

A Sage for the Times: The Role and the *Oeuvre* of Frithjof Schuon

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If Guénon was the master expositor of metaphysical doctrines and Coomaraswamy the peerless scholar and connoisseur of Oriental art who began his exposition of metaphysics through recourse to the language of artistic forms, Schuon seems like the cosmic intellect itself impregnated by the energy of divine grace surveying the whole of the reality surrounding man and elucidating all the concerns of human existence in the light of sacred knowledge.

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A Personal Note

In the mid-70s I was idly meandering through an Australian weekly magazine which, amongst other things, carried reviews of recently published books from various fields. My eye caught a review of *The Sword of Gnosis*, an anthology of writings on "Metaphysics, Cosmology, Tradition, Symbolism", edited by Jacob Needleman. The review was sufficiently arresting for me to seek out a copy of the book. It was with growing excitement that I first encountered the writings of several figures whose work I would come to know well over the years ahead—René Guénon, Titus Burckhardt, Martin Lings, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, amongst others. But the effect of Schuon's essays was quite mesmeric: here, in the exposition of traditional doctrines and principles, was a clarity, a radiance and a depth which seemed to me, as indeed it still does, to be of a more or less miraculous order. Nasr has written of the appearance of Guénon's first book (*Introduction générale à l'étude des doctrines des hindoues*, 1921),

It was like a sudden burst of lightning, an abrupt intrusion into the modern world of a body of knowledge and a perspective utterly alien to the prevalent climate and world view and completely opposed to all that characterizes the modern mentality.²

¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred Crossroad*, New York, 1981, p.107.

² *ibid.*, p.101.

This, precisely, is how Schuon's essays struck me. My own intellectual and spiritual life was changed forever. At that time, Schuon's books were not easily available in Australia. It was in the face of some difficulties that I rapidly accumulated not only Schuon's works but those of other contemporary exponents of the *sophia perennis*. I soon felt the force of Ananda Coomaraswamy's remark that, "if you ever really enter into this other world, you may not wish to return: you may never again be content with what you have been accustomed to think of as 'progress' and 'civilization'."³ And so it proved!

After working my way, at headlong pace, through such works of Schuon as I could procure, I determined to make a much more systematic study, one perhaps done most easily in a university environment. After an absence of nine years, I returned to university where I completed a Masters thesis entitled *Frithjof Schuon, the Perennial Philosophy and the Meaning of Tradition*. Since that time I have continued to study and to ponder his works. As a teacher I had discovered my vocation: to make available and to explain, to the best of my abilities and to those capable of understanding, the perennial wisdom enshrined in all integral religious and mythological traditions, and to make more widely known the work of Schuon and other traditionalists who sought to preserve the wisdom of the ages through an explication of its governing principles. My own spiritual pilgrimage, hitherto rather intermittent and haphazard, also took on new purpose and direction. I was deeply impressed by Schuon's caution that,

If metaphysics is a sacred thing, that means it could not be...limited to the framework of the play of the mind. It is illogical and dangerous to talk of metaphysics without being preoccupied with the moral concomitances it requires, the criteria of which are, for man, his behaviour in relation to God and to his neighbour.⁴

It is more or less conventional to make hyperbolic claims about the recently deceased. However, I can say without hesitation that the writings of Frithjof Schuon profoundly changed my life—not only its outer trajectory but, more importantly, the inner life without which our visible doings are nothing but empty husks.

³ Ananda Coomaraswamy, "Medieval and Oriental Art" in *Coomaraswamy I: Selected Papers, Traditional Art and Symbolism* ed. Roger Lipsey, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1977, pp.45-46.

⁴ Frithjof Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* Perennial Books, London, 1987 (new translation), p.183.

It is a singular honour to respond to the editor's invitation to contribute to this issue of *Sophia*, dedicated to Frithjof Schuon. I join those many others who were privileged to read his books and whose lives were thereby transformed, in giving thanks to God for his life and work. I mourn the passing of a great soul. What follows is based on excerpts taken from a forthcoming book on traditionalism, or perennialism as it is often called in America. I offer it as a widow's mite and as a token of the incalculable debt I owe to Frithjof Schuon. By way of an aside I should also register my gratitude to those several scholars and writers who have helped to bring Schuon's work to a wider audience: beyond those traditionalists named elsewhere in this article, mention must be made of Whittall Perry, William Stoddart, Huston Smith and James Cutsinger.⁵



Schuon and his Precursors, René Guénon and Ananda Coomaraswamy

René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy and Frithjof Schuon have played different but complementary roles in reaffirming the perennial philosophy, each fulfilling a function corresponding to their distinct sensibilities and gifts. Guénon occupies a special position by virtue of being the first to articulate the fundamental metaphysical and cosmological principles through which the *sophia perennis* might be rediscovered and expressed anew in the West. Schuon recognized Guénon as a "providential interpreter, at least on the doctrinal level" for the modern West.⁶ In a like sense, Jean-Pierre Laurant refers to Guénon's "hieratic role".⁷ Guénon's critique of the "reign of quantity" also provides the platform from which more detailed criticisms might be made by later traditionalists. His reaction to modernism was integral to his role and constitutes a kind of clearing of the ground, enabling us to understand

some of the darkest enigmas of the modern world, enigmas which the world itself denies because it is incapable of perceiving them although it carries them within itself, and because

⁵ See particularly Huston Smith's Introduction to the revised edition of *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* Quest, Wheaton, 1993, ppix-xxvii, and James Cutsinger, *Advice to the Serious Seeker: Meditations on the Teaching of Frithjof Schuon* SUNY, Albany, 1997.

⁶ Frithjof Schuon, "L'Oeuvre", quoted by Whittall Perry in "Coomaraswamy: The Man, Myth and History", *Studies in Comparative Religion* 12:3, p.160

⁷ Jean-Pierre Laurant, "Le problème de René Guénon", *Revue de l'histoire des religions* CLXXIX: i, 1971, p.63.

this denial is an indispensable condition for the maintenance of the special mentality whereby it exists.⁸

Guénon was a prolific writer. He published seventeen books during his lifetime, and at least eight posthumous collections and compilations have since appeared. The *oeuvre* exhibits certain recurrent motifs and preoccupations and is, in a sense, all of a piece. Guénon's understanding of tradition is the key to his work. As early as 1909 we find Guénon writing of "...the Primordial Tradition which, in reality, is the same everywhere, regardless of the different shapes it takes in order to be fit for every race and every historical period."⁹ As the English traditionalist, Gai Eaton, has observed, Guénon

believes that there exists a Universal Tradition, revealed to humanity at the beginning of the present cycle of time, but partially lost... his primary concern is less with the detailed forms of this Tradition and the history of its decline than with its kernel, the pure and changeless knowledge which is still accessible to man through the channels provided by traditional doctrine...¹⁰

The existence of a Primordial Tradition embodying a set of immutable metaphysical and cosmological principles from which derive a succession of traditions each expressing these principles in forms determined by a given Revelation and by the exigencies of the particular situation, is axiomatic in Guénon's work.¹¹ It is a first principle which admits of no argument; nor does it require any kind of "proof" or "demonstration", historical or otherwise.

Guénon's work, from his earliest writings in 1909 onwards, can be seen as an attempt to give a new expression and application to the timeless principles which inform all traditional doctrines. In his writings he ranges over a vast terrain—Vedanta, the Chinese tradition, Christianity, Sufism, folklore and mythology from all over the world, the secret traditions of gnosticism, alchemy, the Kabbalah, and so on,

⁸ René Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times* Penguin, Baltimore, 1972, p.11.

⁹ René Guénon, "La Demiurge", *La Gnose* 1909, quoted in Marco Bastriocchi, "The Last Pillars of Wisdom" in S. Durai Raja Singam, *Ananda Coomaraswamy: Remembering and Remembering Again and Again* privately published, Kuala Lumpur, 1974, p.351.

¹⁰ Gai Eaton, *The Richest Vein* Faber & Faber, London, 1949, pp.188-189.

always intent on excavating their underlying principles and showing them to be formal manifestations of the one Primordial Tradition. Certain key themes run through all of his writings and one meets again and again with such notions as these: the concept of metaphysics transcending all other doctrinal orders; the identification of metaphysics and the "formalisation", so to speak, of gnosis (or *jñāna* if one prefers); the distinction between the exoteric and esoteric domains; the hierarchic superiority and infallibility of intellective knowledge; the contrast of the modern Occident with the traditional Orient; the spiritual bankruptcy of modern European civilisation; a cyclical view of Time, based largely on the Hindu doctrine of cosmic cycles; a contra-evolutionary view of history.

Guénon gathered together doctrines and principles from diverse times and places but emphasized that the enterprise was a synthetic one which envisaged formally divergent elements in their principial unity rather than a syncretic one which press-ganged incongruous forms into an artificial amalgam. This distinction is a crucial one not only in Guénon's work but in traditionalism as a whole.¹²

Guénon repeatedly turned to oriental wisdoms, believing that it was only in the East that various sapiential traditions remained more or less intact. It is important not to confuse this Eastward-looking stance with the kind of sentimental exoticism nowadays so much in vogue. As Coomaraswamy noted,

If Guénon wants the West to turn to Eastern metaphysics, it is not because they are Eastern but because this is metaphysics. If "Eastern" metaphysics differed from a "Western" metaphysics—one or the other would not be metaphysics.¹³

One of Guénon's translators made the same point in suggesting that if Guénon turns so often to the East it is because the West is in the position of the

¹¹ The relationship between the Primordial Tradition and the various traditions needs clarification in that while each tradition in fact derives its overall form and principal characteristics from a particular Revelation, it nevertheless carries over (in many of its aspects) certain essential features of the tradition which precedes it.

¹² See René Guénon, *The Symbolism of the Cross* Luzac, London, 1958, pp.x-xi and René Guénon, *Crisis of the Modern World* Luzac, London, 1945, p.9 & pp.108ff.

¹³ Ananda Coomaraswamy, "Eastern Wisdom and Western Knowledge", *The Bugbear of Literacy* Perennial Books, London, 1979, pp.72-73.

foolish virgins who, through the wandering of their attention in other directions, had allowed their lamps to go out; in order to rekindle the sacred fire, which in its essence is always the same wherever it may be burning, they must have recourse to the lamps still kept alight.¹⁴

The contrast between the riches of traditional civilisations and the spiritual impoverishment of modern Europe sounds like a refrain through Guénon's writings. In all his work

Guénon's mission was twofold: to reveal the metaphysical roots of the "crisis of the modern world" and to explain the ideas behind the authentic and esoteric teachings that still remained alive... in the East.¹⁵

For those who accept Guénon's premises his work is a voice crying in the European wilderness. However, as both Schuon and Perry have stressed, Guénon's function cannot strictly be termed "prophetic", the age of prophecy being over. Schuon:

If on the doctrinal plane the Guénonian work has a stamp of unicity, it may not be useless to point out that this is owing not to a more or less "prophetic" nature—a supposition that is excluded and which Guénon had already rejected beforehand—but to an exceptional cyclical conjuncture whose temporal aspect is this "end of the world" in which we live, and whose spatial aspect is—by the same token—the forced convergence of civilisations.¹⁶

Although certain of his own intellectual realization of the truth Guénon never assumed the role of the spiritual master; he consistently refused those who requested initiation from him.¹⁷

Like other traditionalists, Guénon did not perceive his work as any kind of essay in creativity or personal "originality", repeatedly emphasising that in the metaphysical domain there was no room for "individualist considerations" of any kind. He certainly did not see himself building a new philosophy or creating a new school of thought. (If it is sometimes necessary to speak of the traditionalist "school" this is merely an expedient.) In a letter to a friend Guénon wrote, "I have no other merit than to have

¹⁴ Quoted in Gai Eaton, *The Richest Vein* p.199.

¹⁵ Jacob Needleman in his "Foreword" to *The Sword of Gnosis* Penguin, Baltimore, 1974, pp.11-12.

¹⁶ From Frithjof Schuon, "L'Oeuvre", quoted in Whitall Perry, "Coomaraswamy: The Man, Myth and History", p.160. For some reflections by Frithjof Schuon on Guénon see "Definitions" in *Sophia* 1:2 Winter 1995; and Schuon's contributions to *Les Dossiers H: René Guénon* ed. Pierre-Marie Sigaud, L'Age d'Homme, Lausanne, 1984, and *L'Herne: René Guénon* ed. Jean-Pierre Laurant, Les Editions de l'Herne, Paris, 1985 (which also includes a letter from Guénon to Schuon, 16th April, 1946).

¹⁷ See Jean-Pierre Laurant, "Le problème de René Guénon", pp.62-64.

expressed to the best of my ability some traditional ideas."¹⁸ When reminded of the people who had been profoundly influenced by his writings he calmly replied, "...such disposition becomes a homage rendered to the doctrine expressed by us in a way which is totally independent of any individualistic consideration...".¹⁹ It was Guénon's role to remind a forgetful world, "'in a way that can be ignored but not refuted', of first principles and to restore a lost sense of the Absolute".²⁰

Ananda Coomaraswamy was a much more public figure than René Guénon but here we shall concern ourselves less with biographical matter than with a few observations about the influence and significance of his work. By the end of his life Coomaraswamy was thoroughly versed in the Scriptures, mythology, doctrines and arts of many different cultures and traditions. He was an astonishingly erudite scholar, a recondite thinker and a distinguished linguist. He was a prolific writer, a full bibliography running to upwards of a thousand items on geological studies, art theory and history, linguistics and philology, social theory, psychology, mythology, folklore, religion and metaphysics. He lived in three continents and maintained many contacts, both personal and professional, with scholars, antiquarians, artists, theologians and spiritual practitioners from all over the globe.

We can discern in Coomaraswamy's life and work three principal interests which shaped his ideas and writings: a concern with social and political questions connected with the conditions of daily life and work, and with the problematic relationship of the present to the past and of the "East" to the "West"; a fascination with traditional arts and crafts which impelled an immense and ambitious scholarly enterprise; and thirdly, an emerging preoccupation with religious and metaphysical questions which was resolved in a "unique balance of metaphysical conviction and scholarly erudition".²¹ Allowing for some over-simplification, we can distinguish three "roles" in Coomaraswamy's intellectual life: social commentator and Indologist, historian of Asian art, perennial philosopher. Each of these roles was dominant during a certain

¹⁸ Whitall Perry, "The Man and His Witness" in S. Durai Raja Singam *Ananda Coomaraswamy: Remembering and Remembering Again and Again* p.7.

¹⁹ Marco Bastriocchi, "The Last Pillars of Wisdom" in S. Durai Raja Singam *Ananda Coomaraswamy: Remembering and Remembering Again and Again* p.356.

²⁰ Whitall Perry, "Coomaraswamy: the Man, Myth and History", p.163.

²¹ Roger Lipsey quoted in Whitall Perry, "The Bollingen Coomaraswamy Papers and Biography", *Studies in Comparative Religion* 11:4, p.206.

period in his life. However, his early concerns took on a different character when Coomaraswamy, following the encounter with the work of Guénon, arrived at a thoroughly traditionalist understanding.

The influence of Guénon was decisive. Coomaraswamy discovered Guénon's writings through Heinrich Zimmer some time in the late '20s and, a few years later, wrote,

...no living writer in modern Europe is more significant than René Guénon, whose task it has been to expound the universal metaphysical tradition that has been the essential foundation of every past culture, and which represents the indispensable basis for any civilisation deserving to be so-called.²²

Several commentators have detailed the creative reciprocal influences which flowed between Coomaraswamy and Guénon.²³ We shall not go over this ground again here. However, it is worth noting that Coomaraswamy told one of his friends that he and Guénon were "entirely in agreement on metaphysical principles" which, of course, did not preclude some divergences of opinion over the applications of these principles on the phenomenal plane.²⁴

The vintage Coomaraswamy of the later years is to be found in his masterly works on Vedanta and on the Catholic scholastics and mystics.²⁵ His work on the Platonic, Christian and Indian conceptions of sacred art is also unrivalled. Some of his work is labyrinthine and not easy of access. It is often laden with a mass of technical detail and with linguistic and philological subtleties which test the patience of some readers. Of his own methodology as an exponent of metaphysics Coomaraswamy wrote,

We write from a strictly orthodox point of view...endeavouring to speak with mathematical precision, but never employing words of our own, or making any affirmation for which

²² Coomaraswamy quoted in Roger Lipsey, *Coomaraswamy; His Life and Work* Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1977, p.170.

²³ See Whitall Perry, "The Man and the Witness", pp3-7; Marco Pallis, "A Fateful Meeting of Minds", *Studies in Comparative Religion* 12: 3&4, pp.176-182; and Marco Bastriocchi, "The Last Pillars of Wisdom", pp.350-359.

²⁴ Whitall Perry, "The Man and the Witness", p.5.

²⁵ Coomaraswamy himself remarked: "I have little doubt that my later work, developed out of and necessitated by my earlier works on the arts and dealing with Indian philosophy and Vedic exegesis, is really the most mature and most important part of my work." Quoted in Roger Lipsey, *Coomaraswamy; His Life and Work* p.248.

authority could not be cited by chapter and verse; in this way making our technique characteristically Indian.²⁶

Sometimes one wishes the chapter and verse documentation was not quite so overwhelming! Coomaraswamy was much more scrupulous than Guénon in this respect, the latter sometimes ignoring the niceties of scholarship at the cost of exposing some of his claims to scholarly criticism.

Coomaraswamy brought to the study of traditional metaphysics, sacred art and religious culture an aesthetic sense and a scholarly aptitude not found in Guénon. The Frenchman had, as Reynolds observes, "no great sensitivity for human cultures".²⁷ In a sense Coomaraswamy brings the principles about which Guénon wrote, down to a more human level. His work evinces more of a sense of history, and a feel for the diverse and concrete circumstances of human experience. There is also a sense of personal presence in Coomaraswamy's writings which is absent in Guénon's work which, to some readers at least, must appear somewhat abstract and rarefied. As Gai Eaton put it, to move from Guénon's work to Coomaraswamy's is to "...descend into a far kindlier climate, while remaining in the same country...The icy glitter is replaced by a warmer glow, the attitude of calm disdain towards all things modern by a more human indignation."²⁸ Whitall Perry contrasts their roles through a metaphor which each would have appreciated:

Guénon was like the vertical axis of a cross, fixed with mathematical precision on immutable realities and their immediate applications in the domain of cosmological sciences; whereas Coomaraswamy was the horizontal complement, expanding these truths over the vast field of arts, cultures, mythologies and symbolisms: metaphysical truth on the one hand, universal beauty on the other.²⁹

Like Guénon before him, Schuon drew a cloak of anonymity around his personal life. (Recall Coomaraswamy's observation about Guénon: "the least important thing about Guénon is his personality or biography...The fact is he has the invisibility that is

²⁶ Quoted in V.S. Naravane, "Ananda Coomaraswamy: A Critical Appreciation" in S. Durai Raja Singam, *Ananda Coomaraswamy: Remembering and Remembering Again and Again* p.206.

²⁷ P.L. Reynolds, *René Guénon: His Life and Work* (unpublished manuscript), p.6.

²⁸ Gai Eaton, *The Richest Vein* Faber & Faber, London, 1949, p.199.

²⁹ Whitall Perry, "The Man and the Witness", p.7.

proper to the complete philosopher...".³⁰) From an early age Schuon devoted himself to a study of philosophy, religion and metaphysics, reading the classical and modern works of European philosophy, and the sacred literatures of the East. Amongst the Western sources Plato and Eckhart left a profound impression while the *Bhagavad Gita* was his favourite Eastern reading. Even before moving to Paris Schuon came into contact with the writings of Guénon with whom he corresponded for many years and later met in Cairo. Guénon's work "served to confirm his own intellectual rejection of the modern civilisation while at the same time bringing into sharper focus his spontaneous understanding of metaphysical principles and their traditional applications."³¹ The accent of this passage is important. Schuon was not a disciple of Guénon whose writings only helped to clarify an understanding already attained. For this reason it is improper to label the thought of Schuon as "Guénonian". Indeed, in many respects, Schuon surpasses his predecessor in the exposition of the eternal *dharma*. (In any event, it needs be remembered that, "To follow Guénon is not to follow the man, but to follow the light of traditional truth...".³²)

Schuon combined in himself something of the qualities of both Guénon and Coomaraswamy. His work includes psychic, moral and aesthetic dimensions which are missing from Guénon's writings. As Jean Tourniac has remarked

Un autre écrivain, M. Frithjof Schuon, devait, pour sa part, développer l'exégèse spirituelle des formes traditionnelles dans une série d'ouvrages d'un genre différent de ceux de Guénon, ouvrages de "coloration" ...le mot n'est pas excessif, car la beauté et la couleur jouent un rôle particulier dans l'oeuvre de F. Schuon...plus "christique" que ceux de Guénon qui, eux, s'en tiennent d'abord, et essentiellement, à la définition des mécanismes principaux invariables.³³

Schuon's work has a symmetry and an inclusive quality not found in the work of his precursors; there is a balance and fullness which give his writings something of the

³⁰ Coomaraswamy in S. Durai Raja Singam *Ananda Coomaraswamy: Remembering and Remembering Again and Again* p.223.

³¹ *Frithjof Schuon, Metaphysician and Artist* World Wisdom Books, Bloomington, p.2. See also Whitall Perry, "The Revival of Interest in Tradition" in *The Unanimous Tradition* ed. Ranjit Fernando, Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies, Colombo, 1991, pp.14-16.

³² Bernard Kelly, "Notes on the Light of the Eastern Religions" in *Religion of the Heart* pp.160-161.

³³ J. Tourniac, *Propos sur René Guénon* Paris 1973, p16, quoted in P.L. Reynolds, p13. (Trans: "Another writer, M. Frithjof Schuon, for his part, had to develop the spiritual exegesis of traditional forms in a series of works of a different kind to those of Guénon, works of high colour—this word is not excessive, for beauty and colour play a distinctive role in the work of F. Schuon—more 'Christly' than those of Guénon which essentially hold themselves to defining the mechanisms of invariable principles.")

quality of a spiritual therapy. In this sense Schuon does not simply write about the perennial philosophy but gives it a direct and fresh expression proportioned to the needs of the age.

The contrast with Guénon can be clearly seen in the style and tone of language. If Guénon's expositions can be called "mathematical", Schuon's might be described as "musical"—this, of course, not implying any deficiency in precision but rather the addition of a dimension of Beauty. As Nasr has observed of Schuon's writings,

His authoritative tone, clarity of expression and an "alchemy" which transmutes human language to enable it to present the profoundest truths, make of it a unique expression of the...*sophia perennis*...³⁴

Marco Pallis refers to what he rather loosely calls "the gift of tongues": "...the ability, that is to say, both to speak and to understand the various dialects through which the Spirit has chosen to communicate itself...the power to penetrate all traditional forms...".³⁵

Like Guénon, Schuon appears to have an intuitive grasp of metaphysical and cosmological principles but he is less likely to subordinate facts to principles in a way which would leave his work vulnerable to scholarly attack. One sometimes senses in Guénon's work an impatience with and disdain for empirical and historical considerations. Schuon's commitment to first principles is no less steadfast but he has much more sensitivity to the exigencies and diversities of human experience and to the spiritual textures of different civilisations. In this sense he is closer to Coomaraswamy with whom he also shares a discerning eye for the spiritual riches of traditional art. Although formidably learned Schuon's approach is less academic and scholarly than Coomaraswamy's, less burdened with technical minutiae and the ever-proliferating qualifications which sometimes make Coomaraswamy's work something of an obstacle course. As a writer he is more discursive and fluid, and more poetic, than either Guénon or Coomaraswamy.

³⁴ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Preface to Frithjof Schuon *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy* p.viii.

³⁵ Marco Pallis, *The Way and the Mountain* Peter Owen, London, 1960, p.78.

For Schuon the study of tradition has meant, primarily, the study of religion within a metaphysical framework. Guénon's work was fixed on questions of principle and on arcane repositories of metaphysical wisdom. Coomaraswamy's interests were wide-ranging indeed but, for the most part, underpinned by his preoccupation with the relationships of truth, beauty and goodness. Schuon, on the other hand, moves in a boundless universe, being concerned with the spiritual life in all its aspects. He has written of religion in all its dimensions—doctrinal, ethical, psychological, historical, social, aesthetic and so on. He is equally at home with the most abstruse subtleties of, say, Eckhart's exposition of metaphysical knowledge, and the simple pieties of a European peasant. The explanation of the exoteric-esoteric distinction is fundamental in Schuon's work but, unlike Guénon, he does not restrict himself to the latter domain alone. His books are more finely attuned to the legitimate claims of religious forms and of the theological orthodoxies than those of either of his precursors. He situates the exoteric and esoteric aspects of religion in a framework that gives to each its due.

Writing of the work of Guénon and Coomaraswamy, Whitall Perry suggested that

The complement and copestone of this witness remained to be realised in the message of Schuon, coming freshly from the sphere of the *Religio Perennis*, in contradistinction to the *Philosophia Perennis* which was the legacy of the other two. His was the third pole, needed to complete the triangle and integrate the work on an operative basis.³⁶

There is a nobility of spirit in Schuon's work which makes it something much more than a commanding body of ideas: it is a profoundly moving *theoria* which reverberates in the deepest recesses of one's being. Without question, he is the most sublime metaphysician of the age. It is not without reason that Whitall Perry has compared Schuon's work to that of Plato and Shankaracharya.³⁷ In Schuon's work we find the richest, the most authoritative and the most resonant expression of the *sophia perennis* in modern times. One might borrow the following words, applied to Meister Eckhart but equally true of Schuon:

³⁶ Whitall Perry, "The Man and the Witness", p.7.

³⁷ Whitall Perry, "The Revival of Interest in Tradition", p.15.

Being wholly traditional in the truest sense, and therefore perennial, the doctrine he expounds will never cease to be contemporary and always accessible to those who, naturally unsatisfied with mere living, desire to know how to live, regardless of time or place.³⁸



The Exposure of Esoteric Wisdom

Before turning to Schuon's writings I would like briefly to consider a question which people with a budding interest in Tradition often raise. Sapiential truths which previously had remained extrinsically inexpressible and which had been protected by those few capable of understanding them are now on public display, as it were. How is it that in the most irreligious and impious period in human history the esoteric wisdoms preserved by the religious traditions are more widely and easily accessible than ever before?

The erosion of the protective barriers which previously enclosed traditions has, in part, been caused by historical factors which, in a sense, are "accidental". One might cite the exposure of the Upanishadic Scriptures as a case in point; here certain developments, such as the introduction into India of cheap printing presses, combined with a degree of imprudence on the part of some of the "reformers" of Hinduism to subvert the esoteric status of these Scriptures which became available to anyone and everyone. There are also innumerable cases where a garbled version of half-understood secret doctrines has been thoughtlessly and carelessly put into public circulation. The Biblical verse "For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed..." has sometimes been taken as a licence for all manner of excesses in the popularising of esoteric doctrines. The warnings about false prophets might often be more to the point.

In the case of traditionalists such as Guénon and Schuon the unveiling of some esoteric teachings has been considered and prudent. What sorts of factors have allowed this development? Firstly, there are certain cosmic and cyclic conditions now obtaining which make for an unprecedented situation. In discussing the fact that what was once hid in the darkness is now being brought into the light, Schuon writes,

³⁸ C.F. Kelley, *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge* Yale University Press, New Haven, 1977, p.xiv.

There is indeed something abnormal in this, but it lies, not in the fact of the exposition of these truths, but in the general conditions of our age, which marks the end of a great cyclic period of terrestrial humanity—the end of a *maha-yuga* according to Hindu cosmology—and so must recapitulate or manifest again in one way or another everything that is included in the cycle, in conformity with the adage "extremes meet"; thus things that are in themselves abnormal may become necessary by reason of the conditions just referred to.³⁹

Secondly, from a more expedient point of view,

...it must be admitted that the spiritual confusion of our times has reached such a pitch that the harm that might in principle befall certain people from contact with the truths in question is compensated by the advantages that others will derive from the self-same truths.⁴⁰

Schuon reminds us of the Kabbalistic adage that "it is better to divulge Wisdom than to forget it."⁴¹ And thirdly, there is the fact already mentioned: esoteric doctrines have, in recent times, been so frequently "plagiarised and deformed" that those who are in a position to speak with authority on these matters are obliged to give some account of what "true esoterism is and what it is not".⁴²

From another perspective it can be said that the preservation, indeed the very survival, of the formal religious exotericisms may depend on the revivifying effects of an esotericism more widely understood:

exoterism is a precarious thing by reason of its limits or its exclusions: there arrives a moment in history when all kinds of experiences oblige it to modify its claims to exclusiveness, and it is then driven to a choice: escape from these limitations by the upward path, in esoterism, or by the downward path, in a worldly and suicidal liberalism.⁴³

At a time when "the outward and readily exaggerated incompatibility of the different religions greatly discredits, in the minds of most of our contemporaries, all religion",⁴⁴ the exposure of the underlying unity of the religions takes on a deep urgency. This task can only be achieved through esotericism. The open confrontation of different exotericisms, the extirpation of traditional civilisations, and the tyranny of secular and profane ideologies all play a part in determining the peculiar

³⁹ Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* p.xxxiii.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ Frithjof Schuon, *The Transfiguration of Man* World Wisdom Books, Bloomington, 1995, p.10.

⁴² Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* p.xxxiv.

⁴³ Frithjof Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way* Perennial Books, London, 1980, p.19.

⁴⁴ Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* pp.xxxiii-iv.

circumstances in which the most imperious needs of the age can only be answered by a recourse to traditional esotericisms. There is perhaps some small hope that in this climate and given a properly based metaphysical framework in which to affirm the "profound and eternal solidarity of all spiritual forms",⁴⁵ the different religions might yet "present a singular front against the floodtide of materialism and pseudo-spiritualism".⁴⁶

The hazards and ambiguities attending the exposure of occult doctrines to an audience in many respects ill-equipped to understand them have posed the same problems for representatives of traditional esotericisms the world over. Joseph Epes Brown writes of the disclosure of traditional Sioux wisdom, to choose one example, in terms very similar to those used by Schuon:

...in these days those few old wise men still living among them say that at the approach of the end of a cycle, when men everywhere have become unfit to understand and still more to realise the truths revealed to them at the origin...it is then permissible and even desirable to bring this knowledge out into the light of day, for by its own nature truth protects itself against being profaned and in this way it is possible it may reach those qualified to penetrate it deeply.⁴⁷

It is no accident that the few remaining holy men amongst the Sioux and traditionalists like Schuon should see this matter in the same terms.



Schuon's Oeuvre

Schuon's published work forms an imposing corpus and covers a staggering range of religious and metaphysical subjects without any of the superficialities and simplifications which we normally expect from someone covering such a vast terrain. His works on specific religions have commanded respect from scholars and practitioners within the traditions in question. As well as publishing over twenty books he was also a prolific contributor to journals such as *Études Traditionnelles*,

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁶ Frithjof Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom* Perennial Books, London, 1979, p.12. See also Whitall Perry *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom* Allen & Unwin, London, 1971, footnote p.22.

⁴⁷ Joseph Epes Brown, *The Sacred Pipe* University of Oklahoma Press, 1953, p.xii. (This passage was omitted from the Penguin edition.) See also Schuon's "Human Premises of a Religious Dilemma" in *Sufism, Veil and Quintessence* pp.97-113.

Islamic Quarterly, *Tomorrow*, *Studies in Comparative Religion* and *Sophia Perennis*. Most of his major works, written in French, have now been published in English.⁴⁸

Schuon's writings are all governed by an unchanging set of metaphysical principles. They exhibit nothing of a "development" or "evolution" but are, rather, re-statements of the same principles from different vantage points and brought to bear on divergent phenomena. More so than with either Guénon or Coomaraswamy, one feels that Schuon's vision was complete from the outset. The term "erudition" is not appropriate: it is not a matter of bookish learning. Schuon travelled widely, particularly before the war, and maintained close relationships with representatives of all the major religious traditions. He not only knows "about" an encyclopedic range of religious manifestations and sapiential traditions but understands them in a way which, for want of a better word, we can only call intuitive. His writings in this field are without equal.

All of Schuon's work is concerned with a re-affirmation of traditional metaphysical principles, with an explication of the esoteric dimensions of religion, with the penetration of mythological and religious forms, and with the critique of a modernism which is either indifferent or nakedly hostile to the principles which inform all traditional wisdoms. All of the traditionalist are, by definition, committed to expounding the *sophia perennis* which lies at the heart of the diverse religions and within their manifold forms. They are also dedicated to the preservation and illumination of these forms which give each religious heritage its *raison d'être* and guarantee its formal integrity and, by same token, ensure its spiritual efficacy. Schuon's general position—or better, the position to which Schuon adhered, for "truth is not and cannot be a personal affair"⁴⁹—was defined in his first work to appear in English, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (1953), a work of which T.S. Eliot remarked, "I have met with no more impressive work on the comparative study of Oriental and Occidental religion."⁵⁰ This book elaborated, in peerless fashion, the distinction between the exoteric and esoteric dimensions of religious traditions and, by uncovering the metaphysical convergence of all orthodox religions, provided a

⁴⁸ For a full bibliography of Schuon's writings upto 1990 see *Religion of the Heart* pp.299-327.

⁴⁹ Frithjof Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds* p34

⁵⁰ Quoted by Huston Smith, Introduction to *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* p ix.

coherent and irrefutable basis for a properly constituted religious ecumenicism—one might well say the only possible basis.

Much of Schuon's work has been explicitly directed to the Islamic tradition in which he first became interested as a very young man in Paris. His interest in Islam led him into a close study of Arabic, first with a Syrian Jew and afterwards at the Paris mosque. In the 1930s Schuon several times visited North Africa, spending time in Algeria where he became a disciple of the Shaikh Ahmad Al'Alawi, the Algerian Sufi sage and founder of the 'Alawi order.⁵¹ Schuon has written of this modern saint:

...someone who represents in himself...the idea which for hundreds of years has been the life-blood of that civilisation [the Islamic]. To meet such a one is like coming face to face, in mid-twentieth century, with a medieval Saint or a Semitic Patriarch.⁵²

Four of Schuon's books focus on aspects of the Islamic tradition: *Understanding Islam* (1963); *Dimensions of Islam* (1969); *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy* (1976); *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence* (1981). Both *Christianity/Islam: Essays on Ecumenic Esotericism* (1985) and *In the Face of the Absolute* (1989) explore aspects of the Christian and Islamic traditions. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, himself perhaps the most eminent Islamic scholar in the contemporary world, wrote of *Understanding Islam*, "I believe his work to be the most outstanding ever written in a European language on why Muslims believe in Islam and why Islam offers to man all that he needs religiously and spiritually."⁵³ Whilst all of Schuon's works have a Sufic fragrance his work was by no means been restricted to the Islamic heritage. Two major works focus on Hinduism and Buddhism: *Language of the Self* (1959) and *In the Tracks of Buddhism* (1969). A revised and enlarged version of the latter was published by World Wisdom Books in 1993 as *Treasures of Buddhism* whilst the former, unhappily, has long remained out of print. Although he has not devoted such

⁵¹ See Martin Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century* University of California Press, Berkeley, 1971, and Michel Valsan: "Notes on the Shaikh al-'Alawi, 1869-1934", *Studies in Comparative Religion* 6:1, 1971.

⁵² Schuon quoted in M. Lings *A Sufi Saint* p.116. There is a moving portrait of the Shaikh by Schuon, facing p.160.

⁵³ See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* Allen & Unwin, London, 1973, p.10. Nasr has been no less generous in commending later works. See his Prefaces to Schuon's *Dimensions of Islam* Allen & Unwin, London, 1969, and *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy* World of Islam, London, 1976, and his Introduction to *The Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon*.

sustained attention to other religious and mythological traditions there are countless illuminating references in Schuon's work to all manner of religious phenomena and doctrines, drawn from all over the globe.

Schuon and his wife developed friendly contacts with visiting American Indians in Paris and Brussels in the 1950s. During their first visit to North America in 1959, the Schuons were officially adopted into the Red Cloud family of the Lakota tribe, that branch of the Sioux nation from which came the revered "medicine-man" Black Elk. Schuon, Coomaraswamy and the late Joseph Epes Brown were all instrumental in efforts to preserve the precious spiritual heritage of the Plains Indians.

Schuon's effulgent writings on the spiritual treasury of the Plains Indians have been collected, together with reproductions of some of his paintings, in *The Feathered Sun: Plains Indians in Art and Philosophy* (1990). In one sense this might be said to be one of Schuon's most "personal" books, textured as it is with direct references to his own experience. A further token of this aspect of the book is that one cannot imagine any of his predecessors writing anything like it. The book, in both text and image, is also pervaded by the pathos which marks the disappearance of a spiritual economy and a way of life of extraordinary beauty and nobility. There is also a peculiar poignancy in the fact that Schuon was adopted into both the Crow and Sioux tribes, remembering their heroic resistance to the encroachments of "civilisation". Furthermore, one cannot but see in Schuon himself just those qualities which he extolled in the Indians—"a stoical and combative heroism with a priestly bearing [which] conferred on the Indian of the Plains and Forest a sort of majesty at once aquiline and solar...".⁵⁴

Schuon's love of nature, which reverberates through his work like a haunting melody, was deepened during the two periods which he and his wife spent with the Plains Indians. "For Schuon, virgin nature carries a message of eternal truth and primordial reality, and to plunge oneself therein is to rediscover a dimension of the soul which in modern man has become atrophied."⁵⁵ Schuon himself, writing in the context of Red Indian receptivity to the lessons of nature, said this:

⁵⁴ Frithjof Schuon, *The Feathered Sun* pp.39-40.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p.6.

Wild Nature is at one with holy poverty and also with spiritual childlikeness; she is an open book containing an inexhaustible teaching of truth and beauty. It is in the midst of his own artifices that man most easily becomes corrupted, it is they who make him covetous and impious; close to virgin Nature, who knows neither agitation nor falsehood, he had the hope of remaining contemplative like Nature herself.⁵⁶

For Schuon, the "timeless message of Nature constitutes a spiritual viaticum of the first importance".⁵⁷

Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts (1954) is a collection of aphoristic essays including studies of Vedanta and sacred art, and a meditation on the spiritual virtues. My own most conspicuous memory of first reading this book, apart from a sense of its crystalline beauty, is of Schuon's compelling contrast between the principles which govern all traditional art and the pomposity, vacuity and grotesqueness of much that masquerades as "art" in the post-medieval world and which has long since ceased to "exteriorize either transcendent ideas or profound virtues".⁵⁸ Schuon's writings on art are often embellished with striking epigrams. Who could forget one as pungent and as telling as this:

When standing before a [medieval] cathedral, a person really feels he is placed at the centre of the world; standing before a church of the Renaissance, Baroque or Rococo periods, he merely feels himself to be in Europe.⁵⁹

From his earliest years Schuon was fascinated by sacred art, especially that of Japan and the Far East. In an unusual personal reference in one of his works he tells us of a Buddha figure in an ethnographical museum. It was a traditional representation in gilded wood and flanked by two statues of the Bodhisattvas Seishi and Kwannon. The encounter with this "overwhelming embodiment of an infinite victory of the Spirit" Schuon sums up in the phrase "*veni, vidi, victus sum*".⁶⁰ One commentator has drawn attention to the importance of aesthetic intuition in accounting for Schuon's extraordinary understanding of religious and social forms: "It

⁵⁶ Frithjof Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds* Perennial Books, London, 1965, p.84.

⁵⁷ Frithjof Schuon, *The Feathered Sun: Plains Indians in Art and Philosophy* World Wisdom Books, Bloomington, 1990, p.13.

⁵⁸ Frithjof Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* p.36.

⁵⁹ Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* footnote p.65.

⁶⁰ Frithjof Schuon, *In the Tracks of Buddhism* Allen & Unwin, London, 1968, p.121.

suffices for him to see...an object from a traditional civilisation, to be able to perceive, through a sort of 'chain-reaction', a whole ensemble of intellectual, spiritual and psychological ideas."⁶¹ This may seem a reckless claim but those who have read Schuon's work will not doubt the gift to which it testifies.

Gnosis: Divine Wisdom (1959), *Logic and Transcendence* (1976) and *Esoterism and Principle and as Way* (1981) are largely given over to extended and explicit discussions of metaphysical principles. The first includes a luminous section on the Christian tradition while *Logic and Transcendence* contains his most explicit refutation of some of the godless ideologies of the modern West. His early arraignment of such characteristically modern philosophies of negation and despair as relativism, rationalism, "concretism", existentialism and psychologism put us in mind of Manjusri's sword! The later parts of the book tend towards its culmination in this passage:

To the question of what are the foremost things a man should do, situated as he is this world of enigmas and fluctuations, the reply must be made that there are four things to be done or four jewels never to be lost sight of: first, he should accept the Truth; second, bear it continually in mind; third, avoid whatever is contrary to Truth and the permanent consciousness of truth; and fourth, accomplish whatever is in conformity therewith.⁶²

Schuon suggested some years ago that *Logic and Transcendence* was his most representative and inclusive work. That distinction is perhaps now shared with *Esoterism as Principle and as Way* which includes one of Schuon's most deliberate explanations of the nature of esotericism,⁶³ and with *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism* (1986) which is a magisterial work of metaphysical synthesis.

Stations of Wisdom (1961) is directed mainly towards an exploration of certain religious and spiritual modalities but includes "Orthodoxy and Intellectuality", an essay which is of paramount importance in understanding the traditionalist position. *Light on the Ancient Worlds* includes a range of essays on such subjects as the Hellenist-Christian "dialogue", shamanism, monasticism and the *religio perennis*.

⁶¹ Frithjof Schuon, *Metaphysician and Artist* p.1.

⁶² Frithjof Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence* Harper & Row, New York, 1975, pp.265-266.

⁶³ Schuon's translators often use the word "esoterism"; I have preferred "esotericism". Schuon's comment about *Logic and Transcendence* is recorded in Whitall Perry's review in *Studies in Comparative Religion* 9:4, 1975, p.250.

Schuon's most recent works are *To Have a Center* (1990), *Roots of the Human Condition* (1991), *The Play of Masks* (1992) and *The Transfiguration of Man* (1995). The later writings exhibit a masterly lightness of touch and a style that is increasingly synthetic and poetic. The title chapter of the first of these four collections is perhaps Schuon's only extended statement concerning the literary and artistic "culture" of the last two hundred years. Other essays in these books cover such subjects as intellection, integral anthropology, art and prayer—the latter a subject to which Schuon seemed more and more drawn in his later years. *Echoes of Perennial Wisdom* (1992) is an anthology of diamond-like apophthegms from many of his works. Perhaps the most remarkable event of recent years is the publication of *Road to the Heart* (1995), which contains nearly one hundred poems in English. In these poems, the principles and insights expressed in Schuon's other writings find a lyric voice in the most simple and concise form.

In addition to these works there is an impressive array of articles in the journals already mentioned. Several cardinal essays were published in *The Sword of Gnosis* (Penguin, 1974). An event of signal importance was the publication of *The Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon* (1986) which included some of the essays most pivotal in Schuon's work along with several pieces previously unpublished. The anthology was edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr whose introduction identifies some of the recurrent themes and principles in Schuon's work and situates Schuon's work in a context intelligible to readers coming across a traditional outlook for the first time. A *festschrift* for Schuon's eightieth birthday, *Religion of the Heart*, was published in 1991 under the editorship of Nasr and William Stoddart, and includes a bibliography of Schuon's writings.

In *Understanding Islam* Schuon had this to say about the nature of sacred Books:

...that is sacred which in the first place is attached to the transcendent order, secondly possesses the character of absolute certainty and, thirdly, eludes the comprehension and power of investigation of the ordinary human mind. ...The sacred is the presence of the centre in the periphery, of the motionless in the moving; dignity is essentially an expression of it, for in dignity too the centre manifests at the exterior; the heart is revealed in gestures. The sacred introduces a quality of the absolute into relativities and confers on perishable things a texture of eternity.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Frithjof Schuon, *Understanding Islam* Allen & Unwin, London, 1976, p.48.

Without wishing to make any extravagant claims such as might conflate Schuon's writings with holy Scriptures, I do not think it too much to avow that these qualities are everywhere manifested in his *oeuvre*. The pervasive sense of the sacred, the love of prayer, of sacred symbols and of "modes of Divine Presence", the wonderful sensitivity to "theophanic manifestations" and "celestial perfumes", the discernment of the "metaphysical transparency of phenomena", the capacity to grasp the "principial within the manifested", to see "the vertical ray", to see God everywhere—these qualities overflow in Schuon's work and constitute a providential and incomparable gift to an age apparently determined to turn its back on the sacred.⁶⁵



Epilogue

All of Schuon's work, particularly his more intimate and later writings, are shot through with references to prayer. In a rare interview in 1996, when asked about his message for people in general, he replied, "Prayer. To be a human means to be connected with God. Life has no meaning without this. Prayer, and also beauty, of course; for we live among forms and not in a cloud. Beauty of soul first and then beauty of symbols around us."⁶⁶ It seems appropriate, then, to end with a passage from one of Schuon's earliest books in which his sense of prayer and his love of the beauty of natural forms converge. It is a passage which takes on added poignancy in the light of Schuon's recent passing from his mortal coil.

Man prays and prayer fashions man. The saint has himself become prayer, the meeting place of earth and Heaven; and thereby he contains the universe and the universe prays with him. He is everywhere where nature prays and he prays with her and in her: in the peaks which touch the void and eternity, in a flower which scatters its scent or in the carefree song of a bird. He who lives in prayer has not lived in vain.⁶⁷



⁶⁵ The quoted phrases are Schuon's and come from fragments of correspondence published in *The Transfiguration of Man* p.113.

⁶⁶ Deborah Casey, "The Basis of Religion and Metaphysics: An Interview with Frithjof Schuon", *The Quest* 9:2, Summer 1996, pp.77-78.

⁶⁷ Frithjof Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* p.223.