The principal objective of The Matheson Trust is to promote the study of comparative religion from the point of view of the underlying harmony of the great religious and philosophical traditions of the world. This objective is being pursued through such means as audio-visual media, the support and sponsorship of lecture series and conferences, the creation of a website, collaboration with film production companies and publishing companies as well as the Trust's own series of publications.

The Matheson Monographs cover a wide range of themes within the field of comparative religion: scriptural exegesis in different religious traditions; the modalities of spiritual and contemplative life; in-depth mystical studies of particular religious traditions; broad comparative analyses taking in a series of religious forms; studies of traditional arts, crafts and cosmological science; and contemporary scholarly expositions of religious philosophy and metaphysics. The monographs also comprise translations of both classical and contemporary texts, as well as transcriptions of lectures by, and interviews with, spiritual and scholarly authorities from different religious and philosophical traditions.

PATHS THAT LEAD TO THE SAME SUMMIT

AN ANNOTATED GUIDE TO WORLD SPIRITUALITY

सत्यान्नास्ति परो धर्मः

There is no dharma higher than Truth.

Maxim of the Maharajas of Benares
Mahābhārata, CE 1, 69, 24

PATHS THAT LEAD TO THE SAME SUMMIT

An Annotated Guide to World Spirituality

by

Samuel Bendeck Sotillos

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Preface

The initial idea for this monograph came from Robert D. Crane (b. 1929), who after reading several of my reviews suggested that I compile them into a book as they would "make an excellent annotated bibliography for the whole field of perennial wisdom." The reader may ask, why purchase a book of previously published reviews? After all, it is not common to find a book consisting solely of reviews. The significance and value of such a collection is that each review provides a "crib sheet" or draws upon what is essential to understand and reflect upon regarding religion and what the religions say about each other, to provide the reader with a glimpse into a religious and spiritual universe of a particular faith tradition, while at the same time seeing how it differs from and parallels other traditions of the world. The collection provides a map of the terrain and a reference point on how to make sense of religious pluralism in today's world, in order to recognize what the great art historian of the twentieth century Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877–1947) termed "Paths That Lead to the Same Summit".[1]

As many of the spiritual themes overlap in this monograph, the reader will find unavoidable repetitions, yet rather than being viewed as a limitation, they can be viewed as a boon. Remembering that traveling the spiritual path itself is not only a continuous unfolding of the divine Mystery, but time and

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[1] See Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "Paths That Lead to the Same Summit: Some Observations on Comparative Religion," *Motive*, Vol. 4, No. 8 (May 1944), pp. 29–32, 35.

time again returning to the present moment and examining the limits of what was thought to be known, realizing that there is yet again a deeper and more integral perspective that transcends and assimilates the former point of view. Ongoing practice and repetition then become essential for deepening one's awareness of the essential themes and how to travel the spiritual path in light of the fact that supraformal Truth is inexhaustible.

It was difficult to select which reviews were going to be included in this monograph as there was insufficient space to include all of them. It is thus essential to discern which themes were covered and how to limit the replication of the themes presented as much as possible. The book reviews that comprise this collection nonetheless speak in their own unique way to the timeless and universal wisdom found in all times and places and known as the perennial philosophy.

Some may recall the extensive collection of book reviews and articles by the French metaphysician René Guénon (1886–1951),[2] the many book reviews compiled by the distinguished Thomist metaphysician Bernard Kelly (1907–1958),[3] or those of the leading perennialist author William Stoddart (b. 1925), largely unpublished, all of whom inspired the creation of this current anthology.

Many of the saints and sages of the world's religions have emphasized the limitations of relying solely on books for spiritual realization, as Śrī Rāmakrishna (1836–1886), the Paramahamsa of Dakshineshwar, notes here: "You may read thousands of volumes, you may repeat verses and hymns by hundreds, but if you cannot dive into the ocean of Divinity

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[2] See René Guénon, "Reviews of Books and Articles," in *Studies in Hinduism* (Ghent, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), pp. 105–232.

[3] See Scott Randall Paine (ed.), *A Catholic Mind Awake: The Writings of Bernard Kelly* (Brooklyn, NY: Angelico Press, 2017).

with extreme longing of the soul, you cannot reach God";[4] or "One cannot realize Divinity by reading books."[5] True knowledge and the human being's return to the Divine are not dependent on book learning, but rather on what Plato calls *anamnesis* (recollection or remembrance), that is a knowledge obtained by recalling the truths latent within the human soul. From this point of view learning is possible because it already exists within, and for this reason the Spirit is both transcendent and immanent. Śrī Ānandamayī Mā (1896-1982) emphasizes: "If someone really wants God, and nothing but God, he carries his book in his own heart. He needs no printed book."[6]

With this taken into consideration, books can nonetheless provide a significant support for those seeking and those on the Path, especially in the present-day when authentic spiritual teachers are very few and far between and given the myriad confusions around spiritual matters. Coomaraswamy discusses the importance of books in regard to the phase of the temporal cycle in which we find ourselves in the contemporary world, and gives the following advice to the serious seeker in order to realize "paths that lead to the same summit":

> Constant reading of all the traditional literature and learning to think in those terms [rather than "thinking for yourself"].... I would say you have to read the "100 best books"...all of Plato, Philo, Plotinus, Hermes, Dionysius, Eckhart, Boehme; some of John Scotus Erigena, Nicholas of Cusa, St Thomas Aquinas (eg, at least the first volume of the *Summa* in translation), St Bernard; *The Cloud of*

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[4] Śrī Rāmakrishna, "God and the Scriptures," in *The Original Gospel of Rāmakrishna: Based on M.'s English Text, Abridged*, eds. Swāmī Abhedānanda and Joseph A. Fitzgerald (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2011), p. 151.

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] Śrī Ānandamayī Mā, quoted in *The Essential Śrī Ānandamayī Mā: Life and Teachings of a 20th Century Indian Saint*, trans. Ātmānanda, ed. Joseph A. Fitzgerald (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2007), p. 5.

> *Unknowing*. Also some of the American Indian origin myths; all of Irish mythology; and the *Mabinogion*. Folklore generally. From the East, all of Rumi, Attar and other Sufi writings including Jami's *Lawaih*; the *Bhagavad Gita* (in various versions, until you know it almost by heart); the *Satapatha* and the other Brahmanas—and you know what of Chinese and Japanese yourself. When you have assimilated all this and begin to act accordingly, you will have got somewhere and will find that much of the internal conflict—"which shall rule, the better or the worse, inner or outer man"—will have subsided.[7]

Due to the abnormal conditions and spiritual crisis in our midst, Marty Glass points out that, "In our life in the spirit we have to keep reading.... The traditional guru relationship is not available to the overwhelming majority..."[8] He continues,

> Books, in other words, in our times, are equivalent to that "society of the holy" which tradition is unanimous in declaring indispensable. So reading is necessary. But not sufficient.... We need to go directly to the Teacher. To the source. And in devotional meditation, that's Who we are going to: The Teacher. He is within us, and He alone can definitively, so we'll never doubt it again, impart the Truth, the Truth which He is. He can reveal the Truth because He is the Truth. "I am the Teacher of all teachers," says Krishna in the *Bhagavatam*. The books we read—I use the classic image—are fingers pointing at Him.[9]

The task of reading all the books contained in this volume may be arduous for the curious or even challenging for the seeker given the lack of time and complexity of the present-

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[7] Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "Letter to Helen Chapin, Oct. 21, 1945," in *Selected Letters of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy*, eds. Alvin Moore, Jr. and Rama P. Coomaraswamy (Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 325.

[8] Marty Glass, "Ask the Teacher," in *Eastern Light in Western Eyes: A Portrait of the Practice of Devotion* (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2003), p. 136.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 137.

day. It is the intent of this collection to function like a guide to aid the seeker with taking a pilgrimage through the distinct religious and spiritual universes and to convey and remember what is at the heart of each of the revealed sapiential traditions, the one Truth hidden in all the forms. Our aim is conveyed in the words of St. John of the Cross (1542–1591) who, when providing instruction on the spiritual path wrote, "those who read this book will in some way discover the road they are walking along, and the one they ought to follow if they want to reach the summit."[10] We recall the words of the *hadīth qudsī* that speak to the symbolic meaning of the manifestation of the cosmos: "I was a hidden treasure, and I wanted to be known; hence I created the world." At the summit where all paths converge in the transcendent Unity, the seeker and the sought, appearing as subject-object also coincide and become One, as the Divine alone exists, and this is the dominating paradox of the human condition. Without seeking, the Self cannot be found, and yet seeking also prevents finding the Self, as only the Self can know the Self. The human being that embarks on the spiritual path initially identifying as an "I" or empirical ego, envisioning itself as separate, at the end of the journey sees that this was always an illusion. The pure Subject as the Self realizes the object within itself which is inseparable from Ultimate Reality or the Absolute.

Samuel Bendeck Sotillos

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[10] St. John of the Cross, quoted in the Prologue to "The Ascent of Mount Carmel," in *John of the Cross: Selected Writings*, ed. Kieran Kavanaugh (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), p. 60.

Introduction
The Path and the Perennial Philosophy

Across the world, throughout the four directions and encompassing all times and places including the diverse societies and civilizations, is the recognition that the human being was and is inseparable from Spirit and that there are many paths to realize this unanimous Truth. There are many names for this universal and timeless wisdom known as the perennial philosophy. Aldous Huxley (1894–1963) is responsible for popularizing the term in recent times with his anthology *The Perennial Philosophy* (1944).

It was in the early twentieth century when several key figures, later regarded as the perennialist or traditionalist school of comparative religious thought, became associated with the perennial philosophy. Some of these luminaries are René Guénon (1886–1951), Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877–1947), Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998) and Titus Burckhardt (1908–1984).[1] Yet they also include many others such as Marco Pallis (1895–1989), Lord Northbourne (1896–1982), Martin Lings (1909–2005), Whitall N. Perry (1920–2005), Joseph Epes Brown (1920–2000), William Stoddart (b. 1925) and Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933).

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[1] Frithjof Schuon emphasized that the perennialist or traditionalist school has two "originators," Guénon and Schuon, and two "continuators," Coomaraswamy and Burckhardt. See William Stoddart, "Frithjof Schuon and the Perennialist School," in *Remembering in a World of Forgetting: Thoughts on Tradition and Postmodernism*, eds. Mateus Soares de Azevedo and Alberto Vasconcellos Queiroz (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2008), pp. 51–66.

Within Hinduism this teaching is known as the *sanātana dharma* (eternal religion), and in Islam as *al-ḥikmat al-khālidah* (eternal wisdom; *jāwīdān-khirad*, in Persian), or also *al-dīn al-ḥanīf* (primordial religion). Other Latin phrases that are also used to articulate the perennial philosophy are: *sophia perennis* (perennial wisdom), *religio perennis* (perennial religion) and *religio cordis* (religion of the heart). It is sometimes known as the transcendent unity of religions, the underlying religion, Great Chain of Being, Primordial Tradition or simply as Tradition. Coomaraswamy has additionally referred to this metaphysical doctrine as the "Universal and Unanimous Tradition"[2] or "*Philosophia Perennis et Universalis*".[3]

Although the perennial philosophy is not a monolith and has innumerable variations and expressions so that no single individual or school can claim for itself this timeless and universal metaphysics, this does not mean that there are multiple or divergent forms of the perennial philosophy.[4] It is paramount to clarify also that this does not mean that all religions are the same or that one religion or spiritual path is viewed from this perspective as being superior to another religion or path. To assume this is to mistake what the perennial philosophy signifies. This again is because "Truth is one, and it is the same for all who, by whatever way, come to know it."[5] In the same way that "there can be only one

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[2] Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "The Nature of Mediaeval Art," in *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), p. 144.

[3] "*Philosophia Perennis et universalis* must be understood, for this 'philosophy' has been the common inheritance of all mankind without exception" (Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "Eastern Wisdom and Western Knowledge," in *The Bugbear of Literacy*, Middlesex, UK: Perennial Books, 1979, p. 68).

[4] "The Philosophia Perennis… embodies those universal truths to which no one people or age can make exclusive claim," Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Hinduism and Buddhism*. New York: Philosophical Library, 1943, p. 4.

[5] René Guénon, "Eastern Metaphysics," in *Studies in Hinduism*, p. 87. "There is a unity at the heart of religions" (Huston Smith, "Introduction" to Frithjof

metaphysics,"[6] correspondingly, "There is only one 'Perennial Philosophy'."[7] The perennial philosophy, like metaphysics, cannot be the exclusive property of any individual or school, as is made clear in the following: "The truths just expressed are not the exclusive possession of any school or individual: were it otherwise they would not be truths, for these cannot be invented, but must necessarily be known in every integral traditional civilization."[8] Guénon powerfully states:

> If an idea is true, it belongs equally to all who are capable of understanding it; if it is false, there is no credit in having invented it. A true idea cannot be "new", for truth is not a product of the human mind; it exists independently of us, and all we have to do is to take cognizance of it; outside this knowledge there can be nothing but error.[9]

When we speak here of "philosophy" as it is associated with the perennial philosophy, we mean the ancient understanding of *philo-sophia* or the "love of wisdom" grounded in a way of life to achieve its goal of wisdom and assimilating the primacy

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Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* [Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1993], p. xxiii).

6 Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "Śrī Ramakrishna and Religious Tolerance," in *Coomaraswamy, Vol. 2: Selected Papers, Metaphysics*, ed. Roger Lipsey (Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 38. Hereafter cited as *Coomaraswamy. Metaphysics*.

7 Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "Recollection, Indian and Platonic," in *Coomaraswamy. Metaphysics*, p. 65.

8 Frithjof Schuon, "Preface," to *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, p. xxxiii. "There can be no property in ideas. The individual does not make them, but finds them; let him only see to it that he really takes possession of them, and his work will be original in the same sense that the recurrent seasons, sunrise and sunset, are ever new although in name the same" (Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "Understanding the Art of India," *Calcutta Review*, Vol. 55, Nos. 1–3 [April/June 1935], p. 3).

9 René Guénon, *The Crisis of the Modern World* (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2004), pp. 56–57.

of Truth[10]—in order to "put [everything] in its rightful place"[11] and—to learn "how to think".[12] It is the doctrines and methods found across the religions that provide discernment between the Real and the illusory or the Absolute and the relative, together with the concentration on the Real as a means to return to the One.

Perhaps no other theme is more perplexing to the contemporary mind than religion and how to understand religious pluralism in today's world amidst all of the confusion that surrounds these matters. Due to the militant secularism and skepticism in these times, an integral framework for building bridges between the religions is imperative. This is especially necessary at a time when "the outward and readily exaggerated incompatibility of the different religious forms greatly discredits, in the minds of most of our contemporaries, all religion."[13] Without the integral framework of the perennial philosophy authentic bridge-building between the religions cannot take place.

While the word *religion* has become off-putting and is less used today than *spirituality*, it is necessary to remember that the etymological root of the English word "religion" is the Latin *religare*, meaning "to re-bind," or "to bind back", by implication to the Divine or the Supreme Identity that is at once transcendent and immanent. The etymological significance of the term religion itself alludes to its powerful connotation in restoring the integral human condition that has become estranged and besieged with myriad ill-fated

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10 See Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999).

11 René Guénon, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, p. 42.

12 Frithjof Schuon, quoted in James S. Cutsinger, *Splendor of the True: A Frithjof Schuon Reader* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2013), p. xxxii.

13 Frithjof Schuon, "Preface," to *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, pp. xxxiii-xxxiv.

diagnostics. Nonetheless religion is both paramount for both the individual and the human collectivity as it is the unitive force of humanity.

The perennialist critique of the modern and postmodern world is concerned with the loss of the sense of the sacred and the spiritual crisis that has developed in its wake. Although this crisis emerged in post-medieval Western Europe, it has since spread throughout the world, becoming a global phenomenon, and the human collectivity is now grappling with its destructive consequences. The perennial philosophy views the "secularizing and desacralizing tendencies"[14] to be at the heart of the crisis of modernism and postmodernism. The consequences of the eclipse of the sacred have had catastrophic effects on the contemporary West.

A fundamental divide and no less a conflict exists between the tenets of modernism and Tradition. Nasr underscores the essential distinction between Tradition and the ideology of modernism, "that which is cut off from the transcendent, from the immutable principles which in reality govern all things and which are made known to man through revelation in its most universal sense."[15] This outlook culminates in the now famous phrase and false thesis of the "Clash of Civilizations",[16] which has been aptly debunked as the "Clash of Ignorance".[17] The "clash" is in many ways aggravated by the extremism

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14 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Need for a Sacred Science* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 159.

15 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Reflections on Islam and Modern Thought," *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 15, Nos. 3 & 4 (Summer/Autumn 1983), p. 164.

16 Bernard Lewis coined the term "clash of civilizations" before Samuel P. Huntington. See Bernard Lewis, "The Roots of Muslim Rage," *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 266, No. 3 (September 1990), pp. 47–60; Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 3 (Summer 1993), pp. 22–49.

17 See Edward W. Said, "The Clash of Ignorance," *The Nation*, Vol. 273, No. 12 (October 22, 2001), pp. 11–14.

of anti-religious secularism and religious fundamentalism. When considered in a larger context, the rise of modernism which gave birth to secularism has created a void in the human collectivity which has heavily impacted the religions themselves. This vacuum has created an imbalance which religious fundamentalism and New Age spirituality attempt to fill. Religious fundamentalism, which emerged to defend itself from the threats of anti-religious secularism, has totally lost sight of what religion is, and it is in fact a betrayal of religion.[18] The loss of the sense of the sacred has created an unbalanced human psyche which has become myopic and almost impermeable to the invisible or unseen world that is of a higher order of reality.

While a deep immersion into the sapiential traditions is needed to comprehend what they say about each other, to recognize their uniqueness and even the necessary and providential nature of these differences, the goal is to simultaneously understand these differences and how they reconcile and meet one another in the divine Unity. This does not in any way minimize the formalistic practice of religion, as each orthodox faith tradition provides the fullness of truth through its doctrines and methods. When the religions are understood through metaphysics, they are no longer viewed as a limitation, but rather as a necessity leading to the doorway of the supra-formal: "Forms are doors to the essences"[19] rather than obstacles. These spiritual or "traditional forms… are keys to unlock the gate of Unitive Truth."[20]

Each of these exclusive truth claims, while necessarily

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[18] See Joseph E.B. Lumbard (ed.), *Islam, Fundamentalism, and the Betrayal of Tradition: Essays by Western Muslim Scholars* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2009).

[19] Frithjof Schuon, *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism* (Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1986), p. 11.

[20] Marco Pallis, "Foreword," to *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, ed. Whitall N. Perry (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), p. 10.

differing with each other in their exoteric or outer dimensions, since each faith tradition is the only valid and true religion for that particular individual or human collectivity, does not present contradictions or irreconcilable differences within their esoteric or inner dimension, as there is what has been termed a "transcendent unity of religions". This is clarified further here:

> Our starting point is the acknowledgment of the fact that there are diverse religions which exclude each other. This could mean that one religion is right and that all the others are false; it could mean also that all are false. In reality, it means that all are right, not in their dogmatic exclusivism, but in their unanimous inner signification, which coincides with pure metaphysics or, in other terms, with the *philosophia perennis*.[21]

If each Revelation differentiates itself from others, it is because of its supra-formal essence which cannot be reduced to its formal manifestation.

The perennial philosophy, while timeless and universal, is not in any way advocating a religion or tradition of its own, a common misconception. There cannot be a "supra-religion" or "meta-religion" that places one religion above all others, as the diverse religions correspond to the diverse human beings and derive from the Absolute. Each faith tradition is sufficient for the return or reintegration into the Divine and requires diverse means of facilitating this function. There cannot be a "supra-religion" or "meta-religion" that replaces all the sapiential traditions because this would distort the intrinsic meaning of the perennial philosophy that all the religions are unique manifestations of Absolute.

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21 Frithjof Schuon, quoted in Deborah Casey, "The Basis of Religion and Metaphysics: An Interview with Frithjof Schuon," *The Quest: Philosophy, Science, Religion, the Arts*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Summer 1996), p. 75.

It is also important to keep in mind that: "No new religion can see the light of day in our time for the simple reason that time itself, far from being a sort of uniform abstraction, on the contrary alters its value according to every phase of its development. What was still possible a thousand years ago is so no longer."[22] As the perennial philosophy acknowledges the "transcendent unity of religions", it can sometimes be erroneously confused with New Age pseudo-spirituality, which is syncretic in nature and is a parody of integral spirituality. Let us be clear: the perennial philosophy has nothing to do with New Age counterfeit-spirituality.

A defining symbol that is used to describe the perennial philosophy and the diverse spiritual paths is the *circumference and the center* of a circle, and correspondingly the *mountain and the summit*. Regarding the circumference and the center, the outer dimensions of the religions are situated along the points of the circumference while the inner or mystical dimensions of the religions are the radii leading from the circumference to the center. The center is itself the Absolute where the diverse religions originate and consequently where they return. "We must be capable of the cardinally important intuition that *every religion*—be it Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, or Islam—*comes from God and every religion leads back to God*."[23] The "transcendent unity of religions" is analogous to the center as described here: "Centre where all the radii meet, the summit which all roads reach. Only such a vision of the Centre," Nasr continues, "can provide a meaningful dialogue

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[22] Frithjof Schuon, "No Activity Without Truth," in *The Sword of Gnosis: Metaphysics, Cosmology, Tradition, Symbolism*, ed. Jacob Needleman (London: Arkana, 1986), p. 33.

[23] William Stoddart, "Religious and Ethnic Conflict in the Light of the Writings of the Perennialist School," in *Remembering in a World of Forgetting*, p. 32.

between religions, showing both their inner unity and formal diversity."[24] Martin Lings comments:

> Our image as a whole reveals clearly the truth that as each mystical path approaches its End, it is nearer to the other mysticisms than it was at the beginning. But there is a complementary and almost paradoxical truth which it cannot reveal, but which it implies by the idea of concentration which it evokes: increase of nearness does not mean decrease of distinctness, for the nearer the centre, the greater the concentration, and the greater the concentration, the stronger the "dose".[25]

From this we can logically deduce that in aligning oneself with an authentic spiritual form, one can by similitude know other traditions and where they converge—as radii traveling from the periphery of the circle to its center.

The symbol of the mountain and the summit illustrates the diverse religions and at the same time the "transcendent unity of religions". At the bottom or the base of the mountain the distance between the various religions or paths up the mountain appear to be wide and incompatible, yet at the summit there is the unanimity of the One or Ultimate Reality. As Lord Northbourne explains, "Paths that lead to a summit are widely separated near the base of the mountain, but they get nearer together as they rise."[26] Lings summarizes this doctrine in a powerful way:

> Religions may be likened in their outward or exoteric aspects to different points on the circumference of a circle

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[24] Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Islam and the Encounter of Religions," in *Sufi Essays* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1973), p. 150.

[25] Martin Lings, *What is Sufism?* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 21-22.

[26] Lord Northbourne, "Religion and Tradition," in *Religion in the Modern World*, ed. Christopher James 5th Lord Northbourne (Ghent, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), p. 4.

> and in their esoteric or mystical paths to radii leading from these points to the one centre which represents the Divine Truth. This image shows exoterism as the necessary starting point of mysticism, and it also shows that whereas the different exoterisms may be relatively far from each other, the mysticisms are all increasingly near and ultimately identical, converging upon the same point.[27]

Stoddart utilizes what he has termed the "mountain-climbing metaphor" to articulate the perennial philosophy and the spiritual path:

> The doctrine of the transcendent or esoteric unity of the religions is not a syncretism, but a synthesis. What does this mean? It means that we must *believe* in all orthodox, traditional religions, but we can *practice* only one. Consider the metaphor of climbing a mountain. Climbers can start from different positions at the foot of the mountain. From these positions, they must follow the particular path that will lead them to the top. We can and must believe in the efficacy of all the paths, but our legs are not long enough to enable us to put our feet on two paths at once! Nevertheless, the other paths can be of some help to us. For example, if we notice that someone on a neighboring path has a particularly skillful way of circumventing a boulder, it may be that we can use the same skill to negotiate such boulders as may lie ahead of us on our own path. The paths as such, however, meet only at the summit. The religions are one only in God.[28]

Nasr observes this ascent of the spiritual path within the human being: "The human spirit is One only at the summit of

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[27] Martin Lings, *Ancient Beliefs and Modern Superstitions* (Cambridge, UK: Archetype, 2001), p. 65.

[28] William Stoddart, "Religious and Ethnic Conflict in the Light of the Writings of the Perennialist School," in *Remembering in a World of Forgetting*, pp. 30–31.

the human soul. Therefore, means must be found for men to climb to this summit of their own being."[29]

What this means for those who change their religion is very informative, as Stoddart explains:

> While it is a grave matter to change one's religion, the mountain-climbing metaphor nevertheless illustrates what takes place when one does. One moves horizontally across the mountain and joins an alternative path, and at that point one starts climbing again. One does not have to go back to the foot of the mountain and start again from there.[30]

Schuon astutely comments from the esoteric or mystical perspective that, "to practice one religion is implicitly to practice them all."[31] This is because "a given religion in reality sums up all religions, and all religion is to be found in a given religion, because Truth is one."[32] This vastly differs from endless dabbling in the various religions or mystical practices, as it is decisive that one path be taken and traveled until its end. This non-committal way of approaching religion is very deceptive and ultimately goes nowhere, as Shaykh al-Darqāwī (1743–1823) makes clear: "They are like a man who tries to find water by digging a little here and a little there and [who] will die of thirst; whereas a man who digs deep in one spot, trusting

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29 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Need for a Sacred Science*, p. 49.

30 William Stoddart, "Religious and Ethnic Conflict in the Light of the Writings of the Perennialist School," in *Remembering in a World of Forgetting*, p. 31.

31 Frithjof Schuon, "Diversity of Revelation," in *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom, A New Translation with Selected Letters*, ed. James S. Cutsinger (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2006), p. 20. "To have lived and experienced any religion fully is in a sense to have experienced all religions" (Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Need for a Sacred Science*, p. 159).

32 Frithjof Schuon, "To Refuse or To Accept Revelation," in *From the Divine to the Human* (Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1982), p. 147.

in the Lord and relying on Him, will find water; he will drink and give others to drink."[33]

As human diversity mirrors religious pluralism, in the same way "the underlying truth is one… because man is one."[34] The many ways to the Divine belong to the diversity of human types, as the Sufi adage upholds, "There are as many paths to God as there are human souls."

Contemporary ecumenical or interfaith dialogue, although often well intentioned in accepting other faiths as legitimate, and advocating tolerance towards other faiths, radically falls short and does not truly plumb the depths of the religions to understand how authentic bridges may be established between them. Present-day ecumenical or interfaith dialogue, often without necessarily realizing it, ends up concluding that no one religion can possibly possess the fullness of the Truth: since they are all the same and each facilitates a part of the Truth, it is implied that each religion is an imperfect receptacle of Truth. It goes without saying that no amount of tolerance equates with understanding and, while tolerance is much needed, it is limited to say the least. This perspective unequivocally restricts the full scope of what religion signifies, and therefore it cannot facilitate a true understanding and authentic meeting between the diverse religions. Again, each religion possesses the fullness of the Truth, which is sufficient for salvation or the return to the Divine, as each is an expression of the one Truth originating in a common metaphysical essence. It cannot be forgotten that "Traditional norms… provide the criteria of culture and

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[33] Shaykh al-Darqāwī, *Letters of a Sufi Master*, trans. Titus Burckhardt (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1998), pp. 61–62. "You can't chase two rabbits at the same time" (quoted in Francis Dojun Cook, *How to Raise an Ox: Zen Practice as Taught in Zen Master Dogen's Shobogenzo* [Los Angeles, CA: Center Publications, 1978], p. 77).

[34] Frithjof Schuon, "Understanding Esoterism," in *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, trans. William Stoddart (Bedfont, Middlesex, UK: Perennial Books, 1990), p. 16.

civilization. Traditional orthodoxy is thus the prerequisite of any discourse at all between the traditions themselves."[35]

What is needed is to build bridges between the religions based on an "esoteric ecumenicism"[36] that transcends sectarian boundaries, is rooted in metaphysics, and is an expression of the universal and timeless wisdom of the perennial philosophy that is "neither of the East nor of the West" (Qur'ān 24:5).

The expositors of the perennial philosophy in no way attempt to alter or update the religions and their mystical dimensions, as this would be unnecessary and even mistaken, but rather allow the traditional sources and their saints and sages speak for themselves on their own terms, in order to present the universal and timeless wisdom to contemporaries seeking the one Truth hidden in all the forms.

What is of essential importance in this topsy-turvy and radically confused time is to adhere to an authentic religious form and to practice it with all of one's heart and mind. Yet this commitment cannot be imposed from without and needs to come directly from the person themselves, as we are reminded: "There is no compulsion in religion" (Qur'ān 2:256).

> Tradition speaks to each man the language he can understand, provided he be willing to listen; this reservation is essential, for tradition, we repeat, cannot become bankrupt; it is rather of man's bankruptcy that one should speak, for it is he who has lost the intuition of the supernatural and the sense of the sacred.[37]

While religion derives from a supra-formal order, human beings need forms to travel the spiritual path in order to return

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35 Bernard Kelly, "Notes on the Light of the Eastern Religions," in Scott Randall Paine (ed.) *A Catholic Mind Awake: The Writings of Bernard Kelly*, p. 33.

36 See Frithjof Schuon, *Christianity/Islam: Essays on Esoteric Ecumenicism* (Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1985).

37 Frithjof Schuon, "No Initiative without Truth," in *The Play of Masks* (Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1992), p. 77.

to the Spirit. Forms themselves are the disclosure of the supra-formal order, as "form is a revelation of essence."[38] Human beings live in the world of forms and analogously require them for their return to the Divine: "To say man is to say form,"[39] and likewise, "to say man is to say spirit."[40] Spiritual forms correspond to both human diversity and religious pluralism as: "Truth is situated beyond forms, whereas Revelation, or the Tradition which derives from it, belongs to the formal order, and that indeed by definition; but to speak of form is to speak of diversity, and so of plurality."[41]

Even though each religion is a "relative absolute", human beings require a spiritual form to travel one of the revealed paths up the mountain to its summit, or analogously to travel from the circumference of the circle to its center. The principal difficulty in reconciling the particular tensions and antagonisms that arise from the exclusive truth claims of the world's religions has been succinctly framed by Nasr:

> The essential problem that the study of religion poses is how to preserve religious truth, traditional orthodoxy, the dogmatic theological structures of one's own religion and yet gain knowledge of other traditions and accept them as spiritually valid ways and roads to God.[42]

The resolution to this ever-perplexing issue is none other than the universal metaphysics that has existed at all times and in all places, known as the perennial philosophy. What

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[38] Meister Eckhart, quoted in Whitall N. Perry (ed.), *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, p. 673.

[39] Frithjof Schuon, "Understanding Esoterism," in *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, p. 29.

[40] Frithjof Schuon, "Outline of a Spiritual Anthropology," in *From the Divine to the Human*, p. 76.

[41] Frithjof Schuon, "Diversity of Revelation," in *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, trans. G.E.H. Palmer (Bedfont, Middlesex, UK: Perennial Books, 1990), p. 25.

[42] Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Islam and the Encounter of Religions," in *Sufi Essays*, p. 127.

is needed in order to restore the myopic condition of human consciousness is "To see all things in the yet undifferentiated, primordial unity,"[43] or as exemplified in the *Heart Sutra* (*Prajnāpāramitā-hridaya-sūtra*): "Form is emptiness; emptiness is form. Emptiness is not other than form; form is not other than emptiness."[44] What is necessary to understand for any serious seeker on the path is that not all facets of religion will be comprehended at once and that these matters are not dependent on human will as "He guides whomsoever He will to a straight path" (Qur'ān 10:25), but derive from a higher source, from what is above: "The point I am making is correct, but if you cannot grasp it then let it be, until God himself helps you to understand."[45] Each human being again is a reflection of the diverse and unique religions and spiritual paths that lead to the same summit. According to Ibn ʿArabī, "If he knew what Junayd said—that the water takes on the color of the cup—he would let every believer have his own belief and he would recognize God in the form of every object of belief."[46] As Coomaraswamy writes in his foundational article "Paths That Lead to the Same Summit," by ascending a single spiritual path to its conclusion the wayfarer will reach the single and unanimous summit found at the heart of all of the religions:

> There are many paths that lead to the summit of one and the same mountain; their differences will be the more apparent

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43 Lao Tzu, quoted in Jean C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Introduction to Taoism: The Wisdom of the Sages* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2010), p. 37.

44 The Heart Sūtra, quoted in Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *The Heart Sutra Explained: Indian and Tibetan Commentaries* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 57.

45 "Chapter 34," in *The Cloud of Unknowing and The Book of Privy Counseling*, ed. William Johnston (New York: Doubleday, 1996), p. 80.

46 Ibn al-ʿArabī, quoted in William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 344.

the lower down we are, but [they] vanish at the peak; each will naturally take the one that starts from the point at which he finds himself; he who goes round about the mountain looking for another is not climbing.[47]

[47] Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "Paths That Lead to the Same Summit," p. 35.

Part I

The Hindu Tradition

1

*Introduction to Hindu Dharma**

> *Ekam sat viprā bahudhā vadanti.*
> (It is the one truth, which the sages call by different names.)
>
> *Rigveda* 1:164:46

This recent work brings to light over four thousand discussions of the axial sage His Holiness Jagadguru Shankaracharya Shri Chandrashekarendra Saraswati Swamigal, the 68th Jagadguru of Kanchi (1894–1994). His spiritual lineage is traced to an unbroken chain of succession back to Ādi Śaṅkarācārya (509–477) who established the philosophical school of *Advaita Vedānta* (non-dualism). The Jagadguru of Kanchi was installed as pontiff in Kanchi at the young age of thirteen, meaning that he spent eighty-seven years of his life dedicated to preserving and perpetuating the Hindu *dharma*. When opening this book the reader will find that the first pages and the back cover are full of testimonies devoted to the 68th Jagadguru of Kanchi by kings, prime ministers, scholars and a spiritual paragon of the twentieth century—Śrī Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950), who responded the following when asked about the Jagadguru: "When were we separate…? We are always together." There is also a statement of gratitude

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* *Introduction to Hindu Dharma: Illustrated*, by the 68th Jagadguru of Kanchi, Introduction by Arvind Sharma, edited by Michael Oren Fitzgerald, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2008, 168 pp.

and blessing from the Kānchi Kāmakoti Pītha or spiritual hermitage of the Jagadguru with regards to this laborious and noteworthy publication.

Despite the reverence and acknowledgment from such renowned and distinguished individuals, it is curious that little is known about the 68th Jagadguru of Kanchi in the West, particularly with the growing interest in non-dual spirituality. It is for this reason that this book is of vital importance, for it not only stands as an irreplaceable introduction to Hinduism through the spiritual legacy of one of the most beloved and honored spiritual authorities (*āchāryas*) of the twentieth century, but it also illuminates the quintessential necessity of religion in a world that has disowned itself from its spiritual heritage. The ramifications of the split between the spiritual and secular worlds are now blatant, disclosing its mark of disarray throughout the four directions of the earth. This book thus functions as a call to spiritual life for all people of all nations: whatever their religious orientation may be, it is a call to remember their own spiritual heritage.

It should also be remembered that the Jagadguru did not write these teachings contained in the text; they were conveyed to his disciples by the traditional method of oral transmission, which esoterically speaking means not orally transmitted *per se*, but transmitted *via* the direct presence of an *āchārya*—known as "heart to heart". This form of transmission is exemplified by the term *Upanishad*, "to sit down near to", which describes one of the central methods by which most, if not all, spiritual traditions have been passed down throughout time. As sacred art is characteristic of India's spiritual traditions, it is fitting that this book is filled with sacred images (*murtis*) of the 68th Jagadguru, including the current and past *Āchāryas* of the Kānchi Kāmakoti Pītha, Hindu deities and many other images referenced throughout the text, giving the reader not only a written, but also a visual pilgrimage (*tīrtha-yātrā*) into the sacred dimension of this axial sage.

The Jagadguru clarifies the misnomers attributed to the terms "Hindu" and "Hinduism" as these terms were given to the Indian people by foreigners and not by the Indian people themselves. They were used to refer to the land adjacent to the Sindhu (*Indus*) River that they called "Indus" or "Hind" and it is from this name that the religion of India became known as Hinduism. The Jagadguru states that originally no name was given to the Indian religion because it was the ancient religion that was found everywhere extending beyond India and the Indian subcontinent. This is why it has been referred to as the *sanātana dharma* or "primordial, eternal code of conduct". It is from the perspective of the *sanātana dharma* that the Jagadguru confirms that all spiritual paths lead to the same summit—*Paramātman* or "Transcendent Unity":

> The temple, the church, the mosque, the *vihāra* (a Buddhist monastery; a residence for meditation) may be different from one another. The idol or the symbol in them may not also be the same and the rites performed in them may be different. But the *Paramātman* (Transcendent Unity) who grants grace to the worshipper, whatever be his faith, is the same. The different religions have taken shape according to the customs peculiar to the countries in which they originated and according to the differences in the mental outlook of the people inhabiting them. The goal of all religions is to lead people to the same *Paramātman* according to the different attitudes of the devotees concerned (p. 8).

The Jagadguru of Kanchi also acknowledges the unanimity of the divine messengers and teachers in spite of religious and social distinctions:

> ... great *jñānins* have arisen in the world, from time to time, no matter what religion they professed. All these prophets and saints proclaimed the same Truth, each in his own way, and if they happened to come back to life now and meet together, there would be perfect unity in

> their messages. It is the followers that have put into their mouths more than what they said and wrangle with others, freezing the original teachings, mangled in their hands into institutional forms, which foster narrowness and bigotry (p. 139).

The Jagadguru openly discusses controversial topics that are perceived heresies in the current era, such as the caste system (*varnadharma*) or the role of women in Indian culture. There is perhaps nothing more fervently attacked and criticized within "Hinduism" or *sanātana dharma* than the caste system. In today's world Westerners are not alone in this critique. There are even many Indians who have begun to share this modern outlook that not only questions their spiritual heritage, but in many ways denies or negates its implicit authority. The Jagadguru reminds the reader of the often forgotten virtues of this integral system: "Greed and covetousness were unknown during the centuries when *varna dharma* [caste system] flourished. People were bound together in small, well-knit groups, and they discovered that there was happiness in their being together" (p. 22). The Jagadguru explains further:

> That was the tradition for ages together in this land—there was oneness of hearts. If every member of society does his duty, does his work, unselfishly and with the conviction that he is doing it for the good of all, considerations of high and low will not enter his mind. If people carry out the duties common to them, however adverse the circumstances be, and if every individual performs the duties that are special to him, no one will have cause for suffering at any time (p. 25).

The misunderstandings of the caste system extend into the role of women in Indian culture which are assumed to be, by Western standards, inherently discriminated against, treated unfairly or degraded, "The vocations have to be

properly divided for the welfare of mankind. If everybody paid attention to this fact, instead of talking of rights, it would be realized that the *śāstras* [scriptures] have not discriminated against women or any of the *jātis* [a sub-division of caste]" (p. 95). The Jagadguru also clarifies that "Those who complain that women have no right to perform sacrifices on their own must remember that men too have no right to the same without a wife. If they knew this truth they would not make the allegation that Hindu *śāstras* look down upon women. A man can perform sacrifices only with his wife" (p. 95).

Regarding marriage (*saha-dharma-cārinī-samprayoga*), which is perceived as a union for the practice of *dharma* and wedding ceremonies, the Jagadguru categorically denies the extravagances that have become a norm in the current era. He also denies the notion of the dowry: "All the ostentation at weddings, the dowry and other gifts given to the groom's people have no sanction in the *śāstras*" (p. 97). And again "Above all the custom of dowry must be scrapped" (p. 97).

The Jagadguru of Kanchi also discusses with great detail and precision traditional government that integrates spiritual authority and temporal power. He asserts that "true secularism" is not that "the State should be completely detached from all religions. On the other hand a State, instead of being supportive of a particular religion, should support all the religions" (p. 134), even to the degree that "The State should support all religions with equal concern and help in their growth, without mutual ill-will" (p. 134).

Another misunderstanding is the notion that the Brahmin caste somehow imposes a tyrannical system upon the non-Brahmins (i.e. *Śūdras*) and is therefore able to acquire wealth and comfort at the expense of other castes. Although this scenario did take place in the wake of the British occupation of India, it was not a traditional *de jure* facet of the social makeup, but a *de facto* error. It is through this idea that ill feelings have arisen between the Brahmins and non-Brahmins.

To bring light to such mentality the Jagadguru states, "As a matter of fact, even by strictly adhering to this *dharma* the Brahmin is not entitled to feel superior to others. He must always remain humble in the belief that 'everyone performs a function in society; I perform mine'" (p. 29), and elsewhere he confirms, "A Brahmin ought not to keep even a blade of grass in excess of his needs" (p. 105). The Jagadguru does not create a scapegoat so to speak of the Brahmins for "It is the duty of these others [non-Brahmins] to make Brahmins worthy of their caste" (p. 99). The author sums up about the caste system with the following words, "No civilization can flourish in the absence of a system that brings fulfillment to all. *Varna dharma* brought fulfillment and satisfaction to all" (p. 25). In contrast to traditional society and its integral foundations, the Jagadguru states the following in regard to the postmodern West and its so-called "freedom":

> There is much talk today of freedom and democracy. In practice what do we see? Freedom has come to mean the license to do what one likes, to indulge one's every whim. The strong and the rough are free to harass the weak and the virtuous. Thus we recognize the need to keep people bound to certain laws and rules. However, the restrictions must not be too many. There must be a restriction on restrictions, a limit set on how far individuals and society can be kept under control. To choke a man with too many rules and regulations is to kill his spirit. He will break loose and run away from it all (p. 76).

The Jagadguru discontentedly acknowledges that there are not enough authentic spiritual teachers in the present age (*yuga*) and this is a distressing reflection of the state of the *dharma*. In identifying the current decline of the *dharma*, coupled with the influx of interest in non-dualism (*advaita*), the Jagadguru underscores the pitfalls of neo-advaita or neo-vedānta that have become commodities in the spiritual marketplace of today's world, "those who want to take the

path of *jñāna*, without being prepared for it through *karma*" (p. 57). Yet, as the Jagadguru reminds the reader, it is by means of the spiritual doctrine and method that one can potentially realize the non-dual nature of reality: "... the deities must be worshipped, but again with the conviction of arriving at the point where we will recognize that the worshipper and the worshipped are one" (p. 60), and even then it is not that the spiritual forms are discarded *per se*, it is that there is no longer a dualism (*dvaita*) of subject-object separateness, "When you come to this state there will be no need for the Vedas too for you: this is stated in the Vedas themselves" (p. 61). Those who interpret non-dualism to be a "dropping" or getting rid of spiritual doctrines and methods are quite mistaken, as the founder of this philosophical school, Śaṅkarā, says: "Chant the Vedas every day. Perform with care the sacrifices and other rites they enjoin upon you" (p. 51). In many ways the innovative notion of "evolutionary" spirituality that has become common place in the current era bear resemblance to what the Jagadguru cautions directly against:

> If we tried to create a new dharma for ourselves it might mean trouble and all the time we would be torn by doubts as to whether it would bring us good or whether it would give rise to evil. It is best for us to follow the dharma practiced by the great men of the past, the dharma of our forefathers (p. 2).

The 68th Jagadguru of Kanchi encapsulates the quintessence of Ādi Śaṅkarācārya's metaphysics whose lineage he is the direct spiritual succession and representative of:

> Briefly put, this is the concept of *Bhagavatpāda* (Śankara): ultimately everything in the phenomenal world will be seen to be *Māyā* (cosmic illusion). The One Object, the One and Only Reality, is the *Brahman*. We must be one with It, non-dualistically, without our having to do anything in the same way as the *Brahman*. I, who bear the name of Śri Śankara,

> keep speaking about many rights, about *pūjā* (sacrificial offerings), *jāpā* (invocatory prayer), service to fellow men, etc. It is because in our present predicament we have to make a start with rites. In this way, step by step, we will proceed to the liberation that is non-dualistic. It is this method of final release that is taught us by Śri Krishna *Paramātman* and by our *Bhagavatpāda* (Śankara). At first *karma*, works, then *upāsana* or devotion and, finally, the enlightenment called *jñāna* (p. 113).

The Jagadguru invites the reader—even those not of Indian origin—to return to their respective spiritual traditions. It is through returning to one's respective tradition, while acknowledging that there is only one *Paramātman*, that the spiritual illness that filters into one's psychological and social life can be cured. It must be remembered that "it is religion that develops the mental health" (p. 134). In the Jagadguru's teachings there is no notion of "conversion" as such for—"its [the *sanātana dharma*'s] canonical texts do not contain any rite for conversion" (p. 8). His position is transparent and lucid: "there is no need to abandon the religion of your birth and embrace another" (p. 7). He continues to elaborate on this point:

> My wish is indeed that people following different religions ought to continue to remain in their respective folds and find spiritual fulfillment in them. I do not invite others to embrace my faith. In fact I believe that to do so is contrary to the basic tenets of my religion. Nothing occurs in this world as an accident (p. 21).

In fact the notion of conversion is irrelevant to the *sanātana dharma* for "Our catholic outlook is revealed in our scriptures which declare that whatever the religious path followed by people they will finally attain the same *Paramātman*. That is why there is no place for conversion in Hinduism" (pp. 14–16).

And perhaps we can put to rest this idea of conversion with these words, "The goal must be unity, not uniformity" (p. 9).

The 68th Jagadguru of Kanchi confirms that it is through the completion of the individual and collective duties that social harmony and prosperity as a norm can prevail. We are called to remember the words of the Jagadguru "A man can be fortunate in many ways. But there is nothing that makes him more fortunate than the opportunity he has of serving others" (p. 127). Love is inseparable from the spiritual path—"if there is no love there is no meaning in life" (p. 132). It is the same voice that guides the terrestrial world that "We must learn to look upon the entire universe as the *Paramātman* and love it as such (p. 132).

The Jagadguru strangely enough brings elucidation to a troubled and broken age by affirming that there are certain benefits to living in the *Kali-Yuga* which were unavailable to human individuals of earlier ages:

> Vyāsa himself says: 'The age of *Kali* is in no way inferior to the other ages…' In other *yugas* or ages Bhagavān is attained to (Self-realization) with difficulty by meditation, austerities, and *pūjā*, but in *Kali* He is reached by the mere singing of His names. (pp. 106–107)

It is in the repetition (*japa*) of the Divine Names that human individuals living in the age of *Kali* can practice the *dharma*, as it is a spiritual method available to all regardless of social status or spiritual aptitude: "He may think of god even on the bus or the train as he goes to his office or any other place" (p. 5). The Jagadguru even states that should there be an absence of priests: "in the future everyone should be able to perform Vedic rites himself" (p. 30). And yet the Jagadguru also confirms his concerns regarding the current state of an untraditional world: "I am also extremely concerned about the fact that, if the Vedic tradition which has been maintained like

a chain from generation to generation is broken, it may not be possible to create the tradition all over again" (p. 37).

This book is an invaluable contribution to the treasury of traditional wisdom that has paradoxically become more accessible in the present era due to the breakdown of the numerous traditional civilizations. It will be of considerable significance for the varied seekers of truth as the Jagadguru speaks as a pontiff *par excellence*, acknowledging both the need *in divinis* for the participation in an authentic spiritual tradition, and at the same time emphasizing its transcendent function that is universal and unanimous—the *sanātana dharma*. It is in the light of such a work that modern seekers can better understand the pre-modern or traditional world in order to recognize and comprehend the inherent biases that are already ingrained and conditioned into the modernist outlook. We will conclude this review with the discerning and humbling words of the 68th Jagadguru of Kanchi, "Setting an example through one's life is the best way of making others do their duty or practice their dharma" (p. 77).

2

*The Original Gospel of Rāmakrishna**

> God is Truth, the world is untruth; this is discrimination. Truth means that which is unchangeable and permanent, and untruth is that which is changeable and transitory. He who has right discrimination knows that God alone is the Reality; all other things are unreal.
>
> Śrī Rāmakrishna[1]

Amidst the spiritual confusion that besieges the contemporary world with its counterfeits, Śrī Rāmakrishna is an authentic luminary of a forgotten era, who brings crystalline clarity to the modern and postmodern malaise, reminding the sincere wayfarer of what is required for those on the path of Self-Realization. Śrī Rāmakrishna (1836–1886), the Paramahamsa of Dakshineshwar, was the living embodiment of the perennial philosophy, the *sanātana dharma* or "eternal religion", as he not only emphasized the transcendent unity of religions in its theoretical tenets, but lived and experienced its pluralism directly and as a personification of its universality. Reductionist attempts to psychologize the saints and sages,

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* *The Original Gospel of Rāmakrishna: Based on M.'s English Text, Abridged*, revised by Swāmī Abhedānanda, edited and abridged by Joseph A. Fitzgerald. Foreword by Alexander Lipski, Introduction by Swāmī Vivekānanda. Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2011, 260pp.

1 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

such as Rāmakrishna, cannot by their very nature yield insights into their inner lives due to their profane point of view. Due to the rise in secularism, some have considered the saints and sages to be suffering from mental illnesses or psychopathologies, as illustrated in the following excerpt from Stanislav Grof:

> Psychiatric literature contains numerous articles and books that discuss what would be the most appropriate clinical diagnoses for many of the great figures of spiritual history. St. John of the Cross has been called "hereditary degenerate," St. Teresa of Avila dismissed as a severe hysterical psychotic, and [Prophet] Mohammed's mystical experiences have been attributed to epilepsy. Many other religious and spiritual personages, such as the Buddha, Jesus, Ramakrishna, and Shri Ramana Maharshi have been seen as suffering from psychoses, because of their visionary experiences and "delusions."[2]

Because the domain of the human psyche or psychology is always subordinate to the spiritual domain and not the other way around, so reductionism in whatever form can never transcend its own limits, just as the human psyche cannot leap beyond itself.

Interest in neo-Advaita and in the doctrine of "non-duality" is proliferating in the present-day, especially in its commonality with modern science. Neo-Advaita, while appearing to be a legitimate expression of *Advaita Vedānta*, has more in common with New Age spirituality, having

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[2] Stanislav Grof, "Spirituality and Religion," in *Psychology of the Future: Lessons from Modern Consciousness Research* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), p. 215. "Medical materialism finishes up Saint Paul by calling his vision on the road to Damascus a discharging lesion of the occipital cortex, he being an epileptic. It snuffs out Saint Teresa [of Avila] as an [*sic*] hysteric, Saint Francis of Assisi as an [*sic*] hereditary degenerate" (William James, "Religion and Neurology," in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, New York: Penguin Books, 1985, p. 13).

largely departed from the traditional understanding of Hindu spirituality.[3] Selecting doctrines and practices based on personal preferences contradicts all true forms of religion and spirituality. It is not for human beings to decide these things, but the Divine. This phenomenon of subjectivized religiosity is indicative of a fundamental misunderstanding of what religion and spirituality are in their truest sense.

In the same way, there has been a rise of false spiritual masters who attract seekers by the manifestation of certain psychic powers, but such powers have been illustrated by numerous spiritual authorities to have nothing to do with the realization of the Absolute (*Brahman*): "The realization of God is not the same as psychic power" (p. 147). In fact, psychic powers are inferior and even dangerous for those traveling the spiritual path and should be avoided, "There is, indeed, great danger in possessing psychic powers" (p. 147). There have also been attempts by contemporary *gurus* or so-called spiritual masters to forge a spiritual lineage that links directly back to Śrī Rāmakrishna or another spiritual giant, Śrī Ramana Maharshi, in order to obtain legitimacy, when there was no authenticated lineage to be had or recognized.

With the death of great masters like these and others, their legacy is vulnerable to being coopted and rewritten to benefit the agenda of New Age counterfeits. There is the case of a so-called American-born *avatāra* who asserts that he is the incarnation of both Swāmī Vivekānanda and Rāmakrishna in the modern West. The impostor seized on the following statements by Rāmakrishna—"Today I have

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[3] See René Guénon, *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines* (Ghent, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), pp. 232–235; Frithjof Schuon, "Vedānta," in *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts: A New Translation with Letters* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2007), pp. 99–129; Rama P. Coomaraswamy, "The Desacralization of Hinduism for Western Consumption," *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Winter 1998), pp. 194–219; Harry Oldmeadow, *Journeys East: 20th Century Western Encounters with Eastern Religious Traditions* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2004).

given you my all and I am now only a poor fakir, possessing nothing."[4] and "My Divine Mother has also shown me that I shall have to come back again and that my next incarnation will be in the West" (p. 199)—and erroneously interpreted them to substantiate his own claim to be the incarnation of both Vivekānanda and Rāmakrishna. This was further complicated by the fact that the *avataric* manifestation would not be recognized by the masses, as stated by Rāmakrishna himself: "When an avatar comes, an ordinary man cannot recognize him—he comes as if in secret."[5] This phenomenon suggests that any *avataric* manifestation in theory could be utilized by the less scrupulous to abusively claim spiritual authority. It goes without saying that such assertions need to be approached with a large dose of skepticism, mindful that religion and spirituality in the *Kali-Yuga* take on innumerable abnormalities.

Rāmakrishna was aware of these dangers and wrote the following regarding the inability of false teachers to adequately provide spiritual guidance to the seeker, as well as the possible harm that could occur:

> He cannot get realization himself and he tries to show the way to others. It is like the blind leading the blind. In this way more harm is done than good. When God is realized the inner spiritual sight opens and it is then that the true teacher can perceive the sickness of the soul and can prescribe the proper remedy (p. 75).

Śrī Rāmakrishna in large part became known in the West through the book *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, translated by Swāmī Nikhilananda (1895–1973). What is generally unknown

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[4] Śrī Rāmakrishna, quoted in *The Gospel of Ramakrishna: Originally recorded in Bengali by M., a disciple of the Master*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1977), p. 72.

[5] Śrī Rāmakrishna, "March 11, 1883 – Section 2, Chapter 3," in Mehendranāth Gupta, *Srī Srī Rāmakrishna Kathāmrita, Vol. 2* (Chandigarh, India: Sri Ma Trust, 2002), p. 28.

is that there was an earlier version of the *Gospel* that predates the better-known 1942 translation by Nikhilananda, yet it does not help that the earlier edition was published under the same title as the later edition; however, the earlier edition published in 1907 is considered to be the "Authorized Edition". Both these editions stem from the Bengāli work entitled *Srī Srī Rāmakrishna Kathāmrita* or "Words of Nectar of Srī Rāmakrishna" recorded by householder disciple "M." or Mehendranāth Gupta (1854–1932). From its inception, the *Kathāmrita* continued to expand during "M.'s" life, and in its final version consisted of five volumes. What makes this new volume of *The Original Gospel of Rāmakrishna* unique and important is that it was translated from Bengāli into English in part by Mehendranāth Gupta himself who gave Swāmī Abhedānanda, also a direct disciple of Rāmakrishna, permission to edit it and translate some parts from the original Bengāli. Hence, this volume is an edited and abridged version of the original 1907 English edition. Until recently the "Authorized Edition" of 1907 was difficult to obtain, but is now, after more than sixty years, made available again.

Rāmakrishna was born as Gadādhara (a name of Vishnu) in the village of Kāmārpukur, in the Hooghly District of West Bengal, India, into an orthodox Brahmin family. Before his birth his parents experienced signs about the significance of his birth. From an early age people were drawn to him and wanted to spend time in his presence. At the age of six, he was well-versed in the sacred Hindu scriptures such as the *Purānas*, the *Rāmāyana*, the *Mahābhārata*. As the pilgrim route to Purī was near his village he came into contact with ascetics and wandering monks whom he spent time with, discussing facets of the Hindu *dharma* and listening to tales of their journeys. The following captures an early glimpse into Rāmakrishna's inner world through an ecstatic experience he had as a young boy:

At the age of six or seven Gadadhar had his first experience

> of spiritual ecstasy. One day in June or July, when he was walking along a narrow path between paddy-fields, eating the puffed rice that he carried in a basket, he looked up at the sky and saw a beautiful, dark thunder-cloud. As it spread, rapidly enveloping the whole sky, a flight of snow-white cranes passed in front of it. The beauty of the contrast overwhelmed the boy. He fell to the ground, unconscious, and the puffed rice went in all directions. Some villagers found him and carried him home in their arms. Gadadhar said later that in that state he had experienced an indescribable joy.[6]

Rāmakrishna's universal outlook on the religions of the world was a striking and extraordinary dimension of his teaching: "all religions are like paths which lead to the same common goal" (p. 201). And yet traditional paths, while essential, must not be mistaken for the goal; he states: "all religions are paths, but the paths are not God" (p. 6). In fact arguments about religion and spirituality were discouraged: "As long as a man argues about God, he has not realized Him."[7]

The tale commonly known as "The Elephant in the Dark", known in various religious traditions, is a fitting example of mistaking the part for the whole and is especially significant regarding the theme of religious pluralism and what has been termed the transcendent unity of religions. Rāmakrishna retells this tale entitled "Parable of the Elephant and the Blind Men":

> "Four blind men went to see an elephant. One touched a leg of the elephant and said: 'The elephant is like a pillar.' The second touched the trunk and said: 'The elephant is like a thick club.' The third touched the belly and said: 'The elephant is like a huge jar.' The fourth touched the ears and said: 'The elephant is like a big winnowing-basket.' Then

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[6] Swami Nikhilananda, "Introduction," to *The Gospel of Ramakrishna*, p. 4.

[7] Śrī Rāmakrishna, "With the Devotees in Calcutta," *ibid.*, p. 735.

> they began to dispute among themselves as to the figure of the elephant. A passer-by, seeing them thus quarreling, asked them what it was about. They told him everything and begged him to settle the dispute. The man replied: 'None of you has seen the elephant. The elephant is not like a pillar, its legs are like pillars. It is not like a big water-jar, its belly is like a water-jar. It is not like a winnowing-basket, its ears are like winnowing- baskets. It is not like a stout club, its trunk is like a club. The elephant is like the combination of all these.' In the same manner do those sectarians quarrel who have seen only one aspect of the Deity. He alone who has seen God in all His aspects can settle all disputes" (p. 7).[8]

Similarly, all the Divine Names are distinct ways of expressing the underlying Reality. Rāmakrishna affirms this point: "Vaishnavas, Mohammedans, Christians, and Hindus are all longing for the same God; but they do not know that He who is Krishna is also Shiva, Divine Mother, Christ, and Allah. God is one, but He has many names" (p. 5).

The ability of Rāmakrishna to remain firmly rooted within a single religion, that of Hinduism, and at the same time to

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[8] Cf. other versions: "Some Hindus had brought an elephant for exhibition and placed it in a dark house. Crowds of people were going into that dark place to see the beast. Finding that ocular inspection was impossible, each visitor felt it with his palm in the darkness. The palm of one fell on the trunk. 'This creature is like a water-spout,' he said. The hand of another lighted on the elephant's ear. To him the beast was evidently like a fan. 'I found the elephant's shape is like a pillar,' he said. Another laid his hand on its back. 'Certainly this elephant was like a throne,' he said" (Rūmī, "The Elephant in the Dark," in A. J. Arberry, *Tales from the Masnavi* [Surrey, UK: Curzon, Press, 1994], p. 208). "It is as if some blind men, hearing that an elephant had come to their town, should go and examine it. The only knowledge of it which they can obtain comes through the sense of touch; so one handles the animal's leg, another his tusk, another his ear, and, according to their several perceptions, pronounce it to be a column, a thick pole, or a quilt, each taking a part for the whole" (Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazzālī, *The Alchemy of Happiness*, [Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1991], p. 20).

remain universal in his orientation allowing him to travel other spiritual paths, is illustrated here:

> There is something in Ramakrishna that seems to defy every category: he was like the living symbol of the inward unity of religions; he was in fact the first saint to wish to enter into foreign spiritual forms, and in this consisted his exceptional and in a sense universal mission—something allying him to the prophets without making him a prophet in the strict sense of the word; in our times of confusion, distress, and doubt, he was the saintly "verifier" of forms and the "revealer" as it were of their single truth.... [His] spiritual plasticity was of a miraculous order.[9]

A further elaboration of Rāmakrishna's "spiritual plasticity" or universality is provided in the following excerpt:

> Nothing, perhaps, so strangely impresses or bewilders a Christian student of Saint Ramakrishna's life as the fact that this Hindu of the Hindus, without in any way repudiating his Hinduism, but for the moment forgetting it, about 1866 completely surrendered himself to the Islamic way, repeated the name of Allah, wore the costume, and ate the food of a Muslim. This self-surrender to what we should call in India the waters of another current of the single river of truth resulted only in a direct experience of the beatific vision, not less authentic than before. Seven years later, Ramakrishna in the same way proved experimentally the truth of Christianity. He was now for a time completely absorbed in the idea of Christ, and had no room for any

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9 Frithjof Schuon, "Vedānta," in *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, pp. 122, 127. "To be sure, there have been rare individuals such as Ramakrishna, who lived in the nineteenth century in India, who have actually tried to climb the different paths to give experiential proof of these paths leading to the same summit, but even in such cases there has been an a priori intellectual certitude that the paths did actually do so" (Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Reply to Huston Smith," in *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, [Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2001], p. 160).

> other thought. You might have supposed him a convert. What really resulted was that he could now affirm on the basis of personal experience,[10] "I have practiced all religions—Hinduism, Islām, Christianity—and I have also followed the paths of the different Hindu sects.... A lake has several ghāts. At one the Hindus take water in pitchers and call it 'jal'; at another the [Muslim] take water in leather bags and call it 'pāni'. At a third the Christians call it 'water'."[11]

Rāmakrishna again in no way repudiates or brings into question his participation in Hinduism, but affirms the universality of all sapiential traditions, while abiding within the fold of his own faith tradition.

Given the modern loss of receptivity to the sacred, the forms of spiritual practice (*sādhanā*) of previous ages, where the palpable sense of the sacred dominated, have not been as accessible as they once were for the common person. In addressing the connection between the *Kali-Yuga* or "Dark Age" and the changes in the human receptivity to the Divine, he stated: "Truthfulness in speech is the *tapasyā* of the Kaliyuga.... By adhering to truth one attains God."[12] "The fact is that in the Kaliyuga one cannot wholly follow the path laid down in the Vedas."[13] Rāmakrishna unequivocally affirms that the most effective spiritual practice in the *Kali-Yuga* is the Invocation of the Divine Name, or *japa-yoga* as it is known in Hinduism:

> The holy name has saving powers, but there must be earnest longing with it. Without earnest longing of the heart no

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10 Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "Śrī Ramakrishna and Religious Tolerance," in *Coomaraswamy. Metaphysics*, p. 34.

11 Śrī Rāmakrishna, quoted in *The Gospel of Ramakrishna*, p. 35.

12 Śrī Rāmakrishna, "The Master's Reminiscences," in *The Gospel of Ramakrishna*, p. 749.

13 Śrī Rāmakrishna, "Instruction to Vaishnavas and Brāhmos," *ibid.*, p. 297.

> one can see God by mere repetition of His name. One may repeat His name, but if one's mind be attached to lust and wealth, that will not help much. When a man is bitten by a scorpion or a tarantula, mere repetition of a *mantram* will not do; a special remedy is necessary (p. 4).

Far from being empty phrases, the distinct names of the Divine are synonymous with the Divine, as Rāmakrishna himself affirms, "God and His name are identical".[14] The practice of *japa-yoga* is found in both *jnāna* and *bhakti*, as Shankara affirmed in one of his hymns: "Control thy soul, restrain thy breathing, distinguish the transitory from the True, repeat the holy Name of God, and thus calm the agitated mind. To this universal rule apply thyself with all thy heart and all thy soul."[15] The Invocation is not to be undertaken with blind adherence but with the fullness of our hearts and minds: "It is necessary to have absolute faith in the name of the Lord" (p. 70).

While this spiritual practice is intended to be accessible to all in an age when authentic spiritual forms are increasingly more difficult to access, the seeker must have a sincere longing for the Divine to make it effective.

> In this age (*Kali yuga*) the path of devotion and love (*bhakti yoga*) is easy for all. The practice of…*bhakti* is better adapted to this *yuga*. One should repeat the holy name of the Lord and chant His praises and with earnest and sincere heart, pray to Him, saying: 'O Lord, grant me Thy divine wisdom, Thy divine love. Do Thou open my eyes and make me realize Thee.' (p. 108)

The futility of relying solely on human effort to attain liberation (*moksha*) or realization of the Self (*Ātmā*) overlooks

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[14] Śrī Rāmakrishna, "The Master with the Brāhmo Devotees," *ibid.*, p. 222.

[15] Śrī Śaṅkarācārya, quoted in *Pray Without Ceasing: The Way of the Invocation in World Religions*, ed. Patrick Laude (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2006), p. 69.

the true enactor of all activity in the phenomenal world. All sapiential traditions challenge the notion that the empirical ego is the enactor of all activity, "I am the doer" (Bhagavad-Gītā 3:27). The empirical ego is in fact not the doer. Due to the misidentification with the empirical ego, the human being wrongly attributes agency to him or herself, forgetting that "God is the real Actor, others are actors in name only" (p. 106). "A man may make thousands of attempts, but nothing can be accomplished without the mercy of the Lord" (p. 23). Likewise, "Everything depends upon His grace" (p. 36). In the Christian tradition this same truth is recognized: "with God all things are possible" (Matthew 10:27). And similarly within Islamic spirituality: "In His hands is to be found the dominion (*malakūt*) of all things" (Qur'ān 26:83). When seekers came to Rāmakrishna to ask him how to help the world, he recommended that they first help themselves by confronting the disorder within before attempting to help others. As long as the self identifies with, and is consumed by, the empirical ego, the possibilities of selfless service are challenged: "You talk glibly of doing good to the world…who are you to do good to the world? First practice devotional exercises and realize God. Attain to Him. If He graciously gives you His powers (*shakti*), then you can help others, and not till then" (p. 75).

It is not through book-learning alone that the seeker can realize the Absolute (*Brahman*), in fact, nothing short of inner longing and abiding in the Divine alone will grant the seeker the Real: "You may read thousands of volumes, you may repeat verses and hymns by hundreds, but if you cannot dive into the ocean of Divinity with extreme longing of the soul, you cannot reach God" (p. 151), or "One cannot realize Divinity by reading books" (p. 35).

Divine transcendence is beyond all things in the phenomenal world, yet Divine immanence is within all things in the phenomenal world. Thus, the Divine is also to be found within

the human body: "The Lord dwells in the temple of the human body" (p. 26), or "Thou appearest as a human being, but in reality Thou art the Lord of the universe" (p. 193). True human identity is inseparable from the Divine, but due to forgetfulness, our psyche remains deluded by the world of appearances: "The soul in its true nature is Absolute Existence, Intelligence, and Bliss, but on account of *māyā* or the sense of 'I', it has forgotten its real Self and has become entangled in the meshes of the various limitations of mind and body" (p. 19). This immanent Self is expressed in Islamic spirituality in the following terms, "We are nearer to him than the jugular vein" (Qur'ān 50:16), and again, "He is with you wherever you are" (Qur'ān 57:4). When responding to a devotee's questions about how to meditate on God, Rāmakrishna responds: "The heart is the best place. Meditate on Him in your heart" (p. 89). This is also confirmed within the broader Hindu tradition: "I am seated in the hearts of all" (Bhagavad-Gītā 15:15). Similarly Divine immanence is expressed in the Christian tradition as: "The kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21).

Through right discrimination both the uniqueness and similarity of human diversity becomes evident, as well as its essential core, its transpersonal nature: "You should love everyone; no one is a stranger; God dwells in all beings" (p. 11). However, this prescription does not therefore mean that we should dispense with discernment (*viveka*) for "although God resides in all human beings, still there are good men and bad men, there are lovers of God and those who do not love God" (pp. 12–13); nonetheless, one must remember that "God is walking in every human form and manifesting Himself alike through the sage and the sinner, the virtuous and the vicious" (p. 37). With this said, even with the best intentions to help others, some attempts can be futile when hearts have become hardened and unresponsive to the influence of the Divine: "Those who are thus caught in the net of the world are the *baddhas*, or bound souls. No one can awaken them. They do

not come to their senses even after receiving blow upon blow of misery, sorrow, and indescribable suffering" (p. 16).

Rāmakrishna also affirms that the Divine is not to be found in the hereafter, but where we are, in this very moment, in the world: "this world is the kingdom of God" (p. 37). Rāmakrishna makes no distinction between householder and non-householder, both can equally realize the Divine given their different circumstances: "He who has found God here has also found Him there.... He can then live both in God and in the world equally well" (p. 40). Likewise, "Whether you live in the world or renounce it, everything depends upon the will of Rāma. Throwing your whole responsibility upon God, do your work in the world" (p. 39). The spiritual seeker can realize the Divine within the busy-ness of contemporary life. The seeker does not need to flee the responsibilities of the world in order to fulfil ones spiritual obligations: "You can attain to God while living in the world" (p.152) for "God can be realized even at home" (p. 153). For Rāmakrishna, like other saints and sages, the Divine is to be found everywhere. We recall the often-quoted words of the Qur'ān, "Wherever you turn, there is the Face of God" (2:115), and also, "Everything is perishing but His face" (28:88). Likewise for Rāmakrishna, the Divine is clothed in the world of phenomena:

> I saw a woman wearing a blue garment under a tree. She was a harlot. As I looked at her, instantly the ideal of Sītā appeared before me! I forgot the existence of the harlot, but saw before me pure and spotless Sītā, approaching Rāma, the Incarnation of Divinity, and for a long time I remained motionless. I worshipped all women as representatives of the Divine Mother. I realized the Mother of the universe in every woman's form (p. 92).

God, the object of his contemplation, was so utterly fused in his mind with the object of his vision, that in a state of ecstasy or God-consciousness (*samādhi*), Rāmakrishna transcended the normal subject-object relations, even the

ordinary dichotomies of male and female as is conveyed here: "At that time I felt so strongly that I was the maid-servant of my Divine Mother that I thought of myself as a woman.... My mind was above the consciousness of sex" (p. 93). To the ill-informed such experiences may initially appear to be signs of mental illness, when they are quite the opposite, being gifts of a Realized soul: "At one-time I had this madness. I used to walk like a madman, seeing the same Spirit everywhere and recognizing neither high nor low in caste or creed. I could eat even with a *pariah*. I had the constant realization that *Brahman* is Truth and the world is unreal like a dream" (p. 103). Rāmakrishna makes an important point on God-intoxicated states: "These states are not for those who are living in the world and performing the duties of the world, but for those who have absolutely renounced internally and externally" (p. 103). It is also important to clarify that no amount of authentic spiritual practice will lead the psychologically balanced seeker to be unbalanced: "He who is mad after God can never became unbalanced or insane" (p. 112).

While Rāmakrishna regarded himself as a *bhakta*, he also understood the disposition of the *jnāni*: "There are various paths which lead to the realization of the Absolute *Brahman*. The path of a *jnāni* is as good as that of a *bhakta*. *Jnāna yoga* is true; so is *bhakti yoga*" (p. 50). Again, Rāmakrishna asserts that all paths lead to the Divine: "Innumerable are the paths. *Jnāna*, *karma*, *bhakti* are all paths which lead to the same goal" (p. 123). He recognized that the transpersonal dimension of the Intellect (*buddhi*) "can be realized by the purified intellect (*buddhi*)" (p. 172). The ordinary mind or reason is not synonymous with *buddhi* as is often assumed, but transcends normal boundaries of cognition: "The small intellect of a man cannot grasp the whole nature of God" (p. 159). Rāmakrishna thus illustrates the vantage point between both *bhakta* and *jnāni*: "A *bhakta* wishes to enjoy communion with his Lord and

not to become one with Him. His desire is not to become sugar, but to taste of it" (p. 66).

While yoga has become a popular commodity for mass consumption in the contemporary West, it is important to contextualize it within the broader scope of Hindu spirituality in order to understand that, though it can bring about certain physical and psychological benefits, for its full benefits to be experienced yoga needs to be connected to the spiritual practice of the Hindu *dharma*. The limitations of yoga to transcend the psychophysical domain are presented here by Rāmakrishna:

> *Hatha yoga* deals entirely with the physical body. It describes the methods by which the internal organs can be purified and perfect health can be acquired... these powers are only the manifestations of physical *prāna*. So the practice of *hatha yoga* will bring one control over the body, but it will carry one only so far (p. 125).

Hindu metaphysics takes into consideration both the manifest and the unmanifest domains of Reality, which correspond to the relative and the Absolute: "to think of Him as the formless Being [*Brahma nirguna* or "unqualified"] is quite right, but do not go away with the idea that that alone is true and that all else is false. Meditating upon Him as a Being with form [*Brahma saguna* or "qualified"] is equally right" (p. 25). On qualified non-dualism, Rāmakrishna emphasizes:

> No doubt we reason at the outset that the all-important thing is the kernel—not either the shell or the seeds. In the next place, we go on reasoning that the shell and the seeds belong to the same substance to which the kernel belongs. At the first stage of the reasoning we say, 'Not this, not this.' Thus the Absolute (*Brahman*) is not the individual soul. Again, it is not the phenomenal world. The Absolute (*Brahman*) is the only Reality, all else is unreal. At the next stage we go a little farther. We see that the kernel belongs to the same substance as that to which the shell

> and the seeds belong; hence the substance from which we derive our negative conception of the Absolute *Brahman* is the identical substance from which we derive our negative conceptions of the finite soul and the phenomenal world. Our relative phenomena (*līlā*) must be traced to that Eternal Being which is also called the Absolute. (pp. 173–174)

Hindu metaphysics teaches that manifestation or *prakriti* is made up of qualities or *gunas*. Rāmakrishna explains how each human being is composed in varying degrees of the three *gunas*: "All men look alike, but they differ in their nature. In some the *sattva* quality is predominant, in others *rajas*, and in the rest *tamas*" (p. 74), likewise, "People's character can be divided into three classes—*tamas*, *rajas*, and *sattva*" (p. 157). The quality which dominates will determine the nature of the person:

> Those who belong to the first class [*tamas*] are egotistic; they sleep too much, eat too much, and passion and anger prevail in them. Those who belong to the second class [*rajas*] are too much attached to work.... Those who belong to the third class [*sattva*] are very quiet, peaceful, and unostentatious; they are not particular about their dress; they lead a simple life and earn a modest living, because their needs are small; they do not flatter for selfish ends; their dwelling is modest (p. 157)

Identification with the empirical ego remains until the soul is reabsorbed into the Divine: "Egoism does not leave until one has realized God" (p. 107), or "When 'I' is dead, all troubles cease" (p. 19). This mistaken identification with the empirical ego is perpetuated by the dominant *tamasic* quality, "Egotism is the quality of *tamas* arising from ignorance" (p. 157). The Divine cannot be realized until the qualities of *rajas* and *tamas* are reintegrated into the Spirit: "God cannot be realized until the *sattva* qualities, such as devotion, right

discrimination, dispassion, and compassion for all, prevail" (p. 108). Ultimately, Spirit transcends *prakriti* and the three *gunas*: "God is beyond the three gunas—*sattva, rajas, and tamas*."[16]

Because of the inverted nature of today's world in the *Kali-Yuga*, seekers need to remember the traditional adage, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). In the *Kali-Yuga*, this looks strikingly different from the earlier temporal conditions due to it being more removed from the spiritual domain. Paradoxically, in the present-day: "In this age our life depends upon material food; if you cannot get anything to eat for a day, your mind will be turned away from God" (p. 153).

> In the Kaliyuga the life of a man depends entirely on food. How can he have the consciousness that Brahman [the Absolute] alone is real and the world illusory? In the Kaliyuga it is difficult to have the feeling, 'I am not the body, I am not the mind, I am not the twenty-four cosmic principles; I am beyond pleasure and pain, I am above disease and grief, old age and death.'[17]

While there remains a spiritual void within the contemporary world, there are endless attempts made to fill it with everything under the sun except what can bestow ultimate peace and contentment to the soul. The one thing needful according to all sapiential traditions is to: "Perform all your duties with your mind always fixed on God" (p. 28); "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind" (Matthew 22:37).

The Original Gospel of Rāmakrishna is essential reading for those interested in the world's religions, especially Hindu

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[16] Śrī Rāmakrishna, "The Master and Vijay Goswami," in *The Gospel of Ramakrishna*, p. 176.

[17] Śrī Rāmakrishna, "The Master and Vijay Goswami," in *ibid.*, p. 172.

spirituality. It reflects the teachings of one of India's greatest saints, who embodies the *sanātana dharma*. This volume, deemed the "Authorized Edition", contains a text which has been virtually unavailable for more than sixty years. Through stories, parables, conversations and teachings offered during the last four years of his life, readers can capture the fragrance of what it was like to sit at the feet of one of India's great spiritual masters, the Paramahamsa of Dakshineshwar, Śrī Rāmakrishna. At a time when meaningful and integral forms of ecumenical dialogue or religious pluralism are evermore necessary, Śrī Rāmakrishna is a quintessential testament of how to be firmly rooted in one's own faith tradition while simultaneously upholding the legitimacy and truth of other faiths. It is through Rāmakrishna's example that an integral and universal understanding of what religion and spirituality are may be realized, without erring in either New Age syncretism or exclusivist claims that only one's own religion is true. The remarkable nature of Rāmakrishna's spiritual realization becomes known through his own self-disclosure of the One manifesting in all the distinct forms: "He who was Rāma, who was Krishna, Buddha, Christ, and Chaitanya, has now become Rāmakrishna" (p. 198).