

Editorial: Remarks on Jean Borella's « The Problematic of the Unity of Religions »

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The Christian Philosopher Jean Borella was considered for a long time as a mainstream traditionalist author, sharing with both R. Guénon and F. Schuon, their criticism of the modern world but also their Gnostic perspective. In the more recent years however, he has progressively distanced himself from the core-teaching of the Perennialist School, developing a more confessional Christo-centric argumentation, which leads him, in *Guenonian Esoterism and Christian Mysteries*¹ to criticize not only Guénon's problematic thesis on the Christian sacraments but also Schuon's appeal to a quintessential and supra-confessional esoterism. To the thesis of “the transcendent unity of religion,” he has opposed the idea of “an apophatic unity of the revelations”,² rejecting as purely illusory the idea that one could claim any knowledge of the Center from which religious forms crystallizes and of the “reasons,” hidden into the *Logos* itself, for religious pluralism.

In his afterword to Bruno Bérard's *Introduction à une métaphysique des mystères chrétiens*, republished in *Sacred Web 17*, Jean Borella continues his “deconstruction” of the thesis of the unity of religion, moving to even more confessional conclusions on the absolute superiority of Christianity. He argues that the Guénonian Primordial Tradition and the Schuonian “transcendent unity of religions” are unacceptable because of their supposedly “extravagant consequences”: in the case of Guénon, the theory of the “King of the World;” in the case of Schuon, the idea of a *Religio Perennis*, he defines very ambiguously and inaccurately as “a universal and perennial meta-religion.”

About Borella's understanding of this concept, one cannot avoid to make a brief and ironical comment. Borella, himself a great Platonist, seems to commit exactly the

¹ Jean Borella, *Guenonian Esoterism and Christian Mysteries*, Sophia Perennis and Universalis (October, 31st 2004)

² « Intelligence spirituelle et Surnaturel » in Eric Vatré, *La Droite du Père, Enquête sur la Tradition catholique aujourd'hui*, Trédaniel, 1994.

same error as Aristotle about the platonic *eidōs*. The author of the *Metaphysics* wrongly regarded them as some kind of intelligible “things,” whereas in the *Parmenides*, Socrates has dismissed *in advance* such a naïve and reifying interpretation of his doctrine of forms. In a way, Borella’s criticism of the *Religio Perennis* betrays a similar but fundamental misunderstanding: for Schuon never claimed that this *Religio* could become a new revealed religion with its own rites.

About Schuon himself and in the same breath, Jean Borella makes the following appraisal: “The intensely spiritual climate of Schuon’s doctrine is attributable less, it seems to me, to the very nature of the *Religio Perennis*, such as he has framed this notion –and he is the first to have done so- than to the already existing religions (Christianity, Islam and the Native American tradition as far as his own subjectivity is concerned) from which he borrows this climate, tonality, or atmosphere, and which he transposes esthetically onto the level of a (re)constituted *Sophia Perennis*, and therefore onto the level of an abstraction.”

It is indeed profoundly inaccurate to describe the *jñanic* synthesis made by Schuon as a laborious and syncretistic *reconstitution* of the *Sophia Perennis*. This perennial wisdom cannot be lost and then reconstituted, because contrary to the more mythical Primordial Tradition of Guénon, its content is inscribed in the very substance of the naturally supernatural Intellect. It is simply the “language of the Self.” Schuon’s teaching had indeed a self-professed esthetical component, which manifested on the plane of forms a given aspect of the *hikma maryamiyya* itself. But the transposition or better the integration of a plurality of elements from “already existing traditions” is better described as obeying to intellectual and methodological necessities, reflecting a certain range of possibilities within a purely esoteric context. Intellectual because Schuon was, as we have somewhere else argued, a sage rather than a “religious man” and it is in the light of Gnosis, of a metaphysical and supra-theological perspective that this properly alchemical transmutation is operated. Methodological also, because these contacts with several religious worlds presuppose to be correctly appreciated a preliminary exposition of Schuon’s spiritual method, which is properly speaking a *jñana marga* based not on some

random combinations but on the fundamental symbols of Islam and certain heavenly gifts, namely the “primordial themes of meditations.”³

Having supposedly refuted both Guénon and Schuon, Jean Borella then goes to offer his own “model,” his Christian response to the problematic of the unity of religions. As we are supposedly unable to know the divine reasons for religious pluralism and as the divine Mercy excludes *a priori* that millions of non-Christian have been deluded on the object of their faith for centuries, we need to admit a plurality of authentic revelations, but necessarily of unequal value. Criticizing the concept of “religious form” as too ambiguous and relativistic, Jean Borella observes that the concept of “religion” has supposedly emerged only with Christianity. The argumentation here has a very striking nominalist tone for it seems to naively confuse the (Latin) word *religio* and the reality it designates. Christianity, with the specificity of his Trinitarian Mysteries, would then be the religion revealing other religions to themselves. Its apparition would be comparable to the sunrise after a centuries-old night of self-ignorance, confusion and even cosmolatry, for Jean Borella seems sometimes inclined to admit the absurd neo-Thomist distinction between natural and supernatural mysticisms.⁴

Returning to the rather brilliant analysis of the analogy he has offered in his authoritative *Penser l’analogie*,⁵ Jean Borella applies it to the concept of religion itself. Being opposed to both religious exclusiveness - which does not recognize any communality between Christianity and the other religions and treats the concept of religion in a purely equivocal manner - and a supposedly too simplistic and univocal theory of the *Religio Perennis*, Borella explains that “religion” needs to be defined in an *analogical* manner. More precisely, what is at stake would be an analogy “by reference to a first reality,” this first reality being of the same order, ontologically speaking, as secondary realities to which the concept is attributed. To the transcendent *Religio Perennis*, he has defined problematically as a form beyond form, a super-form (but still a form) above the others, he opposes Christianity as a kind of *primus inter pares*, not as the

³ About the spiritual method of Frithjof Schuon and the themes of meditation: the third chapter of Jean Baptist-Aymard and Patrick Laude, *Frithjof Schuon, life and teachings*, SUNY, 2004 and the last two chapters of Frithjof Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom*, World Wisdom, 1995.

⁴ For instance, he argues that without a trinitarian doctrine of the divine *hypostatis*, « I don’t think one can escape the illusory accessibility offered by eastern representations *ultimately cosmological in nature*. »

⁵ Jean Borella, *Penser l’analogie*, Ad Solem (Avril 10th 2000).

essence of all religion (the *Religio Essentialis*) as but the highest religion.

“As a consequence there is, in the (relative) namelessness of pre-Christian religions at once a memory of the indistinctness of the divine Principle from which they spring, but also a certain “illusion” about their true nature, a basic incompleteness which prevents them from seeing their own limits, which causes them to live in a kind of infinitude and keeps them from perceiving clearly what is beyond them. (...) Christianity is just by its advent, the revealer of all religions insofar as religions. In its light, or rather the light of Christ, the religious nature of the other forms have effectively appeared, whether they know it or not.”

What is profoundly unsatisfactory with this argumentation is that it would also be perfectly possible to admit, *given that religious pluralism is supposedly better understood on an analogical ground*, that the Hindu *Dharma*, because of its primordality and its subtle equilibrium between *karma*, *bhakti* and *jnana*, represents this “first reality,” or is at least a stronger “candidate” than a late Semitic religion like Christianity. This “first” could also plausibly be *Advaita Vedanta*, which is not a religion but the esoteric exegesis of the *Veda*, that is to say of an existing and concrete historical revelation, but also in the Traditionalist view the paradigm of all *gnosis*. We are not pretending that Schuon or Guénon would have directly defended this thesis themselves⁶ but at least, we cannot help thinking that it would not be very difficult to conclude in a very different manner than Jean Borella does, by simply choosing a different term than the one he has arbitrarily picked up.

About *Advaita*, it is particularly significant that criticizing the Schuonian “definition” of the *Religio Perennis* (discrimination between the Real and the unreal, concentration on the Real) as too abstract and schematic - but Schuon would not have denied this- Jean Borella fails to realize that this definition, is a clear and unambiguous reference in Schuon’s mind to this tradition and to the discrimination (*viveka*) between *Atma* and *Maya*. There is absolutely nothing artificial or arbitrary here, at least for someone who remembers that for Schuon:

“The [*advaita*] *Vedanta* appears among explicit doctrines as one of the most direct

⁶ On the necessity of a certain type of optical illusion in every confessional climate, one could refer to Schuon’s « The Idea of the Best in Religions », *Christianity/ Islam, Essays on Esoteric Ecumenicism*. World Wisdom, 1981.

possible formulations of that which makes the very essence of our spiritual reality.”

In that respect, it is properly astonishing that in his whole article, Borella does not make a *single* mention of this paradigmatic function of *Advaita* and that enumerating “the already existing forms from which he [Schuon] borrows his climate,” he does not refer to Hinduism.

Jean Borella concludes his litany of criticism by arguing that Schuon, although he was opposed to the Guenonian thesis on Christianity, was still missing the very essence of a religion, the Catholic philosopher characterized as the only religious form, which would have to renounce its fundamental dogmas - namely Trinity and Incarnation- if we were to admit “the theory of the transcendent unity of religions.” Jean Borella builds his argumentation on a somehow schematic opposition between the Christian concept of Incarnation of the second *person* of the Trinity and the Hindu concept of *avatara*, loosely defined as a “divine descent.” On the basis of a single passage of *the Transcendent Unity of Religions* and ignoring all the later Christological writings of Shaykh Isa, he claims rather abruptly that Schuon never really understood “the hypostatic union of the two divine and human natures” and relied once again on an eastern naturalistic model which “sees in the *avatara* a certain earthly nature (human being or possibly animal, vegetable, or mineral) inhabited by a certain divine nature.”

Jean Borella is certainly a very knowledgeable Catholic theologian but one would have expected from him a much closer discussion of these deficient *avataric* views on the Incarnation and in the first place an argumentation demonstrating a truly exhaustive knowledge or at least a sufficient familiarity with Schuon’s Christology, certainly not limited to a single early text. In this respect, the orthodox author James Cutsinger seems to have had a far more positive appraisal of Schuon’s understanding of the Christian mysteries, when he wrote that “whatever else one might say about his message in general, it is absurd to think that his Christology came from neglect or misinformation »⁷ and concluded a comparative article between the Schuonian Christology and the teaching of the Fathers of the Church on this topic by claiming for Shaykh Isa Nur Ad-Din the most immaculate orthodoxy.

⁷ "The Mystery of the Two Natures," *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies*, 4:2 (1998).