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ARTICLE

Monotheism and its Religious Alternatives: Some Neo-Perennialist Perspectives on the Divine Reality

Christopher C. Knight

Abstract

Vladimir Lossky's focus on the apophatic and contemplative nature of theology may be extended to argue for a kind of "neo-perennialist" understanding of the faith traditions of the world. This neo-perennialism seeks to avoid the flaws of classic perennialism but to retain its belief that there is "one mountain but many paths to the summit" in relation to the Divine Reality and to maintain its distinction between esoteric and exoteric aspects of any authentic faith tradition, with the latter acting as "signposts" on the particular spiritual paths associated with such traditions. The present paper is intended as an extension to the arguments of the author's book, *Exploring Religious Pluralism* (Cambridge University Press, 2024), focusing on its implications for understanding the relationship between monotheistic faith traditions and certain other traditions that are either non-theistic or polytheistic. Central to this study is the belief that what Brian Davies has called "theistic personalism" and David Bentley Hart has labelled "monopolytheism" has distorted much modern monotheistic thinking, and that what is required is a return to traditional theistic metaphysics that stresses that God is to be seen as the source of being.

Keywords

apophaticism, David Bentley Hart, interfaith dialogue, Vladimir Lossky, monotheism, monopolytheism, neo-perennialism, non-theistic faith traditions, polytheism, theistic personalism

Introduction

Arguments for religious pluralism—the belief that several different faith traditions are equally valid—have usually been philosophical in nature, as in the well-known work of John Hick.[1] Such arguments suggest that we should reject both exclusivism, which denies the value of any faith tradition but one's own, and inclusivism—at least in its usual form—which sees at least some other traditions as being partially valid even though proclaiming only incomplete or distorted versions of one's own tradition's "truths."[2] The present paper seeks to provide another kind of argument for pluralism. Its purpose relates to those many religious believers who already quasi-instinctively believe or suspect that, in relation to moving towards what the monotheist calls God, there is "one mountain but many paths to the summit." My intention is, quite simply, to provide a more plausible theoretical justification for accepting that pluralistic analogy than has previously been available.

I shall do this by expanding aspects of my recent book *Exploring Religious Pluralism* (henceforth *ERP*) in terms of the relationship between monotheistic faith traditions and non-theistic and polytheistic ones.[3] My main argument, while arguably complementing some of the arguments of pluralistic philosophers, will relate to that book's focus on the pluralistic perspectives associated with perennialism, not in its classic form—which I believe to be significantly flawed—but in terms of a kind of neo-perennialism that I believe avoids the flaws of classic perennialism. In this neo-perennialist perspective, "natural" human religiosity—while variable in the experiences and "beliefs" to which it has given rise—may be seen as legitimately pointing towards what some call God and others refer to in ways that are either non-theistic or polytheistic. For this reason, in what follows I shall sometimes

1 John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1989).

2 Regarding inclusivism, I have suggested at least the possibility of being open to the validity of religious pluralism but of adopting what I call *reciprocal inclusivism* as a necessary methodological strategy; see Christopher C. Knight, "Reciprocal Inclusivism: A Methodology for Understanding the Faiths of the World," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 55 (2020): 609–629; also *ERP* (see note 3) 194–204.

3 Christopher C. Knight, *Exploring Religious Pluralism: From Mystical Theology to the Science-Theology Dialogue* (Cambridge University Press, 2024). I shall refer frequently to that book as *ERP* in what follows, though it should be noted that in a short study of this kind I can do no more than indicate where some of the detailed arguments to which I shall refer can be found in it. However, my focus in this study is rather different to that to be found in the earlier book, so that it is companion to it rather than simply a resumé of its arguments.

use, not the monotheistic term God, but another term: the Divine Reality. This latter term can, I shall suggest, incorporate the perspectives not only of the monotheistic faith traditions, but also of certain kinds of polytheistic understanding, and of what some Buddhists—despite refusing to speak about God—call the "Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unconditioned."[4]

As a kind of "test case" for—and illustration of—the strengths of this whole argument, I shall not only focus on some interesting analyses made by others about the relationship between certain monotheistic and non-monotheistic faith traditions, but also on something that is not considered in those analyses or in *ERP*. This is the way in which most people in the western world view theology and the philosophy of religion—whether they regard these disciplines as meaningful or otherwise—as attempts to articulate historical and philosophical truths about a hypothetical "bodiless person" called God and about the interactions between this uncreated entity and created things. I shall argue in this paper that these disciplines are not of the kind that fall straightforwardly into these categories, and that much of what now passes for monotheistic belief is in fact distorted by what Brian Davies has called "theistic personalism" and David Bentley Hart has labelled "monopolytheism."[5] What is needed, I shall argue—and not only by monotheists but also by those adhering to other faith traditions—is a return to traditional theistic metaphysics that stresses, first and foremost, that God is to be seen as the source of being.

Central to this whole approach is the argument, set out in *ERP,* that the Divine Reality is indeed an objective reality but that little that is said about this Reality within the different faith traditions may be regarded as definitive in philosophical or historical terms. Rather, I argue that that what is legitimately offered to us in any authentic faith tradition is not a set of narratives and doctrines that must be seen as articulating historical and philosophical "truth claims." Rather, these narratives and doctrines are to be seen as signposts to guide those on different pathways that authentically offer a spiritual journey towards this Reality. Each such pathway, I argue, is associated with a particular faith tradition and its characteristic signposts are to be understood as essentially contemplative in nature rather than as being a set of "truth claims" in any abstract sense of that term.

4 See William Stoddart, *An Illustrated Outline of Buddhism: The Essentials of Buddhist Spirituality* (World Wisdom, 2013), 3.

5 See Brian Davies, *An Introduction to thew Philosophy of Religion,* 2nd ed (Oxford University Press, 1993) and David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (Yale University Press, 1993) 127–128.

The Contemplative Dimension

To talk about religious narratives and doctrinal statements as signposts that are contemplative in nature risks a possible misunderstanding. This is because the word contemplation is often now understood in the way that the *Cambridge English Dictionary* defines it: "serious and quiet thought for a period of time."[6] The English word has its origin, however, in the Latin word *contemplatio*, which points to its relationship to what in Latin was called a *templum*—a building for worship or a piece of ground set aside and consecrated for divination of auspices. This origin points us towards the way in which the word contemplation is still often used in a religious context: not as "thinking about" something but entering into a state of direct, intuitive apprehension of the nature of that thing.

My focus on contemplation has its origins in the perspectives articulated by one of one of the most influential Eastern Orthodox Christian authors of the twentieth century, Vladimir Lossky. Those who are aware of Lossky's interpretation of early Christian perspectives often focus on his defence of negative theology: the practice, found in some early Christian writers, of focusing on what God is not rather than on what God is. This kind of "negative theology" is certainly part of Lossky's analysis but—as he himself has stressed—his "apophatic" perspective is not to be understood only in terms of the distinction between the negative theology that he analyses and the path of cataphatic or positive theology, which proceeds by affirmations rather than negations. Rather, the kind of apophaticism that Lossky perceives in much early Christian literature—and advocates as still relevant to theological understanding—relates not only to negative theology but also to a broader sense of the way in which the terms used in religious language should not be regarded as circumscribing the realities towards which they point. The radical apophaticism defended by him relates, as he puts it, to "an attitude of mind which refuses to form concepts about God" so that "theology will never be abstract, working through concepts, but contemplative: raising the mind to those realities which pass all understanding."[7]

Lossky sees this attitude especially in the late-fifth- or early-sixth-century Christian writer who adopted the name of a first-century figure, Dionysius the Areopagite. Lossky emphasizes, however, that this attitude can be found

6 *Cambridge English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "contemplation," accessed November 2025, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/contemplation.

7 Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, (James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 1957) 39 and 43.

earlier than these "pseudo-Dionysian" writings, and especially in the work of the fourth-century bishop, Gregory of Nyssa, who recognized that the concepts we form "in accordance with the understanding and the judgement which are natural to us, basing ourselves on an intelligible representation, create idols of God instead of revealing to us God Himself."[8]

This kind of apophatic approach, however, is not peculiar to Christianity but has parallels in many faith traditions. In Judaism, for example, a kind of apophaticism is to be found in the medieval thinking of Maimonides, though arguably it has only become prominent within Jewish thinking in modern times.[9] In a comparable way, in the Hindu world, the Upanishadic sense that Brahman—the highest universal principle, the ultimate Reality—is *neti neti* (neither this nor that) has been expanded in the work of the influential medieval writer, Sankara.[10] The twentieth-century Buddhist scholar, Marco Pallis, has, similarly, stressed that the Buddhist tradition's reluctance to speak about God (or even about the self) should be understood in terms of the "apophatic method which Buddhism favours."[11]

It is, however, in strands of Islamic thinking that we find an attitude that is in some respects most similar to the Christian approach analyzed by Lossky. The apophaticism to be found in Islam's Shi'ite strand of thinking, for example, is related to a sense of the unknowability of God's essence that is comparable to the same stress that exists within Lossky's Eastern Orthodox tradition (in which the distinction between God's essence and energies became especially influential through the work of Gregory Palamas in the fourteenth century, though the distinction can be found much earlier.)[12] The Arabic term for "negative theology" is *lahūt salbī*, the practice of which involves the use of *taʿṭīl*, which means "negation." As Mohammad Ali

8 Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 33 (paraphrasing Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* II.165).

9 See e.g. Michael Fagenblat, ed., *Negative Theology as Jewish Modernity* (Indiana University Press, 2017).

10 See Ioan Dura, "'Defining the Indefinable': The Hermeneutics of the Upanishadic Negation *neti neti* in Sankara's Apophatic Theology," in *Proceedings of the XXIII World Congress of Philosophy*, ed. Konstantinos Boudouris (Greek Philosophical Society, 2018), 89–94.

11 Marco Pallis, *A Buddhist Spectrum: Contributions to Buddhist-Christian Dialogue* (World Wisdom, 2003), 131.

12 See e.g. the discussion in Kallistos Ware, Bishop of Diokleia, "God Immanent yet Transcendent: The Divine Energies according to Saint Gregory Palamas," in *In Whom We Live and Move and Have our Being: Panentheistic Reflections on God's Presence in a Scientific World*, eds. Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke (Eerdmans, 2002).

Amir-Moezzi writes, this teaching is related in Shi'ite teaching to the way in which God is seen in terms of "two ontological levels." As he describes:

> [F]irst, of the Essence (*dāt*). This is said to be forever inconceivable, unimaginable, above all thought, beyond all knowledge. It can only be described by God through revelations and can only be apprehended by a negative apophatic theology […]. However, if things were to remain so, no relation would be possible between the Creator and His creatures. Thus God, in his infinite grace, lets blossom in his own being another level: of Names and Attributes (*asmā' wa ṣefāt*) by which He reveals himself and makes himself known. This revealed level, recalling the *Deus revelatus* of Christian theology, is no longer God the Unknowable, but God the Unknown who aspires to be known. It is the exoteric, manifest, revealed level of God that can be known in Him.[13]

I have argued, in *ERP*, that this apophatic, "mystical" approach to the nature of theological language may be extended to allow any particular faith tradition to be adhered to without requiring the assumption that it provides a set of propositional truths that necessarily deny the "competing" truths provided by other faith traditions. Instead, I argue, it seems to permit us—in terms of the "one mountain, many paths to the sumnmit" analogy—to see the narratives and doctrines associated with any particular faith tradition as a set of signposts to aid those who have begun their spiritual journey from the cultural starting point to which that tradition relates. The possibility that there might be other valid starting points—and other wayside signposts for those pursuing their spiritual journey along a different contemplative path towards the same destination—does not seem to be precluded by this understanding.

Have a Bit of Nous!

The colloquial use of the term *nous*, meaning "common sense," reflects one aspect of what ancient philosophers meant when they used this word, but

13 Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, "Shi'ite Doctrine," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* online, published July 20, 2005; updated January 14, 2013, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/shiite-doctrine.

this was not the main thing that they had in mind.[14] These philosophers were talking primarily about a mental faculty that they believed exists, at least potentially, in all of us: a faculty that enables us to perceive intuitively what is true or real. A complication here is that the word *nous* is often now rendered in English translations of Greek texts as "intellect" because of its early translation into Latin as *intellectus.* This English translation is, however, potentially misleading to people today because the English term intellect is now understood more narrowly than when the translation into Latin was made. In modern English, the term intellect is now often seen as referring to nothing more than the seat of discursive reasoning. However, the term *nous*—at least in ancient philosophical usage—referred to something quite different, viz., to an essentially intuitive mental faculty that enables what was called noetic discernment of what is true or real, an apprehension that is quite distinct from that which arises from use of the discursive rational capacity.

This distinction—more obvious in the Greek vocabulary of the patristic and Byzantine periods than in modern English[15]—is an interesting one because it is only recently that a comparable distinction has become common among us once again, largely because of our current scientific knowledge of the functions of the two hemispheres of the brain. Through the work of Iain McGilchrist, in particular, we are becoming increasingly aware of the way in which, in the culture of the western world, we have for several centuries attributed great value to the capacities that we now associate with the left hemisphere of the brain—our quantitative and analytical capacities—but have tended to attribute little value to the capacities that arise from the right hemisphere, which are related to creativity, emotion and intuition.[16]

14 In certain parts of Britain, people criticize someone else's lack of common sense by saying "have a bit of nous!" This last word, *nous*, when pronounced in this colloquial way, to rhyme with mouse, simply reflects an old-fashioned British pronunciation of a Greek word. In modern Greek and in theological and philosophical circles, however, this word is now usually pronounced to rhyme, not with mouse, but with moose.

15 In the Greek of the patristic period and of later Byzantine writing, the distinction was often made clear by the use of a different term—*dianoia*—to describe the discursive rational capacity.

16 See Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Modern World*, expanded edition (Yale University Press, 2019). What McGilchrist does not do, it must be emphasized, is think of the two hemispheres of the brain as doing completely different things (as was once widely thought.) Rather, he emphasizes that, while both are involved in all mental processes, they contribute to these processes in different ways. Each hemisphere is associated with a different kind of attention, which (so to speak) "creates" in us two different versions of the

It cannot be said that the right hemisphere capacities that McGilchrist describes correspond exactly to the capacities that the ancient Greeks ascribed to the *nous*. There are, nevertheless, considerable overlaps between the two understandings so that, if we take McGilchrist's sense of western culture's lack of balance seriously, we need to think about how the concept of the *nous* was used in a comparable way in early Christian and Islamic theological thinking and to ask ourselves whether ignoring its implications seriously unbalances our modern thinking and experience.[17]

That this lack of balance exists in our current theological thinking is indicated by the fact that, when we examine the use of the term *nous* by early Christian theologians, we find that the noetic apprehension arising from the full use of the *nous* was seen by many of them as central to what they called, in Greek, *theōria*: the contemplation of God (and also of creation, which they sometimes saw as an essential preliminary to the contemplation of God).[18] The *nous* was seen by them, in fact, as what some of them called the "eye of the soul" and it was understood as something quite distinct from the capacity for discursive reasoning. Its intuitive grasp of reality was seen as needing to be used in a balanced way in relation to that reasoning so as to avoid the danger that the concepts we form "in accordance with the understanding and the judgement which are natural to us, basing ourselves on an intelligible

world that we can either integrate into a unified understanding or keep apart. In our present western culture, he argues, we have become enslaved to the analytical version of the world provided by the left hemisphere and have under-valued or even ignored the more holistic, intuitive version provided by the right hemisphere. He argues that a well-adjusted approach must correct this imbalance and that—as the title of his book indicates—the proper relationship between the two should be one in which the "emissary" left hemisphere serves the "master" right hemisphere rather than tending (as in our western culture) to usurp all power and influence. He explores the religious meaning of this understanding in Iain McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions, and the Unmaking of the World* , vol. 2 (Perspectiva, 2020), 1193–1303, in which he notes that the term *God* "is obfuscated and overlaid with so many unhelpful accretions that […] it is not surprising that people recoil from this idol. It's not just that, obviously, God is not some old man sitting on a cloud, but that very much else that is often believed, or at any rate believed by atheists to be believed by theists, badly gets in the way of an understanding" (1200).

17 In the Islamic world, the influence of a neo-Platonic understanding of the *nous* is often perceived by modern scholars in the work of early Islamic philosophers like al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, and Ibn Rushd.

18 The contemplation of nature was seen in this way especially by Maximus the Confessor (d. 664), though the concept goes at least as far back as the fourth century work of Evagrius Ponticus. See Christopher C. Knight, *Eastern Orthodoxy and the Science-Theology Dialogue* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), 10–11.

representation, create idols of God instead of revealing to us God Himself."[19] In modern western theological thinking, by contrast, this "eye of the soul" concept is frequently ignored or undervalued.

It is noteworthy that McGilchrist's sense of our undervaluing the intuitive capacities associated with the right side of the brain has, in recent years, led to a new appreciation of the concept of spiritual intelligence and—among a few at least—to explorations linking this concept to the ancient concept of the *nous*.[20] In particular, Petre Maican has pointed out the relevance of disability theology in relation to this, arguing that the loss of innate cognitive capacities in senile dementia does not diminish what is most important about personhood. This understanding, Maican argues, may be expanded in terms of the concept of the *nous*, and this reflects my own emphasis on the way in which that concept is still used within Eastern Orthodox Christianity, underlining the way in which the *nous* should be seen as in some sense separate from other mental functions, in the sense that it is what truly links the human mind directly to the "mind of God."[21]

There are, admittedly, several distinct, if related, understandings of the *nous* to be found in theologians of the early part of the Common Era, due in part to the ways in which they took up one or other of the different nuances of the term to be found in ancient Greek philosophers such as Aristotle, Plato, and the Neo-Platonists. Nevertheless, the concept of the *nous* was widely used by these theologians in relation to its perceived function as what one modern scholar has called "a connector, the medium by which we relate to God, the ordering principle of our relation to the complex that

19 Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 33 (paraphrasing Gregory of Nyssa, Life of Moses II.165).

20 This topic of spiritual intelligence is addressed in general terms by various authors in an edited volume: Marius Doborantu and Fraser Watts, eds., *Perspectives on Spiritual Intelligence*, Routledge Science and Religion Series (Routledge, 2024). It is also the focus of a recent special issue of the journal *Christian Perspectives on Science and Theology* 3 (2024) titled "Artificial and Spiritual Intelligence: Proceedings of the 2023 Conference of the International Society for Science & Religion," and guest edited by Doborantu and Watts.

21 See Petre Maican, "Spiritual Intelligence and Dementia: A Theological Re-evaluation of the *Nous*," *Christian Perspectives on Science and Theology* 3 (2024): 54–71; Christopher C. Knight, *Science and the Christian Faith: A Guide for the Perplexed* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2020), 107–111; Christopher C. Knight, "The Human Mind in this World and the Next: Scientific and Early Theological Perspectives," *Theology and Science* 16 (2018): 151–165.

is our selves, and the director of external relations, inasmuch as our moral existence stands at its command."[22]

An aspect of this usage is a sense that the *nous* should be seen as the organ of a kind of contemplation that transcends discursive thinking. Indeed, in many strands of late antique and medieval Christian thinking, the *nous* was seen as central to the relationship between the human person and God: the point at which the human mind is in some sense in direct contact with the divine mind. Faith itself was often seen as related to the *nous,* and in general the *nous* was seen as "the highest faculty" in humans, through which—provided it is purified—one knows "God or the inner essences of created things by means of direct apprehension or spiritual perception."[23] The full noetic perception to which the unfettered use of the *nous* gives rise was, however, regarded as being at least partially eclipsed in "fallen" humanity, and this eclipse was seen as remediable only through what we might now call spiritual practice.

This kind of focus on non-discursive contemplation is not only reflected in the apophatic understanding that Lossky has advocated from a Christian perspective but also has parallels in several non-Christian faith traditions (such as the Sufism of the Islamic world) which have comparable notions of the existence of a kind of "spiritual sight" that needs to be cultivated. Among the implications of this notion of spiritual sight is, in fact, the possibility that it provides new ways of exploring attitudes towards the relationship between these traditions, leading us to see several of these traditions as being equally valid.

The relevance of Lossky's thinking to this conclusion lies primarily in the way in which his focus on the importance of contemplation—if it is extended in a way that he himself does not consider—seems to permit any faith tradition to be seen as one to which its adherents can remain faithful without assuming that it provides a set of propositional truths that necessarily deny the "competing truths" provided by other faith traditions. Rather, the narratives and doctrines associated with any one tradition may be seen in the way that I have suggested: as a set of signposts to aid those who have

22 A. N. Williams, *The Divine Sense: The Intellect in Patristic Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 234.

23 In relation to Gregory of Nyssa's understanding, see, for example, Martin Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith: Union, Knowledge and Divine Presence* (Oxford University Press, 2004). Also see Bruce Foltz, *The Noetics of Nature: Environmental Philosophy and the Holy Beauty of the Visible* (Fordham University Press, 2014) 248–249. (The implicit reference here is to the understanding that was most highly developed in the seventh-century work of Maximus the Confessor.)

entered upon their spiritual journey from the starting point provided by the particular tradition to which they adhere. The possibility that there might be other valid starting points—and other wayside signposts for those pursuing their spiritual journey along a different contemplative path towards the same destination—does not seem to be precluded by this understanding.

An aspect of this argument is Lossky's contention that a radically apophatic approach implies, in theology, acceptance of a degree of apparent logical inconsistency—what is sometimes called antinomy—that contemporary analytic philosophy would usually reject. In this apophatic framework, not only will "theology will never be abstract, working through concepts, but contemplative: raising the mind to those realities which pass all understanding." In addition, as Lossky goes on, this is why the dogmas of the Christian tradition "often present themselves as antinomies […] It is not a question of suppressing the antinomy by adapting dogma to our understanding, but of change of heart and mind enabling us to attain to the contemplation of the reality which reveals itself to us as it raises us to God, and unites us, according to our several capacities, to Him."[24]

In *ERP*, I have set out an argument that this kind of emphasis on spiritual growth through contemplative practice, and on the role of antinomy, has implications for many of the philosophical arguments sometimes used to attempt to refute a pluralistic understanding. In these anti-pluralistic arguments, incompatibilities between the doctrinal "truth claims" of different faith traditions are stressed in order to conclude that pluralism is incoherent because no more than one of these "competing" claims can be true. If we accept Lossky's antinomic approach to theology, however, then apparent incompatibilities of this kind cannot automatically be seen as definitive for assessing complementarity at a deeper, contemplative level.

The point here is that when we expand Lossky's understanding to differences between the doctrinal frameworks of the various faith traditions of the world, these frameworks may—at least in principle—be seen as something other than as sets of "truth claims" of an abstract kind. They may be seen, instead, as relating more to the noetic apprehension that arises from the purified *nous* than to "philosophical truths" developed through discursive reasoning, of the kind often assumed by analytic philosophers of religion. Such philosophers are—as John Cottingham has put it—"prone to use the 'fruit-juicer' method" of looking at words in isolation from the total context in which they are used, requiring "the clear liquid of a few propositions to be extracted for examination in isolation from what they take to be the

24 Lossky, The *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 43.

irrelevant pulpy mush of context."[25] This approach leads them—as Mikel Burley has observed —to have "a tin ear for possibilities of sense, especially with regard to religions or cultures very different to those with which they are familiar."[26]

In this context, the "one mountain, many paths to the summit" analogy allows us to get a sense of how more than one set of narrative and doctrinal "signposts" may authentically give guidance on journeys along different spiritual paths with the same ultimate destination. In the context of what I have said about the *nous* and about apophaticism, we can expand our sense of how this analogy may legitimately be used by seeing with greater clarity how, as the mountain's summit is approached along any one path, an intuitive, noetic understanding of the divine Reality can gradually develop, in which supposedly "incompatible" descriptions of that Reality are transcended, since they may be seen not as "truth claims" but as "means" or "methods" that act as signposts along a particular spiritual pathway.

This language of "means" or "methods" is not, admittedly, usually associated with Lossky's understanding and he himself was not a pluralist. However, Lossky's main points about the contemplative nature of theological language may be seen as comparable to those found among the advocates of another, comparable kind of understanding, the framework of which does use this kind of language. This is the framework of the pluralistic school of thought associated with the work of scholars like René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon, which is sometimes referred to as the Traditionalist school, sometimes as perennial traditionalism, and sometimes—as in what follows—simply as perennialism.[27]

Perennialism and Esoteric Ecumenism

While often associated primarily with certain Islamic scholars, the perennialist school of thought has followers in many different faith traditions, including Christian scholars such as Huston Smith, a Methodist, Jean

25 John Cottingham, "The Lessons of Life: Wittgenstein, Religion, and Analytic Philosophy," in *Wittgenstein and Analytic Philosophy: Essays for P. M. S. Hacker,* eds. Hans-Johann Glock and John Hyman (Oxford University Press, 2009), 209.

26 Mikel Burley, "Reincarnation and the Lack of Imagination in Philosophy," *Nordic Wittgenstein Review* 5, no. 2 (2015): 39–64.

27 There are in practice minor differences between those who use these terms, but there is sufficient overlap between their understandings to make it appropriate, in the context of our present exploration, to treat these terms as effectively synonymous.

Borella, a Roman Catholic, and the Eastern Orthodox scholar, James Cutsinger.[28] While these perennialist Christians express their views in slightly different ways, they all reflect the following perspective articulated by William Stoddart, in his *Foreword* to a multi-author (and multi-faith) collection of perennialist essays on Christianity:

> The perennial philosophy—which is true universalism and true ecumenism—is, at least extrinsically, a recognition of the divine origin of each religion. The essence of each religion is pure truth. And the various religions clothe that truth in garments of different designs and colors. "In my Father's house are many mansions." This saying of Christ's applies not only to Heaven, but also to earth. The function of the various religions is to express the truth, and to offer a way of salvation, in a manner suited to the different segments and ethnicities of mankind. Each religion comes from God and each religion leads back to God. Each religion, moreover, comprises a doctrine and a method, that is to say, it is an enlightening truth coupled with a saving means.[29]

A central perennialist belief—that the nearer one approaches the metaphysical truth at the heart of one's own tradition, the more one will recognize the existence of spiritual paths other than one's own that lead to the same intuitive understanding—is one that is much older than perennialism in its modern form. It may, for example, be found in an essentially Neo-Platonic form in Renaissance writers such as Marsilio Ficino and Giovani Pico della Mirandola. However, the dominant current version of perennialism—while acknowledging this earlier thinking as part of its heritage—has its main roots elsewhere, most notably in René Guénon's interpretation of the Vedantic traditions of India, originally published in French in 1925.[30]

28 See e.g. Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth: The Common Vision of the World's Religions* (HarperCollins, 1976); Jean Borella, *Guénonion Esoterism and Christian Mystery* (Sophia Perennis, 2005); James S. Cutsinger, *Advice to the Serious Seeker: Meditations on the Teaching of Frithjof Schuon* (State University of New York Press, 1997).

29 William Stoddart, "Foreword," in *Ye Shall Know the Truth: Christianity and the Perennial Philosophy*, ed. Mateus Souras de Azevedo (World Wisdom, 2005), x–xi. I should perhaps note that I myself avoid speaking of differences between "ethnicities" and focus, instead, on cultural differences.

30 René Guénon, *Man and His Becoming According to the Vedānta*, trans. Richard C. Nicholson (Sophia Perennis, 2001; original French edition: *L'Homme et son devenir*

Both the older and the more recent forms of perennialism have sometimes been classified as manifestations of what in the Renaissance was called perennial philosophy (*philosophia perennis*).[31] However, some within the school now avoid this term and prefer the term "perennial wisdom" (*sophia perennis*) because they see wisdom—with its connotation of metaphysical discernment—as closer to what is meant by them than is the term "philosophy," which is used in the narrow sense assumed in the "analytic" school, at present dominant in the philosophy of the English-speaking world. This discernment is seen by perennialists as providing the ability to distinguish what they call the esoteric core of any particular faith tradition from its exoteric aspects.[32] These exoteric aspects are seen, not as pointing to "incompatibilities" between the "truth claims" of various faith traditions, but simply as constituting part of the "means" or "methods" by which adherents of any particular tradition are led towards an intuitive grasp of its esoteric core. (These means or methods are not purely verbal, however, but relate to the contemplative or liturgical use of narratives and doctrines together with various non-verbal practices.)

Perennialists' sense of the essential identity of each authentic faith tradition at this "core" level has meant that their personal choice of a particular tradition to which to adhere is not based on an exclusivist or even inclusivist sense of that tradition's correctness. Indeed, they often seem to see themselves as having more in common with those of their fellow-perennialists who adhere to faith communities other than their own than they do with those of their co-religionists who fail to make the perennialist distinction between the exoteric and the esoteric that is so important to them. It has therefore been possible for those who accept the school's basic assumptions to find homes in several different faith communities, both monotheistic and otherwise. Some leading perennialist writers, such as Marco Pallis and Alfred Bloom, for example, have been converts to

selon le Vedānta [Les Éditions Traditionnelles, 1925]).

31 In the Renaissance period, the term perennial philosophy was used to describe the notion that the philosophies of Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus expounded the same truths as Christianity. Subsequently, in modern perennialism, the term was expanded to cover the metaphysics of other traditions, notably Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam.

32 This word esoteric indicates something usually "hidden" but it has the unfortunate connotation, for some, of small groups providing "secret" practices and teachings. As I indicate in *ERP*, however, it can relate, not to such groups, but to the gradual growth of a "deeper" understanding than is usual of the public teachings and practices of various faith traditions.

Buddhism, which does not speak about God.[33] Perennialist ideas are also to be found in the polytheistic Hinduism of the period immediately prior to Guénon's work on Vedantic metaphysics—especially in the work of the Hindu reformer Ram Mohan Roy and of the mystics Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekenanda. (Another Hindu, Ananda Coomaraswamy, is often regarded almost as a co-founder, with Guénon, of perennialism in its modern form.)[34]

One of the things that distinguishes perennialists from many other pluralists is that they have in general stressed the necessity of adherence to a *particular*, historically-rooted faith tradition for the spiritual growth necessary before one can discern the metaphysical truth at the heart of all valid traditions. This stress on the importance of particular, historically-rooted traditions has had the effect of insulating most perennialists from any temptation to a syncretistic combining of aspects of different traditions. For perennialist thinking, only certain traditions or sub-traditions can provide what I have called the "signposts" required for progress along a particular spiritual pathway, though in practice perennialists have not always agreed on which traditions or sub-traditions may legitimately be seen in this way. (For example, Guénon, who was effectively the founder of perennialism in its modern form, initially rejected Buddhism as a valid Traditional religion because he saw aspects of its teachings as unacceptable. Only gradually—under the influence of other perennialists—did he accept at least early Buddhism as valid. He also tended to reject Christianity and had considerable doubts about the more positive view of it that was later developed by Schuon.)[35]

The Continuing Relevance of Perennialist Insights

The perennialist understanding that I have described has, we should note, recently become unfashionable in the academic field of religious studies, partly because of valid objections to its classic form. The most important of these objections—with which I agree—are that classic perennialists tend to impose an interpretative framework on historical and empirical evidence in a questionable way and also often exhibit nostalgia for a fictional past in

33 See especially Pallis, *A Buddhist Spectrum* and Robert D. Baird and Alfred Bloom, *Religion and Man: Indian and Far Eastern Religious Traditions* (Harper and Row, 1972).

34 See Ananda Coomaraswamy, *The Essential Ananda Coomaraswamy*, ed. Rana P. Coomaraswamy (World Wisdom, 2004) for an anthology of his writings.

35 Frithjof Schuon, *Fullness of God: Frithjof Schuon on Christianity*, ed. James S. Cutsinger (World Wisdom, 2004).

which it is assumed there existed a "primordial tradition" that has now been partially lost. My sense of the validity of both of these objections is precisely the reason that I advocate, not perennialism in its classic form, but a kind of *neo-perennialism*, in which these problems are avoided through a focus on human religiosity rather than on very questionable historical beliefs.[36]

This focus on human religiosity has arisen in part from the model of divine action that I have developed as a component of my work on science-engaged theology. This model—as Sarah Lane Ritchie has observed—exhibits significant parallels, at the conceptual level, with two other components of what she has described as a "theological turn" in 21st century discussions of divine action among science-engaged theologians.[37] These are the revision of scholastic understandings developed within the Roman Catholic world by Michael Dodds and the focus on the Holy Spirit developed within the Pentecostal and charismatic strands of Protestant thinking by James Smith and Amos Yong.

In these parallel developments, Ritchie notes, the metaphysical basis of the model of divine action that has been dominant among science-engaged theologians for several decades is radically challenged in much the same way as in my own model. All the proponents of this theological turn—despite their different starting points—challenge the earlier model's assumption of an essentially autonomous universe that God must influence from "outside" through some sort of "causal joint." They instead posit, in their various ways, a universe that is to be understood only in terms of the divine presence within it, arguing—as Ritchie puts it—that mainstream proposals "are dependent upon question-begging metaphysical commitments, which in turn inadequately frame the entire divine action conversation. These presuppositions involve basic ontological questions about the God-nature relationship, and especially the question of what, exactly, it means to be properly 'natural.'"[38]

One aspect of this parallelism relates to the basic understanding of nature. Just as, in my own Eastern Orthodox framework, there is "no 'pure'

36 It is the fact that these historical beliefs have no independent evidence that constitutes, in my judgement, the main impediment to accepting classical perennialism. These beliefs seem to be nothing more than an implausible attempt to "explain" a plausible kind of pluralistic understanding.

37 Sarah Lane Ritchie, "Dancing Around the Causal Joint: Challenging the Theological Turn in Divine Action Theories," *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 37 (2017): 362–379; Sarah Lane Ritchie, *Divine Action and the Human Mind* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

38 Ritchie, "Dancing Around the Causal Joint," 361.

nature to which grace is added as a supernatural gift," so also, says Ritchie, the pneumatologists "deny the implicit deism that would legitimize the notion of an autonomous natural world apart from the Spirit of God."[39] Another similarity lies in the understanding of miraculous events. Such events may be seen, in my own approach, as an aspect of the "natural" functioning of the world that may be spoken of in terms of the scientific notion of regime change or (following Augustine) the theological concept of "higher" laws of nature.[40] In a comparable way, the pneumatological approach is, as Ritchie observes, one in which, if "some events seem more supernatural than others, this is due to varying levels of creaturely response and openness to the Spirit." Such events are, she goes on (quoting Smith), "sped-up modes of the Spirit's more regular presences."[41]

In the context of the present paper, however, the real importance of the "theological turn" in the discussion of divine action lies not in these "science-engaged theology" issues but in the way in which it has given rise, in *ERP,* to a "single act" model of divine action that I have extended to defend the notion of what we might call a *single act of divine revelation*. This concept is not only compatible with religious pluralism generally, but has also provided a way of developing a very particular understanding of religious pluralism through a focus on human religiosity and on the kind of associated neo-perennialism that I have developed.

While my understanding of divine action—with its move away from any separation between the natural and the supernatural—reinforces the kind of neo-perennialism that I have developed, there are, we should note, widespread objections to classic perennialism which may be seen as being applicable also to my neo-perennialism, so that we need to understand why these objections are, at best, only partially valid.[42] The main issue here is

39 Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 101; Ritchie, "Dancing Around the Causal Joint," 374.

40 *ERP*, 143–144.

41 Ritchie, "Dancing Around the Causal Joint," 375, quoting James A. K. Smith, "Is the Universe Open for Surprise? Pentecostal Ontology and the Spirit of Naturalism," *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 43 (2008): 879–896, 892. What is meant here seems to be that, as in my own model, the miraculous is not to be understood in terms of any separation between natural and the supernatural.

42 It is noteworthy, in relation to this separation, that Eastern Orthodox Christianity, while it makes a strong distinction between the created and the uncreated, does this in a way that denies the separation between the natural and the supernatural that has become quasi-instinctive in much western Christian thinking. In this respect, Orthodoxy's approach is comparable to that which arises from the critique of that separation that is to be found in the 20th century Ressourcement

that both classic perennialism and neo-perenialism tend to assume that faith traditions have emerged historically—albeit sometimes in a complex way—from foundational religious or "mystical" experiences, and that there is a common core to these experiences that relates them directly to the Divine Reality.

This way of understanding religious experience and its relationship to faith traditions reflects the common understanding of an earlier generation of scholars such as W. T. Stace.[43] In recent years, however, this understanding has been widely criticized within the field of "religious studies" by advocates of the "contextualist" or "constructivist" thesis advocated by scholars like Stephen Katz, who stress not only the danger of "cherry picking" certain experiences and ignoring others (in the way that they often see as characteristic of much perennialist thinking).[44] Critics like Katz also insist that the context provided by a particular tradition will inevitably influence or even "construct" such experiences. The more extreme "constructivist" of these scholars have—as one of them has put it—attempted "literally" to reverse "the perennialist claims on mysticism" by highlighting "the importance of religious institutions, doctrines, scriptures, and established norms and practices in grounding, catalyzing, and even constructing mystical experiences."[45]

This attempted reversal may be seen as partially valid, not least because of the empirical research into religious experience that was initiated by Alister Hardy in the mid-twentieth century.[46] This research is important because it does not "cherry pick" certain experiences to reinforce an existing thesis but is based on surveys of those who have undergone what they themselves see as unusual experiences of a "religious" kind. These

movement in the Roman Catholic church (see Hans Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery* [Oxford University Press, 2009]). Indeed, I have suggested that the Eastern Orthodox approach goes further because it has a distinctive understanding in which events that seem "above nature" may be seen as anticipations of the "natural" as it is to be experienced fully in the "world to come." Such events are, in this sense, only above the "subnatural" state in which we exist in a "fallen" cosmos, not above the "truly natural" world that is the ultimate goal the created order. See Knight, *Science and the Christian Faith,* 177–195.

43 W. T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (Macmillan, 1960).

44 Stephen C. Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Stephen C. Katz (Oxford University Press, 1978) 22–74.

45 Aydogan Kars, *Unsaying God: Negative Theology in Medieval Islam,* AAR Academy Series (Oxford University Press, 2019), 8.

46 See e.g. Alister Hardy, *The Spiritual Nature of Man: A Study of Contemporary Religious Experience* (Oxford University Press, 1979).

surveys indicate, among other things, that the content of such experiences may often be expressed by those who report them in terms of a religious or philosophical tradition to which they already adhere, indicating that the contextualist thesis has an element of validity.

In *ERP*, I have argued, nevertheless, that the shaping of experience by an existing religious framework is in practice only partial and may often involve no more than interpretation of experiences that have a common, "unconditioned core." This possibility of such a core is, in fact, suggested not only by Stace's own work but by a number of factors that have become evident since his work was published. These factors are, however, frequently ignored by defenders of the contextualist thesis in its "constructivist" form, who remain convinced that—as one of them has put it—mystical experiences should not be seen as "the experiential seed of religious institutions and doctrines" but should be seen, instead, as "their fruit."[47]

One of these countervailing factors, I have argued, relates to the way in which much of the present use of the contextualist thesis relates to an "anti-perennialist" strand of thinking that has developed as part of the very questionable "recipe knowledge" that is often now exhibited by scholars within the religious studies field.[48] This term "recipe knowledge" has its origin in the sociology of knowledge, and it refers to the way in which people often operate by using a kind of spurious "knowledge" that has become quasi-instincive because it has effectively lost any roots in the attempt at objective thinking that it may have had at some period in the past. We need, therefore, to ask whether this concept may be applicable to aspects of the way in which the academic field of religious studies has developed in recent decades, especially in relation to the common reaction against the perennialist belief that—despite the evident surface differences between faith tradition—there may, at a deeper level, be a core that is common to at least some of those traditions, which relates to universal aspects of human religiosity.

There are several reasons for adopting this belief in a common "core." One of these is the way in which—as the empirical research of Alister Hardy and his successors has indicated—"religious" experiences are not, as was once widely thought, rare occurrences that come only after long immersion in a particular faith tradition. In practice, they are relatively common and

47 Kars, *Unsaying God*, 8.

48 See Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Doubleday & Company, 1966), which develops Alfred Schutz's thinking on this topic.

often occur in people with no religious affiliation, so that in many cases the discourses and practices of particular faith communities cannot be seen as a causal factor in their occurrence. Another point is that, even if we still think that the majority of religious experiences can be explained in terms of some version of the contextualist thesis, there are other experiences—what Robert Forman calls "pure consciousness events"—which are not fundamentally linguistic and conceptual in nature and are not influenced by context or prior expectation.[49] As Steve Taylor has commented, we must take into account what he calls "extratraditional awakening experiences" if we are to be true to historical and empirical evidence.[50]

Yet another point to take into account is the historical observation that the descriptions and interpretations of their experiences, given by those widely acknowledged as mystics, have often had an equivocal relationship with their own faith tradition's doctrinal frameworks, and this has frequently led to their being regarded as suspect or even as heretical within their own faith communities. This sense of dissonance suggests that there is often something in such experiences that does not conform to contextualist assumptions.

Perhaps the most important observation that I make is, however, not related directly to these particular issues. It arises from developments in the cognitive science of religion, in which what is sometimes called a "dual-process" understanding has been explored. (This understanding may be related to McGilchrist's analysis of the functioning of the two hemispheres of the brain, which I have already noted.) In this dual-process understanding, two cognitive modes are distinguished: a system that is largely intuitive (sometimes described in its religious manifestations as "imagistic" or "shamanistic") and a more discursively oriented system that is, in evolutionary terms, a later development.

In relation to this dual-process understanding, the occurrence of extraordinary "mystical" experiences by those whose religious affiliation is to a "doctrinal" framework is an important indication of the validity of Fraser

49 Robert K. C. Forman, "Pure Consciousness Events and Mysticism," *Sophia* 25 (1986): 49–58.

50 See Steve Taylor, "From Philosophy to Phenomenology: Arguments for a 'Soft' Perennialism," *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* 35 (2016): 17–41. For Taylor, these "extratraditional awakening experiences" suggest the need, from a transpersonalist perspective, for a "soft" form of perennialism that arguably complements the perspectives outlined in this book in certain ways, even though this "soft" form is seen by him as questioning the kind of metaphysics that I endorse.

Watts's observation that, in relation to religious apprehension, capacities that have emerged only relatively recently in human evolution "exist side by side with older ones."[51] This observation is reinforced by the way in which, even among those who usually focus on discursive capacities in relation to their religious apprehension, there sometimes occur "mystical states" which, as William James once observed:

> [S]eem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time.[52]

In the light of all these considerations, the present tendency of certain scholars to blithely dismiss perennialist or neo-perennialist perspectives clearly needs to be challenged, and I have argued that while perennialism in its classic form certainly has aspects that need to be questioned, its neo-perennialist form deserves to be treated by scholars as, at the very least, a valid research program.

Here, the important thing, from the perspective of the present study, is that classic perennialism, despite its faults, may be seen to have a number of positive characteristics that can be retained in a neo-perennialist framework. One of these positive characteristics relates directly to what I have said about the *nous* because perennialists emphasize the way in which—in the ancient traditions that they view as authentic—the human person is seen as composed of three levels of being: spirit, soul, and body. (In Greek, for example, ancient and medieval writers spoke of *pneuma* or *nous*, *psyche,* and *soma*; in Latin, they spoke of *spiritus* or *intellectus*, *anima*, and *corpus*; and in Arabic of *rūḥ* , *nafs,* and *jism*.) While the differences between traditions in their use of this threefold classification are sometimes insufficiently acknowledged by perennialists, what is relevant to our present exploration is their use of it to point to the importance of a capacity that they usually associate with the "spirit" component of what it is to be human. Like those

51 Fraser Watts, "The Evolution of Religious Cognition," *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 42 (2020): 89–100, 93.

52 William James, "Mysticism" from Lectures XVI and XVII of his *The Varieties of Religious Experience* as reprinted in Douglas W. Schrader and Ashok Kumar Malhotra, eds., *Pathways to Philosophy: A Multidisciplinary Approach* (Pearson, 1996), 416.

who stress the *nous* in a Christian or Islamic context, perennialists see this capacity, not as the seat of discursive, rational thinking but as something that operates at a deeper, intuitive level. This understanding leads them to stress that perceiving the esoteric "truth" that they see as being at the heart of all authentic faith traditions involves an essentially intuitive kind of spiritual intelligence, since they believe, with Guénon, that true metaphysics "constitutes an immediate, or in other words, intuitive knowledge, as opposed to the discursive and mediate knowledge that belongs to the rational order."[53]

This aspect of classic perennialist understanding is one of the things that can, in my judgement, be retained in the kind of neo-perennialism that I advocate, together with its related disdain for modern philosophy of the analytic kind, especially when it is applied to religious doctrines. This attitude—which exhibits parallels with the expansion of Lossky's approach that I have outlined—is rooted in the belief that that what philosophers in the analytic tradition usually take to be the "truth claims" of the doctrinal languages of the world's faith traditions are in fact no more than part of what perennialists and neo-perennialists call the exoteric aspects of those traditions, which are seen by them as constituting part of the "methods" or "means" by which adherents of different faith traditions are guided along the particular spiritual pathways that have been developed in those traditions towards the goal of full noetic insight. What they see as important is the way in which—as one makes progress along any one of these spiritual pathways—one will increasingly apprehend these doctrines'esoteric meaning in a noetic manner. Because this esoteric meaning is grasped intuitively rather than discursively, it is not, for perennialists, to be understood in terms of apparently competing truth claims. Rather, this esoteric meaning is seen by them as identical in all authentic faith traditions, so that their understanding of pluralism is sometimes labelled by them as esoteric ecumenism.[54]

53 René Guénon, *The Essential René Guénon: Metaphysics, Tradition, and the Crisis of Modernity*, ed. John Herlihy (World Wisdom, 2009), 105.

54 See e.g. Frithjof Schuon, *Christianity/Islam: Essays on Esoteric Ecumenism* (World Wisdom, 1985); James S Cutsinger, "Hesychia: An Orthodox Opening to Esoteric Ecumenism," in *Paths to the Heart: Sufism and the Christian East*, ed. James S. Cutsinger (World Wisdom, 2002).

"Incompatibilities" between Various Faith Traditions

Philosophers in the analytic tradition—which is at present dominant in English-language philosophy—are, as I have noted, "prone to use the 'fruit-juicer' method" of looking at words in isolation from the total context in which they are used, so that they develop "a tin ear for possibilities of sense, especially with regard to religions or cultures very different to those with which they are familiar."[55] In terms of this method, one of the apparent "incompatibilities" between faith traditions can seem a very stark one. This is the apparent irreconcilability of the notion of a "personal" God, as found among adherents of the Abrahamic faith traditions, and that of a non-personal Reality, of the kind perceived in those strands of Buddhism that speak about the "Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unconditioned." The moment we begin to look in detail at the context in which notions of "personhood" and "non-personality" are used in real (as opposed to philosophically fruit-juiced) faith traditions, however, we find that the starkness of the choice between these two views of the Divine Reality may be more apparent than real.

The assertion that "non-personal" Buddhist understandings constitute a kind of atheism, for example, has been criticized as "neo-Buddhism" by the Buddhist writer, Marco Pallis, who—as already noted—stresses that his own tradition's reluctance to speak of God (or even of the self) should be understood in terms of the "apophatic method which Buddhism favours."[56] Moreover, we need to recognize that this awareness of Buddhist apophaticism may be especially important in relation to the Buddhist concept of *śūnyatā*—usually translated as "emptiness"—which is often taken as indicating that Buddhist thought has never had any sense of an ultimate reality. Not only, as Abraham de Cea has noted, have comparisons between the Christian notion of God and the Buddhist one of emptiness been made by D. T. Suzuki, Thomas Merton, and the Kyoto school in a way that has "greatly contributed to the apophatic interpretation of emptiness."[57] In

55 Cottingham, "The Lessons of Life," 209 and Burley, "Reincarnation and the Lack of Imagination in Philosophy," *Nordic Wittgenstein Review* 4, no. 2 (2014): 40.

56 Pallis, *A Buddhist Spectrum*, 131.

57 See the emphasis on parallels between Zen Buddhist perspectives and those of the Christian mystic, Meister Ekhart, in Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist* (Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1957). Also see Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New Directions, 1968). Finally, the Kyoto school of philosophy has frequently drawn attention to the parallels between its thinking and that of the Meister Ekhart. See the review of the school given by Bret W. Davis, "The Kyoto School," in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, eds. Edward N. Zalta and Uri

addition, as de Cea also notes, we must take into account comparisons made by members of what he calls the "Masao Abe-John Cobb group," who see Masao Abe's dynamic interpretation of Buddhist "emptiness" as exhibiting important parallels with the emphasis on *kenosis* (self-emptying) to be found in important strands of Christian thinking.[58] (It also has, we should note, parallels with Jewish kabbalistic thinking about the concept of *tsimtsum*.)[59]

These considerations all point to the legitimacy of William Stoddart's perennialist assertion that Buddhist thinking does not entail denial of some kind of Absolute.[60] He quotes, as evidence of this, the description of the Absolute attributed to the Buddha himself in the Udāna passage of the Kuddaka-Nikaya (or "Collection of Little Texts," the fifth part of the Pali canon):

> *There is an Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unconditioned. If that Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unconditioned were not, there could be no escape from this that is born, originated, created, conditioned. But because there is That which is Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unconditioned, an escape from this that is born, originated, created, conditioned can be proclaimed.*[61]

The "Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unconditioned" that this text proclaims may at first sight seem very far from the "personal" God of much theistic thinking, but there may be good reasons to be careful about how we understand the notion of a "personal" God. In particular, we need to recognize that there is much in the metaphysics of most of the main monotheistic traditions that points beyond the "theistic personalism" that many modern theists understand their belief in God to entail. As David Bentley Hart has argued throughout his book, *The Experience of God*, classical

Nodelman, published February 27, 2006; last modified April 9, 2019, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2022/entries/kyoto-school/. The quotation at the end of the sentence derives from Abraham Vélez de Cea,"A New Direction for Comparative Studies of Buddhists and Christians: Evidence from Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 26 (2006) 139–55, 139.

58 Masao Abe, "Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata," in *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation*, eds. John Cobb and Christopher Ives (Wipf and Stock, 2005) 3–68. Also see the essays that follow Abe's essay in *The Emptying God.*

59 See e.g. Agata Bielik-Robson, "'Humbled onto Death': Kenosis and Tsimtsum as the Two Models of Divine Self-Negation," *The Free Library,* published October 1, 2024, https://www.thefreelibrary.com/%22Humbled+onto+Death%22%3a+Kenosis+and+Tsimtsum+as+the+Two+Models+of...-a0814375446

60 Stoddart, *An Illustrated Outline of Buddhism,* 1–3.

61 Stoddart, *An Illustrated Outline of Buddhism,* 3, citing Kuddaka-Nikaya, Udāna, 80ff.

theistic metaphysics does not speak of God as *a* being but as the timeless source of being. Because of this, classical theism is far removed from what many theists in the modern period—including philosophers in the analytic tradition—have assumed the term God to mean. Indeed, says Hart, the classical metaphysics of the main theistic traditions may be seen not only in those traditions but also in Buddhism in its Mahayana form, at least in relation to its formulations of "Buddha consciousness or the Buddha nature, or even to the earliest Buddhist conception of the Unconditioned."[62]

When examined from this perspective, the notion of the "Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unconditioned" found in strands of Buddhist thinking may be seen as far closer to traditional theistic metaphysics than is the notion of a temporal, "personal" God upheld by many theistic believers of the present day. Indeed, what Stoddart calls the "Supreme State" envisaged in Buddhism and the "Supreme Being" envisaged in theistic traditions may, as he argues, be seen as "expressions of the same transcendent Reality: That which is absolute, infinite, and perfect" so that the apparent difference between Buddhism and theistic faith traditions is, from this perspective, no more than "a difference of point of view or angle of vision."[63]

Moreover, just as there is a range of views among Buddhists about whether their tradition is atheistic, so also there is a range of understandings within the Christian tradition of how the concept of a "personal" God may legitimately be used. Indeed, as those familiar with that tradition will be aware, notions that verge on the non-personal are far from uncommon. Whether we examine the medieval understanding expressed in Eckhart's understanding of the Godhead, for example, or the modern one of Paul Tillich, with its notion of God as "being-itself," we find that a complex set of understandings is found in Christian history.[64]

The importance of this spectrum of opinions within faith traditions is, however, often underestimated or even ignored, not only by ordinary theistic believers but also by those whose primary academic training has been in philosophy rather than theology. The Christian philosopher, Richard Swinburne, for example, has claimed that "the most elementary claim of

62 David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (Yale University Press, 2013), 4.

63 Stoddart, *An Illustrated Outline of Buddhism,* 1.

64 For a brief analysis, see Bernard McGinn, "The God beyond God: Theology and Mysticism in the Thought of Meister Eckhart," *Journal of Religion* 61 (1981): 1–19. In relation to "being itself" see Guy B Hammond, "Tillich on the Personal God," *Journal of Religion* 44 (1964): 289–93.

theism" is that "God is a person, yet one without a body."[65] There are, however, more theologically-aware scholars, like Adrian Thatcher, who see this notion not only as philosophically incoherent but also as failing to recognize that in the Christian world "most respected theologians […] both ancient and modern, have no use for the modern term 'person' in relation to God."[66] Swinburne's view is, in Thatcher's judgment, "unwarrantable and misrepresents what the [Christian] theological tradition says about God."[67] He perhaps overstates his case when he says that belief that God is a person is "foreign to Christian theology, with the unfortunate consequence that a philosophical defence of it is not only mistaken: it is also pointless."[68] Nevertheless, as the cases of Eckhart and Tillich illustrate, there are certainly strands of the Christian tradition of which his observation is true.

Another example of the way in which a misreading of the "truth claim" that God is personal can lead to confusion is to be found in the tendency of some philosophers and theologians to conflate this notion with another: that of God as a *temporal* being, whose experience of the flow of time is much like our own. They often dismiss any notion of the non-temporality of God—what Brian Davies calls "the classical view of divine eternity"—as the "God of the philosophers" and fail to take into account the way in which this notion has roots in mystical experience as well as in ancient and medieval philosophical understanding.[69] (As F.C. Happold has noted, "the mystic feels himself to be in a dimension where time is not, where 'all is always now'" so that such experience is not understandable "unless one is prepared to accept that there may be an entirely different dimension from that of clock time or indeed of any other sort of time.")[70]

Failing to take seriously not only this mystical dimension of the question but also the modern scientific understanding of time as part of the created cosmos, these advocates of God's temporality dismiss the subtle view of the relationship between God and time that was dominant in patristic and medieval Christian thinking and claim that temporality is intrinsic to a

65 Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford University Press, 1977), 1n1.

66 Adrian Thatcher, "The Personal God Who is a Person," *Religious Studies* 21, no. 1 (1985): 61–73, 71.

67 Thatcher, "The Personal God," 61.

68 Thatcher, "The Personal God," 71.

69 Brian Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press,1993), 141.

70 F. C. Happold *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology* (Penguin, 1963), 48.

proper understanding of God's "personal" nature.[71] However, in my work on divine action—as I explain in *ERP*—the modern focus on temporality as an aspect of God's "personal nature" may be seen as a major distorting factor in discussions of that action among science-engaged theologians. Moreover, I point out, there are, from an apophatic perspective, basic flaws in the way in which modern philosophers such as J. R. Lucas argue that to "deny the temporality of God" is to deny "that he is personal in any sense in which we understand personality."[72] While this may be true, I argue, it is irrelevant because it fails utterly to acknowledge the kind of radically apophatic perspective that "refuses to form concepts about God" which means that we should see our own understanding of personality as irrelevant to this issue.[73] From this apophatic perspective, our own understanding of personality may be precisely one of the projections—"in accordance with the understanding and the judgement which are natural to us, basing ourselves on an intelligible representation"—which "create idols of God instead of revealing to us God Himself."[74]

Another issue that seems to some philosophers to present a stark choice between different faith traditions is that which arises from the monotheism of the Abrahamic traditions and the polytheism of the various Hindu traditions. Once again, however, a theological and historical understanding of these traditions questions the commonly-assumed nature of this supposed incompatibility.

We need, for a start, to recognize that many Biblical scholars see the monotheism of the Abrahamic traditions as having developed from an earlier polytheism only slowly during the period covered by the Hebrew

71 This subtle view was expressed by Thomas Aquinas in terms of what has been called the "classical view of divine eternity" (Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 141) and—in an even more subtle way—by Maximus the Confessor; see Sotiris Mitralexis, *Ever-Moving Repose: A Contemporary Reading of Maximus the Confessor's Theory of Time* (Cascade, 2017). Regarding time and the created cosmos: One of the main differences between Newtonian mechanics and its replacement—Einstein's relativistic mechanics—is the way in which Newton saw space and time as absolutes within which the universe unfolds, while Einstein saw them simply as aspects of the created order, which were in fact interdependent in a way that means that distances and time intervals between events may be different for different observers.

72 J. R. Lucas, "The Temporality of God," in *Quantum Cosmology and the Laws of Nature: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*, eds. Robert John Russell, Nancey Murphy, and C. J. Isham (Vatican Observatory, 1993), 236.

73 Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church,* 38–39.

74 Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 33 (paraphrasing Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* II.165).

Bible, and some have gone on to suggest that this development has only rarely led to the radical monotheism that it could have become. As I put it in my second book, *The God of Nature*, "the savage tribal god of the earliest phases of […] the Judaeo-Christian] community's development, still evident in parts of the Old Testament, sometimes co-exists rather uneasily in [Christians'] minds with the loving, merciful, and universal God the New Testament" (and also,I might have added, of Second Temple and later Judaism). Indeed, I went on, "even before we take the New Testament into account, we can already recognize the way in which the tribal god of the earliest period was gradually transformed, through prophetic interpretation of historical experience and of the legends that arose from that experience, into the God of the later Judaistic faith: the creator of the cosmos and the redeemer, not only of God's chosen people but, through them, of all humankind."[75] In a historical-critical perspective, I continued, there emerges "a picture of the development of Judaism in which, at each stage, relatively new conceptions co-existed with remnants from earlier periods" so that, just as the evolutionary biologist "can find, in any living creature, features of the way in which that creature's ancestors adapted to an environment that has long since disappeared, so the Biblical historian can find, in documents of any given period, aspects of the religious attitudes of earlier periods."[76]

When we acknowledge this historical development, I suggested, we can go on to recognize that:

> Once the conception of a single God had developed, it retained, in some respects, characteristics that had been appropriate only to the earlier age of polytheism. In particular, just as the gods of the earlier period had been assigned quasi-human attributes that distinguished them from one another, so also the single God of the new perception was still understood as having such attributes—albeit ones that, under prophetic influence, took on an increasingly ethical dimension. Even as these elements changed in detail, however, evolutionary remnants among them tended to remain, and this was reinforced by the high status given to documents and traditions from much earlier periods. The result was the kind of belief in a single God that still bore traces of earlier belief—for example, the

75 Christopher C. Knight, *The God of Nature: Incarnation and Contemporary Science* (Fortress Press, 2007), 16–17.

76 Knight, *The God of Nature*, 16–17.

> concept of God's "jealousy" of other gods (Exodus 34:14). It was not yet radical monotheism but a transitional attitude, sometimes referred to as henotheism.[77]

However, since the word *henotheism* is also used in a difference sense, might be better termed *monopolytheism*: a term which, as already noted, has been coined by David Bentley Hart.[78]

In a way that is in some respects comparable to this historical development of Judaism (and of the other two Abrahamic traditions, which inherited from Judaism the monopolytheism of its later forms), at least some polytheistic traditions, such as those to be found in Hinduism, have developed historically in a way that has led, not to monotheism but to a kind of henotheism that differs from the one common in the monotheistic traditions. In this Hindu kind of henotheism—which involves devotion to a single god while accepting the existence of other gods—there is a way of speaking about *gods* that is significantly different to the way in which radical monotheists speak about God. This means that the questions involved in comparing the two ways of speaking relate to far more than numbers.

As Alain Daniélou has put it, the Hindu conception of the infinity of the divine means that focusing on numbers is potentially misleading since "we may be nearer to a mental representation of divinity when we consider an immense number of different gods than when we stress their unity; for the number one is in a way the number farthest removed from infinity […]. Though, in its manifest form, divinity is of necessity multiple, in its ultimate essence it cannot be said to be one or many."[79] In a different way, the Christian monk, Bede Griffiths, has focused on the way in which some Hindu traditions have developed ways of speaking about Brahman that are reminiscent of monotheistic perspectives. As a result, he argues, the polytheism of these traditions does not eclipse the monotheist's sense of the

77 Knight, *The God of Nature*, 17.

78 The term *henotheism* was popularized by Max Müller (d. 1900), though he saw it primarily in terms of the Hindu practice of worshipping a single god while acknowledging the existence of others. The term is still widely used in this general sense but because this henotheism clearly existed in early Yahwism as well as in Hinduism, some have, like me, extended the meaning of the term to cover any "monotheistic" understanding in which, while the reality of other gods is formally denied, one can still discern traces of this earlier belief.

79 Alain Daniélou, *The Myths and Gods of India: The Classic Work on Hindu Polytheism* (Inner Traditions International, 1991), 7.

character of this Reality, so that their polytheism may be seen as constituting an understanding that is, from a monotheistic perspective, not idolatrous.[80]

These considerations point to the way in which, as David Bentley Hart has observed:

> [T]here are two senses in which the word "God" or "god" can properly be used. Most modern languages generally distinguish between the two usages […] by writing only one of them with an upper case first letter, as though it were a proper name—which it is not. Most of us understand that "God" (or its equivalent) means the God who is the source of all things. Whereas "god" (or its equivalent) indicates one or other of a plurality of divine beings who inhabit the cosmos and reign over its various regions. This is not, however, merely a distinction in numbering, between monotheism and polytheism, as though the issue were merely that of determining how many "divine entities" one happens to think there are. It is a distinction, instead, between two entirely disparate conceptual orders. In fact, the very division between monotheism and polytheism is in many cases a confusion of categories. Several of the religious cultures that we sometimes inaccurately characterize as "polytheistic" have traditionally insisted upon an absolute differentiation between the one transcendent Godhead from whom all being flows and various "divine" beings who indwell and govern the heavens and earth.[81]

As an example, he notes that Swami Prabhavananda, "speaking more or less for the whole of developed Vedantic and Bhaktic Hinduism" says that only the one God "is 'the uncreated', while gods, though supernatural, belong […] among the creatures."[82]

In this sense, Hart goes on, many "polytheistic" frameworks are directly comparable, not only to the pagan polytheism of much of the Mediterranean world in which Christianity initially spread, but also to the outlook of those late Hellenistic Jews and early Christians who "recognized a multitude of angelic 'powers' and 'principalities,' some obedient to the

80 See especially the comments on this in Bede Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, new ed. (Canterbury Press, 2003).

81 Hart, *The Experience of God*, 28–29.

82 Hart, *The Experience of God*, 29.

one transcendent God and some in rebellion, who governed the elements of nature and the peoples of the earth." To any impartial observer at the time, he continues, "coming from some altogether different culture, the theological cosmos of a great deal of pagan 'polytheism' would have seemed all but indistinguishable from that of a great deal of Jewish or Christian 'monotheism.'"[83]

For this and other reasons, Hart speaks a number of times in his book, *The Experience of God* about the way in which much modern monotheism is in fact a kind of monopolytheism—a term which, as already noted, is particularly apt when we take into account the way in which, before that term was coined, I had already observed that the monotheism of the Abrahamic faith traditions may be seen, in a historical-critical perspective, as having evolved only gradually from an earlier polytheism, and that this monotheism has arguably only rarely moved fully beyond aspects of polytheistic thinking except in relation to the number of "divine entities" assumed to exist.

Beyond the Analytic Philosophy of Religion

One of the things that is required for greater interfaith understanding is recognition that, in addition to explicitly monotheistic faith traditions, there are other traditions that are not unusually expressed in monotheistic terms but may nevertheless be less clearly distanced from monotheism than is usually assumed. The implicit monotheism of some of these traditions is precisely what is indicated by the examples outlined in the previous section.

If we ask why the implicit monotheism of these traditions is not always recognized by their adherents, the answer surely lies in the way in which they often accept uncritically the way in which many modern monotheists—including philosophers of religion—interpret their own monotheism in terms comparable to that which I have noted in the work of Richard Swinburne, for whom "the most elementary claim of theism" is that "God is a person, yet one without a body."[84] This statement represents one of the more extreme examples of a widespread assumption that has been criticized by David Bentley Hart, who says that many contemporary philosophers of religion "have effectively broken with classical theistic tradition, adopting a

83 Hart, *The Experience of God*, 29–30.

84 Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 1n1.

style of thinking that the Dominican philosopher Brian Davies calls theistic personalism."[85]

It is not only analytic philosophers of religion who tend to think in terms of theistic personalism, however, but also, in an inchoate way, the majority of ordinary adherents of the monotheistic faith traditions, for whom reliance on the scriptures of their tradition leads to a reliance on "proof texts" that reflects the "fruit juicer" methodology employed by analytic philosophers. One aspect of the problematical nature of this is, as we have seen, the monopolytheism of much monotheistic belief, which may be partly understood in terms of the historical development of the Abrahamic monotheistic traditions as revealed by historical-critical Biblical study.

These kinds of theological and historical factors are often underestimated or even ignored by those whose prime training has been in analytic philosophy rather than in theology, and this poses a major challenge to much current work in the analytic philosophy of religion. However, to observe the nature of this challenge is not to suggest that philosophical perspectives are to be ignored. Rather, it is to indicate that philosophical perspectives must be informed by theological considerations if they are not to lead us astray. This means that, if philosophers of religion have a role to play in helping overcome the barriers that exist between adherents of different faith traditions, this will require expansion of their horizons beyond the "purely philosophical" kind of "fruit juicer" analysis that at present tends to characterize their discipline.

Such an expansion requires not only a greater awareness of the kind of radical apophaticism that Lossky has advocated but also a sense of the

85 Hart, *The Experience of God*, 127–128. Hart goes on to observe that this theistic personalism seems "to involve a view of God not conspicuously different from the polytheistic picture of the gods as merely very powerful discrete entities who possess a variety of distinct attributes that lesser entities also possess, if in smaller measure […]. It is a way of thinking that suggests that God, since he is only a particular instantiation of various concepts and properties, is logically dependent on some more comprehensive reality embracing both him and other beings. For philosophers who think in this way, practically all the traditional metaphysical attempts to understand God as the source of all reality become impenetrable […]. It is a way of thinking that suggests that God, since he is only a particular instantiation of various concepts and properties, is logically dependent on some more comprehensive reality embracing both him and other beings. For philosophers who think in this way, practically all the traditional metaphysical attempts to understand God as the source of all reality become impenetrable. (This critique reflects in part the kind of critique offered by other philosophers, including ground of being theists such as Paul Tillich.)

potential inherent in all forms of religious pluralism, whether expressed in neo-perennialist terms or otherwise. This will open philosophers up—in a way that is rare at present—to the ways in which philosophical perspectives from other faith traditions might sometimes illuminate those of their own. Once again, it is the Eastern Orthodox scholar, David Bentley Hart, who perhaps points the way forward in terms of methodology, when he comments that the Vedantic thought of Sankara might throw important light on the thinking of one of the most influential Christian authors of the patristic era, Maximus the Confessor, while "the whole rationality of the Christian tradition […] entails and requires a kind of metaphysical monism that has only sporadically manifested itself in the tradition, but that certain schools of Vedanta (not to mention certain schools of Sufism) have explored with unparalleled brilliance."[86]

Conclusion

These comments—on the way in which philosophers of religion need to expand their discipline by taking multi-faith considerations into account in an interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary way—are not, however, the main point that I have sought to articulate in this paper.[87] For monotheists, in particular, I have sought to express the way in which neo-perennialism—when combined with the other factors that I have outlined in relation to the "implicit" monotheism of some non-theistic and polytheistic traditions—provides a way of seeing these traditions in a new light. In this light, there are significant challenges to the way in which these traditions are often assumed by monotheists to deny the reality of the "one, true God" and are therefore to be regarded as invalid. I have also sought, in all that I have said, to challenge the tendency among many—whether monotheists or

86 David Bentley Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse* (Baker Academic, 2022),183.

87 The meaning of this term "transdisciplinary" has been explored in Basarab Nicolescu, *Manifesto of Transdisciplinarity*, trans. Karen-Claire Voss (State University of New York, 2002). Its general meaning is, however, not tied to Nicolescu's particular approach. The term seems to have been first used in the 1970's to advocate an approach to psychology that is not limited to recognizing the interactions or reciprocities between specialized fields of research. Rather, it locates these links inside a total system without stable boundaries between those fields. This understanding has now been expanded to incorporate the interaction of any two disciplines. Implicit in this approach is a more flexible attitude towards the accepted boundaries and methodology of each discipline than is usual in interdisciplinary work—in many ways the present paper represents a transdisciplinary approach.

otherwise—to interpret monotheistic belief in terms of the kind of theistic personalism that has tended to eclipse what radical monotheism should properly be.[88]

This is not to say that theistic personalism needs to be seen as inappropriate at every stage of monotheists' spiritual lives. In my development of neo-perennialist perspectives in *ERP*, I have stressed that notions of this kind may properly be seen as an aspect of what perennialists have called the exoteric "means" or "methods" that assist people as signposts on their spiritual pathway, especially near its beginning. Indeed, only those who are somewhat advanced on that pathway are likely to recognize the need to re-think what may well have been helpful to them in that pathway's earlier stages. I caution, nevertheless, that what may legitimately be seen as a kind of spiritually helpful, scripturally-oriented "folk theology"—functioning as set of signposts along the pathways associated with the monotheistic traditions, especially near their beginning—is not adequate for anyone who seeks to contribute to theological understanding at a deeper level. In particular—as this paper has indicated in relation to the defects of theistic personalism—trying to combine "folk-theology" with complex philosophical reasoning in the manner of analytic philosophers of religion will only rarely produce real insight. It is more likely, in fact, to lead to the phenomenon of what people in computer programming circles characterize as "garbage in, garbage out."

The main purpose of this paper is not, however, to articulate the requirements of an adequate philosophy of religion, important as that is. At the heart of its purpose has been—as I mentioned in my introduction—to give to those many religious believers, who already quasi-instinctively believe or suspect that there is "one mountain but many paths to the summit," a plausible theoretical justification for accepting that pluralistic analogy.

Even without such a justification, the analogy remains a useful one because we can all clearly understand the way in which, geographically, a mountain may be approached from the surrounding lowlands by many

88 As Paul Tillich once put it in his *The Courage to Be*, monotheists need to re-think the kind of "theological theism" many of them hold and recognize what he calls "the paradoxical character of every prayer, of speaking to somebody to whom you cannot speak because he is not 'somebody', of asking somebody of whom you cannot ask anything because he gives or gives not before you ask, of saying 'thou' to somebody who is nearer to the I than the I is to itself" (Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (Collins-Fontana, 1962), 181). This last comment is reminiscent of the Quranic statement that "We created man—We know that his soul whispers to him: We are closer to him than his jugular vein" (50: 15–18).

paths that start from different locations. These locations will inevitably lie in different directions from the mountain, so that the compass directions of the earlier stages of each path will necessarily be different. This means that someone starting from north of the mountain, for example, and travelling southwards towards it, need not see the northward direction of those starting from a location south of the mountain as misguided because this orientation is different from their own. In much the same way, even when the mountain's slopes have been reached, there may still be different paths to the summit in order to avoid particular difficulties that will be encountered on the mountain's different sides.

This analogy, even on its own, can make it plausible that loyalty towards one's own faith tradition, and to the spiritual path that it offers, need not preclude the possibility that eventually, at the end of one's spiritual journey, one will meet others who have journeyed by different paths towards the same destination. Analogies can only, however, take us so far, and on their own can easily be dismissed as wishful thinking. Only the neo-perennialist distinction between the esoteric and exoteric aspects of any faith tradition can, in my judgement, allow us to go beyond wondering whether this might be the case, and to develop a coherent theological understanding of why more than one pathway exists.

Christopher C. Knight *is an archpriest of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Before his retirement he was the Executive Secretary of the International Society for Science and Religion and is now a Senior Research Associate of the Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies in Cambridge, England. He is the author of five books and of over 70 book chapters and articles in refereed journals.*

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