

Sophia Perennis

by

Frithjof Schuon

Source: *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 13, Nos. 3 & 4. (Summer-Autumn, 1979). © World Wisdom, Inc.
www.studiesincomparativereligion.com

“PHILOSOPHIA PERENNIS” is generally understood as referring to that metaphysical truth which has no beginning, and *which* remains the same in all expressions of wisdom. Perhaps it would here be better or more prudent to speak of a “Sophia perennis”, since it is not a question of artificial mental constructions, as is all too often the case in philosophy; or again, the primordial wisdom that always remains true to itself could be called “Religio perennis”, given that by its nature it in a sense involves worship and spiritual realization. Fundamentally we have nothing against the word “philosophy”, for the ancients understood by it all manner of wisdom; in fact, however, rationalism, which has absolutely nothing to do with true spiritual contemplation, has given the word “philosophy” a limitative colouring, so that with this word one can never know what is really being referred to. If Kant is a “philosopher”, then Plotinus is not, and vice versa.

With Sophia perennis, it is a question of the following: there are truths innate in the human Spirit, which nevertheless in a sense lie buried in the depth of the “Heart” — in the pure Intellect — and are accessible only to the one who is spiritually contemplative; and these are the fundamental metaphysical truths. Access to them is possessed by the “gnostic”, “pneumatic” or “theosopher” — in the original and not the sectarian meaning of these terms — and access to them was also possessed by the “philosophers” in the real and still innocent sense of the word: for example, Pythagoras, Plato and to a large extent also Aristotle.

If there were no Intellect, no contemplative and directly knowing Spirit, no “Heart-Knowledge”, there would also be no reason capable of logic; animals have no reason, for they are incapable of knowledge of God; in other words, man possesses reason or understanding — and also language — only because he is fundamentally capable of suprarational vision, and thus of certain metaphysical truth.

* * *

The fundamental content of the Truth is the Unconditioned, the Metaphysical Absolute; the Ultimate One, which is also the Absolutely Good, the Platonic Agathon. But it lies in the nature of the Absolute to be Infinity and All-Possibility, and in this sense St. Augustine said that it is in the nature of the Good to communicate itself; if there is a sun, then there is also radiation; and therein lies the necessity of the cosmos which proclaims God.

However, to say radiation is also to say separation from the source of light. Since God is the absolute and infinite Good, whatever is not God — that is to say, the world as such—cannot be absolutely good: the non-divinity of the cosmos brings with it, in its limitations, the phenomenon of evil or wickedness which, because it is a contrast, emphasizes all the more the nature of the Good. “The more he blasphemes”, as Eckhart said, “the more he praises God”.

The essential here is discrimination between Atma and Mâyâ, between Reality seen as “Self”, and relativity seen as “cosmic play”: since the Absolute is infinite—failing which it would not be the Absolute — it must give rise to Mayâ, a “lesser reality” and in a sense an “illusion”. Atmâ is the Principle—the Primordial Principle, one might say — and Maya is manifestation or effect; strictly speaking Maya is in a sense also Atmâ, since in the last analysis there is only Atmâ; both poles therefore must impinge on one another and must be bound up with one another, in the sense that, in Atmâ, Mâyâ is in a way prefigured, whereas, contrariwise, Maya in its own fashion represents or reflects Atmâ. In Atmâ, Mayâ is Being, the Creator of the world, the Personal God, who reveals Himself to the world in all His possibilities of Manifestation; in Mayâ, Atmâ is any reflection of the Divine, such as the Avatara, the Holy Scriptures, the God-transmitting symbol.

In the domain of Mâyâ or relativity, there is not only “space”, there is also “time”, to speak comparatively or metaphorically: there are not only simultaneity and gradation, but also change and succession; there are not only worlds, but also “ages” or “cycles”. All this belongs to the “play” of Mâyâ, to the well-nigh “magical” unfolding of the possibilities hidden in the Primordial One.

* * *

But in the Universal All there is not only “that which is known”, there is also “that which knows”; in Atma the two are undivided, the one is inseparably present in the other, whereas in Mâyâ this One is split into two poles, namely object and subject. Atma is the “Self”; but one can also call it “Being” — not in the restrictive sense — depending on the point of view or relationship in question: it is knowable as Reality, but it is also the Knowledge, dwelling within us, of all that is real.

From this it follows that the knowledge of the One or the All calls, in accordance with its nature, for a unifying and total knowledge; it calls, over and above our thinking, for our being. And herein is defined the goal of all spiritual life : whoever knows the Absolute — or whoever “believes in God” — cannot remain stationary with this mental knowledge or with this mental faith, he must go further and involve his whole being in this knowledge or in this faith; not in so far as knowledge and faith are purely mental, but in so far as, in accordance with their true nature and through their content, they demand more and give more than mere thinking. Man must “become what he is”, precisely by “becoming that what is”. This immediate spiritual necessity applies both to the simplest religion and to the profoundest metaphysics, each in its own way.

Good in itself more than one's ego, and this self-knowledge and selfless love constitute the whole nobility of the soul.

* * *

The Divine is Absoluteness, Infinitude and Perfection. Maya is not only the radiation which manifests God and which, through this manifestation, necessarily distances itself from God, it is also the principle — or the instrument — of refraction and multiplication: it manifests the Divine not only through unique existence, but also through the innumerable forms and qualities that shimmer in existence. And since we perceive these values and recognize them as values, we know that it is not enough to call the Divinity the Absolute and the Infinite; we know that, in its Absoluteness and Infinity, it is also the Perfect, from which all cosmic perfections derive, and to which in a thousand tongues they bear witness.

* * *

Pure “dogmatism” and mere “speculation”, many may say. This in fact is the problem: a metaphysical exposition appears as a purely mental phenomenon when one does not know that its origin is not a mental elaboration or an attitude of soul, but a vision which is completely independent of opinions, conclusions and creeds, and which is realized in the pure Intellect — through the “Eye of the Heart”. A metaphysical exposition is not true because it is logical — in its form it could also not be so — but it is in itself logical, that is to say, well-founded and consequential, because it is true. The thought-process of metaphysics is not an artificial support for an opinion that has to be proved, it is simply description that has been adapted to the rules of human thinking; its proofs are aids, not ends in themselves.

St. Thomas Aquinas said that it was impossible to prove the Divine Being, not because it was unclear, but, on the contrary, because of its “excess of clarity”. Nothing is more foolish than the question as to whether the suprasensory can be proved: for, on the one hand, one can prove everything to the one who is spiritually gifted, and, on the other, the one who is not so gifted is blind to the best of proofs. Thought is not there in order to exhaust reality in words — if it could do this, it would itself be reality, a self-contradictory supposition — but its role can only consist in providing keys to Reality; the key is not Reality, nor can it wish to be so, but it is a way to it for those that can and will tread that way; and in the way there is already something of the end, just as in the effect there is something of the cause.

That modern thought, still wrongly called “philosophical”, distances itself more and more from a logic which is deemed to be “scholastic”, and more and more seeks to be “psychologically” and even “biologically” determined, does not escape our notice, but this cannot in any way prevent us from thinking or from being in the manner that the theomorphic nature of man, and hence the sufficient reason of the human state, demand. One speaks much today of the “man of our time” and one claims for him the right to determine the truth of this “time”, as if man were a “time”, and as if truth were not valid for man as such; what in man is

mutable does not belong to man as such; what constitutes the miracle of “man” is not subject to change, for, in the image of God, there can be neither decrease nor increase. And that man is this image follows from the simple fact that he possesses the concept of the Absolute. In this one primordial concept lies the whole essence of man and therefore also his whole vocation.