

# Letters to the Editor:

**From Patrick Moore:**

## **Two Questions about Fundamental Christian Doctrines**

As a practicing Orthodox who was formerly a practicing, traditional Catholic—and, for Mr. Upton, I am one more living ex-Catholic who is not anti-Catholic—I was particularly interested in the discussions in the readers' section of issue 28 about two matters central to Christianity: that of the Eucharist and that of the Trinity, this latter in Dr. Wolfgang Smith's letter in response to Khalil Andani.

The discussion about the sacrament of the Eucharist was interesting but raises a question that I do not believe was addressed and which seems central: the matter of eating and drinking Christ's Body and Blood. I do not believe it will offend either Schuon or Christ to analyze this issue further.

My question is twofold. First, leaving aside the question of transubstantiation, which I believe (believed even as a Catholic) one may read as an *upaya*; and leaving aside on the other hand the question of the Real Presence, which I take as a given: what is the particular role in understanding the Eucharist of the ideas that bread and wine change into Christ's Body and Blood, together with the concomitant ideas of eating this Body and drinking this Blood? Christ and the priest say very plainly, "Take and eat, this is My Body" and "Drink this ... this is My Blood," and both Catholics and Orthodox insist on and take for granted their reality in the sacrament. Do not the ideas of Body and Blood and of eating and drinking them therefore have their own particular relevance to understanding what the sacrament confects and what it bestows,

over and above the more general issue of the Real Presence? Is this not something more than a *façon de parler* to be taken at face value only by the uninitiate?

Note that for the Orthodox, as far as I can tell in contradiction to the Catholics, there is a benefit in receiving the two, distinct species that is not realized in receiving just the bread or body.

As an aside, I will be particularly interested in any response to this particular question, and more generally to the background discussion, that Dr. Wolfgang Smith might add, who has written with such admirable clarity on many Christian issues. I have read his article on the Eucharist and agree with it, but I believe that this question admits also of more a particular answer.

The questions for Dr. Smith, both in fact related to each other, are about the Christian Trinity and how to understand It in relation to the Essence. I realize that my questions are somewhat outside of the context of Dr. Smith's remarks in issue 28 which bear on Khalil Andani's earlier article; but his statements here about the Trinity and about "Christian metaphysics" are central to his argument and I think that they merit their own attention.

Dr. Smith says in his reply to Khalil Andani that Eckhart does not posit a "God beyond God" when comparing the Trinity to the Essence. Dr. Smith also repeats what he has said elsewhere, that the Trinity is a matter of a particularly Christian metaphysics that differs greatly from the metaphysics of other traditions.

Question one: Leaving aside the question of any correlation of the Trinity with Ismaili gnosis and leaving aside also any question of how to interpret Eckhart—in any event, I think one can reasonably read Eckhart otherwise than Dr. Smith appears to—how does Dr. Smith explain the undeniable reality that, to put it baldly, "one comes before three"? Is he claiming with Cardinal Alain Danielou that "Trinity is as primordial as Unity" and that the Essence is not more than notionally different from nor in any way "prior to" the Trinity? If so, how does he deal with that basic principle? If he does not mean this, how does he understand the Trinity to be related to the Essence—again with this fundamental principle in mind?

Having read Aquinas on the Trinity and believing that I understand the distinction between the Persons and the Substance, I do not see

how this distinction addresses the question that arises from principle that “one comes before three.”

Two: When he speaks of the significant differences between Christian metaphysics and the metaphysics of other traditions, what exactly does he mean? For metaphysics is metaphysics—the doctrine of the Absolute and of Relative, or of the One and the Many—no matter what the traditional language (if language it be) used to express it and, if René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon are right in saying that the Hindus have articulated metaphysics singular more baldly than others, why should one not attempt to understand the depths of Christian doctrine with the help of this particularly plain Hindu articulation? Is not metaphysics after all where one gets as far as can be from formal divergences, and is it not precisely the depths of one’s own tradition that can best be elucidated, at need, through metaphysics as articulated through other traditions?

Is this assertion of what metaphysics fundamentally is indeed what Dr. Smith denies? If so, how then can “truth be one” as it necessarily must be?

In ending, thanks to *Sacred Web* and the contributors for their efforts to shed light on these most important questions.

God knows best.

*Patrick Moore*

#### **From Wolfgang Smith:**

##### **Response to Patrick Moore on Christian Metaphysics**

It is with great pleasure that I respond to Mr. Patrick Moore’s penetrating questions relating to Christian metaphysics, or what can equally well be termed Trinitarian non-dualism, a subject I have treated at length in my book, *Christian Gnosis*. What renders the issues Mr. Moore has raised significant in the extreme is the fact that not only Christian theology and metaphysics, but the Christian life as such rest squarely upon that Trinitarian doctrine. And this explains the immense concern, on the part of nascent Christianity, to formulate that primary and all-important doctrine with the greatest conceivable precision, and to protect the faithful from contact with heretical sects. It seems the Fathers understood, far better than we, the havoc erroneous theological conceptions invariably wreak upon the spiritual life.

The first question Mr. Moore poses relates to what some refer to as the “God beyond God” hypothesis: the idea, namely, that the Trinity refers to a “lesser God,” a God that stands to the Absolute essentially as *Isvara* to *nirguna Brahman*. For my part, I maintain that this thesis is in fact heretical, and can be viewed as inherently Sabellian. And Mr. Moore disagrees: what I, in the name of Christian orthodoxy, judge to be heresy, he perceives apparently as an esoteric truth. The point is made in the form of a query: “How does Dr. Smith explain the undeniable reality that, to put it baldly, ‘one comes before three’?” It is needful, first of all, to understand that Trinitarian theology is not a question of arithmetic. The Greek and Latin Fathers, who formulated that doctrine, realized full well that in fact it transgresses the bounds of human rationality. And this means that words, or the concepts they signify, assume a radically new significance. Call it “symbolic” or what you will: the point is that Trinitarian theology is not simply a matter of philosophical discourse in the ordinary sense. One needs to realize that what gives substance to the doctrine and renders it both sacred and true are the actual words of Christ Himself: the very words declared by the Savior to be “spirit and life.” It suffices in fact to read the Gospel of St. John in light of the Patristic commentaries to discern the twin doctrines upon which Christianity is based: that of the Trinity and of the Incarnation.

But let us get back to “the undeniable reality that one comes before three”: I will not attempt, at this point, to argue against the “God beyond God” thesis from the ground up; after all, I have devoted an entire book to that task. Suffice it to show, with the utmost brevity, that Meister Eckhart—who is generally perceived by the erudite as the prime champion of “God beyond God” theology—has in fact repudiated that position. He does so, for instance, in Sermon 10, which broaches the subject with the words: “There is a power in the soul which seeks the ground [of God] ... and takes God in his oneness and in his solitary wilderness, in his vast wasteland, and in his own ground.” Admittedly, this does sound very much like “God beyond God” theology; but wait: this is not all the Meister has to tell. “I once said in a Latin sermon on the Feast of the Trinity” he continues, and goes on to say:

The difference comes from the oneness, that is, the difference in the Trinity. The oneness is the difference and the difference is the oneness.

The greater the difference, the greater the unity, because this is difference beyond difference.

Here we have it: in the Trinity “the one is the three and the three is the one.” The “one,” thus, is not after all “*before* the three”! What confronts us in this Eckhartian dictum is indeed the authentic Trinitarian nondualism, which seems not to coincide with the Shankarian. But let it be clearly understood that this does not render the Christian doctrine “exoteric” as many incline to believe: nothing could be further from the truth!

One more point pertaining to Question 1: Mr. Moore refers to the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas, according to which Essence stands to Person as “substance” to “relation.” Now, without wishing to deny that this (inherently Aristotelian) formulation has its merit and its *raison d'être*, I would argue that it ranks in authority below the less articulated formulations of the Fathers, which are common to both the Roman and the Orthodox Church. The fact, moreover, that the Eckhartian nondualism does not apply so long as the Trinity is viewed Thomistically is to me an argument against the primacy of that formulation.

This brings us to the second query: what is it that differentiates Christian metaphysics from that of other traditions? Again, an excellent and vitally important question. On the face of it, if one defines metaphysics classically as “the science of being as being,” or as “the doctrine of the Absolute and the Relative, or the One and the Many,” as does Mr. Moore, it would seem that there can be no such thing as a Christian metaphysics, any more than there can be, say, a “Christian arithmetic.” Yet the fact remains that Patristic metaphysics broke away from the Platonist mold at its very inception. Take Clement of Alexandria, for instance: an ardent Platonist prior to his conversion, who continued moreover to regard Greek philosophy as a providentially ordained preparation for the reception of the Christian faith, he had this to say:

Our gnosis, and our spiritual garden, is the Savior Himself, into whom we are planted, being transferred from our old life into the good land... The Lord, then, into whom we have been transplanted, is the Light and the true Gnosis.

Obviously this is a far cry from Platonism! It appears that with the advent of Christ everything on earth has changed; even the metaphysical landscape is no longer the same: not for the Christian! A profound division has befallen mankind: what is sacred and saving truth for the

disciples of Christ is indeed “foolishness to the Greeks” as St. Paul has declared. And the fateful divide persists to this day, and only grows deeper with the passing of time.

What needs to be grasped with the utmost clarity is that Christianity rests squarely upon the Petrine recognition, the one “flesh and blood has not revealed”: the realization, namely, that “Thou art the Son of the living God.” This “act of faith” is indeed “the rock” upon which the true Church is founded (Matt 16.17,18), the pivot upon which everything Christian turns—even its metaphysics! Let us never forget that Jesus of Nazareth was neither a *risbi* nor a prophet: clearly, no *risbi* and no prophet ever said—or could say—what Christ has declared. What prophet, indeed, has ever proclaimed: “*Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood there is no life in you*”? Only a madman—or in truth the Son of the living God!—can speak these words. And let us clearly understand that Christian metaphysics springs from the teaching of Jesus Christ; as I have said before, what renders the new metaphysics both sacred and true are indeed the actual words of Christ: words which spring directly from the Word and lead back to the Word, from which, as “spirit and life,” they are inseparable. It turns out, thus, that Clement of Alexandria was right: “the Savior Himself, into whom we have been transplanted, *is* the Light and the true Gnosis.” And let me emphasize also the words “*into whom we have been transplanted*”: everything hinges upon that!

This tells us what it is that distinguishes Christian metaphysics from that of all other sapiential traditions, and shows why this teaching is nowhere to be found in any non-Christian religion. Admittedly, there exists a plethora of concordances between Christianity and other *bona fide* religions—not to speak of a meeting of hearts!—yet the fact remains that these concordances do not take us into the core of the Christian teaching, which is precisely the Trinitarian metaphysics. On the contrary: Shankarian Vedanta, for example, inasmuch as it commits us to a “God beyond God” interpretation of the Trinity, repudiates the Trinitarian metaphysics by demoting that doctrine in effect to the status of an exoteric belief, while replacing it with its own version of *advaita*. I must consequently disagree with Mr. Moore when he asserts (again in the form of a question): “Is it not precisely the depths of one’s own tradition that can best be elucidated, at need, through metaphysics as

articulated through other traditions?” But how can “other traditions” elucidate “the depths” of Christian doctrine if they lead to an erroneous conception of the Trinity? And is it not strange to imagine that one can glean from a human master, no matter how enlightened, what cannot be learned from the Son of God? I would contend that no matter how true and profound these non-Christian teachings may be in their own right, they are far more likely to prevent us from ever grasping the core teachings of Christianity: that a Christian who turns, say, to the Vedanta for enlightenment, is far more likely to end up in a state of considerable confusion, if not in outright heresy. There is wisdom, after all, in the biblical admonition not to “drink from foreign cisterns”! Whatever the gain may be, to do so courts danger of various kinds, not the least of which, it seems, springs from the pretensions of a questionable esoterism.

Most fittingly, therefore, Mr. Moore concludes with the question: “How then can ‘truth be one’?” The answer, I believe, is the same for Christians, Hindus, or Platonists: that the ultimate gnosis, namely, is perforce no longer doctrinal, no longer conceptual, no longer *mediated*: “For now we see through a glass, darkly, but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known” (1 Cor. 13.12). We need to realize that concepts as such constitute “a glass” through which one sees “darkly.” It is thus in *unmediated* gnosis that metaphysics attains its consummation. And so too, presumably, it is in the ultimate gnosis that the “transcendent unity of religions” is to be found, if indeed there is such a unity.

*Dr. Wolfgang Smith*

### **From Larry Rinehart: On Perennialism and Christianity**

The following reflections pertain to several themes from *Sacred Web* 28. Page numbers are cited parenthetically.

Ali Lakhani’s fine editorial on ‘Tradition and Religious Pluralism’ raises anew the delicate question of the relative authority of universal metaphysical doctrine, on one hand, and the particular religious doctrines deriving from divine revelation, on the other. He writes: ‘It is an error when the metaphysical priority of the Divine Light of transcendence is subordinated to the particularities of its theological coloring.’ (11) Yet it is precisely such ‘coloring’ that derives most directly from divine

revelation as formulated in revealed Scriptures; whence arises the danger that in 'subordinating' orthodox religious 'colorings' to a metaphysical Light independent of the corresponding revelations, a genuine distortion of religious orthodoxy can occur. This point is reinforced by the esteemed Sufi quoted by Mr Lakhani in his review of *A Sufi Master's Message* (125): 'There is not a "transcendent unity" of religions that can be extracted, or abstracted, from forms. There does not exist an "eternal wisdom", or a *sophia perennis*, independent of the messages of the Prophets ... .' And Charles Upton argues in the course of a letter, that "the super-formal, metaphysical point of view" does not and cannot "go against" an orthodox theological perspective in the sense of contradicting it, though it may certainly provide an esoteric exegesis of a particular dogma that theologians whose horizons are limited to the exoteric will not accept.' (172) Now Mr Lakhani, in the aforesaid editorial, goes on to say that 'Tradition is merely the metaphysical substratum of religious orthodoxy' (12), and as such cannot replace the practice of a particular traditional religion; yet the implication persists that the religious orthodoxy ('coloring') is subordinate to its own 'substratum' in cases of apparent contradiction.

I believe the 'delicate question' thus raised, is especially acute for Christians contemplating perennialist doctrine, as the letters of Wolfgang Smith and Stratford Caldecott confirm. For despite the standard argument that every religion has its 'exclusivity clause' to establish the integrity of its tradition, it is clear that the Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic traditions are intrinsically better equipped to acknowledge Christianity as a legitimate path to the 'same summit' than is the Christian tradition to reciprocate such acknowledgements. Neither the Jagadguru nor the Dalai Lama is interested in converting Christians or Muslims, and while Muslims are charged to make the Qur'anic teachings known to all, they are also charged to respect other Books and their believers, even as they are informed that God intends a plurality of religions. Christians, by contrast, are instructed that there is no other Name under heaven by which human beings must be saved, than Jesus Christ, and that this Name is to be preached to all nations along with the offer of baptism in the triune form of this Name. Now Jean Borella has pointed out that a Christocentric view of the history of religions can acknowledge the divine origin of the great religions, and also that these can be 'means of



salvation for their faithful'. ('The Problematic of the Unity of Religions' SW 17; see also 'The Transcendental Unity of Religions according to Nicholas of Cusa' in *Sophia*, Vol 16, No 2) Yet this is not to concede that the Way of Christ is but one of many equivalent paths to the same summit (though God knows best), since the genuine *scandal* of Christian doctrine, metaphysics included, is the claim that this one human being is God. Specifically, and more subtly, this human being, spirit-soul-&-body, is united with the eternal divine *Ousia* (Essence, Substance, Being) in the form of a *Hypostasis* or Person whose principal names are Jesus Christ, Son of God, and Logos. Furthermore, this Person who hypostatically unites, while keeping clearly distinct, the eternal Essence of God and the specific human being, is Himself the Second Person of the uncreated Holy Trinity.

So I really must insist that Khalil Andani is simply mistaken when he says that 'the Son of God is not defined by the hypostatic union itself' (187), and that he is likewise in error when he says that Christ's 'human nature is the *manifestation* or the *reflection* of the Second Person' (188). I can well believe that such formulations are in accord with 'Sufi and Isma'ili conceptions of the Prophets and the Imams', but again, Christ is considered *by Christians* as more than another Prophet, and indeed the metaphysics of His hypostatic union differs from that of the manifestation of an avatar, as again Borella demonstrates ('The Problematic'), and as Dr Smith's remarks on the uniqueness of Christian metaphysics (183) further support. Mr Andani also fails to grasp the point regarding his modalist interpretation of the Trinity, for neither Dr Smith nor myself are in any doubt about the orthodoxy of the *distinction* between the Essence and the Persons. The Essence and the Persons of the Trinity are distinct in their undivided Unity, just as the divine and human essences or natures are distinct in their hypostatic union as the Second Person. The error of modalism is to interpret the necessary distinction as a separation of ontological order, so that Essence is seen as a Godhead *superordinate* to the Three, and the Unity is placed *above* the Trinity, when it is precisely their ontological conjunction that illustrates the *mystery*. As for Eckhart, I believe Dr Smith has sufficiently demonstrated the way to a non-modalist exegesis of his most seemingly-modalist texts, for anyone who is interested in Christian orthodoxy. Conversely, to interpret Eckhart's trinitarian

doctrine as modalist is to interpret it as heretical, again by the standard of Christian orthodoxy.

Finally, Charles Upton's letter on 'Schuon and Transubstantiation' (166-177) raises important questions, to several of which I would like to respond. Schuon's acceptance of the Lutheran Communion does not imply 'calling into question the necessity of the Catholic and Orthodox priesthood' (167), since he explicitly attributes superior 'graces' and 'spiritual possibilities' to the Roman and Eastern rites. On the question of Consecration, this clearly occurs in the Lutheran rite because apart from the Eucharist the bread and wine are just that, but within the rite they are the Body and Blood of Christ. This Consecration is ascribed to Christ alone as the Great High Priest, not to the universal priesthood of believers as Mr Upton suggests (173), for the role of the universal priesthood is to offer the sacrifice of praise on behalf of all creation. The Roman theory of Transubstantiation is not so much *anathema* from the perspective of Augsburg, as it is *adiaphora*, i.e. permissible but not essential: if it is helpful for the support of faith it may be embraced, but it is not considered a *necessary* doctrine of faith. This is not so much 'impatience with theological minutiae' (169) as it is reluctance to ascribe salvific necessity to a particular philosophical explanation of a divine mystery. I think Mr Upton's proposal to 'illuminate the esoteric depths' (173) of the Eucharistic rite from the Roman, Eastern and Lutheran perspectives is a meritorious one, and by way of a modest beginning I would point to my essay on Eucharistic Remembrance in the same issue of *Sacred Web*. As for Hans Urs von Balthasar, I am not so sure his work is 'more to the effect of further weakening orthodoxy than renewing it' (175): while he does accept modernity as *fait accompli*, his explication of post-Kantian (indeed post-Cartesian) 'metaphysics' reads like a diagnosis (*The Glory of the Lord V*), and he considers Aquinas the high-water mark of Western metaphysics. He is not a Teilhardian. Lastly, I incline to agree with Mr Upton's call 'for the esoterics to choose the orthodox revelation that is to be their way and fully embrace it, mortifying in themselves the desire to preach the Primordial Tradition or the Transcendental Unity of Religions ...' (176), except in individual cases of persons who need the perspective of *philosophia perennis* to find their way to a traditional form. The contemplation of symbolic concordances and analogies between the several ancient and orthodox

religious traditions, and the intellection of their spiritual significance 'conceal(ed) ... within our hearts', may by God's grace give us a foretaste of that eschatological feast of Light when He shall unite the faithful of all His flocks. But in our syncretistic *zeitgeist*, with all orthodox religious faiths under withering attack by the secular culture including its academic wing, the broad proclamation of perennialist teaching could well serve to further their disintegration, especially to the extent that this teaching implies the subordination of religious orthodoxy to metaphysical principles.

*Larry Rinehart*