

# On Vedantic Non-Dualism and Christianity:

*A Dialogue between Robert Bolton and Charles Upton*

**Editor's Introduction:** The first in this series of letters was written by Robert Bolton (author of *The Order of the Ages*) to James Wetmore (of *Sophia Perennis*, publisher of books on tradition, including English translations of the works of René Guénon) and Bolton raises there some of his concerns regarding Non-Dualism in light of his understanding of the Christian doctrines of divine personality. Wetmore forwarded Bolton's letter to Charles Upton (author of the modernist critique, *The System of Antichrist*), who was provoked by the letter to respond to Bolton, leading to an exchange of correspondence between Bolton and Upton on this important issue and other related metaphysical issues. The authors have permitted excerpts from their correspondence to be published in *Sacred Web* in this slightly revised and edited form. [M. Ali Lakbani, Editor]

## **Letter #1: Bolton to Wetmore: February 18, 2005**

I used to be a keen believer in the Non-Dualist esoteric, and this book (*"Christianity and the Doctrine of Non-Dualism"*<sup>1</sup>) is giving me a lot more ideas about why I broke with it. The first principle, that the highest impersonal reality *must* be more real than highest personal one, is strange because we never know the impersonal except as a part of the inner life of persons. For all I can see, the impersonal out of relation to the personal is simply a self-contradiction, since it is an object without a subject. (And by the way, if the Non-Dualists have an effective answer to this, that will be the behaviour of persons as well).

A significant peculiarity of the Guénonian Vedantic esotericism is the way the Vedantic dichotomy of everything between the Godhead and illusion matches the dichotomy in exoteric religion, of a purely infinite God and a purely finite creation. The resolution of dichotomies like

<sup>1</sup> *Christianity and the Doctrine of Non-Dualism* by "A Monk of the West", translated by Alvin Moore, Jr. and Marie M. Hansen, Sophia Perennis, 2004, was reviewed by Harry Oldmeadow in *Sacred Web 15*, June 2005.

these are precisely what we have the esoteric for! Facts like this tend to justify Borella's idea of the esoteric as an exoteric with an extra big ego. At any rate, there is definitely something sub-esoteric in Guénon's thinking.

Another point, according to this system, the universal mystery of creation is to be explained by an analogy with the way light is reflected on water, in which case a child could understand it. So what would we want the esoteric for? In fact, this conception of creation absolutely excludes creativity on all levels, since it would require neither intelligence, nor power, nor will, nor purpose. That would be a religion without mystery, and a God capable of much less than we know humans can do.

### **Letter #2: Upton to Bolton: February 19, 2005**

I was moved to reply to your e-mail to James Wetmore, which he forwarded to me. As I see it, your idea of the Vedanta—though one might make the point that this is actually the way Guénon presents it—contains certain misconceptions which seem to be very common among Christians. They are: (1) That the Vedantic Absolute is strictly “impersonal”; (2) That the Vedanta divides everything between an infinite God and an illusory cosmos, and (3) That the Impersonal Divinity must be an “object,” since the Personal Divinity can be nothing other than a “subject.”

(1) The first misconception, on the sentimental extreme of the spectrum, becomes the Chestertonian image of the Mysterious East as an abyss of numb impassivity and terrible, impersonal heartlessness. This simply indicates that a personalistic sentimentalism must see all that transcends its own level as a demonic emptiness, void of all life, love and relatedness—and this may indeed be the realm encountered by some westerners who have been attracted to the eastern religions because they are basically in flight from God. To them, an impersonal Absolute seems less threatening than a personal God who is *watching* us, and Who may even require something of us. An impersonal Absolute seems much less inconvenient; as C. S. Lewis said about the God of pantheism, “He is simply there if you need him, like a book on a shelf; there is no danger that heaven and earth will flee away at his touch.” I would hazard a generality that Christians, or those with a Christian cultural background, will tend—consciously or not—to view the Vedanta as if

it as were a kind of Greco-Roman pantheism, which is certainly not the case. And this misconception will present itself equally to those attracted by the Vedanta and to those repelled by it. I'll deal with this misconception in greater depth under item (3); here I only want to say that to us westerners the word "impersonal" denotes something on a lower level of being than personhood, like "the Force" in the Star Wars myththology, something on the order of electricity or magnetism or nuclear energy. But the "impersonal" Absolute is actually *transpersonal*, otherwise the Personal God could not be its first and highest intelligible manifestation. The Absolute transcends what we know as personhood in the same sense—though to an infinitely greater degree—that you or I, as persons, transcend a stone. To say that God is only or essentially personal *may* be to imply that He is no more than we conceive Him to be; it may be to imprison Him on our human level of understanding, to deny that He opens out "beyond" into the Infinite. But of course we habitually do the same thing in our conceptions of other people and ourselves; we treat others as if they were no more than our ideas of them, and ourselves as if we were limited to our self-images; we forget that *all* persons are, precisely, personal faces of the same Transpersonal Mystery, because they are made in the image and likeness of God. As an icon of Christ is not Christ Himself but a window opening onto His Reality—which is ultimately the reality of the Father Whom "none has seen at any time," given that "I and the Father are one"—so you and I are "icons" of the Universal Humanity, as Paul indicated when he said, "It is not I who live, but Christ [Who is One with the Father] lives in me."

(2) The Vedanta does *not* strictly divide reality between an Infinite God and an illusory cosmos. To begin with, *Maya* does *not* mean "illusion;" it means "manifestation" or "magical apparition," deriving from the root "to measure"; *Maya*, then, is the Infinite when seen according to any finite conceptual or perceptual set. God creates the universe by His *Maya*-power, projecting it as something which exists in one sense, and in another sense does not. The classical metaphor for the action of *Maya* in the Vedanta is "to mistake a rope for a snake." The "snake" is clearly an illusion; the "rope" is not. *Maya* is a manifestation of the God Who is unknowable in His Essence. If we take the universe as something existing in its own right, as something which would continue to exist even if God were to withdraw His attention from it, then we are

deluded by *Maya*. The universe does not exist in its own right—it is a creation of God, Who has not simply created it in the past, but holds it in existence in this moment. It is created *ex nihilo* in the sense that God creates the universe from nothing *other* than Himself, since only He possesses Being intrinsically; the universe does not. In one sense it is a manifestation of Him: “the heavens show forth the glory of God, and the earth declares His handiwork. In its own right, it is nothing. And if we believe that it exists in its own right, then *Maya* has deluded us; in this sense alone can *Maya* be translated as “illusion.”

Furthermore, the Vedanta does *not* make a strict separation between God and cosmos. If no separation at all were made—if the level where such a separation applies were not recognized—then the Vedanta would indeed be pantheism. And, as you say, if the Vedanta were to absolutize this separation in a simple way, then it could in no way be called an esoterism. In reality, the Vedanta recognizes four levels of consciousness, which are equally four ontological (or trans-ontological) levels: (a) “Brahman is real, the universe is unreal”; (b) “There is only Brahman”; (c) “I am Brahman”; (d) “All this, too, is Brahman.” And the earlier levels are not negated by the latter, but rather contained within them. Thus level (d) is not pantheism, because it embraces level (a) which negates pantheism, nor is level (c) megalomania, because it embraces level (b), where the individual self does not appear, as well as level (a) where, though it appears, it is recognized as illusory.

To say “the reality of the universe is like the image of the Sun reflected on the water” is not, in my opinion, simplistic; rather, it is *simple* in the sense of immediately efficacious and accessible. Any child could understand it—in a childish way—but how many of us can really *see* the world around us, and our own phenomenal selves, as direct reflections of the Absolute? We can only pray that a lifetime of spiritual purification will enable us to catch a glimpse of this level of Reality. Here we come to one of the great apparent divides between the Vedanta and what some would call “exoteric” Christianity—or that between, say, Plotinus and Semitic monotheism: the seeming conflict between “emanationism” and “creationism.” For God to “emanate” the universe rather than creating it, as in the case of the appearance of the image of the Sun in a motionless body of water, seems to make creation an “automatic” reflex of the Divine Reality, and thus to constrain God by something less than He is,

something that is merely on the order of natural law—as if God were helpless *not* to create the universe, and thus, in effect, helpless also to deliberately create it. On one level, we can say that whereas Beyond Being emanates the universe—if we can actually place Beyond Being in relation to its own emanation as “other,” which strictly speaking we cannot—the Personal God, or Pure Being, creates it. In other words, the Absolute (as it were) brings the universe into being by first “emanating” Pure Being, the Creator. In Vedantic terms, the first “reflex” of Brahman is Ishvara, who does indeed plan, create, govern and maintain the visible universe; even Ramana Maharshi asserts this—though he adds that, from the standpoint of *jñānic* realization, Ishvara is simply the “last thought.” While we experience ourselves as actors, God is the Supreme Actor whose actions supercede ours; by our own actions we can create only certain modifications in the conditions of our lives, while God the Creator has established both the entire range of those conditions, and ourselves as acting subjects with free will. But as soon as we transcend the experience of ourselves as authors of our own actions—by means of the realization that, in reality, God is the only Actor—then (paradoxically) we have also transcended God as Actor and Creator, at which point all things are viewed not as objects created by Him, but rather as direct emanations or reflections of His essential nature.

(3) To say that the Impersonal Absolute (presumably Nirguna Brahman or God-without-attributes) is Object, while the Personal God (Saguna Brahman) is Subject, is not what the Vedanta teaches. It teaches precisely the reverse: that Nirguna Brahman, as the Absolute Witness or Atman is, in Frithjof Schuon’s phrase, “the Absolute Subject of [or behind] our contingent subjectivities,” whereas the world of conditions, taken (on one level of consciousness) as Saguna Brahman, is *objective* to this Witness; Beyond Being is the Absolute Witness of Being and all It creates—with the understanding that it does not witness Being as *other* than Itself, but rather *as* Itself.

At this point we can come to a deeper understanding of the Vedantic Absolute, in the mode of Atman, not as impersonal, but as transpersonal. That in me which witnesses things is my very power of consciousness, my very Self, the furthest thing from anything impersonal. And yet that Self nowhere appears in the total field of the possible objects of consciousness, since anything I witness out there as “myself” is not my true

Self, but merely a self-image, or a sense-image of my body; (remembering Blake's doctrine, from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, that "the Body is the portion of the Soul perceived by the five senses"). Who I Really am never appears, *cannot ever* appear, as an object of consciousness; in Vedantic terms, "the eye cannot see itself." The very essence of my personhood is thus not *impersonal*, but rather *transpersonal*.

What could be more obvious than our Self? And what is more hidden, to our passion-darkened habitual consciousness, than the obvious? It is not I who see the world, and the self I think I am, but Christ who sees it through my eyes. If I seek to retain my soul, the self I think I am, I will lose it. But if I lose it for His sake, I will find it [as the Self]. Three (or four) levels of consciousness are described here. The first is the level of "seeking to keep our souls," the level of our habitual egotism where we, in effect, believe that we have created ourselves, or at least that it is up to us to define ourselves, and to maintain our identities as so defined. (If we cannot transcend this level we will lose ourselves anyway, not by self-transcendence but by eternal self-destruction; we will fall into the world where everything is defined by the ego in its failed and despairing attempt to create and maintain itself—this being the state of hell, the "darkness outside"). The second level of consciousness is where we lose our souls for His sake; this corresponds to the second level of consciousness posited by the Vedanta, the level of "there is only Brahman," as well as to *fana* (or "annihilation") in Sufism. And the third level, the one where, because we have lost our souls for His sake, we now "find" them, corresponds to "I am Brahman," and to the Sufi *baqa* or "subsistence-in-God." (The fourth Vedantic level, the level of "All this, too, is Brahman," corresponds to everything Christians mean by Apocatastasis.) The same passage from self-defined subject through annihilation in the transcendent Divine Object to the unveiling of the Absolute Subject is also encapsulated in the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad, may peace and blessings be upon him: "Pray to God as if you saw Him, because even if you don't see Him, He sees you."

And it is certainly true that an "esoteric" ego is a much bigger and more savage beast than an exoteric one. "To whom much has been given, much will be required." All that is required of the exoteric believer—and it in itself is no simple task—is sincerity and humility; the esoteric *jñānin* must submit to total annihilation and "objectification"; if he fails in this

he will rebel like Lucifer, and fall as just deep.

**Letter #3: Bolton to Upton: February 21, 2005**

I was surprised that you should have replied to my comments to James Wetmore at such length. I have just read your letter, and am not sure if I can provide a detailed response at the moment.

I am sure there must be many theoretical arguments against what you have said, but more important than any of them is what G.K. Chesterton called “the little dumb certainties of experience.” These are things which you appear to have exterminated so that you could contrive to put a world of phantoms between yourself and reality, which to me is merely to abuse one’s sanity.

You speak so confidently about “the Vedanta”, although when we speak of it in relation to what I was addressing, this really only means the Vedanta as interpreted by Shankara. What we are talking about would not be possible, subject to the interpretations of Ramanuja or Madhva, I believe. Both Guénon and Schuon ignore that as well.

With what you say about all the levels to pass through, and the mysterious processes through which something or other (the ego?) must pass, it looks as though you have summed up the system of the truly real, but for one thing, namely, that *you are thinking it*, and that is something else again.

**Letter #4: Upton to Bolton: February 21, 2005**

To disagree with you is obviously to invite you to disagree with me, hopefully in the spirit of exposing error and serving truth.

So: What “little dumb certainty of experience” are we dealing with here? Could you be more specific?

Your point is well taken that I have unthinkingly identified “the Vedanta” with the non-dualistic, Shankarian Vedanta alone. I will be more careful in the future.

You ask if it is the *ego* that goes through all those levels of consciousness. Good point! Language undoubtedly constrains us to speak as if the “little me” were realizing God, as if it were capable of encompassing Him. But as is made clear in the First Chapter of John, the little me cannot realize God, and insofar as that little me remains—which it always seems to, for almost all of us, at least while we are still in this life—then it is a

servant of God, in need of His grace and helpless without it.

So the question is, are my ideas “phantoms”? And if they are, are *all* ideas then phantoms? Or all metaphysical ideas? I suppose you mean to challenge me to ask myself whether all this metaphysical mumbo jumbo is simply a kind of information acquired by mental effort which lives nowhere but in my temporal memory which will perish with my mortal flesh. Undoubtedly some of it is. It is certainly possible to “learn metaphysics” by rote—but it is also possible to speak out of realization, to express a metaphysical truth that is “before one’s eyes” in as concrete a way—in even more concrete a way—as the coffee cup on the desk.

#### **Letter #5: Bolton to Upton: February 23, 2005**

Thank you for your reply. I will try be more specific.

You challenge my use of the word “impersonal” rather than “transpersonal” in regard to the Absolute, but I can easily concede that, because it too is something known on the basis of the personal and not ontologically separable from it. That is important for what we believe about God: whether God’s unity embraces the personal, the transpersonal and the impersonal, or whether God-as-personal and God-as-transpersonal are ontologically different realities.

This is probably the essence of our disagreement. To begin with, you seem to come out against the latter alternative, referring to C.S. Lewis’ remark about the pantheists who treat God as though He were just a book on a shelf. But are you not actually committed to a position for which the personal God who can require something of us is nevertheless the lesser of the two realities?

You say that all persons are “personal faces of the same Transpersonal Mystery”, when we should really say that they are all images of the archetypal humanity of Christ—and that humanity cannot be regarded as a mere mask, as the Monophysites believe.

You say that Vedanta (according to Shankara?) does not divide reality between and Infinite God and an illusory cosmos, and that *Maya* does not mean “illusion”; that is the opposite of everything I have been able glean on this subject, so the interpreters must be deeply divided. Do any creatures exist in their own right? That is very much an issue in modern Catholic theology, which may be influenced by the Vedanta in dividing everything between an absolutely self-existent God and an absolutely



contingent creation. Being a Platonist, that means for me that in this case there could not possibly be any relation between them. All things are joined by means. Thus the highest members of creation share to a large extent in (created) self-existence, and only the lowest members are completely contingent. Hence the Great Chain of Being. Just to say that the soul is immortal is to say that it has a degree of self-existence. (Actually Aquinas affirms this.)

You say very emphatically that “Who I Really am can *never* appear as an object of consciousness”, although by holding this position, you undermine some other things you say: you mention the four levels of consciousness through which Vedantists progress, but we cannot know what levels we are on if the “I” cannot be an object of consciousness to itself. Similarly, where you say that we can only save our souls by losing them (into God’s hands, presumably), we cannot know whether we are doing that or not, if the self is not an object of consciousness to itself. Perhaps you mean we just have to hope that we are doing so in the conduct of our lives. Losing one’s soul in order to find it raises a logical problem, by the way: if we mean it literally, we are not really doing so, if we are hoping for anything – losing one’s soul (literally speaking) must mean losing it in order to lose it. But in reality, the meaning of this expression is strictly of the moral order, not the ontological order.

The word Apocatastasis is used in a good many ways, but no Christians, apart from, possibly, Origen, have used it to mean that there will ultimately be nothing but God. That is Monism precisely.

Back to the “two Gods” issue: the Transpersonal God who “creates” a world by something as casual and contingent as causing a reflection, and the Personal God who creates the world on purpose and sees that it is good—these are either two antagonistic Gods, or this is all just a way of saying that, while God really is the Creator, He has other activities which have nothing to do with creating. If man can have a private life, why not God as well?

I am a Christian Platonist, and that allows a certain kind of esotericism, which has very sound credentials. But the esotericism of Guénon and Schuon seems to me to owe too much to the “tradition” founded by H.P. Blavatsky. We are clearly a long way apart, but I hope that this will help you to see what the issues between us are.

**Letter #6: Upton to Bolton: February 28, 2005**

I will respond shortly in greater detail to your latest (more challenging) letter. For the present, I want to share this with you: last night, my wife and I attended a theatrical version of C. S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce*, and I was conscience-struck by one of the characters: the painter for whom the love of light had been replaced by the love of paint. As Rumi says, "When I came to Love, I became ashamed of all I ever said about Love." And yet (like Rumi, who in his *Mathnawi* keeps saying "Enough! Now all is silence. . ."), and then goes on to compose another thousand lines) we continue to write. I think it was Li Po who made the same comment about Lao Tzu: If he believed that "those who know don't speak and those who speak don't know," how came he to compose a book of 5000 characters?

**Letter #7: Bolton to Upton: February 28, 2005**

Thanks for your latest, but for this time will just clarify my original reply. I had no intention of disparaging metaphysics as such—ideas are not just thoughts, but realities reflected in thought. My reference to the "world of phantoms" was projecting something of my own experience. In my younger days there was something which inclined me to Solipsism without my realizing it, and the Guénonian Vedanta blended with that trait, so I was a keen consumer of this Oriental mysticism. Solipsism gives one a world full of emptied beings, devoid of inner reality, inner worlds, or mystery. Those are the phantoms which one would be putting between oneself and reality. If you have no such problem with this doctrine, I would not know whether that was to the credit of your doctrine or of your psychic self-defences.

This is all of a piece with the "little dumb certainties of experience." Monism/NonDualism, if taken seriously, has an effect of devaluing the reality of things we naturally take to be real, as though we could only make God look more real by making creation look less than real. That may be helpful for people who are inclined to make a God of the world, but I do not include myself there. On the other hand, if the "illusion" doctrine is really just another way of underlining the difference between creation and the uncreated God (as you seem to suggest), do we really need it?

Now the ego or the "little me", as you call it: this perception of the

self is wholly owing to sense-perception, which is deceptive in many ways, and most of all when it pretends to show us our own selves. We cannot base deep metaphysics, let alone initiatic knowledge, on sense perception—and untrained common-sense perception at that. And yet, it seems to me that most of the impact of Vedantist mysticism depends on our taking this average man's sense perception of finite beings, passing into and out of existence like shadows, as though it were a revelation from God. But metaphysical knowledge must get behind these appearances, and the esotericism I have in mind does that. Conversely, if sense perception rules, it must define knowledge as such, and our metaphysical knowledge may well be phantasmal.

Here we get to the main focus of our differences: there are deeply different ways of defining the esoteric, and they depend in turn on how we define man himself. There are two diametrically-opposed ways of doing that, one of them of Indian origin, as adopted by Guénon and Schuon, and one of Egyptian origin. For the Indian doctrine, man is in essence the same as God, but cosmically polluted in the course of arriving in this world. So, then, we just have to scrape off the pollution, and there will then be nothing but God, just as it ought to be. This is practically the same as saying that man as such is not real at all.

The opposite of this is a conception for which this multi-leveled, microcosmic nature we have is not accretion, but is our very essence, created by God. Consequently, it would be self-contradictory to try to fully realize that essence by trying to be a pure spirit, like God. I could say more about the real or esoteric nature of the individual self, if need be.

#### **Letter #8: Upton to Bolton: March 7, 2005**

You ask me whether God's unity embraces the personal, the transpersonal and the impersonal, or whether God-as-personal and God-as-transpersonal are ontologically different realities. That is an extremely good question. I would say that It/He does embrace all these levels of reality. Yet (paradoxically) we can still discern these ontological levels within that Unity (though to strictly identify them with the Persons of the Trinity is not warranted). I share what is perhaps your concern about some of Guénon's and Schuon's formulations of the ontological distinction between Saguna Brahman and Nirguna Brahman, or the

Personal God as Pure Being and the Godhead as Beyond Being, which sometimes seem in danger of degrading the Personal God to some kind of independent, created demiurge. That is sometimes a problem with their language, though not (I trust) with their substance.

I certainly agree that we are not mere masks of the Transpersonal (despite the etymology of “person” from the Latin for “mask”; literally, something that is “sounded through”); rather, we are individual instances of It: unique instances of the Human Archetype, which in itself “opens up behind” into the Infinite. God Himself is not merely universal; He is also unique, is Uniqueness itself.

Do creatures exist in their own right? I would say that nothing created by God exists in its own right—at least in the same sense that God does—but for the fact that God confers that right upon it. In my own religion (Islam), the absolute sovereignty of God over creation—a sovereignty that is both willful and ontological—is emphasized to such a degree that some schools of thought seem to deny secondary causation. This, however, is not literally the case; no tradition that doesn’t allow for secondary causation could have so advanced the human understanding of natural law. It’s just that the First Cause is seen as absolutely superseding and dominating all secondary causes, though He chooses to allow them to operate, or actually wills them to operate. To say that God “turns existence over” to secondary causes, however—which also implies that He turns it over to beings who (now) exist in their own right, and can thus create in their own right—opens the door to Deism. Sentient beings choose and create, natural laws operate, but always as created, witnessed, allowed, and ultimately willed by God. (When we will something, it is really God Who is willing it—*not* because we have no free will, but because, as we draw upon God’s gift of His Own Being for our very existence, so we draw upon God’s own power of willing for our actions and choices: if “it is not I who live but Christ lives in me,” it is also not I who act, but God acts in me—action being an essential aspect of life. Yet God does not impose His Will upon us; this is the principle expressed by Ibn al-Arabi as “the determined determines the Determiner.”) So everything, on all levels of the Great Chain of Being, is absolutely contingent upon God; on pain of Deism we must assert this. God’s free gift of His own autonomy is the source of whatever autonomy we have, and such autonomy varies vastly in degree, from that of the

Seraph to that of the falling rock. Both are equally contingent upon God in this present creative moment. He wills both to be, and could at any moment will them not to be. And both are totally free to be what they are as he has made them. Yet the freedom and autonomy of the Seraph immensely surpasses that of the rock.

You are right in saying that if we try to lose our life in order to find it, then we have defeated our own purpose—but then why did Jesus say “he who loses his life for My sake shall find it”, if he was not somehow recommending a kind of self-annihilation, of which His crucifixion was the clearest and most complete example? Jesus obviously knew that He would rise again, that He possessed eternal life, but that didn’t prevent Him from going straight through the experience of “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?” Yes, we must lose ourselves completely in God, as if we never knew that we were immortal, because we cannot at the same time hold on to our desire for the continued existence of our individual identity, and really let go of that identity. We may plan to do this kind of letting go in the future, in hopes of obtaining something infinitely better; the spiritual life would be impossible without the theological virtue of Hope. But when the moment of truth arrives, we have to (in Rama Coomaraswamy’s colloquialism) “fish or cut bait.” In that moment, the one we imagined “obtaining” something is no longer the old “me”, but rather One for whom nothing need be obtained because, to Him, all eternally is. The life we regain is His life, not ours (and, in truth, it was always His). But since there is no continuity between my individuality and the Absolute, I really do have to die “without hope,” as hope is defined by my mortal thoughts and desires. Conversely, because there is nothing real that does not partake of the Absolute and is not supported by It, my human individual personhood is itself eternal—eternal as long as I have really died to it, died to its concupiscence, its pride, its temporality and its mortality.

Here you bring up one of the real paradoxes of mystical experience, or at least of the kind of mystical theology which says things like: “I cannot know God, but God knows Himself in me.” You are absolutely right that, if the individual self cannot be an object of consciousness to itself, then there is no way we can experience its loss to, or in, God. So the only way our life can be lost and regained in God, in full consciousness, is if the experience is ultimately God’s own consciousness—not

that of a strictly transcendent God, but of a God who is immanent, at this moment, in me. This immanent God is the Absolute Witness, the Atman: "It is not I who live, but Christ lives in me."

You say that in reality, the meaning of this expression is strictly of the moral order, not the ontological order. But can there be anything moral that is not, on another level, also ontological? If so, it wouldn't be real. (So much for the false voluntaristic exoterists who deny the Hierarchy of Being.) And can there be anything ontological that is not, on another level, also moral? If so, it wouldn't be good. (So much for the antinomian pseudo-esoterists.) I say that the exoteric meaning of "to lose one's life for Christ's sake" is moral, while its esoteric meaning is ontological. And the two are not ultimately separate (which, incidentally, is why both Elijah—symbol of the esoteric, ontological dimension—and Moses—symbol of the moral, the exoteric—appeared next to Christ in His Transfiguration). But who else says this? Probably not even Dionysius the Areopagite. Perhaps only Eckhart is explicit about it, when he says "My truest 'I' is God." In my view, this is precisely the esoteric exegesis of "he who loses his life for My sake shall find it." I define Atman as the "I" Who knows Itself essentially—by being itself, not by becoming an object of consciousness to itself—which is not to say that It does not also (partially and imperfectly) become an object of consciousness to Itself, thereby manifesting the universe. In other words, we cannot say that before creation God was ignorant of His true nature, that he manifested the world as a kind of creative Self-exploration. We may learn more about ourselves in the act of creating something (though I believe that we often forget nearly as much at the same time, if not more), but God does not need to practice art therapy in order to better understand Himself; His Being is His Knowing.

You say: "The word Apocatastasis is used in a good many ways, but no Christians, except, possibly Origen, have used it to mean that there will ultimately be nothing but God. That is Monism precisely." If by Apocatastasis we mean that all things will be restored to their original form and stature as God created them, then this implies that human consciousness will also be so restored. I maintain that such restored consciousness sees all things in God. "All this is Brahman" is not strictly Monism, since there is still an "all this," a "ten-thousand things," and since, as I said in my earlier letter, this fourth level does not negate the earlier

three levels, but embraces them. This is what Schuon means by "*maya-in-divinis*," and it is *maya-in-divinis* which negates strict "literal" Monism. In the (Shankarian?) level two, "there is only Brahman," all individual distinctions disappear; but here they are restored, as manifestations of God, not as veils hiding Him—as is the case with level one, "Brahman is real, the universe is unreal." Only a universe of veils need be negated in favor of God; a universe of theophanies need not be. It seems to me that the experiential "realization" of Monism is represented by those enraptured saints, much in evidence in India, to whom the particulars of the world, other people and themselves, have disappeared, the ones immersed in *nirvikalpa samadhi* and therefore totally unable to deal with practical affairs. Traditions which recognize the existence and validity of such ecstasies usually speak of them as inferior to those sages who, while they may have passed through an ecstatic stage, have now "returned" to the conditional, manifest world, seeing it all as a theophany but not for all that ignorant or unable to deal with the particulars of other people and of changing situations—even more able than most to deal with such things, some would argue, since they no longer view them through the obscuring veils of subjectivity. So Monism, though false as a description of the essential nature of things, does represent what the Sufis would call a *maqam*, a "station," a proximate stage-of-realization, whereas the sage who sees all things as participating in the divine theophany, in their total depth of particularity, but without this veiling to the slightest degree the Presence of the Absolute, sees things as they really are, and so is beyond all stations. This is what I believe is indicated by "And all this is Brahman."

With regard to Guénon, Schuon and Blavatsky, exactly how do you see Guénon and Schuon as part of an esoteric tradition "created" by Blavatsky? Doctrinally, which is what we are talking about here, they are poles apart. Of course Guénon investigated many occult organizations in his earlier life, and may have retained certain accidental habits of mind from those years, but that doesn't mean he shared any doctrinal common ground with the Theosophical Society, except by virtue of what the Society stole from the Vedanta (by "stole" I mean "appropriated for their own purposes, and in so doing took totally out of context"). Guénon wrote an entire book exposing the Theosophical Society as a pseudo-religion; are we to believe that he had no doctrinal reasons for

doing so, that their disagreement was a mere turf-war among rival gurus? It is true that Blavatsky on the one hand, and Guénon and Schuon on the other, spoke of a Primordial Tradition (in Hindu terms the *sanatana dharma*), but this, in Blavatsky's rendition, is something that is destined to replace the revealed religions in the near future, while Guénon and Schuon maintained that it was manifest in the revealed religions, and was only spiritually effective within the bounds of one of them. This is the great divide between Blavatsky and Guénon. Guénon's teaching reached back to the days "when God walked with man in the cool of the evening"; Blavatsky's went back only as far as the Tower of Babel. Guénon speaks (at his best) out of the Primal Word, Blavatsky only from the Confusion of Tongues. You can legitimately disagree with Guénon's position, but no well-informed person can confuse his teaching with Blavatsky's, except in accidentals.

When you refer to "the Transpersonal God who 'creates' the world by something as casual and contingent as causing a reflection," and the Personal God who creates the world on purpose and "sees that it is good", where you see "casual and contingent," I see "inevitable, effortless, and perfect." Do you think God has to struggle to create the universe? Wrestle painfully with His materials like some tormented artistic genius? Raise a sweat like a carpenter or bricklayer? As the Qur'an says, "He needs only to say to a thing 'Be!', and it is." Once all is already created, in a moment of eternal time, then God's creative power extends further, toward bringing "out" into existence what has been created, and finally toward working on, and with, what already exists. (Here we can see the operation, on three distinct levels, of three of God's Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names: the Creator, the Producer, and the Fashioner.) Perhaps on certain levels God is a Workman, but if we take the level where He (apparently) must struggle against the chaotic inertia of matter to build the cosmic harmony, then we deny His Omnipotence (besides starting to sound an awful lot like Freemasons), which is instantaneous and ontologically absolute.

Man truly would have a private life—if it were not for God. God is the only One whose private life is absolutely private. (I love your metaphor, by the way; it is worthy of C.S. Lewis.) Certainly, He has many other "activities," or modes of Being, than those defined by His role as Creator; and yet all His activities are subsumed under the definition of God as



“pure Act.” In God, all possibilities are actualized—by His nature, not by what we would think of as discrete, particular actions, in which what is first a mere potency is later made actual. The motion from potency to act happens in the already-projected reflection of God in the sea of cosmic *prima materia*, where the creative aspect of Him “stands out” as Creator. Only when a Creator is confronted with a mass of possibility which has yet to be actualized can we speak of such a motion. But in the depths of the Godhead, all is actualized already.

The Creator, in essence, is the Godhead itself—yet, as you say, that Godhead also has a “private life” beyond His creativity. To speak of this “private life” is to speak of the Divine Essence *per se*—but truly there is no separation between this Essence and the Creator Who is Its manifestation—Its manifestation to us as creatures. The Creator is fully Godhead, and yet Godhead is not limited to Its creative function. God Is, Perfectly, in His Own nature—and since He Is (nothing else than) *that* He Is (to quote His Self-description at the Burning Bush), He is also Beyond Being. He is Beyond Being by the fact that He is neither this nor that; by the fact that, since He Is by His Own Essence alone, He is not one among the various things that possess Being; and by the fact that He is neither contingent upon some other Being, nor is He “contingent upon Himself”. He has not created Himself and so need not maintain Himself. He need not Be. He is Beyond Being.

Again, those writers I follow—the Traditionalists, Ramana Maharshi, and others—do not define *maya* as “illusion,” but as the “magical” self-manifestation of God. If we think that the universe is literally God, we are deluded by *maya* (*avidya-maya*), whereas if we see the forms of the universe as nothing other than manifestations of the very Godhead, Who can never be defined in terms of that which manifests Him, then we are witnessing *vidya-maya*. And this is the furthest thing from stumbling around in a world of contingent, illusory, dying phantoms: rather, it is a witnessing of the Real, as if face-to-Face, and of all forms as living, breathing instances of Life Itself. It is poles apart from an alienated vision of things; it is a vision of all things restored. In Blake’s words, “If the Doors of Perception were cleansed, all would appear to Man as it is, Infinite.” In the same vein, Olivier Clement, in *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, quotes from Vladimir Maximov: “...it is as if I were seeing the forest for the first time. A fir tree was not only a fir tree, but also something else

much greater. The dew on the grass was not just dew in general. Each drop existed on its own. I could have given a name to every puddle on the road." In Buddhist terms, this is a vision of the union of "suchness," *tathata*, and "voidness," *shunyata*. This *shunyata* is not some horrible, dead emptiness—only thought thinks that. It is rather an "emptiness of self-nature" in things, which means that things are not hidden from us, and from themselves, by some obscure sort of self-involvement, but rather are exactly as they appear, as they appear to the eyes of Truth Itself. They are not *mere* appearances; in all their uniqueness, they are the very appearance of the Real. This is their suchness, their *tathata*.

I'm sorry, but I just can't see how the Advaita Vedanta could be based on naïve realism taken to its metaphysical extreme, as you have suggested; that would be materialism. It is true that Hinduism and Buddhism—Buddhism in particular—tend to emphasize the passing impermanence of things, but they do so as a spiritual method: If we witness our phenomenal selves as impermanent, for that precise reason we will *not* identify with sense experience or seek to hold on to old self-concepts, which are the chief among those lifeless phantoms you mention. When the phenomenal self is allowed to pass, when it is clearly witnessed as passing, then the noumenon shines clear.

With regard to your reference to cosmically polluted man scraping off his pollution, here is where we run into the whole idea of reincarnation—which Guénon, rightly or wrongly, denied was ever taught by the legitimate Vedanta—which may seem to deny the eternal immortality (rather than the indefinite temporal extension) of the individual soul. Here is where we must ask the question: what incarnates?, which is another way of asking: "who am I?" Guénon emphasizes the doctrine of the Advaita Vedanta that "the Self (or Brahman) is the one and only Transmigrant." Only He passes (or appears to) from form to form. On a less absolute level, however, we could say that what "reincarnates" is my physical and psychic *materia*, which, like my clothes and books, may pass on to new owners after my death. My form, however, is never repeated. And what is never repeated is, thereby, immortal form the standpoint of God's consciousness in the eternal present. Exactly how Hinduism expresses this kind of immortality on a doctrinal level I am not entirely clear on—like most Westerners I jumped directly to the Vedanta; fool that I was, I didn't want to busy myself with with

concepts that seemed no better than Christian—but it is clear that the sages of the past, who can intercede for the living, are conceived of as immortal on some level; Ramakrishna himself has visions of those immortal exalted sages who are higher even than the gods. Likewise the dying Ramana Maharshi, when asked by his disciples where he would “go” after death, replied: “Go? Where could I possibly go? I will be ‘here,’ even where I am now.”

The individual, form-bound self can never become pure Spirit (it is Luciferian to believe it can)—except as witnessed by pure Spirit, Who, while remaining totally aware of all form- and time-bound particulars, in essence (and paradoxically) sees nothing but Itself. The created, form-bound self remains a servant of its Creator. What happens, however—if it happens—is that the Absolute Witness is unveiled, after which point it is not I who witness myself, but He who witnesses me. I am objectified before the face of God, Who Alone knows me perfectly, precisely as I am. Before this metanoia, my contingent self is “me” and God is “He.” After it, my contingent self is “he,” while God is “I”—again, in Eckhart’s words: “My truest ‘I’ is God.” In this state our individuality remains; it is not merged or blotted out in the Formless. Rather, it is witnessed by the Formless, which (paradoxical as it may seem) by Its witnessing both reveals my form-bound, witnessed self to be totally contingent upon the Formless, and at the same time sees it as being, in all its synthetic complexity, transparent to It. By becoming fully objective to the Absolute Witness, that self becomes most fully itself, and at the same time is revealed as fully “void of (contingent) self-nature.” Its uniqueness is known as a unique instance of the Absolute Uniqueness of God. Thus what once appeared as various layers of cosmic accretion and pollution, obscuring the face of Truth—which is exactly what we seem to be (and, effectively though not essentially, what we are) when perceptually limited by our passions and egotism—is now revealed as a manifestation of all it once seemed to hide—a manifestation in which nothing is hidden. When veiled we are veils—when unveiled, unveilings—of the Truth.

What you have to say is profoundly true to the dark, alienated ways in which abstract thought can construe spiritual truth, and to what so many westerners have actually found who have turned to Buddhism and the Advaita Vedanta in flight from Christ (in the case of Christians) or Yah-weh (in the case of Jews). But Christ, Yah-weh are there too, if

they only knew. And undoubtedly many Hindus have the same alienated relationship to their own tradition, as do many westerners to Christianity and Judaism, and many Muslims to Islam. The Advaita Vedanta is old, in cultural terms. But the Truth Itself, though old, never becomes old. The Ancient of Days is also archaic and, simultaneously, Ever-Young. Ibn al-'Arabi met him at the Kaaba.

### **Letter #9: Bolton to Upton: March 16, 2005**

In arguing for the Guénonian idea of the Vedanta, you are arguing for a form of mysticism which requires that the world should result exclusively from emanation and not creation, and so this discussion will have to be mainly concerned with the question as to whether there is a real creation or not. Your latest reply begins by agreeing that God is really one, and so comprises everything personal and transpersonal, so here is at least one orthodox belief about God on which we are agreed.

However, the “two Gods” idea, and the Non-Dualist doctrine of “identification” appear to stand or fall together. If God cannot be divided into one half which is above Maya and one which comes under it, because the determinate and the indeterminate aspects of God are equally real, God must be outside this conceptual framework. Why then may not everything else be?

You have said before that “Maya” does not really mean “illusion,” but in that case, you are parting ways with Schuon. He affirms that it does in Chapter 5 of his book, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, and he says that God as Creator is “determined by Maya” in his book, *Survey of Metaphysics and Esotericism*, at p. 55. For Schuon, “Maya,” “illusion,” and “collective dream” all mean the same thing. He relates this to “All is Atma,” which implies that everything but the Absolute must be illusion.

In any case, you would be right to discard the doctrine of Illusion, because it is really just a monument to bad logic. Its premise is that the world cannot be as real as God is, but illusion does not follow from that. There are so many relevant examples: for example, as homes go, mine is not much compared with Buckingham Palace, but that does not mean it is not a home, or that it is anything less than a home; practical arithmetic is not as advanced a subject as algebra, but it is in no way less mathematical. In fact, God gives everything the exact amount of being and reality which is appropriate for it.

Where you say that “we are individual instances of It,” you appear to be excluding the idea that we are individually created, and this is a case where an implicit emanationism is evident. You state that “nothing created by God exists in its own right.” Not in the sense of self-created, of course, and most modern people are completely blind to this. But you add that if God “turns existence over” to secondary causes, that “opens the door to Deism.” But it is a principle in Scholastic tradition that God never acts directly in the world when He can act through some subordinate agent. Since you reject the idea of God creating the world laboriously, you should accept this idea of causal delegation.

When St. Paul said “it is not I who live, but Christ lives in me,” he was not saying that he was Christ, or that he was incapable of sin or error, but the use you make of this text does imply both that and that we could say the same of ourselves. But if we deny our independent being or substances, we may well have to so speak of ourselves. Nevertheless, the idea of created beings with some degree of absoluteness is to be found in Aquinas: “But to be simply necessary is not incompatible with the notion of created being...Again. The more distant a thing is from that which is a being by virtue of itself, namely, God, the nearer it is to non-being; so that the closer a thing is to God, the further it is from non-being...Thus some created beings have being necessarily.” *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Vol. 11, Chapter 30, (5) & (6). This text excludes the idea that while God has absolute self-existence, everything else has only absolute contingency (if that could be more than nothing). There are many degrees of real and necessary being in creation, and that is why it manifests its Creator. God does not make rubbish, and Moslems and Christians should be able to agree about that.

Later on, you speak of “a kind of self-annihilation, of which His Crucifixion was the clearest and most complete example,” but He only submitted to that and did not do it to Himself. When He rose again He was still Himself, with the same recognizable human personality, the Wounds, and the same relationship to the disciples. If that was annihilation, we all get annihilated every time we go to sleep at night. The idea that “we must lose ourselves completely in God,” can be understood in a moral sense without an ontological one as well. One can be “selfless” in a moral sense, and still have a real self physically, and one can be “of one mind” with one’s associates when all have real minds of their own.

If you insist on the idea of “losing oneself” in the ontological sense, you are ignoring the distinction between the corrupt and selfish self, and the virtuous self, and treating them both as the same kind of evil to be eradicated equally, as though God made a mistake in creating, and as though nature was evil in itself. This results from following a doctrine which does not distinguish between the Creation and the Fall, and which therefore has something unmistakably Manichaean about it. In any case, what you are affirming here could only mean physical death.

This does not mean that I am unaware of the need for theoretical truth to be “realized,” but I have a different idea as to what that means, but one which is still traditional. It is more like a slow “assimilative conversion” which calls for more patience than modern people can find. This belongs naturally with a Platonic intellectual basis, and the point of departure for that is the immortal soul, and to pretend that that did not exist would be as pointless as pretending that God did not exist. On this basis, “losing oneself” cannot have the same meaning, because the “losing” would have to be something going on in the self or soul that is supposed to be getting lost. Your doctrine applies to the self’s ego, not to the self or soul. I have worked out some consequences of this in “Dualism and the Philosophy of the Soul,” which appeared in *Sacred Web* 4. These were opposed to the Guénonian Vedantist idea of the individual self, because the latter is tied to the common sense idea of self-as-ego, and that the world containing the ego is made up of things just as one perceives them. These perceptions are assumed to be shared by everyone else, and to be the causes of their experiences, just as much as of one’s own, when they are in any case only the final effects of the objective world, and not causes at all. Each person is thus conceived solely as an object contained in a common world which is really only one’s own. If each soul in reality contains its own representation of the world which contains its ego, the self-annihilation idea must mean something quite different. It need not be crudely untrue, of course, but just more limited and more psychological.

But if our psycho-corporeal being is thus, must it not still be mortal and perishable, even if the soul itself is immortal? Possibly even that is only an appearance which deceives the senses. Esoterically, the person who appears to perish is really only a minute part of the real person which extends as a continuum through countless states cover different

times. That would not be literally open to annihilation on any natural level. I gave some explanation of that in "Life, Death and Resurrection," in *Sacred Web* 7. This is the reason why I said that the Non-Dualist doctrine depends on an idea of reality based only on sense-perception. Besides, it is so largely expressed in terms of temporal processes that we should be warned not to take it too literally for that reason alone.

The position you are defending would be sound enough if Eckhart's saying "My truest 'I' is God," were literally true just as you quote it, but in reality the literal sense could only amount to one of two absurd alternatives, either: (1) (assuming that we are real beings) that God was divided up into little bits (by whom, or by what?) for the private use of creatures, in which case God could not be separate from creation; or: (2) that God is not really divided, and the world and ourselves are just illusions, and there is no creation. Phantoms only. But what Eckhart was really referring to here was not precisely God, even though it is in many ways Divine, but what is known as the "eye of the soul," or the Divine spark," or the "synteresis," of the soul. This is necessary to complete the human microcosm, and its nature is the next reality to God, that of the Uncreated Heaven. I give an explanation of this in Chapter 8 of my next book which is in preparation at the moment, but if that had to be adapted for popular consumption, one would end up saying that the highest part of the soul was "God," just as Eckhart did. When we judge statements, we must also consider those to whom they were addressed before we take them literally.

Then there was my remark about H.P. Blavatsky and the Traditionalists. I do not see why the idea that Guénon's break with the Theosophists as "a turf war among rival gurus" should be so obviously wrong. *L'Erreur Spirite* is mostly an attack on the shortcomings of other Theosophists and not an attack on Theosophism itself, if I can read French. That is why it is so tedious—four hundred pages of hacking away at other people's inadequacies, and no attempt to engage with the fundamental issues of Theosophism. It all amounts to proof of a lot of very soured personal relationships and disillusionments, I would say.

It is very likely that, when Guénon ceased to practice his Catholicism, he compensated by intensifying the inner mindset behind it, the passionate interest in orthodoxy and fear of losing it. He may thus have seen heretics everywhere and ignored the possibility that he was one himself.

Similarly, many Protestants who lost their faith used to compensate by working harder at Christian morality. This is a well-known religious phenomenon. At any rate, Guénon ended up claiming to speak for orthodoxy from a position ABOVE orthodoxy, rather as the Theosophists were doing in their own way. We have no way of knowing that this was not just the latest version of the Serpent's "Ye shall be as gods," so I do not see how you can feel so certain that he was right.

Guénon was in some respects a typical intellectual of his time, influenced by the way in which metaphysical thought in Europe had already moved in the direction of monistic Pantheism under the influence of 19th Century German idealism. Blavatsky just had to connect that with the Shankaran Vedantic tradition. That meant that European intellectuals would assume from then on that the most monistic interpretations of Indian thought must be the most authoritative.

Where creation is concerned, and you ask "Do you think that God has to struggle to create the universe?" that would be clearly anthropomorphic, but something of that problem remains even when we say the He creates it with the greatest of ease, because that is human as well. Some degree of anthropomorphism is in fact necessary in view of man's "Theomorphism," as Schuon would call it. As for effort, I suppose Omnipotence must be able to create challenges for itself, as the state of the modern world seems to confirm.

One objectionable aspect of the "reflection" analogy of creation is that it excludes the idea of there being any intention to create any specific beings. The personal relation between God and man would therefore have no basis, and the saving of the soul would be purely and simply a matter of human activities, as Guénon evidently thought it was. Another objection to it is that it explicitly confuses the creation of the world with the procession of Christ from God the Father: "He *reflects* the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by the word of his power." (Heb. Ch.I, v.3, Catholic R.S.V.) If this can be said of the processions of the Trinity, it can NOT be said of the natural world—except on the emanationist assumption that there is no essential difference between God and creation.

The same view of God and creation appears where you say "Here we must ask the question: what incarnates?" The one coherent consequence of the reincarnation idea is that there are no personal identities,



because all apparent identities are just so many ephemeral disguises for God. So to affirm reincarnation is to affirm the doctrine of Illusion and deny the reality of creation, although both our faiths affirm the reality of creation.

Similarly, where you say that “The individual form-bound self can never become pure Spirit,” you are denying theoretically something which Non-Dualism affirms in the concrete with its belief in an “identification” of the self with God, who is necessarily a pure spirit. But regardless of any supposed reincarnation, man’s not being a pure spirit is not an accident, since he is specially created as an epitome of all levels of being. Each person is therefore a world, so that the real objective world consists of the sum total of all these worlds, and of which one’s own world is just a tiny part. Such is the true Macrocosm, known only to God. (The smallness of the ego in relation to its world reflects this on the empirical level).

If you can say that you are aiming for a state where “my contingent self is ‘he,’ while God is I”, this would mean that God is either unwilling or unable to confer real being on anything. One may, of course, say that God wants to confer on us something much more important, namely, Himself, but even Omnipotence cannot confer itself on nothing. There must be a common measure between the recipient and the Received, and that is why created personal identities must be real, and why they must have appropriate degrees of infinity in them, as instanced in their comprehension of worlds. The Vedantist (and Moslem?) perspective is so much centred on man-becoming-God that there is no room for the complementary Christian doctrine of God-becoming-man. This issue must make a very serious difference to what it is that one is supposed to “become!”

#### **Letter #10: Bolton to Upton: March 18, 2005**

This is to complete what I was saying (*Editor*: in Letter #9). Just to add something to the idea of “illusion:” Schuon, in *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, admits that the usual arguments for it are not very good, and then goes on to offer one of his own for it, which is one of the worst he ever used. This is the idea that we are all in a collective dream because our archetypal Universal Man, is “dreaming,” and thus making us all dream with him. Considering that we are speaking of an eternal Form, this

is like saying that the Square on the Hypotenuse is feeling sick. He must have known that archetypal and physical realities could not be conflated like that.

This idea involves a denial of our own faculties which may as well be a denial of our sanity. It is utterly irrational to think that we shall wake up and get real when some big mystical revelation comes. Why should that not be a dream as well? Besides, if we can only dream that we have a desire for reality, we probably do not have one. As Schuon himself says somewhere, a being who is inherently absurd cannot have the possibility of ceasing to be so.

Although we may try the alternative of avoiding the word “illusion” by speaking of “the magical self-manifestation of God,” and being able to “see the forms of the universe as nothing other than manifestations of God,” we are not much further on. At best, this is a way of speaking about heightened forms of experience, such as poets have, but even so we do not have a right to take such things as encounters with God, because God has no sensory or sensuous attributes. In such experiences, what is really happening is that the mind is struck, not by God as such, but by the eternal Forms of the things observed. They are experienced so intensely that the individual properties of their instantiations are forgotten. But God is not the world of Forms, even though He is ultimately the cause of the relationship of our faculties to the formal causes of the world. In any case, the difference between “illusory” and “magical” is mainly semantics, and there is no great mileage in it.

My attitude, you suggest, is owing to “the dark, alienated ways in which abstract thought can construe spiritual truth.” Nevertheless, I construe a lot of other kinds of spiritual truth with the same mind, but with very different results. If conceptual thought indicates something dark and alienated in connection with Non-Dualism, it would be more natural to assume that that is the fault of Non-Dualism; but if we must allow at least the possibility that it is owing to this kind of thought, one still cannot assert that it is so without proof. If one does, it could only mean that Non-Dualism is being put beyond the range of discussion—that is, set up as a dogma.

Another reason as to why logical analysis might find something negative about Non-Dualism, from a Christian point of view, is that it requires one to discard a doctrinal truth, i.e. that the world is a real thing, created

by a personal God Who transcends it. Having done that, it would not be surprising if the new outlook appeared dismal. It is far easier to be an ex-Christian than to acquire another and commensurate truth. “The way down is easy,” but the way back up may not be recognizable.

There is a problem with Indian thought here, which is not just mine. Europeans are spiritually Egyptians—the Judaeo-Christian tradition, Platonism, Pythagoreanism, and Hermeticism are all of Egyptian origin. The fact that God acted in history through Moses and in Christ clearly did not alter its essential nature. Therefore, trying to graft Indian spirituality onto people with that heritage is really just a way of increasing the amount of confusion in the world.

### **Letter #11: Upton to Bolton: April 4, 2005**

Responding to your criticism of Schuon’s arguments regarding “illusion”, Schuon here is using the word “dream” metaphorically. He doesn’t mean that God dozed off after dinner and helplessly dreamed the universe. By the word “dream” he means “a world created out of one’s own substance with no immediate perceptual relation to any outside reality.” When we, as limited and imperfect beings, have dreams, these dreams are highly subjective (though as I pointed out earlier, they can also contain certain objective elements) and are thus less real than the waking world around us. But when God dreams, His dreams are as real as can be; not as real as Himself, of course, but in no way less real than some other more objective world, because—given that God creates *ex nihilo*—there is no such *other* world.

Your comment that “it is utterly irrational to think that we shall wake up and get real when some big mystical revelation comes” seems to deny the universal testimony of the mystics. When St. Paul was hit by God’s light on the road to Damascus, though his fleshly eyes were blinded by it, the eye of his Heart was opened. Given that he passed from being a persecutor of Christians to the premier Christian missionary and proto-theologian, I don’t know how you can call that anything other than a great awakening. And as for dreams, I can only quote the words of William Butler Yeats to the effect that “In dreams begin responsibilities.”

And where does Schuon say that human beings are “inherently absurd”?

Certainly we do not see God directly; in God’s light, we see the Forms

or *logoi* of things as symbols of Divine realities. In St. Paul's words (Romans 1:20): "For the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead." And yet, does not the Christian assert that, since the Incarnation, it is actually possible to see God in Christ ("Who has seen Me has seen the Father")? That Christ is the *ikon* of the Father? And that the cosmos, in Christ, is transfigured, until it is all theophany? Maximos the Confessor says: "He, the undifferentiated, is seen in differentiated things, the simple in the compound. He who has no beginning is seen in the things that must have a beginning; the invisible in the visible; the intangible in the tangible. Thus he gathers us together in himself, through every object ... enabling us to rise into union with him, as he was dispersed in coming down to us."

With regard to your comments regarding abstract thought and spiritual truth, abstract thought does not only construe Truth darkly; it can also, within its limitations, open to spiritual Truth; when logically sound it is an inescapable sign of that Truth, as C. S. Lewis so brilliantly demonstrated in his book, *Miracles*. Nonetheless, clear, valid logical thought is only a tiny part of our (potential) spiritual experience; most of what we experience—on all levels, not just the spiritual—cannot be expressed in any human language.

One cannot, by definition, logically prove the doctrine of Non-Dualism, since arguing from premise to conclusion is dualistic in essence. Non-Dualism is, and must be, the First Premise as well as the Ultimate Conclusion, and premises, in the sense of axioms, are never arrived at logically; they are understood through direct Intellection. If it were not for axioms witnessed via Intellection, there would be no axioms at all, and therefore no logic. In the case of axiomatic knowledge, proof proceeds from certainty, which is prior to it. It manifests certainty; it does not establish it.

With regard to the comment about "the way back up" being unrecognizable, I concur that, once having gone down, the way up is totally unrecognizable—without spiritual Guidance and the virtue of Faith: the evidence of things not seen. And once again, I do not see NonDualism as asserting the literally illusory nature of the world in every sense. The introductory essay "Shankara's Doctrine of Non-Dualism" to *The Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*, translated by Swami Prabhavananda and

Christopher Isherwood, explains it like this:

When Shankara says that the world of thought and matter is not real, he does not mean that it is non-existent. The world-appearance is and is not. In the state of ignorance (our everyday consciousness) it is experienced, and it exists as it appears. In the state of illumination it is not experienced, and ceases to exist. Shankara does not regard any experience as non-existent as long as it is experienced, but he very naturally draws a distinction between the private illusions of the individual and the world-illusion. The former he calls *pratibhasika* (illusory) and the latter *vyavaharika* (phenomenal). For example, a man's dreams are his private illusions; when he wakes, they cease. But the universal illusion—the illusion of world-phenomena—continues throughout a man's whole waking life; unless he becomes aware of the Truth through knowledge of Brahman. Shankara makes, also, a further distinction between these two kinds of illusion and those ideas which are altogether unreal and imaginary, which represent a total impossibility or a flat contradiction in terms—such as the son of a barren woman.

Here, then, we are confronted by a paradox—the world is and it is not. It is neither real nor non-existent. Any yet this apparent paradox is simply a statement of fact—a fact which Shankara calls *Maya*. This *Maya*, this world-appearance, has its basis in Brahman, the eternal. The concept of *Maya* applies only to the phenomenal world, which, according to Shankara, consists of names and forms. It is not non-existent, yet it differs from the Reality, the Brahman, upon which it depends for its existence. It is not real, since it disappears in the light of knowledge of its eternal basis. World-appearance is *Maya*; the self, the *Atman*, alone is real.

I would add one further dialectical step to Shankara's (or the translators') argument: that the world-appearance both disappears and does not disappear in the light of the knowledge of Brahman. In the *nirvikalpa-samadhi* it disappears; in the state of waking consciousness of a sage like Ramana Maharshi it obviously reappears, but is directly recognized as illusory in itself and not other than Brahman in its essence. Ramana Maharshi could recognize individuals, respond to specific questions, walk deliberately from point A to point B; his perception was not absorbed in an undifferentiated field of Divine Light. Yet the disappearance of the world-illusion that he had already experienced, and undoubtedly often returned to, was always there in the background of his day-to-day experience of the world-appearance; it was this very realization which revealed that appearance to be illusory.

With regard to your comment that Europeans are spiritually Egyptians, there was an age, before the tower fell (or before the vision fell that

tempted man to try to “put Humpty-Dumpty together again” by building such a tower), when “India” and “Egypt” were one. In the spiritual Heart of man, that age is with us still.

**Letter #12: Bolton to Upton: April 21, 2005**

In reply to your question about Schuon, I do not remember where that passage was, but only that Schuon was speaking conditionally, as in fact I was: given a certain idea of the human condition, then must follow absurdity, etc.

Granted that Schuon was using the word “dream” metaphorically in this context, the implication of this metaphor, “a world created out of one’s own substance”, is that the world is not a result of creation but of emanation. What happens in dreams has no more relation to our conscious intentionality than the shadows cast by our bodies. Such a conception clears the way for a mysticism of identification, but the word “creation” in this context could only be rhetorical.

You say further on that my arguments about the collective dream “deny the universal testimony of the mystics,” rather as though there were only one such testimony, and that perfectly clear. What happened to St. Paul does not amount to a universal testimony. The great majority of mystics, in Catholic tradition at least, did not take their experiences as a basis for changing their ideas of reality, but were rather reluctant even to speak of them. This was because their experiences gave them a new dimension to what was contained in their faith in any case. St. Benedict and St. Teresa of Avila were typical in this respect. One could only say I was denying their testimony by drawing conclusions from their visions which they did not draw.

On the question of seeing God in nature, it is true that we do not perceive the Forms exclusively, because God relates to all the Forms as each one of them does to all its instantiations, so God is seen in an implicit way in every Form. A Unity which contains too much for human minds can be known in a divided and serial manner. However, I do not follow the transition from the Incarnation’s manifestation of God the Father to His being manifested by all nature as well. If God were manifest to that extent, would the Incarnation have been necessary?

Concerning proof of Non-Dualism, you say that it must be “the First Premise as well as the Ultimate Conclusion,” and that it is an axiom

“witnessed via Intellection.” However, if you wish to claim that, you must show what your axiom actually states. From what you say, you believe its truth to be self-evident, which looks highly unlikely, because there is no agreement as to whether even so basic a statement about God as “God is” is self-evident. In fact, it can only be so if one accepts Anselm’s Proof, and that in turn requires Platonic premises.

On the other hand, it is easy enough to see one basic proposition for Non-Dualism, namely, “God is, therefore nothing else is,” but there is no self-evidence there. If true, it would mean that “God is the Creator” was self-contradictory, which logicians have never suspected it of being. It is also hardly self-evident that the self and God each consist of two separate things: the one, a metaphysical part and a collection of psycho-biological junk, and the other an undetermined Absolute and a personal Creator; and that the two metaphysical parts fuse while Maya disposes of the biological junk and its Creator.

This is not to deny a strong form of psychological self-evidence in this connection, which is true in general, even if not of you in particular. If one takes the position that there is no creation; no one to pray to; no redemption; no immortal soul; and no eternal life for human beings as such, one has given up a lot (and even more if one had some belief in them in the first place). That kind of asceticism creates an unshakable sense of moral superiority over those who do not follow this path, and this combines powerfully with the mind of the unconverted and despairing pagan who remains somewhere inside even the devoutest of us. He always thought that life came from nothing and returned to nothing, and now he can come back home to stay, with a spiritual role to play. No one can deny the strength of this combination.

This underlines the fact that Non-Dualism does not require any faith, such as one must have to believe in personal salvation. It also begs the question that we might, after all, be created, and created specifically for the purpose of finding individual salvation and immortality in Heaven. (I know Non-Dualists believe that Heaven is only for stupid people, but if they are so intelligent, one would expect them to be able to see that this opinion of theirs results only from an idea of Heaven they acquired in childhood and never developed further.)

I remember once explaining Guénon’s Non-Dualist gospel to someone who knew nothing about it, at a time when I still believed in it. To my

amazement, he said it was hardly any different from Communism! But later on, I was not so amazed, when I saw how both systems attack people through their moral sense with a cult of self-elimination, where they find the idea of personal redemption completely incredible. In either case, this despair gives rise to a rejection of individuality as such, and with it any spirituality of creativity.

Concerning what you say about reality and illusion, and the text you quoted about it, it is not yet clear to me how far that coincides with what Plato and Aristotle have said about the way in which nature falls short of the reality of the Forms instantiated in it. To try and see how near or far apart we may be on that subject had best wait till another time.

A general point about Non-Dualism is that, if it were true, one would expect that finding God and finding one's own real self would be one and the same thing, whereas real life shows again and again that they are not. It is possible to find God in a sad and frustrated kind of way without finding one's real self, and those who go too far down that path end up as the "holy idiot" types found in religious cultures. Conversely, those who find their real self often fall into the trap of thinking that they must have found God as well. Possibly Gurdjieff did that. At any rate, his usefulness is mainly for those whose need is to find their real self.

### **Letter #13: Upton to Bolton: April 21, 2005**

Your experience confirms so much of my own when it comes to certain "Traditionalists." The egotism based on a tendency to despise all that is created and all that is personal—and which is in fact scandalized by the least mention of love, whether human or divine—is certainly the worst form of egotism I can conceive of. "Blessed is he who is not scandalized in Me."

I assume the "self" you are speaking of here is the psychic self, the soul. The Self the Advaita Vedantins speak of is the spiritual Self, the Atman, which is closer to what Christians mean by "synteresis" or "Nous," though the two may or may not be strictly identifiable. (Most Christians, I'm sure, would not strictly identify them.) You touch here on the all-too common tendency of those attempting to follow a spiritual Path to use that Path as an excuse not to understand themselves in human, creaturely terms, and then to justify this flight from self-understanding by pontificating as to how the Atman or Nous so vastly transcends



the “mere” soul or psyche. But it is this “mere” soul which is saved or damned, which means that we had better understand ourselves on this “all-too-human” level as well as we possibly can. The fact that the Atman is undamnable and eternally one with God, and that we are host to it intrinsically, is a “mere” truism which has nothing to do with the salvation or damnation of our immortal soul. If we are so involved in the passions—chief of which is the passion of pride, whose metaphysical expression is the error of solipsism—that we are set to inherit Hell, then there is no way we can realize the *moksha* of the advaitins. And to use the mere mental knowledge, the mere belief, that “my truest ‘I’ is God” as an excuse to not even *begin* the path of self-purification, the “unseen warfare” against the passions for the purpose of realizing the virtues—which absolutely *requires* human self-understanding, as well as all conceivable humility and gratitude to God for His grace and help, without which we would be irretrievably lost—is nothing short of sacrilegious. It is also inconceivably foolish. To think that you can read some books on the Vedanta, understand them well enough mentally so that you can expound them, do maybe a few meditation exercises, and thereby become a realized Non-Dualist Sage—without ever having confronted the spiritual darkness in your own soul, not to mention having gone through the metanoia that such a confrontation calls for but cannot by itself accomplish—is just plain dumb. “Paper cakes do not satisfy hunger.” This is the ingrained foolishness of so many of these “Traditionalist” wise men. Thank God I have been privileged to meet certain other Traditionalists who have not been deluded by ideas. I am thinking of one person in particular, a saint in the making, the most canny and unglorious of men, whose presence nonetheless radiates, in spite of himself, the Untreated Light.

As a member of an e-mail group dedicated to the teachings of René Guénon, I just answered an e-mail from a Rumanian Guénoniste who is preparing a bibliography of texts from all the world’s religions on the theme of “the Truth is beyond words.” So this would probably be a good time to bring our dialogue to a close, since I haven’t said much in this exchange that I haven’t said in earlier ones. Feel free to reply, of course! I’m not trying to put you off, just sensing that we are starting to get a little repetitive. It’s clear that we agree on some things and disagree on others, and that this will probably not change all that much. In the

words of the Holy Qur'an, in the next world "God will enlighten us as to wherein we differ."

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