

BEYOND “UNITY”: AN APPROACH TO INTER-SPIRITUAL DIALOGUE¹

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“Where God is not revealed as fully personal *in se*, human personality is always in danger of being undervalued, or even suppressed in some way.”



As Pope Benedict XVI has indicated from the day of his election, his papacy is committed to continuing the inter-religious dialogue begun under his predecessors. Christians are rightly involved in what some have called “the wider ecumenism” with followers of other religions. They are right, also, to renounce all violent or aggressive methods of evangelization—methods which have been used in the past but which are incompatible with the fundamental principle that good intentions do not excuse the doing of evil. The only methods we have are peaceful ones: conversation, persuasion, example. Intellectual obstacles need to be dissolved gently in the solvent of knowledge and argument, not run down by the bulldozers of

¹The term “inter-spiritual” may be preferable in some contexts to “inter-religious,” if it means a dialogue on the basis of personal experience and faith, for the purpose of greater mutual understanding, not necessarily agreement, let alone some kind of “political” compromise.

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ideology. Beauty, truth and goodness must be allowed to shine out for those who have eyes to see.

However, in order to clarify the approach of the new pontiff to this dialogue between religions, there are at least two types of wider ecumenism which need to be distinguished from each other: let us call them “deep” and “shallow.” *Deep ecumenism* is an engagement with what might be termed “difference in identity.” In this case the believer approaches another religion in full fidelity to his own distinct religious identity, but with openness to aspects of the truth that may be revealed in the other. *Shallow ecumenism*, by contrast, glosses over difference for the sake of superficial or pragmatic friendliness. Instead of difference in identity, it seeks “diversity in equality.” Though better than nothing, it is an approach which tends to bracket the real differences between self and other (perhaps out of a fear of facing them) along with the question of ultimate truth. At its extreme, this becomes a “least common denominator” ecumenism that concentrates only on what is common and discards all that distinguishes Christianity from other religions.

As the twentieth century came to a close, the Declaration *Dominus Iesus* (2000), from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, under the then-Cardinal Ratzinger, aimed to clarify the teaching of the Catholic Church “On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church.” The document was regarded by many commentators at the time as a setback for dialogue, owing to its uncompromising assertion that the missionary proclamation of the Church in the new millennium has been endangered by “relativistic theories which seek to justify religious pluralism” (n. 4), and its determination to spell out the essential elements of that proclamation in the face of the philosophical and theological presuppositions that undermine it. Nevertheless, the document is an accurate statement of the Church’s faith, and its uncompromising nature makes it a suitably challenging point of reference for the present article.

In an important essay that might be read in conjunction with *Dominus Iesus*, commenting on the “heavenly council” of Nicholas of Cusa (and implicitly on the various attempts to produce a global religious council today), the future pope argues that today “mission and dialogue should no longer be opposites but should mutually interpenetrate. Dialogue is not aimless conversation: it aims at conviction, at finding the truth; otherwise it is worthless.” The truth

always surpasses me. I am never the sole "possessor" of truth, and there are things that I must receive from the other. "I need to be willing to allow my narrow understanding of truth to be broken down. I shall learn my own truth better if I understand the other person and allow myself to be moved along the road to the God who is ever greater, certain that I never hold the whole truth about God in my own hands but am always a learner, on pilgrimage towards it, on a path that has no end."² Here, unexpectedly, the supreme Christian dogmatician joins hands with the early Sufi sage who gave us this beautiful affirmation: *Truth melts like snow in the hands of one who does not melt like snow in the hands of truth.*³

Roch Kereszty, O. Cist., develops a systematic theological account of inter-religious dialogue along these lines in an article that appeared in *Communio*.⁴ He begins by explaining the rationale for dialogue. All religions claim a certain knowledge of truth. Dialogue founded on mutual respect and openness requires that this knowledge be associated not with the "possession" but with the "contemplation" of truth: truth of this order is necessarily *above* the knowing subject.

If this is so, in no dialogue may the truth be used as a weapon to assert one's superiority over the other, but truth is always (potentially, at least) a common treasure we both acknowledge as transcending, enriching, and even governing us. At the moment we abuse the truth as a means of domination, we have already distorted it.⁵

Most importantly, Father Kereszty continues:

²J. Ratzinger, *Many Religions—One Covenant* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 110–112.

³Bayazid of Bastam (origin undocumented). Of course, this attitude is perfectly compatible with the claim that the fullness of truth has been revealed in the Catholic Church.

⁴Roch Kereszty, "Toward a Christian Theology of Inter-Religious Dialogue," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 29, no. 3 (Fall 2002): 579–597. See also his article, "The Word of God: A Catholic Perspective in Dialogue with Judaism and Islam," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 28, no. 3 (2001): 568–580, and the fifth chapter of his remarkable *Jesus Christ: Fundamentals of Christology* (New York: Alba House, 2002).

⁵Kereszty, "Toward a Christian Theology of Inter-Religious Dialogue," 582.

This understanding of truth, however, excludes any relativist approach. If my dialogue partner's affirmation of a truth can be valid only for him/her but not for myself, and vice versa, the dialogue cannot enrich either of us; it will degenerate into a double monologue that may call for mutual sympathy but renders any exchange of views ultimately meaningless.⁶

Dialogue is built into our nature, as creatures made in the image of the Trinity. God's mode of self-revelation takes this into account, since God (the ultimate truth) approaches us through an Incarnation that fully reveals its riches only "through the whole of history and through all redeemed humankind."⁷ This is the work of the Holy Spirit.

On the basis of these principles, Father Kereszty discusses the discernment that a Christian will need to make in any encounter with another religion. Original sin, personal sins, and accumulated ignorance have had a distorting effect on all cultures and religions.⁸ On the other hand, grace has also been active in those cultures and religions. Individual non-Christians may collaborate with that grace to the extent of becoming saints, and particular teachings of other religions may contain truths that even Christians can accept or recognize as belonging to the fuller understanding of a truth revealed in Christ. (Father Kereszty refers to *ahimsa*, certain forms of *yoga*, the necessity of dying to the "false self" in Buddhism, the value of vicarious suffering for others, the natural law of the *Tao*, celibacy as the integration of yin and yang, and so on.) In fact, he argues that the divinely intended fuller understanding of the Christian mysteries and way of life has been and will always be achieved *in dialogue* with other religious cultures.

The attempt to integrate truths from other religions is, nevertheless, fraught with peril if not undertaken with "critical discernment." The Christian possesses a principle of discernment in the deposit of faith under the guidance of the Magisterium of the Church. The Church, through its essential structures, extends the teachings, actions, and person of Christ to all times and places. Equipped with this criterion, the Christian can engage in dialogue in relative safety, learning from others, sorting truth from falsehood,

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid., 585.

⁸Though not on the essential structures of the Catholic Church or her teachings.

and assisting all who are "obedient to the operation of the Holy Spirit" in their own religions to come to a fuller knowledge of the truth. All Christians, however, must cling to the fundamental points that make Christianity distinctively itself: Incarnation (hypostatic union) and Trinity, together with the whole Christian mystery whose understanding is constantly unfolding in dialogue. Authentic dialogue is not dependent upon downplaying or discarding the characteristic beliefs of any given religion, let alone one's own. This need not blind us to the truths found in other religious texts.⁹

Truth is above the knowing subject. This means it is not the *possession* of the Christian any more than it is of the Muslim or the Hindu. We have a duty to proclaim it, but we also have the duty to continue listening, obeying, searching. Just as St. Thomas Aquinas did in his day, we must look to other traditions for truths that will enable us to understand better what we ourselves have been entrusted to represent.¹⁰

It is by taking seriously the search for an ultimate truth whose unsurpassable revelation the Church guards, but does not monopolize or exhaust (the revelation is not some limited set of propositions, but Christ himself in person) that we can engage in non-trivial dialogue without relativistic compromise.¹¹ Despite the

⁹It might be worth re-emphasizing that one should not too quickly conclude from the apparent contradictions between the Scriptures of two different traditions that one is always simply true and the other simply false. Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, in *The Vision of Islam* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1996), 168–175, argue that key Koranic verses seem to be directed against early Christian heresies, not against the more sophisticated orthodox Christology of the great creeds and councils. Where the Koran is held to deny the Crucifixion, we are clearly faced with a contradiction, but where it denies that God could have a Son because "he has no wife" (6:101), or accuses Christians of believing in a Trinity consisting of God, Jesus, and Mary (5:116) or of calling God "a third of three" (5:73), it is attacking a straw man.

¹⁰Some of what is said of the One God within Judaism, Islam, or even Hinduism may be acceptable (with careful discernment) to an orthodox Christian. John Paul II writes in *Fides et ratio* (1998): "In India particularly, it is the duty of Christians now to draw from this rich heritage the elements compatible with their faith, in order to enrich Christian thought" (n. 72)—remembering always that the doctrine of God as loving communion (Trinity) transforms our understanding of the divine Unity.

¹¹For a classic Sufi account of religious diversity as willed by God (albeit one that would not be accepted by all Muslims) see William C. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*:

radically different interpretations that exist of the Bible and the Koran, the behavior of the Redeemer and the behavior of the Prophet, many Christians and Muslims should be able to agree with this principle. In the present essay I have tried to think through the doctrine of salvation from the Christian side, for the sake of a developing dialogue whose importance can scarcely be exaggerated.

1. Beyond “salvation”

Dominus Iesus is concerned with the fact that “the universal salvific will of the One and Triune God is offered and accomplished once for all in the mystery of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Son of God,” and thus primarily through the Roman Catholic Church as the extended body of Christ (nn. 13, 16). It echoes, in other words, the traditional formulation, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (“no salvation outside the Church”). On the other hand, it gives this formula a decidedly “inclusive” interpretation. For other religions and their founders may conceivably also “fall within the divine plan of salvation,” and elements of sanctification and truth may be found within other churches and ecclesial communities, even though these in some way “derive their efficacy from the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church,” and from Christ as “the one mediator between God and men.”¹²

Ibn al-Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1994). To this a Christian would want to add that while the Reality transcends all systems of belief, God’s self-revelation in Christ transcends them in a way that transcends all partial revelations.

¹²Section 14 of *Dominus Iesus* reads as follows (with my emphasis): “It must therefore be *firmly believed* as a truth of Catholic faith that the universal salvific will of the One and Triune God is offered and accomplished once for all in the mystery of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Son of God. Bearing in mind this article of faith, *theology today, in its reflection on the existence of other religious experiences and on their meaning in God’s salvific plan, is invited to explore if and in what way the historical figures and positive elements of these religions may fall within the divine plan of salvation. In this undertaking, theological research has a vast field of work under the guidance of the Church’s Magisterium. The Second Vatican Council, in fact, has stated that: ‘the unique mediation of the Redeemer does not exclude, but rather gives rise to a manifold cooperation which is but a participation in this one source.’* The content of this participated mediation should be explored more deeply, but must remain always consistent with the principle of Christ’s unique mediation: ‘Although participated forms of

To put this another way, but still in conformity with the faith expressed in the Declaration: non-Christians may potentially be saved without ever converting or being visibly baptized. They must only be *non-culpably* ignorant of the truth of Christianity, and have remained faithful to that light of truth which was shown them, however partial or mingled with error it may have been, within the context of their own religion or tradition.¹³ It is not implied here that that religion *per se* is itself salvific, but simply assumed that such a "good pagan" may be capable, when Christ comes again, of responding to him with a loving heart—because *implicitly* he had already in his earthly life recognized and accepted Christ's grace. To them he will respond, when they ask why he is admitting them to

mediation of different kinds and degrees are not excluded, they acquire meaning and value *only* from Christ's own mediation, and they cannot be understood as parallel or complementary to his.' Hence, those solutions that propose a salvific action of God beyond the unique mediation of Christ would be contrary to Christian and Catholic faith."

Note that the document cautiously does not insist that other religions *do* fall within the divine plan of salvation but simply encourages us to explore the possibility (as I try to do in the present article). The teaching of Vatican II echoed in the document is consistent with the pre-conciliar tradition summarized by Ludwig Ott in *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1955), 312–313. While the Fourth Lateran Council declared in 1215 that "The universal Church of the faithful is one outside of which none is saved," echoing Irenaeus, Origen, Cyprian, et al., St. Thomas "concedes that a person may be saved extrasacramentally by baptism of desire and therefore the possibility of salvation without actual membership of the Church by reason of a desire to be a member of the Church," and by the time of Pope Pius IX the Church had admitted that "in the case of invincible ignorance or of incapability, actual membership of the Church can be replaced by the desire (*votum*) for the same," which "*need not be expressly (explicite) present, but can also be included in the moral readiness faithfully to fulfill the will of God (votum implicitum)*" (my emphasis). In this teaching, of course, the Church was only reflecting the teaching of Scripture (e.g., 1 Tm 2:4).

¹³This does not imply, however, that Christians are not required to evangelize—that is, to attempt to convert others, by the example of their lives and by persuasion, to Christianity. To fail to do so, on the grounds that one may be saved (by Christ) whatever one's religious belief, would be culpable on their part, as Pope John Paul II makes clear in his document on the missions, *Redemptoris Missio* (1990). We must proclaim and explain our own faith to others. Of course, whether they are able or willing to receive or understand what we are telling them, and to affirm it by an act of supernatural faith, is their concern (and God's). Sincere adherence to another religion may function as one of the forms of "invincible ignorance" permitted by God.

his Kingdom, “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Mt 25:35). The attitude of expectation which is cultivated by many religions fits very well with such “eschatological ecumenism”: the prophecies of the Messiah, the Mahdi, the Maitreya, are all to be fulfilled (albeit superabundantly, in a way hardly expected by those who use these terms) by the second coming of Christ in glory.

The document is concerned primarily, if not exclusively, with the concept of *salvation*. The truth entrusted to the Church through the apostolic succession is *saving truth* (n. 22). It is worth noting in this connection, however, the difficulties of translating key concepts from one system of religious ideas to another, and in particular this very concept of “salvation.”¹⁴ To put things somewhat crudely, Christianity is about rescuing the human person from sin, and from the “second death” that is consequent to sin, through union with God in Christ and participation in the divine nature. Buddhist salvation, on the other hand, is about release from suffering through detachment and entrance into the paradoxical state of *Nirvana*,¹⁵ Islam about submission to the will of God and return to Paradise, and so on. *Dominus Iesus* naturally measures other religions against the yardstick of the Christian concept of salvation. It asserts, in full accord with the entire Christian tradition, that salvation comes only through Christ and his Church. To the obvious question, “Does everyone need to be saved, in the *Christian* sense of that word?” the document’s only answer is in the words of Scripture: “God desires all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tm 2:4). All human beings stand in need, whether they know it or not, of salvation in Christ.

To some this may still seem an unpromising foundation on which to build a dialogue with other religions, but it is the only foundation we have, for it is the only one that does not fatally

¹⁴For example, J. A. DiNoia, *The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1992); Gavin D’Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Maryknoll and Edinburgh: Orbis and T. & T. Clark, 2000).

¹⁵Strictly speaking, this applies to Hinayana rather than Mahayana Buddhism, for the ideal of the latter is the compassion of the Bodhisattva, who postpones his own liberation until that of all other beings is achieved. Nevertheless, whether we are speaking of one being or all beings, it is still (Buddhist) “liberation” for *Nirvana* that is in view here, and not Christian “salvation.”

compromise the truth that Christians bring to the table.¹⁶ Let us therefore probe its meaning a little further, in order to throw the differences between the religions into sharp relief. We must seek greater clarity both concerning the nature of salvation, and concerning the identity of the human person or self that is to be saved. These questions are intimately related. Vedanta's liberation is a liberation of the "self," by which it seems to mean the innermost center of the creature, where it emerges from God. The supreme realization of Vedanta is that *Atman* (this innermost "self," which, as we shall see, is not the self for Christianity) is identical with *Brahman* (God). In most forms of Theravada Buddhism, liberation from self-identification is expressed in negative form: there is no abiding "self-nature" anywhere, conceived as an object of consciousness.¹⁷ Furthermore, whereas Buddhism often presents itself as a system of therapy designed to induce the conscious realization of this insight, the object of Christianity is quite different. Christianity is concerned with the salvation of what it calls the "person," that is, a unity consisting of a soul and a body. It is not that the Christian denies the inner presence of God as cause of the creature—"closer to me than I am to myself," as St. Augustine says. But the Christian refuses to identify this Presence of God with "himself,"¹⁸ and he refuses for a reason different from that of the Buddhist, who may not believe in the existence of a "self" at all.

Christian salvation is not attained by means of *gnosis*, by the achievement of a certain state of awareness or experience of *satori* (even though salvation, once finally achieved, does include the Beatific Vision, which is a state of knowledge). God's Self is indeed the supremely Real, in a sense the only Real: but my own self, the

¹⁶That truth is not, fundamentally, a religious ideology or set of concepts, but Jesus Christ himself, the Truth incarnate. Christians represent Christ. More than that, they are to be "sacraments" of Christ, in whom, through the indwelling Holy Spirit they have received in Baptism, Christ is truly present for others.

¹⁷Whether this could be translated into the Christian affirmation that all entities are ontologically dependent upon a God known only to himself is a matter for continuing debate.

¹⁸God does not thereby become separate from the self. "God is not 'an other' but is that being in whom my existence is established, my truth preformulated, and the significance of my existence contained. If I come to God in knowledge, love, and activity, I discover myself in Him" (Romano Guardini, *Freedom, Grace, Destiny*, [New York: Pantheon, 1961], 81).

self that is the human person (or the human person in God) also exists, in its own degree. It is not God but it participates in the Being that God is, by virtue of its creation. Christianity is about the salvation of this less-than-supremely-Real person: not its dissolution, but its integration within the Real; a process of *theosis* or divinization which involves a moral as well as a cognitive dimension. (That is also the reason that theories of reincarnation are useless to Christianity. Whatever may or may not be supposed or imagined to become of the various elements of my body and soul after death is of no concern to it: Christianity is interested in the fate of the personality as a whole; that is, precisely insofar as it is a unity and not an aggregate.)¹⁹ The involvement of the entire material cosmos in man's divinization will be discussed later on in an excursus.

The doctrine of the person that shapes Christian self-understanding originally derives from the concern of the early Christians to have some way of distinguishing the Son from the Father in the one divinity, in order to do justice to the fact of the Trinity and Incarnation. The Incarnation is therefore a theological concept inseparable from the doctrine of the Trinity. It is this complex of ideas (Person, Incarnation, Trinity) that lies behind the Christian term "salvation," and forms the ultimate root of the most important differences between Christianity and other religions. This difference even marks the expressions of mystical experience within the traditions. Without a Trinity at least in the background, a mysticism or cult of love (such as we find in Bhakti Yoga or in Sufism) will always tend to become confused, at least at the popular level, with monism or pantheism: with the idea that our distinct existence is illusory; that our ultimate destiny is therefore to merge without remainder into the Beloved, like a moth consumed in the

¹⁹The "decomposition" of the human being after death is analysed differently by the various religious traditions. Some divide the human compound into nine or ten distinct physical and spiritual elements—the *Khu*, the *Ba*, the *Ka*, and so on (to use the Egyptian names). The fate of these elements after the death or break-up of the compound is not the fate of what Christianity calls the "self," nor even of the "soul," which cannot be divided into parts because it is precisely the principle of life for the organism as a whole. For an interesting discussion of the composition of the self in relation to Hinduism and to the doctrine of reincarnation—and the difficulty in that tradition of accounting for the distinctive individuality of each empirical human being—see Pratima Bowes, *The Hindu Religious Tradition: a Philosophical Approach* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), 58–69.

flame or a drop of water dissolved in the ocean.²⁰ It is the otherness-in-unity of the Trinity, and the union-without-commingling of the two natures in Christ, which alone can guarantee the truth of St. Paul's promise that "love never ends" (1 Cor 13:8), for love *would* end if the lover ever ceased to have someone to love.

2. Reality of the person

In order to engage in a serious dialogue, however, it is necessary not simply to affirm the profound differences of content or emphasis between the religions, but to search assiduously for possible common ground. Often this is sought in the writings of the mystics, whose utterances may appear strikingly similar. Yet the task is not an easy one, since while certain differences between the teachings of the religions may be overcome by giving them a "mystical" interpretation, apparent similarities often mask a deeper divergence.

Despite the strong emphasis in Islam upon God's creation of the world, Sufi mystics speak in similar terms to those found in Asian non-dualist traditions about the "extinction" of the Seeker in the Beloved, as though the world of multiplicity were an illusion. In his explanation of this language, Al-Ghazzali (d. 1111), the classical defender of the Sufis within the Islamic mainstream, made it clear that the real meaning of these utterances is not what it appears. Being, he wrote (in *The Niche for Lights*), is divided into "that which has being in itself, and that which derives its being from not-itself. The being of the latter is borrowed, having no existence by itself. Nay, if it is regarded in and by itself, it is pure non-being. Whatever being it has is due to its relation to a not-itself; and this is not real being at all."²¹

For the greatest mystics of Islam, therefore, the human consciousness is not annihilated in God: it does not cease to be.

²⁰Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic*, vol. 2 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 181. Cardinal Ratzinger describes the central concern of his book, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 85, as the "fundamental choice between the mysticism of identity and the mysticism of personal love," or to put it another way, the "mysticism of identity" vs. a "personal understanding of God" (ibid., 45).

²¹*Al-Ghazzali's Mishkat Al-Anwar*, trans. W. H. T. Gairdner (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1924), 103.

Rather, it never “existed” in the first place—that is to say, it exists only in relation to God, and this is not “existence” in the most perfect sense of the word, which applies only to that *whose very essence is to exist*. That is why a Sufi such as Ibn Arabi is able to say (in his “Treatise on Being”): “most of ‘those who know God’ make a ceasing of existence and the ceasing of that ceasing a condition of attaining the knowledge of God, and that is an error and clear oversight.” He is criticizing the false mystics and pantheists, with whom the true Sufis are often confused. He goes on: “things have no existence, and what does not exist cannot cease to exist. For the ceasing to be implies the positing of existence, and that is polytheism.” (In other words, only the One God can “exist.”) “Then if thou know thyself without existence or ceasing to be, then thou knowest God, and if not, then not.”²² Certainly at first sight this appears to contrast with the Christian view of the dependent, contingent yet actual reality of all creation and every creature. However, Christian philosophers and mystics have also acknowledged that the word “exists” cannot be used in the same sense of God and creatures. Etienne Gilson puts it thus: “As soon as we identify God with Being it becomes clear that there is a sense in which God alone is,” “[a]nd thus all that seems to us most obviously real, the world of extension and change around us, is banished at one stroke into the penumbra of mere appearance, relegated to the inferior status of a quasi-unreality.”²³ A sympathetic Christian interpreter of Ibn Arabi would conclude that the Shaikh is playing on this difference between the two senses of the word, rather than denying reality to things at their own level.²⁴ (Similar problems of interpretation arise with the Hindu Sankara.)²⁵

²²Ibn Arabi, “*Whoso Knoweth Himself . . .*” (London: Beshara, 1976), 5.

²³Etienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1936), 65, 64.

²⁴In *Sufi Metaphysics and Qur’anic Prophets: Ibn Arabi’s Thought and Method in the Fusus Al-Hikam* (Islamic Texts Society, 2003), e.g., 7–13, Ronald L. Nettler has a useful discussion of the deliberate dialectical tension in Ibn Arabi’s writing between oneness and multiplicity—*wujud* (=esse?) having two faces, those of absolute and conditional being, the Real and the real.

²⁵Sankara’s teaching cannot be examined here in detail. I refer the reader to A. J. Alston, *Sankara on the Absolute: A Sankara Source-Book*, vol. I (London: Shanti Sadan, 1980). Pratima Bowes is extremely critical of Sankara’s description of the phenomenal world as illusion, arguing that this distorts the meaning of the Hindu

There is an infinite difference between the uncaused fullness of Being, and the dependent, contingent being that arises from it. On this basis we may concur with the formulation of Abhishiktananda, a Christian who strove to do justice to the insights of Hinduism:

The world is not devoid of truth or reality; it is not *maya* or illusion, except when it is thought of as separated from the One who reveals himself in it, since its whole reason for existing, its very nature as a sign, consists precisely in making him manifest. Therefore when one wants to distinguish the world from God, one should not say that it lacks reality, but rather, following the great doctors of Vedanta, that it cannot be perceived, defined or grasped by concepts, that it is neither *sat* nor *asat*, neither real nor unreal. The Christian also affirms that the world only exists in God, in the Word, by whom it was made. If it exists, it is by no means after the fashion of something that one fine day was casually launched into being; nor is it a thing which, while it owes its existence to God, is nevertheless far away from him. According to Christian revelation, the world exists in the very depths of God, the most secret and profound abyss of the Father's Love, of which it is the mysterious expression and manifestation.²⁶

According to the line of interpretation that I have been following, the "illusion" with which the mystics tell us we must ultimately dispense is that deception of everyday consciousness

Scriptures: "The Upanisads concern themselves with the non-dual divine essence of the universe, but they in no way reject the numerical manyness [of the world] in order to preach non-dualism" (137). Sankara's favorite metaphor of the rope (Reality, the One) that is mistaken for a snake (representing the world of multiplicity) does not solve the conundrum of the world's existence. Does Reality deceive itself, and if so, why? Besides, even a dream—to which he likens the existence of the world—cannot be said to be *nothing at all*, though of course it is not as real as we believe it to be while we are dreaming. A more sympathetic reading of Sankara as completely opposed to all pantheism is to be found in *Christianity and the Doctrine of Non-Dualism* by a Monk of the West (Hillsdale, N.Y.: Sophia Perennis, 2004). The author's name is in fact Alphonse Levée; he was a Cistercian lay brother. Finally, an important new book by Reza Shah-Kazemi, *Paths to Transcendence: According to Shankara, Ibn Arabi and Meister Eckhart* (Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 2006) appeared as this article was going to press.

²⁶Abhishiktananda (Dom Henri Le Saux), *Hindu-Christian Meeting Point: Within the Cave of the Heart* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1976), 67.

which convinces us that God, if he exists at all, is merely another “thing” in the world, though of supreme quality and importance. This perspective interposes a kind of screen between ourselves and God. Thus the Christian author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* can write: “All men have reason for sorrow; but he who knows and feels that he exists has a very special experience of sorrow. In comparison to this, all other sorrows seem to be a sort of pretense.” These passages must be balanced with others, in which the author writes that to desire non-existence would be “the devil’s madness and contempt for God.” The contemplative “is sincere in his heartfelt thanks to God for the noble gift of his being,” although he desires “without seeking” to lose the awareness of it.²⁷ According to the author of the *Cloud*, then, we must in the end *forget ourselves* in the love of the Beloved. He is in agreement with Ibn Arabi (and arguably Shankara) on that point. But this is very different from ceasing to exist altogether. Our existence does not depend on our awareness of it, but solely on God’s awareness of us, which is also his knowledge of himself in us.²⁸ The contemplative who loses himself in the love of God will find himself again when he sees with God’s eyes.

As we have seen, the new term that Christianity introduces into this discussion, and which can help us refine our understanding of mystical “extinction” or “liberation,” is the term *person*. That which is “person” in us must be distinguished from the false, self-centered ego. Indeed, whereas this latter must be extinguished, personality (and thus the authentic individual self) will live forever. But personality cannot be understood without reference to the Trinity, which in turn is bound up with the doctrine of the Incarnation. These ideas will be examined in more detail in the next section.

3. The Trinity

The supreme Principle is beyond all duality, and thus beyond God conceived as Creator of the world (in Hindu terms beyond *Iswara*, or the Absolute conditioned by the act of creating). It is often

²⁷*Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. James Walsh, S.J. (London: SPCK, 1981), ch. 44.

²⁸Many of these points are discussed in Reza Shah-Kazemi, “The Metaphysics of Interfaith Dialogue,” 140–89.

assumed by non-Christians that this means that the Absolute must be *beyond what Christians call the Trinity*, but this is a complete mistake. Even St. Denys the Areopagite in *The Divine Names*, an important source of the distinction between God and Godhead in Eckhart, writes of the super-unknowable Transcendent Goodness itself as "Triadic Unity."²⁹ The Christian Trinity cannot be relegated to the level of the "conditioned Absolute." It is neither determined nor conditioned: the persons of the Trinity are relations the Absolute has with itself.³⁰

The point deserves to be emphasized. The doctrine of the Trinity is primarily about God as he exists in himself, as the divine Essence, not about God as he exists in a relationship with us or as determined by that relationship. Of course, the *revelation* of the doctrine is determined by a relationship to us, but the content or meaning of the doctrine is not. As a dogma of faith, the Trinity remains a "mystery" precisely because it is not to be understood as a mental concept by which the human creature can lay hold of God. If we think we have understood it, what we have understood is not God. As Al-Ghazzali puts it, "none knows Allah with a real knowledge but He Himself." It is in fact, in Christian terms, *the Son* who is forever and necessarily the only valid "idea" of God.

Let us, then, look more closely at the nature of this "Son" as understood in the Christian tradition. Jesus is clearly a divine manifestation and a prophet, as other religions will happily acknowledge; but for Christians he is also much more than that. He is a

²⁹*Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1987), 53.

³⁰With each other, that is, not with the divine essence, as though this stood somewhere behind the persons, an Absolute to their Relative. Vincent Rossi says rightly that for the Hesychasts of the Christian East, "the Divine Personhood enhypositizing the Divine Essence is the absolutely transcendent principle, not the Divine Essence as an unhypositized principle standing alone. The Trinity expresses the primacy of the Person of God over the Divine Essence in the experience of His Presence. Person, not Essence, is the ultimate mystery. For the Hesychasts, then, the Absolute is not transpersonal, but trans-essential" (Cutsinger, *Paths to the Heart*, 79). The Orthodox perennialist Philip Sherrard makes a similar point in criticism of René Guénon in his book *Christianity: Lineaments of a Sacred Tradition* (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1998), 76–113. Despite some important differences between Orthodoxy and Catholicism in the way the mystery of the Trinity is expressed, this is true of both major Christian traditions.

human being, composed of a human body and soul, and he is also God. In the words of the Athanasian Creed, he is

God of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds; and man of substance of His mother, born in the world. Perfect God and perfect man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting. Equal to the Father as touching His Godhead, and inferior to the Father as touching His manhood. Who, although He is God and man, yet He is not two, but one Christ. One, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of that manhood into God. One altogether, not by confusion of substance, but by unity of person.

A “unity of person”? How deep a mystery underlies this simple phrase! The Incarnation illuminates the mystery of personhood by revealing that there is more to a man than his soul and body; that these two natural elements (the one the animating “form” of the other) are held in unity by their relation to God—a relation that exceeds that of Creator to creature. If man were body and soul only, as other animals appear to be, there would have been no room for God to enter into hypostatic union with him. The word *persona* has been used to refer to this unity characteristic of man, which is that of a dramatic “role,” a “mission,” linking all the diverse moments and elements belonging to each human life on earth and making them the unique trajectory of a *person* through time and space (a trajectory, in the end, towards God). In a sense every human life can be described as the “incarnation” of a person; but the person who assumes that role is divine, not created, solely in the case of the man Jesus.

In himself, in the divine Essence, God knows all and loves all that can be loved—the totality of being. That is to say, he knows and loves himself. But it would be equally true to say that he knows and loves the Other, for his knowledge and his love each result in a distinct person, a “subsistent relation.” These relationships do not divide God. They are not things, not modes, not (as Aquinas puts it) accidents inhering in a substance, not separate centers of consciousness, but are each the very same indivisible divine substance and consciousness. They are distinct in relation to each other, but not to the Essence (except notionally). According to the Church Fathers, they are not even truly “three” in a numerical sense, any more than God is “one” in a numerical sense; that is, they are not part of a

series of units, and they do not form a group in relation to anything else standing outside them or able to perceive them as such.

The Incarnation, understood in this light, is not simply a manifestation of God in his relationship with us, or of his relationship with creation as a whole. It is these things, certainly; but it is also a revelation of God's relationship with himself; that is, as Father, Son, and Spirit.

Nowhere does Scripture say that *God* was made flesh, but that the Word was made flesh. What matters here is not the *nature*, but the *hypostasis*. It is not Divine Nature that assumes human nature, it is the Hypostasis of the Son, and this metaphysical difference brings with it decisive consequences in the respective economies of each one of the religions.³¹

By relating ourselves to Christ, we are drawn into the relationship of the Son with the Father, and this is the key to the meaning of "divinization." *God became man so that man could become God.* The individual must "lose his life," in order to find it again in another state of existence. He must be born again (cf. Jn 3:3–15). That is, he must be entirely "personalized." All that is in us must be purged of selfish individualism; it must be absorbed into our relationship to God; that is, *integrated with our personhood.*

It is because Christians believe that relations in God are "subsistent," constituting real persons, that their own relationship with God, their "personality," takes on such significance. The fact that there are persons in God means that our final destiny or aspiration is not best described as "extinction" in the literal sense. If something is to be extinguished, it is the selfish ego or "old Adam." The limitations of the material world will fall away, as they did for the resurrected body of Christ. That which is positive in our individual existence is not eliminated but preserved. Personality, therefore, is not eliminated, but upheld in an eternal embrace. There is already a "place" for us, with and in the Son. That place has room for all that is loveable and worthy of love.³²

³¹Jean Borella, *Guénonian Esoterism and Christian Mystery* (Hillsdale, N.Y.: Sophia Perennis, 2004), 454.

³²A correspondent, John Médaille, responded to a draft of this essay by putting it more clearly than I have done: "Only in relationship can we *be* at all, just as God subsists only in the divine relations. These relationships are entirely ones of giving

All this may be already implied in the writings of other religious traditions, if we read them with the eyes of Christian faith. Each tradition has a way of describing the One, the supremely Real, the Absolute, as containing the fullness of all that may be found in creation. That must include everything that is found in us. To be dissolved into the Absolute, therefore, cannot be in the ordinary sense a disappearance or a destruction of what we are. On the contrary, it must be a discovery and an expansion. However, if this is (conceivably) implied in the Vedas or the Dhammapada, it is made fully explicit only within the Trinitarian framework of Christianity. In other traditions the emphasis often lies more on the negative than the positive meaning of union with the divine. Where God is not revealed as fully personal *in se*, human personality is always in danger of being undervalued, or even suppressed in some way.

4. *Excursus: salvation of the cosmos*

Christianity therefore gives a new value to the creation as a whole. Through the Incarnation, God is seen as completing the

all and receiving all, and giving it again after re-fashioning it. The one who gives without receiving (if such there could be) might be a great philanthropist, but is not a person; and one who receives without giving may become as rich as a great philanthropist, but is not a person; they are individuals, and they and all their works will be destroyed. To the extent that a person 'holds on' to whatever he receives (and all that he has is something received), he remains an individual; to the extent that the individual refashions what he receives and gives it, he becomes a person. In this way, each person recapitulates the whole of being, which is nothing less than an interchange of love between the divine persons. What is 'ours' will pass; what is given and received will endure. Indeed, salvation, and hence survival, is dependent upon being incorporated into the Church, which is the Body of Christ, and hence is always to lose one's individuality in favor of one's personhood; the former attempts to stand alone and apart, the latter is always relational; what stands apart can only lead to death; what is shared is life itself. And of course, this ties directly to Eckhart's notion that we become the Son of God by becoming nothing." In the final draft of this essay, however, I have avoided speaking of the "extinction of individuality" in this sense because it is likely to be misunderstood. "Individuality" in the normal sense of the word is not only preserved but deepened in God. For my own discussion of some of these issues in Eckhart, see "Trinity and Creation: An Eckhartian Perspective," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 30, no. 4 (Winter 2003).

creation. He does so by raising the material world from the temporal to the spiritual level through a kind of "enhypostasization," in Christ, through the Church.³³ From having a beginning and an end, a before and an after, the whole material world enters a realm of being in which there is no end, and no before or after in the sense of successive, fragmentary moments. The Christian sense of God has been very bound up with the notion of an absolute beginning of things (and even of time itself) from God.³⁴ But by itself *creatio ex nihilo* establishes only the contingency of creation upon the will of God. As long as there will also be an ending, the world has only a very fleeting existence. That much is known by all traditions, including the Jewish and the Christian. But the full Christian sense of creation is equally shaped by another distinctive doctrine: that of the Resurrection. Jesus Christ truly rose from the dead and ascended into heaven in bodily form. In this way the world as a whole was given a *new beginning*, to which we look forward in hope, necessarily unknown to those who do not accept the Christian revelation in faith. Death continues to dissolve the fabric of things, but now beyond death a new place has been revealed: a "house with many mansions," the Father's house, a trinitarian house.

Maurice Blondel once wrote:

If things are because God sees them, they are at first only patient of his creative action and so to say non-existent in themselves. But if things are active and truly real, if they subsist under their objective aspect, in short, if they exist, it is because the divine gaze sees them through the gaze of the creature itself, not so much insofar as he creates them, but inasmuch as they are created and their author makes himself patient of their proper action.

It is through the Incarnation that the world becomes more than a shadow of reality. "Without Christ, the creation would be no more

³³In *Cosmos: The Word and the Glory of God* (Petersham: St. Bede's Publications, 1988), Louis Bouyer writes of man as the instrument of a "universal divinization" on the grounds that "man as person includes within himself the entire universe" (225, 227). Cf. my "Cosmology, Eschatology, Ecology," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 27 (Fall 1988): 305–318, for further references and arguments.

³⁴See G. May, *Creatio ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of "Creation out of Nothing" in Early Christian Thought* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994). May shows that the doctrine was developed by Theophilus and Irenaeus, though it was left to later thinkers (Augustine, Aquinas) to grapple with the philosophical difficulties.

than an idea of God; it would not have being, subsistence, divinity. *Omnia et in omnibus Christus*. Things are because Jesus sees them. I am because Jesus loves me.”³⁵

5. Conclusion

The Christian understanding of the Incarnation was not easily arrived at. It took many centuries of theological reflection. Christ seems both more human, and more divine, than the mythological Avatars of Hinduism. He is, uniquely, a human individual assumed by a divine person. Uniquely, he reveals the inner life of God and invites us to share in that life. He is not Visnu, clothing himself in the appearance of the flesh (Docetism).³⁶ He has a human body and soul (*contra* Arianism). The divinity of Christ is present as the principle uniting these physical and spiritual elements. This principle is personal, and in the person is included the world of matter. Christians see God the Son as giving the material world a new depth, a new quality or intensity of existence, by being joined to matter in the hypostatic union. He has completed the act of the world’s creation by becoming Incarnate within it.

It is said that the closest analogy to Christ within Islam is not to the Prophet, but to the Koran: Jesus is the Word made man, as the Koran is regarded as the Word made book. But not even as Book is the Word as deeply implanted within creation as it is in

³⁵Both passages from M. Antonelli, “Trinity and Eucharist in Blondel,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* (Summer 2000): 290.

³⁶Here one must place also the orientalist Henry Corbin, who has nevertheless contributed so much to our understanding of Persian and Sufi philosophy. Corbin rejects Incarnationist Christology as a later development or distortion of Christian thought, identifying the early (and more “authentic”) tradition with that of the Illuminationists: “The theophanic conception . . . is that of an Apparition which is a shining of the Godhead through the mirror of humanity, after the manner of the light which becomes visible only as it takes form and shines through the figure of a stained-glass window. The union is perceived not on the plane of sensory data, but on the plane of the Light which transfigures them, that is to say, in ‘Imaginative Presence’” (*Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi* [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969], 275). The point is that the Chalcedonian and orthodox understanding of the Incarnation is possible only with a doctrine of the Trinity, which these Islamic thinkers did not possess, and which Corbin rejected.

Jesus.³⁷ There is no physical copy of the Koran on earth which is literally the Word of God incarnate, *and there never was*. It is not claimed that the first parchment on which the words of the Angel to the Prophet were inscribed was itself the very Word of God, the uncreated divine Intellect. Rather, the words of the sacred text reveal that Word to those who receive it spiritually (in Arabic, to be sure). In the man Jesus, on the other hand, the Word that is God and with God is supposed to dwell bodily, and although that presence has been removed to heaven since the Ascension, we may still be placed in direct contact with it through the Eucharist. Jesus remains a human being.

In Islamic terms, Jesus perhaps corresponds most closely to the Sufi idea of the Universal Man, through whom alone union with God may be realized, even if the Incarnation as such is necessarily veiled to Muslims.³⁸ In the terms of Chinese Taoism, Christ is the *Tao* incarnate.³⁹ In India, he may perhaps be described as the incarnation of *Vac* (Speech) or perhaps *Purusha*, the immanent personality of the supreme Principle.⁴⁰

As these (albeit tentative) suggestions indicate, there are many possible avenues for dialogue still open to us after *Dominus Iesus*, once we have rejected the false pluralism against which the document was directed. The concept of salvation means something different in each religion, and we must attend carefully to this diversity of meaning. It is bound up in the Christian case with our understanding of so much else—not least the nature of God as triune. But whether or not one accepts the Trinity as having been divinely revealed, Christians (who do so accept it) may be forgiven for thinking that the implications of their belief are vast indeed. It

³⁷Nor, of course, is it taught within Islam that the Word of God is a second divine person.

³⁸See Abd al-Karim al-Jili, *Universal Man*, trans. and ed. Titus Burkhardt (Cheltenham: Beshara Publications, 1983).

³⁹See Hieromonk Damascene, *Christ the Eternal Tao* (Valaam Books, 2002).

⁴⁰However, the person of Jesus is not merely an image or reflection of *Purusha* but its "very self," and this by virtue of hypostatic union. This intriguing suggestion has been made in a book by Ian Davie, whose own path led to Jesus through Hinduism, which he regarded as a revealed religion complementary to Judaism. See I. Davie, *Jesus Purusha: A Vedanta-Based Doctrine of Jesus* (West Stockbridge: Lindisfarne, 1985), 12.

would be as foolish to deny these implications as to use them in order to block any further theological advance. Instead, we must see how far the doctrine may throw light on the path of dialogue that still lies before us, the end of which is not in view. □

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