

Frithjof Schuon on the Spiritual Life

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When this book came to us for review we accepted it almost reflexively and without sufficiently considering the enormity of the task, because for us to review Frithjof Schuon would be like holding a candle to the sun. We shall not attempt a conventional review, therefore; our approach will be more tangential, using this Schuon anthology as reference for a few remarks that may make points that relate to those which Schuon makes. But we begin by simply calling attention to the publication of this extraordinary volume as well as by some observations on the ambience in which it appears, commenting briefly on the setting both in time and in its “qualitative locale”; and we shall make some remarks which bear upon the body of Schuon’s work as well as the works of René Guénon and Ananda Coomaraswamy. These three would have to figure very prominently in any unbiased intellectual history of the later modern world, for several reasons: they delivered a searing and irrefutable criticism of the deviation that, precisely, constitutes modernity; they showed not only that intelligence is by no means the sole prerogative of the natural sciences as some anti-traditional rhetoric would have it, but that naturalism itself is fundamentally flawed and even contradictory; and they reintroduced to the modern world the supremacy of genuine Intellectuality/Spirituality as well as the doctrine of non-dualism and its corollary, metaphysical realization. These ideas have been central to all of mankind’s great and enduring civilizations — *mutatis mutandis*, for the color of the water is the color of the receptacle as Ibn al-Arabi noted.

In particular we shall call attention to Schuon’s specific teaching on the doctrine of non-dualism, for it seems to us that this doctrine is the

attraction which westerners perceive in oriental doctrines, usually no doubt "through a glass darkly"; it is nevertheless a valid attraction because it offers glimmers, as part of the human patrimony, of teachings which are implicit if well-hidden in the orthodox forms of Christianity but which have come to be discountenanced and denied by Christianity at large – again a function of modernity. Some notion of the Absolute-Infinite and non-dualism are innate in man or at least in some men of each generation, even as there must be a few *jivan muktas* in each generation for so long as humanity endures. A personal anecdote may serve as an example of the seemingly fortuitous way in which this doctrine may spread in the conditions of the modern world. During a youthful *wanderjahre* we were traveling through the Atacama desert in northern Chile and at Antofagasta we met a Chilean Indian, a seeker, who asked us what we knew about the Hindu doctrine of Brahman. Our answer, unfortunately, had to be: "nothing". Soon afterwards back in the States we took a temporary job in a telephone "boiler room", and once again the subject of "Brahman" came up when one of our coworkers asked what we knew about the "theory of Brahman". These two incidents were our introduction to the most profound idea which the human mind can entertain, an idea that has been developing with us ever since, over many decades. In Edmund Spenser's words:

Like as a ship, that through the ocean wide
Directs her course unto one certain coast,
It met of many a counter wind and tide,
With which her wingéd speed is let and crossed,
Yet making many a borde and many a bay,
Still winneth way, nor hath her compass lost;
Right so it fares with me in this long way,
Whose course is often stayed, yet never is astray.

Towards the end of this essay we shall briefly compare exoteric with esoteric conceptions of man's final end; and we shall conclude with a few citations from Schuon's book which will help round out this rough schema of what from one side is man's Return to his Principle; while from the other, it is the release of the One from the bondage of creation/manifestation. Treatment of the outward Procession, that is, man's creation (or manifestation), is also to be found *passim* in Schuon's works; but the Procession is necessarily assumed to be behind us when man is

considered in his present distressed condition and when his chief concern must be the Return. As to readers themselves, let us say that we are not "preaching to the choir", so much as addressing especially those from Christian or secular backgrounds who may be neophytes in traditional studies and for whom some additional orientation may be welcome.

The anthologist of the present volume, Professor James S. Cutsinger, is the leading academic authority on Frithjof Schuon. Obviously he knows the Schuon *oeuvre* thoroughly and he has chosen the passages in this anthology wisely and well. Like the feathers of a bird's wing, their "fit" serves a single overarching purpose. It is a given, of course, that Schuon's vocation was to communicate; what is remarkable is that this sustained purpose is evident throughout his published writing which, however, was itself mostly *ad hoc* in execution. This fact is itself silent evidence of the inspired character of his published work which, along with that of Coomaraswamy and Guénon, testifies to a beneficent Providence which has not left itself without witness even in these terminal "dregs of time". Another indicator of the quality of the writing of Coomaraswamy, Guénon, and especially Schuon, is its innascible character. The Arabic proverb, "He who knows ten, let him teach nine", is indirectly applicable here; the best part in the writing of these three men remains unsaid. As for Schuon, on the evidence of his published work one cannot deny that he knew "the language of the birds", which is to say that intellectually he functioned from the level of the transpersonal or angelic Intellect; or, in Christian terms, that he wrote with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Does this mean that Schuon was infallible in his every utterance? This is not our claim; for all we know, Schuon's inspiration, like his writing, was also *ad hoc*. Our concern here is to call attention to the responsibility deriving from the fact that discrimination and discernment are innate in human intelligence; both are givens and are a part of what it means to be human. Man is responsible for the proper use of all his talents, physical, mental, or intellectual, including the judgments he makes and the reception he gives to matters of substance that come before him. If someone is perceived to speak with intrinsic authority, it must be recognized that such authority can only be that of Truth itself for it cannot be the possession of an individual. Ironically, the branches of the Christian tradition which have embodied the most authoritarian structures — we refer spe-

cifically to Roman Catholicism and in a lesser degree to Orthodoxy — also enshrine Christ's implicit counsel to his apostles to use their faculties of discernment when he asked: "What think ye of Christ?" (*Matthew* xxii, 42). In any event we believe that the primary agency in the mature work of Coomaraswamy, Guénon, and Schuon, was Providential in character and that the three were *apostles*, sent to us whose "cosmic moment" falls in these last times, in order to reawaken intellectually and spiritually some few in the modern world and help them find that "pearl of great price" that has been forgotten or lost.

We have happily read this book from cover to cover, including the hitherto unpublished material in the Appendix, and have found nothing that seems incompatible with heavenly inspiration or with orthodox Christian doctrine, if this latter is not understood in the narrowest literal sense. Indeed, there is much in this volume that sheds precious light on Christianity itself. Nevertheless we bear in mind Schuon's advisory that the esoterist rises above doctrinal limitations not by shattering them from without, but by transcending them from within.

Mention of understanding Christian doctrine brings to mind Schuon's statement to the effect that monotheism, whether Hebrew, Christian, or Islamic, cannot as such admit the doctrine of the Supreme Identity. As this issue touches on the implicit purpose of this book and on Schuon's writing in general, we cite the full passage (p 81):

In Monotheism religious dogmatism excludes non-dualistic formulations of union; no formulation can go against dogma, which is of necessity dualistic. Now this dualism, like that of the Vishnuites moreover, says that human nature is human nature and the divine Nature is the divine Nature, and nothing else. From the point of view of dogmatic language, non-dual union belongs to the inexpressible; it is as though, being unable to say that a plant is green, one said that at the same time it was yellow and blue, and neither one nor the other. Created nature assuredly remains what it is: no one had ever maintained that the created as such is transformed into the Uncreated.

This must not be understood as implying that monotheists are invariably in an inferior position vis-à-vis the greater spiritual possibilities which pertain to man *qua* man; nor that Jews, Christians, and Muslims are somehow prohibited from entering fully into the Kingdom of God (which ultimately is God himself). Jews have the Kabbalah and Muslims have Sufism, both being institutional expressions of their respective esoterisms which, at their highest echelons, are non-dualist. The issue, then, is

essentially a Christian matter; but Christianity was itself esoteric in its inception and still is in its orthodox forms, though the understanding of these forms has become exoteric – no doubt Providentially. A non-dualist perspective, therefore, is not intrinsically alien to Christianity even if, as Schuon says, it must be denied conditionally for the sake of dogmatic integrity and for the immediate good of the greater number. Among known Christians, St. Dionysius the Areopagite, John Scotus Eriugena, Meister Eckhart, Dante Alighieri, Angelus Silesius, among others, testify to the perennial appeal of non-dualism. Our initial task, then, is determined in part by the nature of these end times in which is prepared the return of all the world’s positive elements to their Alpha and Omega. The task is one of the recovery of lost or forgotten doctrine, of finding its proper setting within a Christian ambience, of penetrating dogma intellectually, of making the necessary accommodations and adjustments in a vertical sense; and, needless to say, of applying these findings within our lives. Incidentally, there is strong evidence that in medieval Latin Christianity the exoteric authorities recognized a certain place for esoterism. Eastern Christianity, deeply apophatic, has always been reluctant to define things too narrowly and has been more disposed to grant the inexpressible all its rights. Paradoxically, however, Latin Christianity has been more speculative (in the etymological sense) than the Christian East. If today Christians seem to have fewer possibilities for spiritual realization the want is not only in a lack of qualifications on the part of Christians themselves but also in the conditions in which we live, conditions which reflect our own chosen orientations and interior life. Life in the modern world, the manner of life we have collectively chosen and continue to choose, is deeply shaped by our passionate nature into which we have descended in the name of a false “freedom”, by an extroversion that has become our “second nature”, a view of the world and of human goals that has largely rejected the interior life, and an unending restlessness that is inimical to pursuit of the “one thing needful”. Yet it must not be overlooked that there are “qualitative determinations” of time and place which are not invariably the responsibility of this or that individual, though the individual inevitably inherits them, and to which the gifted individual may not be entirely subject. If no one could escape the dire conditions that afflict men of the *kaliyuga*, there would be no point in the somewhat covert (covert because it cannot be preached from the pulpit) re-

introduction of esoterism into the modern world. In any case, no tradition is complete without offering in a manner appropriate to itself the full spectrum of spiritual possibilities. It is thus that we see the Divine Mercy at work in the achievements of Coomaraswamy, Guénon, and Schuon, each of them charged with the mission of reintroducing to the modern West essential elements of full traditional doctrine; and, with Schuon especially, the means of spiritual realization — *esoterism* in a word.

Doctrine or *theoria* (from a root meaning “to see”, “to behold”) obviously constitutes the intellectual aspect of a tradition and it is mentioned here because René Guénon noted that the essentials of spiritual realization are adequate theory and concentration. Schuon’s statement of the same principle, matching Hindu *apothegmata*, was that one must distinguish between the Real and the unreal and concentrate upon the Real, implying the necessity of adequate theory. It was Schuon’s task to offer both theory and certain essential means of realization, chiefly invocatory prayer – whence this book.

Schuon cites Eckhart’s statement that *aliquid est in anima quod increatum et increabile, et hoc est intellectus* (there is something in the soul which is uncreated and uncreatable, and this is the Intellect). And he says that Eckhart could easily retract this dictum because, unless understood elliptically, it is obviously erroneous as stating immanentism. He goes on to say that the statement “in reality implicitly affirms the created intellect as the vehicle of the uncreated Intellect, but it does not put this into words since spiritual vision is ‘vertical’ and ‘essential’, not ‘horizontal’ and ‘analogical’” (p 82). Further,

The *essential* [italics added] identity of manifested intelligence and principal Intelligence is necessary and metaphysically clear because the microcosmic subject cannot be of another essence than the absolute Subject, the Subject as such, the Self. There is only one single Subject; the rest is blindness....The monotheistic religions are objective perspectives; now it is not possible to set forth directly in ‘objective’ terms the ‘subjective’ truth of the essential identity between the objectivized subject and the pure Subject; the extinction of the microcosmic subject in the metacosmic Object is not strictly speaking a formula of identity, although the reality thus expressed is the same (pp 82, 83).

Schuon’s remarks provide insights of great *theoretical* importance about our own nature and its parameters, about human consciousness, its origin and its virtually infinite scope – infinite not in its specifically hu-

man made to be sure, but in its roots in the formless and Uncreated orders. “The rest is blindness”, Schuon writes, because every descending degree of creation/manifestation, from the highest angel to the least microscopic organism, marks a diminution of the Light of the Logos, the Divine Intellect that is the one “true light that enlightens every man coming into the world”, and not only every man but also every conscious being. There is “one Conscious in all consciousness”, one eternal Witness of everything that passes through creation. The recognition of this *essential* kinship of human intelligence (or better, Intelligence in man) with principal Intelligence is obviously latent and quiescent in most men; in others, however, it is in various degrees of awakening, and if we are so fortunate as to be among the latter, we must nourish and tend to this awakening. St Gregory Palamas wrote: “It is because the Intellect is pre-eminent among our inner powers that our soul is deiform” (“On Prayer and Purity of Heart, in the *Pbilokalia*). In his commentary on the *Brahmasutra*, Shankara said that “The nature of consciousness is indivisible, but those who see only dimly distinguish as if separately something perceived, the perceiver, and the perception”.

If there is to be a world there must be movement away from the Principle, and this entails forgetfulness and a fall. The *Upanishads* tell us that “the Self-subsistent pierced the openings of the senses outwards; therefore a man looks outwards and not within himself”. In our discrete existence we are distant from the Divine, but the Divine remains near us, “nearer to us than we are to ourselves”, with an immediacy that is the very condition of our existence. “Closer than breathing, nearer than hands and feet”, He is the direct Agent not only of our existence from moment to moment but even in the very functioning of our faculties. Our task, then, is to become what we essentially *are*, which means “un-becoming” what we seem to be. Nothing created “becomes divine”; we are already liberated, but do not know it. But to repeat, *aliquid est in anima quod increatus et increabile*; the created must “unbecome”, “going back the way it came”. The ways and means for this Return are to be found in the orthodox traditions of mankind; it cannot be effected through our own designs or by isolated efforts, though a synergy of Divine grace and personal effort is necessary, always remembering that this synergy that must be deployed by us in ways congruent with the orthodox tradition to which we are called.

Schuon magisterially sums up the profound doctrine of the Self in Chapter 10, "The Servant and Union", the most articulate and highly concentrated exposition from a western writer known to us of non-dual union. The chapter has appeared in other books of Schuon but appropriately it is reproduced in full in the present work. We believe the reader could not find a more succinct and lucid exposition of the essentials of non-dual doctrine.

At this point let us examine what is understood by salvation in exoteric Christian conceptions, for it will be seen that the classic exoteric notion of man's finality differs vastly — infinitely so, one might almost say — from esoteric conceptions. Bear in mind, however that, as Schuon wrote, the individual as such can have no motive for going beyond the perfect happiness inherent in achieved salvation. Nevertheless, "many are called, but few are chosen" (*Mt* xx, 16); if man can look beyond paradisaic bliss this is not as a human individual but because *aliquid est in anima quod increatus et increabile*. In St. Thomas Aquinas' teaching and for western theology generally, man's final state remains within the individual order which in the exoteric perspective is a finality notwithstanding that within this perspective the cycle of Procession and Return remains incomplete. Salvation understood exoterically is prolonged life in some extension of the human state. Liberation, on the contrary, implies an effective ontological identification with the ultimate Subject of all human beings, who is also the ultimate Subject of all creatures, of all the worlds, of all creation. Even within exoteric dogma, however, there are ambiguities; for example St. Thomas (who often seems to know much more than he says) mentions, though without elaboration, that certain men even in this life may be raised to the ranks of the highest angels, implying passage beyond form.

There are differences, too, between classic Catholic and Orthodox conceptions. Deeply concerned to deny any existential continuity between the Divine and the human, the Catholic view is that man's final end is indeed to behold God in the beatific vision. But in Catholic conceptions this contemplation is conceived as the entelechy of the individual even though the official position — up to Vatican II, at least — was that man must receive the *lumen gloriae* or Light of Glory, itself a created grace, in order to actualize this vision. In any event, in official Catholic theology there is no question of a passage beyond individuality or be-

yond the dualism intrinsic to the formal order. Though most Orthodox would agree with much of this, the issue does not admit of too precise comparison. Not only do the Orthodox eschew too fine definitions but they also avoid the tendency to systemization, and within their defined parameters one may find some range of views. Generally in Orthodox doctrine, *theosis* (deification) is understood as meaning that man, or something in man, is divinized in a real ontological participation in the Divine energies and attributes but without the loss of personal identity (which immediately suggests the question: “Who, then, am I?”). St. Gregory Palamas writes (*Triads* 3, I, 34) that “the deifying gift of the Spirit is not the superessential *ousia* of God but the deifying activity ($\mu\frac{1}{2}\mu\acute{\alpha}\mu^1\pm$) [that is, the Divine Energies, the Logos].” We may note, in passing, that in Orthodox teaching the “superessential *ousia*” of God is imparticipable (consonant with all traditional teaching). As the Upanishads ask: “by what knowledge would one know the ultimate Knower?” And here we cite the words of Christ Logos: “No one cometh to the Father but by me” (*John* xiv, 6). Following St. Gregory certain Orthodox monastic circles accept that the hesychast way potentially realizes the unity of all mankind and even of all Nature, and that this same realization envisages a passage beyond the formal order, that is, beyond the limitations of individuality though not beyond *personality*. Again, who or what is the Person, who am I? If one accepts these Palamite and hesychast views as legitimate, this would seem to bring Orthodox positions nearer esoterism. In certain respects it does indeed seem that Orthodox positions are more nearly esoteric than are the positions of official Catholic theology; but we need to remember that esoterism itself can be compared to a sliding scale and that certain exoteric conceptions may be effectively esoteric for the profane. However that may be, one cannot say that, globally, Orthodoxy is esoteric. From the exterior evidence, it may be said that the realization Orthodoxy offers is incomplete. We have seen, nevertheless, that in the Orthodox view *theosis* means ontological participation in the Divine Energies, that is to say, in the Logos or Divine Intellect. “I and my Father are One” (*John* x, 30). Let us recall, too, that all men are one man in Adam; and in St. Augustine’s words, all men are one man in Christ. For the rest, it is enough to refer to Schuon’s characterization: exoterism reflects the interests and ingrained biases of the human being in his individual condition. Orthodoxy falls within this characterization. On the other hand,

esoterism views things as they are and this is its perennial appeal and strength. Man as an intelligent being desires to know. To know what? All there is to be known, but first and foremost and in virtue of the *aliquid in anima quod increatus et increabile* he desires to know himself, his most profound personal identity which is identity with his Principle. Only esoterism can respond in more than a schematic way to these concerns and, moreover, provide the contingent means for their full realization. In stating "No man cometh to the Father but by me", Christ, while citing his own essential and irreplaceable rôle, also implies that coming to the Father is man's final end.

Ending these remarks we present a few additional citations, pivotal in character, which may round out this summary of the Goal of the *sophia perennis*:

The normal content of the intelligence – that for which it is made – is the Absolute-Infinite; in a word, man is intelligence at once integral and transcendent, 'horizontal' and 'vertical', and the essential content of this intelligence is at the same time our deliverance: man is delivered by consciousness of the Absolute, his salvation being the remembrance of God....we are condemned to the Infinite (p. 70).

The fundamental deviation of modernity could hardly be set in bolder contrast than by comparing contemporary "civilization" with this statement of the human norm. Modernity is the denial of this norm and thus the denial of humanity. The recognition of this deviation for what it is can tell us much about the nature of our times.

Happiness is religion and character, faith and virtue. It is a fact that man cannot find happiness within his own limits; his very nature condemns him to surpass himself, and in surpassing himself to free himself.... To know oneself is to remember That which is (p. 93).

Again, this impeccable statement is the antithesis of modern perspectives which, in effect, bid man indulge himself, to make of this life a bed rather than a vessel.

... Spirituality stands in a sense between metaphysical truth and human virtue, or rather it has an absolute need of these two, though it can be reduced to neither (p. 95).

The presence in our mind of metaphysical truth is by itself inoperative as far as our final ends are concerned (p. 95)... If metaphysics is sacred, this means that it cannot be presented as though it were only a profane philosophy sufficient unto itself, that is, not surpassing the

sphere of mental operations. It is illogical and dangerous to talk of metaphysics without concerning oneself with the moral concomitants, the criteria of which are, for man, his behavior in relation to God and his neighbor (p. 97). Metaphysical knowledge is sacred. It is the property of sacred things to require of man all that he is (p. 250).

Virtue is ‘moral’ – and therefore volitive – ‘truth’; it concerns not only action but the whole of life. The center of man cannot see as long as the periphery is blind. Virtue is the abolition of egoism. Why? Because the ego is error; it is a principle of illusion which falsifies the proportions of things with regard to both God and one’s neighbor. To know God with all that we are: the very infinity of the Object of knowledge requires the totality of the act of knowing, and this totality requires the essential virtues (p. 113). Intellection and virtue: everything is there (p. 116).

Pure intelligence implies by definition the realization of its single Essence and consequently the forgetting – or surpassing – of the cosmic accidentality that is the thinking ego: intelligence ‘serves God’, one might say, by ‘becoming what it is’; it is ‘impious’ when it deliberately remains an individualized vision that is committed to nothing, that constitutes an end in itself and dispenses man from any obligation. Although intelligence is in itself contemplation and thus ‘non-acting’, it requires of man an inward act that is total, and this act is ‘love’ (p. 44). The human substance is only a veil. Nothing ‘returns’ to God except what ‘pre-exists’ in Him (p. 79).