

## **The Deep Horizon**

### **Stratford Caldecott**

"Wherever men and women discover a call to the absolute and transcendent, the metaphysical dimension of reality opens up before them: in truth, in beauty, in moral values, in other persons, in being itself, in God. We face a great challenge at the end of this millennium to move from *phenomenon* to *foundation*, a step as necessary as it is urgent. We cannot stop short at experience alone; even if experience does reveal the human being's interiority and spirituality, speculative thinking must penetrate to the spiritual core and the ground from which it rises. Therefore, a philosophy which shuns metaphysics would be radically unsuited to the task of mediation in the understanding of Revelation." [i]

With such words as these, **Pope John Paul II**, in his 1998 encyclical letter on *Faith and Reason* addressed to the bishops of the Catholic Church, calls for a renewal of metaphysics, "because I am convinced that it is the path to be taken in order to move beyond the crisis pervading large sectors of philosophy at the moment, and thus to correct certain mistaken modes of behaviour now widespread in our society". He goes on, "Such a ground for understanding and dialogue is all the more vital nowadays, since the most pressing issues facing humanity - ecology, peace and the co-existence of different races and cultures, for instance - may possibly find a solution if there is a clear and honest collaboration between Christians and the followers of other religions and all those who, while not sharing a religious belief, have at heart the renewal of humanity" [section 104]. The encyclical itself, which exposes many of the philosophical and spiritual errors of modernity - including scientism, relativism and nihilism - does not claim to be an exposition of metaphysics. It is an invitation and a challenge to seek metaphysical Wisdom where she may be found; a challenge which, coming as it does at the end of the Pope's careful preparations for the end of one millennium and the beginning of another (the "hermeneutical key of my pontificate" as he writes in *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*), suggests that the rebirth of metaphysics forms part of the foundations of the new historical era that he believes is now close upon us.

In one sense the dialogue of which the Pope speaks is already well underway, although it can hardly be said to have achieved a very high profile. The Islamic historian of science, **Seyyed Hossein Nasr** argued as long ago as 1968 that the degradation brought about by the prostitution of nature can only ultimately be reversed by a revitalization of theology and philosophy through metaphysical knowledge.[ii] Decades earlier, **Ananda Coomaraswamy** had exerted a strong

influence on, among other Catholics, the craftsman and writer Eric Gill. Coomaraswamy, a remarkable Hindu scholar who worked as Research Fellow at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in the 30s and 40s, was one of three writers sometimes referred to as the founders of the "Traditionalist school" (of which Nasr is a later and eminent representative), the others being the Frenchman **René Guénon** and the Swiss **Frithjof Schuon**. Traditionalism crosses religious boundaries but (it claims) without eroding them. It insists that truth can only be attained through the practice and mediation of a religious tradition. Such forms can be transcended only from within: each revealed religion remains unique and precious in all its details, and must be accepted and practised as the condition for spiritual realization.

The Thomist writer **Bernard Kelly**, a contemporary of Gill's, wrote of one work by Schuon (*Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*), "The book has a fullness of light which we have no right to find in the twentieth century, or perhaps any other century." To Kelly and other Catholics (including the Catholic Anglican, T.S. Eliot), Schuon's achievement seemed to hold out the hope of a genuine dialogue with the Oriental cultures at their most profound level. As Kelly put it:

"Neither the nineteenth century nor our own possesses a philosophical language able to render metaphysical truth with precision. The attempt to find words for exact metaphysical terms has baffled the translators of St Thomas no less than of the Upanishads. There is however a difference, for while the translators of St Thomas may be presumed to have one traditional intellectual discipline at their fingertips, the translators of the Upanishads who needed to have two generally had neither. It has been said, with some justice, that they appear to have taken their philosophical language from the newspapers. The Hindu texts are not the cause of confusion, but the occasion for its display."

He goes on to say that while this fact was demonstrated in an incomparable way by Coomaraswamy, the necessary "common metaphysical language" was developed primarily by Guénon and Schuon. The three figures taken together - and notwithstanding what Kelly already perceived as their failure to appreciate certain key teachings of Christianity (a point I will touch on below) - have played a key role in reopening the "luminous eye" of each tradition "towards the source of its light". They are "situated far above the syncretism of an Aldous Huxley or a Gerald Heard".<sup>[iii]</sup>

But the fact that the call for a dialogue between the religions on the basis of a renewed metaphysics has been taken up again by a Pope of the "Vatican II Church" must be regarded as a striking event by those who believe that the Council effectively ended access to Tradition for those who remained faithful to Rome. It raises hopes once more of what Guénon (himself a former Catholic) in the early years of the twentieth century referred to as the *redressement*, or restoration of traditional intellectuality within the Church. In this article, I want to try to establish what might be meant by the renewal of metaphysics in our present cultural situation within the Catholic Church, and then to go on

to raise certain questions about the nature of the Christian tradition itself that will need to be answered in the course of such a renewal.

### **The Degrees of Reality**

In the modern world, it is in the field of popular science rather than philosophy that many of our metaphysical concerns and assumptions are played out. As has frequently been noted, in the "new physics" the cosmos is compared to an organism rather than a machine. It is described as a *pattern of relationships*, preserving itself in a meaningful homeostasis or equilibrium in the midst of change - even while the matter of which it is composed is in constant flux. The development of the sciences of organization - cybernetics and General Systems Theory - established a conceptual framework for the study of systems as such: that is, of wholes whose properties depend not just on the sum of their parts but on their interrelationships. Whatever the exaggerations to which this view has led - examples of which abound in the popular science section of every bookstore - it seems clear that a fundamental shift in perception has occurred, or is occurring, in the consciousness of a great many people, symbolized by the rise of the science of ecology: a shift away from the mechanistic and reductionistic, towards the organicist and participatory.

I have no intention of surveying the entire field of such writings, but will simply dwell for a moment on one particularly instructive example. **Henri Bortoft** was influenced both by the writings of the anthroposophist Owen Barfield and by the experience of working with the physicist David Bohm in the 1960s. He finds in the long-neglected scientific writings of the German Romantic poet Johann von Goethe practical guidelines for a new "delicate" or "participatory" empiricism.<sup>[iv]</sup> This requires the scientist to be trained to perceive the whole in its parts; to attain through imagination the *Gestalt* (form or figure) that unites the phenomena in their multiplicity: in other words, to *understand* before explaining. On this basis one may conceive of building up what Bortoft calls a "science of qualities" superior to the purely quantitative physics of Isaac Newton. For according to Goethe, cognition is not something imposed, but something received from nature, received within the "sensory imagination, when this is developed as an organ of perception" [*ibid.*]. A human consciousness trained in this way participates in the very being of the plant or animal under examination, so that the form perceived

imaginatively, far from being a mere mental (nominalistic) representation of the thing, becomes its incarnation in consciousness.

As this briefest of sketches tries to suggest, there is much that is appealing and important in Bortoft's writing. However, as in the case of most of the metaphysics offered by modern scientific writers as the underpinning or conclusion of their speculations, Bortoft's Goethean metaphysics seems to be partly based on a false contrast with the ancient or Platonic philosophy. For Bortoft, the enemy is a science based on "metaphysical separation". This is the view that behind this world we experience with the senses "there is another, nonsensory world, which is the intelligible origin of what appears," so that the "intelligibility of whatever we encounter in the world of sense experience is in another world that is separate from this sensory world" [*ibid.*, 180, cf. 252]. This is seen by Bortoft as the "organizing idea" behind modern science, with its attempt to penetrate into the pure mathematical foundations of reality and reduce the cosmos to what is sometimes described as a "formula you can wear on your T-shirt". That is why he is attracted to Goethe, who (at least after the encounter with Schiller) rejected this fundamental principle. For Goethe, "There is no underlying reality behind the appearances, but only the intensive depth of the phenomenon itself" [*ibid.*, p. 233]. Bortoft blames this metaphysical separation on Plato, thus locating the problem at the very root of the intellectual and spiritual tradition of European thought.

Precisely here, I believe, the Traditionalist authors can offer a much-needed corrective not only to Bortoft but to much modern thought - and the contrast will enable me to establish more clearly what I mean by *thesophia perennis*. For these authors, who certainly regard themselves as being of one mind with Plato, there can be no question of a "separation" of the two worlds. If anything, the temptation lies in the other direction; that is, in a monism that would reduce the world of multiplicity to sheer illusion. According to **Titus Burkhardt**, who maintains a careful balance in this matter, the *eide* or *logoi* which are the archetypal forms of everything in the world have no reality apart from God on the one hand and the world on the other. As mental forms they are indeed mere abstractions. But as "possibilities" inherent in the Intellect and (principally) in the divine nature, they constitute the meaning and content of reality, which without them would fall back into nothingness.[v]

Inseparable from the traditional ontology outlined in Burkhardt's book is an epistemology and an anthropology. The doctrine of the degrees of reality, in both macrocosm and microcosm, leads Traditionalists to reject any dualistic anthropology that might deprive the human subject of access to

archetypal reality. The human subject is *tripartite*, consisting of body, soul and spirit, corresponding to the three main levels of reality. The faculty by which we know the divine Ideas, variously called *Nous*, *Intellectus* or *Buddhi*, constitutes a ray of the divine Sun in the heart of man. It knows the *logoi* by connaturality, by intuition. At the level of the soul, these intuitions are clothed in symbols by the *imagination*, which mediates between the intellect (supplier of the "form") and the bodily senses (which provide the "matter") for human cognition. The Orientalist **Henry Corbin** has written a series of impressive studies on the Persian tradition of Ibn Arabi, Suhrawardi and Mulla Sadra, bringing out the role of the "creative imagination" as an organ of perception, and the "theophanies" that these writers discovered in the *mundus imaginalis*.[\[vi\]](#)

Though these ideas are today more closely associated with writers on Islamic than on Christian philosophy, it would not be hard to relate them (as Traditionalists often do) to Scholastic thought in the West. The Christian Scholastics were well aware of the Islamic philosophers, to whom in many cases they owed their knowledge of the great texts of Classical philosophy, and they spent a great deal of time refuting or transforming their ideas in the light of the Christian revelation. Nevertheless, though the Christian and Islamic thinkers of the Middle Ages were in many respects opposed, they were much closer to each other than to the Nominalists of the fourteenth or the Rationalists of the seventeenth centuries. The Catholic philosopher **E.I. Watkin** brings out many of these commonalities in his neglected book *A Philosophy of Form*, which could stand as a model of the kind of retrieval of medieval thought that needs to take place today if a serious metaphysical dialogue between the religions is to be possible. There he points out, among other things, that the Christian Scholastics (preeminently, of course, Aquinas and Bonaventure) were first of all *contemplatives*, rather than philosophers or theologians in the modern sense. Yet they stand at the very end of medieval thought, and the method they adopted for disputation was exploited by the less contemplative men that came after in the interests of Rationalism. Furthermore, the Thomistic principle *nihil in intellectu quod non prius in sensu* ("there is nothing in the understanding which was not first in the senses"), which was valid if understood as Aquinas intended it,

"may be understood, and unfortunately has been understood, to mean that our perceptions of external objects are wholly sensible and our senses alone produce such perception. On the contrary, so-called sense perception is possible only because, in a confused medley of atomic sense data, the mind directly intuits the forms which give these data significance. Perception involves a factor of intellection. The denial of this truth has led directly to the *proton pseudos* of modern philosophical error - the positivist and sensationalist empiricism which admits only evidence derived from sense perception wrongly taken to be such".[\[vii\]](#)

Another consequence of taking seriously the "degrees of reality" is a healthy scepticism with regard to purely materialist theories of evolution, which in fact make sense only to people who lack the sense of spiritual forms or essences. If that whole dimension is closed to our minds, if there is no conception of what might be meant by "vertical causality", then naturally there is nowhere else for species to *come from* than below, through a combination of chance and necessity. The successive temporal unfolding of species does not prove the truth of the theories that are adduced to explain it. According to Titus Burckhardt: "All 'matter' is like a mirror that reflects the activity of the essences by inverting it; that is why the seed comes before the tree and the leaf bud before the flower, whereas in the principal order perfect 'forms' preexist".<sup>[viii]</sup> And Watkin agrees: "Since the hierarchy of beings is, as we have seen, a scale of degrees between nothingness and Absolute Being, we should expect *a priori* corresponding continuity in their appearance" [*ibid.*, 258-9]. And: "Matter cannot give birth to form. The new form therefore must derive from the Divine Mind where all forms are contained and all are perfect" [*ibid.*, 260]. The inner form that makes a species *what it is* exists eternally, and is simply imprinted upon the matter that is ready to receive it at the right time. Here too we find ground for agreement - or at the least dialogue - between Catholic and Traditionalist thought.

### **The Catholic Tradition**

Cardinal **Henri de Lubac** has devoted a long essay to the development and subsequent neglect of Pauline tripartite anthropology (see 1 Thess. 5:23) in the Christian West.<sup>[ix]</sup> In the first part of this he establishes that St Paul's references to this anthropology have deep roots in Scripture as well as in human experience. They were not simply imported from an alien Greek philosophy (de Lubac notes the existence of "Plato phobia" among many Christian scholars, especially in the modern period). But the term for "spirit" (*pneuma*) remains deliberately ambiguous in Paul. On the one hand it may refer to the Holy Spirit or divine life implanted in man by baptism; on the other, it may refer to a part of man, and specifically to that "breath of life" which God breathed into his nostrils at the very beginning (Gen. 2:7). It becomes clear as he proceeds that we are talking of the "highest point of the soul", and that the ambiguity in question is precisely due to the paradoxical relationship of nature to grace in our

human destiny. We are created to share in the life of God, but we are not *compelled* to do so: we can attain that life only through the exercise of freedom.

It is worth noting that Rudolf Steiner regarded the Fourth Council of Constantinople (870) as having effectively demolished this paradoxical, tripartite anthropology within orthodox Catholicism, replacing it with a dualistic understanding of man. However, that Council took the position it did in order to *oppose* an incipient dualism. It was concerned to ensure that the distinction of the spirit from the soul of man would not introduce a "Gnostic" duality into the human subject of salvation.<sup>[x]</sup> St Thomas, similarly, four centuries later, was concerned to defend the immortality of the soul by resisting the teaching of the Arabian Peripatetics who made a single angel the common source of intellectual illumination for all men. For Thomas, the light flows directly from God to the human spirit, and belongs to the essence of the soul, though it may be "strengthened" by an angel's light. St John of the Cross (in his "Counsels of Light and Love") seems to imply actual angelic transmission: "Consider that your guardian angel does not always move the desire to act, though he ever illumines the reason".

De Lubac, at any rate, does not judge the decision of 870 worthy of mention, but sees the tripartite tradition continuing without interruption right through the early Scholastic period. In St Thomas, the distinction takes a slightly different form: that between action and contemplation, or the moral and the mystical life, or *ratio* and *intellectus*. It re-emerges fully in the Renaissance with Nicholas of Cusa and Ficino. Despite the triumph of the new Cartesian dualism in the universities, the authentic Christian tradition shines through in a continuous chain of authors up to and beyond Paul Claudel (who speaks of "this sacred point in us that says *Pater noster*"). How could it not, when the experience of every spiritual master confirms the existence in us of a place where we encounter God - the spirit, or "soul of the soul"?

Another important reference-point for the contemporary dialogue on metaphysics is the work of **Jean Borella**, a Catholic Traditionalist who has in recent years distanced himself from Schuon, having concluded that both Schuon and Guénon had failed to understand some crucial elements of the Christian tradition (including the sacraments and the Trinity). His book *The Sense of the Supernatural*, building on de Lubac, is an attempt to wrestle with the question of what went wrong in the Church that led to the modern loss of the sense of the sacred, and to formulate a valid ontology and epistemology that will be acceptable within present-day Catholicism. He recognizes the "new

evangelization" of John Paul II as "a project of vast proportions", undermining the recent tension with the Catholic Traditionalists. "By calling them to the task of recovery in which he has been involved, he is showing that henceforth it is not absurd to carry on this struggle from *within* the Church".<sup>[xi]</sup>

Borella is particularly concerned, in the last part of his book, with the concept of "deification" and its implications. He argues that the loss of the sense of the sacred and the supernatural in the modern world (and among the Modernists in the Church) is linked, as de Lubac showed in the 1940s, with the loss of a sense of human *transcendence* - the possibility of "transformation into God" as taught by Scripture, the Church Fathers and the great mystics.<sup>[xii]</sup> Once again, he insists on the tripartite nature of the human being, with the spirit or "soul of the soul" as the actual *place* of our union with God. It is in the heart and centre of the soul that "the divine Essence unites with created being and becomes the very act of its intellect"; in other words, where the knowledge and will of the creature become one, in perfect receptivity to the *actus purus* which is God. Borella adds:

"Does all this involve the literal identification of the creature's substantial being with God? Certainly not. The created being as such remains a created being, and never 'becomes' the Creator.... Far from effacing the creature, deification alone makes it possible for it to exist in its integral truth. If deification were equivalent to a negation of the creature, it would be a sheer contradiction, since to negate the creature is to negate the creative Will of God and therefore God himself. Deification is, to the contrary, the only possible affirmation of the creature" [*ibid.*, 130-40].

It is, in fact, the completion of that process which the Christian tradition calls "creation".

The final paragraph of Jean Borella's book is full of significance for us. "The grace of the active assumption of finiteness is conferred on us by the Passion of Christ's dying on the Cross. 'Abandoned' of God, he renounces the 'God' of his natural will and goes, with a single loving rush, right to the end, right to the exhaustion of created being. In him the human will, espousing in a mortal and crucifying union the creative Will of divine Love, accepts being only what it is; it wills its own ontological finiteness, it accomplishes the infinite Will of the Father."

### **A Question Concerning "Transcendental Unity"**

We have seen that there could well be considerable scope for agreement between Catholic and Traditionalist - not just on the need for metaphysics, but to some extent on metaphysical doctrine itself,



and even on its implications for cosmology and anthropology. But how far can this agreement extend before it runs aground on the Christian claim that Christ alone *saves*, let alone the claim that *outside the Church there is no salvation*? For Schuon, each religious tradition has a perfectly valid claim to be unique and central, superior to all others. Indeed, for the collectivity to which it is addressed, it *is* central and indispensable. Just as each man in a crowd may legitimately call himself "I", and cannot but view himself as situated at the centre of the world, so in each religion the Absolute says "I" and demands unqualified adherence.<sup>[xiii]</sup> One could perhaps demonstrate that the methods and aims, the doctrines and ethics of each religion are not directly in conflict with one another, but when correctly understood are somehow complementary (so that the "salvation" offered by Christianity is a different thing from the "Liberation" offered by Buddhism, or the denial of the Trinity in Islam is directed at an understanding of the Trinity different from that of Christians, for example). For the sake of argument let us assume that such has been shown. But the question remains, at least for Christians: is even this sufficient to safeguard our sense that Christianity itself transcends even such a "transcendental unity"? This forces us to look more closely at the precise relationship of metaphysics to *theology*.

Traditionalist metaphysics rests on the self-evidence of the One as its first principle. S.H. Nasr, for his part, is "aware of the necessity, on its own level, of the theological formulations which insist on the hiatus between God and man or the Creator and the world." However, he believes the metaphysical knowledge of Unity "comprehends the theological one in both a figurative and literal sense, while the reverse is not true".<sup>[xiv]</sup> For Schuon similarly, theology (based on revelation) transcends philosophy, but equally metaphysics must transcend theology. "The latter is the Word of God spoken to his creatures, whereas intellectual intuition is a direct and active participation in divine knowledge and not an indirect and passive participation, as is faith. In other words, in the case of intellectual intuition, knowledge is not possessed by the individual insofar as he is an individual, but insofar as in his innermost essence he is not distinct from his Divine Principle".<sup>[xv]</sup>

A corollary, therefore, of the transcendental unity of religions is the transcendence of theology by metaphysics. For a Christian, however, one of Schuon's least impressive books is *Logic and Transcendence*, where he struggles to make out that the Christian Trinity is merely an *upaya* - a provisional or skillful means, in the Buddhist sense, more or less effective as an aid to devotion but not finally "true". He treats the Persons as "aspects" of the divine Unity. "Whatever may be the

necessity or the expediency of the Trinitarian theology, from the standpoint of pure metaphysics it appears to confer the quality of absoluteness on relativities." "Only Unity as such can be a definition of the Absolute." Of course, he points out, the Creator possesses a certain "relative absoluteness" with regard to creatures in its various aspects or modalities, "but to assert, as one has heard it done, that the Trinitarian relationships belong, not to this relative absoluteness, but to the pure and intrinsic Absolute, or to the absoluteness of the Essence, amounts to asking us to accept that two and two make five or that an effect has no cause, which no religious message can do and the Christian message has certainly never done."[\[xvi\]](#) (Thus he dismisses the Councils of the Church and many of the Church Fathers with a wave of the hand.) On the contrary, as a Christian *who is faithful to tradition* may wish to argue, this "absoluteness of relativity" is precisely what we are asking you to accept. Its other name is love.

If the Christian is right that the Absolute has revealed to man a truth about its own inner life, and that this revelation of the Trinity can only be received in faith, then it must be faith rather than metaphysics that penetrates most deeply into the nature of reality. Theology (the science that reflects on revelation) must be permitted to *transform metaphysics*. Something like this is argued by the Traditionalist author **Philip Sherrard**, a member of the Greek Orthodox Church, in his final book, *Christianity: Lineaments of a Sacred Tradition*.[\[xvii\]](#) Sherrard devotes a long chapter to the "Logic of Metaphysics" in René Guénon - although the points he makes are just as applicable to Schuon, as we shall see. Guénon did more than anyone else to reawaken metaphysical perception in our century, he says. But Guénon made two important assumptions that predisposed him against Christianity and towards Vedanta (and which help to explain his own conversion from Catholicism to Islam). The first of these assumptions was that a strict correlation must be preserved between the metaphysical and the logical order - thus ruling out in advance the more paradoxical Christian relationship between Unity and Trinity in the Godhead. The second assumption was that every "determination" of the Absolute must be some form of limitation, and is therefore incompatible with the divine nature. These two assumptions led Guénon into an apophaticism so radical that he could affirm nothing at all of the Absolute, except by way of negation - including, obviously, a negation of the Christian Trinity.

Before his death, then, Sherrard had come to the conclusion that a Christian thinker who accepts Revelation must start from an entirely different point of view - must begin, in fact, from the

knowledge that the supreme Principle is the Trinity, and furthermore that "personality" (indeed, triple Personality) in God is *not necessarily a limitation*. Without it, in fact, the Absolute has no actual freedom to determine itself or create a world: the freedom of God becomes merely the absence of external constraint. Although Sherrard assumes Schuon's "transcendental unity" approach throughout his book, it does seem to me that this particular insight calls into question one of the core teachings of the Traditionalists: that a personal (or Tri-Personal) deity derives from an impersonal Godhead and will be "dissolved" in the gnosis which transcends Being. (As Sherrard writes, "This view thus involves a total denial of the ultimate value and reality of the personal. It demands as a condition of metaphysical knowledge a total impersonalism - the annulment and alienation of the person.") Of course, the insight leaves the other religions intact. It even leaves open the possibility that the Traditionalists have correctly understood them. But it separates Christianity from them, and perhaps even *raises Christianity above them*, in a way that seems to me incompatible (more so than he himself realized) with the theory of "transcendental unity".

### **Theological Metaphysics**

Much more food for thought on this vexed question of the "uniqueness" of Christianity is provided by the Catholic theologian and cultural historian **Hans Urs von Balthasar**. Widely recognized as a major influence on the thought of Pope John Paul II, Balthasar recognizes more than any other modern theologian the need for theology to transform metaphysics. In his own work he develops two themes that are of great relevance to us here. In the series called "The Glory of the Lord" (particularly the first volume) he makes the distinction between authentic Christian *gnosis* and the varieties of heretical Gnosticism, exploring the meaning of what it is to "see the form" (the *Gestalt*) of Christ as the revelation of the Father and the glory of God. This involves him in a retrieval of theological aesthetics - of theology under the aspect of "beauty". And in the subsequent series of volumes entitled *Theo-Drama* he develops a new understanding of what is meant by the relationship between the freedom of God and the freedom of man.[\[xviii\]](#)

To take first the question of gnosis: Balthasar intends to "secure for gnosis the place which belongs to it in virtue of its outstanding importance and certainty" [*GL*, I, 136]. Biblical (and Alexandrian) gnosis is not merely a "preamble" to faith, but "the interior understanding of faith, the

insight into the mystery of faith itself". In the interior appropriation of faith, its content unfolds before the "spiritual senses". "The gnostic Christian does not outgrow the proclamation of the Church, but in the kerygma he finds, revealing himself, the Logos, who, in the most comprehensive sense, 'enlightens' the believer ever more clearly and, indeed, draws him, as John was drawn, to his breast ever more intimately and unites him interiorly with himself" [GL, I, 137] - that is, on the Cross and in the Resurrection. Balthasar continues:

"In his humanity and its symbolic character, the Logos then lets the light of the divine nature with its truth and beauty - the very glory of the Father - illumine the gnostic ever more brightly. To say that for the gnostic the earthly veil enveloping revelation has become transparent means equally that in the letter he sees the Spirit, in the Old he sees the New Testament, and in the latter the promised eternity; in Jesus' humanity he sees his divinity, and in the Son, through the Spirit, he sees the Father. What is here involved is, therefore, nothing other than the turning of faith to its own interior authenticity, as faith in a proposition ('belief that Christ') becomes faith in a person ('believing Christ')."

Ultimately it is love that enables the spiritual senses to blossom in this way. "Love is the creative power of God himself which has been infused into man by virtue of God's Incarnation. This is why, in the light of the divine ideas, love can read the world of forms and, in particular, man correctly" [GL, I, 424]. So Balthasar can say (in the same passage) that it is in *love for his neighbour* that the Christian "definitively receives his Christian senses, which, of course, are none other than his bodily senses, but these senses in so far as they have been formed according to the form of Christ" - the form of love.

If I may now compare this with Schuon's perspective, it is noticeable that while he writes a great deal on love, he generally refers only to our love for God (or for each other), and rarely to God's love for us. In fact he regards love as an "aspect" of God which for Christians becomes primary only because they are considering the Absolute at a relative level, having been forced by their interpretation of the Incarnation to introduce the distinction of Persons (thus "relativity") into the Absolute. As was suggested in the previous section, Schuon assumes that Christians are reading the Trinitarian relations into God "from below", as it were. For Balthasar and the Church Fathers, these are revealed "from above". They cannot therefore be "understood" (in the literal sense of that word), or rationalized (although this is a constant temptation in Western theology), but can only be known by being lived. Schuon, we might say, writes at length about the Trinity and often quite beautifully (for he is a poet as well as a metaphysician), but he *does not have the eyes of faith*, and so does not see as clearly as Philip Sherrard the lineaments of the Christian tradition.

Christian gnosis, or Balthasar's "seeing the form" (the title of the first volume of *The Glory of the Lord*), is the place where we might integrate (with appropriate adjustments!) much of what the Persian tradition tells us about the Interworld or *mundus imaginalis*. Despite widespread suspicion of the imagination among the Desert Fathers and other Christian authorities, Balthasar concentrates less on the imagination as a capacity for deception and as a source of distraction and temptation than on its role in prophecy and in the revelation of spiritual truths, as the locus for visionary experience, and as the home of symbolism, of poetry and of creativity. It is, Balthasar seems to suggest, the world of the "heart" where the Virgin Mary ponders the words and deeds of God, and where she first conceives the Word in humble obedience to the great Angel. Thus from the gnosis of faith, hope and love, infused into the human soul by the Holy Spirit, we have moved easily to the "feminine": the Church or Bride of Christ, with Mary his Mother as the unblemished, esoteric heart mediating all his graces, radiating him into the world. Balthasar notes:

"The terrible havoc which the 'historical-critical method' is today wreaking in the world of faith is possible only in a spiritual sphere from which the Church's Marian dimension has been banished and which has, therefore, forsaken all spiritual senses and their ecclesial communication. This devastation is spreading not only over the whole theological realm [he wrote this in 1961]; it is penetrating even the area of philosophy. Here the world is becoming imageless and valueless; it is a heap of 'facts' which no longer say anything and in which an equally imageless and formless naked existence is freezing and anguishing unto death. The philosophy and the theology of the image sat and fall together, and when the *image* of woman has vanished from the theological realm, and exclusively masculine, imageless conceptuality and thought-technique takes over, and then faith finds itself banished from the world and confined to the realm of the paradoxical and the absurd" [*GL*, I, 423].

## **A Theological Metaphysics**

The passage I have just quoted prepares the way for much in the later series, *Theo-Drama*, concerning the mediation of divine Glory by the feminine - as does his section on Vladimir Solovyev, whom he praises for having successfully synthesized and purified the whole history of Western Sophiology: he "integrates gnosis into Christianity" [*GL*, III, 285]. But what I want to concentrate upon here is the way in the second series Balthasar develops the idea of (feminine) *receptivity* as a function of personal relationship and communion at every level, including the divine, and as an intrinsic part of his account of divine and human freedom - especially the freedom of God to create, and the freedom of man to choose eternal damnation (thus raising two of the most fundamental questions for Christian esotericism).

God, the supreme Act of existing, is also the supreme act of giving. Before giving existence to creation, the Father eternally and completely gives himself to the Son in the Spirit. This giving is in fact what *constitutes* both the Son and the Spirit (as being eternally "from" the Father, each in a different way). But if there is giving in God, there must equally be receiving - even on the part of the Father, who lovingly receives back the Son's gift of himself in the Spirit. Therefore, instead of rejecting the idea of receptivity in God as many Thomists have done because it seems incompatible with divine perfection, Balthasar argues that any imperfection in receiving applies only to a being who is receptive *because needy*. (The finite, of course, can add nothing to the Infinite; but not because it is strictly "nothing", only because the Infinite has always-already received it, always-already transcended it.) He builds upon the Aristotelian distinction between Act and Potency, and the Thomistic distinction between Existence and Essence, but within the Act which is God's nature he sees a further distinction, between the kenosis (self-giving) and receptivity that properly belong to love.[\[xix\]](#)

The distinction is a function of the "otherness" of the divine Persons one from another, within the self-same nature and unity of love. This intra-Trinitarian "distance" (the Son is not the Father or the Spirit) provides Balthasar with the key to overcoming the cosmological problem noted by Philip Sherrard: the conventional interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo*, which sets up the created world as an "other" - and virtually a rival - to God.[\[xx\]](#) If there is this distance within God, because God is a Trinity, then there is a "space" within God for the act of creation, which takes place *ab intra*, not *ad extra* (to use Sherrard's terms). Balthasar's focus, however, is on the implications for divine freedom. According to Frithjof Schuon, "Divine freedom means that God is free not to create a particular world; it cannot mean that He is free not to create at all".[\[xxi\]](#) For both St Thomas and for Balthasar, on the other hand, the creation must be a free act on God's part, simply because its Existence is distinct from its Essence. It cannot be "necessary being".[\[xxii\]](#) But the creation is also not required even as an expression of God's goodness, because the need of goodness to communicate itself (the old Platonic principle) is forever already satisfied in the generation of the Son by the Father.

The fact of the Trinitarian processions thus seems to open up a new horizon of freedom within the Absolute. It also implies a new dimension of glory for the creature, if God's only motivation in creating is love. For love has a quality of superabundant delight in doing the unnecessary, in

"surprising" the Beloved with an unlooked-for gift. "It is one of the laws of love that the lover cannot completely fathom the essence of the beloved.... He must always disclose and surrender himself afresh, continually surprising and overwhelming the lover. If ever this movement were to stop, to be replaced by a conclusive knowledge of each other, love would come to an end. What seemed to be complete knowledge would be the sign of a real finitude. But in God nothing is finite."[\[xxiii\]](#)

In the very last pages of *Theo-Drama*, Balthasar confronts the question, "What does God gain from the world?" This connects two of his major themes: not only that of God's freedom in creating, but also the relationship of God's freedom to that of man: in particular, the possibility that some creatures may through the use of their freedom be damned forever and therefore lost to God. The question then becomes: what does God lose in losing man? Balthasar had earlier written a controversial book entitled *Dare We Hope (That All May be Saved)?* arguing that we may indeed so hope, both on the basis of Scripture and on the basis of visions and insights granted to the mystics. (He draws the line, unlike Sergei Bulgakov, at the salvation of demons.)[\[xxiv\]](#) Schuon, of course, regards the doctrine of an eternal hell as pertaining to "exoteric" truth, not to esotericism, because the eternity of such a state cannot be located on the same *level of reality* as the eternity of God.[\[xxv\]](#) While Balthasar does not propose a simple rejection of the doctrine of hell, he stresses the *defeat for God* that the damnation of any person would in fact represent, and sees the separation of the sinner from God as encompassed and contained by the separation of Son from Father in the abandonment of the Cross.

The otherness of the divine Persons from each other within the Trinitarian Act, which is the "result" of their unlimited self-giving, is therefore the basis not only for the free act of creation, but also for the redemption of that creation once it has fallen through the use of its own freedom into the depths of sin. Without going into detail, Balthasar has proposed the dogma of the Trinity as the basis for authentic Christian esotericism. Balthasar is not afraid to refer to it as such, though he stresses that the authentically Christian esotericist is one who has recognized the beauty of Christ and been initiated into the mystery of his suffering: "For at this point one must have seen the same thing as they if one is to understand them, and this, therefore, is the point where a certain esotericism is unavoidable and where the proofs for the truth contemplated necessarily bear the character of a ritual initiation, as the *Symposium* showed long ago. Even so truly a Church of the People' as the Catholic Church does not abolish genuine esotericism. The secret path of the saints is never denied to one

who is really willing to follow it. But who in the crowd troubles himself over such a path?" [GL, I, 34.] As for the freedom of God, Balthasar does not place it at the same level as that of man. In God, freedom and necessity coincide perfectly, and this is true preeminently of the "must" of love. As he says, "The whole thrust of this book has been to show that the infinite possibilities of divine freedom all lie *within* the trinitarian distinctions and are thus free possibilities within the eternal life of love in God that *has always been realized*."[\[xxvi\]](#)

### **From Eckhart to Ruysbroeck**

Among Christian writers, we find the closest approach to Schuon's view of metaphysics in Meister Eckhart, whose Christian orthodoxy has often been called into question (notably, of course, by the Pope in his own lifetime). It is still not clear, however, that this perspective is straightforwardly heretical, or even entirely incompatible with the more mainstream Dominican tradition represented by St Thomas. It has been argued, for example, that Eckhart accepted and assumed everything the Church and St Thomas had taught, but was trying to write and speak from the point of view of divine knowledge - from God's point of view, rather than that of the creature.[\[xxvii\]](#) This makes him appear to be elevating a "Godhead" above the Trinity, when he might have been intending to do nothing of the sort.

Balthasar - who is critical of this tendency in Eckhart, preferring the more explicitly Christocentric and love-centred mysticism of Suso, Tauler and John of the Cross - makes a useful distinction. He writes that "ideas have their own historical dynamic; they are governed by and obey their own laws, regardless of the meaning they had for their originator." (In fact, it is precisely the purpose of Balthasar's *The Glory of the Lord* to explore this historical dynamic and so to unravel the knot of modernity.) Consequently, he is able to view Eckhart's as an "authentically Christian" experience of God, "wholly limpid and shadowless", even though clothed in ill-fitting garments which bequeathed innumerable problems to his successors. The future "will not think, as he does, with a worshipping heart, and so will misuse his words and insights for the purposes of its Titanic Idealism". It was in this way that Eckhart unwittingly opened a way for Cusanus and Boehme, for Luther and Hegel, and even for modern atheism.[\[xxviii\]](#)



Even if we assume there is more to Eckhart than simple heresy, it remains true for those of us who lack his evident purity that to neglect the perspective of the creature in a premature assumption of divine knowledge would be to risk falling into Luciferian intellectual pride. This is the spiritual danger that lies in wait for Traditionalism when it separates metaphysics too self-confidently from theology, in effect dispensing with the humble submission to revealed truth which is proper to the creature as such. (It should be remembered that Lucifer was an angel of light.) Humble faith, on the other hand, is a sure path that leads through hope to love, and in love to the most complete and active participation in divine knowledge, through the grace of the Holy Spirit. In this way theology as the "esotericism of the saints" will always overtake metaphysics.

Balthasar regards Eckhart's successor John Ruysbroeck as having most successfully "purified" his thought of these tendencies, and in particular the tendency to separate the Trinitarian process from a dark primal Ground or *Ungrund* (his closest approach to Vedantic and Islamic mysticism). For Ruysbroeck it is the *Father*, not the "Godhead", who is the "unilluminable primal Ground" of the divine Unity, "utterly light, manifest to itself, in the reciprocal love that is effulgent in the Son". "The Son and the Spirit 'flow back' into the Father: this both the self-transcendence of the Persons into the simple identity of essence and the highest bliss of love of the Persons, who are perfected as such in this very self-transcendence. Thus God remains eternal event, yet without temporal becoming" [*T-D*, V, 459].

Thus in Ruysbroeck's understanding, as in Balthasar's, Trinity and Incarnation are bound up together in a way that must - when fully grasped - transform both the metaphysical conception of God and our conception of Being.

"[What is] shown to us is that the limitless and all-embracing breadth of the trinitarian Father has replaced and far surpassed the compass of the philosophico-mystical Ungrounded Principle. To be sure, many who have grasped this difficulty have too quickly sought to clothe their answer in Neo-Platonist concepts.... But this can in no way diminish the legitimate urgency of grasping truly and immediately, within faith's personal love-encounter, the ultimate transpersonal and trinitarian reality. The pantheistic *tat tvam asi*, which identifies subject and object in their depths, can be resolved only by virtue of the unity between God and man in the Son, who is both the *ars divina mundi* and the quintessence of actual creation (see Book III of Nicolas of Cusa's *Doctor Ignorantia*), and by virtue of the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from this incarnate Son in his unity with the Father"[*GL*, Vol. I, 195].

With this we can pick up the theme we have already glimpsed in Jean Borella concerning that mysterious inner point of the human spirit which is in contact with the infinity of the divine Spirit. "Looking into his own ground," Balthasar writes, Ruysbroeck "sees beyond it into the eternal I, which for man is both the source of his own I as well as his eternal Thou, and in the final analysis this is because the eternal I is already in itself I and Thou in the unity of the Holy Spirit" [*GL*, V, p. 70]. The encounter with God in this Place is a nuptial encounter, a spiritual marriage. Thus Ruysbroeck integrates the feminine in a way that Eckhart fails to do.

## **Conclusion**

In this essay, I have tried to suggest that Christians should pay some attention to the Traditionalist writers, who speak in the name of a metaphysics that they claim transcends religious divisions. If they wish to revive authentic metaphysics in our time, as the Pope has suggested, they cannot ignore the fact that in social and cultural terms the different religious traditions of the world now effectively interpenetrate. It is essential to work out how far a Christian can go in acknowledging the "seeds of truth" in other religions. A dialogue with the Traditionalists would help to force this question to the very deepest level. At the same time, I have argued that Traditionalists should pay more attention to some at least of the recent developments within Catholic theology.

According to Balthasar (who affirms this even more strongly than Borella or Sherrard), what Christians have to say is not something less than, say, Vedanta or Sufism: Christians must necessarily take a step beyond the other earthly expressions of the "primordial tradition"; a step prompted and justified by God's freely-given revelation. Balthasar believes that "the Christians of today, living in a night which is deeper than that of the later Middle Ages, are given the task of performing the act of affirming Being, unperturbed by the darkness and the distortion, in a way that is vicarious and representative for all humanity: an act which is at first theological, but which contains within itself the whole dimension of the metaphysical act of the affirmation of Being" [*GL*, V, 648]. This affirmation of being includes the cosmic hierarchy of forms and meanings. He writes, for example:

"The gods cannot be interpreted as the personifications of human and cosmic forces which could just as well be given abstract names. As concrete forms, they are radiant, unique images and unveilings of Being, of human existence within experienced Being, of 'regions' of Being which

cannot be divided by arbitrary borderlines. Within finite contours, these images validly encompass and embody the fulness of the universe. A Michelangelo, a Goethe, a Keats must still have seen such gods with their inner eye; many of their figures presuppose such encounters. And we must ask ourselves whether the inability of the modern heart to encounter gods - with the resultant withering up of human religions - is altogether to Christianity's advantage. The derision of the gods by Christian apologists, even by the great Augustine, is not indeed in every respect a glorious chapter of the Church's history" [GL, I, 500].

This passage, however, must be read in the context of Balthasar's entire argument, where he shows that the realm of the 'gods', of mythology, of symbolism, of poetry, ultimately becomes the receptacle of divine glory through the Incarnation. Christianity includes all that is true, and therefore of perennial value, in the other traditions, but at the same time it is possible to integrate this with what is uniquely shown in the Christian revelation.[xxix] The difference is irreducible. "It is not that an eternally present cosmic law is now brought to consciousness in a new way by Christ; rather, out of the freedom of God's love *a mode of salvation is created by which all is safeguarded in God*" [GL, I, 507, my emphasis].

Balthasar is surely a writer that the Traditionalists should take extremely seriously. But they may find hard to accept his view of Christianity as somehow "more" than all other religions, or his conclusion that "the Christian is called to be the guardian of metaphysics for our time" [GL, I, 656]. For on the face of it, what could seem more absurd? In the last few centuries, and particularly in the last fifty years, Christians have become the least metaphysical people on earth. It was Christianity that opened the door to modernity, which is virtually founded on the destruction of metaphysics. On the other hand, does not this very fact imply the role that Balthasar gives Christianity, for *the worst is a corruption of the best*? Only something quite unique among world religions could possess such an unprecedentedly destructive power.

The reader will have to decide. One thing is clear. If such a transformation of Christians into "guardians of metaphysics" on a world scale is to take place - or even a much less ambitious recovery of a *sense of the supernatural*, and thus of the true meaning of their own sacraments and liturgy - Christians must look to the deepest springs of their tradition. Like Borella, Sherrard and Balthasar, they must become aware both of its distinctive character, as the revelation of a mystery within God, a "mystery hidden from all ages" (1 Cor. 2:7), the mystery of Christ - and also of all the elements of universal truth which Christianity seeks to integrate around that unique centre.

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[i] John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, Vatican: 1998, section 83.

[ii] *The Encounter of Man and Nature*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1968.

[iii] These quotations are from B. Kelly, "Notes on the Light of the Eastern Religions", *Blackfriars Publications*, Vol. 7, 1954.

[iv] H. Bortoft, *The Wholeness of Nature: Goethe's Way of Science*, Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1996. For more on this theme, see my article "A Science of the Real", in *Communio*, XXV:3, Fall 1998.

[v] T. Burkhardt, *Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, Wellingborough: Aquarian Press, 1976, 62.

[vi] For example, H. Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi*, Princeton University Press, 1969. See also William C. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-Arabi and the problem of Religious Diversity*, State University of New York Press, 1994. Unless we take account of the nature of the imagination we cannot make much sense of the way visions and apparitions convey truth in a form that is nevertheless conditioned by culture and presupposition. Corbin, unfortunately (originally a Christian), is so carried away by the attractions of the Interworld that he can no longer conceive of a material Incarnation.

[vii] E.I. Watkin, *A Philosophy of Form*, London: Sheed & Ward, 1950, 110.

[viii] *The Sword of Gnosis*, Baltimore: Penguin, 1974, 144.

[ix] H. de Lubac, S.J., in *Theology in History*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996.

[x] See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Para 367.

[xi] J. Borella, *The Sense of the Supernatural*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998, 43.

[xii] Like E.I. Watkin on pp. 389-90 of *A Philosophy of Form*, he strongly objects to Jacques Maritain's denial of substantial or "entitative" contact of the human soul with God, contrasting this with the plain statement of St John of the Cross.

[xiii] See, for example, his essay "Tradition and Modernity", reprinted in Vol. 1 of *Sacred Web*, July 1998.

[xiv] S.H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989, 136-8.

[xv] F. Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1975, xviii.

[xvi] New York: Harper & Row, 1975. Quotations are from the chapter "Evidence and Mystery".

[xvii] The book was published posthumously, by Holy Cross Press (Brookline) and T&T Clark (Edinburgh), in 1998.

[xviii] The following abbreviations will be used for texts by Hans Urs von Balthasar. *GL* = *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, Edinburgh and San Francisco: T&T Clark and Ignatius Press, 1982-91, seven volumes. *T-D* = *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988-98, five volumes.

[xix] See G.F. O'Hanlon, *The Immutability of God in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, Cambridge University Press, 1990.

[xx] P. Sherrard, *Christianity: Lineaments of a Sacred Tradition*, Brookline: Holy Cross, 1998, ch. 10. Sherrard sees this interpretation as lying at the root of secularization and also of the present ecological crisis.

[xxi] *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, London: World of Islam Publishing Co., 1976, 173.

[xxii] No Essence can exist unless "actualized": that is, only the *act of existing* makes it something rather than nothing. Here Balthasar sides in his interpretation with the so-called "existential Thomists", such as Etienne Gilson, for whom Existence reigns supreme, and God's Essence is infinite precisely because it is identical with his Existence. It should be noted for the sake of further dialogue between Catholic philosophers and the representatives of "Tradition" that a more Platonic interpretation has been developed by Josef Seifert and his colleagues at the International Academy of Philosophy, which still accepts the "real distinction" in St Thomas, but criticizes this view of the divine infinity and the exclusive priority of Existence over Essence on the grounds that not every essence is necessarily a limitation. See J. Seifert, "Essence and Existence", *Aletheia*, I and I.2, University of Dallas Press, 1977.

[xxiii] Adrienne von Speyr, *The World of Prayer*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985, 42. See also H.U.von Balthasar, *T-D*, II, 258-9.

[xxiv] But even here he makes an interesting qualification in *T-D*, V, 508: "the question of the fate of demons is insoluble in a *theologia viatorum* and must therefore be excluded". Does he mean that it is only necessarily to be excluded in a *theologia viatorum*?

[xxv] F. Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1963, 71-83.

[xxvi] *T-D*, V, 508. Here, then, Balthasar comes closest to something Schuon would recognize as metaphysics, yet he comes to it by confronting more deeply the dogmatic mystery of the Trinity that Schuon cannot perceive except at the level of exotericism.

[xxvii] C.F. Kelley, *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977, 37; Cyprian Smith, O.S.B., *The Way of Paradox*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1987, 65; Joseph Milne, "Eckhart and the Problem of Christian Non-Dualism", *Eckhart Review*, March 1993.

[xxviii] The quotations from Balthasar in this paragraph come from *GL*, V, 16-47.]

[xxix] In this connection one can better understand Balthasar's interest in a remarkable but flawed work of Christian esotericism, *Meditations on the Tarot* (New York: Amity House, 1985), to which he contributed a Foreword in the German edition. One of the points he makes there is that the anonymous author, whom he calls "a thinking, praying Christian of unmistakable purity" (actually the former anthroposophist Valentin Tomberg) "is able to enter into all the varieties of occult science with such sovereignty, because for him they are secondary realities, which are only able to be truly known when they can be referred to the absolute mystery of divine love manifest in Christ. He does not in any way conceive of the Christian revelation as some kind of imprint - potential or real - of archetypes, be they subjective or objective. Rather, the latter merely form the cosmic material into which the unique Christian revelation finally incarnates; and since the incarnation of divine love, becoming human, is the ultimate aim of cosmic evolution, they comprise a round of allegories and schematic patterns announcing this event by way of 'mirrors and enigmas'." It is the Logos who is the Archetype of archetypes and revealer of the Father. By becoming man he gives to the fabric of existence a greater reality than it could otherwise have possessed.

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