This paper takes up a question posed by Prof. Huston Smith (1988), one that he said was of “ongoing existential concern” for him: what is the status of conceptual schemata in the writings of perennialists like Schuon, Nasr, and himself?

In addressing the question, my perspective is limited to the perennialist quest for a unity of religions which transcends the differences of particular traditions. Through this effort perennialists intend, in Smith’s words, “to honor the world’s diversity without falling prey to relativism” (1989:13).

I submit that this question of status confronts perennialists with a challenging dilemma. If this dilemma is constructively faced, that can lead to a fruitful reassessment of perennialist claims. If it is not faced, the perennialist effort thwarts itself.

The question of status relates to a concept of hierarchy or degrees of reality. Smith has presented a useful sketch of such “degrees of reality”, in which at the highest, metaphysical level is infinite Godhead, touching the human faculty of Intellectus; and beneath that is the theological level: God, and the human response of faith in revelation; at the third, philosophical level are phena and the faculty of ratio; and at the lowest, scientific level is the physical world and sense-data analysis (1988). Elements of particular traditions which remain on the theological and philosophical levels are called “exoteric”; elements which reach the metaphysical level are called “esoteric” (1).

Within this conception of hierarchy, what is the status of the perennialist schemata which claim to articulate a transcendent unity of religions? Do they have metaphysical status, describing the infinite and thus transcending the expressions of particular cumulative traditions?

I argue that in the writings of perennialists there is confusion regarding the status of these schemata. This confusion results in excessive claims which
thwart, rather than further, the effort to "honor the world's diversity without falling prey to relativism".

The claim is made by perennialists that their schemata are reality-depicting, and that they are of privileged, metaphysical status.

I rely on Huston Smith for the claim that the perennial philosophy is reality-depicting: "To say it as clearly as I can: There is a Way that things fundamentally and unchangingly (metaphysically) are. Human collectivities have never been without a grasp of that Way. The perennial philosophy is the articulation of that grasp" (1989:179) (2).

Perennialists also claim for their schemata a privileged, metaphysical status. Smith finds the underlying truth within differing particular revelations by abstraction, "shifting from theology to metaphysics", i.e. to the Infinite which "both includes and transcends everything else" by integrating the relative into itself (1987:562) (3).

These schemata should therefore function as keys to open particular traditions to the Infinite and to open genuine intellection in their adherents. Adherents to particular traditions, if they are open to the esoteric, should then find in perennialist schemata a call to the "best self" of that tradition, to a transcendent realization which fulfills the heart of that tradition (4). Then diversity would be honored, and relativism overcome.

That is how conceptual schemata in the writings of perennialist are supposed to function. What actually happens, however, is something quite different. As a Catholic informed by medieval Franciscan mysticism, when I read Smith, Schuon and Nasr I find many instances where perennialists misunderstand or do violence to my tradition by imposing elements of alien particular traditions as if they were universally normative (5).

I select five issues where claiming metaphysical status for these schemata results in misunderstanding of and violence to the Christian tradition.

The first issue is God and the Godhead. For perennialists, God and Trinity and Logos are subordinated to "the Godhead in its Infinitude and Oneness above all relativity" (Nasr 1981:293). But for a Christian mystic like Bonaventure, God as One is on the same ontological level as Trinity, and it is this coincidence of opposites (which also includes not only Logos but the man Jesus Christ) which opens upward – opening beyond any possibility of words or schemata. Now, it would be a misunderstanding to conclude from this that Bonaventure is merely an exoteric. Such a conclusion would impose one particular understanding (primacy of Unity) as normative for a mystical expression of another particular tradition. By contrast, Bonaventure treats both Unity and Trinity as at the theological level, and reserves speech regarding what is beyond. (Which behavior is more consistent with the perennialist concept of hierarchy?)

The second issue is human response. Consistently Smith puts intellection (knowledge) at the top of the hierarchy and love at the lower, theological/
philosophical level. However, Bonaventure affirms the primacy of love, and it is love that carries one into the apophatic. Were a perennialist to conclude that Bonaventure is therefore merely exoteric, we would have a misunderstanding, imposing on Christianity a Theravadin Buddhist evaluation of bhakti-religion. Fortunately, Smith recognizes that ultimately knowledge and love coincide (1975:xxvi).

The third issue is Christ. Schuon charges Christians with confusing "the historical with the cosmic Christ" (1975:120). Christians call this "confusion" Incarnation, and it is at the heart of the tradition. Indeed for Bonaventure, this "confusion" is precisely "the perfection of the mind's illumination" (1978:c6:n7). Schuon's charge is mere Docetism, something that the Christian tradition has seen beyond for over fifteen hundred years.

The fourth issue is creation. Seyyed Hossein Nasr espouses a doctrine of necessary creation (1981:134), and Smith concludes from the principle of plenitude that this world must be the best possible (1989:71). To medieval Christianity such a conclusion would be merely naive, for the opposites of plenitude and contingent creation by a free God coincide in a Trinitarian vision. Here is a case in which the perennialist schema is weaker than and inferior to the expression of a particular tradition (6).

The fifth issue is time. Perennialist hostility to evolutionary and developmental historical visions is based explicitly on a particular dogma of cosmic cycles, perhaps the Hindu conception of the yugas (Nasr 1981:121 n3; Schuon 1975:119, 128). Linear history is seen as "exoteric" in Christianity (Nasr 1981:231). Yet the historical affirmation is one genuinely distinctive characteristic of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Further, eschatology is a significant mystical theme for Bonaventure. I do not claim that linear history is therefore metaphysical; rather, I question whether the rejection of evolution and the dogma of cycles on which that rejection rests are not merely theological/philosophical—lacking the status to pass judgment on Christian eschatological or evolutionary schemata.

These five issues reflect what I see as sharp misunderstandings of elements at the heart of my own Christian tradition by perennialists claiming metaphysical status for their schemata. I suspect that similar catalogs of different but equally essential misunderstandings could be produced from the perspectives of any number of particular traditions.

Now, what happens when a criticism like this is made of perennialists? Huston Smith's response shows us. First, the perennialist claims to focus on what religions have in common rather than their differences (1989:77). The perception of differences, you see, belongs to the lower, theological/philosophical or exoteric level, whereas the recognition of unity is metaphysical and esoteric. Evidently, then, the person raising this criticism—along with the majority of humankind—is operating on that lower level. However, "the question is whether truth has reaches that the majo-
rity has difficulty tracking” (1989:63). Smith seems to recognize how precarious this response is: “I realize”, he says, “that that is an inflammatory statement, for it suggests that [my opponent] is incapable of following truth as far as I can” (1989:63). Inflammatory as it is, that is the perennialist response. Unfortunately, this response begs the very question that is the subject of this paper by assuming that perennialist schemata have metaphysical status. Further, it lowers the rhetorical level of the discussion to the ad hominem. The no-win logic of this response is: if you understood, you would agree; if you disagree, obviously you don’t understand.

The essential confusion at work here can be spotted in Smith’s maneuver that finds primordial Truth by abstraction from particular traditions, thereby “shifting from theology to metaphysics” (1987:562). While such abstraction might bring our thought to another logical level, it is gratuitous to affirm that it raises us to a higher ontological level, any more than factoring an equation moves one from algebra to calculus (7).

Further, this confusion regarding the status of conceptual schemata violates a key perennialist caveat. Perennialists affirm that the metaphysical level is ineffable (Smith 1987:554). It follows then that any attempt to descriptively state that level inevitably tumbles down to the theological/philosophical level, however hard it is trying to point into Infinity (8). It appears then that perennialists themselves fall victim to the one-way mirror image used by Huston Smith (1985): a person standing on a lower ontological level cannot see above himself, whereas one on a higher level can see all below him. Now the perennialist stands on the theological level, stares upward and thinks he sees into the metaphysical level, but actually he merely projects metaphysical status onto the reflections of his own limited schemata.

The net effect of this confusion regarding the status of conceptual schemata is to thwart the perennialist effort to “honor the world’s diversity without falling prey to relativism”. Adherents to the world’s diverse traditions rightly take offense when, instead of being called to the “best self” of those traditions, they rather find the heart of one tradition denied by absolutizing the dogma of another. And perennialists make themselves easy prey to relativists when the effort to state an absolute, transcendent unity merely absolutizes particular (relative) doctrines and shows uncompromising intolerance toward others (9).

It may be that there is a two-edged sword of primordial Truth. And perennialists may indeed have hold of it!... but not at the hilt end.

A stark dilemma is posed by this confusion in status of conceptual schemata. Either perennialists persist in claiming privileged, metaphysical status for their schemata and continue to do violence to the world’s diversity, or they abandon that claim, admit that the content of the “philosophia perennis” is historically conditioned, and so fall prey to relativism.

How are we constructively to face this dilemma? The entire perennialist
project is impaled on either of its horns. To go for the middle – claiming an "archetypal" rather than metaphysical status for perennialist schemata – merely butts us back into the original dilemma. What is to be done? I wish to sketch a way that amounts to overleaping the dilemma by grabbing hold of both horns at once and using them as a springboard.

The middle option is tested at one point by Huston Smith by claiming an "archetypal" status for perennialist schemata arrived at by "abstraction" (1987:564). The problem remains, though, whether these "archetypes" are on the theological or metaphysical level. The dilemma is not solved.

An effective way deftly to overleap our dilemma is suggested in the work of Janet Martin Soskice (10). First, specify that what we are talking about here is not doctrines or concepts as if they existed in themselves: rather, we speak of utterances by human persons in dialog with one another. Second, distinguish the descriptive content of an utterance from its reference. We can then admit the conditioned character of descriptive content, thus honoring the world's diversity; and we can affirm the objectivity of reference, thus eluding the claws of relativism.

Soskice specifies utterances – with their social, interactive context – in order to "dispense with the empiricist dogma that reference is fixed by unreviewable description" in favor of a theory where reference is fixed largely by speaker's use of terms in particular situations (1985:151) (11).

The descriptive content of religious utterances is to be understood as metaphorical, subject to revision, and cumulative. Perennialists should be at home with the metaphorical character of this descriptive content (12). It will be harder for perennialists to admit its being subject to revision and cumulative (13).

Soskice's discussion of reference shows that metaphoric religious language "can be reality depicting without pretending to be directly descriptive, and by doing so support the [...] right to make metaphysical claims" (1985:145). Further, through metaphoric utterance it is possible not only to make reality depicting reference to some "beyond", but because of the social nature of such utterance, it is possible to attain to a kind of transcendent unity among such utterances (without, of course, claiming absolute knowledge of its nature). "The great divine and the great poet have this in common", Soskice says: "both use metaphor to say that which can be said in no other way but which, once said, can be recognized by many" (1985:153).

In short, it is possible to salvage the perennialist project from its self-defeating confusion by reassessing perennialist claims. Perennialist descriptive schemata are metaphorical, provisional, and definitely not metaphysical. However, the reference of those schemata is reality depicting and metaphysical. Moreover, to the extent that they do function as keys to open particular traditions to the Infinite and open genuine intellection in their
adherents – in a way “recognized by many” – to that extent they may reveal a unity which is genuinely transcendent, but a unity beyond conceptual schemata.

Such a reassessment would imply some redirection of the perennialist project.

First, a new humility regarding conceptual schemata might temper the vehemence with which some perennialists attack those who differ with them. The perennialist project must avoid the hazard of the “exoteric perennialist”, i.e. one who takes his own conceptual formulations too seriously.

Second, the power of metaphysical reference in particular traditions might be affirmed with all the confidence and enthusiasm of which a vibrant man like Huston Smith is capable (14). In relation to this affirmation, the different “spiritual personality types” Smith refers to (1987:563) might be distinguished less by adherence to perennialist schemata – which fits uneasily with reverence for historical traditions – than by capacity to follow the reference of a particular tradition into the Infinite. Then indeed the perennialist would call believers to the “best self” of their particular traditions, fulfilling them at the heart.

Third, the perennialist quest for universality might shift away from schemata purporting to present some universal conceptual content, and seek instead to probe the social, interactive phenomenon noted by Soskice that the ineffable reference of a religious metaphor, “once said, can be recognized by many” (1985:153). Another direction for the quest for unity, also located not in conceptual schemata but in persons and communities, is suggested by Wilfred Cantwell Smith: what the world’s religions have in common is that they share in the same history, a history whose interconnectedness is only “newly discovered” (1981:4-6).

Fourth, perennialists may find some use for archetypal abstractions in assisting the cumulative growth of particular traditions in metaphorical apprehension of their transcendent reference. Here the cumulative character of traditions becomes a positive value, and their “newly discovered” interconnectedness a promising direction that may simply supercede, rather than demolish, the “Modern Western Mindset”. Soskice notes that a tradition develops a rich assortment of metaphoric models to interpret religious (perhaps mystical) experience, models in turn interpreted by changing experience (1985:152-61) to produce an ever richer apprehension. Perennialist schemata may serve as guides to adherents of particular traditions, suggesting what to seek, what to expect, what to hope for as they progressively penetrate their converging heritage, while constantly insisting upon the complete transcendance of that to which that heritage refers (15).

Such a redirected perennialist project might succeed in honoring the world’s diversity without falling prey to relativism. So it might help to awaken a world so shriveled by the limits of the Modern Western Mind that
it fails to see the spiritual opportunity of this age. Perennialists might return this age to its own "best self" through revitalization of the perennial, and really transcendent, heart of particular traditions in their community of communities.

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NOTES

(1) The paper adopts Huston Smith’s hierarchical schema simply as a framework for addressing the issue, not necessarily as a valid description of the way things are. If the argument presented holds even within Smith’s schema, that should count for the argument’s validity.

(2) See also the preface and first chapter of Smith’s Forgotten Truth (1976).

(3) Huston Smith describes this abstraction in one place through analogy with Chomsky’s deep structures of language and then with “beauty in paintings and song” (87:563), and in another through analogy with “getting past Irish potatoes and Peking duck to talk about carbohydrates, nutrition, and... food” (87:556). David Griffin refers to another discussion of this “abstraction” in a forthcoming essay of Huston Smith (1989:19).

(4) Smith focuses on the apophatic aspect of perennialist utterances as the point where, strictly speaking, convergence among traditions is to be found (1987:564); Custiger stresses Schuon’s insistence that all thought is indicatory and provisional in relation to the Infinite (1988:6).

(5) Here are some instances in selected writings of Nasr, Schuon and Smith where this writer, from the perspective of a medieval Christian mystical tradition (expressed in the writings of Bonaventure), recognizes the imposition of elements from alien traditions as normative –

Nasr, Knowledge and the Sacred:
p. 47 – in context of contrasting historial awareness with a sense of absoluteness and permanence, Nasr attacks change from Latin liturgy in the Catholic Church as “desacralization of language”, yielding to a vernacular “only too familiar [...] everyday [...] filled with experiences of triviality”. However, Latin itself was an innovation, “vulgar” (e.g. Vulgate) in its time. This is an instance of focusing on something far from essential to the tradition and so, instead of being esoteric, becoming merely reactionary.

ch. 2 – the concept of “tradition” developed here seems heavily Islamic, and alien to a Christian.

66 – in discussing tradition, a doctrine of cycles is invoked which is entirely alien to Christianity.

68 – a definition of tradition as “truths or principles [...] revealed”, etc., reflects an Islamic notion of prophetic revelation rather than a Christian notion of revelation as event and person.

71 – “Tradition contains the sense of a truth”, etc. Again a narrowly prophetic notion of truth is coupled to an alien doctrine of cycles.

71 – the particular doctrine of unity in Islam is suspiciously close to the entire perennialist project. (In contrast, Bonaventure’s Christian notion of unity stresses a dynamic coincidence of opposites.)

74-75 – tradition is tied to “direct message from Heaven”, a very particular notion of revelation.

75 – the sacred is denoted as absolutely immutable; in Bonaventure immutability is gathered with dynamism in the Trinity, a coincidence of opposites which transcends both.
time and becoming seen as "withering influence", contrary to eschatological patterns in Christianity, both exoteric and mystical.

The norm by which traditionalists condemn the modern West is taken directly from the Qur'an.

- "a principle of cosmic compensation" is invoked as universal without reference to its particular roots; it is alien to Christianity.
- a "resuscitated knowledge of a principial order" is assumed as the criterion for distinguishing true from false, yet is itself particular and alien to Christianity.
- the dogma of cycles, unverified and alien to Christianity, is the basis for Nasr's rejection of theories stressing development and evolution.
- a doctrine of necessary creation is hostile to Christianity.
- the condemnation of "Promethean man" is based on the doctrine of cycles.
- curiously, Nasr's analysis of dissolution of the medieval spiritual world is parallel to Bonaventure's!
- the theory of the "descent of man" is alien to Christianity.
- discussion of caste and race run counter to Christian tradition of essential unity and equality of humankind.
- Nasr turns to Hermeticism and alchemy for integration of nature, massing the entire Franciscan movement, which is in the mainstream of Western Christian thought and definitely integrates nature.
- Nasr sees concern for linear history as only exoteric in Christianity, preferring cyclic time as esoteric. Judaeo-Christian eschatology, frequently mystical, takes linear history seriously as revelatory, deliberately superceding and absorbing cyclic models of time.
- Attacks on Teilhard de Chardin are mere name-calling until p. 242, where Nasr fails to recognize the traditional Christian principle of final causality at work in Chardin's schema.
- "The slightest intuition of the immutable archetypes and the sense of the Eternal would have evaporated this fog of illusion which seeks to sublimate the temporal into the order of the Eternal of which it cannot be but a shadow." Intended as an attack on Teilhard de Chardin, this statement applies as well to much authentically traditional Christian expression, including Bonaventure's, which stress Incarnation. Nasr would distill from Christianity then something merely Plotinian and call it the "authentic, true" Christianity, but it would be unrecognizable to Christians.
- God and Trinity and Logos are subordinated to "the Godhead in its Infinitude and Oneness above all relativity". Bonaventure places this "Godhead" within Trinity by way of coincidence of opposites, reversing what Nasr would call esoteric and exoteric. Nasr's claim that "only esoterism" can evaluate in this case is so laden with assumptions lifted uncritically from other, alien particular traditions that it is a classic case of a Perennialist claim doing serious violence to - and completely misunderstanding - a core truth of a major religious tradition. In so taking its own schemata as normative as if their content was actually metaphysical, perennialism mistakes expression of ultimacy for the ultimate itself, an error that Paul Tillich calls "idolatry" and "the demonic" (1985:12-16).
- "I-Thou duality" misses the unity of opposites through participation, which may be a higher unity than the unicity of an ultimate simple if it is seen from a Jewish (Martin Buber) or Christian (Gabriel Marcel) perspective.
- in Christianity, Nasr identifies as esoteric, and so authentically traditional, the Eucharist - which is central in the Christian tradition - and (without distinguishing in importance) the Templars, Rosicrucians, etc., movements which are peripheral to the core of Christianity.

Schuon, The Transcendent Unity of Religions, 1975

- Schuon wishes to impose a Hindu dogma of cosmic cycles upon the distinctively historical Biblical tradition.
- the "identification of historical facts with principial truths" which Schuon criticizes
“confuses the historical with the cosmic Christ”. What Schuon calls a confusion is the classic teaching of Chalcedon.

122 n – Schuon interprets Jesus’ saying regarding John the Baptist “metaphysically” expressing the superiority of what is principal over what is manifest. Ironically, he misses or arbitrarily ignores the principal burden of the Lukan passage (7:28), which is the progression of eras in salvation history, i.e. a theology of history which implies a metaphysical validation of history quite in contrast to Schuon’s beloved dogma of cosmic cycles.

124 – the discussion of Trinity and Unity betrays a reductionist character (a least common denominator approach) to this issue, missing the distinctive mystical import of Trinity and calling it “more relative”.

125 – Christianity is criticized for having mixed together esoteric Truth and exoteric Law, thus laying ground for the “terrible subversion represented by the modern world”. What is criticized here is the Incarnational principle, governed by a logic of the coincidence of opposites – quite central to Christianity. Might it be that the Islamic critics and Schuon are the ones who have missed the point, precisely by failing to appreciate a tradition on its own terms? In the note pp. 125–26, this misunderstanding is carried further, imposing an Islamic idea of inspiration and revelation upon a tradition in which revelation occurs through history and in community.

128 – another classic case of imposing alien particular schemata: the dogma of cosmic cycles is imposed upon Christianity with great violence, as if it provided some sort of superior “esoteric” insight.

James Cutsinger summarizes Schuon on the Christian doctrine of Incarnation, reflecting a clearly Docetist interpretation of that doctrine and so reading into it a dualism that orthodox Christianity explicitly repudiated (1988:28).

Cutsinger likewise interprets Schuon as rejecting the eschatological orientation which is an essential element of Christianity (1988:29).

Huston Smith

Introduction to Schuon Transcendent Unity 1975

xxv – “For esoterics [Jesus] ‘me’ will designate the Logos. For exoterics, less supple in their capacity for “spiritual abstraction”, in precise proportion as the word relaxes its hold on the concrete historical personage of Jesus of Nazareth, the assertion forfeits its saving power.” For a Christian mystic like Bonaventure both must be fully true at once, transcending with considerable suppleness Smith’s perspective.

xxv – For the Christian mystic like Bonaventure God’s personal mode and the Absolute, Godhead, etc., coincide at the same level or the Godhead is subsumed within the personal mode via coincidence of opposites.

xxvi – For the Christian mystic like Bonaventure the world is both real and “no separate reality”, again a coincidence of opposites. The same pattern applies to the human soul.

xxvi – For Bonaventure love is ultimate, for Thomas Aquinas knowledge. Of the two, Bonaventure is the mystic. Smith hedges here, “in the end”, for love and knowledge coincide. But to tag “knowledge” as higher than “love” imposes a particular theological viewpoint as normative over other equally legitimate theological viewpoints.

Primordial Truth and Postmodern Theology 1989

62 – responding to David Griffin’s accusation (23) that Advaita Vedanta seems to be normative, Smith says the right thing, i.e. quoting Schuon that the Vedanta is one of the “formulations of that which makes the very essence of our spiritual reality”, but then selects out of Christianity statements that agree with the Vedanta, rather than recognizing that the Christian insight into the relation of creatures to the Absolute is distinctive.

64 – The discussion of God as personal falls short by imposing a standard logic of noncontradiction on an issue best served by a logic characteristic of Christian mystics. In the logic of coincidence of opposites, two opposites are true only in relation to each other; either is false (or at least misleading) if understood alone.

71 – Smith takes the Neoplatonic principle of plenitude to imply necessity in creation, whereas Trinitarian thinkers like Bonaventure are able to affirm plenitude within Trinity and so affirm contingency in creation and freedom in God. Once again Smith applies a logic that falls
short of that actually at work in the tradition, and so his schema comes out weak, even naive, in comparison to expressions of the particular tradition.

172 – Smith hierarchically orders “personal God, transpersonal Godhead” in a way very different from and not necessarily superior to Bonaventure’s.

(6) A comment by Wilfred Cantwell Smith is appropriate here: “[...] it is not the case that all religions are the same. Moreover, if a philosopher ask (anhistorically) what they all have in common, he or she either finds the answer to be ‘nothing’, or finds that they all have in common something so much less than each has separately as to distort or to evacuate the individual richness and depth and sometimes grotesqueness of actual religious life. [...] the historian must stand guard against a vitiation of man’s actual religious living by enthusiasts for emaciating abstractions. He or she must stand guard, in the name of actuality and of the unique, and of human dignity.” (1981:5)

(7) A similar logic lies behind Paul Ricœur’s critique of Mircea Eliade’s method of interpreting myths by myths: “This mode of understanding [...] tends to place the symbols in a whole which is homogeneous with the symbols, but vaster, and which forms a system on the plane of the symbols themselves. [...] the question of truth is unceasingly eluded.” (1967:353)

(8) One expression of Huston Smith captures this confusion of levels. He states that “the perennialist finds the unity of religions in the religions in the way she finds beauty in paintings and song” (1987:563). But the status of “beauty” remains far from clear. Is beauty a subjective response of the viewer? Is it a quality inseparable from a particular painting? Is it an existent ontological reality somehow reflected in paintings? Is it a reference of paintings beyond themselves into what cannot be otherwise expressed? Smith’s analogy dramatizes the confusion rather than dispelling it.

(9) Steven Katz responds, with reason, to Huston Smith’s arguments as “unreflective dogmatism” and “pontifical certainty” (1988:750-51), leaving Smith only to admit that this scholarly exchange failed (1988:759). See also David Griffin’s charge that Smith absolutizes Advaita Vedanta (1989:23) and Smith’s response, which simply isolates out of context Christian insights selected for their computability with Advaita (1989:62-63).


(11) Soskice’s approach contrasts with that of Philip C. Almond (1981), who remains within an empiricist analytic approach to mystical language. He assumes a propositional model for evaluating religious truth claims and tries to focus on “contentless” experiences abstracted from persons in their particular communities. As a result, his analysis fits Christian mysticism only poorly. Soskice seems more reasonable in measuring the adequacy of the empiricist analytic approach by its fit to the traditions, rather than vice versa.

(12) Soskice defines: “metaphor is that figure of speech whereby we speak about one thing in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another” (1985:15), a definition which avoids the double-reference complication of theories which define metaphor as comparison of unlike things. In their clearer moments perennialists refer to their schemata as “provisional” (Cutting 1988:6); their ineffable metaphysical intuitions “can only be symbolized” (Smith 1987:554). Even at that, confusion is present when Smith says that for the esoteric all particulars are ultimately symbols, “coverings or containers for inner essences” (1987:562), for it is not clear whether he includes his own schemata as symbolic particulars or as absolute and descriptive statements of inner essences.

(13) Griffin summarizes Huston Smith’s stand that scientific-level truth may be cumulative, but in metaphysics, religion and art, there is nothing more to be discovered (1989:35-36). Cut-
singer refers to Schuon’s rejection of cumulative knowledge in the name of a knowledge of everything that coincides with the substance of Intellect (1988:21), and indeed Schuon’s invalidating of all cumulative knowledge (1988:26).

(13) The confidence – almost missionary zeal – of Huston Smith might be justified in relation to the transcendent reference of the perennialist vision, but is misdirected if transferred to the perennialist schema. Further, Smith’s antagonist Steven Katz is justified in his critique of perennialist schemata, but he fails seriously to address the issue of reference in mystical expressions (1988:752). Moreover, he does not exclude an affirmation of this sort, insisting that his approach is not necessarily reductionist (1988:754). Might an exchange between them on this issue of reference be less likely to fail than previous efforts?

(14) Reviewers critical of Soskice’s work point to an inadequate development of the descriptive content of metaphor, “the strange terrain between the mediate and unmediated, the clearly known and the completely unknown” (Journal of Religion 67:409). The perennialist project may be seen as mapping that terrain – but with schemata recognized as provisional, revisable, and cumulative. Another reviewer notes that Soskice fails to say how we can now that a religious metaphor truthfully describes God if all we can affirm is reference (Theological Studies 47:523). A third suggests such a “radical relativism” can be avoided by Soskice’s social and contextual theory of reference, which includes a claim that terms can be “coreferential across theories” – recognized by many (Review of Metaphysics 40:403).

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