

## *Introducing The Writings of Frithjof Schuon*

### **On Some of the Features of His Works**

THE WRITINGS OF FRITHJOF SCHUON are characterized by essentiality, universality and comprehensiveness. They have the quality of essentiality in the sense that they always go to the heart and are concerned with the essence of whatever they deal with. Schuon possesses the gift of reaching the very core of the subject he is treating, of going beyond forms to the essential formless Center of forms whether they be religious, artistic or related to certain features and traits of the cosmic or human orders. To read his works is to be transplanted from the shell to the kernel, to be carried on a journey that is at once intellectual and spiritual from the circumference to the Center.

His writings are universal, not only because the formless Essence *is* universal, but also because even on the level of forms he does not confine himself solely to a particular world, period or region. His perspective is truly universal in the sense of embracing all orders of reality from the Divine to the human and on the human level worlds as far apart as that of Abrahamic monotheism and the Shāmanic heritage of Shintoism and the North American Indian religions. It is also of course universal in the metaphysical sense of always being concerned with either the meaning of the Universal as such or the particular in the light of the Universal. For him the particular at once veils and manifests the Universal as form hides and reveals the Essence and as the phenomenon, while opaque in

itself, is, as symbol, the gate to the noumenal world which is none other than the universal order.

Schuon's works are also comprehensive and all-embracing in the sense that they include practically the whole mountain of knowledge understood in the traditional sense, ranging from its metaphysical peak which touches the infinite expanse of the heavens to particular fields such as formal theology, anthropology and psychology, which are the foothills along with the trails which lead from these foothills to the exalted peak. Amidst this century of the segmentation of particular branches of knowledge and the proliferation of usually unrelated bodies of information which have made the vision of the whole well nigh impossible for those who begin from the parts rather than the whole and who remain rooted only in a knowledge of an empirical order, Schuon demonstrates with blinding evidence the possibility of an all-embracing knowledge. This knowledge is rooted, however, not in the scattered multiplicity of the world of the senses but in the unity of the intellect which Schuon understands in its traditional sense and as it has been used by a Meister Eckhart. Schuon is at once metaphysician, theologian, traditional philosopher and logician, master of the discipline of comparative religion, expositor of traditional art and civilization, authority in the science of man and society, spiritual guide and a critic of the modern world in not only its practical but also philosophical and scientific aspects. His knowledge, moreover, embraces East and West, the ancient medieval civilizations as well as the modern world, German literature as well as Hindu sculpture. From the point of view of sheer scholarly knowledge combined with metaphysical penetrations, it is hardly possible to find a contemporary corpus of writings with the same all-embracing and comprehensive nature combined with incredible depth. As a result of this quality in addition to the essentiality and universality which characterize Schuon's works, it can be said that these writings demonstrate in a unique fashion not only the unity of the Divine Principle but also the unity within diversity of the multiple recipients of the messages which have issued from the Divine Principle in the form of religions and civilizations and cultures which the manifestations of that Principle have brought into being. His works depict upon a vast canvas the descent of all that exists from the One, the multiplicity and richness within the human order as a result of this descent, and finally the reintegration of this multiplicity back into the One. In achieving this enormous task across religious,

theological, philosophical and cultural borders, Schuon has accomplished a synthesis which could in fact have been brought about only in this day and age when the normal barriers between human collectivities are becoming weakened or even falling apart. His synthesis is an antidote, issuing from the fountainhead of grace, for the ills of chaos, confusion, relativism, skepticism and nihilism which have befallen many people in the modern world precisely as a result of the erosion and in many places collapse of the traditional structures which have, over the ages, provided meaning for human beings during their earthly journey.

### The Study of Religion

The vast writings of Schuon are concerned most of all with religion. But for him religion is not reduced to that truncated reality with which so many modern authors who treat the subject called religion are concerned. For him religion is still related to *religio*, to all that binds man to God, to the Ultimate Principle. Religion for Schuon is not reducible to the limited category of modern thought bearing that name and not even to much of what passes for theology in the West today, divorced as religion in this sense has become from the other domains of human thought and action, alienated from both the cosmos and human society, and exiled to a corner of man's life in a world which is being secularized to an ever greater degree. Schuon, needless to say, is perfectly aware of this process and the sad state into which religion and religious studies have fallen in the modern West, but he does not accept this state as the norm or "reality" with which he must grapple as a theologian like so many modern religious thinkers who have conceded defeat even before beginning the battle against all that threatens religion today.

Nor is Schuon satisfied with the study of religion in terms of any other category of thought or discipline. While being fully aware of the unfolding of each religion in history, he is strongly opposed to historicism or the reducing of the reality of a religion simply to its history. While emphasizing the central role and importance of faith, he refuses to reduce religion to only faith with total disregard for the element of doctrine or truth seen as an objective reality. While being aware of the significance of every phenomenon in the traditional universe, he does not limit the study of religions to mere

phenomena divorced from their universal reality and the total sacred universe within which religious phenomena reveal their meaning *qua* religious phenomena. While being fully aware of the role of a religiously structured society, its stratifications and ethnic elements in religion, he stands totally opposed to reducing religion to its sociological component. While being a master of religious psychology and having written some of the most illuminating pages on the transformations which the religious and spiritual life bring about in the psyche of those who follow such a life, he distinguishes clearly and categorically between the spiritual and the psychic and criticizes severely those who would reduce religion to religious psychology.

One can summarize his approach to the study of religion by saying that for Schuon religion is the principle reality of human existence not to be reduced to any other category although it is related to all other categories and domains of human thought and action. One of the main reasons in fact why Schuon has been so much neglected in circles concerned with religious studies in the modern world is that for most of them he takes religion too seriously while many modern religious thinkers and theologians, although purporting either to study religion or to think in theological categories, function in a world in which the light of religion has already become dim. To face an intellectual and spiritual universe in which religion shines once again as the central sun which illuminates and orders all things is too daring and awesome an experience which few are willing to face. The glare appears too blinding to those accustomed to semi-darkness. Better to act as if such a universe did not exist while studying religion in terms of non-religious categories. Better to discuss religion in terms of abstract concepts depleted of all sacred content to the extent possible than to enter a fire which consumes the whole of one's being.

The singular neglect of Schuon's writings in both academic and nonacademic circles concerned with religion, there being some notable exceptions, is precisely because these writings are so seriously concerned with religion that one cannot even take cognizance of their presence and take their challenge seriously without having to change one's own halfhearted engagement with the religious world, without questioning the skeptical and secularized world of modern man and replacing it with one based on religious certitude while possessing the greatest intellectual rigor. If finally today after such long neglect of Schuon's writings, there is a much greater interest in his works,

it is because many people who possess the necessary perspicacity are finally tired of halfway solutions and are willing to face the challenge of his writings whatever might be the consequence for their own intellectual and spiritual life. It is because many an intelligent person who is attracted to the study of religion is no longer satisfied with the reduction of the study of religion to its history, or phenomenology, or sociology. One cannot study the writings of Schuon on religion without taking religion and man's religious nature seriously and thereby without developing an attitude toward the whole reality of religion and religious studies different from what most modern men are presented with today not only in their course of education, but also in many cases by theologians and religious philosophers and thinkers of their religious community.

Schuon is concerned with both the study of religion and religions, with the reality of religion as such and with the relation between the many religions which exist and have existed on the global scale. These two concerns are in fact related together in his perspective for he writes for a world in which the journey across religious frontiers has already become a profound reality and where for many people the study of religions affects in one way or another their own participation in and understanding of religion in itself. Schuon, while accepting and in fact honoring and respecting in the profoundest sense the diversity of religions which is willed by Heaven, emphasizes both the inner unity within this diversity and the religious significance of this diversity itself. He has written over and over again on how each religion is *the* religion, how to have lived any religion fully is to have lived religion as such and therefore in a sense all religions, how each religious universe is absolute for those who live within that universe and yet only the Absolute Reality which stands above all manifestation and particularization is the Absolute as such, how the sun of each religious cosmos is for that cosmos *the* sun while being a star in that spiritual firmament which symbolizes the Divine Infinity.

Schuon emphasizes the spiritual genius and originality — in the etymological sense of the word as being related to the Origin — of each religion along with the civilization, social structure, art and culture which it brings into being. He also emphasizes perennial religion, or *religio perennis*, that he also calls the religion of the heart, which resides at the center of every particular religion and also at the center and in the very substance from which man is made. If

man were able to penetrate to the center of his own being, to enter the inner kingdom, he would reach that *religio perennis* or *religio cordis* which lies at the center of revealed religions. But because of the fall of man and its effects upon his soul, it is in fact not possible to enter the heart save with the aid of the grace which issues from those objective manifestations of the Divine Logos which are the revealed religions. The emphasis upon the perennial and universal religion of the heart, far from destroying or diminishing the significance of the religious traditions of mankind, accentuates their Divine Origin, sacred character, absolute necessity for the human order and indispensable nature in making possible access to that *religio perennis* which lies at the center of all religions.

The usage of the term religion by Schuon and his expansion of the boundaries of its meaning far beyond the confines that modern readers are accustomed to associating with it can be better understood by turning to the word “tradition”, another key concept which Schuon uses very often in his works usually in close conjunction with the term religion. The writings of Schuon can in fact be characterized as being before anything else traditional. He considers himself a traditional metaphysician and religious “thinker”, if such a singularly modern term can be transposed into the traditional context. Therefore, if we were able to understand what is meant by tradition as used by him and other writers of this school, we would be able to gain a profound insight into the nature of his writings and world view.

Tradition, as used by Schuon and before him by such masters as René Guénon and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, is neither custom nor habit. Nor is it simply what has been believed or practiced for a certain period of time during the history of a particular civilization. Rather, it is a supraformal reality, hence impossible to define completely through delimitation. It is all that has its origin in Heaven, in revelation in its most universal sense, along with its unfolding in a particular spatio-temporal setting determined by the Source from which the tradition originates. It applies not only to this truth of celestial origin, but to the application of the principles contained therein to realms as disparate as law and art, as methods of meditation and the manner of cultivating a garden. There is therefore not only such a usage of this term in relation to metaphysics and religion, but there is traditional art, traditional social structure and the traditional sciences. In the words of a well-known expositor of the traditional perspective, Marco Pallis,

It will already be apparent to the reader that by tradition more is meant than just custom long established, even if current usage has tended to restrict it in this way. Here the word will always be given its transcendent, which is also its normal, connotation without any attempt being made, however, to pin it down to a particular set of concepts, if only because tradition, being formless and supra-personal in its essence, escapes exact definition in terms of human speech or thought. All that can usefully be said of it at the moment is that wherever a complete tradition exists this will entail the presence of four things, namely: a source of inspiration or, to use a more concrete term, of Revelation; a current of influence or Grace issuing forth from that source and transmitted without interruption through a variety of channels; a way of "verification" which, when faithfully followed, will lead the human subject to successive positions where he is able to "actualise" the truths that Revelation communicates; finally there is the formal embodiment of tradition in the doctrines, arts, sciences and other elements that together go to determine the character of a normal civilization. (*The Way and the Mountain*, London, 1960, pp. 9-10).

The full impact of the term "tradition" becomes evident when it is contrasted to all that lies outside of its embrace, namely the modern world which is at once modern in the temporal sense and antitraditional in nature. The traditional writers distinguish between the traditional and the modern not because of the particular period of history in which certain patterns of thought or forms of art happen to have been prevalent but because of the nature of those patterns and forms. Traditional therefore does not mean simply ancient and medieval or old and modern postmedieval and new. Not all that is old is traditional, late Graeco-Roman art and philosophy being an example. Nor is all that is new or postmedieval modern as the poetry of Angelus Silesius or present day Navaho sand paintings exemplify. That is why within this perspective a clear distinction is made between modern and contemporary. One can be contemporary yet opposed to all that characterizes the modern world as such and distinguishes it from all the traditional, and from the perspective of Schuon and those who share his perspective, normal civilizations of East or West. To stress the crucial term tradition is to provide the means with which one can discern between truth and error, between all that comes from Heaven and that is in conformity with the spiritual

nature of man, and all that is simply of human origin, based on the negation of the supra-human, and because of this limitation ultimately sub-human. To neglect the meaning of tradition is to lose sight of the centrality of the concern for Truth as such in the writings of Schuon and those who belong to the traditional school. To lay aside this basic concept in order to avoid causing an affront to various proponents of modernism is to be forced to face the dangerous forest of confusion and chaos which characterizes the modern world without the light of discernment that alone can save man from becoming lost and finally devoured by the beasts lurking in this forest. The result of the negation of tradition cannot but be the weakening of the will to know the truth and become attached to that truth. It cannot but lead to half-truths if not pure error and the penetration of the secular into the precinct of the sacred itself. To refuse to accept the category of tradition and significance of the traditional, is to be disarmed against the dangers of the antitraditional which has withered away the religious life and thought of Western man since the Renaissance and of Oriental man since the last century and now threatens to undo religion from within.

To comprehend the message of Schuon, therefore, it is essential to gain a clear understanding of the meaning of the term tradition and its applications. Perhaps no other concept is so crucial for the understanding of his writings. Schuon is first and foremost an expositor of traditional teachings and wants to be known as such. Both his expounding of religion, metaphysics, art, etc. and his criticism of the modern world and its aberrations are based on the meaning of tradition. Not only does Schuon write about aspects of things human and divine in the light of tradition, but he also criticizes philosophy, art, science, social structures and other thoughts and activities related to human existence in the light of that truth of which all traditions are embodiments. Schuon is traditional in all that he writes as both expounder of the truth and critic of error.

A second basic characteristic of the writings of Schuon, especially as it concerns religion, is orthodoxy. Schuon considers himself strictly orthodox and the defender of orthodoxy. It might therefore appear as some what strange for those who identify orthodoxy with limitation and narrowness that under the umbrella of orthodoxy, Schuon should defend not only a Meister Eckhart within the Christian tradition but also both the exoteric and esoteric dimensions of other religions, while in the name of the same principle criticizing



pseudo-yogis and other syncretic modernists within Hinduism. For Schuon orthodoxy is related at once to Truth and the formal homogeneity of a particular traditional universe. To speak of the Truth is also to speak of the possibility of error. To be orthodox is to be on the side of the Truth. But since the Truth has revealed itself not once and in only one formal language but many times in different 'worlds' possessing their own formal homogeneity and language of discourse, the question of being on the side of the truth involves also the formal world in question. Schuon therefore defends Christianity as orthodox in itself while being heterodox from the point of view of Jewish orthodoxy and he explains why Buddhism is an orthodox religion, that is an embodiment of the Truth and means "provided" by that Truth to attain the Truth, while it is considered as heterodox from the perspective of Brahmanism.

Within a single religion also, he explains why an esoteric school such as Sufism in Islam is strictly orthodox in itself while being sometimes misunderstood as a heterodox phenomenon by the exoteric authorities and why also within Sufism there have been those who have deviated from orthodoxy. He also points out the significance of the criterion of orthodoxy even on the esoteric level for the evaluation of certain individualistic or aberrant manifestations which can take place and in fact have taken place even in traditional worlds as far apart as medieval Japan and Europe. For Schuon orthodoxy does not mean limitation. Rather, it is like form which is not opposed to the illimitable expanses of the Formless but is the indispensable gate which opens inwardly unto the Formless. The limitations imposed by orthodoxy are there to prevent man's falling into error. They are rails on the two sides of the straight path of correct doctrine (*orthodoxa*) and correct practice (*ortho-praxis*) which prevent the seeker from falling into the abyss of ignorance, error and finally disintegration. They are not to prevent him from marching upon the path which leads ultimately to complete freedom and liberation from all limitation and constraint either in this life or the next. For Schuon orthodoxy is not only not opposed to the loftiest metaphysical knowledge or spiritual realization but is a necessary condition for their attainment, the exceptions being there only to prove the rule and to re-affirm the truth that, "The Spirit bloweth where it listeth." In his study of religion, as of other domains, Schuon must be characterized as being orthodox as he is traditional, if both of these terms are understood in the universal sense which he himself, along with

other expositors of the traditional perspective, have given to them.

Schuon's works are concerned at once with the elements which constitute a religion and the relation between religions. He deals with the components of religion in itself such as the meaning of revelation, hermeneutics, theology, ethics and mysticism and also with different religions as they are related to each other and the problems which the multiplicity of religions poses for the reality and significance of religion in itself. He does not deal so much with the history of religions as currently understood which means the reduction of the reality of religion to its history and temporal unfolding. He is also not concerned with the sociology or philosophy of religion if these terms are understood in their usual academic sense which reduces religion to a social phenomenon or introduces the categories of a profane philosophy to understand and explain the verities of religion. Nor is he concerned with the psychology of religion if again one understands by this term the psychologization of religion and its reduction to simply a psychic phenomenon. But he is interested in all of these aspects of religion from the point of view of the primal and principal reality of religion. He deals extensively with the manner whereby the reality of a particular religion manifests itself in different times and places. He has devoted many studies to the applications of the teachings of religion to the social order. His studies are replete with the exposition of the intellectual dimension of religion and are concerned with the "philosophy of religion" in the profoundest sense of this term if only philosophy were to be understood in the traditional sense. Likewise some of the most far-reaching discussions of the effect of the reality of religion upon the human psyche are to be found in his writings for Schuon is a master of the traditional science of psychology which in order not to be confused with the modern field bearing the same name should perhaps be called pneumatology for it is concerned not so much with the psyche as with the *pneuma* and with the psyche itself to the extent that it becomes wed to the *pneuma* in that sacred union from which is born the gold of spiritual alchemy.

In any case there is hardly a branch of religious studies with which the contemporary discipline bearing this name is concerned that is not treated amply in the writings of Schuon with both amazing metaphysical and religious insight and science and scholarship. Only the point of view is radically different from what is found in most modern works on various aspects of religion. That is precisely

why without being a historian, philosopher, sociologist or psychologist of religion, Schuon brings the profoundest insight into all these fields, namely, the history, philosophy, sociology and psychology of religion. His works are like the morning wind, which breathes new life into a stifling, closed space wherein religion is imprisoned in the modern world and especially within the academic disciplines which are supposed to be concerned with it. He deals with religion in a manner which brings out the primacy of religion and demonstrates its relation to facets and aspects of human thought or experience without subordinating it to these facets and aspects.

Schuon is also a theologian of great import without being just a theologian for he is concerned most of all with a metaphysics or *scientia sacra* which stands above theology as this term is usually understood in Christianity. But he does concern himself with theology as such and displays amazing knowledge of not only the major traditional Christian schools of theology such as the Augustinian, Thomistic, Palamite and also Lutheran but also of the various schools of Islamic theology or *kalām*. His discussion of the Trinity or the question of the two natures of Christ within the context of Christian theology, or of free will and determinism in Ash'arite *kalām* as found in such a work as *Logic and Transcendence*, reveal his mastery in the treatment of classical theological issues with intellectual rigor and at the same time on the basis of certitude. In studying his theological expositions one realizes how little theology is actually left in the works of some of the most famous modern theologians who, in their desire to placate what they consider to be the imperative demands of modern rationalism and empiricism, have practically depleted theology of its theological nature and thereby destroyed its very *raison d'être*.

Being the outstanding metaphysician and expounder of the intellectual aspects of religions that he is, Schuon is nevertheless also deeply concerned with the practical aspects of religion as it is crystallized in ethics. Although he has not written a separate opus on ethics any more than he has on theology, his works on religion, such as *Esoterism as Principle and as Way* and *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Fact*, are replete with passages which concern ethics. He deals with morality in its relation to the principles of each religion and also to the spiritual virtues which are inward embellishments of the soul but related in an inextricable manner to the domain of morality. Schuon seeks to demonstrate at once the necessity of morality for the religious life, the relativity of moral injunctions within each

religion in relation to other religions, and at the same time the absoluteness of the inner content of these injunctions as they concern the spiritual virtues and their effect upon the human soul.

Speaking from the metaphysical perspective, from the Center of the circle of existence which is at once above forms and at the heart of things, Schuon is of course concerned with inwardness without which there is no spirituality. The essentiality characteristic of his works to which we have already referred necessitates dealing also with the essential or inward aspect of religion which is usually called mysticism. In order to avoid the ambiguities and ambivalence surrounding the term "mysticism" which many equate with vagueness rather than clarity and passivity rather than activity, Schuon has been very careful in the way in which he has used this term. Rather, he has based his treatment of the whole subject of mysticism upon the fundamental traditional distinction between the exoteric and esoteric dimensions or aspects of religion and has written numerous works to elucidate their fundamental nature and rapport, as well as complementarity and opposition.

Religion issues from the Source or the Ultimate Reality which is at once transcendent and immanent, completely beyond and here at the center of things. But man lives in the world of forms, of multiplicity and of opacity which is a subjectivization if the Ultimate Reality is considered as the Supreme Object, the Transcendent One; or an objectivization and superimposition if that Reality is considered as the Supreme Subject, the Immanent Self. In either case the very principle of manifestation requires the acceptance of the distinction between Essence and form, between the inward and outward, between the noumenon and phenomenon, religion being no exception since like the cosmos itself, it issues from and is created by that Ultimate Reality which is the source of all that is. Moreover, being the direct revelation to man, religion is itself the key for the understanding of the inner reality of the cosmos as well as man seen as the microcosm.

Religion is like a walnut, to use the Sufi image, with both a shell and the core or fruit which can grow and possess existence only within the shell. The purpose of the shell is to protect the fruit but without the shell there would be no fruit. Likewise, the final end of religion is to guide man to God, to enable man to be delivered from the bondage of limitation which is the goal of esoterism here in this life and which even exoterism aspires to in future life. Exoterism is,

however, absolutely necessary to make the attainment of this end through esoterism possible even when man lives in this world. Without the exoteric, no esoterism could survive and be efficacious. But also without esoterism religion would be reduced to only its external aspects without means of providing a way for those whose nature is such that they must follow the esoteric path in order to follow religion. Such a situation would also leave religion without the means of responding to certain challenges of an intellectual order which only the esoteric is capable of answering with the result that cracks would appear in the wall of even the exoteric aspect of religion and threaten the very existence of the religion in question.

Schuon has gone to great pains not only to distinguish exoterism from esoterism and to show their necessity and Divine Origin within each tradition, but also to make a clear distinction between esoterism and occultism, individualistic mysticism and especially all the pseudo-esoteric movements of modern times which claim authenticity without recourse to exoterism or to traditional orthodoxy and which would seek to open the gates of Heaven without the aid of those plenary manifestations of the Universal Logos to whom alone such a key has been given. In this context Schuon provides not only an unrivaled exposition of the various aspects, elements and manifestations of esoterism in itself and within different religions but also a chart with which one can navigate upon the dangerous waters of the present day scene where on the one hand man is faced with so many religious institutions and teachings shorn of their esoteric dimensions and on the other hand with so many pseudo-esoteric cults and groups. Schuon's aim is to substantiate the reality of esoterism not as a vaguely defined reality by itself, but within each orthodox religion, thereby strengthening religion as such and even exoterism as considered in itself and independent of the esoteric. Schuon always defends the most outward and limited exotist who has faith in God and His revelation against any pseudo-esotist with the wildest metaphysical and esoteric claims who in the name of a supposedly "higher truth" rejects the traditions which have guided men over the ages.

Within the context of the Christian tradition where the term mysticism has gained a rather special meaning, Schuon has turned over and over again to the elucidation of the message of those concerned with mysticism, whether these mystics be Catholic or Orthodox and including also certain Protestant mystics. He has distinguished between the three fundamental types of Christian mysticism,

namely Christian gnosis as represented by a Clement of Alexandria or Meister Eckhart, Christian love mysticism of a St. Bernard or St. Francis and finally the passionate mysticism of the Renaissance and later periods represented by such figures as St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila. With the discernment and lucidity which are characteristic of his works, Schuon clarifies the differences between not only the ways of knowledge and love within the Christian mystical tradition, but also the intrusion of the passionate and individualistic elements characteristic of the Renaissance into Christian mysticism thereby creating a mode different from traditional Christian mysticism yet nevertheless capable of producing saints because it still remained within the orthodox Christian tradition.

Schuon's treatment of the modes and forms of esoterism in other traditions which could also be called mysticism, if this term were to be understood as that which is concerned with the Divine Mysteries, is imbued with the same profundity, subtlety and lucidity. He has a direct sense of the sacred and the understanding of the meaning of sanctity which can only issue from experience and which enables him to discern the presence of sanctity wherever and whenever it is to be found. In the complex domain of esoterism in general and mysticism in the more particular sense given to it in the Christian tradition, he provides guidance of unparalleled luminosity and universality. To experience the perfume of his writings is to experience something of the presence of sanctity itself. That is why a contemporary traditional Catholic could write, "If in the *Transcendent Unity* he [Schuon] speaks of the way of Grace as one who understands that Divine economy in relation to the esoteric and exoteric paths of Islam, and in principle, in relation to exotericism and esotericism as such, in *Spiritual Perspectives* he speaks of Grace as one in whom it is in operation and as it were in virtue of that operation. The book has a fullness of light which we have no right to find in the twentieth century, or perhaps in any other century." (*Dominican Studies*, vol. 7, 1954, 265.)

### **The Multiplicity of Religions and the Method of their Study**

As already mentioned, the study of religion for Schuon is almost always carried out in the light of the multiplicity of religious forms which has become an undeniable reality for the life of modern man.

In fact if there is one really new element in the religious life of men and women today to the extent that they and their society are touched by the forces and influences of the modern world, it is the presence of other religions which pose a most profound challenge to one's own religious faith and threaten that faith if they are not taken seriously. The reality of other religions may not be of "existential" concern for those who still live in what remains of traditional worlds, whether this be a Moroccan town, an Indian village or even some faraway hamlet in the countryside in Spain or Italy. But the multiplicity of religious forms cannot but be of crucial concern for men who no longer live in a homogeneous traditional ambience and yet thirst for the certitude of faith and the beatitude of the spiritual life. It is to this category of human beings that Schuon addresses his studies of the multiple religious universes within which humanity lives today, providing an indispensable key for the understanding of these worlds in religious terms without relativizing or weakening one's own religion. In fact his exposition of the inner or transcendent unity of religions as contained in such works as *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* and *Formes et substance dans les religions*, not only does not place a tool in the hands of the materialists and relativizers who want to destroy the absoluteness of religion by pointing to the multiplicity and relativity of religious forms and external practices, but provides an indispensable support for the protection of religion itself. As depicted and described by Schuon, other religious worlds become a divine compensation for the loss suffered by religion in the modern world as the result of the incessant attacks made against the very structure of religion in the West since the Renaissance by such forces as humanism, rationalism, empiricism, materialism, Marxism and the like.

The use of the term transcendent unity of religions by Schuon emphasizes the fact that this unity is not to be sought on the level of external forms. Each religion lives within a world of forms and yet is based upon and issues from the formless Essence. It also possesses an esoteric dimension which is in fact concerned with the inner reality above forms and an exoteric dimension which governs, orients and sanctifies the domain of multiplicity and forms within which human beings live and act. The unity of religions can only be found on the level of the formless, the inward, the esoteric. On the exoteric level there can be polite conversation and diplomatic harmony but not unity. As he has said, it is only in the divine strato-

sphere and not in the human atmosphere that the real harmony and ultimate unity of religions can be sought.

Each religion comes from the Absolute and possesses an archetype which determines its earthly reality. Within the universe created by each religion the manifestation of the Supreme Logos is central and “absolute” whereas metaphysically only the Absolute as such is absolute. Nevertheless, the concept of the “relatively absolute”, a term often used by Schuon, is indispensable for the understanding of the absoluteness of a religion even in its formal order within its own universe while in reality only the One is Absolute in Itself. Each religion contains within itself the absolute truth and at the same time is a method and means, or *upaya*, to use the Buddhist term, for the attainment of that truth. As an *upaya* it is based on opportuneness to save human souls rather than on the Truth as such. To move from the level of religion as opportune truth to the Truth which resides at its heart, to penetrate into the meaning of forms and to reach their Essence, to see beyond the multiplicity of religious forms which come from Heaven and are most precious precisely because they are willed by God to the unity which transcends these forms without destroying them requires a dimension of inwardness, a profound spirituality and a metaphysical knowledge which belong to the esoteric domain properly speaking. As Schuon has written more than once, if ecumenism about which there is so much discourse today is to become anything more than either a tool for diplomacy or an aid to the forces of modernism to secularize religion even further, it must be based on the esoteric perspective. The only legitimate ecumenism is esoteric ecumenism. In fact ideally speaking, only saintly men and women possessing wisdom should and can engage in a serious manner in that enterprise which has come to be known as comparative religion. The works of Schuon are like a gift from Heaven in this crucial enterprise for they have carried out this esoteric ecumenism with a depth and also expansion in the geographic sense to embrace all the major religions of the world providing those who are of a religious nature but who cannot carry out such an enterprise themselves indispensable keys for the understanding in depth of these religions without doing any injustice to any particular religion. Schuon has both elucidated the various religious traditions with unparalleled spiritual sensitivity and metaphysical insight and provided a vision of that perennial religion, the *religio perennis*, which lies at the heart of each religion.



Schuon's study of what has come to be known as comparative religion has not involved only the analysis, description and penetration into the meaning of the messages or the manifestations of the Absolute but also the human receptacles which color and condition the Heavenly messages. In a number of essays he has dealt with the ethnic, linguistic and temperamental characteristics of various human collectivities, characteristics which alongside the primary archetypal realities of different religions are responsible for the diversity to be observed among religions and even within a single religion. With his mastery of the science of man in its many aspects, he has dealt with the human margin which is responsible for certain ambiguities and even apparent contradictions which one sees not only in the perspective of comparative studies but even within the traditional structure of each religion. In dealing with the human margin in religion and more generally speaking the veil in the metaphysical sense (the Arabic *al-ḥijāb* and the Sanskrit *māyā*) which conditions all cosmic manifestation, he has for the first time brought a crucial element to bear upon the study of religion in the contemporary context, an act which can only be called ingenious.

It is indeed amazing that in the modern West and especially in the English speaking world where there is so much interest in comparative religion and endless debates about the theological significance of the presence of other religions, the traditional point of view as expounded by Guénon and Coomaraswamy and especially in its most perfect and complete form by Schuon is not considered more seriously. If there had been satisfaction with the prevalent methodologies and philosophies revolving around historicism, phenomenology and the like, one would understand this almost total neglect. But seeing how dissatisfied are in fact some of the most perceptive religious thinkers today with prevalent theories and practices of ecumenism and the study of comparative religion, one would think that at least a serious attempt would be made to make an in-depth study of Schuon's point of view. Of course it is true that the understanding of this perspective requires much more metaphysical knowledge and also devotion to religion itself than the other methods and schools prevalent in academic and religious circles these days.

It can be said with certainty, however, that the desert of desolation which characterizes the religious scene today, especially as it pertains to comparative studies, is forcing many to search more desperately and with greater effort for that oasis which contains the

salutary spring of life. In such a situation despite deliberate neglect on the part of some scholars in the field and unintentional neglect on the part of others, the traditional approach to the studies of religion in general and that of Schuon which crowns the traditional school in particular are bound to find finally their way as at least one of the recognized paths of charting a course in the turbulent waters of contemporary religious studies. As for those who fully understand his message, the way provided by him cannot in fact but be the only way which can present the dazzling beauty and majesty of other religions without in any way belittling or relativizing one's own so that the very study of comparative religion becomes a religious study which abets one's own religious and spiritual life rather than becoming a detriment to the intellectual understanding and even practice of religion itself.

Schuon has of course not only written about how to study diverse religions but also carried out in practice such a study in the case of the major religions of present day humanity as well as many religions of historic significance whose light has ceased to shine upon the earthly plane.

Of the major families of religions it is the Abrahamic one consisting of Judaism, Christianity and Islam that has received, along with Hinduism, the greatest attention in Schuon's works. He has dealt with the reverential love for God reflected in the Psalms, with the dazzling peaks of Kabbalistic esoterism as well as with Talmudic Law and the *Mischna*. He has written of the covenant of the people of Israel with God, of the sacred nature of the Torah and the reasons for the rejection of Christianity by orthodox Judaism. His treatment of the Old Testament has turned on many occasions to the Songs of Solomon whose esoteric significance he has sought to resuscitate. Although he has not devoted a separate book to Judaism, the significance of the first of the Abrahamic religions in the whole history of the monotheistic faiths as well as its relation both exoterically and esoterically to Christianity and Islam appear in many of his works starting with *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* wherein he dealt for the first time in a systematic fashion with the relation between exoterism and esoterism within the Abrahamic traditions. There is a kind of concrete presence of the spirituality of the traditional Semitic world in Schuon's writings which give a particular flavor to his study of Judaism as seen in relation to the universal Abrahamic monotheism before its particularization or "Israelization" in historic Juda-

ism while at the same time he reveals the profound significance of this particularization for the religious history of later humanity.

Although only his book *Christianisme/Islam* contains the name Christianity in its title, Schuon has been concerned with nearly every aspect of the Christian tradition in practically all of his works some of which, like *Gnosis – Divine Wisdom*, contain major sections devoted to Christian spirituality. Schuon has tried to defend the integral Christian tradition from the attack of skeptics from without and modernists from within and to resuscitate the esoteric and metaphysical teachings of the Christian tradition which have been eclipsed or forgotten during the past few centuries. He has also sought to distinguish between Christianity and modern European civilization with which certain Christian thinkers have been only too anxious to identify themselves with catastrophic consequences for the Christian religion.

On the doctrinal level Schuon has sought to resurrect sapiential teachings of Christianity as contained in the works of such figures as Origen and Clement of Alexandria as well as Dante and Meister Eckhart. He has been especially keen to emphasize that although Christianity is an esoterism which became an exoterism when called upon to save a whole civilization, that although Christianity is essentially a way of love and that even if Christianity did incorporate such pre-Christian esoteric doctrines as Platonism and Hermeticism into its structure, Christian esoterism in general and Christian gnosis (which is used by Schuon as principial knowledge which liberates and not in its sectarian sense) in particular is Christian in the most basic sense of this term in that it comes from Christ and the Christic message.

Schuon also defends the various schools of traditional Christian theology, whether they be Augustinian, Bonaventurian, or Thomist. He defends these schools rigorously against those modern critics who reject them because they simply fail to understand them, while he points to the limitation of these theological formulations, especially the medieval Scholastic syntheses, in the light of that pure wisdom or *sapientia* which lies at the heart of the revelation. For obvious reasons Schuon rejects strongly such modernistic “theologies” as Teilhardism while pointing to the reason for the reaction against the Church in the Reformation and the existence of a certain type of Christian spirituality within Evangelism and especially among certain Protestant mystics.

There are also many pages devoted by Schuon to Orthodox theology and spirituality, especially works such as the *Philokalia* concerned with quintessential prayer. There is something of the "Oriental" doctrine of the saving grace of beauty, of the mystery of icons, of the Hesychast prayer of the heart, of the apophatic theology of a St. Gregory of Palamas and of the luminous skies above Mt. Athos in the writings of Schuon. Many have, in fact, been led to the discovery of Orthodoxy through his works, as others have been guided by them to the rediscovery of Catholicism or even traditional Lutheranism.

The concern of Schuon with the study of the Christian tradition has not been only doctrinal. Nor has it been only to situate it within the Abrahamic family of religions or to compare it with Hinduism and Buddhism. Rather, Schuon has also written extensively on the Christian rites, on prayer and litanies, and on Christian art. He has defended the traditional Christian rites, especially the liturgy, vigorously. He has written on the possibility of inward prayer, meditation and contemplation as Christian disciplines in the contemporary world where access to contemplative methods has become very difficult for most Christians, and he has composed some of the most illuminating pages on Christian sacred art distinguishing it rigorously from the worldly religious art of the Renaissance and the Baroque and demonstrating the crucial role of Christian sacred art for the Christian tradition.

Finally within the Abrahamic family of religions it is especially Islam with which Schuon has been concerned and to which he has devoted numerous studies. Already in *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, there is a sense of the presence of the grace or what in Arabic is called *barakah* of Islamic spirituality which could only come from intimate contact with the very essence of this tradition. It must be remembered that Schuon has journeyed extensively in the Islamic world and that he knows both the Arabic language and Arabic literature, especially as it has received the imprint of Sufism. One cannot read this work without taking seriously the reality of Islam as a religion willed by Heaven and seeing Islamic spirituality as one which possesses powerful and efficacious means that can aid contemporary man wherever he happens to live. Many a half-Westernized Muslim has returned to the practice of Islam as a result of the study of this treatise not to speak of Schuon's major opus on Islam entitled *Understanding Islam*. This latter work is his best known

book in the West and is as well known in the Islamic world from Senegal to Malaysia as any work on Islam in a European language. It is in the view of many leading Muslim thinkers the best book written to introduce Islam to the Western world.

While in *Understanding Islam* Schuon has explained the significance of the fundamental aspects of the Islamic tradition itself, namely the religion of Islam, the Quran, the Prophet and the Way or Sufism, in such other works as *Dimensions of Islam* and *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, he has dealt with some of the most difficult issues of Islamic metaphysics and cosmology such as God being both the Inward and the Outward or man being able to realize Divine Unity while remaining the “slave of God”. He has also confronted such complex issues as the question of free will and determinism as discussed by the Ash‘arites and other schools of *kalām*. He has, moreover, delved into the very spiritual substance of the Prophet to discover the roots of that dichotomy between Sunnism and Shi‘ism which has marked all later Islamic history. He has also compared Islam extensively not only with Judaism and Christianity in nearly every one of his works on comparative religion but also with Hinduism. The chapter on Sufism and Vedanta in *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* is one of the masterpieces of comparative religion across that difficult-to-traverse boundary which separates the Abrahamic religions from the Indian ones.

As can be expected, since Schuon speaks from the point of view of the *sophia perennis*, it is especially Sufism that has occupied him more than any other subject in his studies on Islam. His intimate experience of Sufism and grandeur of vision has made him the foremost expositor of the verities of Sufism in the contemporary world. His knowledge of not only Sufi doctrine and practice but also the various schools of Sufism and the multifarious manifestations of Sufism within Islamic history are simply a source of wonder. While many of those who call themselves “traditionalists” in France and who claim to follow Guénon have gravitated around the teachings of Ibn ‘Arabī as the sole and supreme authority of Sufism, Schuon has insisted on the presence, in Sufism, of many peaks and many major figures such as Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, pointing over and over again to the wealth of diversity manifested within the Sufi tradition. In his *Sufism, Veil and Quintessence*, which is a unique work in the annals of Sufism, he has penetrated into the writings of even the greatest masters of Sufism such as al-Ghazzālī and Ibn ‘Arabī to reveal within

them a quintessential Sufism based on Unity (*al-tawhīd*) and invocation of the Divine Name (*al-dhikr*) to be distinguished from a more peripheral manifestation of Sufism which displays certain characteristics most difficult for Westerners with the best of intentions to comprehend. In writing with incomparable lucidity and depth about Divine Unity, the esoteric meaning of the Quran, the spirituality of the Prophet, the early saints of Islam, the inner life of prayer, the theophanies to be contemplated in virgin nature and art, the alchemical effect of love, poetry and music, Schuon has produced a corpus of writings on Sufism which are themselves among the most important and precious works of Sufism.

Altogether the works of Schuon on Islam are unique in the contemporary Western world. Not only do they reveal for the first time for the Western audience the depth and amplitude of the Islamic tradition in a way which cannot be found elsewhere and which force those scholars of religion who are serious to take a new look at the Islamic tradition long neglected by most of the scholars in comparative religion; but they also provide an indispensable intellectual weapon with which Muslims can defend themselves against the onslaught of modernism in its various forms as it threatens the very existence of the Islamic world, weapons without which they are faced with the tragic alternatives of some form of secularization or a blind fanaticism which paradoxically enough is simply the other side of the coin of modernism. His works are therefore as important for the Muslim intelligentsia in need of discovering intellectual means of preserving the identity of the Islamic world and of responding to various modern challenges as they are for Westerners to understand Islam.

Before departing from the Abrahamic world, it is important to mention the central role that the one female prophetic being in this world, namely the Virgin Mary, plays in the spiritual universe of Schuon. He has written eloquently about her role not only in Christianity and even in Judaism through the house of Aaron, but also in Islam where she is called the woman chosen by God among all other women of the world. Schuon speaks of the Virgin's inviolable purity and receptivity to the Divine Message, her primordial sanctity, her never-failing mercy, her embodiment of Divine Wisdom and her beauty which saves and infuses the soul with paradisaical joy and beatitude as one who has himself experienced the Marian grace. It is in any case impossible to understand his spiritual universe

without considering the importance of that feminine element of the Universal Logos of which Mary is the embodiment in the Abrahamic universe, casting a merciful and beatific presence within both the Christian and the Islamic worlds.

If one travels East from the lands which gave birth to the Abrahamic family of religions, one first traverses the Iranian plateau, the home of the Iranian religions such as Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism. Schuon has been less concerned with this group of religions than those born east and west of Persia, but he has mentioned in several of his works the significance of the ethical dualism of Zoroastrianism in the light of religious monotheism which is metaphysically satisfying but has difficulties, theologically speaking, in explaining the famous question of theodicy or the presence of evil in a world created by God who is absolute goodness. As far as the Iranian world is concerned, it is mostly with the Islamic culture of Persia, especially Sufism, that Schuon has been concerned rather than those ancient Iranian religions only one of which — namely Zoroastrianism — survives to this day.

The spirit of Schuon was drawn from his youth to the majestic peaks and rolling plains of India, to the battlefield where Kṛṣṇa taught Arjuna the truth of life and death, to the forests where the Ṛṣis received those metaphysical revelations known as the Upanishads. This interest has been preserved throughout his life, and he has referred often to the “miracle of India” about whose religions, art and society he has written so extensively. While *The Language of the Self* devoted mostly to Hinduism was published in India, and highly appreciated by some of the most important traditional authorities of Hinduism, Schuon has written many other studies devoted to various aspects of Hinduism ranging from yoga to Hindu art. In fact he considers Hinduism as a kind of religious museum wherein is to be found nearly every mode of religious teaching and path of initiation, of which the well-known division into the ways of knowledge (*jñāna*), love (*bhakti*) and work (*karma*) is only the most obvious.

Schuon finds in Hindu metaphysics, especially as expounded by Śāṅkara in the form that is known as Advaita Vedānta, one of the most complete and perfect expressions of metaphysics and therefore willingly uses some of its terminology in his own metaphysical expositions while also expounding the meaning of these teachings themselves with a firm mastery of Sanskrit religious and metaphysical terminology. An example is the term *māyā* which is not only used

in a very central and crucial manner by Schuon in his numerous studies on manifestation and the principle of “veiling” which accompanies it, but is also explained in a magisterial manner in several studies as both veil and divine creativity.

Schuon discusses both Hindu metaphysics and its social structure, rites and art. While being concerned mostly with the Vedanta, he strongly opposes those pseudo-Vedantists who separate the Vedanta from the traditional Hindu cadre within which it belongs. He is also a staunch defender of the traditional Hindu doctrine of caste within the particular traditional structure which Hinduism represents while recognizing many of the misdeeds and malpractices which are prevalent in India today. He defends the Hindu tradition in principle against all modernist deviations and deformations without neglecting, to say the least, that in this Age of Darkness or Kali Yuga Hinduism is certainly not in that state of perfection and vigor characteristic of the Golden Age. The result is the appearance of certain cracks within its structure without which in fact Islam could not have spread in India to the degree that it did.

As for the other major religion to have issued from India, namely Buddhism, it has been mostly with the northern or Mahayana school that Schuon's works have been concerned. Touched deeply by the manifestation of the Void in Buddhism and by the beauty of Buddhist art and spirituality, Schuon has set about in numerous essays and the major opus *In the Tracks of Buddhism* to explain the significance of this particular tradition based on silence concerning the nature of Ultimate Reality and the metaphysics of the Void and yet possessing an extremely elaborate cosmology and eschatology. He has also sought to remove misunderstandings concerning Buddhism in the West, such incredible misjudgements which cause some people to call Buddhism atheistic or even to claim that the Buddhists have no religion. He has also explained some of the most difficult elements of Buddhist doctrine such as the “mystery of the Bodhi sattva” and the presence of grace in Mahayana Buddhism.

It is especially Japanese Buddhism and in fact all things Japanese that have always been of great interest to Schuon. He sees in Japan a perfection of artistic forms, an awareness of beauty and a power of creativity related to wisdom and closely tied to the ethnic genius of a more or less homogeneous and secluded people that has made of Japanese civilization a unique and remarkable witness to the truth and beauty of tradition. He has in fact written a great deal more on things Japanese, including Buddhism, than on China whose



religions — not only Buddhism but also Confucianism and Taoism — he treats in a more summary fashion. On the basis of the belief that the Japanese tradition has survived more intact into the modern world than the Chinese, it is especially to Japanese religious and artistic forms that he has turned over and over again in his study of the religions of the Far East as living realities.

In the Japanese Buddhist world he deals with many aspects of Zen Buddhism whose very popularity in the West has caused numerous fads and pseudo-esoteric cults to be created around its name. While trying to save the Western reader from being attracted to Zen for the wrong reasons, Schuon explains the causes for the iconoclastic attitudes of certain Zen patriarchs and clarifies such major Zen practices as the use of the *koan* and various artistic activities connected with the perfecting of inner discipline. But he also deals with the much more neglected Jodo-Shin school and the practice of the *nembutsu*. In fact he considers this form of Japanese Buddhism to be more appropriate for most Westerners who are at present drawn to Zen.

As in India so in Japan, some of the greatest traditional authorities have found in Schuon's writings a masterly exposition of Buddhism and have espoused his works warmly. They have seen in his words the traces of the presence of the Void and the power of a mind which having stilled the waves of *samsāra* is finally able to affirm the identity of *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra*, of a mind which without falling into a crude mixing of tongues, can assert that the affirmation of such an identity in Buddhist terms means, for those breathing in the universe of Abrahamic revelation, "seeing God everywhere".

The interest of Schuon in Japan has caused him to delve also into the national religion of Japan, namely Shintoism, which complements Buddhism in the Land of the Rising Sun. In studying its complex cosmogony and mythology in *In the Tracks of Buddhism*, he has also dealt with the meaning of mythology and mythological language in general while providing what is perhaps the most accessible account of Shintoism in a Western language. He has also dealt through Shintoism with some of the general characteristics of the Shamanic family of religions to which Shintoism belongs, such characteristics as the apparent refusal to deal extensively with questions of eschatology.

The other branch of Shamanism which spread into America in the form of the North American Indian religions has also been amply treated by Schuon. In fact it can be said that as far as the religion of the nomads of the Plains in North America is concerned,

no one has presented the heart of the cosmological and metaphysical teachings of these Indians with the same light and lucidity as has Schuon. Drawn from early childhood to the courage, virility, nobility and beauty of the American Indians, he made a profound study of their religion and art and during two journeys to their homeland encountered some of the most important representatives of the tribes who still possessed a knowledge of their traditions. Schuon has been in fact received into one of the tribes and been actually present during the performance of the Sun Dance. The experience is reflected in his remarkable study of this central rite of the Indians while his intimate knowledge of the Indians is reflected in both his exposition of their teachings and his own painting of the traditional Indians and their religion. His descriptions of the majesty of mountains and contemplative calm of lakes, of the traceless flight of the eagle in the infinite expanse of the sky and the dispersing of the leaves of a flower in the morning breeze are reminiscent also and even reflect something of this American Indian spirituality which sees in the forms of nature the direct reflections of the Divine Presence, preserving something of the paradisaical vision of primordial man.

This introduction does not permit a complete analysis of all the facets of Schuon's study of religion and religions. Suffice it to say that he has dealt not only with religion as such and the major religions which govern the life of humanity today but also with the art, social structures and thought patterns created and molded by religion. He has sought the ultimate meaning of events in religious history in the light of the Ultimate Itself while exposing religions in themselves as means of attaining the Ultimate. With an encyclopedic knowledge of many religions and metaphysical penetration into the heart of each religion, Schuon has provided an unparalleled knowledge of the religions of the world while providing keys for the understanding of religion in its essence. But at the center of his concern has always lain that perennial religion which lies at the core of all religions and which can only be attained by a person who lives one of God's religions fully and realizes the meaning of religion as such. One can say that the works of Schuon have been written to cast light upon the path of religion in general and perennial religion in particular which lies at its heart and that his writings in their totality can in a sense be called by the title of one of his latest works, namely, *On the Trace of Perennial Religion*.

## Metaphysics

Whether it be the domain of religion, art, theology or epistemology, the perspective of Schuon remains always metaphysical. He is first and foremost a metaphysician concerned with the reality of religion, art, human society or the cosmic order. To understand the meaning of metaphysics as used by him, however, requires a new, and at the same time age old, appreciation of the connotation of this term. For Schuon, metaphysics is not a branch of philosophy concerned with what lies beyond physics. Nor is it in fact a purely human knowledge bound by the context and categories of the human mind. Rather, metaphysics, which some of his translators render as metaphysic in order to emphasize its non-multiple but unitary nature, is the science of Ultimate Reality, attainable through the intellect and not reason, of an essentially suprahuman character and including in its fullness the whole of man's being. It is a sacred science or *scientia sacra*, a wisdom which liberates and which requires not only certain mental capacities but also moral and spiritual qualifications. It is gnosis in the original non-sectarian meaning of the term, the *sophia* of the ancient sages and the *sapientia* of medieval ones. It is the *jñana* of the Hindus and *al-ma'rifah* or *al-ḥikmah* of Muslims. It is light and presence and issues from the seat of the intelligence which is the heart while its elaboration is carried out by the mind. Its conceptual understanding, however, although of great importance, is one thing and its realization quite another.

Metaphysics as thus understood is therefore not at all a branch of philosophy. Rather, philosophy when it was still of a traditional character, corresponded to the theoretical and conceptual aspect of metaphysical knowledge as distinct from the operative methods for the realization of this principal knowledge. As stated in some of Schuon's earliest works such as *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, metaphysics is of a sacred character and therefore accessible in its fullness only within a traditional cadre which provides the appropriate means for the transmission of this knowledge much of which has in fact been kept in an oral form to this day. Schuon has mentioned often that if this knowledge is now being written in books, it is only because the modern world is in every way an anomaly when com-

pared the millennial civilizations which have guided mankind over the ages and one anomaly deserves another. For him metaphysics is inseparable from tradition, from traditional transmission, from spiritual realization. It lies at the heart of religion and even of the *religio perennis* and also at the heart of man himself where resides the Divine Intellect. Being of a sacred character, it requires of man all that he is. That is why in traditional worlds it is taught only after a long period of moral and intellectual preparation of those qualified to receive such knowledge.

Nevertheless, the modern world being what it is, namely a world in which normal channels for the transmission of such knowledge are no longer available for many who would be qualified to receive it, it is necessary to present this knowledge in the manner done by Schuon. There are always those with sufficient intellectual intuition to grasp its import. There are those whose minds and souls are in such a state that the spark of such type of knowledge even if contained in books can set them on fire, burning the obstacles which exist within them and which prevent them from seeking and attaining what Christ has called the one thing necessary.

Man's intelligence was made to know the Absolute and as Schuon has written often it is only the Absolute that man *can* know absolutely. Metaphysics, which is none other than this knowledge of the Absolute, resides in the very substance of the intelligence. Its fountainhead is to be found at the center of man's being himself. But this spring will not gush forth and the inner Logos will not be attained save with the help of that objective manifestation of the Logos which is revelation. That is why in normal civilizations where the tradition molds all things according to the principles contained in the celestial message ruling each civilization, metaphysics is always formed within the inward or esoteric dimension of the religion in question, in the Orphic mysteries, in the Kabbala, in the Dionysiuses, Erigenas and Eckharts of Western Christianity, in the writings of Sufis within the Islamic world. In the Oriental traditions also where the esoteric teachings are present often in a more open and direct fashion in the works of such men as Nāgārjuna and Śāṅkara, of Lao-Tzū and Chuang-Tzū, they are nevertheless found within certain circles of adepts qualified to receive them. To grasp the significance of metaphysics as expounded by Schuon, it is this traditional understanding of this supreme science, its content and significance that must be understood fully.

Schuon is not only a metaphysician of the highest order to be compared to the foremost metaphysicians of history, but he also possesses a knowledge of the metaphysical schools of many traditions. His studies of comparative religion nearly always reflect at their center a study of comparative metaphysics. He not only speaks of metaphysics as the science of the Real, but also juxtaposes, compares and contrasts the views of the metaphysicians of both East and West. Those who share the current interest in what is coming to be known as comparative philosophy—but most of which should be called, properly speaking, comparative metaphysics—will find an almost inexhaustible wealth in his writings wherein he brings his characteristic essentiality and universality to bear upon the discussions of the major themes and issues of this domain of comparative studies.

The metaphysical doctrine expounded by Schuon exposes for the contemporary reader the full range of metaphysics in a manner which has not been available in the West since the end of the medieval period save for the works of Guénon and Coomaraswamy whose metaphysical expositions might in fact serve as a basis for some, but not necessarily all, readers for the comprehension of the more all-embracing and spiritually vivid presentations of Schuon.

To gain a complete knowledge of Schuon's metaphysical expositions, it would be necessary to read over all his books and most articles because he returns to various metaphysical questions in nearly every study. Already in *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* and *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* one sees the clear distinction made between metaphysics and profane philosophy and comes to understand what is the nature of metaphysical knowledge, while in such later works as *Gnosis—Divine Wisdom* and *Stations of Wisdom*, many chapters deal with purely metaphysical subjects, as does his more recent *Logic and Transcendence*. But it is especially in *Esotericism as Principle and as Way* that he deals most directly with esoteric knowledge which is inseparable from metaphysics. The most important work of all in this field, however, is *From the Divine to the Human* which can be said to summarize Schuon's metaphysical teachings.

Metaphysics, as expounded by Schuon, does not begin with Being but with that Ultimate Reality which is at once the Absolute, the Infinite and the Perfect Good and which contains all the possibilities of manifestation. Beyond being in Itself, It is the Principle of Pure Being which is the first determination of the Beyond-Being

in the direction of manifestation and creation. Inasmuch as it is infinite, the Ultimate Reality must possess all possibilities including the possibility of the negation of Itself which is the world or manifestation. There is therefore a projection towards nothingness which constitutes the cosmogonic act and brings all things into existence. The Beyond-Being generates Pure Being, Pure Being generates Universal Existence and Universal Existence actualizes and externalizes the latent possibilities in the world of existence as usually understood. In a hierarchic fashion there is a descent in the direction of nothingness or non-existence without this limit ever being reached.

In a language which draws from the technical vocabulary and symbolic imagery of several traditions including not only the Platonic and Christian but also the Islamic, Hindu and Buddhist, Schuon depicts in a dazzling fashion and with a freshness which can result only from vision and realization, the traditional doctrine of the nature of the One, the descent through the cosmogonic act of the various levels of existence, the question of theodicy and the presence of evil, the role of the Logos in creation, the nature of eternity and the generation of time, causality and numerous other questions of a metaphysical nature turning at every moment to answer criticisms brought by various types of modern philosophy against traditional metaphysics and drawing from different traditions to both strengthen his metaphysical presentation and to accentuate the remarkable harmony which exists in various traditions once the symbolic language used for the presentation of such knowledge is fully grasped.

## Cosmology

Cosmology, as traditionally understood, is the application of metaphysical principles to the cosmic domain. It is not a generalization of an empirical physics as one finds in the modern world. It is a knowledge of the cosmos on all its levels of existence and not only the material. Although he has not written separate treatises on cosmology itself or on the cosmological sciences such as alchemy, as have some of the followers of his thought and teachings, Schuon has devoted many pages to the study of cosmology and its spiritual significance. He has devoted in-depth studies to Islamic cosmology and angelology to which it is closely related in his *L'Oeil du coeur* and

to the cosmology of the American Indians in *Language of the Self*. On several occasions he has dealt with the complexities of Buddhist cosmology and has referred to the main tenets of Hindu cosmology whose doctrine of cosmic cycles he has turned to on many occasions in order both to criticize the linear and quantitative conception of time of modern science and to clarify certain misunderstandings that can be observed in modern Western interpretation of the Hindu doctrine of these cycles.

Although not as concerned with traditional mathematics and the symbolic science of letters which is closely related to it as was Guénon, Schuon has also dealt in more than one instance with traditional mathematics. His mastery of the subject can be seen in *Esoterism as Principle and as Way* where, as in his earlier references to the subject, he is particularly keen to point out the qualitative nature of traditional mathematics, the Pythagorean number and geometric form. He has emphasized the archetypal nature of both number and geometric form as traditionally understood and the role they play in art as means of bringing about recollection in the Platonic sense of the celestial essences and in metaphysical and cosmological sciences in providing a powerful intelligible language for the exposition of such forms of knowledge which, however, are not bound to this type of language alone and which can be expressed through non-mathematical means as well.

## Epistemology

When confronted with the writings of Schuon, one is faced with the question, "How does he know?" How can one gain the kind of knowledge of which Schuon speaks? Besides writing on initiation, spiritual practice and the development of inner faculties which enable man to have a new mode of consciousness and awareness, Schuon has spoken explicitly about the faculty of the intellect which exists within man and which can be made operative through spiritual practice and of course by the grace of Heaven. For Schuon man can know through a hierarchy of means which range from the senses, through the various powers of the psyche and the mind including imagination and reason, to the intellect which is a supranaturally natural faculty within man and which can know God and suprasensible realities directly provided it is not prevented from being operative

by the passions and veils that hide man from himself. The intellect resides in the heart whereas reason which is its reflection on the mental plane is associated with the brain and the head.

Moreover, the inner Intellect is the subjective pole of the Word, the Logos, the Universal Intellect by which all things were made and which is the source of revelation in its objective mode, in the mode which established formal religion. That is why revealed truth is the highest source of knowledge when compared to reason, the sentiments and the senses which for the vast majority of men constitute their only sources of knowledge. For the sage, however, the eye of whose heart has opened and who is able to receive this inner and subjective "revelation" which issues from the Intellect residing at the Center of his being, the objective revelation is the complement of this inner source of knowledge. The objective revelation also provides the cadre for the actualization of this knowledge and places at the disposal of man the indispensable means of attaining to this source of inner knowledge. That is why there is such a profound nexus in Schuon's writings between faith and knowledge and also orthodoxy and intellectuality as seen in such work as *Stations of Wisdom*.

For Schuon ultimate knowledge lies in the very substance of human intelligence which was made to know the Absolute. There is for him no legitimate right to absurdity in the name of religious mystery. If the Divine is a mystery, it is so because of the limitation of our knowledge and not because of an obstacle which cannot be surmounted in principle. If all men could be taught metaphysics, if they were able to use their intelligence without the impediments of the passions and individualistic aberrations, they could know God. Moreover, there would be no atheists and agnostics, the existence of intelligence, like that of human consciousness, itself being the proof of the existence of God.

For Schuon even the categories of logic are of a divine nature and come ultimately from the Spirit. What is the origin of logical or mathematical certitude if not ultimately the Divine Intellect? Schuon stands always on the side of logic against illogicism which does not mean that he stands on the side of rationalism. Logic is one thing and rationalism quite another. In fact in *Logic and Transcendence* he criticizes modern rationalism not through fideist appeals but through the use of logic. Also in the same work he resuscitates the classical proofs for the existence of God and demonstrates that they are still meaningful and efficacious by appealing to logic and logical demonstration rather than solely to faith. For him logic is



inseparable from intelligence, hence from the Transcendent. Reason is not the rebellious agent which having declared its independence runs havoc through the world of faith and as the progenitor of an inhuman technology creates chaos in the world of nature. Rather, once illuminated by the Intellect, it becomes the complement of faith and the instrument of man as the vicegerent of God on earth. In this age of positivism on the one hand and irrationalism on the other, Schuon's epistemology, based upon the hierarchy of faculties leading to the intellect through which revealed and inner knowledge are united and the positive appreciation of logic in its wedding to transcendence and the most intense form of spirituality, is a salutary alternative of the greatest import for not only theology but also philosophy and science if only his message were to be fully understood.

## Philosophy

To comprehend Schuon's views toward philosophy, it is necessary to distinguish philosophy in its current sense from the meaning it had for a Pythagoras or a Plato or even a Cicero. Schuon is strongly critical of postmedieval European philosophy based firstly upon rationalism and empiricism and finally, because of the very limitations of these approaches, upon the irrationalism which characterizes so much of twentieth century philosophy. Schuon sees this kind of profane philosophy as a caricature of traditional metaphysics and philosophy and asserts that profane philosophy, even when it does express certain correct intuitions as one sees among a number of nineteenth century German philosophers, does not possess efficacy as far as the realization of this truth thus discerned is concerned. As he has said in his early criticism of profane philosophy in *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, such a philosophy cannot engender sanctity.

In contrast to this profane understanding of philosophy, however, there is traditional philosophy to be distinguished from the pure metaphysics or *sophia* already mentioned. This traditional philosophy whether found in an Aristotle, Ibn Sīnā or St. Thomas, is given its full positive appreciation in the traditional intellectual universe where, as Schuon asserts, there are not two but three intellectual disciplines which are concerned with knowledge of principles: theology, philosophy, and metaphysics which can also be called gnosis or theosophy if this term is understood in its traditional sense. He also mentions

that every great theologian is also to some extent a philosopher and metaphysician, as every great traditional philosopher is also a theologian and metaphysician and every metaphysician a theologian and philosopher. This assertion holds true very much in the case of Schuon himself who is not only a metaphysician of incredible breadth and depth but also a theologian and philosopher who is a master of logical discourse and philosophical dialectic.

Schuon defends schools of traditional philosophy against both their theological and mystical opponents. He demonstrates the validity of certain theses of the Islamic philosophers against the attacks of both the scholars of *kalām* and even those Sufis who in emphasizing intuition have denigrated the works of the Islamic philosophers based upon demonstration. He has likewise defended the sapiential strand of Greek philosophy against the attacks of certain of the early Church Fathers showing how in the dialogue between the Hellenists and Christians, it was not simply a question of debate between truth and error, but contention between two perspectives whose unity can only be grasped by metaphysics as it was in fact by the Christian Platonists and Neoplatonists.

Schuon renders the greatest service to the correct understanding of both the Western and the Islamic and Jewish intellectual traditions by reevaluating Platonism and especially Neoplatonism as an authentic metaphysical doctrine of an ultimately Divine Origin destined providentially to provide a suitable metaphysical language for the expression of principial knowledge by the sages and metaphysicians of Judaism, Christianity and Islam rather than a harmless and “inoffensive” philosophy in the modern sense with the help of which one simply removes the claim of seriousness on behalf of any metaphysical doctrine. How often have such sapiential doctrines of the profoundest depth as those of an Erigena or Ibn ‘Arabī been dismissed simply by calling them the result of Neoplatonic influence? The works of Schuon cast light upon a subject which cannot but be of central concern for those who are now in the process of reappraising the meaning of the Western intellectual tradition. His discussion helps especially to grasp anew the spiritual and intellectual import of Platonism and Neoplatonism which have served in the hands of modern historians of philosophy and religion to veil the true nature of the doctrine of those called Jewish, Christian, or Islamic Platonists and Neoplatonists and to draw a wall between the world of faith and essential knowledge, a wall which certainly did not exist in the traditional universes of Islam and Judaism and even Christianity.

Before leaving the discussion of philosophy, it is essential to mention perennial philosophy or *philosophia perennis* to which Schuon has referred on several occasions in his works including his latest opus *Sur la trace de la religion pérenne*. As that perennial and universal wisdom which lies at the heart of all traditions, *philosophia perennis* can in fact be identified with metaphysics and its multifarious applications. Since this knowledge is related to spiritual practice and is not limited to theory—even *theoria* in its traditional sense—it can also be called *sophia perennis* in order to emphasize more the operative element related to realization. It is not accidental that Schuon has summarized his whole message in an essay entitled “*Sophia perennis*”. Certainly he is the foremost living expositor of this perennial wisdom, the *philosophia perennis*, interest in which has been resuscitated during this century, and which has seen its most powerful and eloquent contemporary spokesman in Schuon.

## Art and Beauty

Schuon is not only a metaphysician but also an artist, at once poet and painter. Moreover, as metaphysician he has always emphasized the importance of forms on their own level and the necessity to “possess” form in order to be able to pass beyond it. Therefore, he has been concerned from the beginning with the significance of art and beauty and has written extensively on what could be called traditional aesthetics in such works as *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, *Language of the Self*, and *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, while making numerous references to the subject in his other books and essays.

Beauty plays a central role in spirituality as expounded and described by Schuon for, as he has written more than once, beauty is to the contemplative person not the cause of worldly dissipation and diversion, but the occasion for recollection, in the Platonic sense, of the spiritual world. Beauty is an extension, a reflection of Divine Infinitude and as such melts the hardness of the heart and removes the obstacles before the mind leading to liberation and deliverance.

There is for Schuon first of all a fundamental distinction to be made between traditional and profane art which can include an art whose subject might be religious such as post-medieval European religious art, but whose language is not symbolic nor is its inspiration suprahuman. Then he distinguishes within the domain of tradi-

tional art between sacred art which is directly concerned with the sacred rites and practices of the tradition in question and other types of art in a traditional civilization which, although not directly concerned with cultic and ritual elements of the tradition, reflect its principles through the symbolic language, methods and techniques provided by that tradition. With an incredible knowledge of various types of traditional art, he provides a universal key for the understanding of the spiritual significance of art in different traditional civilizations. In fact his explanation of traditional art complements his study of different religions. In both cases he acts as guide for the journey across frontiers which, until modern times, have separated humanity into several humanities. He seems to have been blessed with the gift of the "language of the birds", to use the well-known Islamic symbol, in penetrating into not only the inner meaning of different religious forms but also diverse worlds of artistic form which are always profoundly related to the inner dimensions of the religion dominant in the civilization that gives birth to the artistic forms in question.

It is this inner nexus between spirituality and art that causes Schuon not only to devote so many studies to questions of traditional art and aesthetics, but also to criticize in a relentless manner post-medieval European art which at once reflects and has abetted the gradual fall of modern man from the state which tradition considers as normal and which European man shared with other members of the human race before beginning on that perilous adventure identified with the Renaissance and the age of rationalism and humanism. Schuon traces the stages of this fall in European art which after the Middle Ages first becomes humanistic rather than hieratic while preserving certain human and natural characteristics in the hands of the greater artists of that age. Then, this early period of rebellion against the medieval artistic norms and in fact the whole medieval philosophy of art as expounded by a St. Thomas or Meister Eckhart is followed by an even greater degree of naturalism corresponding to the spread of rationalism on the philosophical level. Finally, the naturalistic forms in a sense crack under their own weight leading to that dissolution of forms which should properly be called sub-realism rather than surrealism for it is the level below the world of forms with which such an art deals rather than with the level above it. This dissolution, moreover, has its counterpart in anti-rational philosophies such as existentialism which appear on the European philosophical scene at almost the same time as the breakdown of artistic naturalism.

While emphasizing the catastrophic consequences of a titanic and Promethean art and its later dissolution from below for man seen as *imago Dei* and the role of such an art in aiding in man's rebellion against Heaven and in fact against his own theomorphic nature, Schuon nevertheless points out some positive qualities to be found among certain artists even amidst this non-traditional climate of European art.

One can find in the works of Schuon both a metaphysics and theology of art of the highest order and a universal criterion for the judgment of the spiritual significance of art in both East and West. Moreover, like all plenary messages of gnosis which originate in a fresh vision of the Truth rather than simple repetition of another source, the writings of Schuon are themselves clothed in a language of highly artistic quality with a resonance of beauty which only confirms once again the veracity of the saying that beauty is the splendor of the truth. One cannot read his works without becoming aware that metaphysical knowledge once realized and lived rather than merely thought cannot but express itself in vehicles which possess beauty and that this wisdom is inseparable from art. This is a truth to which the Sacred Scriptures and the earthly manifestations of the Logos in various traditions bear witness at the highest level for they save not only through the content of their message but also through the beauty of the container which is itself determined by the content.

## Nature

Schuon's concern for beauty is not limited to art as created by man but embraces the work of the Supreme Artisan, that is, virgin nature. Besides writing of the cosmological sciences, Schuon has devoted many pages to the spiritual significance of nature which has its own metaphysics and spiritual life. The pages of the cosmic book bear a gnostic message of the highest order which can in fact be deciphered only by a person of high spiritual realization. When reading the works of Schuon, one feels as if they were not written in some closed room but in the bosom of nature. There is something in the very substance of his works of the crystalline majesty of the Alps, the inviolable purity of the North African desert, the inner mystery of the forests of North America, all of which he has experienced and which he loves. He stands always on the side of the grandeur of God's handiwork as seen in virgin nature against the petti-

ness of the works of fallen man and especially the stifling ugliness of the modern urban environment created by Promethean man to enable him to forget the absence of God.

Schuon not only defends the rights of nature against the incessant encroachment of the modern industrial world, but also asserts the primacy of the rhythms of the life of nature over those of modern man and its final victory over that type of man who sees himself as nature's conqueror rather than the bridge between Heaven and earth. He also has written extensively of the spiritual significance of nature not only in particular cases such as Taoism, Shintoism or the North American Indian religion where its forms play a specific cultic role but in general as a most powerful support for the spiritual life and gift from Heaven at a time when much of the earthly environment is so desolated. There is something of the prayers of the birds in the early morning hours, of the luminosity of the rising Sun upon mountain peaks and of the glittering stars of a desert night in Schuon's writings which are reminiscent of classical Sufi poetry and also certain types of German nature poetry and which remind man of the great spiritual significance of nature and the central role that virgin nature can play in the spiritual life without man falling into any form of naturalism of which so many Christian theologians have been fearful. In defending the spiritual rights of nature and the metaphysical significance of virgin nature and her forms and rhythms, Schuon has resuscitated an aspect of spirituality of which the Western world is in direst need and which in fact many have been seeking since the existence of the ecological crisis has become a reality for them. He has described nature as one who sees all things in God and God in all things, as one who has realized the goal of seeing God everywhere.

## Man

Among all the traditional sciences such as alchemy, arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy with which other expositors of traditional doctrine such as René Guénon and Titus Buckhardt have dealt, it is the science of man or anthropology, if only the *anthropos* were to be understood in its traditional sense, that has been of particular concern to Schuon. He has always been interested with the insight and keenness of intelligence which characterize all aspects of his

thought in the human phenomenon and while attacking strongly humanism has defended man staunchly against all that seeks to debase and degrade him. He has insisted that if anyone wishes to speak for man, he should speak of the whole of man and not just his animal part, for to leave the spiritual dimension and spiritual needs of man aside while claiming to speak for him is to reduce him to a level that is not just animal but below the animals. Schuon has confirmed on many occasions the Augustinian dictum that to be human is to seek to be suprahuman. Man can in fact be defined as the being created to transcend himself and to seek the Transcendent as such.

Schuon's exposition of the science of man appears in many of his writings but is summarized in a very condensed and concentrated form in his *From the Divine to the Human*. He sees man as a theomorphic being with an intelligence made to know the Absolute and a will created to attach the whole of man's being to the Origin. He also deals with all the intermediate human faculties such as the sentiments and imagination and discusses their role in the spiritual life. He has analyzed the microcosmic structure of man in *L'Oeil du coeur* and *Gnosis — Divine Wisdom* and has returned over and over again to point to the remarkable mystery of human subjectivity which itself is direct proof of the Divine "I" and to the power of objectivity which is direct witness to the Absolute. To understand the meaning of human consciousness and the nature of intelligence is to be convinced of the reality of God for to say man is to say God. The need for religion and in fact the fountainhead of religious truth lie in the nature of man himself, at the center of his heart. If man were able to penetrate to the center of his being by himself, he would discover God within himself and in all things. He would be like Adam in paradise before the fall.

The theomorphic nature of man is not reflected only in man's intelligence and will nor even in the intelligence alone together with the sentiments which can be transmuted through the alchemy of Divine Love. This nature is also reflected in the human body, both the male and the female bodies possessing an innate perfection which could not possibly have been the result of some kind of evolution by chance or struggle. Schuon in fact rejects with arguments which are at once metaphysical, theological, philosophical and logical the theory of evolution as currently understood and reveals its absurdity with a clarity and vigor which is unique. Schuon also deals directly

in *From the Divine to the Human* with the metaphysical and cosmological symbolism of various parts of the human body, unveiling an esoteric teaching in a manner which is not possible to find in other contemporary sources.

In speaking of man Schuon also of course speaks of woman for he uses man in its broad sense as embracing both sexes like the Greek *anthropos*, the Latin *homo*, the German *Mensch* and the Arabic *al-insān*. There is certainly a strong awareness of the feminine dimension of spirituality and the spiritual significance of femininity in his writings. While dealing on the metaphysical level with the Divine Infinity as the feminine hypostasis of the One and creative act or *māyā* as the feminine consort of the creating word or Logos, he has also written some of the most beautiful pages of living spirituality concerning the Virgin Mary in both Christianity and Islam and even explained the reason for the presence of a feminine element in Mahayana Buddhism, a tradition which appears to be so masculine in both its doctrinal and operative aspects. His paintings are also replete with feminine American Indian figures or the Virgin who is the subject of all his non-Indian paintings.

Schuon is fully aware of the feminine element in an integral spiritual way and even of the positive role which sexuality can play in the spiritual life while accepting the possibility and efficacy of that type of ascetic and sacrificial attitude found among classical Christian theologians. His essay on sexuality in *Esoterism as Principle and as Way* is a masterly treatment of a central aspect of human experience with which contemporary Christian theologians, heir to the age old manner of envisaging sexuality as a sin in itself and yet living amidst one of the most sexually permissive societies in human history, are confronted as a crucial moral and religious problem.

Schuon displays the grandeur of the human state while opposing strongly that Promethean and titanese expansion of an earthly kind which, in the name of the greatness of man, sought to obliterate the seal of Divinity upon his nature, thereby condemning him to the subhuman world in which humanity finds itself today. Schuon also depicts man as a being at the center of the wheel of existence, destined for immortality, as a being presented with the precious gift of a state which is central and which can therefore lead to the spiritual empyrean beyond all cosmic becoming. He shows the great opportunity and also danger of human life precisely because man *is* the *imago Dei* and therefore bears a responsibility towards Heaven and



earth, towards God, other human beings and in fact the whole order of nature, a responsibility which he cannot avoid under any pretext. To refuse to accept such a responsibility is to damn himself while to accept and to fulfill his responsibilities at the summit of which rests knowing and loving the Truth is to attain that goal for the sake of which all things were brought into being and, to use a Sufi image, all the wheels of the heavens were made to rotate.

## The Spiritual Life

Far from being an expositor of doctrine alone, Schuon always writes from the point of view of realized knowledge and presents a teaching which itself has the operative power of transforming the reader. His concern is of course to present the Truth but in the context of the spiritual life and not just as theory. He has therefore devoted numerous studies to the spiritual life, to prayer, meditation, contemplation, modes of spiritual realization, the spiritual virtues and the states upon the spiritual path which he calls the stations of wisdom. Nearly all of his works contain some chapter or section dealing with the spiritual life starting with *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* which includes a most remarkable discussion of the prayer of the heart to *Esoterism as Principle and as Way* which in a long section summarizes his teachings on the spiritual life.

Schuon first of all emphasizes the absolute necessity of actually practicing the religious and spiritual life within the context of an orthodox tradition in order to attain the kind of knowledge of which he speaks. To understand the traditional point of view is to understand the necessity of the participation of one's whole being in the practice of a tradition and the inadequacy of only its theoretical understanding, for man is not just a disembodied and floating mind. In fact man's participation in the truth comes through the attainment of spiritual virtues by means of spiritual practice and not in mental concepts of the truth.

In the complex domain of religious and spiritual practices where Schuon describes the significance of rites as different as the Christian Mass, the Islamic benediction upon the Prophet and the American Indian rite of smoking the calumet, he emphasizes over and over again the centrality of prayer to which he has devoted many pages in his works, among the most complete being the chapter on prayer

in *Stations of Wisdom*. It is, however, invocation and quintessential prayer or the prayer of the heart as it has survived in Orthodox Christianity to this day and of course as it is found in the *dhikr* of the Sufis, the *japa yoga* of the Hindus and *nembutsu* of the Buddhists that is his special concern. He has made reference to the central rôle of this mode of spiritual practice in the latter days of human history and its power to save those who invoke the Divine Name with faith, fervor and sincerity. He has also emphasized the indispensability of initiatic transmission, spiritual guidance and also the traditional moral and aesthetic cadre and ambience which alone enable the practice of the invocation of the Divine Name to be efficacious and without which such a practice becomes dangerous and at best without efficacy. Schuon writes about prayer as one in whom it is operative, as one whose being has been transformed by its grace. When he writes of the prayer of the saint and nature praying with him, he writes as one who has not simply read about or observed such a participation from afar. Some of the most moving pages on prayer written in this century are to be found in his works side by side with that penetrating metaphysical exposition which too often in the modern world has become divorced in the minds of people from the possibility of prayer and ritual practice as faith has become divorced from intelligence which is then seen as the progenitor of a knowledge according to the flesh and divorced from grace. In Schuon one discovers that theophanic prayer which both leads to the One and issues from the One in that Sacred Name wherein the Invoked, invocation and invoker are ultimately united.

Prayer of a quintessential order requires meditation and the control of the mind and is closely related to contemplation. Schuon has therefore also discussed both meditation and contemplation in many different contexts, showing what they are and what they are not and emphasizing their importance while criticizing all those peddlers of instant realization who seek to present Oriental methods of meditation and contemplation shorn of their traditional context and also of the protective presence of the “angelic” forces which guard the gates against the onslaught of the titans or *ásúras* in the traditional cosmos so as to provide protection for the hero who through meditation, contemplation and invocation seeks to journey beyond the cosmic crypt.

Not only different forms of Hindu and Buddhist techniques such as yoga are discussed with great mastery by Schuon, but he also

presents in his works a vast canvas upon which is depicted the various modes of spiritual realization and different types of spiritual temperaments. The major paths of knowledge, love and action added to different human types and spiritual temperaments cause the spiritual life to possess many modes and modalities which Schuon explains in worlds as far apart as the Hindu and the Christian, pointing to the necessity of the diversity of spiritual paths within an integral living tradition in order to be able to cater to the needs of all the different spiritual types living within its embrace.

Schuon is especially insistent in pointing out the different features and characteristics of the path of love and of knowledge. Since he speaks from the perspective of realized knowledge, one might think that he belittles the significance of the way of love. But in reading his works, especially such an essay as "Concerning the Love of God" in *Logic and Transcendence*, one realizes how deeply he has experienced such a love and how he is so keenly aware of its importance. What Schuon seeks to achieve is not to criticize the path of love or *bhakta* in itself. Rather, he wishes to answer the arguments presented by representatives of this way against those who follow the path of knowledge. Furthermore, he shows how the path of knowledge or *jñana*, when realized, and not just discussed cerebrally as is the case with the modern pseudo-Vedantists, in one way or another embraces the path of love, this being especially true of Sufism which is essentially a path of knowledge but almost always wed to the path of love. But even in Hinduism in the case of a Śankara, the supreme *jñani*, there are devotional hymns composed by him and expressing something of a *bhaktic* character. One can hardly over-emphasize the concern of Schuon for the reality and significance of the love of God and faith in Him especially since in the contemporary world only too often discussions of metaphysics are divorced from that love which according to Dante "moves the heavens and the stars".

Spiritual realization is inseparable from the attainment of spiritual virtues which man must acquire before he becomes worthy of being burned in the fire of Divine Unity. Schuon has devoted an extensive study to the spiritual virtues in his *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* and again in *Esoterism as Principle and as Way* in both of which he has projected a luminosity issuing from the world of the Spirit upon the whole domain of virtues thereby removing the opacity of sentimental virtue considered only in its moralistic sense and revealing its metaphysical basis. Far from opposing virtue to intel-

ligence, he has shown how the virtues are in fact inextricably related to intelligence and the principial knowledge which is attained through the intelligence. Reducing all the virtues to the three fundamental virtues of humility, charity and truthfulness, he has commenced with humility and shown why one must be humble not because of sentimentality but because before God we are nothing and He is everything while before the neighbor we possess some kind of limitation or infirmity which he does not have and which should cause us to have a sense of humility towards him. Yet, we should not disdain the truth in the name of humility by denying honor and pride, in the positive sense of the term, in the gifts that God has bestowed upon us. Most of all Schuon criticizes that kind of pietistic humility which denigrates the intelligence and ultimately commits a sin against the Holy Ghost. He likewise redefines charity, this most maligned of virtues in modern times, in the name of which so much transgression has been committed against religion itself, by returning to the ontological reality which makes of charity ultimately an expansion of our own being. Most of all he reminds modern man of that most forgotten saying of Christ, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and all else shall be added unto you," and discusses the futility and even demonic character of that type of charity which would put the love of the neighbor above the love of God and ultimately in its place leading to that idolatry of man's earthly life which characterizes the modern world. Finally, Schuon reveals how, on the basis of humility and charity, man can attain to the virtue of truthfulness which implies seeing things as they are and not through our subjective prejudices. The attainment of such a virtue thus leads to seeing things as God sees them and also realizing the Truth as such. It leads to the spiritual station of certitude after which man craves because of the very nature of his intelligence.

Schuon has summarized the stages of the spiritual life in a masterly and brilliant fashion in his *Stations of Wisdom* in the chapter which has given its name to the title of the book itself. Man participates in the truth passively and actively and on the three levels of action, love and knowledge. Hence there are six stations of wisdom. There is a passive station associated with action which is identified with inviolable purity and withdrawal from the vicissitudes and turmoils of the world. There is an active participation on this level which is spiritual action, combat and vigilance, the spiritual war against the laziness and sloth of the unrealized soul and its negli-

gence of the Divine through a slumber that it considers ordinary life. There is a passive station of love which is repose in the peace and beauty which characterizes the Divine Presence and collectedness and inwardness against the externality and fragmentation of the profane world. There is an active station of love where man participates with perfect confidence in the love of God which saves and consumes him. There is a passive station of knowledge in which man realizes that he is nothing and the transcendent One everything. It corresponds to what the Sufis call annihilation (*al-fanā'*). Finally there is the active station of knowledge in which man realizes that only in the Divine "I" can he utter "I" and that at the center of his self resides the Supreme Self. It corresponds to the Sufi station of subsistence in God (*al-baqā'*).

Through this remarkable synthesis Schuon points to the major stages of spiritual realization and through their numerous combinations depicts not only the different types of spirituality but also the dominating form of spirituality within each religion such as Christianity. The stations of wisdom are like a map of the spiritual universe and also the ladder with the help of which man climbs until he reaches that roof that stands above the world of separative existence and in the Divine Presence. He thereby fulfills his entelechy and the final end for which he was placed upon the earth.

## Eschatology

In speaking of man and his final end, Schuon has also written many essays on various questions of eschatology starting with his study of man's posthumous states in *L'Oeil du coeur*, continuing with essays on various eschatological problems and different modes and degrees of paradise in his *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy* and *Formes et substance dans les religions* and synthesizing his whole exposition in the final chapter of *Sur les traces de la religion pérenne*. In this difficult domain which even many of the traditional metaphysicians have passed over in silence, Schuon has delved into the complex nature of the intermediate states, the difference between the Abrahamic paradises which are permanent and certain Hindu paradises which are temporary, the apocatastasis in relation to the final consumption of all states of being including the infernal ones in the Divine Principle, the "freezing of the fires of hell" mentioned by Ibn 'Arabī

and many other issues of the greatest theological and also personal importance for those who have faith in the immortality of the soul. Schuon deals particularly in detail with the grades of paradise as described in Sufism and the paradisaical symbolism of the Quran which has been so often misconstrued in Western sources.

Against those pseudo-esoterists who belittle paradise as if they were a Sufi in union with God or a *jīvan-mukta*, Schuon emphasizes how precious is the paradisaical state and how difficult it is to enter paradise upon the moment of death. But as one for whom the imponderables of Divine Grace are more than just theory, he refuses to be overschematic in his eschatological discussions, casting his usual light upon these issues while reminding the reader that the Divine Grace can operate as God wills and that as the Bible states "with God all things are possible."

### Critic of the Modern World

The very first book of Schuon, *Leitgedanken zur Urbesinnung* contains some of the most relentless and scathing criticisms of the modern world to be found anywhere, a theme to which Schuon, like other expositors of the traditional perspective, has returned again and again. Both *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* and *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* treat this theme in its various dimensions while *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, in addition to contrasting the traditional worlds and the modern one, traces the stages of the fall of theomorphic man which the optical illusion resulting from the subversion of the Truth in the modern world has caused to appear as progress.

To speak of truth is also to be forced to face the question of the presence of error. Moreover, to defend the truth is ultimately the highest form of charity while to overlook error in the name of charity is to destroy the very foundation of charity and its spiritual significance. Schuon's criticism of the modern world does not result from a lack of charity as some of his sentimental critics have claimed. It results from the love for truth. One cannot love God without rejecting that which would deny Him. Schuon criticizes the modern world not because of a lack of concern for modern man but precisely because of its concern for only a limited aspect of man who is a being born for immortality but stifled by a civilization which is contrary to his real nature and ultimate end. In seeking to destroy the premises

upon which the modern world is based, Schuon seeks to save man from this world before it devours and destroys him.

Today, criticism of modern civilization based on the horrors of war, pollution of the environment, scarcity of food and natural resources and other obvious maladies has become common-place. One no longer has to be a seer to predict what is finally going to happen to a civilization based on disequilibrium not only vis-à-vis Heaven which it has long denied, but also because of this denial, with the earth itself for whose conquest modern man has sacrificed his spiritual heritage and in fact his own spirit. Current criticisms, however, usually deal with effects rather than causes. They observe the symptoms without being able to discover the deeply rooted causes of the illness. Usually lacking metaphysical knowledge of an integral nature, most critics cannot distinguish between partial truths embedded in a cadre of error and Truth as such.

For Schuon modern civilization which began in Europe during the Renaissance and which after destroying traditional Christian civilization has been spreading into other parts of the globe, is false not only in its results but in its very premises. It has created hospitals and roads to be sure, but whatever partial good it has achieved fails utterly to save or legitimize it because of the falsehood of its very foundations and dominating ideals. It is based on earthly man as an end in himself. It reduces man to his rational and animal aspects and denies the central role of the spiritual life and final end of man as determining the character and purpose of his earthly life. It has lost the vision of primordial and paradisaical human perfection which it places in some ambiguous future in time substituting the pseudo-dogma of evolution for the traditional doctrine of the descent of man and progress with its earthly paradise of the perfect human society in some future period for the gradual fall of man and his society taught by traditional doctrines. It cuts off the hands of God from nature and society even if belief in the Divinity continues among certain people and substitutes earthly and Promethean man as the Divinity on earth with ultimate rights over nature, society, and even religion. The result is that debilitating secularism which has led at once to the destruction of the inner man and the desecration of the natural environment.

Schuon does not of course identify the whole of the contemporary world with the modern one. There still survives something of the premodern and the traditional in the West which gave birth

to modernism and within the soul of Western man. Were this not the case, it would be futile either to criticize the modern world or present the traditional doctrines to that world. Therefore, the criticism of Schuon is not against the West as such for he defends the Western tradition whether it be in the domain of religion, art or literature in the strongest terms while criticizing in the most categorical terms the modern West.

Nor is Schuon the kind of sentimental admirer of the East who extols all that is Oriental without distinguishing between the authentic and living traditions of the East and their decadent forms not to speak of the subversion of some of these forms in modern times. If Schuon admires the East, it is because of its millennial traditional civilizations and the fact that despite the vicissitudes of time, the traditional life still survives to a greater extent there than in the West and also because the sapiential sources of religion are more available in the Oriental traditions. In Schuon's writings one can discover a new chapter in the dialogue between East and West, one which bases itself on the Truth as such rather than on geographical prejudices and which speaks, one might say, from the vantage point of that Blessed Olive Tree, to use the Quranic image, which is neither of the East nor of the West but whose light illuminates the whole cosmos.

The criticism of the modern world by Schuon involves at once philosophy, science, art, everyday life and even religion wherever modernism has succeeded in penetrating into its structure. While certain chapters of his books and some of the essays deal in their entirety directly with such types of criticism, an example being his "Letter on Existentialism," it is often amidst the discussion of other subjects that he opens up parentheses and presents some of his most profound and direct attacks upon various aspects of modernism. Remarkable examples of such cases can be found in *Understanding Islam* and *In the Tracks of Buddhism* while such works as *Logic and Transcendence* contain not only whole chapters on the refutation of such modern philosophical ideas as rationalism and relativism, but return to these themes in later chapters treating of theology and religion. One could in fact publish a book on Schuon's criticisms of the modern world composed of the parenthetical comments he has made in those writings which deal mainly with various metaphysical and religious subjects.

In the realm of philosophy Schuon attacks the whole of modern philosophy starting with Descartes who in reducing ontology to



epistemology and reality to the two substances of mind and extension prepared the stage for the impoverishment of philosophy in modern Europe. This “most intelligent manner of being unintelligent” prepared the ground for that agnosticism which characterizes Kant and which refuses to the intellect its innate power to know the essence of things in themselves, this refusal being the result of the confusion between intellect and reason. Likewise, Schuon criticizes those post-Kantian schools based on either rationalism or empiricism which cannot grasp the meaning of the intellect as source of knowledge and usually end up with one or another type of sensual empiricism. Schuon is even more relentless against the antirationalistic philosophies which follow Hegel and which result in various kinds of modern existentialism based on the total destruction of the functioning of the intellect and even its mental image, reason, and which in the attempt to go beyond Hegelian rationalism fall below it, preparing the way for that loss of the very coherence of thought which is a characteristic of much that passes for philosophy today.

As for science, Schuon’s criticism is not of what science has discovered but of what is claimed as scientific knowledge while being only hypothesis and conjecture and of what is left aside by modern science. Had this science been integrated into a higher form of knowledge, it could have been legitimate to the extent that it corresponds to some aspect of physical reality. But Schuon asks by what right a science can study the whole of creation abstracted from God and His Wisdom. Moreover, science is totally ignorant of other dimensions of reality, of the rhythms of the cosmos, of the qualitative nature of time, of the inward nexus of matter with the subtle states and many other cosmic realities. Yet, it generalizes its particular vision of a part of the Universe as if it were the knowledge of the whole supported by the prestige that results from its material and technological feats. The result of its generalized perspective is a cosmos in which the existence of man has no meaning, where both life and intelligence are added realities to be explained away by some kind of evolutionary process rather than fundamental realities constituting the very substance of the Universe.

There is no scientific idea that is criticized with more vehemence by Schuon than the theory of evolution which in fact does not play only the role of scientific theory but also a pseudo-religious dogma which is upheld by its scientific supporters with a kind of religious zeal rather than scientific detachment and is defended in such a way

that the very manner of its defense reveals how it has replaced religion for so many modern men. Schuon is especially critical of the intrusion of this pseudo-scientific dogma into the domain of religion itself in the writings of such figures as Śri Aurobindo and especially Teilhard de Chardin. He sees the spread of such types of modernistic theology as a very significant sign of our days for they bear witness to the penetration of the antitraditional forces into the very citadel of religion itself. If until modern times the forces of modernism secularized art, philosophy, science and the social patterns of life, they opposed religion from the outside and at least one knew where one stood. It has remained for the middle and end of this century to bear witness to the penetration of these forces into religion itself to subvert it from within, Christianity in fact not being the only religion confronted with such a phenomenon.

In criticizing the modern world Schuon clears the ground in order to make possible the presentation of the truth, for as the Quran states, "When Truth comes, error disappears." He has had to sweep the intellectual and religious ground clean and to break the idols of modernism in order to present that teaching which can rekindle the lamp of the spirit and provide the key for religion itself to defend its teachings from the array of forces before which the enfeebled army of modernized theology is helpless. Only tradition can provide the weapon necessary to carry out that vital battle for the preservation of the things of the spirit in a world which would completely devour man as a spiritual being if it could, and the verities of tradition cannot be made accessible save through that type of criticism of the modern world carried out by Schuon. This basic aspect of his writings must therefore be seen not only as a result of his concern for the truth but also his love and charity, in the profoundest sense of the term, towards man in his totality and all that makes him worthy of being loved and respected as God's vicegerent on earth, as the *imago Dei*.

### Who is Frithjof Schuon?

Considering the grandeur and depth of his metaphysical expositions and the fact that he is the premier living expositor of that *sophia perennis* which lies at the heart of all revelations, it might appear strange that so little is known about Schuon. But it is in his

character and also as a part of his intellectual and spiritual function to remain personally secluded, keeping at a distance from the sound and fury which characterize the lives of so many great and less than great men of this century. His works have caused echoes in East and West while he himself has refused to teach or lecture publicly in contrast to most of the well-known religious and spiritual teachers of this age.

Frithjof Schuon was born of German parents in Basle, Switzerland in 1907. His father was a musician and the household was one in which, in addition to music, other arts were prevalent, including the literature of the East as well as of Europe. Schuon lived in Basle and attended school in that city until the death of his father after which his Alsatian mother moved to Mulhouse, where Schuon was obliged to become a French citizen. Having received his earliest education in German, he was now exposed to a French education and hence gained perfect knowledge of both languages early in life. At the age of sixteen he left school to support himself as a textile designer, beginning his first steps in the field of art which he had always loved as a child but in which he never received formal training.

Also as a child, Schuon had been drawn to the Orient, to the lofty songs of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* which was his favorite work as well as to *The Thousand and One Nights*. He had also a natural propensity for metaphysics and read Plato even when he was of a tender age. While still in Mulhouse he discovered the works of René Guénon which only confirmed his intellectual intuitions and provided support for the metaphysical principles he had begun to discover.

Schuon journeyed to Paris after serving for a year and a half in the French army. In Paris not only did he work as a designer but also began his study of Arabic in the Paris mosque school. He was also exposed in a much greater degree than before to various forms of traditional art especially those of Asia which he had always loved even as a child. This period marked therefore on a more extensive scale than before both an intellectual and an artistic familiarity with the traditional world and was followed by Schuon's first visit to Algeria in 1932. North Africa was still witness to a more or less intact traditional pattern of life. This journey therefore marked Schuon's first actual experience of a traditional civilization and also his first immediate contact with the Islamic world, resulting in his gaining first-hand knowledge and intimacy with the Islamic tradition including Sufism some of whose greatest representatives such as Shaykh al-

'Alawi he encountered. In a second journey to North Africa in 1935, he was to visit not only Algeria but also Morocco, while in 1938 he journeyed to Cairo where he finally met Guénon with whom he had been corresponding for years.

In 1939 he stopped in Egypt again while on a journey to India, a land which he had always loved and whose spirituality had attracted him since his childhood days. Shortly upon his arrival in India, however, the Second World War broke out forcing him to return to France where he began to serve in the army. After several months, he was captured by the Germans and imprisoned. When he discovered that the Germans were planning to induct him into their army because of his Alsatian background, he fled to Switzerland where he settled and whose nationality he finally accepted.

For some forty years Switzerland became Schuon's home. Here in 1949 he married a German Swiss with a French education who, besides having interests in religion and metaphysics, is also a gifted painter. It was also here that he wrote most of his works and was visited by many well-known religious scholars and thinkers of East and West. Besides traveling from time to time to the majestic mountains of this land to breathe the fresh air of the morning of creation, he also journeyed occasionally to other countries. These voyages included regular visits to Morocco, and a visit in 1968 to Turkey where he spent some time at the House of the Holy Virgin in Kuşadası near Ephesus.

In 1959 and again in 1963, Schuon journeyed to America to visit some of the American Indian tribes for whom he had had a special love and affinity since childhood and some of whose members he had met before in Europe. He and Mrs. Schuon visited the Sioux and Crow reservations in South Dakota and Montana and were received into the Sioux tribe. The paintings of haunting beauty of the life of Indians as well as the exposition of their traditional teachings by Schuon attest to his particular relation with the spiritual universe of the American Indians, a relation which was especially fortified and extended during these journeys.

### **Schuon as Poet and Artist**

Schuon's concern with beauty is not only intellectual but also operative and practical in the sense that he not only writes about

art and beauty but has himself produced remarkable poems and paintings. In addition to the aesthetic quality which characterizes all of his writings, one finds among the published works of the author two collections of poetry in German entitled *Tage-und Nächtebuch* and *Sulamith* while he has also composed poems which have never been published. His poetry combines the romantic musicality of the best German lyrics with a kind of mystical profoundness and nostalgia.

One might expect the author of such major religious and metaphysical works to be also a poet but one would hardly expect him to be a painter. Rarely does genius in the veritable sense of the term manifest itself within a single human being in both metaphysics and the plastic arts. But for Schuon these domains complement each other. His sense of beauty is an occasion for the recollection of the profoundest metaphysical truths while his spiritual message shines through his artistic works which reflect the same qualities as his teachings, qualities of grandeur combined with a childlike innocence, beauty enhanced with the sense of the presence of the sacred.

Some of Schuon's paintings have been exhibited in this country in the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center and are now becoming gradually known, this fact being true especially of those paintings dealing with the Indians. To quote from the catalogue of this exhibition which was held in 1981, "Fundamentally, what he [Schuon] portrays are higher realities as lived through the medium of his own soul, and he does so by means of human portraits and scenes taken for the most part from the life of the Plains Indians. But he also has painted a number of pictures of the Virgin Mother, not in the style of Christian icons but in the form of the Biblical Shulamite or the Hindu *Shakti*." As for his style he combines the rules of traditional painting with certain techniques of Western art. To quote the catalogue again, "In short, he combines the positive features of Western art with the rigor and symbolism of the Egyptian wall painting or the Hindu miniature. Perhaps one could say that Schuon's work, as regards its technical aspects, lies somewhere between the Hindu miniature and expressionism, while at the same time being flavored with a certain influence from Japan." Through his art as through his writings Schuon portrays a message from the world of the Spirit clothed in forms of beauty which characterize that world and all that is concerned with the Truth.

## **The Language and Style of Schuon's Writings**

Schuon does not only write in order to transmit a message but also to teach contemporary man to think and carry out intellectual discourse once again without becoming imprisoned in either the limitations of reason or the knots of his own subjectivism. He wishes to create an intellectual world and to forge a language of thought wherein the traditional teachings regain their reality and vitality. Through a rhythm comprised of oscillation between analysis and synthesis, punctuated not only by the assertion of metaphysical principles but often by their repetition as the subject at hand demands, Schuon has created a pattern of thought in which intuitive grasp of the truth is combined with intellectual rigor and logical acumen. He resuscitates the traditional styles and methods of thought and intellection in a language which is contemporary and which he has created for this purpose. The role of the language used by him is therefore of great importance.

In his writings, Schuon has made full use of the geometric clarity of French but also has brought into his French style something of the genius of the German language, its archaic nature and architectonic structure. There is also present in this language of discourse something of the intuitive depth of Arabic, a Semitic language, combined with the speculative and didactic possibilities of the Indo-European languages, the genius of whose sages for metaphysical speculation Schuon has discussed often.

Making full use of the possibilities of the French and German languages and employing occasionally technical metaphysical terms of Sanskrit and Arabic origin, Schuon has produced a language and style which is almost miraculous in its ability to express metaphysical knowledge. His language and style are as unique in the contemporary world as is the content of his message.

The style of Schuon possesses what one commentator upon his works has called a spherical quality in the sense that the sphere contains the greatest volume for a given area. Schuon's style likewise contains the maximum amount of meaning for a given expression. His language, at once symbolic and dialectical, always possesses a dimension of depth and is not exhausted by its surface. His writings are difficult for those not prepared intellectually and also spiritual-

ly to receive them and in fact open their embrace only for those for whom they are meant. But whatever one does grasp of his works even if it be only a part of some page, is heavily laden with meaning. To understand even a passage is to understand a great deal. His language and style reflect in themselves the inner rapport between content and container which characterize all expressions of the Spirit and on the highest level those plenary expressions of the Logos, the prophets and *avatārs*, who are the founders of the traditions governing the human collectivity.

### The Influence of Schuon

Schuon's writings have caused profound echoes and also reactions among many outstanding figures of this past half century. T.S. Eliot wrote of Schuon's first book, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, "I have met with no more impressive work in the comparative study of Oriental and Occidental religion." A.K. Coomaraswamy considered him as one of the very few Westerners qualified to interpret the teachings of the East to the contemporary world. Huston Smith, who is one of the leading philosophers of religion in America today, writes of Schuon, "The man is a living wonder; intellectually *à propos* religion, equally in depth and breadth, the paragon of our time. I know of no living thinker who begins to rival him." Of his *Transcendent Unity of Religions*, Smith writes, "At once the most powerful statement of the grand, or better, primordial tradition to appear in modern times and a statement of that tradition that is original in incorporating what our age for the first time demands; that religion be treated in global terms."

Schuon's writings have attracted leading authorities in different religious traditions. Such Japanese masters as D.T. Suzuki, Chikao Ujijisawa, Kenji Ueda, Sohaku Ogata, Shin-ishi Hisamatsu and Shojun Bando have been in close contact with him. In India such revered authorities of Hinduism as Ananda Moyi Ma, the Maharshi, the Shankaracharya of Kanchi, Swami Ramdas, Hari Prasad Shastri, Ramaswami Aiyar, T.M.P. Mahadevan, K.V. Rangaswami Aiyangar, R. Raghavan and A.K. Saran have appreciated highly his exposition of Hinduism. In the Islamic world his writings on Islam and Sufism have been much praised and his *Understanding Islam* which is so widely known in that world exists in Arabic and is even taught

in many places. His works have been acclaimed and have influenced many Muslim scholars and authorities including the late Shaykh ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Mahmūd, the former rector of Al-Azhar, Uthman Yahya, A.K. Brohi, Muhammed Ajmal, Yusuf Ibish, and others.

In the Jewish world, the most lucid contemporary work on the Kabbala, by L. Schaya, is deeply indebted to Schuon. As for Christianity, some of the most notable figures of Christian theology, such as Jean Daniélou and Henri de Lubac, have been interested in Schuon’s works. Thomas Merton had become deeply attracted to the writings of Schuon through Marco Pallis, the friend of Schuon with whom Merton corresponded regularly during the years preceding his death. Such traditional Catholic writers as Bernard Kelly, Jean Borela and Elémire Zolla have also highly appreciated his works.

The influence of the works of Schuon among scholars in both East and West is too extensive to record here. Suffice it to say that besides such figures as Titus Burckhardt, Martin Lings, Marco Pallis, Jean-Louis Michon, Victor Danner, Joseph E. Brown, William Stoddart, Lord Northbourne, Gai Eaton, W.N. Perry and Jean Canteins, who have been personally connected with the intellectual universe of Schuon over the years, such well-known scholars as H. Corbin, G. Durand, H. Smith, E.F. Schumacher, J. Needleman and many others have drawn deeply from his writings. J. Needleman has in fact edited a volume, *The Sword of Gnosis* (published by Penguin books), which is centered around the writings of Schuon and a group of scholars closely associated with his thought and works. There are also numerous scholars in whose writings one can detect the presence of Schuon’s teachings without formal reference to his name and of course many who are not writers but whose thought patterns and even lives have been entirely remolded and transformed as a result of exposure to his books and articles. Schuon’s influence, therefore, is much more extensive than external signs would reveal. He is a sun whose rays are not only directly manifested through his writings but which also shines upon the night of this world in spiritual eclipse through the reflected light of many a moon.

### **The Message of Schuon**

If we were asked what are the main characteristics of Schuon’s works, we would say that while from one point of view they possess



essentiality, universality and comprehensiveness, from another they possess three spiritual characteristics which complement those already mentioned, these three being inwardness, the light of intelligence or a *scientia sacra* which penetrates into all things and the awareness of the sacred in the realm of the multiplicity of forms. Schuon's writings possess a dimension of interiority and inwardness that characterizes whatever he discusses whether it be an idea, a virtue or a form. His perspective has a penetrating quality like the rays of the sun, as if the cosmic intelligence itself were shining upon the manifold order. Finally, Schuon casts his vision upon the world of diverse religious and artistic forms, upon the world of man and virgin nature and reveals within them a spiritual and sacred quality which issues from the realization of the exalted state of seeing God everywhere and from the spiritual perspective based on the sacralization of the domain of multiplicity with the view of integrating it into the One. May the pages which follow and which have been chosen carefully from the vast corpus of his rich writings present, within the space allotted, the main aspects of his teachings as well as his intellectual style and manner of discourse. Above all may they aid the reader in discovering both the many facets of his work and his crucial message to the modern world and open a door into the religious and intellectual universe of one of the most remarkable spiritual figures of the contemporary period.

### **An Annotated Description of the Writings of Frithjof Schuon**

Over the span of half a century, Schuon has composed a remarkable number of articles and books written mostly in French but also some in German and translated over the years into several languages especially English.<sup>1</sup> It must be emphasized, however, that the definitive presentation of the teachings of Schuon are to be found in his French books into which he has incorporated many of the essays written earlier in article form.<sup>2</sup> It must be pointed out also that not all the books have been composed in this manner, some having been written in their entirety solely in book form first. It is therefore particularly important to mention a few words about each of these books. A detailed discussion of all his writings would require a separate study.

*De l'Unité transcendente des religions*

The first major, doctrinal work of the author in which he sets out for the first time his method and approach to the study of religions, discussing the meaning of exoterism and esoterism and their relation especially within the Abrahamic family. There are also important sections devoted to traditional art, the particular nature of the Christian tradition and quintessential prayer.

*L'Oeil du coeur*

This work consists of three sections dealing with metaphysics and cosmology, forms of the Spirit and spiritual life. In the first section the author commences with the symbolism of the eye of the heart, which has given its name to the book, in order to discuss principal knowledge and the nature of knowledge as such, then turning to an extensive discussion of Islamic cosmology based on the symbolism of light (*al-nūr*), then to the Buddhist *nirvāna* and the posthumous states of man.

The second section deals with various themes drawn from different traditions in a comparative setting but including also studies devoted to a specific tradition such as those on the Buddhist *koan* and the Islamic ternary of *īmān*, *islām*, *ihsān*. The final section treats the various modes of spiritual realization, prayers, purification, sacrifice, meditation and other elements of the spiritual life.

*Perspectives spirituelles et faits humains*

The second book of the author to be written mostly in the form of aphorisms and short comments (following the German *Leitgedanken*), this work represents a series of meditations upon tradition and modern civilization, art, the spiritual life, metaphysics and the virtues. Of special importance in this volume is Schuon's extensive discussion of the spiritual virtues as well as a masterly comparison between the perspectives of Sufism and the Vedānta.

*Sentiers de gnose*

Again consisting of three parts, the first section, entitled "Controversies", deals with specifically religious questions such as the sense of the Absolute within religions, the diversity of revelation, the question of "natural mysticism," and the different types of spiritual temperament. It also includes a metaphysical discussion of the doctrine

of illusion. The second section entitled “Gnosis” discusses both the means of attaining gnosis and the nature of what is attained including a chapter on “Seeing God Everywhere.” The final section entitled “Christianity” contains perhaps the most important synthesis of the views of the author concerning the Christian tradition.

*Castes et races*

This short work contains the author’s most important study of human society based on the two concepts of caste and race which are applied in the traditional context while modern misconceptions of them are discussed and refuted. The work also contains an extensive essay on the “Principles and Criteria of Universal Art” which is one of Schuon’s most important studies on art.

*Les stations de la sagesse*

One of the author’s major works on religion itself, the work deals in six chapters with the relation of orthodoxy to intellectuality, the nature of faith and arguments for its defense, the various manifestations of the Divine Principle, the notion of charity with all the complexity it possesses and the misunderstandings which have grown around it in the modern world, prayer and finally the “stations of wisdom” which recapitulate and summarize the stages of the spiritual life.

*Images de l’Esprit*

Starting with a key essay on the “symbolist spirit” which characterizes traditional man, the author turns in three sections to the study of Shintoism, Buddhism and Yoga, the latter considered both as a technique and in relation to the question of operative grace and regularity of transmission.

*Comprendre l’Islam*

The author’s most important work on Islam and among the books written by a Westerner on Islam the one most universally accepted by Muslims. This most widely read of Schuon’s works deals in four chapters entitled, “Islam,” “The Quran,” “the Prophet,” and “the Way” with the major dimensions of the Islamic tradition including Sufism. This book also seeks to answer many of the questions Christians have posed concerning Islam.

*Regards sur les mondes anciens*

In a sense an appraisal of the history of man seen from the traditional point of view, the work casts metaphysical light upon the ancient civilizations and their significance and traces the gradual fall of man to the modern period and the revolt of European man against the Christian tradition. It also deals with the crucial debate between Hellenists and Christians, the Shamanic character of North American Indian religions and the significance of monasticism. It concludes with the essay "*Religio Perennis*" which summarizes what lies at the heart of all religions and which may be considered to be the essence of religion as such.

*Logique et transcendance*

This long work is Schuon's most important philosophical opus in the sense of containing long chapters devoted to specifically philosophical questions such as relativism, the notion of concrete and abstract and rationalism. But the book also contains some of his most succinct theological discussions concerning both Christian and Islamic theology. The last part of the book turns again to diverse questions of the spiritual life including a discussion of the function of the spiritual master and concludes with a study of man and certitude.

*Forme et substance dans les religions*

This is the second work of Schuon (following *The Transcendent Unity*) which is devoted primarily to comparative religion. Beginning with two essays on the distinction between truth and presence and form and substance in religions, the author then turns to several major metaphysical studies of the most subtle nature concerning the distinction between *Ātma* and *māyā* and subject and object. He then devotes several studies to specifically Islamic themes including the Islamic understanding of Christ and Mary and two essays on Buddhism. The work concludes with another set of chapters which treat some of the most difficult theological and religious problems such as the question of theodicy, difficulties in sacred texts, paradoxes of spiritual expression, the effect of the human margin in revelation and certain eschatological issues.

*L'Esotérisme comme principe et comme voie*

This work is one of the major syntheses of Schuon in that it recapitulates his teachings on the meaning of esoterism, on the moral and spiritual life and on art and sacred forms concluding with two condensed studies on Sufism. The section on the moral and spiritual life is especially extensive containing nine chapters which treat of the most important questions and problems of the moral and spiritual life considered in a practical and operative manner.

*Le soufisme, voile et quintessence*

This unique work on Sufism commences with the elipses and hyperboles which characterize the Arabic language and which color the formal expression of Sufism in that language. Then the author discusses how elements of exoterism have penetrated into the domain of Sufism itself causing certain formulations and statements difficult to understand. To this symbiosis he contrasts quintessential Sufism based on the supreme doctrine of Unity whose hypostatic dimensions he examines in a final chapter. This book also contains Schuon's most important discussion of the meaning of the notion of philosophy.

*Du divin à l'humain*

This synthesis of the whole metaphysical message of Schuon, summarizes in three sections his teachings concerning epistemology, metaphysics and the science of man. Beginning with the discussion of the human subjectivity, consciousness and intelligence, he turns in the second section to present the most succinct and complete study he has ever made on the nature of the Divine Principle, the hypostases, principial possibility and the conditions of existence. Finally he turns to man to discuss what it means to have a spiritual anthropology, the message of the human body, man's sense of the sacred and the question of accepting or refusing God's message.

*Christianisme / Islam — Visions d'œcuménisme ésotérique*

This work brings to its peak the author's comparative studies of Christianity and Islam and demonstrates what ecumenism can be if taken seriously. The first part devoted to Christianity discusses certain liturgical, ritual and theological questions as well as the significance of evangelism within the Christian tradition. The second

part contains two very basic comparative studies in succession on the Semitic monotheisms and divergent moralities of Christianity and Islam. The last and longest part contains several studies on Islam including the dilemmas of Islamic theology and such problems as atomism and the Divine Will.

*Sur les traces de la religion pérenne*

One of the last works to have appeared so far from the pen of Schuon is another synthesis, mostly of his views on religion; but since his point of view is that of the *sophia perennis*, it is also a work of a highly metaphysical nature. In seven chapters the author deals again with the question of epistemology and the dimensions and degrees of the Divine Order. Then he deals with more specifically religious questions such as confessional speculation, the problems engendered by the language of faith, religious typology and certain enigmas present within Sufism. It concludes with a synthesis of eschatological teachings which he calls "universal eschatology".

*Approches du phénomène religieux*

Schuon's latest opus is once again concerned with the central issues of religion. In the first section of this work he deals with general traits of religions including certain complexities of religious language found in various revelations, the problem of exoterism, the question of evil and the meaning of eternity. The next two sections turn again to Christianity and Islam discussing some of the most difficult aspects of the theology of the two religions and ending with one of the most important essays of the author on Islamic esoterism dealing with the mystery of the spiritual substance of the Prophet and its significance in Sufism.

Besides these works in French, there are the following English books of Schuon which do not have a French original in the form in which they have been published but which must nevertheless be briefly mentioned here:

*Language of the Self*

A special arrangement of some of the essays of Schuon collected particularly with the view of the Indian audience for which it was prepared, the book having been printed in India and dedicated to the Shankara charya of Kanchipuram.

*In the Tracks of Buddhism*

A collection of Schuon's major studies on Buddhism to which his study of Shintoism has been added.

*Dimensions of Islam*

A collection of a number of Schuon's most metaphysical and esoteric works on Islam embracing the fields of metaphysics, cosmology and commentaries upon the Quran and *Hadīth*.

*Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*

Another collection of essays on various Islamic themes dealing with metaphysical, theological and eschatological questions.

The four works in English mentioned above were all assembled with permission and under the supervision of the author, the first two being prepared with the Indian and Buddhist worlds specifically in view, while the last two are more "*pièces d'occasion*", prepared on particular occasions to make the author's works on Islamic subjects, especially certain articles which were not readily accessible, more easily available to the English speaking audience.

We must mention here also a German book written by Schuon in his youth and which has never been translated into any other language:

*Leitgedanken zur Urbesinnung*

A series of meditations on the nature of things, on God and man, on tradition and the modern world written mostly in the form of aphorisms and sayings in a very pure and traditional German which reminds us of Meister Eckhart's and Boehme's style. This work consists of four books written partly in Europe and partly in Algeria, the last book having been dedicated to the celebrated Algerian Sufi Shaykh al-'Alawī.

## NOTES

### **An Annotated Description of the Writings of Frithjof Schuon**

1. The English translations of the works of Schuon have been carried out by a group of men who are themselves accomplished scholars, devoted to his writings, completely familiar with his language and teachings and themselves masters of both English and French. The English works are therefore in a sense an extension of the French texts and possess an authenticity and literary quality rarely found in a body of translation of works of such a nature.
2. See the appendix to this volume for a list of his books and their translators.

The text above is the “Introduction,”  
written by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, to the book  
*The Essential Frithjof Schuon*,  
edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr,  
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