the first two, though this question of symbolic presentation is without importance here.

¹¹ *Sambhoga-kâya*, the “body of heavenly Delight”, and *Dharma-kâya*, the “body of the Law”, the Divine Essence.

¹² We could just as well speak of a “circular” garden and an “axial” garden, in conformity with a geometric symbolism not at all difficult to understand.

¹³ This is the complementarity between the “axial” dimension and the “circular” dimension.

that of continuity or inclusiveness—and this is infinitely more than a way of seeing¹⁴—“every thing is *Âtmâ*”, and direct union is therefore possible;¹⁵ according to the second mystery, that of discontinuity or of exclusiveness, “*Brahman* is not in the world”, and the separation between created and uncreated orders is consequently absolute, hence irreducible. It is only on the basis of this irreducibility that it is possible to conceive adequately of the inclusive homogeneity of the Real and of its spiritual consequence, the mystery of Identity or the “Paradise of the Essence”.

¹⁴ In the principal order, a perspective is determined by an objective reality; it is not the “point of view” that as it were creates the “aspect”, unless one dare speak of a “divine point of view”.

¹⁵ Given that indirect union, precisely, is preexistent; in other words, it is realized in advance through the divine homogeneity of the Universe, which pantheism would account for if it had the complementary and crucial notion of transcendence. The geometric symbol of this homogeneity, which is not “material” but transcendent, is the spiral, for it combines the perspective of the concentric circles with that of the rays.