

# Editorial: Tradition and Religious Pluralism

*By M. Ali Lakhani*

Religions are like lamps of colored glass...  
...if it is true that without a given colored lamp one would see nothing,  
it is quite as true that visibility cannot be identified with any one color.

*Frithjof Schuon*

[We take our] color from God;  
and who is better than God at coloring?  
And we worship Him.

*(Qur'an, Al-Baqarab, 2:138)*

**T**he central paradox of existential reality—that what exists is both illusion and reality—derives from the principle that Reality is Absolute. To affirm this principle is to recognize the truth that “God alone *is*” and thereby to perceive the contingent and privative aspects of reality in relation to this transcendent principle. To affirm the Absolute is to situate formal particularity within the context of essential universality, and to admit of the symbolic nature of existence. It is to acknowledge the essential harmony underlying diversity, and to submit to the moral imperatives of the transcendent virtue that this acknowledgment entails.

The hierarchical structure of reality perforce necessitates relativity—in its privative aspects—that is to say, it contains diverse “points of view” of the universal and transcendent Centre which is the principle of Absolute Reality, that is both immanent in and transcends this relativity. It is in respect of this relativity however that a tension exists, first

as between the vertical and the horizontal dimensions, and second as between the diverse aspects that exist on the purely horizontal plane. In the first case, the tension is formalistic, between inwardness and outwardness, and manifests in the tendency to absolutize reality on the wrong plane by reducing a contingent level or aspect of reality to the Absolute which transcends it (to mistake the reflection for the moon, as it were). And in the second, the tension is exclusivist, between the competing diverse revelations of reality, and manifests in the tendency to privilege one vantage over another, without subordinating the perspective of this vantage to transcendence (to believe that a summit can be approached exclusively by a path seen from one's own vantage, as it were). Both of these tensions—formalism and exclusivism—underlie religious expression.

Each particular religion is a providential revelation of God to Man. It is a reaching-out by the transcendent mystery 'above us' to the immanent intimacy 'within us', and thereby is a summons to reawaken the spiritual potential that lies like a seed dormant within the Heart of Man. Religion as such is both an expression of Truth—that is, of the Unity of Being—and an elaboration of the Way to Truth—that is, of the realization of Union. In these respects, all religions are universal: their universality derives from the principal truth of Absolute Reality, and the goal of salvation. Though each revelation is unique, the archetypes informing them, and their ultimate Source, are universal. It is for this reason that, according to traditional metaphysics, "particularity is perfectly compatible with universality" (Martin Lings).

Though religion as such is universal, each particular religion is unique: it is a particular expression of the Truth and the Way. Each particular religion is an "entrance into the world from above", as it were, and is therefore subject to the laws of *maya* or existential distortion. Truth distorts through the medium of its expression, and it is important here to bear in mind that the medium of any revelation is not only the medium of its transmission—or the outer content of the revealed signs—but also the medium of its reception—or the inner self by which we perceive them. That is to say, subject and object, container and content, are inter-defining terms—as modern science is beginning to understand. It is because reality is porous that one cannot create silos between physics and metaphysics, science and religion, or the world and the self. The

medium of transmission of any revelation, and the human capacity to apprehend what is being revealed, are interconnected.

Regardless of whether one considers the potential for distortion within revelation from the perspective of its content, or of the filter of its reception, the reality of such potential is evident. In the case of revealed religions, the tendency to perceive universal Truth through the prismatic lamp of a particular theology is, using Schuon's analogy of the colored lamps, inherent within the very medium of its transmission. Similarly, the potential for distortion also underlies our human limitations to apprehend transcendent Reality, as expressed in the famous utterance of Junayd of Baghdad (d. 910), "The water takes on the color of the glass" (this saying is also, from a different perspective, a reference to the receptivity of Truth according to the different spiritual typologies). The answers we seek are shaped by the questions we ask: we perceive the reality we are predisposed to see.

Bearing in mind the tendency for existential distortion, we can now examine how this relates to religious particularism. We have earlier cited two tensions in religious expression: formalism and exclusivism. Formalism is the tendency to emphasize form over content, the letter over the spirit. Each religion partakes of Truth and evidences it inasmuch as it resonates within our inner core—the Heart of our being. However, the Light of Truth can take on the hues of the medium by which it is expressed and received. To return to Schuon's analogy, the value of the lamp is the visibility of its light, albeit each lamp refracts it in a different color. It is an error when the metaphysical priority of the Divine Light of transcendence is subordinated to the particularities of its theological coloring. Thus, Schuon has commented as follows regarding the relationship of theology and metaphysics:

In theology, aspects and points of view—objective and subjective situations—are frozen for the spiritual benefit of such and such a mental predisposition; only in pure metaphysics does the Real reveal diverse aspects—in themselves divergent—and intelligence shifts its position according to these divergences. Metaphysics alone knows how to reconcile the "vertical" dimension of causality with the "horizontal" dimension, or the absoluteness of the Divine Principle with Its aspects of relativity.

It would be a mistake to regard this statement as denying the validity of theological orthodoxy. The important point is to recognize that orthodoxy must be rooted in transcendence, in the principial Reality that

is the foundation of the Truth and the Way. In other words, it is the Spirit that “in-forms” existential reality because, in Meister Eckhart’s words, “Form is a revelation of Essence.” The outer forms must be assessed in relation to the truth of their inner content. In the domain of religions, the sacramental forms of a particular religion are legitimate because they derive their orthodox value from their providential revelation and from their metaphysical transparency, and not from their merely formal container. Spiritual forms are sacred because they radiate Truth. So too, the outer aspects of religious expression are legitimized by their inner connection to Absolute Reality. This understanding is central to Tradition, hence Schuon’s comment:

Rigorously speaking, all religious exoterism is an intrinsic heresy, evidently so with respect to other religions, but also, and above all with respect to the *sophia perennis*; this perennial wisdom, precisely constitutes esoterism when it is combined with a religious symbolism.

Here it is necessary to clarify that Tradition or *sophia perennis* is not a substitute for any revealed religion. The term *religio perennis*, which has sometimes been used as a synonym for Tradition, may have contributed to this misconception. Tradition is merely the metaphysical substratum of religious orthodoxy, without itself being a Way or a meta-religion. If it is to be understood in any sense as a religion, then it is best understood as the *religio cordis*—or the heart of religion. In response to the misperception that Tradition is a kind of “universal religion”, Seyyed Hossein Nasr has written,

The *philosophia perennis*, or even what Schuon called the *religio perennis*, is not a religion alongside other religions except that it is of an esoteric character. Rather, it is an eternal and universal truth which lies at the heart and is identified with the inner dimensions of the orthodox and traditional religions which have governed the life of humanity over the ages. There is no...access to...“universal religion” identified with the perennial philosophy save through attachment to and following of one of the orthodox traditions.

There is a further clarification necessary: Tradition, while emphasizing the metaphysical priority of content over form, does not dispense with the necessity of religious forms. The fact that there can be an error in the direction of formal dogmatism does not justify an error in the direction of the anarchy of forms—whether through essentialism or through

syncretism. On the contrary, barring the exception of divine grace (“the Spirit bloweth where it listeth”), sacramental forms are the indispensable means of the spiritual progress upon the Way. Hence the Qur’anic admonition to enter houses by their proper doors (*Al-Baqarab*, 2:189). In Islamic terms, the Way is characterized first by the Wide Path of *Sbaria* or ascription to the outer forms, and then by the Narrow Path of *Tariqa* or the progressive sacramental interiorization of the outer forms. It is only by opening ourselves up to the Sacred through the saving grace of its spiritual forms, and through putting on the Divine Qualities they resonate, that we can, by grace, be alchemically transformed and attain the Truth (in Islamic terminology, *Haqiqa*).

One final point regarding the delicate relationship between the inner and the outer, between the essence and the form: it is vital to understand that Truth *is* Presence. Truth is not an abstraction, but the very matrix of Reality in which we ourselves participate. The dilemma of religious expression is that the means of revelation become like the finger pointing at the moon, or like sound proclaiming silence. They become distractions from the content they are intended to convey. This is why one requires faith, an orientation to the inward reality of religious forms, in order to allow their sacramental presence to transform us to the reality of the deeper Being that they and we embody—that is the Divine Light or the “Face of God”, to whose Presence the forms summon us.

Turning now to the issue of exclusivism, the exclusivist tendency within religions must be distinguished from its necessary coloring. All divine revelations are unique in how and when they were providentially revealed, the forms of their sacramental expression, and their spiritual economy. On any formal level, the revelations are incommensurable. Of necessity, they will therefore be exclusive. To adapt Tolstoy, one may say that “universal religions are all alike; every exclusive religion excludes the other in its own way.” However, this is not to legitimize their exclusivism: as Martin Lings has written, “two spiritual perspectives can be, for doctrinal and methodical reasons, mutually exclusive in some of their aspects while converging on the same end.” One may embrace a particular religion as one’s own, and commit to its path, without condemning other revealed religions. Tradition and orthodoxy are not mutually exclusive. There are many paths—each legitimate—to the same summit.

The unique and the universal are not mutually contradictory. It is only by embracing Tradition that religious particularism can be reconciled with the universal vision that is inherent within the principle of reality as Absolute. It is only from the vantage of the summit that all the paths can be seen. With regard to these paths, it is useful to distinguish three different stances toward religious diversity: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Exclusivism is a fundamentalist tendency which rejects the legitimacy of any other form of religious expression than its own. Inclusivism is a syncretistic tendency that embraces all forms, with the danger of diluting their content. Pluralism is a relativistic tendency, with the danger of losing any objective basis for Truth. It is only through Tradition that the three stances are reconciled and their errors corrected. Tradition accepts that each religion is a unique—and therefore exclusive—expression of Reality, which has its own orthodox doctrines and sacraments which are particular expressions of the Truth and the Way. It sees each religion as radially connected to the same Centre—and therefore inclusive. And it accepts the transcendent unity of religions based on objective metaphysical criteria—and is therefore pluralistic.

It is the pluralistic dimension of Tradition—the principle that respects the theological orthodoxy of all faith traditions—which is so vitally important for us to grasp in our times, where faith itself is misunderstood and religion is under siege, not only from without but from within. It is this universal principle of which the great Persian mystic, Mansur al-Hallaj (d. 922), has written:

I have meditated on the different religions, endeavoring to understand them, and I have found that they stem from a single principle with numerous ramifications. Do not therefore ask a man to adopt a particular religion (rather than another), for this would separate him from the fundamental principle; it is this principle itself which must come to seek him; in it are all the heights and all the meanings elucidated; then he will understand them.