

# Exclusivist Approach to Hinduism and Islam: A Critique

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Modern scholarship seems to have misunderstood the most important facet of life, viz. religion. Modern man seems to be constitutively incapable of understanding and living religion. Secularism as the defining feature of modern *weltanschauung* can't but misappropriate traditional religion and mysticism. Modern science and scientific methodology is the prime culprit in this misappropriation of traditional religion. Modern psychology, sociology and anthropology with their methodological and philosophical commitments are the prime examples of the application of reductionist-rationalist-secularist methodology and philosophy of science that are responsible for misunderstanding of religion. This analysis proposes a critique of exclusivist interpretation of Islam and Hinduism that is more or less the standard interpretation amongst the scholars as well as most theologians from the metaphysical perspective. We will discuss the standard exclusivist interpretation which is quite representative of the same position. This is the interpretation that is generally taken for granted and with slight modification is discernable in most scholarly and journalistic works. And we shall see that there is hardly any scope for tolerance and fruitful dialogue between these two religions except as a matter of political exigency if this interpretation is accepted.

This paper claims that the best authorities that deserve to be heard on comparative religions are little known traditionalist metaphysicians (who are philosophers not as ordinarily understood in the Western philosophical tradition but in the sense that Plato and Shankara are philosophers or more precisely metaphysicians). The problem that must be acknowledged here is that traditional metaphysics, which is unearthed as the unifying intellectual content of religions, is not an ordinary philosophical discipline or theoretical inquiry; it is a veritable special science, a realizational science of the supra-phenomenal that needs intellection or intellectual intuition or poetic vision which, in turn, demands ethical discipline. This is something of which modern profane enquiries are ignorant. It is open for all who are prepared to undergo the necessary intellectual and ethical training. It is the science that takes as its data the universal experience of sages, mystics and prophets and is not a merely rational inquiry.

Another difficulty is that most of the traditionalist metaphysicians are very obscure authors. Mastering it needs a deep familiarity with mythologies, theologies, philosophies, cosmologies and a host of other sciences of the traditional world. A quite complex jargon or terminology has to be mastered for the same. Besides, perennial philosophy or traditional metaphysics is quite alien to modern Western theological, philosophical and other scientific discourses – much of what goes by the name of humanistic discourse current in modern universities – that have won more or less global acceptance. The thought currents of both modernity and postmodernity that are taken as normative or standard one by most scholars are quite divergent to this

traditionalist perspective. However, it has attracted certain towering figures of the twentieth century and does now claim a respectable though restricted following in the world. Its champions Rene Guenon (Abdul Wahid Yaha), Frithjof Schuon (Isa Nuruddin) and Ananda Coomaraswamy are acknowledged intellects, metaphysicians of the highest caliber. It is difficult to translate and appropriate difficult and obscure (for a modern audience) conceptions of traditionalist scholars in an idiom that will be too easily comprehended. So certain obscurity in our following study for certain class of readers is unavoidable.

### **Organized set of Beliefs**

It should, first of all, be made clear before any comparative analysis as to what do we mean by religion. Most exclusivist interpretations reduce religion to theology and thus make it a set of beliefs or dogmas and rituals. A distinction between faith and belief and theology and metaphysics (as maintained by such scholars of comparative religion as Frithjof Schuon) is not maintained. The supraformal essence, the meta-physical core or the unifying esoteric dimension of religions that alone captures the highest truth of religion's doctrinal or dogmatic expression goes to the background in such analyses. Most modernist psychological or sociological reductionist approaches are guilty of this fallacy. A comparative study based on Durkheim's - one of the prime architects of modern sociology - definition of religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden - beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them" quoted by many a modern scholar must end in some sort of exclusivist interpretation. It is universally accepted that at the plane of theology, religions are not comparable but sharply divergent in their pattern of beliefs. It is traditional metaphysics that translates theological dogmas in terms of intellectual (metaphysical) assertions that dissolves the limiting boundaries of dogmas that provides the solid basis for comparative study. The defining characteristics of religion are enumerated in non-mystical or non-metaphysical comparative studies as : a) It is an organized system of beliefs; b) It has well entrenched distinction of the sacred and the profane; c) It has one or several sacred books; c) It has a founder.

### **Essence of religion**

Then they proceed to apply the criteria to evaluate Hinduism and Islam and claim that Islam (and not Hinduism) fulfils all the criteria and Hinduism none of them. We must however note that religion is primarily faith and not belief and at the plane of metaphysics and realization (both mystical and metaphysical) it is gnosis or knowledge rather than a passive acceptance or belief in one or more propositions. *Faith and belief* are distinguishable and it is faith which is the essence of religion and common denominator of all religions, including Hinduism and Islam. W.C. Smith has argued this point in detail in his classic *Faith and Belief*. Mysticism which is the inner dimension of religion is best characterized as faith and not belief. The essence of religion isn't expressible by any proposition. As one Muslim philosopher has put it "*Iman* is not a passive belief in one or more propositions but vital appropriation of whole universe."<sup>1</sup>

Faith is something a propositional supra-linguistic or pre-linguistic phenomenon. It is best described as an attitude rather than a belief in a proposition.

Exoterically speaking, we could say that religion is an organized system of beliefs. Hinduism can't be an exception. Doctrines or dogmas are key elements in all religions. This can't be a distinguishing feature of any particular religion (such as Islam for instance). Form (or *Sharia* or belief system) is associated with every religion and it is form that gives it distinction and substance or *Din* is one and eternal and immutable. There are many approaches to religion that maintain that substance or the core or the essence of all religions is one. It is the perennialist approach that puts forward this thesis most consistently and with full justice to their theological differences. Thus Hinduism and Islam are comparable, not only at the inner or mystical-metaphysical level where they are expressible in each other's terms but also to a great extent at the theological plane which however is falling away from pure meta-physical plane but nonetheless translatable in metaphysical terms. (Rene Guenon, the great French metaphysician and progenitor of the perennialist approach, has clarified the relationship between meta-physics and theology in his monumental work, *An Introduction to the Study of Hindu Doctrines*). This is what the perennialists have done and we will be discussing the same with reference to Frithjof Schuon (Isa Nuruddin), the great exponent of metaphysical school.

### **The Sacred in Islam**

In all religions a distinction is made between the sacred and the profane but this distinction remains a provisional one and is obliterated at the realizational plane where the One is realized. All is *Brahman* in Hinduism as one pierces the veil of *maya* or everything is permeated by God as He is immanent in the world. So it is an unwarranted point that Islam in contrast to Hinduism has a sharp demarcation between the realms of the sacred and the profane as one of the upholders of exclusivist thesis has argued. For Islam the distinction between the sacred and the profane or religious and the secular hardly exists. The whole of the realm of Manifestation is essentially sacred, the sign of God, in Islam. Life or existence as such is divine, sacred, holy. Eternity is here and now. "Time is God" as the Prophet of Islam has declared.

### **Islam and Earlier Faiths**

Amongst the most repeated theses that are used to strengthen the case for exclusive interpretation is that Islam has a founder unlike Hinduism. This is not true. Islam declares itself to be synonymous with natural, primordial religion of Man or Adam (who stands for the primordial man). Whole existence is Muslim according to Islam. Adam and the great succession of Prophets had one religion – the religion of Islam. Hindu Rishis and "prophets" though unnamed in the Quran can't stand outside the prophetic cycle of Islam as every nation has been blessed by a prophet according to the *Quran*. Rama, Krishna, Manu – all have been appropriated in Islamic succession of Prophets though there is a scope for questioning this appropriation also. Islam in that sense is as ancient as Hinduism claims to be. To assert that Islam isn't the name of a religion, a religion among other religions is simply a Western orientalist fallacy. Islam refers to itself as *al-Din*, a term which has very little in common with

the term 'religion' as ordinarily understood in modern discourse. *Al-Din* is not an aspect of life that could be demarcated from such things as history and culture. Islam encompasses everything because it is the way of life. It is indeed synonymous with very life or existence. It is an attitude of submission to God's will. It is natural living. It is innocence of becoming; it is gratitude to God, to the existence itself. It emphasizes ortho-praxis more than the orthodoxy and this could be a meeting ground with all other religions as the Quran itself makes clear in its call to the People of the Book to accept the common points. Belief in God and righteous works save, and all religions including non-theistic religions concede a belief in the divinity of Self or Principle of Existence. Functionally *nirvana*, heaven, liberation or moksha and God are synonymous terms as Stace has argued in his *Time and Eternity* and the perennialists too argue the same point from a slightly different perspective. Belief in personal God and impersonal Godhead characterizes both Hinduism and Islam. This point will be discussed in a little detail later.

## God in Hinduism

The following observations made about Hinduism by one scholar who holds the exclusionist thesis apply perfectly to Islam and one could well argue that Islam isn't a designation of a specific community but stands for primordial tradition or religiosity as such. It is *Sannatan Dharma* (True Religion) in the real sense of the term. "One of the reasons for not giving any name to the religion practiced by those who were called Hindu, in the words of Bankim Chandra Chatterji, was that" whereas for other people religion is only a part of life, there are things religious and things which are secular. To the Hindu, his relation to God and his relation to man, his spiritual life and his temporal life, form an integral whole".<sup>2</sup> It is well known that Islam is integral in its outlook. There is no distinction between the temporal and the spiritual life, between the Church and the State, between this and that compartment of life and for a Sufi even between this and the other world when the contemplation is fixed. Islam includes everything, sacred and profane, religious and secular in its ambit, so by definition it is the Universe.

## Islam as Sanatan Dharama

Islamic Universalism is a well recognized fact. It could well be said that it is nameless because it is primordially nameless tradition itself and necessarily includes all revealed holy books or revelations in its ambit. Inter-textuality of both its "founder" Muhammad (PBUH) who claimed only to testify other revelations and prophets, named or unnamed in the Quran, that have preceded him and who described Islam only as a remembrance, a *zikr*, not something new or original in the history of religions, as well as of its holy book - the Quran - that is essentially an "inter-text" of all previous holy texts and even the text of Nature, of *anfus* (inner universe) and *aafaq* (outer universe) is too evident to need an argument. There is nothing inside the text of the Quran which isn't outside it also. *Jibril*, the archangel who brought the Quran to the Prophet of Islam, is none other than Universal Intellect in the traditionalist metaphysical perspective. The Quran is a monologue of the Self. It is inscribed in our hearts and the intellect. The following quote from Shri Chandrashekharendra Sarasvati describing Hinduism appears

to be description of Islam as well: "Other religions didn't exist before the time of their founders. Ours is a religion which existed long before the founded religions. Obviously it was the only religion in the world ministering to the spiritual needs of the mankind as a whole; there was no second religion from which it was required to be distinguished. Hence, there was no need for a name for it. It was and even now continues to be nameless." Islam, as the *Sannatan Dharma*, has been there since eternity. It is perennial and had no beginning in time in the sense that it had no founder. Adam – the first Muslim, could well be both historical as well as meta-historical entity, designating man as such. Man is created on *Din-al-fitrat* (loosely to be translated as natural religion. Ed.) which is none other than the primordial *Din* or what Hinduism calls *Sannatan Dharma*.

## **God in Vedas**

If Hinduism is Vedic Dharma or *Sannatan Dharma* and not merely a geographical term then it is comparable to Islam. The term Hinduism stands for nothing or for everything if interpreted in geographical terms. It is only by reducing Islam to some sort of Mohammedanism or last mani-festation or concretization of its perennial tradition or spirit in the seventh century A.D. that one could argue that Islam has a founder or is a religion with some definite historical date attached to it. But this is unwarranted reduction as it falsifies both perennality and universality of *al-Din* which Islam calls itself. The Quran like the Vedas is uncreated. The Vedas signify God knowledge and the term God is used to highlight the fact that they are *apallrsheya*, that is, not created by anyone and are eternal and revealed. The Quran, as orthodox Muslim theology believes, is uncreated in this sense of the term. It is God's speech and God's speech can't be merely temporal historical thing.

Many scholars who hold exclusionist thesis hold that the Vedas have no implication concerning God. This is the assertion that smacks of bad metaphysics from the perennialist viewpoint. Personal God or *Ishwara* may well be denied or only accepted as lower determination of the Beyond-Being or *Nirguana Brhaman* ( *unqualified God or attributeless Divinity*) in Vedantic perspective but that doesn't mean crass atheism of Charvaks (heterodox materialistic sect of philosophers in India) and the modern West that absolutizes relativity. The Vedas like all religious scriptures are centered on God — God as Absolute not as some hypostatic determination of the Absolute as Being – but the same God appears as person or Lord in relation to the creation. Monotheistic theologies may not closely attend to the distinction between personal and impersonal aspects of the divine or have a tendency to reduce God the Absolute to *Ishwara*. But that doesn't mean that this could be taken as standard position of Islam as such.

## **Islam and interpretation of truth**

There is hardly any such thing as orthodoxy in Islam. As such, there is no official excommunicating authority in Islam. There is no Church in Islam. This is not to deny that serious doctrinal differences may not result in practical excommunication of a person from the fold of Islam. But there is always a scope for appropriating this or that kind of heterodoxy

in Islam. Ibn Arabi's *Wajudi* or Unitarian interpretation of Islam (that admits God or Absolute Being as the only reality, as the essence of existence, popularly called as *wahdatul wujud* or oneness of Being and misperceived by some as pantheism) has been appropriated in traditional orthodox Islam. Orthodoxy of Sufism has also been generally accepted and it is the meeting point between Hinduism and Islam (although one must qualify that Sufism is esoteric or inner dimension of Islam and as such inseparable from Islamic framework. It isn't to be confused with Vedantic Islam or Islam in Vedantic dress). Rumi's Unitarian (as distinguished from dualist monotheistic exoteric Islamic) perspective has also been well appropriated in orthodox terms. One qualifies as a Muslim by just declaring *shahadah* and one may not practically follow this or that dictate of Islam (in conduct, in rituals etc.) without being expelled from the fold of Islam. Even those who are guilty of the most serious crime of *shirk* in the eyes of certain Wahabbis haven't been traditionally expelled from the fold of Islam.

Islam has shielded diverse theological, mystical and philo-sophical schools in its history. Its tradition is far more catholic than usually conceded. The catholicity of Sufism is well known and if we grant that Sufism is indeed the esoteric dimension of Islam and not an alien growth on its soil we hardly need to argue for universalism or catholicity of Islam. Some passages of Ibn Arabi would appropriate even non-theists and seeming atheists in the salvific scheme. In fact, much to the delight of many ecumenists, Islam transcends theistic/non-theistic binary. Islam is acceptance of truth in its widest sense. It isn't an interpretation of truth despite the claim of exclusivists to the contrary. Islam doesn't talk about truth but talks truth. It is witnessing the truth and that truth is the truth of Infinite and All-Possibility. The Quran identifies God as *Al-Haqq* or the Real. Truth has no face; it has infinite aspects. Whatever partakes of the reality or truth is affirmed in Islamic *shahadah* (There is no god but God) which is translated by the Sufis and perennialists as "There is no reality but Reality," or "There is no truth but Truth" – God being identified with Truth, Reality. For Ibn Arabi God is Being, Existence, the Totality and nothing really exists except God. God is thus not to be identified with a more or less anthro-pomorphic image of a person, the familiar creator God of theism, but the Absolute, the One. One can even translate Islamic *kalima* in Buddhist terms as "There is no permanence except in the Permanent." Properly understood in metaphysical terms rather than at a purely theological plane) Islamic *kalima* subsumes all fundamental enunciations of metaphysical truth in all traditions. It is all-inclusive definition and subsumes not only the 73 sects as Rumi would say but all other than Islamic formulations of creed that the traditional world has known. It expresses the essence of *ad-Din* of Islam. It explains the purport of such claims of the Quran that God is the Manifest truth and can't be doubted. God is both the Outward and the Inward, or 'what is' in Ibn Arabi's and Krishnamurti's terms. None can afford to be ignorant of God and afford to live really. "We live and move and have our being in God." Islam means surrender to God, Truth and Reality, for God is *Al-Haqq*. It is too inclusive to be guilty of any exclusion which Foucault and others fear. Thus Islam shields a great heterogeneity and the image of pure monolithic homogenous traditional Islam isn't vindicated by its history, the protest from certain ultra orthodox sections notwithstanding. To be a Muslim is to be in a placeless place and on a trackless track. He declares with Rumi (who is generally recognized by the orthodoxy as one of the greatest representatives of esoterism) as:

I have put duality away, I have seen that the two worlds are one;  
One I seek, One I know, One I see, One I call.  
He the First, He the Last, He the outward, He the inward;  
I know none other except 'Ya Hu' and 'Ya man Hu.'  
I am intoxicated with Love's cup, the two worlds have passed out of my ken..  
*Divani Shamsi Tabrizi* (trans. R. A Nicholson)

And beholds with Shabisri (the great medieval Sufi who is remembered for his famous work, *Gulshan-i- Raz* (*The Secret Rose Garden*))  
....the world mingled together  
Angel with demons, Satan with the Archangel  
All mingled like seed and fruit  
Infidel with faithful, and faithful with infidel  
All the point of the present [which alone is real for Sufis] are gathered  
All cycles and seasons day, month and year  
World at beginning is world without end.  
(As translated and quoted in W.N. Perry's *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom* (1979))

## **The Meaning of Universe**

The Quran describes itself as *zik*, a remembrance. Man is only called to remember that he was and is in the heaven and that heaven is here and now; salvation is in this moment – in surrender and acceptance of innocence of becoming. We have come from heaven and are in heaven; we only need to be conscious of this and for that only revelation interferes and proclaims man back to Eden, back to his Origin, to source, which is emptiness or *Sunyata* or God. That centre is Nothingness. The Sufis call it *fana*, as all thought constructs, the mind and the ego (associated with different narratives and ideologies) are transcended. We are asked to recall our Covenant with God made in pre-eternity. It excludes nothing because then it willn't be equated with Reality or Truth. So it is not one grand narrative among other possible grand narratives; it is, to use Marxist phrase, base because it is synonymous with existence, life and being. The whole existence or universe is Muslim by virtue of its very existence. Tree is religious because it exists and thus fulfills the divine command to be.<sup>3</sup> Man is only asked to be himself and 'not be alienated from himself.' This is the meaning of monotheistic rejection of idolatry.

## **The Quran and perception of unity**

It has been argued by the upholders of exclusionist thesis that "Hinduism and Islam don't have any commonalities with respect to the concept of person, God and the theory of creation." This assertion is what we seek to problematize here.

It is only on the unwarranted privileging of the dualist exoteric literalist reading of the scripture that one can argue that there is an essential difference between God and man. Man's nothingness in the face of God asserted in Islam has been widely misunderstood. It is argued

that in contrast to such traditions as Hinduism that have divinized man that in Islam man is a mortal individual and nothing compared to God who is far removed from him and has made man from clay and is clay, by implication. This assumes a prior absolutization of servant-Lord polarity or axis for viewing the relationship between man and God to the exclusion of other relationships between Absolute and relative. He doesn't take God to be the Absolute and man to be relative but reduces Absolute to Creator and theomorphic man to merely a puny little creature, a sinner in exile thrown out of the garden of Eden on account of primordial sin. It is because of ignorance of the full significance of the notion of Beyond-Being or supra-personal Reality which if properly understood comes very close to Hindu conception of *Parmatma* (and Godhead. More of it later). Islamic narrative of genesis has been read so as to make the case for its disagreement with Hinduism. It is claimed that the Fall of Adam has resulted in his being "remorseful about his being, his very existence and has to continually look for his redemption with the help of an outside agency. The consequence of such a view is that a person's outlook towards his own self is one of incompleteness and full of self condemnation and self pity." Man is dust or nothing in the Islamic perspective indeed but this applies only to man as body or as soul and not as Spirit. The picture of man as developed in Sufi view of man is quite close to the Hindu view of the same. The first premise of the doctrine of unity to which Rumi and Ibn Arabi adhered is the vision of God in man, be it male (Shams in case of Rumi) or female (Nizam in case of Ibn Arabi) before which one feels one's nothingness. It is after this vision of God, and love for it, that one strives to attain God Himself and finally becomes His vision, His proof (Ali), His testimony, *Shahid* (Hallaj) or His manifestation (Ibn Arabi), the perfect man. God and the world/man according to the Quran aren't two poles apart. God is the other, the ideal pole of man as far as the latter is the Spirit or the abode of the Spirit (God having breathed the Spirit in him) as pointedly argued by Shuja-al-Haq in his *Forgotten Vision*. Man as an ego or soul, as creature is of course not one with God. Ibn Arabi for whom God is the essence of all existence including man was nevertheless emphatic in maintaining that man can never become God and vice versa. Islam rejects *hulul* in no uncertain terms. It is only when the ego is gone in the experience of fana and only God remains that *An'al Haq* (I am the truth) can be asserted. In fact, this claim is made by the Spirit which is in man but is not his. The Quran's conception of Unity perceives 'both God and the man as the two aspects of reality by underlying the apparent duality of God and the world/man on the one hand and their essential oneness on the other. This is best manifested in the Quranic conception of Jesus, who was a man like any other human being but he was at the same time the word of God (*kalimatullah*) or the one in whom God had breathed His own spirit (*Ruhullah*).' The Sufi conception of the perfect man or *Insan-i-Kamil* also problematizes the absolutization of man-God polarity. The question of man's relation to God is better approached from the Absolute-relative rather than the Lord-creature framework as the perennialist metaphysicians have argued. Theological controversies are resolvable at the metaphysical plane and it is losing sight of this point that has contributed to unwarranted dualistic polemical quibbles between different theological schools and between Hindus and Muslims. The Quran emphasizes both God's trans-cendence as well as His immanence in creation (man/world). A typical verse in this connection is "Nothing is like Him and He is the Hearing, the Seeing." We will discuss Islamic conception of man which exclusionists such as Vohra find radically different from Hindu conception that posits man as children of immortal bliss, the abode of Brahman, the very Brahman, the essence of universe, supreme,



immortal, infinite having the attributes of *sat-chit-ananda* (truth or existence, consciousness, bliss). Islamic (Sufi) conception of man will be discussed with reference to Ibn Arabi to show how unwarranted is the thesis that Hindu and Islamic conception are radically different.

### **Ibn Arabi's Perception**

For Ibn Arabi, it is through man that God knows Himself. He is like God, since he embodies the character traits of God. Man is the locus wherein the divine names are disclosed "Whenever we ascribe any quality to Him, we are ourselves [representative of] that quality, except it be the quality of His Self-sufficient Being. Since we know Him through ourselves we attribute to Him all we attribute to ourselves ... If we witness Him we witness ourselves and when He sees us He looks on Himself. Man is His form and God is his spirit. Man is in relation to Him as his physical body is to his self. Man for the Reality is what pupil is for the eye, through which God sees His creation, according to Ibn Arabi. And again, man is to the cosmos as the seal is to the king, it 'being that place whereon is engraved the token with which the king seals his treasure. So he is called vice-Regent, for by him God preserves His creation as the seal preserves the king's treasure.' According to Ibn Arabi man in his essence is one with God, for nothing is outside God. Only he has to become conscious of this fact and realize that beneath his outer form is the sanctuary of God. According to Ibn Arabi God is in a way dependent on man for it is only through him that he knows Himself. Man is the realization of the desire or longing on part of the Reality, which sought to be known as God. This is the purport of a famous tradition (though its authenticity has been questioned by *hadees* scholarship but it well expresses the fundamental metaphysical truth of radiation of the Good) that the Sufis are fond of quoting which says that God is a hidden treasure and desired to be known. God for Ibn Arabi is the Self-manifesting Subject and the object of that manifestation. The perfect man of Ibn Arabi embodies the wholeness of the Reality, or as he put, being 'the absolute vassal of the Name Allah, he is in a way Absolute himself. He is the inner reality of the Absolute. Ibn Arabi states "When a man realizes God in the sense of 'I am his hearing and his sight', this station justifies the attribution to him of whatever is attributed to God." In the perfect man microcosm and the macrocosm become one through inner reality. He is the part and the whole. The universe turns round him. According to Ibn Arabi the world is sustained through the perfect men. For they are in God and God is in them. He is the Quran. Thus, man far from being a little puny creature made of clay, a miserable finite being, a sinner or condemned to exile is the epitome or crown of creation, the proof of God, potentially God in his inward essence. He is the pole of existence. The perfect man is eternal, pure, awakened and free self. The perfect man can well declare. "There is nothing superior to man in the universe." There is no 'other' to the perfect man.

While highlighting the differences between Islamic and Hindu concepts of creation, it is said that in Hinduism God doesn't create man from clay or from any other material and women from man. He himself takes many forms. The world is eternal and isn't created from nothing. Schuon answers this by asserting that the idea of creation *ex nihilo* isn't opposed to the idea of creative emanation. God's creating man from clay isn't to be understood literally and exoterically. It is Lucifer who believed that man is clay. Eve isn't first woman who was literally fashioned out of Adam's rib. These things are better understood non-literally and that also

allows us to bridge the gulf between Hindu and Islamic accounts. We will now discuss Schuon's translation of Muslim theology in Vedantic terms to show how Hinduism and Islam though theologically divergent are comparable at deeper metaphysical plane.

### ***Atman and Maya***

Schuon critiques Muslim exoterism (which has sustained exclusivist view) on various accounts, especially its conception of God, its exclusivist claim, its anthropomorphism, its practicing of bad metaphysics and appropriates such Hindu conceptions as *Maya* (the notion of illusoriness of the world, understood by the perennialists as Divine Relativity, *Paramatma*, polytheism, reincarnation; identification of *Atman* with *Brahman*, monistic "pantheism" and its Unitarian outlook in perennialist traditionalist or Islamic Sufi terms and critiques Muslim theologian's rejection of them on mystical and metaphysical grounds. This will now be briefly discussed.

Schuon is very critical of Muslim scholasticism for not distinguishing between Being and Beyond-Being and not giving due concession to the idea of *Maya*. "The great weakness of the protagonists of *kalam* is to apply anthropomorphism to what in God most completely eludes being made anthropomorphic namely Beyond-Being with its ontological self determination, namely Being which creates, reveals and saves. This is to confuse, in the absence of the notion of *Maya*, two totally different Divine subjectivities, the first corresponding to *paramatma* and the second to *Ishwara* or even to *Buddhi*, according to the degree envisaged; and it is this lamentable confusion that constitutes the characteristic infirmity of Asharism in particular and of *kalam* in general or even of all doctrinal exoterism, to one degree or other."<sup>4</sup>

By admitting all differentiations within the Divinity, whether it is the question of hypostatic degree or qualities, or of energies Schuon isn't much disturbed by the phenomenon of polytheism; he, instead, emphatically rejects any paganization that it may come to have. He points out that "Original polytheism envisages Divinity both as *Atma* and as a function of *Maya*, it becomes pagan only when it forgets *Atma* and attributes absoluteness to diversity and thus to relativity."<sup>5</sup> It is in according for presence of evil that the above qualification of traditional theology become indispensable. Critiquing Asharism he argues that it is impossible to practice integral metaphysics on the basis of axioms treated apart from the key concept of *Maya*.<sup>6</sup>

Exoterism is also accused of indulging in bad metaphysics. "Intellectually speaking, the mental weakness of Ashari consists in humanizing the Absolute, in speaking of omnipotence when it is a question of All-Possibility and in attributing to omnipotence an individual and almost juristic character."<sup>7</sup>

### **Mohammad (PBUH) as Avtara**

Schuon, attempting to find the equivalents or analogues of Hindu conception of avatars (divine incarnations) in Islam, argues that "Muhammad was not and could not be an *Avatara*; but this is not really the question because it is perfectly obvious that Islam is not Hinduism and

notably excludes any idea of incarnation (*hulu*); quite simply, and using Hindu terminology, which is the most direct or the least inadequate, we would reply that a certain Divine aspect took on under particular cyclic circumstances a particular earthly form, something in full conformity with what the Envoy of Allah testified as to his own nature, for he said 'He who has seen me has seen God' (*El Haqq*, 'The Truth'); 'I am He and He is I save that I am he who I am and He is He who He is'; 'I was a Prophet when Adam was still between water and clay (before the creation); 'I have been charged to fulfill my mission since the best of the ages of Adam (the origin of the world), from age to age down to the age in which I now am.'

In any case, if the attribution of divinity to an historical personage is repugnant to Islam, that is because its perspective is centered on the Absolute as such, as is shown for instance in the conception of the final leveling before the Judgment: God alone in this conception remains 'living' and all else is leveled in universal death including the supreme Angels, and so also even the 'Spirit' (Er-Ruh), the divine manifestation at the luminous centre of the cosmos.

It is natural that the upholders of Islamic exotericism (*fuqaha* or 'ulama *ezh-zahir* 'wise men of the outer order') should have an interest in denying the authenticity of those ahadith which refer to the avatic nature of the Prophet, but the very concept of the 'Spirit of Muhammad' (Ruh muhammadiyah)- Which is the Logos-proves the correctness of these ahadith, whatever their historic value, even if it were admitted that this latter might be doubted."<sup>8</sup>

### **The Vedantic Prescription**

The Quranic statement that God created 'by the Truth' is translated by Schuon in Vedantic terms. The world is an expression of the pure spirit, of pure 'Consciousness' (*Chit*) which objectifies itself in *Maya* through Being (*Sat*).<sup>9</sup> For Schuon Islam is the way of intelligence; it is simply objective perception of the Reality. Allah means Reality, Truth as such which both transcendent and immanent. Islam in its deepest meaning is 'that which is everywhere' And 'that which has always been'<sup>10</sup> and the Prophet represents both universality and primordality.<sup>11</sup> Perennialist perspective conceives Muhammad as Logos, as pole of existence, as one through whom God is known, manifested. *Muhammadu-Rasulullah* means that *Maya* isn't other than *Alma*, in its "not unreal" substance He is the perfect man. As a spiritual principle, the Prophet is not only the Totality of which we are separate parts or fragments; he is also the Origin in relation to which we are so many deviations. In other words, the Prophet as norm is not only the 'Whole Man' but also 'Ancient Man.' The term 'the Whole man' to existence, to perfection of 'being.'<sup>12</sup> Thus to be as Muslim doesn't require belief in a certain proposition, a certain narrative or an ideology. It transcends all linguistic and conceptual categories and thought constructions. Metaphysics isn't absolutization of certain viewpoint or aspect to the exclusion of other possible perspectives. It is the vision of totality of the Real as such and this is achieved by transcendence of merely rational faculty, by becoming a mirror that will reflect the truth, the Essence. Intuition of the mystic isn't subject to any critique such as that of deconstruction. It is pre-reflective pre-linguistic apprehension. Comte's definition and classification fails to capture the essence of religion.

According to Schuon, 'There is no God but God' means cosmic manifestation is illusory and meta cosmic Principle, which he calls as *Atma*, alone is real.

God is synonymous with Reality and Tawhid is unity of Reality in Sufistic perspective. As Schuon commenting on the verse God is the First and the Last, Inward and the Outward notes, "the Name Allah includes all that is and surpasses all that is."<sup>13</sup> In the heart we are united to pure Being and in the intellect to the total Truth, these two being coincident in the Absolute.<sup>14</sup> *La Ilaha illallah* (There is no God but God) means cosmic manifestation is illusory and the metacosmic Principle which Schuon calls as *Atma* alone is real.<sup>15</sup> This Vedantist phrasing he frequently uses. Vedantists say that 'the world is false, Brahma is true.' He translates *la illaha illal Lah* as "there is no reality save Reality" and interprets *Muhammad Rasullullah* as "the cosmos is the manifestation of Reality and "all things are *Atma*."<sup>16</sup> Manifestation does have a relative reality which reflects the Principle.<sup>17</sup> In terms of *Maya* and *Atma* he translates kalima as there is no *Atma* if it be not the one *Atma* and '*Maya* is the manifestation of *Atma*."<sup>18</sup> '*Tat twam Asi*' of Vedanta too gets easily appropriated from Muslim monistic or Unitarian or Sufi perspective. As he writes 'Brahma isn't the world.' But 'all things are *Atma*'; 'Brahma is true, the world is false' and 'He the delivered one, the *mukta*, is Brahman.' In these statements the "hole gnosis is contained just as it is also contained in the *Shahdah* or in two Testimonies."<sup>19</sup>

## Contradictions in Theology

Theology is bedeviled by contradictions or antinomies and esotericism comes to its rescue. Esoterism owns these contradictions by disowning logical and conceptual intellect as a way of knowing Reality in its essence. This is beautifully argued by Stace, a mystical philosopher in his works especially *Time and Eternity*. The East is quite at home in the world of contradictions. Exoterism has no direct access to Truth as it is unable to part with reason, logic and the like. The classical example of contradiction is the statement that God is all and God is nothing, the statements illustrating concepts of negative divine (Upanisadic *neti neti* or description of God by negatives) and the positive divine respectively. Islam emphasizes positive divine without denying the reality of the other term in the binary. Muslim exoterism has generally emphasized the positive divine to the exclusion of negative divine and ironically it has been unable to carry this emphasis to its logical conclusion unlike the *Wujudi* mystics of Islam.

Schuon also points out that against the Buddhist and Christian forms of Revelation which are founded on a humanization of the Divine — of the impersonal Divine in the first case and of the personal Divine in the second — in Islamic and Hindu traditions (as in Jewish tradition also) the Revelation essentially takes the form of Scripture. Hindu Avatarism doesn't alter this fact, for the Veda is prior to the Avatars, it is not they who create it so to speak.<sup>20</sup>

Schuon explains why and how God created the world (a very hard nut to crack for exoterism) quoting a sacred tradition "I was a hidden treasure and I wished to be known, so I created the world." He says that God projects Himself into relativity in order to "perceive Himself in relative mode. Moreover, this unfolding – on pain of being impossible is prefigured in *divinis*, whence the distinction between the Essence and the Qualities, the second referring in fact to Relativity. The ordinary monotheist theologies are hardly capable of giving adequate account of

theism, owing to the fact that they operate only with the utterly inadequate alternatives of the “created and the uncreated.” For these theologies there is only God and the world or the creator and the created, whereas in reality, there is first of all the Absolute and the relative, and then within Relativity itself, the Uncreated Creator, not the Uncreated in itself and all creation. The alternative in question could be transposed to the Divine level and the distinction between the “created” and the “Uncreated” expressed instead as a distinction between the “personal God” and the “impersonal Divinity”, and hence between “Being” and “Beyond-Being.”<sup>21</sup> (The Vedantic *Nirguna Brahman* corresponds to this Beyond-Being and *Saguna Brahman* to personal God of Islam.)

### **Bridging the Gulf**

Schunon has also attempted to bridge the gulf between Muslim and Hindu accounts of Creation. He tries to qualify traditional theistic conception of genesis that insists on the gratuity of creation and its non-eternality of the created/manifested realm. He deploys crucial notions of All-Possibility (metaphysical translation of theological notion of Omnipotence or the scriptural statements such as with God all things are possible or God has command over all things) and the analysis of Divine Nature to argue that the theological idea of creation *ex nihilo* (creation from nothing, as advocated by Muslim and Christian theologians) isn't opposed to the idea of creative emanation (in the Platonic-Vedantic worldview) and that the latter in fact explains the former.<sup>22</sup> He further explains: “It is by reducing the nature of the Universe to the exclusive relationship “Creator and creature” and so confining it in inescapable alternative, that one is prevented from being able to recognize that creation is necessary or rather that it is an aspect of necessity. . . . Universal Manifestation — creation, is nothing other than the out-flowing of a Divine Quality, goes beyond the alternative “Creator creature.” From this point of view, the world is none other than an aspect of *Atma*. *Maya* is Divine aspect mysteriously projected towards a nothingness which by definition never exists but which is always intimated; *Maya* is this intimation itself extending from Being down to the smallest of privations and the spatial void. The duality of “Creator and creature” is situated in *Maya*; *Atma* alone transcends it. Thus it isn't an imperfection for God to manifest Himself.”<sup>23</sup>

Schunon doesn't see any essential contradiction between Muslim and Hindu eschatologies unlike exoterism that finds them simply irreconcilable. He finds the meeting point between the monotheistic eschatology of Islam and Indian “transmigrationism” in the concepts of Limbo and Hell and also in the ‘resurrection of the flesh’ in which the being isn't however invested with a new individuality.<sup>24</sup> Ananda Coomaraswamy, Schunon and other perennialists reject popular animistic conception of rebirth as do they reject exotericist conception of afterlife, of perpetuity of hell or eternal damnation and monopoly of salvation.

Schunon points out that pantheism is the error of introducing the nature of *Atma-Maya* into the ‘Lord-servant polarity, or of denying that polarity on the very plane where it is real.’<sup>25</sup> Vedanta isn't guilty of this error, neither is Sufism. The essential transcendence of Divine Principle isn't denied by them. Sufism or Wujudi mysticism and Vedanta uncompromisingly maintains transcendence of God and can't be dubbed as pantheistic as has been done by

certain orientalists. Pantheism denies transcendence and identifies God with the world or believes only in His immanence in the world.

Thus we conclude that Hinduism and Islam though divergent theologically are still comparable with each other. Fundamentalism and exclusivism are ignorant of the pure truth of religion that is accessible to metaphysics and esotericism. Islam's fundamental claims of unity of revelation and thus of ad-Din and universality of prophecy and that Muslims are required to believe in all prophets are made comprehensible only through the perennialist mystico-metaphysical approach that reconciles the existing orthodox formulations of Hinduism and Islam. The generality of exoteric ulema are not familiar with the metaphysical grounding of their religion and thus unnecessarily led to absolutize the theological plane and thus the divergences in theologies of religions. Theologies can't but be different as they can't transcend the domain of sentiment and individuality. Only metaphysics transcends them and can claim universality.

### **Notes and References**

1. Vohra, Ashok. "Hinduism and Islam: Are They Comparable" paper presented in a seminar on Hinduism and Islam at Gokul, Mathura organized by Samvad (30-02- 10 2005) and published in the proceedings of the same pp108-117. This is a representative defense of exclusionist thesis and has been kept in the background in this paper.
2. Iqbal, M., *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* Ed. and Annot by Mohammad Saeed Sheikh, Adam Publishers and Distributors, Delhi, 1997. p.87.
3. All the references to Ibn Arabi and his quotes have been taken from Shuja Al Haq's *A Forgotten Vision: A Study of Human Spirituality* Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd. 1997. Chapter 4.
4. Schuon, Frithjof, *Islam & the Perennial Philosophy*, World of Islam Festival Publishing Company, 1976, p.141.

A few introductory remarks about the perennialist perspective are in order here. The traditionalist perennialist perspective began to be enunciated in the West at the beginning of the twentieth century by the French metaphysician Rene Guenon, although its precepts are considered to be timeless and to be found in all authentic traditions. It is also known as Perennialism, the Perennial Philosophy, Sophia perennis, or Religio Perennis or sometimes simply referred to as the traditionalist or metaphysical school. The term Philosophia Perennis goes back to the Renaissance, while the Hindu expression Sanatana Dharma - Eternal Doctrine -and the Islamic expression the javidani khird or al-hikmat al-khalidah has precisely the same signification. The other founding figures of the Traditionalist School were the German metaphysician Schuon and the Ceylonese scholar ananda Coomaraswamy. Philosophia perennis, to paraphrase the presentation of it by S. H. Nasr in *The Need For a Sacred Science* (SUNY,1993,p.54) pertains to a knowledge which has always been and will always be and which is of universal character both in the sense of existing among peoples of different climes and epochs and of dealing with universal principles. This knowledge which

is available to the intellect (which in the traditionalist perspective is a supra-individual faculty distinct from reason though the latter is its reflection on the mental plane) is, moreover, contained in the heart of all religions or traditions. At the heart of the *philosophia perennis* lies pure metaphysics understood as the science of Ultimate Reality and to be sharply distinguished from the subject bearing the name metaphysics in post-medieval Western philosophy. Revelation and intellection are the twin sources of metaphysical knowledge. The phenomena of religion, theology and mysticism is a falling from the intellectual purity of the doctrine, though religion has also been seen as an existential formulation of metaphysics rather than falling away from it. And it is not always possible to fully translate metaphysical doctrines in terms of theological dogmas. Only one example will suffice here. The immediate metaphysical truth "Being exists" gives rise to another proposition when expressed in the religious or theological mode "God exists." But as Guenon says the two statements would not be strictly equivalent except on the double condition of conceiving God as Universal Being, which is far from always being the case in fact (Tillich comes close to holding this view of God), and of identifying existence with pure Being or what the Sufis call *Zat* or Essence which is metaphysically inexact. Unlike purely metaphysical conceptions theological conceptions are not beyond the reach of individual variations. Antimetaphysical anthropomorphism comes to the fore in this realm of individual variations. (Rene Guenon, *An Introduction to the Study of Hindu Doctrines*, 2000 (1945) Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi, pp.128-129).

5. Ibid.p., 151.

6. Ibid.p., 142.

7. Ibid.p., 129.

8. Schuon, Frithjof, *Understanding Islam* .George Allen &Unwin, 1963,pp.90-91.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid p. 104.

11. Ibid.p., 104.

12. Ibid.p., 103.

13. Ibid.p., 126.

14. Ibid.p., 123 .

15. Ibid.p., 125.

16. Ibid.p., 106-107.

17. Ibid.p., 126.
18. Ibid.p., 142.
19. Ibid.p., 109.
20. Ibid.p., 58.
21. Ibid.p., 185-186.
22. Schuon, Frithjof. Dimensions of Islam trans. T.N. Townsend George Allen & Unwin, 1969, p. 153.
23. Schuon, Islam and the Perennial Philosophy, pp.132.
24. Ibid.p., 139.
25. Ibid.p., 51.