

# Remarks on Confusions inherent in Number Symbolism

by Timothy Scott

The use of number to describe Reality involves certain ambiguities and, *ipso facto*, risks serious misunderstandings. In the first place, the Absolute might be expressed more or less adequately by either “The One,” expressing Its Unity, or by “Zero,” expressing both Its Infinite possibility and Its transcendent unknowability. Now, zero, strictly speaking, is not a number but the possibility of number.<sup>1</sup> ‘In truth,’ says Ibn al-‘Arabī, ‘all possibilities resolve principally into non-existence.’<sup>2</sup> Possibility is realized virtually in the first number, one, which contains all numbers in pure potentiality. Thus Macrobius says of the “One” that it also is a not a number, but the source of all numbers.<sup>3</sup> Here the use of “one” refers not to the Absolute as such, but to the first determinant, Being. The relationship between potentiality, virtuality and possibility gives rise to a kind of identity between one and zero.

Zero is generally reserved in spiritual literature for the Absolute Reality, as it is in Itself; by analogical transposition zero may also be used to refer to principal potentiality, which is strictly of the cosmological order. Ananda Coomaraswamy observes that, in the Indian tradition, zero is denoted by a range of words: *śūnya*, *ākāśa*, *vyoma*, *antariksa*, *nabha*, *ananta*, and *pūrna*. ‘We are immediately struck’ he says, ‘by the fact

<sup>1</sup> See Coomaraswamy’s essay, ‘*Kha* and Other Words Denoting “Zero,” in Connection with the Indian Metaphysics of Space’: *Selected Papers Vol.2: Metaphysics*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977.

<sup>2</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Fus̄us*, cited in Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2000, p.995.

<sup>3</sup> *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, 1.6.7-9, cited by Meister Eckhart, *Par. Gen. 15* (Meister Eckhart: *The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, (tr.) E. Colledge, O.S.A. and B. McGinn, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1981 p.99).

that the words *sūnya*, “void,” and *pūrna*, “plenum,” should have a common reference; the implication being that all numbers are virtually or potentially present in that which is without number; expressing this as an equation,  $0 = x - x$ , it is apparent that zero is to number as possibility is to actuality.<sup>4</sup> This equation further bears out the relationship between zero, infinity and the first point—which is both zero and one—inasmuch as the mathematically indefinite series, thought of as both plus and minus according to direction, cancel out where all directions meet in common focus.<sup>5</sup> Coomaraswamy further remarks that ‘employment of the term *ananta* [“endless”] with the same reference implies an identification of zero with infinity; the beginning of all series being thus the same as their end.’<sup>6</sup> According to Plotinus, ‘It is precisely because there is nothing within the One that all things are from it.’<sup>7</sup>

The relationship between zero and one is blurred in a similar fashion, and for the same reason, as that between Transcendent Being and Immanent Being. Frithjof Schuon:

When we speak of transcendence, we understand in general objective transcendence, that of the Principle, which is above us as it is above the world; and when we speak of immanence, we understand generally speaking subjective immanence, that of the Self, which is within us. It is important to mention that there is also a subjective transcendence, that of the Self within us inasmuch as it transcends ego; and likewise there is also an objective immanence, that of the Principle in so far as it is immanent in the world, and not in so far as it excludes it and annihilates it by its transcendence. ... One finds here an application of the Taoist *Yin-Yang*: transcendence necessarily comprises immanence, and immanence just as necessarily comprises transcendence. For the Transcendent, by virtue of its infinity, projects existence and thereby necessitates immanence; and the Immanent, by virtue of its absoluteness, necessarily remains transcendent in relation to existence.<sup>8</sup>

Schuon says of the Infinite that ‘it is in the first place Potentiality or Possibility as such, and *ipso facto* the Possibility of things, hence Virtuality.’<sup>9</sup> Schuon’s use of the term Potentiality is unfortunate if viewed in a

<sup>4</sup> Coomaraswamy, *Kba’: Selected Papers Vol.2*, 1977, p.220.

<sup>5</sup> See Coomaraswamy, *Kba’: Selected Papers Vol.2*, 1977, p.222. Coomaraswamy refers to “the mathematically infinite series.” To be precise the term “infinite” should be reserved for the Supreme Principle; mathematical series are properly indefinite.

<sup>6</sup> Coomaraswamy, *Kba’: Selected Papers Vol.2*, 1977, p.220.

<sup>7</sup> *Enneads* 5.2.1.

<sup>8</sup> Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, Middlesex: Perennial Books, 1981, p.70.

<sup>9</sup> Schuon, *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*, Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 2000, p.15.

strictly Aristotelian sense where the transference from potentiality to actuality is predicated upon the prior reality of an ever actual principle. Thus it would seem more satisfactory to refer to the Infinite as Actuality, in the sense of *the* Actual or the Real.<sup>10</sup> For the sake of precision, one can, as René Guénon does, distinguish between the terms “possibility,” “virtuality” and “potentiality.” Thus, possibility primarily refers to the Infinite; virtuality refers to principal Being;<sup>11</sup> potentiality refers to the aptitude of virtual existence to manifest *in actu*, and thus properly to the indefinite. Possibility can be referred to at each level by transposition. However, this does not work in reverse, for it cannot be said of the divine order that it is potential. As Guénon says, ‘there can be nothing potential in the divine order. It is only from the side of the individual being and in relation to it that potentiality can be spoken of in this context. Pure potentiality is the absolute indifferentiation of *materia prima* in the Aristotelian sense, identical to the indistinction of the primordial chaos.’<sup>12</sup> Potentiality refers to a change in state and thus to a lack: God lacks nothing. This point alerts us to a further danger in using zero to express the Absolute Reality. Thus, we must be careful to avoid the modern rationalistic Western confusion that saw the Sanskrit name for zero, *sunya*, meaning “empty,” becoming *chiffre* in the Germanic languages, which carries the meaning of “null” or “nothing.”<sup>13</sup> ‘Needless to say,’ observes Robert Lawlor, “nothing” is a different concept from “empty.”<sup>14</sup>

*Materia prima* is the primordial chaos, represented by the biblical symbolism of the Waters of *Genesis*. From one perspective this is really the first determination and thus deserves to be represented by the

<sup>10</sup> One might describe the Absolute as Actuality and the Infinite as Potentiality, while never forgetting that the Absolute and the Infinite are a single Reality.

<sup>11</sup> Guénon warns against dismissing the principal state—the realm of Forms or Ideas—as somehow less real by virtue of the being described as “virtual”: ‘To consider the eternal ideas as nothing but simple “virtualities” in relation to the manifested beings of which they are the principal “archetypes” ... is strictly speaking a reversal of the relationship between Principle and manifestation’ (‘Les Idées éternelles’: *Études Traditionnelles*, 1947, pp.222-223, cited in Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.772).

<sup>12</sup> Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols: The Universal Language of Sacred Science*, Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1995, p.300, n.37.

<sup>13</sup> Lawlor makes this point in his *Sacred Geometry: Philosophy and Practice*, London:Thames and Hudson, 1989, p.19. Lawlor mistakes “*chiffra*” as Latin. *Chiffre* is a Germanic word meaning “a cipher,” that is, the arithmetical symbol (0) denoting no amount.

<sup>14</sup> Lawlor, *Sacred Geometry*, 1989, p.19.

number one. Yet from “below,” or from the terrestrial perspective, this presents an indeterminate “face” and thus can be, and in fact is, expressed by zero. As with the Divine All-Possibility, of which it is but a graduation, the primordial chaos is both “void” and “plentitude.” This is brought out with the double meaning of the Greek word *khaos*, which, as Schuon observes, means both “primordial abyss” and “indeterminate matter.” It is, says Schuon, ‘neither nothingness pure and simple nor a substance preceding the creative act, but, together with the demiurge, the first content of creation; the active demiurge being the Centre, and its passive complement, the periphery.’<sup>15</sup> As Guénon remarks, ‘the plenum and the void, considered as correlatives, are one of the traditional representations of the complementarity of the active and passive principles.’<sup>16</sup>

The ontological complementarity (Essence and Substance; *Purusha* and *Prakriti*) is prefigured in the supreme complementarity, Divine Essence and Divine Substance, which, as Schuon says, are ‘almost synonymous in practice.’<sup>17</sup> To talk of “Divine Essence” or “Divine Substance” is to consider these terms as symbolic cognomens of the Absolute. To talk of Essence or Substance as “in practice” is to consider these in respect to their ontological realities; here one can talk provisionally of “Pure Essence” and “Pure Substance.” Schuon remarks that they ‘differ in that substance refers to the underlying, immanent, permanent and autonomous nature of a basic reality, whereas essence refers to the reality as such, that is, as “being,” and secondarily as the absolutely fundamental nature of a thing.’ He continues, ‘The notion of essence denotes an excellence which is as it were discontinuous in relation to accidents, whereas the notion of substance implies on the contrary a sort of continuity’<sup>18</sup>. In the Vedantic tradition the concept of Essence is expressed, at the principal level, by *Ātman*, the Divine Self, which, as Guénon observes, is ‘the principle of all states of being, manifest and unmanifest.’<sup>19</sup> According to Guénon, ‘The Self must not be regarded as

<sup>15</sup> Schuon, *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*, 2000, p.52. Meister Eckhart: ‘It is noteworthy that “before the foundation of the world” (Jn.17:24) everything in the universe was not mere nothing, but was in possession of virtual existence’ — *Comm. Jn.* 45 (Colledge & McGinn, 1981, p.137), see also *Par. Gen.* 55, 58-72.

<sup>16</sup> Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, p.309.

<sup>17</sup> Schuon, *In The Face Of The Absolute*, Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1989, p.53.

<sup>18</sup> Schuon, *In The Face Of The Absolute*, 1989, p.53, n.1.

<sup>19</sup> Guénon, *Man and his Becoming According To The Vedānta*, New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint, 1981, p.30.

distinct from *Ātman*, and, moreover, *Ātman* is identical with *Brahman* Itself [the Absolute].<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Schuon notes,

The essence of the world, which is diversity, is *Brahman*. It might be objected that *Brahman* cannot be the essence of a diversity seeing that It is non-duality. To be sure, *Brahman* is not the essence of the world, for, from the standpoint of the Absolute, the world does not exist; but one can say that the world, in so far as it does exist, has *Brahman* for its essence; otherwise it would possess no reality whatsoever. Diversity, for its part, is but the inverse reflection of the Infinity, or of the all-possibility, of *Brahman*.<sup>21</sup>

The identification of Essence and Substance is found in the Greek word *ousia*, which, as Titus Burckhardt observes, connotes the ideas of both “Substance” and “Essence.”<sup>22</sup> In the Islamic tradition, the Aramaic letter-word *ayn*, translated variously as “eye,” “fountain” and “individual essence,” also expresses both “Substance” and “Essence.”<sup>23</sup> From still another perspective, pure Essence and pure Substance are properly speaking the complementary aspects of Immanent Being, and here it is incorrect to speak of the Absolute or Beyond-Being in any of these terms. This difficulty is one of human language, which is necessarily limited.

As Schuon observes, ‘One can represent Absolute Reality, or the Essence, or Beyond-Being, by the point; it would doubtless be less inadequate to represent it by the void, but the void is not properly speaking a figure, and if we give the Essence a name, we can with the same justification, and the same risk, represent it by a sign; the simplest and thus the most essential sign is the point.’<sup>24</sup> According to Shaikh al-‘Alawī, ‘Everything is enveloped in the Unity of Knowledge, symbolised by the Point.’<sup>25</sup> From a more limited and, in a sense, a more precise perspective, the point symbolizes the principle of Immanent Being, and thus Existence. To say Existence is to say space and time.

<sup>20</sup> Guénon, *Man and his Becoming*, 1981, p.38. Throughout the English translations of both Guénon and Schuon there is inconsistency concerning the use of key Hindu terms. This may or may not be an accident of translation. For the sake of consistency I have corrected all quotations in line with current Indological nomenclature. Thus: *Brahman* = the Absolute; *Brahmā* = the creator god; and *Ātman* = the Self.

<sup>21</sup> Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, London: Perennial Books, 1987, p.108.

<sup>22</sup> See Burckhardt, *Alchemy*, Baltimore: Penguin, 1974, p.36, n.3.

<sup>23</sup> See Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, Wellingborough: The Aquarian Press, 1976, p.62, n.1.

<sup>24</sup> Schuon, *Esotericism as Principle and as Way*, p.65.

<sup>25</sup> From ‘Le Prototype unique’, in *Etudes Trad.*, 1938, p.300, cited in Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.778

As Guénon observes, ‘Space itself presupposes the point.’<sup>26</sup> Moreover, Guénon notes that ‘the geometric point is quantitatively nil and does not occupy any space, though it is the principle by which space in its entirety is produced, since space is but the development of its intrinsic virtualities.’<sup>27</sup> Meister Eckhart: ‘a point has no quantity of magnitude and does not lengthen the line of which it is the principle.’<sup>28</sup> In a similar sense, Guénon observes that ‘though arithmetical unity is the smallest of numbers if one regards it as situated in the midst of their multiplicity, yet in principle it is the greatest, since it virtually contains them all and produces the whole series simply by the indefinite repetition of itself.’<sup>29</sup> ‘He that is the least among you all, he is the greatest’ (Mt. 18:14, 20:16; Mk. 9:48, 10:31; Lk. 9:48, 18:14). For Proclus, ‘Every multitude somehow participates in the One.’<sup>30</sup> This is again found in the sufic formula: ‘Unity in multiplicity and multiplicity in Unity.’<sup>31</sup>



There are numerous confusions that the use of number symbolism might produce. Two fundamental examples demand our attention, each, in its own way, derived from the confusion between Transcendent Being and Immanent Being. The first is the confusion that arises with the use of the number one, which is used variously to refer both to Being and the Absolute. In the first case the number one expresses both the unity of Being—the “lesser Absolute”—and its essential principality, demonstrated by its role, at the appropriate level, as Demiurge. In the second case the term “The One” expresses the total Unity of the Absolute. The One, as such, refers to the Unity of the Absolute as, by definition, It includes both Being and Beyond-Being, both Immanence and Transcendence. This distinction between the Absolute and Being might be likened, to varying degrees, to the distinctions that exist, *mutatis mundis*, between Meister Eckhart’s Godhead and God, between *Brahman* and *Atman* in its guise as *Īśvara*, or, in the Islamic tradition, between *al-Abadiyah*

<sup>26</sup> Guénon, *Symbolism of the Cross*, London: Luzac & Co. Ltd., 1975, p.77; see Ch.16.

<sup>27</sup> Guénon, *Man and his Becoming*, 1981, pp.41-2.

<sup>28</sup> Meister Eckhart, *Par. Gen.*, 20. See also Albert the Great, *On Indivisible Lines* 5-6; Euclid, *Geometry*.

<sup>29</sup> Guénon, *Man and his Becoming*, 1981, p.42. Each number is composed of “units” or “ones;” see Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 10.1 (1053a30); Aquinas Ia.11.1.ad1.

<sup>30</sup> Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, prop.1.

<sup>31</sup> Cited in Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.776.

(Transcendent Unity) and *al-Wābidiyah* (Unicity).

The notion of oneness evokes the ideas of both unity and principalis. To talk of unity, without qualification, is to talk of Totality. On the one hand this recognizes the exclusivity of Absolute Unity, which *ipso facto* denies that which is not the Absolute; on the other hand this expresses the inclusivity of the Infinite Plentitude. To talk of principalis is to talk of origin and determination, which is to talk of Being and Existence. Thus, one might say that to talk of unity is to emphasize the Absolute, while to talk of principalis is to emphasize Being. This of course remains a matter of emphasis: the Absolute is *a priori* principal—it is this that Being manifests—while Being is “relatively absolute”<sup>32</sup> and thus a contingent unity.

From a certain perspective the use of the cognomen one to describe Reality implies the error of limiting the Absolute to its first determination. Thus, in the Vedantic tradition, the Supreme Cause is said to be beyond number; otherwise, as Alain Daniélou remarks, ‘Number would be the First Cause. But the number one, although it has peculiar properties, is a number like two, or three, or ten, or a million.’<sup>33</sup> The Vedantists go so far as to say that ‘The nature of illusion (*māyā*) is the number one.’<sup>34</sup> Thus they talk of *advaita*, “not-two” or “nonduality,” a term, as Coomaraswamy remarks, ‘which, while it denies duality, makes no affirmations about the nature of unity and must not be taken to imply anything like our monisms or pantheism.’<sup>35</sup> The idea of nonduality can also be found in Western tradition: ‘Single nature’s double name / Neither two nor one was call’d’ (Shakespeare, *The Phoenix and the Turtle*, 39-40). As Schuon remarks, ‘one may well wonder what interest God has in our believing that He is One rather than manifold. In fact He has no such interest, but the idea of Unity determines and introduces a saving attitude of coherence and interiorization which detaches man from the hypnosis, both dispersive and compressive, of the outward and manifold world; it is man, and not

<sup>32</sup> Schuon talks of Being as the “lesser Absolute” (for example see *In The Face Of The Absolute*, 1989, p.38), which is to recall that Manifestation or the Relative is made “in the image” of the Absolute; hence Being is a “relative Absolute” a phrase that Schuon admits is ‘an unavoidably ill-sounding expression, but one that is metaphysically useful’ (*In The Face Of The Absolute*, 1989, p.57).

<sup>33</sup> Daniélou, *The Myths and Gods of India: Hindu Polytheism*, New York: InnerTraditions, 1986, p.6.

<sup>34</sup> *Maudgala Purāna*, 1, cited in Daniélou, *The Myths and Gods of India*, 1985, p.7.

<sup>35</sup> Coomaraswamy, ‘The Vedanta and Western Tradition’: *Selected Papers Vol.2*, 1977, p.5.

God, who has an interest in believing that God is One.<sup>36</sup> The Absolute is beyond any qualification; it is *neti neti*, “neither this nor that.” From another perspective, which is effectively that of monotheism, the recognition of God as “One” implies the identification of Being with the Absolute, the identification of the essence of the ontological—or even theological—principle with the Divine Essence. In a general sense it can be said that these two perspectives, found varyingly in all traditions, express the apophatic and cataphatic paths respectively.

From a purely theological point of view one may talk freely and indiscriminately of God as “One,” where this cognomen applies to all levels according to a kind of sincere simplicity. Here it is enough to say that it is believing in the One that saves.<sup>37</sup> ‘Reality’ says Schuon, ‘affirms itself by degrees, but without ceasing to be “one,” the inferior degrees of this affirmation being absorbed, by metaphysical integration or synthesis, into the superior degrees.’<sup>38</sup> A superior degree of Reality contains all inferior degrees within it. Therefore from the Divine perspective all is unity. From the human or terrestrial perspective there is a substantial discontinuity between the degrees of Reality, for it is obvious that the lesser cannot contain the greater. Still, when the simple believer sincerely calls the Creator “One”, he or she articulates the truth of essential identity: the recognition, albeit in most cases unconscious, of the essential continuity of the Divine.

From a metaphysical point of view, both strict and precise, one must distinguish between the application of “oneness” to both the Absolute and to Being. When referring to the Absolute one may talk of “The One.”<sup>39</sup> At the same time one may talk of Being as the first determinant or qualification, and here Being is “one” or “the monad.” Guénon: ‘although “ontology” does indeed pertain to metaphysics, it is very far from constituting metaphysics in its entirety, for Being is not the Unmanifest in itself, but only the principle of manifestation; consequently, that which is beyond Being is, metaphysically, much more important than Being itself. In other words [and to use the Vedantic terms] it is *Brahman*

<sup>36</sup> Schuon, *In The Face Of The Absolute*, 1989, p.38.

<sup>37</sup> See Schuon, *Esotericism as Principle and as Way*, 1981, pp.236-37 on this idea of ‘believing in the One both wholly and sincerely.’

<sup>38</sup> Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, Wheaton: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1993, 1993, p.38.

<sup>39</sup> Plotinus’ talks of “The One” (*to hen*).



and not *Īsvara* which must be recognized as the Supreme Principle.<sup>40</sup> Clement of Alexandria: ‘God is one, and beyond the one and above the Monad itself.’<sup>41</sup>



A second fundamental confusion arises with the use of the number three. Here a distinction must be made between the Trinity—which expresses the three coessential “Persons”<sup>42</sup> of the Divine Reality—and the cosmogonic ternary—which arises with the polarization within Being of Essence and Substance. This second use of the number three might best be described by the “mythological” archetype: Being-Father-Mother. A further distinction arises between the ternary Being-Essence-Substance and the ternary Essence-Manifestation-Substance. Again, there is confusion between these “creative” ternaries and the cosmic ternary composed of a hierarchy of constituent elements of the microcosm, such as the ternary, *spiritus-anima-corporis*.

This is not the place for a detailed examination of the intricacies and difficulties associated with the Christian doctrine of the Trinity; nevertheless, some comments are pertinent. Schuon offers an understanding of the Trinity that has proved controversial but which is nevertheless insightful where metaphysics are at issue.<sup>43</sup> He writes:

The Trinity can be envisaged according to a “vertical” perspective or according to either of two “horizontal” perspectives, the former of them being supreme and the other not. The “vertical” perspective—Beyond-Being, Being and Existence—envisages the hypostases as “descending” from Unity or from the Absolute—or from the Essence it could be said—which means that it envisages the degrees of Reality; the supreme “horizontal” perspective corresponds to the Vedantic triad *Sat* (supra-ontological Reality), *Cit* (Absolute Consciousness) and *Ananda* (Infinite Bliss), which means that it envisages the Trinity inasmuch as it is hidden in Unity; the non-supreme “horizontal” perspective on the contrary places Unity as an essence hidden within the Trinity, which is then an ontological Trinity representing the three fundamental

<sup>40</sup> Guénon, *Man and his Becoming*, 1981, p.37.

<sup>41</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus*, 71, 1.

<sup>42</sup> To avoid theological language here leaves us with such terms as “modes” or “aspect,” which lead to the error of “modalism” (see Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1968, Ch.3).

<sup>43</sup> For an example of those who disagree with Schuon here see Timothy A. Mahoney, ‘Christian Metaphysics: Trinity, Incarnation and Creation’: *Sopbia* 8.1, 2002, p.87 particularly n.30. A characteristic Schuonian passage which has attracted criticism from some orthodox Christians can be found in *Logic and Transcendence*, London: Perennial Books, 1984, pp.106-109.

aspects or modes of Pure Being, whence we have the triad: Being, Wisdom, Will (Father, Son, Spirit).<sup>44</sup>

Schuon’s “vertical” Trinity echoes Plotinus’ three consubstantial hypostases: the One, the Intellect and the World Soul. Vladimir Lossky remarks of Plotinus’ hypostases that, ‘Their consubstantiality does not rise to the trinitarian antinomy of Christian dogma.’<sup>45</sup> Lossky’s view reflects a dogmatism—valid in itself—which, in the final analysis, is concerned with what is properly an ineffable and apophatic Reality, such that descriptions of it necessarily involve the antinomy and paradox that see the Trinity being a single Unity with Three Persons that are absolutely distinct and yet absolutely equal. Moreover, the apophatic nature of the Trinity alerts one to the fact that this, as Schuon says, is what the Buddhists call an *upāya*, a “provisional means,” or a way.<sup>46</sup> Apophatic and cataphatic theology are, regardless of the absoluteness of their goal, still “ways” to this goal. Thus, to call the Trinity an *upāya* is no disservice, for any human conception, be it negative or positive, of the Divine as “other,” is contingent or provisional. The Trinity of Itself—one might say, in Its Essence—is not contingent; nevertheless, insofar as we may conceive of it, this conception is precisely an *upāya*; moreover, for the Christian it constitutes, along with the Person of Christ, the *upāya par excellence*, which is to say, the Revelation. In the end this is summed up by a quote from St. Gregory Nazianzen which, it might be noted, Lossky uses to argue the case against the type of conception that some feel Schuon expounds. St. Gregory Nazianzen:

To us there is one God, for the Godhead is One, and all that proceedeth from Him is referred to One, though we believe in Three Persons ... When, then, we look at the Godhead, or the First Cause, or the Monarchy, that which is conceived is One; but when we look at the Persons in whom the Godhead dwells, and at those who timelessly and with equal glory have their being from the First Cause—there are Three whom we worship.<sup>47</sup>

The very nature of “believing in” and “worshipping” express the idea of “otherness” and show the contingent nature of the Trinity thus envisaged; the shift from “looking” at the Godhead to “looking” at the Persons, shows that what is at issue here is a matter of perspective. These are not criticisms of St. Gregory Nazianzen, but recognition

<sup>44</sup> Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, London: Mandala Books, 1976, p.54.

<sup>45</sup> Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 1968, p.49.

<sup>46</sup> Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*, 1975, p.107.

<sup>47</sup> *Oratio XXXI* (Theologia V), 14, cited in Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 1968, p.59.

of the distinction between worshipper and the Worshipped, creature and God, the servant (*al-'abd*) and Lord (*al-rabb*).<sup>48</sup>

It might be contested that the Essence in itself, or the *hyperousia*, as St. Gregory Palamas calls it, is beyond relationship, “incomprehensible and ineffable,” and thus the absolutization of the Trinity, while theologically acceptable, is metaphysically inadmissible. However, as envisaged by St. Gregory Palamas the Godhead has two coessential modalities: Essence and Energies (δυνάμεις). The Essence in Itself might be termed the interiority of God, and to be correct this is “unknowable,”<sup>49</sup> but God in His Essence also possess certain modalities of expression, Energies, which, while remaining uncreated, nevertheless are figured by the Trinity. In this sense the Trinity is the uncreated “expression” of the Godhead. Let it be stressed that this “expression” is still “uncreated” and thus must be distinguished from the created world inasmuch as it is the created “expression” of the Absolute—“made in the image,” with the emphasis on being “made.” Now, one might suppose to see the Essence as the Divine considered *ad intra* and the Trinity as the Divine *ad extra*, but this would be incorrect, for the Divine viewed *ad extra* is the Personal God, the Demiurge and by extension, Creation itself. In fact the Divine considered *ad intra* is both Essence-Trinity and uncreated Energies. The Essence is apophatic, exclusive and interiorising. The Trinity is cataphatic, inclusive and exteriorizing, and it is precisely this that the Energies express. The Essence-Trinity and trinitarian Energy are One. Meister Eckhart remarks, ‘the one essence is their root, and these three are the one essence.’<sup>50</sup> The Essence and the Trinity may be likened to the Absolute and the Infinite, which are, so to speak, the intrinsic dimensions of each other. In the final analysis there is, as Schuon says, ‘no need to consider a trinity formed by the aspects “Good,” “Absolute,” “Infinite;” but rather, what ought to be said is that the Sovereign Good

<sup>48</sup> In the final analysis these are one and the same. According to al-Jilī, ‘if the servant (*al-'abd*) is elevated by cosmic degrees towards the degrees of the Eternal Reality and he discovers himself, he recognizes that the Divine essence is his own essence, so that he really attains the Essence and knows It, as the Prophet expresses it thus: ‘He who knows himself (*nafsab*), knows his Lord;’ (*man 'arafa nafsabu faqad 'arafa rabbabu*) (*al-insān al-kamīl (Universal Man)*, Gloucester: Beshara Publications, 1983, p. 13).

<sup>49</sup> Schuon: ‘Man cannot love God in His Essence, which is humanly unknowable, but only in that which God makes known to him’ (*Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p. 157).

<sup>50</sup> Meister Eckhart, *Comm. Jn.* 67 (Colledge & McGinn, 1981, p. 146).

is absolute and, therefore, that it is infinite.<sup>51</sup>

The Trinity expresses the “articulation of the Essence”<sup>52</sup> through the coessential hypostases: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The three divine hypostases, as St. Gregory Palamas says, possess one another ‘naturally, totally, eternally and indivisibly, but also without mixture or confusion, and they co-penetrate each other in such a way that they possess one energy.’<sup>53</sup> The Absolute is by definition Infinite, comprising the Infinite Substance (*ousia* or *hyperousia*) or All-Possibility, which, by virtue of its absolute inclusiveness, is the Divine Perfection or the Good. The Father can be equated with the Absolute and the Son with the Infinite, inasmuch as Christ is the Word, the Divine Substance, through whom ‘all things came in to being’ and without which ‘not one thing came in to being’ (Jn.1:3). The Holy Spirit is then the Good inasmuch as it is the projection of the Absolute into Relativity, which achieves the perfection of the Infinite. We could equally say that the Son is the Good inasmuch as it is in Him that Relativity is actualized, or “made flesh.” Likewise, the Holy Spirit can be recognized as the Infinite inasmuch as it is the infinite projection of the Absolute. Again, the Absolute is the Supreme Good, being the Ultimate Perfection. ‘These three are one’ (1Jn.5:7),<sup>54</sup> which is to say with St. Augustine that ‘the works of the trinity are indivisible.’<sup>55</sup>

The Divine Essence is the principle of Being, which is to say, Being *per se*. Being is the same with the Essence but the Essence is not limited to Being. At the level of Being the Trinity is the intrinsic nature of the extrinsic Personal God. Here the Christian Trinity may be likened by symbolic transposition to the Hindu *Saccidānanda*, *Sat* (Being), *Cit* (Consciousness), *Ananda* (Beatitude). This is the Trinity envisaged with respect to Schuon’s supreme “horizontal” perspective. Guénon observes that this Trinity has its equivalent in the Arabic terms, *al-‘aql*

<sup>51</sup> Schuon, *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*, 2000, pp.22-23.

<sup>52</sup> Samsel, ‘A Unity with Distinction: Parallels in the Thought of Gregory Palamas and Ibn al-‘Arabi’: *Sophia* 7.2, 2001, p.100.

<sup>53</sup> St. Gregory Palamas, cited in Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1998, p.239.

<sup>54</sup> According to the Vulgate: ‘So there are three witnesses *in heaven: the Father, the Word and the Spirit, and these three are one; there are three witness on earth: the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three of them coincide*’ (vv.7-8) The words in italics are not found in the early Greek MSS. Cf. Jn.14:11, 10:30: ‘The Father and I are one.’

<sup>55</sup> Augustine, *Comm. Jn.* 95.1.

(Intelligence), *al-'āqil* (the Intelligent) and *al-ma'qūl* (the Intelligible): 'the first is universal Consciousness (*Cit*), the second is its subject (*Sat*) and the third is its object (*Ananda*), the three being but one in being "which knows Itself by Itself".<sup>56</sup> As Guénon says, *Sat, Cit, Ananda* are 'but one single and identical entity [*Saccidānanda*], and this "one" is *Atman*<sup>57</sup>. Furthermore, as the Trinity is identical to the Essence so, says Guénon, is *Atman* identical with *Brabman* Itself.<sup>58</sup>

Being is "one that is three," the Trinity envisaged as *Saccidānanda*. At the principal level this is a "distinction without difference" (*bhedābheda*); Being, Consciousness, and Beatitude are not three separate entities but one reality. This ternary is prefigured at the highest level by the principle of the Trinity (Absolute, Infinite, Good), which is Supreme Unity. *Saccidānanda*, the supreme "horizontal" Trinity, gives rise to the ontological ternary. Now, as Schuon remarks, 'the centre-present [that is, the ontological principle] is expressed by the ternary, and not by unity, because unity is here envisaged in respect to its potentialities and thus in relation to its possibility of unfolding; the actualization of that unfolding is expressed precisely by the number two. The number three evokes in fact not absoluteness as does the number one, but the potentiality or virtuality which the Absolute necessarily comprises.'<sup>59</sup>

To talk of the Trinity envisaged ontologically is to talk of Immanence as the articulation of Transcendence. In the Judaic tradition Immanence articulates Itself through what Leo Schaya has termed "the triple immanent principle," *Shekbinab-Metatron-Avir*. Schaya:

*Shekbinab* is the immanence of *Keter*, the presence of divine reality in the midst of the cosmos. *Metatron*, the manifestation of *Hokhmab* and the active aspect of the *Shekbinab*, is the principle form from which all created forms emanate; *avir*, the ether, is a manifestation of *Binab*: it is the passive aspect of *Shekbinab*, its cosmic receptivity, which gives birth to every created substance, whether subtle or corporeal. The triple immanent principle, *Shekbinab-Metatron-Avir*, in its undifferentiated unity, constitutes the spiritual and prototypical "world of creation": *olam haberiyyab*.<sup>60</sup>

According to Schaya, '*Keter* wraps itself in its first casual emanation,

<sup>56</sup> Guénon, *Man and his Becoming*, 1981, p.107, n.1.

<sup>57</sup> Guénon, *Man and his Becoming*, 1981, p.107.

<sup>58</sup> Guénon, *Man and his Becoming*, 1981, p.38.

<sup>59</sup> Schuon, *In The Face Of The Absolute*, 1989, p.143.

<sup>60</sup> Schaya, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, New Jersey: Allen & Unwin, 1971, 1971, p.68.

*Hokhmab*, and surrounds *Hokhmab* with its receptivity, *Binab*; and the radiation of the active principle completely fills the receptivity of the passive cause.<sup>61</sup> He is quick to emphasise that, '*Hokhmab* and *Binab* emanate simultaneously from *Keter*, the dark receptivity of the "mother" being entirely filled with the luminous fullness of the "father;" these two complementary principles are never in any way separate. They are not, therefore, really two; the created being, man, sees them as differentiated, being himself subject to distinction. In reality, *Hokhmab* and *Binab* are indivisible and inseparable aspects of *Keter*, the One.'<sup>62</sup>

Strictly speaking the Trinity refers to Transcendence, whereas the "triple immanent principle" pertains to Immanence. This gives rise to the distinction between the Trinity and the ternary. To say Trinity is to say one with three coessential Persons. The term "ternary" describes the fundamental elements of creative Being; to say ternary is to talk of three "entities"—for want of a more satisfactory term—, two of which are the polarisation of the third. One might pedantically object that the Trinity is in fact a ternary, given the etymological derivation of the word "ternary" from the Latin, *terni* ("three at once"). This is granted, nevertheless, the present distinction between Trinity and ternary is contrived with a view to expedient clarification. In the final analysis all ontological polarizations are resolvable in the *coincidentia oppositorum*, through which the ternary dissolves in the Unity of the Trinity.

There are two fundamental forms of the ternary, of which the polarization of the Principle into Essence and Substance is the exemplar and archetype of the first. This first ternary is comprised of three terms in a relationship such that two terms derive from or contrive to a third term. The principal image of this type is the triangle with its apex situated at the top. 'In India' observes Robert Lawlor, 'the triangle was called the Mother, for it is the membrane or birth channel through which all the transcendent powers of unity and its initial division into polarity must pass in order to enter into the manifest realm of surface. The triangle acts as the mother of form.'<sup>63</sup>

This type of ternary consists of two complementary and, strictly

<sup>61</sup> Schaya, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, 1971, p.75. *Keter-Hokhmab-Binab* are the 'first and transcendental causes' of which *Shekbinab-Metatron-Avir* are the immanent causes.

<sup>62</sup> Schaya, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, 1971, p.75, n.1.

<sup>63</sup> Lawlor, *Sacred Geometry*, 1989, p.12.

speaking, analogous ternaries. The first is comprised of a first principle that gives rise to two complementary principles; this is figured by a triangle with its apex above. The ternaries Androgyne, Father, Mother or Principle, Essence, Substance are of this sort. In the Chinese tradition this is the ternary *T'ai Chi* ("Great Extreme"), *T'ien* ("Heaven), *Ti* ("Earth"). 'And this' says Guénon, 'is not the end of the matter: *T'ai Chi*, transcendental Being or Unity, itself presupposes another principle—*Wu Chi*, Non-Being or the metaphysical Naught. But it is impossible for this principle to enter into relationship with anything beside itself in such a way as to become the first term of a ternary, for no relationship of this sort could possibly exist prior to the affirmation of being or Unity.'<sup>64</sup> The second and complementary ternary of this type is comprised of a harmonious pair and a third term which rises as a result of their union; this is figured by a triangle with its apex below.<sup>65</sup> The ternaries Father, Mother, and Son and the Chinese "Great Triad," *T'ien*, *Ti* and *Jen* (Heaven, Earth and Man) are of this sort.<sup>66</sup>

The polarisation of the Divine Androgyne into the sexual principles (Father, Mother) is answered, so to speak, by the union of the sexes in the "Son," the 'royal child more perfect than its parents,' the *Rebis* of the alchemists. The *Rebis*—from *res bina*, "twofold matter"—is so called because 'it is made of two substances, namely of male and of female ... although at bottom it is the same substance and the same matter ... and these two separate substances derived from the same source are really one homogenous whole.'<sup>67</sup>

Guénon remarks that the two complementary or opposed terms—according to the perspective adopted—express, as the case may be, either a horizontal opposition (between right and left) or vertical opposition (between higher and lower):

Horizontal opposition occurs between two terms which share the same degree of reality and are, so to speak, symmetrical in every respect. Vertical opposition indicates, on the contrary, a hierarchical relationship between the two terms. Although still symmetrical in the sense of being complementary, they are related in

<sup>64</sup> Guénon, *The Great Triad*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1994, p.19.

<sup>65</sup> These two ternaries have been discussed in detail by Guénon, *The Great Triad*, 1994, Ch.2, from which much of the following is drawn with due reference.

<sup>66</sup> The Egyptian triad Osiris, Isis and Horus is perhaps the most famous mythological example of this type.

<sup>67</sup> Pertnety, *Dictionnaire mytho-hermétique*, Paris, 1972, pp.426-7, cited in Chevalier & Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*, Middlesex: Penguin, 1996, p.791.

such a way that one of them must be considered to be higher, or superior, and the other lower or inferior.<sup>68</sup>

'It is important' says Guénon, 'to notice that in a vertical opposition the first term of a ternary of the first type [Principle, Essence, Substance] cannot be placed between the two complementaries or in the middle of the line that joins them: this can only be done with the third term of a ternary of the second type [Essence, Substance, Manifestation]. The reason is that the principle can never be situated at a lower level than the one of the two terms that derive from it; it is necessarily higher than, or superior to, them both.'<sup>69</sup> Thus it is only in the case of the second type of ternary that we can re-arrange it in the form of a vertical line where Essence and Substance are respectively the upper and lower poles of Manifestation.

### The Great Triad



Essence; Father; Heaven; *T'ien*; *Purusba*



Manifestation; Son; Man; *Jen*; *Buddhi*



Substance; Mother; Earth; *Ti*; *Prakriti*

Essence is represented by a circle, both Centre (the first point) and circumference. Substance is represented by a square expressing a plane of Existence delineated by the extent of its four direction, which correspond to the Four Elements (ether not being included corresponding as it does to the Centre). Manifestation is represented by the cross

<sup>68</sup> Guénon, *The Great Triad*, 1994, p.22.

<sup>69</sup> Guénon, *The Great Triad*, 1994, p.22.



expressing the meeting of the “vertical” Essence and the “horizontal” Substance.<sup>70</sup>

The second fundamental ternary is comprised of a hierarchy of constituent elements of the microcosm, *corpus, anima, spiritus; soma, psyché, pneuma; or tamas, rajas, sattva*. This ternary, says Schuon, is based on the ‘qualitative aspects of space measured from the starting point of consciousness which is situated within it: ascending dimension or lightness, descending dimension or heaviness, horizontal dimensions open to both influences.’<sup>71</sup> These are again what Guénon refers to as the “three worlds,” the Hindu *Tribhuvana, Bhu* (Earth), *Bhuvas* (Air) and *Svar* (Heaven).<sup>72</sup> The fundamental difference here is that whereas Essence and Substance (*Tien* and *Ti*, or *Purusba* and *Prakriti*) are ‘outside of manifestation, and indeed are the immediate principles behind manifestation, the “three worlds” signify the totality of manifestation itself, divided in to its three basic categories—the realm of supra-formal manifestation, the realm of subtle manifestation and the realm of gross or corporeal manifestation.’<sup>73</sup> Adrian Snodgrass refers to Earth, Midspace and Heaven;<sup>74</sup> according to a shift in perspective, these are Netherworld, Earth and Heaven; again, these are Dante’s Inferno, Purgatory and Paradiso.

A certain awkwardness arises here, as Guénon observes, inasmuch as we are somewhat obliged to use the terms “heaven” and “earth” to refer both to Essence and Substance and to the supra-formal and gross realms of manifestation. However, as Guénon remarks,

to justify this dual application or connotation of the same terms we need only point out that the supra-formal realm of manifestation is clearly the realm in which celestial influences are predominant, while terrestrial influences will obviously predominate in the gross realm. ... We can also say—and this amounts to saying the same thing in a different way—that the supra-formal realm is closer to essence while the gross realm is closer to substance, although of course this in no way entitles us to identify them with universal Essence and universal Substance themselves.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>70</sup> This diagrammatical representation follows Guénon, *The Great Triad*, 1994, p.22.

<sup>71</sup> Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, 1981, p.67.

<sup>72</sup> See Guénon, *The Great Triad*, 1994, Ch.10.

<sup>73</sup> Guénon, *The Great Triad*, 1994, p.70.

<sup>74</sup> See Snodgrass, ‘The Symbolism of the Levels’ in *The Symbolism of the Stupa*, New York: South East Asia Program, 1985, (pp.233-250). Snodgrass: ‘Midspace extends from the surface of the Earth to the first of the heavens ... Midspace is vertically coextensive with the Cosmic Mountain’ (p.234).

<sup>75</sup> Guénon, *The Great Triad*, 1994, pp.70-71.

Between the first type of ternary we have considered and the ternary figured by the “three worlds” there is a fundamental difference, being specifically evident in their order of production. Thus in the ternary Principle-Essence-Substance, the terms Essence and Substance result from the diremption of the biune Principle. In the Great Triad, *Jen* (Man) or Manifestation is the product of the fundamental masculine and feminine principles. In contrast, each term of the *Tribbuvana*, considered in descending order, has its immediate principle in the term that precedes it.<sup>76</sup>

Allowing for these fundamental differences, one can nevertheless say that there is commonality between the Great Triad and the “three worlds.” In the first instance, and as we have just noted, “heaven” and “earth” of the “three worlds” are, so to speak, “influenced” by Heaven and Earth of the Great Triad. As for what the Vedantists call *antariksba* or the “intermediary world” (*Bhuvas*, Air, Midspace), this, as Guénon remarks, is ‘a combination of the two different classes of mutually complementary influences, balanced and intermingled to such an extent that it is impossible—at least when one is speaking of this intermediary world as a whole—to say which set of influences is stronger than the other.’ Nevertheless, as Guénon stresses, ‘On no account must this middle term of the *Tribbuvana* be confused with the middle term of the Great Triad, Man.’<sup>77</sup> This is not to say that these terms have nothing in common, for in fact they share a correlation of “function”—precisely that of “intermediary.”<sup>78</sup>

One might describe the difference under consideration as that between verticality and horizontality. This is to say that the Great Triad must be seen as vertical inasmuch as Essence, first and foremost, must be considered as “upper” by virtue of its “excellence” and Substance as “lower” by virtue of its “density.” In contrast the “three worlds” are the elements of a horizontal plain of Existence. Nevertheless from the point of view of man, that is, viewed from within Manifestation itself, the “three worlds” appear vertical, and here it is a matter of effective and adequate symbolism. From another point of view, when considered metaphysically the “three worlds” contract, so

<sup>76</sup> Guénon, *The Great Triad*, 1994, p.72.

<sup>77</sup> Guénon, *The Great Triad*, 1994, p.71.

<sup>78</sup> See Guénon, *The Great Triad*, 1994, p.73.

to speak, from the exoteric to the esoteric, from Earth to Midspace to Heaven. This contraction evokes the symbolism of the circle: the circumference is the realm of gross manifestation; the radii are the subtle realm; the centre is the supra-formal realm. The combination of horizontal contraction and the symbolic verticality of the “three worlds” is epitomized by the symbolism of the mountain: as one moves upwards from the base to the apex, one simultaneously moves inwards from the circumference to the centre. At the centre-apex one stands at the heart (*barzakh*) of the Man of the Great Triad, none other than Universal Man. From here one is brought into the presence of the Divine (cf. Moses on Mt. Sinai, Ex.24:12-18), through which and in which one may “taste” without “touching” the Unmanifest Trinity.



On the one hand, Absolute Reality is ineffable and beyond expression through any means, including number. Thus Hermes Trismegistus says that, ‘It is infinite, incomprehensible, immeasurable: it exceeds our powers, and is beyond our scrutiny.’<sup>79</sup> The use of geometric and numeric symbols and ciphers in certain traditions are, at best, approximations of the inexpressible Truth. On the other hand, Hermes Trismegistus also says, ‘And do you say ‘God is invisible’? Speak not so. Who is more manifest than God? For this very purpose has he made all things, that through all things you may see him. This is God’s goodness, that he manifests himself through all things.’<sup>80</sup> In the words of the *hadīth qudsī*: “I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be known, so I created the creation in order that I might be known.” As Shaikh Ahmad al-‘Alawī remarks, ‘It is not a question of knowing God when the veil be lifted but of knowing Him in the veil itself.’<sup>81</sup> Again, Schuon: “God unfolds his possibilities in differentiated mode and He creates man in order to have a witness to this unfolding; in other words, He

<sup>79</sup> Hermes Trismegistus, *Asclepius* 3.31.

<sup>80</sup> Hermes Trismegistus, *Libellus* 11.2.22a.

<sup>81</sup> *Hikmatu-bu*, 25, cited in Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1971, p.211. Lings adds by way of a note: ‘Muhyi ‘d-Din Ibn ‘Arabi quotes the Qoran *Naught is like unto Him, and He is the Hearer, the Seer*, to show how in one verse (XLII, 11) it affirms both his Incomparability and the analogy between Him and His creatures.’

projects Himself into relativity in order to perceive Himself in relative mode.”<sup>82</sup>

To say relativity is to say number. Thus, number is not a mere adequate representation of the matrix of existence; it is the very stuff of existence. Yet for there to be distinction, and thus relativity, there must be the paradox of absoluteness. As Ibn al-‘Arabī says, ‘Were it not that the Reality permeates all beings as form [in His qualitative form], and were it not for the intelligible realities, no [essential] determination would be made in individual beings. Thus, the dependence of the Cosmos on Reality for existence is an essential factor.’<sup>83</sup> Schuon: ‘if the relative did not comprise something of the absolute, relativities could not be distinguished qualitatively from one another.’<sup>84</sup> At the same time the distinguishing qualifications or limitations that allow relativities to be cannot be themselves absolute: ‘The Infinite is that which is absolutely without limits, but the finite cannot be that which is “absolutely limited”, for there is no absolute limitation. The world is not an inverted God: God is without a second.’<sup>85</sup> Manifestation is dispersion, which is both discontinuous (hence the uniqueness of each number) and continuous (hence the relationship of all numbers to the archetypal source: *e pluribus unum*).

The internal unfolding of Immanence may be adequately described by a series of symbolic numerical hypostases. To take but one schema as example: the number “one” expresses the principal point, both centre and origin; the number “two” expresses duality, subject-object; and the number “three” expresses the first sense of relationship, knower-knowing-known. The use of number in any symbolic system, properly called, is in no way intended to indicate a quantitative measure of “levels” or “steps” in a process of emanation or construction. The first hypostasis is not simply figured by the number one because it is first; rather it is first as an aspect of its integral unity, which is a quality of the number one.

One of the most explicit examples of a symbolism expressing Immanence in terms of numerical hypostases is the ten-fold *Sefirot* of

<sup>82</sup> Schuon, *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, London: World of Islam Festive Trust, 1976, p.185.

<sup>83</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Fusus*, (1980, p.57).

<sup>84</sup> Schuon, *Language of the Self*, Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1999, p.17.

<sup>85</sup> Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.168.

Kabbalah.<sup>86</sup> The *sefirot* are commonly expressed as follows:

1	<i>Keter Elyon</i>	Supernal Crown
2	<i>Hokhmah</i>	Wisdom
3	<i>Binah</i>	Understanding or Intelligence
4	<i>Hesed</i>	Love or Mercy
5	<i>Gevurah</i> or <i>Din</i>	Power or Judgment respectively
6	<i>Tiferet</i>	Beauty
7	<i>Nezab</i>	Eternity or Victory
8	<i>Hod</i>	Majesty or Glory
9	<i>Yesod</i>	Foundation
10	<i>Malkhut</i>	Kingdom

Schaya calls the *sefirot* the metaphysical “numbers” or “numerations” of the divine aspects, which are ‘the principal keys to the mysteries of the Torah.’<sup>87</sup> Isaiah Tishby remarks that the *sefirot* are ‘seen as spiritual forces, as attributes of the soul, or as means of activity within the Godhead, that is to say, as revelations of the hidden God, both to Himself and to that which is other than He.’<sup>88</sup> ‘The *Sefirot* in their totality’ says Schaya, ‘constitute the doctrinal basis of Jewish esotericism; they are to the Kabbalah, the mystical “tradition” of Judaism, what the Ten Commandments are to the Torah, as the exoteric law.’<sup>89</sup> This is doubly relevant when it is recognized that the Commandments (the “Word made stone”) are synonymous with the Divine Immanence. Indeed Tishby reaches the ‘crucial and unambiguous conclusion that the Torah is identical with God’<sup>90</sup>. He cites Rabbi Menahem Recanati:

The commandments form a single entity, and they depend upon the celestial Chariot, each one fulfilling its own particular function. Every commandment depends upon one specific part of the Chariot. This being so, The Holy One, blessed be He, is not one particular area divorced from the Torah, and the Torah is not outside Him, nor is He something outside the Torah. It is for this reason that the kabbalists say

---

<sup>86</sup> The best exposition of the *Sefirot* that I have come across is Isaiah Tishby’s introduction to the *sefirot* in his *The Wisdom of the Zohar* 3 Vols., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991. Leo Schaya’s *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, offers an excellent account of the *sefirot* from the position of the *sophia perennis*, which accords with and complements Tishby’s exposition. [Note: In general, where the capitalization is used, i.e. *Sefirot*, specific reference is made to the “system” *in toto*; *sefirot* is the plural and *sefirah* the singular.]

<sup>87</sup> Schaya, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, 1971, p.21.

<sup>88</sup> Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar Vol.1*, 1989, p.271.

<sup>89</sup> Schaya, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, 1971, p.21.

<sup>90</sup> Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar Vol.1*, 1989, p.284.

that the Holy One, blessed be His name, is the Torah.<sup>91</sup>

Schaya:

The ten *Sefirot* represent the spiritual archetypes not only of the Decalogue, but also those of all the revelations of the Torah. They are the principal determinations or eternal causes of all things. This decad is divided into nine emanations or intellections by which the supreme *Sefirab*, the “cause of causes,” makes itself known to itself and to its universal manifestation.<sup>92</sup>

As “spiritual archetypes” the *sefirot* are analogous, *mutatis mundis*, to the Platonic Forms and, again, the Divine Names of Islamic tradition.<sup>93</sup> Concerning the *sefirot* as Names, Jewish tradition says: ‘Each *sefirab* has a specific Name, by which the angels are also named, but Thou (the unknowable Essence) has no specific name, for Thou art the One which fills all names and gives them their true meaning.’<sup>94</sup>

The supreme Form, which is the same with the Intellect as conceived of by Plotinus and Meister Eckhart, is Unity. This unity is refracted, so to speak, though the plurality of forms, like a ray of light shone through a diamond. The symbolism of light, along with that of sound or speech, is the most common symbolism used to express the operation of the Realm of Forms.<sup>95</sup> ‘The Divine Light rays out immediately upon the Intelligences, and is reflected by these Intelligences upon other things’ (Dante, *Il Convito*, 3.14.2). As Tishby remarks, ‘The basic and most commonly used symbol in the *Zohar* is, as its name implies, that of light and splendour.’<sup>96</sup>

The *sefirot* number ten. This numbering is neither absolute nor is it arbitrary. In the first place, the quantity of hypostases does not delineate in any absolute way the “structure” of the Absolute; God is not “constructed” of any number of distinct attributes. As Schaya says, ‘the fact that God makes himself known under multiple aspects, does not mean that he is in reality any particular number or multitude; “he

<sup>91</sup> Rabbi Menahem Recanati, *Sefer Ta’amei ha-Mizvot* (Basle 1581), 3a, cited in Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar Vol.1*, 1989, p.284.

<sup>92</sup> Schaya, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, 1971, p.21.

<sup>93</sup> On the Islamic doctrine of archetypes see Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, 1976, Ch.9.

<sup>94</sup> *Tikkune Zohar*, cited in Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.666.

<sup>95</sup> Herein lies the principal symbolism of the division of the primordial language in to the “seventy two languages.”

<sup>96</sup> Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar Vol.1*, 1989, p.290. “Zohar” means “splendour”.

is One and there is no other”.<sup>97</sup> In the second place, the quantity of hypostases is precise according to the symbolic adequacy of its number. There are various accounts of Reality that use numerical hypostases and each are in their own way correct and precise. Ibn al-'Arabi notes that Islamic theology recognizes eighteen thousand universes; this derives from (1) the Intellect, (2) the Soul, (3) the Throne, (4) the Pedestal, then seven Heavens, four Elements and three Births; the total makes eighteen, and in detailed enumeration they total eighteen thousand. 'However,' adds Ibn al-'Arabi, 'in reality the truth is that the Universes cannot be numbered.'<sup>98</sup> On the various traditions of “numbering” the structure of Immanence, Schuon says:

When one sets out to give an account of metacosmic Reality by means of numerical hypostases, one might without being in the least arbitrary stop at the number three, which constitutes a limit that is all the more plausible in that to some extent it marks a falling back on Unity; it may be said to express unity in the language of plurality and seems to set up a barrier to the further unfolding of the latter. But with no less reason one can proceed further, as indeed various traditional perspectives do.<sup>99</sup>

Certainly the ternary is the most widely used means of expressing, both theologically and mythologically, the Divine Immanence. The *sefirot* number ten; in esoteric Islam there are eighteen thousand universes and, again, “Ninety-Nine Divine Names;”<sup>100</sup> in the esoteric traditions of the Hebrews, where this type of symbolism is common, we find the “seventy-two Names of God” and the “seventy-two lettered Name of God,”<sup>101</sup> or, it is said that Reality is built out of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet; in the Taoist tradition, Universal Manifestation is expressed by the “ten thousand beings.” None of these numerical qualifications denies the others; instead each describes a characteristic of the Divine

---

<sup>97</sup> Schaya, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, 1971, p.21. As examples of this dictum in the Judaic tradition Schaya cites *Isaiah* Chs. 45 & 46.

<sup>98</sup> Ibn al-'Arabi, *Lubbu-l-Lubb (Kernel of the Kernel)*, Gloucester: Beshara Publications, 1981, p.14.

<sup>99</sup> Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, 1981, p.70.

<sup>100</sup> See Al-Ghazali, *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*.

<sup>101</sup> Alternatively given as “seventy” Names.

Reality.<sup>102</sup> In this sense, Tishby says that ‘the *sefirot* become specified, limited areas within the Godhead, not, of course, limited in the sense of tangible objects, but as displaying a spiritual pattern of categories, both of content and of character.’<sup>103</sup>

The symbolism of the numbering from one to ten provides an adequate account of Divine Immanence. Here we have a complete realization or “unfolding” of the potentiality inherent in the principal number one, via the numbers two through nine and the subsequent dissolution of this realized “one-in-many” back into the potentiality from which it has come and from which, in reality, it has never departed. This dissolution is well figured by the Arabic depiction of the number ten, which suggests the return of the one to the metaphysical zero or principal potentiality.



To begin to appreciate number symbolism one must be aware of two basic, yet seemingly contradictory, guidelines: on the one hand, symbolism is a precise science which demands contextual understanding; on the other hand, symbols are homogenous and hermeneutically dynamic. As Tishby remarks: ‘the *sefirot*, which are finite and measurable, are not, however, static objects, like fixed, solid rungs on a ladder of the progressive revelation of the divine attributes. They are on the contrary, dynamic forces, ascending and descending, and extending themselves within the area of the Godhead.’<sup>104</sup> At the same time *Keter* is not *Hokhmah*, which is not *Binah*.

If one must attempt to express the inexpressible then the use of number has a double virtue. Not only is it adequate in its symbolism,

<sup>102</sup> For example, one of the principal symbolisms of the number seventy-two is that of the ontological degrees between the principle and its realization, between the 36 divisions of the Zodiac—representing cosmic existence—envisioned with respect to the perfect number, 10, that is 360, and the 36 divisions envisioned with respect to the spatio-temporal number, 12, that is 432. The difference or number of degrees between 360 (the principle) and 423 (cosmic realization) is 72.

<sup>103</sup> Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar Vol.1*, 1989, p.271. This idea of “areas within the Godhead” raises the theological spectre of the partibility of God. Again, it is stressed that in reality, God the absolute One, has no “parts,” but an infinity of possibilities. Ibn al-‘Arabi: ‘As regards the divine Unity, there is no place in it for one as being one of many, nor does it admit of any differentiation or distinction. His Unity integrates all in potentiality’ (*Fusūs al-bikam (The Bezels of Wisdom)*, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1980, p.106).

<sup>104</sup> Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar Vol.1*, 1989, p.272.



in the sense that it may produce in a qualified and receptive person an *adaequatio rei et intellectus*, but, moreover, it is existentially correct, in that the “sacred web” of relativity is woven with the warp and woof of number. And between any two points that produce a unit of number stretches the infinite void.