

Tradition as Spiritual Function: A 'Perennialist' Perspective

Reza Shah-Kazemi

This article was initially published in [Sacred Web 7](#).

In this paper I intend to focus upon what is arguably the most fundamental aspect of religious tradition, as seen from the viewpoint of the group of thinkers belonging to what has been called the 'Perennialist School'.¹³⁵ This aspect relates to the spiritual function of tradition, the direct means by which the different religious traditions open up paths of spiritual realization, that is, ways of 'making real', within oneself, and at different degrees, the spiritual truths contained within and transmitted by the great religious traditions of the world. This spiritual function can also be referred to as the 'method' that accompanies 'doctrine', the 'praxis' that complements 'theory', the 'activity' that deepens 'thought'; it pertains to the realizatory effort by the will to assimilate what has been conceptually perceived by the mind, the path that leads from the head to the heart.¹³⁶ It can also be simply referred to as 'prayer', taking this term in its widest sense, to include personal petition, canonical prayer, meditation, contemplation, concentration and invocation—all those ways in which the soul addresses itself to 'the one thing needful': all those ways in which life itself is transformed into a permanent attachment of the relative towards the Absolute.

The centrality of prayer in this perspective will be readily apparent in the light of the following sentence by Schuon. It is from the preface to one of his last books, *The*

¹³⁵ We prefer to refer to these writers in this way, rather than as 'traditionalists', although the latter term is now also being widely used. This school of thought, inaugurated at the end of the 19th century by René Guénon and Ananda Coomaraswamy, has been chiefly associated with the name of Frithjof Schuon since the 1950s, and includes such figures as Titus Burckhardt, Martin Lings, Huston Smith, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and Marco Pallis, in whose name the current symposium, 'The Meaning of Tradition', is being convened.

¹³⁶ While this path engages the whole being and has as much to do with the permanent striving after virtue as with the rhythmic practice of a particular spiritual method, these two aspects of the path are to be seen as complementary rather than mutually exclusive. As will be seen from what Schuon says below in connection with the Hesychastic prayer, 'technique' can never be seen as taking the place of virtue; on the contrary, it presupposes virtue while deepening it.

Play of Masks, and gives us a rare glimpse at one of the key motives that lay behind his voluminous and multifaceted writings, spanning almost seven decades: ‘If our works had, on the average, no result other than the restitution for some of the saving barque of prayer, we would owe it to God to consider ourselves profoundly satisfied.’¹³⁷

Prayer is understood here as an essential orientation towards the Sovereign Good, one which comprises various aspects, but is not reducible to any single modality; ultimately, when prayer in the specific sense takes over one’s life, then the whole life itself becomes prayer in the universal sense: ‘Seest thou not that everything that is in the heavens and the earth glorifies God with its praise? And the birds in flight—every one knows its way of prayer and glorification...’ (Qur’an, XXIV: 41)

Prayer entails all the ways in which the relative makes contact with and assimilates the Absolute; as such, it is grasped as the fundamental means by which self-transcendence is attained. For this school of writers, it is this self-transcendence, and all that it requires in the way of conceptual clarity and active commitment, that lies at the heart of their concern with Tradition. For them, Tradition is no mere theoretical construct nor, to quote Schuon again, is it some ‘childish and outmoded mythology’: it is ‘a science that is terribly real’.¹³⁸ Tradition is seen as what we might call the ‘the cutting edge’ of Transcendence, the first point of contact between the soul and those truths revealed by God and transmitted by tradition; truths which are at once transcendent and immanent, hence both infinitely above and mysteriously within the soul. These inward realities, rooted in divine immanence, are not, however, fully accessible except by means of the transformative graces issuing from some outward revelation of the transcendent divinity; for, according to all the great traditions, these inward realities have become clouded by layers of forgetfulness.¹³⁹ Nonetheless, it is precisely by virtue of the traces of these immanent realities within the soul that the truths revealed from ‘on high’, and transmitted

¹³⁷ *The Play of Masks*, (Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1992). See Schuon’s chapter entitled ‘Modes of Prayer’ in his *Stations of Wisdom* (Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1995) for an excellent account of the different types of prayer.

¹³⁸ *Understanding Islam* (Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1994), p.viii.

¹³⁹ Forgetfulness is an aspect of what in Judeo-Christian terms is called the ‘fall’ of Adam; forgetfulness (*ghafla*) is more particularly accentuated in Islam and in those religious contexts most strongly influenced by the Platonic tradition, platonic ‘anamnesis’ being analogous to the Islamic ‘remembrance’ (*dhikr*).

by tradition in the herebelow, are not simply blindly accepted on authority; they are, on the contrary, ‘re-cognised’, intellectually, and they call out to be ‘re-membered’ spiritually. The ‘science’ of Tradition is predicated upon this spiritual ‘re-membrance’, an imperative that is at once cognitive and existential, for it does not only involve remembering in principle a truth that has been forgotten in practice, but also ‘re-membering’, in the sense of ‘putting back together’, or re-uniting, the immanent realities in the depths of the soul with the transcendent realities above it.

‘...What the Revelations ask of us and what Heaven imposes or inflicts upon us, is what we are in reality, whether we think so or not; we know it in our heart of hearts, if only we could detach ourselves a little from the monstrous accumulation of false images entrenched in our minds.’¹⁴⁰

Before going into the ways in which Tradition serves this spiritual function, it is important to distinguish between the Primordial Tradition and Tradition as a generic term. The Primordial Tradition is understood as practically coterminous with the supra-formal wisdom that is inscribed within the heart of primordial man. It is, in other words, the *sophia* or *religio perennis*, what is termed in Hinduism the *Sanatana Dharma*, and in Islam, the *Din al-Fitra*.¹⁴¹ In itself it has no outer tangible form, no rules or regulations; it

¹⁴⁰ Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds* (London: Perennial Books, 1965), p.41; this can be seen as a commentary on the vedantic dictum, ‘That thou art’ (*Tat tvam asi*). Also pertinent in this regard is the following comment by Shankara on scripture. Even though he asserts that there can be no enlightenment without scripture, he adds that scripture does not so much reveal to us what we do not know as remind us of what has been overlaid by ignorance: ‘Scripture, which is the final authority, gains its authoritativeness regarding the Self as serving only to eliminate the super-imposition of the attributes alien to Him, but *not as revealing what has been altogether unknown.*’ (Emphasis added) *The Bhagavad Gita, with the commentary of Sri Sankaracharya*. Tr. Alladi Mahadeva Sastry, (Madras: Samata Books, 1988), II, 18. The Self, according to Shankara, is *nitya-siddha*, that is, eternally realized; it is only ignorance that makes the individual think otherwise.

¹⁴¹ ‘So set thy purpose for religion as one by nature upright: [in accordance with] the Original Nature of God (*fitrat Allah*), in conformity with which He created mankind. There is no changing the creation of God. That is true religion, but most men know it not.’ (Qur’an, XXX,30)

If one looks carefully enough, one will find analogous terms or ideas within most if not all the religious traditions, conceptions opening out to the primordial roots—hence universal ‘branches’ or ramifications—of the truths of one’s own religious tradition. For example, even within Christianity, often cited as the most exclusivist of the later religions, the following assertion by St Augustine is not by any means the only one of its kind in this tradition:

‘That which is called the Christian Religion existed among the Ancients, and never did not exist, from the beginning of the human race.’ Quoted in S.Radhakrishna, ‘Fragments of a Confession’ in P.A. Schilpp, (ed) *The Philosophy of Sarvepalli Radhakrishna* (New York: Tudor, 1952) Compare also this saying from

is rather an integral manner of being, one that is perfectly conformed to the plenary consciousness of the Truth. In the Golden Age of Hinduism, the Satya Yuga, it is said that every soul was perfectly in harmony with this innate *dharma*, in fact, that this *dharma* was consubstantial with each soul. As the *Srimad Bhagavatam* says: In the beginning, ‘men had but one caste, known as *hamsa*. All were equally endowed with knowledge, all were born knowers of Truth; and since this was so, the age was called *krita*, which is to say “Attained”.’¹⁴²

It might be asked: why refer to this original state of primordality as a ‘tradition’ if it was at the dawn of creation?¹⁴³ It is worth raising this question, for the answer, though somewhat speculative, nonetheless helps to affirm a principle of the utmost importance, one which expresses simultaneously two apparently contradictory notions: the quasi-absolute necessity of submitting to a particular tradition, and the derivative, provisional nature of all traditions. One answer that we might give, basing ourselves on the etymology of the word ‘tradition’ (*tradere*: to ‘pass down’), is the following: primordial man received the heavenly and divine realities directly from God; it is these realities that are ‘passed down’ to him. The Qur’an affords certain images by which the principles in this transmission might be intuited: first we have the primordial covenant at the very dawn of creation, when God takes all the souls yet to be born from the reins of Adam, and asks them, in this pre-human state, ‘Am I not your Lord?’ To which all reply

Chou Li: ‘The true doctrine has always existed in the world.’ Quoted in Whittall Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971) p.794.

¹⁴² Chapter xi, verses 11 and 17. Quoted by Whittall Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, p.38.

¹⁴³ ‘Religio is that which ‘binds’ (*religat*) man to Heaven and engages his whole being; as for the word ‘*traditio*’, it is related to a more outward and sometimes fragmentary reality, besides suggesting a retrospective outlook. At its birth, a religion ‘binds’ men to Heaven, ... but it does not become a ‘tradition’ or admit more than one ‘tradition’ until two or three generations later.’ Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, p. 144. We have in this citation another reason for not referring to Schuon and his school as ‘traditionalists’. Although Schuon writes elsewhere that the term ‘traditionalism’ has nothing pejorative about it in itself, ‘it has been associated with an idea which inevitably devalues its meaning, namely the idea of “nostalgia for the past”.’ (*Logic and Transcendence*, (London: Perennial Books, 1975), p.6). Guenon’s ‘Tradition and Traditionalism’, chapter XXXI of his *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times* (New York: Sophia Perennis et Universalis, 1995; 3rd edition) makes the same point. See also S.H. Nasr’s comprehensive and penetrating treatment of themes connected with the term ‘Tradition’ in ‘What is Tradition?’ chapter 2 of his *Knowledge and the Sacred* (State University of New York Press, 1989); the following chapter, ‘The Rediscovery of the Sacred: The Revival of Tradition’ is also very helpful in situating the wider aims of this school of thought.

– ‘Yes.’ (VII: 172) This can be understood as the inscribing within each soul of the consciousness of absolute Reality, along with its concomitant, awareness of the relativity of everything that is other than this Reality, its utter dependence upon It, whence the existential imperative of submission to It. Secondly, in the creation of Adam, it is said that God taught Adam ‘all the Names’, (II:31) by which we can understand all the essences of things. Here we have the archetype of Tradition in the sense of transmission: Absolute truths are transmitted to relative souls in order that these relative souls might return to their source and origin: ‘Truly we belong to God, and truly to Him are we returning’. (II: 156)

It is precisely because of the supra-formal character of this Primordial Tradition that it is not to be regarded in an exclusively temporal manner; it should be understood also in a ‘spatial’ or ‘central’ sense, for this primordial reality is believed to be the inner substance of all the different revealed traditions.¹⁴⁴ The reality of an inner core of religion—what the perennialists call religion as such, as opposed to such and such a religion—is evoked by several verses from the Qur’an, among which the following can be cited: ‘Say: We believe in God and in what has been revealed to us and what was revealed to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and the Tribes, and in that which was given to Moses and Jesus and the Prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto God we submit.’ (III:84) ‘Unto each among you We have prescribed a Law and a Way. And if God had willed He would have made you all one community. But He wishes to test you in that which He gave you. So vie with one another in good works. Unto God is your return, and he will inform you about that wherein you differed.’ (V:51) ‘To every community [was sent] a messenger.’ (X:47)

These verses can provide the basis for an understanding of religions as being so many revelations of one and the same ultimate Reality; thus the religions are grasped as being inwardly at one, while differing outwardly as regards forms, rituals, perspectives.

¹⁴⁴ The subsistence of the primordial nature with man, upon which the later religions are as it were super-imposed, is evoked by the following strongly attested saying by the Prophet Muhammad: ‘Every child is born in accordance with the *fitra* (primordial nature); the child’s parents make him a Jew, a Christian, a Magian.’

The idea of the ‘transcendent unity of religions’ clearly finds support here. While such an idea may be held by many people who have a sense of religions as constituting so many paths leading to the same summit, what makes the perennialists distinctive is their focus upon the means by which this summit is to be reached: not by simply taking note of the fact that it is one summit, but actually embarking on the ascent leading to it, and this translates into practising the most essential elements of one’s own religion, which elements coincide, ultimately, with ‘religion as such’. This focus, far from implying the discovery of some new ‘religion’, on the contrary is intended to deepen commitment to one’s actual religion, upholding all its exoteric requirements while plumbing its esoteric depths.¹⁴⁵ In this perspective, universality does not negate the specificity or distinctiveness of a given religious tradition; on the formal level, each tradition is deemed unique and irreducible. But on the principial level, the distinctiveness of forms gives way to universal realities; that is to say, the metaphysical perspective of the perennialists relates particular qualities to universal principles, and in doing so, it endows those qualities with a greater plenitude or repercussion than can be realized on the formal plane alone. The unique qualities of each tradition acquire an infinite resonance for one who relates them to universal realities; nothing of their uniqueness is sacrificed, quite to the contrary: the uniqueness acquires a touch of the Absolute precisely by opening out into the Absolute, and not remaining bound to a relative and exclusivist viewpoint. What Schuon says in the following passage on the particularity and universality of Christianity can be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to all the great religions:

‘In the sapiential perspective, the divine redemption is always present; it pre-exists all terrestrial alchemy and is its celestial model, so that it is always thanks to this eternal redemption—whatever may be its vehicle on earth—that man is freed from the weight of his vagaries and even, *Deo volente*, from that of his separative existence; if “My Words shall not pass away” it is because they have always been. The Christ of the gnostics is he who is “before Abraham was”, and from whom arise all the ancient

¹⁴⁵ ‘Esoterism, in fact, is not an unpredictable doctrine that can only be discovered, should the occasion arise, by means of detailed researches; what is mysterious in esoterism is its dimension of depth, its particular developments and its practical consequences, but not its starting-points, which coincide with the fundamental symbols of the religion in question.’ *Esoterism as Principle and as Way* (London: Perennial Books, 1990), p.152. Earlier in the same book, Schuon writes: ‘... that which in each religion provides the key for total or non-dualist esoterism is not some secret concept of a heterogeneous character, but it is the very presiding idea of the religion...’ (pp.25-26)

wisdoms; *a consciousness of this, far from diminishing a participation in the treasures of the historical Redemption, confers on them a compass that touches the very roots of Existence.*'¹⁴⁶ (Emphasis added)

Returning to the essential elements of this underlying religion, Schuon often sums up the quintessence of *religio perennis* in two words: discernment and concentration, the first being the *raison d'être* of the intelligence, the second being the deepest function of the will: the intelligence must discern between the Real and the unreal, and the will must attach itself totally to the Real, through unitive and unifying concentration:

'This discernment and this attachment are the quintessence of all spirituality. Carried to their highest level or reduced to their purest substance, they constitute the underlying universality in every great spiritual patrimony of humanity, or what may be called the *religio perennis*.'¹⁴⁷

A useful description of Tradition as a generic category which comprises all the various traditions that embody and transmit this *religio/sophia perennis*, is given by Marco Pallis:

'... wherever a complete tradition exists, this will entail the presence of four things, namely: a source of ... Revelation; a current of influence or Grace issuing forth from that source and transmitted without interruption through a variety of channels; a way of "verification" which, when faithfully followed, will lead the human subject to successive positions where he is able to "actualize" the truths that Revelation communicates; finally there is the formal embodiment of tradition – the doctrines, arts, sciences and other elements that together go to determine the character of a normal civilization.'¹⁴⁸

It is to this 'way of verification' that we should now turn our attention; for it is this element that transforms received tradition into lived reality, and without which tradition becomes no more than an empty shell, an ideology, or a set of social conventions. What distinguishes a religious tradition from any other kind of tradition is

¹⁴⁶ Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, p.70

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.137.

¹⁴⁸ Pallis, *The Way and the Mountain* (London: Peter Owen, 1991), p.9.

precisely this element of personal verification, leading to inner transformation, and bearing fruit in salvation or deliverance in the hereafter, a deliverance that can also be anticipated through spiritual realization in the herebelow.¹⁴⁹ Abiding by the dictates of a revealed tradition entails conformity to this tradition insofar as it is the channel of a spiritual reality; it is far from mere conformism to a set of social rules: it is conformity to sacred 'form' for the sake not of the form itself but for the sake of transcending all form and attaining – by degrees and according to the rhythms of grace – self-realization in the Absolute.

At this point we would like to cite some highly pertinent remarks from someone not usually identified as a member of the Perennialist School, but whose ideas are in many ways consonant with it: Henri Corbin.

'... a Tradition transmits itself as something alive, since it is a ceaselessly renewed inspiration, and not a funeral cortège or a register of conformist opinions. The life and death of spiritual things are our responsibility; they are not placed "in the past" except through our own omissions, our refusal of the metamorphoses that they demand, if these spiritual things are to be maintained "in the present" for us.'¹⁵⁰

Tradition, then, must come alive in our hands, we must be 'metamorphosed' by it. The beginning of this metamorphosis lies in our recognition of the need for it; it is, in other words, to realize that, on our own account, we are both ignorant and impotent: we stand urgently in need of the Absolute. This translates into a recognition of the need to

¹⁴⁹ It is often asserted that the Hindu idea of the *jivan-mukta*, the 'one delivered in this life' precludes the reality of an ultimate deliverance in the hereafter; but this is an error, if we take into account Shankara's conception of the persistence of a certain karmic stock, the *prarabdha karma* even for the *jivan-mukta*: 'Final peace comes [only] at the fall of the body. If it were not for the distinction between action the effects of which have begun to fructify, and action the effects of which have not ... all action without exception would be destroyed by knowledge of the Absolute. And in that case there would be nothing further that could sustain the empirical existence of the enlightened man, and he would enter the final peace forthwith.' (*Shankara on Enlightenment*, Tr. A.J. Alston (London: Shanti Sadan, 1989), p.227) So long as the individual remains on earth, in other words, his deliverance is of an inward, essential order, but it is still outwardly conditioned by the relativity of his continuing empirical existence, the fruit of his *prarabdha karma*.

¹⁵⁰ *En Islam iranien*, (Paris, Editions Gallimard, 1971) vol.1, p.33 (our translation from the French). In similar vein, T.S.Eliot said that traditions 'cannot be inherited'; they are acquired only 'by great labour'. Quoted in Aziz Esmail, *The Poetics of Religious Experience*, Occasional Papers 1 (London, Institute of Ismaili Studies, 1998) p.5.

grasp hold of some saving ‘rope’ that has been thrown down to us by the grace of the All-Compassionate, aware of our need for help. Marco Pallis refers to the ‘voice of traditional wisdom’ which calls out to human beings aware of their imperfections and their possibilities:

‘The voice of the bell is an invitation to us all to undergo transformation into a truly human being, failing which one remains human in principle but subhuman in fact.’¹⁵¹

This touches a very sensitive point for the modern reader: the assertion that we are all, *de facto*, sub-human until we undergo the transformations demanded by traditional wisdom allied to spiritual method. However unpalatable it may be, it remains a basic postulate that we find expressed in different ways in the religious traditions. Now, an opponent of this perspective might well ask: why should one submit to a particular religious tradition, following one revelation, abiding by all its formal requirements, when the ultimate truths are within the soul, in their true essence, devoid of such formalities? Going back to our earlier points above, the answer given from the perennialist perspective might be something like this: if each individual were capable of realizing the ultimate truths by his own resources, unaided by any outward, objective revelation from God, then all those divine revelations that have in fact been granted to mankind by God would be utterly redundant. The opponent might then reply: ‘Not necessarily; the revelations might be regarded as *possible* means, afforded by the Absolute, but not *essential* or exclusive means. Some people need formal religion to reach God and others do not.’ From the perennialist perspective such a position amounts to arrogating to oneself the prerogatives of Edenic man, or man in the *Satya Yuga*; it also amounts to claiming that one is virtually, if not actually, a saint. We shall return to this point below. For now, let us continue with the ‘marriage of wisdom and method’ as Marco Pallis put it: having understood that one needs to respond to the ‘voice of tradition’, the individual will ask, ‘What must I do?’; and then follows the transition from wisdom to method:

‘The first step ... will typically be a negative one; ... one abjures a life governed by profane preoccupations in order to seek the knowledge which comes when the human ego

¹⁵¹ M. Pallis, *A Buddhist Spectrum* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980), p.26

has ceased to treat itself as divine in its own right. In order to fit oneself for the exacting task ahead, one finds oneself compelled to undergo some sort of discipline not of one's own devising, a scheme of do's and don'ts, and this is precisely what the outward prescriptions of a religion do for one, their purpose being to steady the being throughout his or her earthly sojourn ... treated intelligently, a religious law need not seek irksome; but in any case its rough and its smooth should be accepted as part of an organic traditional whole.'¹⁵²

Mention here of the word 'whole' reminds one of the point well brought out by Martin Lings that is the relation between wholeness, holiness and health: all three are derived from the same word originally. Only the saint can be said to be 'whole', his or her soul being 'all there', knit together by the magnetism emanating from the realized heart. It is the purpose of religion, he writes, 'to knit together all looseness in man by setting up in his soul an impetus towards the centre which will bring it once more within range of the attraction of the Heart; and if this applies above all to religious rites, it is true of everything that has a spiritual function. For example, when we contemplate a work of truly sacred art, the whole soul comes together as if in answer to an imperative summons ... Here lies the essence of a sacred civilization, to be forever demanding, in all sorts of ways, that the soul should pull itself together and keep itself together.'¹⁵³

At the point when religion is being practised with a view to 'pulling oneself together' an engagement both the subjectivity of the individual and the objectivity of 'the Other' become channeled by the tradition; the one being an upward movement of aspiration and effort, the other being a source of attraction and grace.

--Subjectively, there is the all-important submission, deriving from humility, to what Pallis calls a 'discipline not of one's own devising'. This obedience is, it should be stressed, far from a reflex of conformism; it is to be understood rather as a mode of self-effacement, a deep-rooted effort to live according to the principles and rules faithfully

¹⁵² Ibid., p.28

¹⁵³ M. Lings, *Ancient Beliefs and Modern Superstitions* (London: Perennial Books, 1964), pp.36-37.

transmitted by the tradition.¹⁵⁴ Opposition to the outward rules of the religion is seen from this point of view not so much as a lack of religiosity as a lack of humility. The initial obedience to religious authority, then, is seen as a necessary pre-requisite for any advancement along the path of transformation and self-transcendence, and anticipates, by the effacement implicit in obedience, that final extinction of egotism which marks the true birth of divine life: ‘He would keep his soul shall lose it; and he would give up his soul shall keep it unto life eternal.’

--Objectively, the rites – even at the exoteric level – once practised, set in motion a spiritual momentum in the direction of the Absolute, given the fact that their source is divine and not human; grace, in other words, enters into the activity of the individual as an objective leaven which transforms his or her spiritual effort.¹⁵⁵ The importance of this supra-human element is central in the traditional perspective, both as regards doctrine and method. Guénon insists repeatedly that the impact of the rites of religion is rigorously objective: they are channels of grace, whatever be our degree of receptivity or knowledge: ‘The repetition of these [ritual] formulas aims at producing a harmonisation of the different elements of the being, and at causing vibrations which, by their repercussions throughout the immense hierarchy of states, are capable of opening up communication with the higher states, which in a general way is the essential and primordial purpose of all rites.’¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ Meister Eckhart says in one sermon that his teachings on union are meant only for the ‘good and perfected people’ in whom dwell ‘the worthy life and lofty teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ. *They* must know that the very best and noblest attainment in this life is to be silent and let God work and speak within.’ *Meister Eckhart—Sermons & Treatises*, Tr. M. O’Connell Walshe, (Dorset: Element Books, 1979) vol. I, p.6.

¹⁵⁵ In his excellent essay ‘Is There Room for Grace in Buddhism?’ (in *A Buddhist Spectrum*) Pallis shows how grace is in fact indispensable in Buddhism, despite its non-theistic conceptual starting point; this, for the simple metaphysical reason that there is no common measure between the Absolute and the relative. The relative can never ‘realize’ the Absolute, ignorance can never become enlightenment. The act of transcendence can never be accomplished by the non-transcendent: the transcendent realizes itself *through* the non-transcendent. As regards the famous saying of the Prophet, ‘He who knows himself knows his Lord’, Ibn Arabi says, there are two types of such knowledge: the first consists in ‘knowing Him through knowing yourself’ whilst the second consists in ‘knowing Him through you *as Him*, not as you’. (*Bezels of Wisdom*, p.108). ‘Only God knows God’, say the Sufis.

¹⁵⁶ *Fundamental Symbols*, compiled and edited by M. Valsan, (tr. Alvin Moore), (Cambridge, Quinta Essentia, 1995), p.40

There is of course a significant difference between exoteric and esoteric rites, but what is important here is that there can be no question, in the perennialist perspective, of separating the two, that is, practising esoteric, initiatic rites outside the framework of the exoteric structure of the religion. Pallis warns us against cults that offer ‘mystical experiences on the cheap, that is to say, minus any requirement that the would-be disciple should adhere to that religious form where the esoteric teachings he seeks originated ... beware of a professing “master” who offers a Sufism without Islam or a Tibetan Tantric initiation without Buddhism or the Jesus prayer without Christianity.’¹⁵⁷

It is a great temptation, in the modern world, to dispense with the formal apparatus of religion – dismissing it as so much ‘superstructure’ unconnected with the mystical ‘infrastructure’ that can be pursued as one will. This is the position of Fritz Staal whose ideas, indeed, offer a useful counterpoint to the perennialist perspective. For Staal, as for the perennialists, the fact that the most diverse religious traditions possess strikingly similar techniques of mediation and invocation, as regards their initiatic or esoteric dimension, is convincing evidence of the essential unity of the ultimate spiritual realization attained by mystics from these different traditions. This realized mystical essence is deemed to be the ‘heart’ of the religions; but while Staal would have this heart disembodied and exploited, the perennialists maintain that the heart cannot live once it is deprived of the body: the body which it vivifies, indeed, but which also provides the heart’s own life-blood. Here lies the difference between a ‘reductionist’ version of universalism, and a universalism which respects the inviolable integrity of the different religious traditions, stressing that the different forms are at once expressions of a unique essence, *and* are necessary pathways thereto. For Staal, on the other hand, the so-called mystical essence, reduced in fact to nothing more than intense phenomenal experience,¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ *A Buddhist Spectrum*, p.28.

¹⁵⁸ In my doctoral thesis, under Dr Peter More’s supervision, *Transcendent Experience or the Transcendence of Experience? A Study of Shankara, Ibn Arabi and Meister Eckhart on Transcendent Spiritual Realization*, one conclusion reached was that, ‘The concept and reality of “experience” presuppose an essentially dualistic ontological framework, for experience is the result of an encounter between an experiencing subject and an object experienced, even if this object be of an inward order. To experience “something” is to be contrasted with “being” that thing. To say experience, then, is to say irreducible alterity; at the transcendent level, alterity—and thus experience—is illusory; transcendent realization entails complete identity with the Absolute, and this Absolute does not experience anything “other”, for nothing “other” truly exists.’

can be arrived at through the use of various techniques of meditation; and these techniques have nothing to do with religious ‘superstructure’—the corpus of traditional dogma, doctrine and ritual that constitute the specific form of the religion in question.¹⁵⁹ From these premises are derived the conclusion that the student of mysticism should eschew any involvement with the formal apparatus of religion, and actively pursue a meditative path under the guidance of a ‘guru’ who has mastered an appropriate mystical ‘technique’. For Staal the guidance of the guru must not extend beyond the realm of meditative training: ‘... despite the initial need for the uncritical acceptance of certain methods of training, it is equally important that the student of mysticism does not turn into a follower of the guru.’¹⁶⁰

What this means in practical terms is that the ‘student’ should distinguish between instruction on meditation—which he must accept uncritically—and instruction on doctrine, relating to religious and philosophical ‘superstructure’—which is to be ignored because it is something ‘which is added and which is often worthless if not sheer nonsense’.¹⁶¹ Among such ‘nonsense’ is the belief in God, which Staal sees as being a ‘special outcome of mystical experiences’.¹⁶² All of this stands in stark contrast to what the perennialists uphold. For them, the effort to realize spiritual knowledge, as opposed to simply seeking intense phenomenal experience, is tantamount to the aspiration to become what Pallis called ‘fully human’ or what Lings referred to as ‘whole’; therefore, in practical terms, to eliminate all that which, within the soul, is contrary to ‘holiness’. This effort cannot be reduced to a question of meditative technique; the knowledge sought after in spirituality, the knowledge ‘that saves’, engages the whole of one’s being, failing which it is a notional rather than an ontological reality: ‘Knowledge only saves us on condition that it enlists all that we are, only when it is a way, and when it works and transforms and wounds our nature, even as the plough wounds the soil. To say this is to say that intelligence and metaphysical certainty alone do not save; of themselves, they do

¹⁵⁹ F. Staal, *Exploring Mysticism* (Penguin, 1975)

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.142.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.143.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p.179.

not prevent titans from falling. This is what explains the psychological and other precautions with which every tradition surrounds the gift of the doctrine.’¹⁶³

Moreover, setting out on the path of mystical knowledge comprises great dangers for souls plunged in forgetfulness, pride and pretension. As Schuon said above, even ‘metaphysical certainty’ does not prevent titans from falling. An important corollary of true ‘knowledge’, when it begins to take root at least, is recognition that it is not just one’s mind but one’s whole soul that needs to be fashioned anew if this ‘knowledge’ is to become ‘being’. It is at this point that a spiritual tradition, authoritative guidance, effective spiritual means, become absolutely imperative; where the folly of setting out alone on a path that is full of dangers, overt and covert, must be recognised; where one becomes, in consequence, acutely aware of the need to accept the guidance offered by guides that have traversed this path before us—guides who themselves were guided by guides, and so on, in a chain of transmitted spiritual authority originating in the revelation that imparts to the tradition its sacred power and efficacy.

The higher ‘spiritual functions’ of tradition, those which relate to the mystical path, essentially involve initiation, a ‘second birth’, a total commitment to the sacred means placed at one’s disposal to effect the transition from the exoteric form to the esoteric essence of one’s tradition. Staal grossly underestimates the scale of the endeavour, and the forces unleashed in what is referred to as the ‘greater holy war’ in Sufism, or as the mystical ‘descent into hell’. Lings writes in this regard:

‘... initiation, followed up by the devotional and ascetic practices that are implicit in it, opens the door to contact with the perfecting and unifying power of the Spirit, whose presence demands that the psychic substance shall become once again a single whole. The more or less scattered elements of this substance are thus compelled to come together; and some of them come in anger, from dark and remote hiding-places, with the infernal powers still attached to them. From this point of view it is truer to say that Hell rises than that the mystic descends; and the result of this rising is a battle between the “mighty opposites”, with the soul as battleground. The mystic fights, by definition, on the

¹⁶³ Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* (London: Faber & Faber, 1954) p.138

side of Heaven, but the enemy will spare no stratagem to seduce him into fighting on the wrong side.’¹⁶⁴

And again, this time with the focus on the means of fighting the spiritual battle:

‘It is not for nothing that in most traditions the obstacle to be overcome is represented as a gigantic monster with supernatural powers. Nothing will serve short of a sword that has been tempered in Heaven ... calling on the Name of God ... is the most positive thing in the all the world because it sets up the the most powerful vibration towards the Heart. The Prophet said: “There is a polish for everything, that taketh away rust; and the polish of the Heart is the invocation of Allah.”’¹⁶⁵

Again in stark contrast to Staal, the perennialists maintain the strict necessity of following the spiritual path within the protective framework of a revealed tradition. As we saw above, Pallis holds that the outward prescriptions of a religious law ‘steady the being throughout his or her earthly sojourn’. This is because, in practising a given method, the soul is opened up not only to knowledge but also to counterfeits thereof, that is, to various temptations, ranging from self-glorification to moral deviation, that can present themselves as ‘fruits’ of a supra-moral vision or of a putative ‘realization’ that offers access to a mode of being which transcends the plane on which conventional morality operates. The knowledge that is sought after in spirituality comprises such risks, among many others, and one of the functions of the outward prescriptions of religion is to counter, or at least minimize, the risks of ‘titanic falls’ (*corruptio optimi pessima*). As Schuon says:

‘It is obvious that a spiritual means has significance only within the rules assigned to it by the tradition which offers it ... nothing is more dangerous than to give oneself up to improvisations in this field.’¹⁶⁶

One point that should also be addressed here is the relationship between the pursuit of a contemplative discipline and a life of virtue. The one should not be seen as

¹⁶⁴ *The Secret of Shakespeare* (Wellingborough: The Aquarian Press, 1984), p.52.

¹⁶⁵ *What is Sufism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1975), p.59.

¹⁶⁶ *Stations of Wisdom* (Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1995), p.130.

exclusive of the other. Despite Staal's excessive idolatry of the element 'technique' this should not detract from the importance we give to this element, when practised in correct context, in the different spiritual traditions. The perennialist perspective on this question, based entirely on traditional teachings, is that there can be no possible spiritual development through the performance of some technique practised in the absence of virtue; or at least, in the absence of a sincere effort to realize the virtues, an effort which in practice is most often defined apophatically: one intends to eliminate all those actions, thoughts and orientations that contradict the virtues. Here, again, it is the tradition, with its rules of conduct and behaviour, rooted in divine Law, that play the part of 'steadying the being' in its spiritual effort.

In the following passage, Schuon defends the traditional 'Jesus Prayer'—the repetition of a short formula involving the name of Jesus—in Hesychasm, responding to those critics who argue that virtue is somehow eclipsed by the stress in Hesychasm on this 'technique' of 'mechanical' prayer:

'To those who consider "spiritual prayer" as a simple and even superfluous practice—another example of the "moralist" prejudice—the Palamite doctrine replies that this prayer represents on the contrary the "straitest" way possible, but that in return it leads to the highest pinnacle of perfection, on condition—and this is essential, and reduces to nothing the shallow suspicion of "moralists"—that the activity of prayer be in agreement with all the remainder of the being's activities! In other words, the virtues—or conformity to the Divine Law—constitute the *sine qua non* without which the "spiritual prayer" would be ineffective.'¹⁶⁷

It will readily be seen how far removed Staal's way of 'following' a guru is from the perennialist approach to the practice of spiritual method. It might perhaps be useful at this point to show how the perennialists are at one with Shankara's definition of the guru within the Hindu tradition, together with his definition of the conditions for proper guidance; for it is not so much Staal versus Schuon as Staal versus an authentic contemporary application of principles fully upheld by traditional authorities.

¹⁶⁷ *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (London: Faber & Faber, 1953), p.181

The guru, according to Shankara, is defined as such by his assimilation of *agama*, traditional teaching, on the one hand, and his position in the chain of gurus handing down that teaching, on the other: reverence not just for his own guru but for the whole line of gurus (*parampara*) is a *sine qua non* of his own authority. While the knowledge thus transmitted according to strict rules doubtless transcends all rules and forms and relativities, it can never be realized, in a spirit of individualistic zeal, apart from complete submission to those rules. Even before receiving preliminary doctrine, the would-be disciple must be in full possession of a range of qualities, spiritual, moral and formal, all of which are in turn predicated upon the fulfillment of all requisite ritual acts. He writes that the knowledge of *Brahman* should only be given to the aspirant ‘whose mind has been pacified, who has controlled his senses and is freed from all defects, who has practised the duties enjoined by the scriptures and is possessed of good qualities, who is always obedient to the teacher and aspires after Liberation and nothing else.’¹⁶⁸

Shankara’s well-known stress on the Self as the sole reality by no means diminishes or dilutes his effacement before such lesser realities as the gurus and their teachings: despite being relative, these aspects of the tradition are nonetheless to be revered as direct prolongations or radiations of the Self, and thus instrumental in eliminating ignorance.¹⁶⁹ Even the performance of the ordinary rituals (as opposed to higher forms of meditation, contemplation and the supreme rite, invocation of the sacred syllable, *Om*) can be described as a ‘cause’ of knowledge insofar as it ‘is instrumental in extinguishing that demerit arising out of past sins which obstructs knowledge of the Absolute.’¹⁷⁰

The perennialists maintain, in contrast to what Staal and others like him have written, that any effort on the part of the individual to side-step religious tradition in the

¹⁶⁸ *A Thousand Teachings—Upadesa Sahasri* Swami Jagadananda (tr.) (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1979), II. xvi,72.

¹⁶⁹ Addressing Gaudapada, he says: ‘I prostrate to the feet of that great teacher, the most adored among the adorable ...’ (*The Mandukyopanisad with Gaudapada’s Karika and Sankara’s Commentary* (Mysore: Sri Ramakrishna Ashrama, 1974) *Karika*, IV, conclusion)

¹⁷⁰ *Shankara on Discipleship*, Tr. A.J. Alston (London: Shanti Sadan, 1989), vol.5, p.89.

quest for the Absolute can be nothing other than an act of individualist folly, at best, and self-deception at worst. For the key enemies to overcome in the spiritual life are not the external ‘demons’ but the internal ones, the congenital sins of pride and individualism, the latter being all the more difficult to overcome in that it can hide behind a putatively supra-individual quest. The individual is just as incapable of overcoming individualism as a person is incapable of escaping from his own shadow.

Intelligent and whole-hearted submission to authentic guidance and traditional authority, then, plays a role of fundamental importance in this perspective; without it, the task of dissolving all the coagulations of soul produced by the poisons of egotism and individualism is well-nigh impossible. In this light, self-effacement and humility might be seen as stimulating a veritable alchemy within the soul, that is, a *solve et coagula*: a ‘dissolving’ of subjective, individualistic knots, and a ‘fixation’ on the elements of truth, conveyed by means that are objective and supra-individual.¹⁷¹

Despite the fact that the ‘spirit blows where it will’, and that the ‘kingdom of Heaven is within’, this same ‘kingdom’ has placed at man’s disposal certain clearly delineated paths that, having ‘descended’ therefrom, lead back thereto; and the inner kingdom of immanence cannot be entered without effacement before the transcendent has been realized. As Coomaraswamy puts it:

‘If, indeed, “the kingdom of heaven is within you”, then also the “war in heaven” will be there, until Satan has been overcome, that is, until the Man in this man is “master of himself” ...’¹⁷²

¹⁷¹ ‘The point of view from which I recommend “searching the scriptures” is that of Chandogya Upanisad, VII.26.2: “From taking hold of the traditional teachings there is release from all the knots (of the heart)”.’ Coomaraswamy, quoted by Lipsey in his *Coomaraswamy 3: His Life and Work* (Princeton University Press, 1973), p.273.

¹⁷² Ananda Coomaraswamy, ‘Who is “Satan” and Where is “Hell”?’ in *Coomaraswamy 2: Selected Papers – Metaphysics*, ed. Roger Lipsey (Princeton University Press, 1977), p.28. The passage continues: ‘For the *Theologia Germanica* (chs.3,22,49), it was the Devil’s “I, Me, and Mine” that were the cause of his fall ... For the self, the I, the me and the like, all belong to the Evil Spirit, and therefore it is that he is an Evil Spirit. Behold, one or two words can utter all that has been said by these many words: “Be simply and wholly bereft of self” ... So, too, Jacob Boehme: “this vile self-hood possesses the world and worldly things; and dwells also in itself, which is dwelling in hell”; ...’

The essay from which the above was taken, ‘Who is “Satan” and Where is “Hell”?’ contains a number of important citations from different religious traditions which demonstrate the urgency, intensity and inexorability of spiritual struggle against ‘the enemy within’, which has been referred to above. Coomaraswamy’s citations, and the conclusions he draws from them, are very valuable in drawing attention to the nature of the enemy that is to be overcome: egocentricity. As has by now been made clear, victory in this battle can only be granted by divine grace; and the individual enlists the saving forces of the grace of ‘the Other’—one’s true ‘Self’—through complete, self-less submission:

‘But this is not only a matter of Grace; the soul’s salvation depends also on her submission, her willing surrender; it is prevented for as long as she resists. It is her pride ... the satanic conviction of her own independence (*asmi-mana, ahankara, cogito ergo sum*), her evil rather than herself that must be killed; this pride she calls her “self-respect”, and would “rather die” than be divested of it. But the death that she at last, despite herself, desires, is no destruction but a transformation.’¹⁷³

Pride is clearly stressed as the key obstacle in the spiritual life, that illusory sense of self-sufficiency that is at the root of all failure to transcend oneself. The denial of the need to reach out and take hold of the means offered by a revealed tradition, according to this perspective, is an expression—whether explicit or implicit—of individualism. This is not to say, of course, that self-effacement automatically follows from formal submission to a revealed tradition; the quotations above show that the enemy of egotism is the most difficult of all enemies to overcome, and self-delusion within the context of religion is a possibility, as the various forms of religious bigotry, past and present, show all too clearly. But this possibility does not detract from the need to submit to a revealed tradition; on the contrary: by revealing the tenacity with which the forces of

¹⁷³ Ibid. Cf. Schuon: ‘That which we can and must know, that we are; and this is why we can know it, infallibly, on condition that we are liberated from the veils which separate us from our true nature. Man imposes these veils upon himself because his luciferian will identifies itself with them; because he believes therefore that he recognizes himself in them; and because, in consequence, to remove them is to die. That at least is what man feels so long as he has not understood that “I am black, but beautiful.”’ *From the Divine to the Human* (Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1982), p.11.

individualism and egotism grip the soul, it simply underlines the need for the graces that are alone sufficiently powerful to liberate the soul from these tentacles. The self of fallen man, being enmeshed in the elaborate webs of illusion, sin and pride, cannot deliver itself by its own resources, whence, precisely, the heavenly interventions: ‘O ye who believe, respond to God and His messenger when they call you to that which gives you life.’ (Qur’an, VIII, 24)

More pertinent to the theme of self-sufficiency versus submission is the verse immediately following the first ones revealed to the Prophet (‘Recite: in the name of thy Lord who created; created man from a clot. Recite: and thy Lord is most bounteous; He who taught by the Pen; taught man what he knew not.’): ‘Nay, but man is indeed rebellious; in that he deemeth himself independent.’ (XCVI, 1-6)

Now since God has indeed spoken and ‘taught’, not to heed His teaching, and to turn away from it in pursuit of some personal ‘programme’ of spiritual enlightenment, is seen from this perspective as a form of ‘rebellion’, however unconscious, stemming from a false sense of self-sufficiency. In this regard, Schuon makes the following affirmation, which will appear to many as excessively ‘dogmatic’, but which simply flows from a total acceptance of what the traditional doctrines actually say about the necessity of abiding by divine revelation:

‘If we start from the idea that intellection and concentration, or doctrine and method, are the foundations of the Path, it should be added that these two elements are valid and effective only by virtue of a traditional guarantee, a “seal” coming from heaven ...the importance of orthodoxy, of tradition, of Revelation is that the means of realizing the Absolute must come “objectively” from the Absolute.’¹⁷⁴

It may be objected that the acceptance of divine revelation is quite different from accepting the need to follow the tradition that ostensibly transmits and prolongs it. For example, in the case of the Christian Church, considered by many today to be a pale shadow of the Christic revelation, and within which it is difficult to find any profound

¹⁷⁴ *Understanding Islam*, p.157.

contemplative path, can there be any real benefit for the individual in accepting its dogmas and performing its rites? For the perennialists, despite their critique of Christian dogma¹⁷⁵ and of the modern churches, the answer would still be a qualified ‘yes’. Pallis says the following in regard to the question of whether it is worth ‘going to church’. For those steeped in the profanity of the modern world, he says, ‘the sacramental rites ... constitute ... almost the only firm support of the sacred influence in their tradition, and it is only when taking part in these rites that their acts are able to be disengaged altogether from profane influences ... That is why, in judging a Christian’s mode of living, for instance, it is not quite far-fetched to count it more in his favour that he “goes to church” than that he “does good”. Whoever wishes to recapture the true spirit of the active life under present circumstances has no other choice but to set out from the accomplishment of those few ritual acts that still, in essence as in their finality and form, possess the character of normal acts.’¹⁷⁶

By ‘normal’, Pallis clearly means ‘sanctified’, as the acts performed by a holy man, alone, can be considered as conforming to the divine ‘norm’. Ritual activity, in this perspective, insofar it is ‘the only firm support of the sacred influence’ of the tradition, thus comes to play a role of extreme importance. In accomplishing the ritual acts that recapitulate (‘re-present’, thus ‘make present’ in existential as well as symbolic mode¹⁷⁷) the fundamental elements of the revelation whence they stem, the individual is, as it were, brought into the sacred and sanctifying presence of the original revelation, becoming, at whatever degree, the recipient of that revelation. Hence we have the famous words of St Augustine, quoted by Eckhart: ‘What does it avail me that this Birth is

¹⁷⁵ See the excellent critique of the Trinity—logically, philosophically, metaphysical—in Schuon’s chapter ‘Evidence and Mystery’ in his *Logic and Transcendence*.

¹⁷⁶ *The Way and the Mountain*, p.61.

¹⁷⁷ Every true symbol cannot but comprise this existential opening to the reality symbolised. As Eliade writes, in regard to symbolic acts of religion: ‘The immediate reality of these objects or actions “bursts” or “explodes” under the irruptive force of a more profound reality ... because of the symbol, the individual experience is “awakened” and transmuted in a spiritual act. To “live” a symbol and to decipher its message correctly implies an opening towards the Spirit and ... access to the Universal.’ ‘Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism’, in *History of Religion*, eds. M.Eliade, J. Kitagawa (University of Chicago Press, 1967), p.103. Martin Lings makes the important connection between symbolism and invocation; the oneness of the ‘sacramental symbol with its Archetype constitutes the basis of the universal esoteric rite of invoking the Divine Name. Hindu japa-yoga (union by invocation) and its equivalents in all other esoterisms have, as their guarantee of efficacy, the truth which Sufism expresses with the words “the Name is the Named”. *Symbol and Archetype* (Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1991), p.12.

always happening, if it does not happen in me? That it should happen in me is what matters.’¹⁷⁸ Likewise, we find the Prophet of Islam saying that the canonical prayer of the believer is his (the believer’s) own *mi’raj*, the miraculous ascent by the Prophet through the seven heavens to the Throne of God, the archetype of all spiritual ‘ascents’ in Islam.

It is, therefore, through a life punctuated, penetrated and dominated by prayer that fundamental openings of a transcendent order are effected, openings that deliver the sacred substance of the individual soul from the chains of its fallen nature, and which also translate conceptions of the mind into intuitions of the heart, rhythms of the spirit. ‘True ideas take their revenge’, says Schuon, ‘on those who restrict themselves only to thinking about them’.¹⁷⁹ What is implied here of course is that these ideas must be assimilated in depth, becoming part of one’s being, if their supra-formal truth is to be made ‘real’. The active and total commitment to a contemplative discipline within a revealed tradition is deemed to be the most effective support for this process of assimilation. Through methodic prayer, a sacred presence is being continuously generated afresh, the initially limited duration of prayer coming eventually to encompass the entire life of the one who prays. In connection with the universal aspects of the monastic ideal, Schuon writes:

‘In this instant, this present, we hold our life, our whole existence; all is good if this instant is good, and if we know how to fix our life in this hallowed instant; all the secret of spiritual faithfulness lies in dwelling in this instant, in renewing it by prayer, in holding on to it by means of the spiritual rhythm, in enclosing wholly within it the time that floods over us and threatens to drag us far away from this “divine moment”. The vocation of the monk is perpetual prayer, not because life is long, but because it is only a moment ...’¹⁸⁰

To perpetuate this ‘moment’ that is consecrated to God amounts to generating receptivity to that presence in which all that is contrary to sanctity is finally overcome. As Schuon says, again: ‘Man cannot stand the divine “climate” in the long term, except on condition of dying, gently, to the world and to himself.’

It is prayer, essentially, that makes one receptive to the purity of divine life; to the sacred presence in whose light all the imperfections of the soul become apparent, and by

¹⁷⁸ *Meister Eckhart—Sermons & Treatises*, vol.1, p.1.

¹⁷⁹ *Spiritual Perspectives*, p.132.

¹⁸⁰ *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, p.133

whose grace they are overcome. However great may be the obstacles in the soul that prevent it from assimilating, and being assimilated by, this presence, these obstacles, being relative, are unable to withstand the graces rendered present through prayer, for these graces are absolute: finite imperfections cannot for long resist infinite Perfection.

These considerations may aptly be brought to an end with the following passage from Schuon, which should turn our minds back to the opening quotation of this paper, expressing the fundamental intention driving the perennialist discourse:

‘All great spiritual experiences agree in this: there is no common measure between the means put into operation and the result. “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible”, says the Gospel. In fact what separates man from divine Reality is the slightest of barriers: God is infinitely close to man but man is infinitely far from God. This barrier, for man, is a mountain; man stands in front of a mountain which he must remove with his own hands. He digs away the earth, but in vain, the mountain remains; man however goes no digging, in the name of God. And the mountain vanishes. It was never there.’¹⁸¹

¹⁸¹ *Stations of Wisdom*, p.157.