

# Letters to the Editor

## On Christianity and the Perennial Philosophy:

I refer to the letters of Dr. Stoddart and Dr. Rama Coomaraswamy in *Sacred Web 11*. I found their criticisms of my comments in *Sacred Web 10* to be helpful in clarifying some of the issues. (In fact I was led by them to study more deeply the writings of Meister Eckhart, whom I have since tried to interpret and defend in the Winter 2003 issue of the journal *Communio*.)

I agree with Dr Coomaraswamy that it is possible to be a perennialist (of sorts) and a Catholic. And as far as the Trinity is concerned, I agree that God in His essence is *nirguna* — without qualities. But I think there is still scope for more discussion of exactly what we mean by the Trinity. The Persons are not qualities that we ascribe to God, but distinct ways of being the unconditioned Absolute. There are no doubt Trinities in Jewish, Neoplatonist and Hindu teaching, but it seems to me that the need to make sense of Christ forces the development of a much more radical Trinitarianism. Christ is not an incarnation or manifestation of God as such, or even of God in relation to us (*Isvara*), but rather of *God in relation to Himself* — that is, of God the Son (and thereby a revelation of God the Father). The “eternal life” offered by Christ is not simply liberation from metaphysical ignorance, but incorporation within that interior and unimaginable interior relationship. I think we are still only at the beginning of what might be said about this. In fact, the present revival of Trinitarian theology in Catholicism may yet prove to be the seed-bed for the *redressement* that Rene Guenon longed to see in his own lifetime — the restoration of metaphysics and true intellectuality within Catholicism.

This brings me to my point about the “evangelical imperative”. Dr Coomaraswamy asks whether one might seriously ask a Rumi, an Ibn ‘Arabi or a Shankara to convert to Christianity, when it is clear they have already attained divine knowledge within their own traditions. I do not doubt that such individuals are saved (in the Christian sense of that word). The Church has long accepted that someone who is invincibly ignorant of the necessity of baptism through no fault of their own, but who follows the light of conscience and whatever truths are accessible to them, will be accounted by God a member of the Church and enter the Kingdom of Heaven. It occurs to me to wonder whether, therefore, whether from a dogmatically Catholic point of view the other religions may be described as systems of divinely inspired “invincible ignorance”, permitted so that God might manifest Himself in a rich variety of ways and cultures.

All the same, I find it hard to imagine that a Rumi or an Ibn ‘Arabi, if they had been led to understand what Catholics truly believe about the Eucharist, for example, would not have wanted to receive it for themselves. The Truth, the very Godhead, which they love and know and contemplate, is substantially present within the Blessed Sacrament. The graces that one may receive from communion are literally infinite. If Rumi or Shankara had been brought to see what Catholics see with the eyes of faith, and had converted to Christianity, what Christians they would have been, and how world history might have been transformed!

It was not to be, and perhaps for good reasons, but Christians should surely not refrain from evangelizing on the grounds that some individuals may be supposedly better off not knowing a truth of such magnitude. While we must never try to force belief, to refrain from speaking and from attempting to persuade would be a betrayal of the revelation that has been entrusted to us. What comes of our attempts, if anything, is God’s concern.

As for William Stoddart’s letter, there I disagree most profoundly. He argues that with Vatican II the Church cracked the exoteric shell of Christianity and took the “downward path” of accommodation with modernity at the expense of Tradition itself. There is an intense argument going on within the Church, which perhaps deserves an article of its own. As has now been recognized by the highest authorities in the Church, Vatican II did contain important ambiguities, which were cer-

tainly exploited by the enemies of Tradition. However, the whole Church was far from being corrupted by this, and a revival of true intellectuality is gathering force. It was already underway by the 1940s under the name *ressourcement*, for its leaders were returning to the Church Fathers for inspiration. They were not Modernists, although they were sometimes confused with them because they rejected the dry-as-dust Thomism which dominated the Schools by the mid-nineteenth century (consolidating, by the way, a dangerous intellectual schism with the Orthodox Church).

Many of the present College of Cardinals (Ratzinger, Stafford, Scola, Schonborn, Ouellet, etc.) were formed in this movement, whose full effects are likely to be seen in the next generation. A mere three or four decades is not enough time to judge the results of a Council. Besides, through the worst of the abuses, the Mass has always remained valid, and saints have continued to emerge in the Church after Vatican II. These points cannot be pursued in detail here, but I would ask that your readers not give up on the Church just yet. For further reading on these matters, see Jean Borella's *The Sense of the Supernatural* (T&T Clark), the journal *Communio* which is a seed-bed for this movement, and Tracey Rowland's recent book, *Culture and the Thomist Tradition* (Routledge).

*Stratford Caldecott*  
[www.secondspring.co.uk](http://www.secondspring.co.uk)



### **Response to Stratford Caldecott:**

I agree with Mr. Caldecott that a deeper study of the Trinity is to be desired. My own inclination would be to look to the early Fathers rather than the works of current theologians — but that may reflect a personal prejudice. With regard to the various “trinities” in other traditions, it is important not to accept each and every “trinity” as equivalent to Christian doctrine — but rather to be sure that they are talking about the same “fecundity” (to use a phrase of Nicholas of Cusa) with regard to the outpouring of God’s absolute reality.

With regard to Rumi *et al*, let me make it clear that no one can be saved by error, but only by the Word of God (or by Truth as others have said).

When one reads the poems of Rumi, one knows he is speaking to one with a fully “Christian” heart, that he is himself in many ways the “fecundity” of the Word. Let us remember that Job was not a member of the community. With regard to the Eucharist, I certainly concur with the presence of God in the Blessed Sacrament, but I am reminded of Eckhart’s statement somewhere that for him everything had become the Blessed Sacrament, and many of the desert saints were deprived of the Eucharist for long periods of time, but not deprived of the graces that we normally receive through com-union. Under no circumstances can one say that anyone is better off not knowing the Truth — ignorance is never bliss. But at the same time, I would suggest that Rumi would without doubt have believed and accepted the Truth of the Sacrament. I have an uncle who became a sadhu after living many years in the West. He was shocked that Christians had no understanding of the Sacrament, and my father was frequently at pains to defend — and hence state — his belief in the nature of the Sacrament.

Finally, I very much agree with Caldecott’s final statement that whatever comes of our attempts is God’s concern — an opinion I might add that comes straight from the Bhagavad Gita. As a psychiatrist, I frequently tell patients that they must do what they believe in their hearts to be the correct thing to do, and be totally unconcerned with the results. The fruits of our efforts are in God’s hands, not ours.

Again, I would like to thank Mr. Caldecott for the courtesy of his reply and hope that this can, for both of us, grow into a fruitful and deeper understanding of the issues involved.

*Rama P. Coomaraswamy*