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The Hindu Vision of Trimūrti and the Christian Understanding of the Trinity

Abstract

This study undertakes a comparative theological analysis of the Hindu concept of Trimūrti and the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity, examining both structural analogies and fundamental ontological differences.

Drawing on classical Hindu sources such as the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, the epic tradition of the Mahābhārata, and modern interpreters of Indian philosophy, alongside patristic and contemporary Orthodox theological reflections (e.g., Vladimir Lossky, Dumitru Stăniloae, Ioannis Zizioulas), the paper explores the metaphysical frameworks underlying each tradition.

While the Trimūrti – Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva – expresses functional differentiation within the dynamic manifestation of the Absolute, Christian Trinitarian theology articulates a communion of distinct divine Persons

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sharing one essence, grounded in the monarchy of the Father. The study argues that, despite superficial triadic similarities, the two models diverge radically at the ontological level: the Hindu triadic structure often emerges within a cosmological and symbolic paradigm shaped by māyā and emanation, whereas the Christian Trinity constitutes an ontological communion of hypostases defined by personal causality and relational being. The paper further examines the philosophical implications of personhood, substance, causality, and freedom, demonstrating that the Cappadocian synthesis introduces a decisive shift from substance-centered ontology to person-centered ontology. Ultimately, the comparison reveals not a simple equivalence of triadic structures, but two fundamentally different visions of divine unity, relationality, and metaphysical grounding.

1　　Introduction

Throughout the long, layered unfolding of Hindu philosophical and religious thought, one may discern that – even when the sages of India ventured into subtle debates and soaring speculative formulations concerning the nature of the divine – they never truly departed from the monistic or pantheistic intuition that binds all existence together. This intuition remains the luminous centre, the axial principle, around which every conceptualisation of the divine ultimately revolves. All decisive valorisations of the sacred appear as centripetal movements, drawing the mind back toward an ultimate, impersonal, all-encompassing Reality, whether this is expressed as the

Upaniṣadic Brahman, as the non-dualism of Śaṅkara's Vedānta, or as the theophanic presence of Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavad-Gītā.

Even within the sphere of devotional Hinduism – where the divine is elaborated in a more "personalistic" mode – this underlying dynamic persists. The Trimūrti, the triadic constellation of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva, has often invited comparison with the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity and has been interpreted by many historians of religions as a form of triadology. Yet, as will become evident, this devotional triad does not function as a centrifugal force pulling away from the pantheistic ground of Hindu thought. Rather, the three deities remain but derivative epiphanies, subordinate manifestations of the impersonal Absolute from which they emerge and to which they ultimately return.

2   The problem of Trimūrti or the attempt to evaluate the Ternary deity in Hinduism

The worship of God or the Absolute in personal form in Hinduism took shape with the theistic synthesis of the Bhagavat-Gīta, which subsequently led to the development of the entire purāṇic literature, based on devotional love (*bhakta*) for one deity or another. This devotional Hinduism, therefore, has very ancient roots. Whether devotion is directed towards Viṣṇu, Śiva, or the Goddess, it creates its own cult, *pūja,* which replaces Vedic sacrifices.

Already present in the Bhagavat-Gītā as one of the three paths leading to liberation, *bhakti-yoga* is at the centre of a huge Vaiṣṇava writing: *Bhāgavata Purāṇa (*around the 8th century AD), according to which Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa "likes only pure devotion (*bhakti)*, the rest being superfluous."[1] In any case, thanks to the

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[1]   *Bhāgavata Purāṇa,* VIII. 7. 52, in: *Ancient Indian Tradition and Mythology: Purāṇas*, vol. 7-11, SHASTRI, J.L. & BHATT, G.P. (eds.), Motilal

Bhagavat-Gītā, we know that around the 5th-4th centuries BC, the devotional path was already predominant, and the preferred deities were those of classical Hinduism: not only Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa, but also Śiva and some female deities.

2During the same period, in the extreme south of India, an abundant religious literature appeared, devoted mainly to the glorification of Śiva, the exposition of his mythology, and the theoretical justification of devotion to the Great God (Mahā-Deva).[3] However, the great Hindu literature of the first centuries of the Christian era is primarily Vaiṣṇavite.

Thus, in the first centuries after Christ, with Purāṇic theism, two great deities appeared whose supremacy would never again be questioned: Viṣṇu and Śiva. They do not form a dyad, strictly speaking, because a Hindu is either a Vaiṣṇava or a Śaiva, never both at once. Conversely, Viṣṇu and Śiva never exclude each other. They are found together in the Trimūrti conception, but each occupies a modest place in the other's temple. Both have their origin in the Vedic sacrifice, although, as will be seen, in very different ways.

As noted, one of the important directions of Hindu philosophical-theological thought consists in reflecting on the simultaneity, like Brahman, of two dimensions: that of absolute

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Barnasidass Publisher, 1983. One of the fundamental legends of Vaiṣṇava devotion concerns the love that the young Kṛṣṇa inspires in *the gopis* (the girls who tend the herds) and the rāsa-līlā, the dance of love he dances with them, multiplying in such a way that each gopi dances and caresses her own Kṛṣṇa. This symbolic episode from the Bhāgavata Purāṇa gave rise to the main Vaiṣṇava festival.

[2]   The major texts were composed starting in the 6th century CE (the Tamil hymns of the Ālvār poets), but the oldest ones date back to the first centuries before Christ. In Sanskrit, Kālidāsa, the great poet of the 5th century AD, composed mythological poems, one of which recounts the marriage of Śiva to Pārvatī, another sign of the importance of devotion to this god. See Kalidāsa, *La Naissance de Kumāra,* trans. by B. Tubini, Gallimard, Paris, 1957.

transcendence, beyond time, and that of immanence within the created world. This line of thought, in this era, led to the idea of Brahman as "three in one," that is, as the circularity of an endless process: creation-preservation-destruction of the universe. Concretely, this idea took the form of the divine triad, *Trimūrti* (*tri mūrta* - "three forms"), in which Brahmā *(*not to be confused with Brahman, which is gender-neutral) watches over creation, Viṣṇu over preservation, and Śiva over destruction.

Unlike the other two, *Brahmā* is less popular, as his functions distance him from the people. It is interesting to see how Brahmā, once a god of creative power, came to occupy such a minor place in the Hindu triad. In Vedic mythology, Brahmā appears mainly as the embodiment of the power of prayer and only later as the creator of the world, father and lord of all living things.[4] In fact, Brahmā is a later identification with *Prajāpati,* the supreme Lord of all beings in the Vedic period, the conscious architect of the world. Because he had not been a god of nature, it was quite easy for him to be invested with supreme wisdom, as well as with traits that are clearly ethical in nature. However, his original or main function as the god of creation and birth in general was not forgotten. Thus, over time, he came to be identified with Brahmā, the first "person" of the Hindu trinity, who absorbed Prajāpati's intellectual function to become the revealer of the Vedas.[5]

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[4]   There are several versions of Brahmā's appearance, three of which are particularly noteworthy: he emerged either from Viṣṇu's navel, or from the primordial lotus that sprang from that navel, or from the primordial egg (*brahmanda)* – the golden embryo (hiraṇyagarbhā) – this cosmogonic and theogonic egg being *the causa causarum.* Victor Kernbach, *Dictionary of General Mythology. Myths, Deities, Religions,* Albatros Publishing House, Bucharest, 1995, p. 92.

[5]   Bibhu Padhi & Minakshi Padhi, *Indian Philosophy and Religion. A Reader's Guide*, DK Printworld (P) Ltd, New Delhi, 1998, pp. 355-356.

Later[6], some legends state that Prajāpati was transferred to Brahmā. Because Prajāpati was born from an egg in the primordial waters to transform chaos into cosmos ("order"), Brahmā was born for the same purpose. Like Prajāpati, he takes the form of a turtle to create offspring and blesses the boar that raised the earth; thus, Brahmā, during the flood, takes the form of a fish, and, as a boar, raises the earth again above the wild waters. This act earned him the name *Nārāyaṇa* ("the one who removes the waters"), which later became the distinctive title of Viṣṇu. In this way, being associated with the "sacrificial god" Prajāpati of the Brāhmanas and later with the "philosophical unity Brahman" of the Upaniṣads, Brahmā was elevated to the "highest position."[7] It should be noted that among the attributes later conferred on Brahman by the Upaniṣads, that of saguṇa or Īśvara was not attributed to Brahmā. However, at the popular level, he evolved concretely into a male god with attributes.

In the two epics, the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata, Brahmā is shown occupying the throne of the universe and is perceived as the protector and refuge of gods and men. However, even in these poems, his original glory is clearly diminishing in the face of the splendour of Viṣṇu and Śiva. Later, in the Purāṇas, he is completely replaced by these two deities or gradually

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[6]   Maurice Phillips, *The Evolution of Hinduism,* New Delhi, Asian Publication Services, 1987, pp. 51-52. Several factors contributed to Brahmā's loss of supremacy. For example, popular enthusiasm was almost absent for a god who "had no appeal to the emotional life of the people, and who remained more a god of the sacrificial, Brahminical caste." Haridas Bhattacharyya, *The Foundations of Living Faiths: An Introduction to Comparative Religion,* Stephanos Nirmalendu Ghosh Lectures (2 vols.), vol. 1, Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1938, p. 192.

[7]   Joseph Estlin Carpenter, *Theism in Medieval India,* London: William & Norgate, 1921; republished: London, Constable & Co., 1926, pp. 10, 170.

transforms into one or the other, his name being retained in the *Trimūrti* concept as "a trace of his former greatness."[8]

This Brahmā, together with the two, Viṣṇu and Śiva, came to be associated in popular Puranic devotion and thus formed the Hindu trinity or *Trimūrti*. It should be noted that from the point of view of its dynamics, this concept leads to a bisexual representation of the deity. It is, in fact, the creation of a symbol of the coexistence in Brahman of the aspect of absolute transcendence, of the "yogic" concentration in itself, but also of that directed towards manifestation. One can imagine or represent something similar to a tension, and even a struggle between these two elements, but in such a way that harmony can be restored at any moment, so that everything can begin again. This gave rise to the idea of imagining divine life as a game of love between a masculine principle (the absolute concentrated within itself) and a feminine principle, that of movement and expansion into multiplicity. This conception, in turn, takes on very special aspects: *primitive androgyne,* endlessly splitting to know and love itself, supreme God represented with a masculine and a feminine half (*Hari-Hara)*, the notion of a power (*śakti)* associated with this supreme God and often represented in the form of a couple: Śiva and Pārvatī, Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī, Rāma and Sīta.[9]

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[8]   Maurice Phillips, The Evolution of Hinduism, New Delhi, Asian Publication Services, 1987, pp. 51-52. Several factors contributed to Brahmā's loss of supremacy. For example, popular enthusiasm was almost absent for a god who "had no appeal to the emotional life of the people, and who remained more a god of the sacrificial, Brahminical caste." Haridas Bhattacharyya, The Foundations of Living Faiths: An Introduction to Comparative Religion, Stephanos Nirmalendu Ghosh Lectures (2 vols.), vol. 1, Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1938, p. 192.

[9]   Michel Hulin & Lakshmi Kapani, *Hinduism,* in Jean Delumeau, *Religions of the World,* chap. trans. by Bogdan Budeş, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 1986, p. 342.

To better understand the concept of Trimūrti, how an evanescent deity (Brahmā) came to be associated in a triad with the two most popular gods in medieval Hindu theism (Viṣṇu and Śiva), we must emphasise the ancient cosmogonic motif linked to a specific level of divinity. At the supreme level, the divinity was a yogi, and his "yoga" explained the emanation of the world and its dissolution. It must watch over the world of sacrifice, so it will take the form of Brahmā to create; it will then have a dominant "rajasic" character (see the three classical characteristics or guṇa with which matter is endowed in Sāṅkhya philosophy), as is always the case when action is involved. But after the creation of the world, it will also ensure its existence, taking the form (*mūrta)* of Viṣṇu: this is the phase in which the regular performance of sacrifices allows the world to endure. It is therefore natural that Viṣṇu – the sacrifice – should become the protective deity of the world. It may seem less normal that, in this function, Viṣṇu should be *sattvic,* since *sattva* predisposes to inaction. Finally, as the process of evolution and involution repeats itself infinitely, the supreme deity has a third form at the same level of manifestation, this time watching over the world's destruction. This third aspect, which brings cosmic darkness, is obviously embodied by the tamasic Rudra (Śiva). Thus, in these three forms – which do not function simultaneously, but are situated at the same level of being, being inseparable – of the Absolute lies the notion of Trimūrti ("triple form") or the Hindu Trinity.

This triplicity of divine manifestation, Trimūrti, appears with the same constancy in all the Purāṇas, regardless of the name given to the supreme form of divinity. In other words, Viṣṇu and Śiva appear, from case to case, at both levels, but not Brahmā, who only intervenes at the level of Trimūrti, which is why he is never invested as the God of devotional worship (*bhakti)* by believers.

In this situation, it seems bizarre that there are temples, albeit very few, dedicated to him.[10]

Thus, Trimūrti has its origins in Purāṇic theism, which presents a "trinitarian theology," postulating a supreme Divinity manifested in three forms: Brahmā, the creator; Viṣṇu, the preserver; and Śiva, the destroyer. Despite the position of Viṣṇu, Śiva, and Brahmā as the three main deities in the Mahābhārata, E. Hopkins (a well-known researcher of Indian epic literature) believes that the union of the three greatest gods into a trinity does not form any part of the epic faith. This is because, although Brahmā is the creator, he is only a demiurge empowered by Viṣṇu to perform his creative acts. In turn, Viṣṇu and Śiva are the two main deities in the Mahābhārata, both being described in terms that establish each, separately, as the Supreme Deity, in a manner that tends more towards *monotheism* than towards *trinitarianism.*[11]

Despite their seemingly overlapping roles, each deity possesses individual characteristics, and in these we find a possible *proto-trinitarianism*, for Viṣṇu is fundamentally benevolent and seeks to preserve cosmic and social order. At the same time, Śiva displays the characteristics of a destroyer, uncontrolled and chaotic, walking the battlefields and dwelling in places of

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[10] Madeleine Biardeau, *Hinduism. Anthropology of a Civilisation,* trans. by Ileana Busuioc, Symposion Publishing House, Bucharest, 1996, pp. 136-137. Speaking of the epic period – that of the Mahābhārata – in Indian thought, S. Radhakrishnan notes that it represents the period when the Greeks, Parthians and Scythians entered India. Now the Trimūrti concept is taking shape, according to which Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva are different forms of the "Supreme One", performing the various functions of creation, preservation and destruction. See S. RADHAKRISHNAN, *Indian Philosophy,* vol. I, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1999, p. 481.

[11] Edward Washburn HOPKINS, *Epic Mythology,* Strassburg: Trubner & Co, 1915, reprinted New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1974, p. 231

cremation. However, such tendencies fail to endure in later Purāṇic trinitarianism.[12]

 Regarding the characteristics of the two most important deities, Śiva and Viṣṇu, the following should be noted: *Viṣṇu,* the most important god in Hinduism, was a minor solar god during the Vedic period. Gradually, he came to be praised for taking three steps that measured and penetrated the entire cosmos, thereby affirming a universe inhabitable by gods and humans. He is benevolent towards humanity, willing and able to grant favours to his worshippers. The character of his omnipresence is also apparent in his identification with the cosmic pillar (*skambha)*, the centre of the universe, which supports the sky; in ritual, this is the pole to which the Vedic sacrificial victim was tied. In late Vedic literature, Viṣṇu's deeds take narrative forms – for example, when he takes the form of a dwarf to regain the world from a demon. The benign character of his activities began to manifest in a form that, over time, reached its peak or apogee in the concept of avatār, or the descent of the deity. Viṣṇu's consort is Śri, the goddess of prosperity and good fortune, also known as Lakṣmī. Śri was constantly linked to Viṣṇu in the late epic period. Still, numerous earlier hymns recount how Indra lost and then regained the beneficence of Śri's presence, which was associated with fertility.[13]

Śiva, the second great god of Hinduism and the third in the "trinity," is considered by Indologists to be a newer

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[12]   What is found in the Mahābhārata, along with the predominant Vaiṣṇava theism, are passages that emphasize the position of Śiva (and occasionally Brahmā) and the Goddess Durgā as the Supreme Deity, highlighting a non-Vaiṣṇava theism. See Nicholas SUTTON, *Religious Doctrines in the Mahābhārata,* Motilal Banarsidass Publishers P.L., Delhi, 2000, p. 181.

[13]   *World Mythology, The Illustrated Guide,* Editor-in-Chief: Roy WILLIS, Foreword by Robert Walter, Duncan Baird Publishers, London, 1993, p. 75.

manifestation of the ancient Vedic god Rudra ("the howler"), the god of storms and destruction. Despite his appearance, Shiva is a complex god whose being is influenced by the pre-Aryan folk beliefs of India. He appears in the Trimūrti as the destroyer, being the one who destroys the world at the end of each cycle (kalpa). Taking on the attributes of the Vedic Rudra, he is the malevolent god of storms, called "Śiva" ("auspicious"), precisely to be appeased. Among the complex pantheon of Hindu deities, Śiva is both a vengeful avenger and a shepherd of souls. Through a similar ambivalence, he is not only associated with yoga and asceticism (he meditates on the peaks of Mount Kailasa), but also has a pronounced erotic aspect. Over time, the figure of this god becomes more serene, his destructive qualities passing on to his wife, *Pārvatī* or *Durgā.* However, because of his main function of destruction, Śiva is usually represented in frightening forms, with three eyes, his body wrapped in snakes, skulls around his neck, etc. As the god of birth and renewal, his main symbol is the lingam (lit. 'sign', 'mark'), a cylindrical stone (phallos).[14]

On a socio-religious level, the structuring of divinity in Trimūrti seems to follow two main directions. First, the polarity of affirmation-negation (*pravrtti-nivrtti)* is affirmed. On the one

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[14]   Closely related to the cult of Śiva is that of his wife *Pārvatī* ("goddess of the mountains"), also called *Durgā* ("the inaccessible one"), *Mahādevī* ("the great goddess") and *Kālī* ("the black one"). She is considered to be Śiva's active energy (*śakti)* or magical power. She has the same attributes, both destructive and beneficial, and her imagery is sometimes dominated by terrifying elements, sometimes by very graceful ones. Indian theology sometimes considers her to be the feminine principle of existence, sometimes the mysterious power with which Śiva rules the earth. Hindu tantrism is linked to the figure of Śakti. See, inter alia, Roy WILLIS, *World Mythology,* pp. 80-81; I.P. CULIANU & Mircea ELIADE, *Dictionary of Religions,* translated by Cezar Baltag, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 1993, pp. 176-177. For an assessment of the rich Indian mythology: Wendy DONIGER O'FLAHERTY, *Hindu Myths,* Harmondsworth, 1975; Idem, *Dreams, Illusions and Other Realities,* Chicago, 1984

hand, "radiating" into the world, generating its order, beauty, happiness, on the other hand, the divine that takes the form of destructive time to destroy any power, any glory that belongs to humanity or worldliness. On the one hand, a logic of legitimate self-affirmation in the world, in accordance with the natural order of things or *dharma,* on the other, an ascetic and transgressive logic of detachment from the world, in search of what will be called liberation (*mokṣa)*. Of the two attitudes, the first is most often attached to the cult of Viṣṇu, in his capacity as the keeper of the cosmic order, the other to the cult of Śiva, the Great Destroyer. In fact, despite a difference in emphasis, each of the two great gods governs one aspect of the two mentioned above, synthetically rendered by the terms *pravṛtti* ("action," "striving") and *nivṛtti (*"denial," the path of detachment from all activity).[15]

At the level of the Trimūrti concept, a distinction must be made between the universal and distant image of the deity (especially Brahmā) and its close, familiar and accessible image or form, linked to a space, more precisely to a sacred place (*tīrtha*) and its history. In mythology, the complementarity of the two aspects is expressed by the notion of *avatāra* ("descent", "descending"). The god's permanent residence is in an "elsewhere", a "heaven" (*svarga)* to which there is no access, but from where, from time to time, he agrees to manifest himself among humans, in order to save the human community as a whole or to respond to the fervent devotion of a believer.

One of the many values of the Hindu triad is linked to the mantra or sacred syllable, *AUM*. Hindu mythology personified the three aspects of cosmic vibration in Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva.[16] It must

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15   Michel Hulin and Lakshmi Kapani, *op. cit.,* p. 342. See also Nicholas Sutton, *op. cit.,* chap. 5: *Epic Theism: The Nature of God,* pp. 141-245

16   These deities have become so real in the popular imagination that they are no longer considered myths, since the devotion of the masses has given them objective reality. In fact, myths, it is said, become real through the power of human thought. To the extent that they carry the

be said that the Hindu devotee regards his gods as divine realities, not merely as symbols of cosmic forces. The question of reality versus unreality has been debated in India for centuries. Some have argued that forms, including especially visions contemplated in ecstasy, are eternally true. Others have insisted that no form is real, that appearances of any kind are only illusions and therefore non-existent.

Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva are cosmic realities for Hindus, and as such, they are expressions of infinite Consciousness, capable of being "moved" to respond personally through the force of devotion. Whatever divine form may appear in vision, it is transcended in deep meditation, at which point it is realised to be only an aspect of AUM – eternally impersonal, formless and infinite. The ultimate truth transcends any connotative symbols that may be used. In this transcendence lies the essential truth of *religion*.[17] Thus, some Hindu thinkers symbolically equate the monosyllable AUM with essential expressions or realities in other religions, such as: the Holy Spirit, the Word of God and Amen in Christianity; with the "sound of primordial waters" in Judaism, with the "Amen" of Muslims, or with *Ahunavar* in Zoroastrianism. According to them, AUM transcends antagonistic paths of faith and offers humanity a universal route to "awakening."

The Trinity of AUM refers to the three basic functions of cosmic vibration in the manifested universe. These three aspects of AUM are consecutive, but they are also coexistent. Their universal function embraces everything individually. Like cosmic creation

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connotation of truths that are focused in the human mind, they become channels of those truths and help man to connect with them.

17 Swami Kriyananda (J. Donald Walters), *The Hindu Way of Awakening: Its Revelation, Its symbols (An Essential view of Religion),* Jaico Publishing House, Mumbai, 1999, pp. 160-161.

itself, everything that man does has a *beginning*, a *middle* stage and an *end.* These three stages are also coexistent, because each end is potentially implied in its beginning, and beginnings are implied, like a distant echo, in each end.[18] The three deities symbolise the three basic functions of cosmic vibration: Brahmā, as the beginning (the vowel "a"), Viṣṇu, as the middle (the vowel "u"), and Śiva, as the end (the long consonant "m"), although these functions, like the deities themselves, are not only complementary but also synchronous, as modes or "forms" (mūrta) of existence of the same absolute Divinity, Brahman, in relation to the entire cosmos, in each cycle of time (*kalpa)*, in a process that recurs *ad infinitum.*

Of course, this interpretation or evaluation of the Hindu concept of the Trinity is interesting. Still, it cannot claim to be "universal" and applies only to the Hindu religious sphere, whose thinking is laden with symbolism. Without understanding the entire pattern of symbolic thinking, this religion could easily be reduced to a primitive or crude form of manifestation of the sacred.[19]

3   The Holy Trinity or overcoming, through the concept of "person," the impersonal-modalistic scheme

The Trimūrti concept, apart from associating three deities to manifest the cosmogonic process with its three aspects, has nothing essential in common with the cornerstone of the Christian scaffolding, namely the triune reality of God. This concept is relatively late in Hinduism and lacks any real religious significance, unlike Viṣṇu and Śiva within the Vaiṣṇavism and

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[18]   *Ibid.,* p. 163.

[19]   For more detail: Alexandru-Corneliu Arion, *Panteismul hinduist şi învăţătura creştină despre Dumnezeu* (*Hindu pantheism and the Christian teaching on God*), Enciclopedică Publishing House, Bucharest, 2010.

Śaivism groups, respectively. It does not receive its own cult, as the Christian Trinity does, there being a strange alternation in the hierarchy of power, each of the three gods being able to become a supreme god, because, in fact, these are not distinct personal existences, but forms or modes of manifestation of the divine *Absolute*.[20]

The Hindu thesis implied in Trimūrti admits that Brahman, the undifferentiated Principle, is the Absolute that manifests itself modally, figuratively, without the divine figures (gods) hypostasising or conferring a personal character on the nature of the Absolute. Being is existence, but its declaration as existence is not made by virtue of an "internal life" of being. Such an approach is foreign to Hinduism. Being is existence because it is "in itself," not because it is discovered as existence through mediation, even if only as a simple image. In manifesting itself, Brahman does not manifest its being, for this remains isolated. Only in the case of its manifestation as "reality" does the creature identify ontically with it (the *ontic* reflection on the "objects" of the world is opposed to the "ontological" reflection on the very being of the world), without meaning that reality represents *something in itself.* This *something in itself* is being, simple, without determinations. The gods of the traditional triad manifest only a certain dimension of the divine and not of being, which always remains identical with itself.[21]

By structuring its categories on personalist premises, Christianity rejects the idea of an impersonal, abstract God. God's quality of *being* God is not affirmed by identifying Him with an

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[20] Ioan Glăjar, *Trimurti and the Holy Trinity*, article in "Mitropolia Ardealului", III (1958), no. 2, pp. 238-2

[21] Nicuşor Nacu, *The Evolutionary Structure of Divinity in Hinduism. Evaluation from a Christian Perspective*, computerised manuscript, University of Bucharest, Faculty of Orthodox Theology, Bucharest, 2000, p. 272.

undifferentiated, neutral Absolute, as in the Brahman of the Upaniṣads. Still, by the real act of Incarnation, the peremptory proof of divine omnipotence, in which humanity becomes the receptacle of full Revelation, of the fact that to *be* God means to *be* Trinity. In other words, the Incarnation places the mystery of the Trinity at the centre of Christian theology, for the One who becomes incarnate is none other than the Logos, the second person of the Holy Trinity.[22] This does not mean, of course, that God is the Trinity only through the Incarnation, but that, through the Incarnation, it is revealed, in the relative space-time plane of the world, that God is an eternal Trinity of Persons.

The difference between the Christian and Hindu planes appears when the Absolute becomes relative, manifesting itself through figures, as in the case of the Trimūrti.

In addition to the existence of God as an absolute personal reality, who revealed Himself in the Person of Jesus Christ, known and accepted by Christian antiquity, the Incarnation brought a fundamental novelty: that God is a Triune Being. The challenge was launched to the non-Christian world, for which the Absolute could not be personal, let alone tri-personal. But through this, a justification had to be found in the face of a contemporaneity accustomed to Greek thinking in categories as instruments of conceptualisation. Therefore, *how God exists,* conceived as tri-personal, is the question that Christianity had to answer with a reasoned argument. The most obvious way was to start from the concrete expression of Christ's presence in the Eucharist. Thus, starting from the Eucharistic experience, the absolute expression of God's oblative love for human beings, the Holy Fathers understood that "Being means Life". They also understood that life cannot be isolated, but in relationship and

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[22]   Vladimir Lossky, *Introduction to Orthodox Theology*, trans. by Lidia and Remus Rus, Enciclopedică Publishing House, Bucharest, 1993, p. 43. The Incarnation and the Trinity are thus inseparable.

personal love, or *communion*[23]*.* Logically, the One who is "Life" (John 14:6) can no longer be an *impersonal* deity, and the doctrine about Him cannot lead to a metaphysical monotheism, where the nature of the Absolute means at most the equality of being with oneself, and by no means self-giving.

A *single-person* God, in turn, would be neither a person nor God. If the divine being existed in a single Person, it would not be good or loving from eternity and therefore would not be divine. But even if it existed in a multitude of persons, their value as worthy of love and capable of infinite love would be relativised, so that this multitude would not be divine either. Only by existing in three Persons are these three Persons divine, because they have a value and a relationship between them that makes them worthy and capable of absolute love. A single-person God would be close to an impersonal essence, subject to a law of evolution or emanation, inexplicable in terms of its origin or what happens through its movement.[24]

God is fully revealed as a Person in the act of the Incarnation of the Son, consubstantial with the Father and the Holy Spirit. He reveals Himself in His pleroma, in that the fullness of the divine nature resides in the communion of persons. Thus, the unity of God is not attributed to being, but to the Person, which becomes

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[23]   Ioannis Zizioulas, *Ecclesial Being,* trans. Aurel Nae, Bizantină Publishing House, Bucharest, 1996, p. 9. This ontology, which springs from the Eucharistic experience of the Church, led the Fathers to develop their doctrine on the being of God, a doctrine formulated, in particular, by St. Athanasius the Great and the Cappadocian Fathers.

[24]   Priest Acad. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *The Holy Trinity or In the Beginning was Love*, IBMBOR Publishing House, Bucharest, 1993, pp. 26-27. That is why the Holy Fathers vehemently combated the Arian and Pneumatomachian heresies, which denied the divinity of the Son and the Holy Spirit and, under the pretext of rejecting polytheism, declared the Son and the Holy Spirit to be creatures, more precisely, the first creatures, even if of a supernatural order.

an element of unity in the Trinity, a unity achieved through *the communion of persons,* which St. Basil the Great considers an ontological category. In fact, the Holy Father tends to replace the ontic category of substance with that of communion, κοινωνια. The nature of God is communion.[25] At this point, God's state of absolute ontological freedom no longer derives from being, but from *the communion of Persons* – which has become an ontic category – Persons with whom man is able to relate in order to perfect his personal nature. This fact in itself also calls for a new definition of the concept of absolute freedom, excluding the affirmation of absolute ontological freedom as deriving from being. If absolute freedom had its source in being, man, subject to his condition as a creature, would have no hope, no possibility of becoming an authentic person. The cause of God's ontological freedom does not lie, however, in His nature, but in His personal existence, that is, in the "mode of existence" of the divine nature.[26]

Compared to the impersonalist conception of the deities of the Hindu triad, Trimūrti, which are only modes, forms (*mūrta*) of manifestation of the Absolute Brahman (*impersonal-modalist* framework), an Absolute that does not manifest its being, which remains isolated, *Christian theology* affirms a completely different model or paradigm of the existence of the triune God. For the Greek Fathers, the uniqueness of God, the one God, as well as the principle or ontological cause of God's personal-

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[25] Ioannis Zizioulas, *op. cit.,* p. 149 and note 23. This does not mean that the Persons have ontological priority over the unique nature of God, but that this unique nature coincides with the communion of the three Persons. "The unity of God lies in *koinonia tes theotetos* (the communion of the Godhead)." St. Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit,* in "Church Fathers and Writers" vol. 12, translation, introduction and notes by Fr. Prof. Dr. Constantin Corniţescu and Fr. Prof. Dr. Teodor Bodogae, Ed. IBMBOR, Bucharest, 1988, pp. 60-61.

[26] Ioannis Zizioulas, *op. cit.,* pp. 37-39.

trinitarian life, does not consist in His unique substance, but in *the hypostasis,* that is, in the person of the Father. The one God is not the one substance, but the Father, who is the cause (αιτια) of the birth of the Son and the procession of the Spirit.[27] Consequently, the ontological principle of God also refers to the person. His Trinitarian existence can be rendered in the statement: the Father, out of love – that is, freely – begets the Son and proceeds the Spirit. If God exists, it is because the Father exists, that is, the One who out of love and freely begets the Son and proceeds the Spirit. In this way, God as a person – the hypostasis of the Father – makes the divine substance what it is: the One God.[28]

The one divine substance is therefore the 'being' of God only because it possesses the three modes of existence, modes which it does not owe to itself, but to a person: the Father. It can be stated categorically that, apart from the Trinity, God, that is, the divine substance, does not exist, because the ontological principle of God is the Father. The personal existence of God (the Father) constitutes, 'hypostasises' His substance. In other words, God's "Being" is identified with the Person. The ontological thesis of the Greek Fathers could be succinctly stated as follows: Without a person or hypostasis or mode of existence, there is no "ousia" or nature; without "ousia" or nature, there is no person. However, the ontological "principle" or "cause" of being—that is,

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[27] The "Filioque" is a problem directly related to this theme. As can be seen, studying the Trinitarian theology of Blessed Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, the West had no difficulty in supporting the "Filioque," precisely because it identified "being," the ontological principle of God, more with His *substance* than with *the person* of the Father.

[28] This point is absolutely crucial, because it is linked to the new philosophical thesis of the Cappadocian Fathers, especially St. Basil the Great: substance never exists "empty" (γυμνη), that is, without hypostasis, without "mode of existence" (τροος υπαρξεως). See: St. Basil, *Epistle 38, 2,* in *op. cit., p.* 178.

what makes something be—is not "ousia" or nature, but *the person* or hypostasis. Thus, existence does not refer to substance, but to *person*.[29]

However, the problem that arose was that of defining being and hypostases, of finding terms that would convey the profound reality of the eternal Trinitarian interrelation and capture *the antinomy* of unity and Trinity. Thus, according to Saint Maximus the Confessor, God is *a Monad* according to the principle of His *essence* and is *a Trinity* according to *His mode of existence,* which means that the three hypostases are more than mere modalities. By affirming unity, one overcomes precisely the modalistic antitrinitarianism of Sabellius or, in comparative religious terms, Hindu modalism. The persons of the Holy Trinity *exist essentially,* which shows that God *exists* in a manner that defines His true *essence* at the same time*.[30]*

In attempting to convey the meaning of the triune unity and to reconcile Plotinus' categories of the Monad and the Triad, patristic theology, especially through St. Gregory of Nazianzus, understood that the Monad, which is being itself, being infinitely equal to itself, is characterised by isolation. However, its remaining in isolation made it impossible for it to manifest its infinite virtualities. The opening of the Monad means precisely the transition beyond the limitations imposed by self-isolation; it means its unfolding in the existence of the Triad. This eternal "oscillation" from One to Trinity excludes *duality,* that is, remaining in the opposition created by polarity, which can only

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[29] Ioannis Zizioulas, *op. cit.,* pp. 35-36. The "monarchy" of the Father is constantly used by the Cappadocian Fathers against those who accuse them of *tritheism*: "God is one," writes St. Basil the Great, "because the Father is one." *Against the Sabellians, 3* (Migne) P.G. 31: 605 A, apud Jean Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology, p.* 245.

[30] Lars Thunberg, *Man and the Cosmos in the Vision of Saint Maximus the Confessor,* trans. by Prof. Dr. Remus Rus, IBMBOR, Bucharest, 1999, p. 35.

suggest separation. The Trinity means overcoming duality, establishing diversity and openness to infinity, a process or, rather, a reality that can be expressed through the logic *of the identity of opposites,* "coincidentia oppositorum."[31] In the Trinitarian datum, Jewish monadism is excluded, as is Hellenic multiplicity, just as any exclusive valorisation in favour of one or another of the Persons is excluded. Applying cosmologically God's mobility towards multiplicity, affirmed by expressions such as that of St. Gregory the Theologian: "The Monad, moving from the beginning towards the Two, rested in the Trinity," Saint Maximus the Confessor indicates the presence of a divine work in creation, admitting that the richness of the monad is precisely expressed in the Trinity because "the inner Trinitarian movement does not establish an ontological distinction or multiplicity, but marks perfection in a living circle, the dynamic of the divine Being that makes itself personal."[32]

Apophatism, characteristic of Eastern theological thought, does not mean a kind of impersonal mysticism, nor the experience of an absolute divine nothingness, in which both the human person and the divine person are lost. The "point" reached by apophatic theology, this endless end, is not a nature or an essence, and it is not a person, but something that is at the same time above nature

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[31] Father Stăniloae says that, although for a long time "the coincidence of opposites" was considered incompatible with reason, in fact all reality bears this mark of antinomic logic, which is nothing more than an effect or reflection of the Holy Trinity in creation: "Reason has now become accustomed to uniting the principle of distinction and unity in understanding reality to such an extent that it is no longer difficult for it to see the antinomic mode of *being* of all reality. For it is now a general fact that plurality does not tear apart unity, and unity does not annul plurality. It is a fact that plurality is necessarily internal to unity, or that unity manifests itself in plurality [...] this natural destiny of reason is an image of the supernatural character of the perfect unity of the distinct persons in the Holy Trinity." Fr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology,* vol. 1, Ed. IBMBOR, Bucharest, 1978, p. 288.

[32] Lars THUNBERG, *op. cit.,* pp. 33-34.

and person – it is *the Trinity.* By resorting to apophatism ("via negativa"), that is, to thinking that places the Trinity beyond the necessary and contingent, the mystery of the Trinity will remain delimited by rationalism, thus avoiding its suppression or reduction to a unity (dynamic antitrinitarianism), to an essence with three forms of manifestation (Sabellianism, Trimurti), or to a division into three beings (triteism). The Trinity, as an absolute structure, is affirmed by the Church – through the term "ὁμοούσιος" – as "the consubstantiality of the Three, the mysterious identity of the monad and the triad; identity and distinction at the same time of the one nature and the three hypostases."[33]

In order to justify logically and relationally that God is one in being and three in persons, the Fathers had to make legitimate recourse to Greek philosophy. They took the terms *ousia*, *hypostasis* and *prosopon*, which they invested with new meanings. Thus, if for Aristotle *ousia (*οὐσία πρωτη – *primary substance)* is that which is not said about any subject, and *secondary substances* (οὐσία δευτερα) are the species in which ousia (substance) subsists[34,] the Holy Fathers identified

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[33]   Vladimir LOSSKY, *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church,* pp. 75, 77-79; While the concept objectifies and subsumes, only methodical thinking "deconceptualised" through apophasis is capable of evoking the Mystery of the person. For what remains irreducible in each nature cannot be defined, but only designated. When the monad unfolds, the fullness of God cannot be reduced to a *dyad,* because two implies opposition and mutual limitation. Two would divide the divine nature and locate the root of the indefinite at infinity, the first polarity of creation that would become a manifestation (as in Gnostic systems). The overcoming of *two,* that is, of number, takes place in three: not a return to the origin, but a flowering of personal being. See Idem, *Introduction to Orthodox Theology,* pp. 54, 57.

[34]   ARISTOTLE, *Organon,* vol. I, *Categories*, 5, 2a-3b, translation, introductory study, introductions and notes by Mircea Florian, Editura Iri, Bucharest, 1997, pp. 98-103.

"primary substance" with the subsistent individual, more precisely with the person, and "secondary substances" with being, essence. Gradually, primary substances were identified as hypostases, as that which can be experienced. *Ousia,* designating in particular *essence,* is the reality that exists by itself, subsisting by itself, without needing another for its subsistence and without having its being in another. The idea is that *ousia* does not need another for its consistency. Ὑπόστασις (from the verb ὑφίσταμαι – "to subsist") designates subsistence, that is, what actually subsists. Obviously, the identity between *hypostasis* and *ousia* is revealed when both terms have the meaning of *existence,* both *hypostasis* and *ousia* having being as their object. This relative equivalence favoured the development of Christian language. The balance between the two terms, whose equal dignity the Fathers wished to emphasise, could not be overturned by the context prior to the development of Trinitarian theology. They thus avoided the risk of giving weight to impersonal essence. By establishing a specialised meaning, the Fathers succeeded in "implanting" the idea of personhood into being and giving ontology a personalist character.[35]

Ousia, in the Trinity, is not an abstract idea of divinity, a rational essence that unites three divine individualities, just as, for example, humanity is common to three different people. Apophatism gives it the metalogical depth of an unknowable transcendence. It should be noted that the Fathers used *ousia* to distinguish what is common in God, that is, being, substance, and *hypostasis* to suggest what is particular, the hypostasis, the person. According to their doctrine, the difference between *ousia* and *hypostasis* is the same as that between the common and the particular, that is, between genus or species and individual.[36]

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[35]   Vladimir LOSSKY, *Introduction to Orthodox Theology*, pp. 51-51

[36]   THEODORET of Cyrus, *Dialogus, 1, Immutabilis*, P. G., t. 83, col. 33 A B, apud V. LOSSKY, *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church,* pp. 81-82.

With regard to *hypostasis*, – and here we see real progress in thinking, under the influence of Christianity – it no longer contains anything individual. *The individual* is part of the species or, more precisely, is only part of it; he is only the result of the fragmentation, the atomisation of nature. This conceptualisation of the individual is far from that of the Holy Trinity, where each *hypostasis* possesses the fullness of divine nature. The hypostases are infinitely united [37] and different. They are divine nature, but none of them possesses it exclusively. Because all hypostases share divine nature without restriction, it is not divided. In turn, this indivisible nature gives depth to each hypostasis, confirming its uniqueness in this communion in which each person, without confrontation, participates fully in all the others.[38]

In the process of developing Trinitarian terminology and in an era influenced by ancient philosophy, which interpreted the individual in an atomistic grid, Greek theology preferred the term πρόσωπον (*prosopon*) to ὑρόστασις to indicate the divine persons, even though both would later acquire the same meaning. The thinking that distinguishes *ousia* from hypostasis in God uses metaphysical vocabulary and is expressed within an

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[37]   Individualities are opposed and repetitive: each possesses a fragment of divine nature; but infinitely divided, it is always the same nature, lacking authentic diversity.

[38]   Vladimir LOSSKY, *Introduction to Orthodox Theology*, pp. 52-53. The more they are *one*, the more the hypostases are different, for nothing of their common nature escapes them; and the more they are *different*, the more they are one, since their unity is not an impersonal uniformity, but a fruitful tension of an irreducible diversity. This mutual interpenetration or intertwining of the divine hypostases is rendered by the abundance of "perichoresis without mixing or confrontation." St. JOHN Damascene, *Dogmatics* (Ἔκδοσις ἀκριβής της ὀρθοδόξου πίστεως) in "The Sources of Orthodoxy," vol. 1, trans. by Dumitru Fecioru, Librăriei Teologice, Bucharest, 1938, pp. 51-52.

ontology in which terms have the value of conventional signs rather than concepts, in order to signal absolute *identity* and absolute *difference*. This introduction of a distinction between two synonyms was a terminological novelty to express the irreducibility of the hypostasis to ousia, of the person to essence, but at the same time without opposing them as two different realities. This irreducibility can only be understood and expressed in the relationship between the three Hypostases, which are in fact not "three" but "*Tri-unity*".[39] While *hypostasis* and *prosopon* would later acquire the same meaning in Greek theology, this happened only because the latter was assimilated to the strong meaning of the former (cf. St. John Damascene, *Orthodoxy*, 59). *Hypostasis* enjoyed a long and interesting evolution as a philosophical and theological term, but it always retained something of its original force.[40]

The entire Trinitarian struggle of the Cappadocian Fathers revolved around the inadequacy of any psychological or other model to the revealed mystery of the Triune God. The writings against the Arian Eunomius by St. Basil the Great and St. Gregory of Nyssa provide an eloquent testimony and expression of their conviction that language and, by extension, the human mind can

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[39] Vladimir LOSSKY, *After the Image and Likeness of God,* translated from French by Anca Manolache, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 1998, p. 106. This "identity in difference" is expressed by Saint Gregory of Nazianzus as follows: "The Son is not the Father, for there is only one Father, but He is what the Father is; the Holy Spirit, although He proceeds from the Father, is not the Son, for there is only one Son, but He is what the Son is." Saint GREGORY of Nazianzus, *The Five Theological Orations,* trans., intro. and notes by Fr. Dr. Academician Dumitru Stăniloae, in The *Fifth Theological Oration,* pp. 116-117.

[40] A force that can be summarised by observing that it is more or less exactly equivalent to *the* Latin *substantia*. Alexander GOLITZIN, *Simeon the New Theologian: Life, Times, Thought,* study in Saint Simeon the New Theologian, *Theological and Ethical Discourses,* Writings I, introductory study and translation by Deacon Ioan I. Ică jr., Deisis Publishing House, Sibiu, 1998, p. 498.

do no more than point to a reality that absolutely transcends them. The reality of divine life lies between different sets of seemingly contradictory statements, which are not subject to any logical resolution. No philosophical-analytical calculation can ever solve the equation of the Trinity in which 1+1+1=1.

This is certainly one reason, probably the main one, why Greek triadology insists on the term *hypostasis*. In fact, the absolute value of the term, which had the meaning of *sub-stratum (*"base, foundation"), of what lies beneath (the solid reality of a thing), came from the fact that *it could* indicate that there is nothing else to which the object under investigation can be reduced. The same is true of *ousia,* a term significantly chosen by the Greek Fathers to designate what is common to the Three Persons, which has the same meaning. In turn, it too can designate a single *existing reality.*[41] The result is an obvious paradox, since God is *Three* (Persons) and *One* Being *at the same time* (1=3), which does not imply, as we have seen, either tritheism or modalism, but the fact that the Three Persons share a single Being. Suggestively, Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, called "the Theologian," compares the Trinity to "three suns" and "one" single "sun." "For us there is only one God, because there is only one divinity. And those who are of it remain in it, although we believe that there are Three. For one is not more God, and another less God."[42] Summarising the entire argumentative development of the Fathers against the tritheistic accusation, Saint Gregory of Nyssa offers a fourfold answer: 1. The Three are One, first of all because they share a single divine will and work (*energeia)*; 2. because they have a single origin or cause, the Person of the Father; 3. because number and division apply only

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[41]   *Ibid*., p. 500. For details: G.L. PRESTIGE, *God in Patristic Thought,* London, 1969, pp. 188-196; J. STEAD, *Divine Substance*, Oxford, 1979, pp. 134-156.

[42]   If the effort to contemplate this paradox proves too much, and the mind collapses in confusion, he adds, that is exactly what we should expect. See Saint GREGORY the Theologian, *Fifth Theological Discourse (On the Holy Spirit),* V, 14, p. 103 and 31-33, pp. 116-117.

to the sphere of created existence, to things that we are able to count. God, however, "is not a thing," but transcends anything we call a being; 4. it is linked to what was later called "interpenetration" (*perichoresis)*, that is, the presence of each of the three Persons in the Others.[43]

Like Hinduism, which possesses an ontological monism, Greek philosophy was incapable of establishing an ontology of the *person*. Greek ontology professes the unity of "being," even if beings are multiple. However, creatures reduce their "being" through their necessary relationship with the single being. The result is that everything that does not participate, through *belonging,* in this unity of "being" must be qualified as "non-being." However, the person does not function according to the harmonious laws that exist in the ontological unity in which the divinity and the world necessarily participate, the consequence being its deprivation of ontic content. Leaving the interval of pre-established harmony, the person (*prosopon)* is not ontically structured, but remains something *external* to the individual.[44] However, such a role confirms the person's identity status, something that makes them unique and unrepeatable.

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[43]　Alexander GOLITZIN, *op. cit.,* p. 501.

[44]　In *Platonic* thought, the concept of "person" is ontologically impossible, because the soul that ensures the duration, the "being" of man, is not permanently linked to the concrete, "individual" man: it lives eternally, but can attach itself to another concrete body, can constitute another "individuality", as in the case of rebirth. For *Aristotle,* on the contrary, the concept of person becomes ontologically impossible because the soul is indissolubly linked to the concrete, to the 'individual': man is a concrete individuality, but he persists only for the duration of his psycho-somatic constitution, because death definitively abolishes this given 'individuality'. Ancient Greek thought thus proves incapable of combining permanence and "individuality" to create a true ontology of the person as an absolute concept. To succeed, it will have to radically revise its ontology. Ioannis ZIZIOULAS, *op. cit.,* pp. 22-23.

But *prosopon* is nothing more than a "mask", something unrelated to the true "being" of man, without ontological content. In the Greek world, "prosopon" designates for man an element superimposed on his entity, and not his true being, his "hypostasis". For "hypostasis" still meant "nature" (φυσις), substance (ουσια) at that time. Many centuries would pass before Greek thought arrived at the historical identification between "hypostasis" and "person."[45]

From an ontological perspective, the Holy Trinity is a *primordial* concept and not a notion that is added to or follows divine substance, and the substance of God, "God," has no ontological content, no true being except as *communion*. It would thus be inconceivable to speak of "God the One" before speaking of God Who is "communion", that is, of the Holy Trinity. In this way, "communion" becomes an ontological concept in patristic thought. In the realm of being, there is nothing that exists and is intelligible in itself, nothing that can, as an individual, subsist "entirely alone," since God Himself exists only by virtue of a fact of communion.

But this communion is not a relationship understood as such, an existential structure that replaces "nature" or "substance" in its primordial ontological role. Like substance, "communion" does not exist by itself, it is not an autarchic category, for the Father is its cause.[46]

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[45] *Ibid.,* pp. 26–27. The same is true in Latin thought, where *the persona* also has no ontological content.

[46] *Ibid.,* pp. 9-10. This thesis of the Cappadocian Fathers, who introduced the concept of "cause" into the Being of God, is of enormous importance. It means that the ultimate ontological category, thanks to which something truly *is*, is neither an impersonal and incommunicable "substance" nor a structure of communion presupposed in itself or imposed by necessity, but *the person*.

The emphasis on the Trinity of Persons before unity in being (as in Western scholastic theology) led Orthodox theology to a *personal* foundation *of the unity of the Trinity*. This corresponds to the Orthodox approach, starting from experience and the experiential. The Triune God is experienced not as a being, but as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Thus, oriented towards experience and the experiential, Eastern theology bases *the unity* of God not on a common being (ουσια); unity is based on *the* so-called "monarchy" (μοναρχία) of the Father. However, "monarchy" here means less the unity of dominion, "arche" meaning more "origin" and "principle" than "dominion."[47] According to Vl. Lossky, "the monarchy of the Father" is the hypostatic relationship that generates both the Oneness and the Trinity; in turn, the Persons of the Trinity exist because they "possess the divine nature; their procession consists precisely in the fact that they receive their nature from the Father."[48]

Thinking in the spirit of Orthodox theology, one can say: the Father is God—and the Son and the Holy Spirit are God because they have the same essence (*ousia*) from the Father. Thus, both the Orthodox and Western Churches teach the Trinity of Persons (Hypostases) and the unity of being. But the principle (*origin)* of unity in the East is the "Hypostasis of the Father." The unity of being, *homoousia* with the Father, is only a consequence of his monarchy. In the Western Church, on the contrary, beginning with Thomas Aquinas, one starts from the substance or being of God, seen as "actus purus" or "natura pura," as the principle from

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[47] This understanding underlies the first sentences of the Creed: "I believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty (*Pantokrator*)." Karl Christian FELMY, *Dogmatics of Ecclesial Experience. The Renewal of Contemporary Orthodox Theology,* Introduction and translation by Fr. Prof. Dr. Ioan Ică, Deisis Publishing House, Sibiu, 1999, p. 98.

[48] Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church,* pp. 79-80.

which the Persons of the Trinity are deduced, together with their specific works.[49]

In order to avoid the risks *of Sabellianism* (given that Plotinus had already spoken of the "hypostases of the divine," but in a monistic-ontological scheme) and *tritheism* (taking into account the current identification between hypostasis and substance), an expression had to be found that would allow theology to attribute ontological content to each Person of the Holy Trinity without jeopardising its two biblical principles: *monotheism* and *the* absolute *otherness* and ontological independence of God from the world. This effort gave rise to *the identification* between hypostasis and person. This identification of the term "hypostasis" with "person" was affirmed in a relationship in which the person is no longer something external to the entity, a "superimposed" element, but *the* very *hypostasis of being,* an entity in itself and the constitutive element of beings. In fact, it is the person who *constitutes* "being."[50]

Thus, the *person* grounds "being" and appears as an ontic category thanks to which something *is*. In the realm of

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[49] In scholastic thought, the Divine Being, in Itself, has its own regime of what has been called "pure act," that is, an absolute identity between *essence* and *existence*. But the fundamental conception of God as a being – "Immutable Being" – and the interpretation of Her way of being and existing as pure act ("Deus est actus purus"), that is, in the sense of the absolute simplicity of the divine Essence, closed in on itself and incommunicable, in which there is no distinction between its "Essence" and its inner "Energies," constitute two quasi-insurmountable aporias for human consciousness. Western theology thus establishes a primacy of Essence over Person. Father Galeriu, *The Salvation of the Philosopher,* article in the volume *Dialogue and Freedom. Essays in Honour of Mihai Şora,* coordinators: Sorin Antohi and Aurelian Crăiuţu, Nemira Publishing House, Bucharest, 1997, 138-140, passim.

[50] Ioannis Zizioulas, *op. cit.,* pp. 31, 33. Through this identification, creatures do not relate their "being" to "being in itself" – "being" not being an absolute category in itself – but to the person who constitutes "being," who makes creatures be creatures.

Trinitarian relations, the cause that constitutes authentic being is the Father, the absolutely free person and by no means an incommunicable "substance." Hence, the consequences are absolute: authentic being is based on the communion originated by a free person; moreover, this communion, in order to be the "image" of God's being, must lead to free persons. In the final analysis, it is not only communion, but also freedom, the free person, that constitutes true being. This is the moment when Christian triadology understands that the absolute in God is given by the relationship between the Persons, a relationship that has as its eternal progenitor the free Person of the Father.[51]

In Christianity, the problem of the person and the hypostasis of nature is expressed in such a way that it simultaneously excludes emphasis on unity (One) or plurality (Multiple). It is the notion of "person" that distinguishes the Persons of the Trinity, and the unity of "nature" makes their separation impossible. This is the "cornerstone" for religions and philosophical thinking outside the realm of Revelation, where the failure to preserve the unity of nature has naturally led to the plurality of figures.

4 The incompatibility between Trimūrti and the Holy Trinity

The problem of finding "bridges" between the ternary conception of God in Hinduism and Christianity is a false one, because the two conceptions: Trimūrti and the Holy Trinity have nothing in common except the number "three". But even in this respect, the two diverge from each other, because if the three deities represent three modes of manifestation of the Absolute Brahman, in Trinitarian theology, the number "three" has no

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[51] *Ibid.,* p. 10. Being is the consequence of a free person, the Person of the Father, the Cause, the One Who loves unconditionally and expresses His identity in the act of communion with the Son and the Holy Spirit.

arithmetic applicability. The idea of number cannot be applied to God, because in this case we would be subjecting divinity to an external determination, to a form adequate to our understanding. Saint Basil the Great resolves this dilemma by stating that: "We do not count (the persons of the Holy Trinity) in the sense that, starting from unity, we arrive at plurality, because we do not say: one, two and three, nor first, second and third. For *'I am the first and the last, and there is no God besides* Me' (Isaiah 44:6). We have never heard of a second God until today. Therefore, worshipping the God in God, confessing the individuality of the hypostases without dividing nature into several parts, we remain faithful to one God."[52] In other words, we are not talking here about the material number used for calculations, which is not at all applicable in the spiritual realm, where there is no quantitative increase. Especially when it comes to the divine hypostases, united inseparably, and whose whole is nothing but unity, always 3=1, the number "three" is not a quantity as it is commonly understood, but it reveals the unspeakable origin of divinity.[53] *Two* is the number that separates, *Three* is the number that goes beyond separation: one, like the multiple, is gathered and contained in the Trinity. As Trinity, God is unity and existence[54], in which each hypostasis is

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[52] St. Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit,* XVIII, p. 60.

[53] Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church,* pp. 78-79. Τριας – "this word unites those who are united by nature and does not allow those who are inseparable to be scattered by a number that separates them," says Saint Gregory of Nazianzus. In The *Fifth Theological Discourse,* pp. 106-107.

[54] "God is truly and eternally One and only by nature, encompassing in Himself, in every way, all existence proper, as the One who is proper even above existence itself. And if this is so, He who has existence proper has nothing, anywhere, of those things that are said to exist." Saint Maximus the Confessor, *Gnostic Heads, I*, 6, in *The Philokalia of the Holy Ascetics,* vol. 2, trans., intro. and notes by Fr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, 2nd edition, Harisma Publishing House, Bucharest, 1993, p. 151.

equal to the other two.[55] The eternity and equality of the Persons excludes any exclusivist understanding of the Trinity in the sense of the disintegration of the unity or multiplicity of being.

Applied to Hinduism, the idea reflects the fact that Trimūrti is a realisation in which the emphasis is on plurality, everything coming from a real deficiency in understanding the manifestation of the impersonal essence, but also from the excessive distinction that exists between the divine figures. No longer being personalised, nature degenerates in manifestation through "multiplication," and from here, because each figure cannot incorporate the whole, the potential antagonism between them also appears.

Thus, the possible congruences between the two conceptions of divinity are nullified, starting from the very valorisation of the number "three". In addition to this aspect, there are other reasons that make a similarity between the two triadic structures impossible.

1. In the case of Trimūrti, we can speak of a historical beginning, in the sense that each of the deities of the triad has a historical necessity in its ascension or decline. Thus, Brahman manifests himself as the creator at the beginning of each kalpa, in Brahmā, but his place, or rather his position in the hierarchy, is taken by Viṣṇu, the Preserver of creation, and at the end of the cycle of time, Śiva, as the Destroyer, leads the world into dissolution (prālāya) in view of a new creation. In the case of the Holy Trinity, it would be an aberration to speak of a "beginning" of It, for each Person *is* eternally equal in dignity to the other two, participating mysteriously together in the act of economy. On the one hand, by virtue of their "consubstantiality," the Three

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[55]   "Three hypostases united in a natural way neither merge into one nor divide into three; for in each of them the other two are seen, in a single being, nature and glory and in a single will." Saint SIMEON the New Theologian, *Second Theological Discourse,* in *op. cit.,* pp. 96-97.

Persons are equal and never opposed, not even *in potential.* On the contrary, they are Father, Son and Holy Spirit from eternity, and the "ad intra" mode of life of the Triune Persons is perichoretic life, in which one dwells in the other two and allows himself to be inhabited by the other two. On the other hand, by virtue *of their closeness,* each Person is eminent in a certain work: the Father in creation, the Son in salvation, and the Holy Spirit in sanctification. This concerns the "ad extra" life of the Holy Trinity or the act of economy, but here too it must be emphasised that there is no divine work in which all three Persons do not participate, for, as St. Athanasius the Great teaches, "God the Father does all things through the Son, in the Holy Spirit."[56]

The "tri-functional" aspect of the impersonal absolute cannot be compared to the Christian divine Trinity, for it belongs rather to an aspect of *mythological thinking*. Mythological thinking will always use the categories of "necessity," categories that are incompatible with thinking based on a personal God with whom one can enter into a relationship. In Christianity, the recourse is to *apophasis:* since the divinity is "das ganz Andere," "in the divine Trinity there is an inner life that escapes concepts."[57]

2. The gods of the triad are always subject *to necessity*, ultimately being absorbed into the undifferentiated One. They are nothing more than aspects or "modes" of the impersonal absolute, destined to absorb themselves into the single monad, at which point the person is an absolute impossibility. In the Holy Trinity, however, the *infinite* aspect of the Persons is revealed to us, since the Father is consubstantial with the Son and the Holy Spirit.

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[56] Perhaps the most telling example can be found in the unfolding of the act of creation (Gen. 1:1-3), where we see the Father creating through His Word or Logos ("And God said...") matter and life, which came forth from the water over which the Holy Spirit "moved."

[57] Nikolai Berdiaev, *Spirit and Freedom. An Attempt at Christian Philosophy,* trans. by Stelian Lăcătuşu, afterword by Gh. Vlăduţescu, Paideia Publishing House, Bucharest, 1996, p. 102.

Here there can be no question of necessity or psychological or moral conditioning, for the divine nature is not beyond the Persons. The Trinity is God, and each Person possesses the fullness of the divine nature, without possessing it exclusively. This fullness of divine nature consists in the communion of divine persons, and man, a person destined by creation for freedom ("spirit and freedom" - Nikolai Berdiaev), tends towards God, establishing a relationship with the preservation of his identity, without annihilating himself in Him.

3. If we disregard the acts of creation, destruction and recreation *ad infinitum* of the universe, in a word of creation (sṛṣti), Trimūrti no longer has any meaning or functionality, since these attributes are only modes of manifestation of the impersonal Brahman. In other words, "creation" is the necessary condition for the modalistic affirmation of Brahman as Brahmā, Śiva and Viṣṇu. On the other hand, in *Christian theology,* the idea of "necessity" has no application, because the Trinity is beyond the antinomy of the necessary and the contingent. There can be no question, as in Trimūrti, of the Trinity's dependence on the created being, nor is there any determination of what is called the "eternal procession" of the divine persons through the act of creation. Even before creation, *God was Trinity,* Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for creation is an act of will, and the procession of persons is an act "according to nature" (κατα φύσιν).[58]

The "ecstatic" feature of God, namely that His being is identified with the fact of communion (*koinonia*), allows for the overcoming of the ontological necessity that His substance would have entailed (if the latter had been the primordial ontological attribute of God), as well as its replacement (the ontological necessity) with the free self-affirmation of divine

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[58] Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church,* p. 76. See also St. John Damascene, *Dogmatics,* I, VIII, pp. 25-30. Entirely personal and entirely natural, in the Trinity freedom and necessity are one and the same, or rather, they cannot exist in God.

existence. And that this communion is a fact of freedom results not from the divine nature, but from a person: the Father, Who, as a Person, freely wills this communion.[59]

4. The triune God of Christianity exists through Himself ("I am who I am" – Exodus 3:14). He is self-sufficient and does not depend on any external element. Here, *selfhood* is an essential attribute of divinity. Father Stăniloae shows that the existence of the Holy Trinity through Himself, as the fullness of life or being, is expressed in three forms: love, omnipotence and omniscience[60], between which there is perfect unity and harmony (none of them manifests itself to the detriment of the other). Associated with these are His justice and immutability. But this divine immutability finds no equivalent in the qualities of the divine figures of the Trimurti, nor even in the immobility of nirguṇa Brahman, the unmanifest, because it represents "absolute stability in goodness, in truth."[61] Similarly, when St. John the Apostle writes that "God is love" (1 John 4:8), this should not be understood as an expression of impersonal primordial energy, but as a way of expressing "the supreme unity of *tripersonal communion*." In Trimūrti, Viṣṇu is a deity who possesses the attribute of compassion towards humanity, which he approaches through his "descents" (avatāra), but this compassion cannot be identified with His "being," for it is devoid of the attribute of selfhood. In Christianity, it is precisely love that best defines God, for, in the Johannine sense, He is the Same as love, but a love manifested fully in freedom, and not under the

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59   Ioannis Zizioulas, *op. cit.,* pp. 39-40.

60   Dumitru Stăniloae, *The Holy Trinity or In the Beginning was Love,* p. 21.

61   It is not immutability in the sense of "Platonic immobility." Father Galeriu, *op. cit.,* p. 127. "He stands and moves," affirms the antinomic Dionysius the Areopagite. *On the Divine Names,* in *op. cit.,* p. 170.

rule of necessity, as in Trimūrti. Moreover, the only ontologically possible exercise of freedom is *love.*[62]

The controversy or dilemma of the similarity between Trimūrti and the Holy Trinity arises when they are considered structurally identical and having a common origin. This suggests that both are merely expressions of God's triune nature. Both the Holy Trinity and Trimūrti (like other triads) are ways of capturing one and the same eternal truth: that of *the divine trinity.* The comparative history of religions is very significant in highlighting the ternary character of divinity, found in so many religions that structure their pantheon triadically (see the triads in the religion of the ancient Egyptians, the Assyro-Babylonians, or the triune aspect of the Chinese "Tao", etc.). The conclusion would be that there is a sign of equality between them, and that the Triad is equally true everywhere. From this, the consequence is that the Holy Trinity is equal to any other triad in any religious space. This is, in fact, the attempt of some historians of religions or esotericists who seek in all religious traditions the "transcendental unity" of religions, trying to prove that religions do nothing more than define in different terms one and the same transcendent truth. In this case, Trinitarian representations would be nothing more than the exposition of the same fact, but formulated differently.[63]

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[62] The statement "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16) means that God "exists" as Trinity, therefore as "Person," and not as substance. Love is not a consequence or a "property" of the divine nature, but what *constitutes* His substance, what allows God to be what He is: the one God. Thus, love ceases to be a qualifying property, and therefore secondary to "being," to become *the ontological category* par excellence. Ioannis ZIZIOULAS, *op. cit., p.* 41.

[63] This is the model proposed by René Guénon and his disciples, notably Frithjof Schuon, as well as by some Hindu thinkers who have attempted to draw closer to Christianity, starting from elements they consider to

To defuse this subjective assessment, one can carefully examine the reality that is the object of devotion in both religions. Thus, in the case of Hinduism, to speak triadically about divinity is a flagrant contradiction, for it opposes the inconsistency of all that exists, the triadic manifestation being, in the spirit of Vedānta, nothing more than an "appearance" determined by māyā. If, however, this ternary conception of divinity comes to be prized and "objectified" devotionally, this can be explained by the monistic-pantheistic configuration of divinity, which causes it to manifest itself in infinite forms (polytheism). Hence the abundance of gods in Hinduism to this day, whose number is considered to be 33 crores, or 330 million. However, the triadic manifestation is only one of the many possible manifestations of the Absolute. But if for *Hinduism* the triad cannot constitute a mode of "being" of the divine, since the Absolute cannot be represented by a limited phenomenal entity, in *Christianity* the Trinity is God, and God is God because He is Trinity. The Trinity, as a primordial given, is revealed to us as a relationship between Persons, but at the same time as a model that establishes the relational meaning of human existence.

While for Hindus, Trimūrti was not an object of religious devotion, the three deities being worshipped more separately – Brahmā even lacking such worship, due to his strongly intellectual character – the Holy Trinity is for Christians an act of faith, around which their entire existence revolves.[64] Trimūrti is

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be common to both. For details: Frithjof Schuon, *op. cit.,* especially chap. VI: *The Ternary Aspect of Monotheism,* pp. 120-129.

[64]   Thus, the "singer of the Holy Trinity," Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, declares with "emphasis" in his poems: "From the day I renounced the things of this world to devote my soul to heavenly contemplations [...], from that day on, my eyes have been blinded by the light of the Trinity, whose brilliance surpasses anything that thought could present to my soul; [...] from that day on, I died to this world and the world died to me." Towards the end of his life, he wishes to be "*where my Trinity is,*" and the combined radiance of His glory, "the Trinity, in which even the

more of an intellectual systematisation than a necessary experience in the plan of liberation. The gods are not absolute realities for understanding divinity because, whether taken as a whole or individually, they do not constitute divinity as such, but merely aspects of it. Based on a *coincidentia oppositorum,* often functional in the Indian space, and especially in the understanding of Indian art, Trimūrti presents three entities manifested within the perimeter of māya, tributary to avidyātic temporality (metaphysical ignorance), each with a well-defined role in mythology.[65] Totally different from this, in the Christian view, based on positive Revelation, the Holy Trinity is not made up of "entities," since its cause or principle is the Father, the absolutely perfect Person, who establishes in the Trinitarian life the communion of Persons. It is fundamental that the real constitutive Cause of being is the Father, and not an incommunicable "substance." The being of divinity is the consequence of a *free* person*,* the Person of the Father, while the Trinity is a conjunctural realisation of the divine, a necessity dictated by *need*.

In the Christian Trinity, God the Father "is love" and pours himself "outside" himself through an act of love. The Father is the principle, he is potential love that is actualised in the Son, love

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unclear shadows filled me with emotion." *Poemata de seipso, I* and X, P.G., t. 37, col. 984-985 and 1165-1166, apud Vladimir LOSSKY, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church,* p. 75.

[65] Zimmer shows that the world is Māyā-māyā, meaning "made of Māyā matter". Māyā means "art": that through which an object or appearance is produced. Māyā is precisely the power or art of the creator. The noun "māyā" is etymologically related to "measure". It is formed from the root "mā", which means "to measure or unfold, to produce, to give form or to create". The Māyā of the gods is their power to take on various forms, unfolding at will the various aspects of their subtle essence. But the gods themselves are the products of a higher māyā: the spontaneous self-transformation of an initially undifferentiated, all-generating divine Substance. And this higher *māyā* produces not only the gods, but also the universe in which they act. Heinrich ZIMMER, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Civilisation,* pp. 28-29.

that does not remain fruitless, but "multiplies" infinitely. Applying the axiom of St. Athanasius the Great ("God does everything through the Son, in the Holy Spirit"), it can be said that the *Father's* Love, concretised in *the Son,* manifests itself (externalises itself) fully in *the Holy Spirit*.

If in Christianity, creation, which is *ex nihilo*, is the act of God's will, a will common to all Persons, in Hinduism, the world appears as a generation, an emanation. This generation is also valid in the case of the gods of the Triad, the undifferentiated One producing the multiple through emanation.[66] The three gods limit each other, a limitation which, naturally, cancels out the possible infinite character. Unlike the Persons of the Holy Trinity, who share the same essence (ousia), in Trimūrti, the nature of Viṣṇu is different from that of Śiva or Brahmā. The three divine figures, by manifesting themselves as opposites of each other, cannot even be complementary. Ultimately, Brahmā, Śiva and Viṣṇu are māyā or the products of a higher māyā, and the triad is an illusion; in other words, the gods are essentially Brahman.[67]

In Christianity, therefore, God does not exist as a 'substance', but as Father, the ontological principle relating to a person. To say that God "is" does not mean to limit His personal freedom, but to relate God's "being" to His personal freedom.[68] The Trinity presupposes the hypostasis of being, without the Hypostases

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[66] In this way, the Absolute becomes relative, and the Triad as a "necessary given" appears superfluous. Nicuşor Nacu, *op. cit.,* p. 291.

[67] H. Zimmer admirably interprets this reduction of all existence to an Ultimate principle, by virtue of māyā: "All universes that coexist in space and succeed one another in time [...] are manifestations originating from an inexhaustible, original and eternal source of being, and are made manifest by a play of *māyā.* [...] Māyā is Existence: both the world we are aware of and ourselves, who are encompassed by the environment in development and destruction [...] At the same time, Māyā represents the supreme power that generates and animates the unfolding of forms: the dynamic aspect of Universal Substance." See: *Myths and Symbols in Indian Civilisation,* p. 29.

[68] Ioannis Zizioulas, *op. cit.,* p. 35.

being considered as three parts of a single Nature. Trimūrti, on the contrary, means precisely the identification with such a perspective, the individual manifestations of the gods highlighting a certain part of the divine nature.

In *conclusion*, there is no similarity between Trimūrti and the Holy Trinity in terms of essence or "substance," but only in terms of "form." Hindus do not consider Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva to be "three persons in one God," but rather three deities, each manifesting a part of Brahman, the impersonal Absolute. Moreover, Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva each have a consort goddess, namely Sarasvatī, Lakṣmī and Śakti. Adding these, the number of primordial manifestations of Brahman reaches *six.* And yet, these are only six among the millions of deities in the Hindu pantheon, all of which are considered various manifestations of Brahman. Thus, any supposed Hindu parallel with the Holy Trinity dissolves into *modalistic polytheism* and, ultimately, into *monistic pantheism,* in which the entire diversity of the universe is merely an expression of the underlying spiritual Unity, a concept so foreign to Christian triadology.

Father Stăniloae, emphasising the stark contrast between the pantheistic and Christian models of existence in relation to morality, says: "A general *pantheistic* existence, in which everything happens according to certain laws, cannot be considered to serve the good. The pantheism of philosophers, which considers that all existence is and moves through a law that is imposed on it in an inexplicable way, cannot explain the ever-increasing thirst for good and its possibility. […] The *Christian* conception of existence is different from the pantheistic one. It is a conception that recognises, alongside the completely free and benevolent God, a world in which the freedom of conscious beings (angelic and human) also plays an important role, without them being able to cause total disorder

in the material or spiritual order in which these conscious beings are made to work.[69]

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[69]   Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *The Holy Trinity or In the Beginning was Love,* pp. 21-22, passim.

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