

Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy

By Michael Oren Fitzgerald, Foreword by William Stoddart
(Bloomington, World Wisdom, 2010)

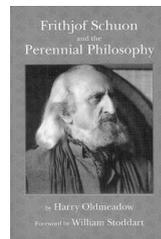
Frithjof Schuon and the Perennial Philosophy

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Reviewed by M. Ali Lakhani

Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998), metaphysician, poet, painter, is well known to the readers of this journal, and it is an occasion for celebration that these two books have recently been published, for together they will serve as an excellent introduction to the life and teachings of this important thinker. These companion volumes were created and published by World Wisdom at the suggestion of Michael Fitzgerald, who had a close relationship with Schuon in the latter part of his life; and they contain a Foreword by William Stoddart, whose own life and work are closely associated with Schuon. The influence of Schuon has been, and continues to be, enormous, both within Perennial Philosophy and in wider circles beyond—though, as Stoddart comments, Schuon’s name is not a household word.

The main aspects of Schuon’s extraordinary life



(childhood signs of spiritual premonitions and of artistic giftedness and genius; the influences of René Guénon and Shaykh Ahmad al-'Alawi; Schuon's entry into Islam and his direction of the Shadhiliyyah-Darqawiyyah *tariqa* in Switzerland and France; the divergence with Guénon regarding questions about the orthodox legitimacy of Buddhism and of the Christic Mysteries; the influence of Schuon's first love, "Madeleine", and the inspirational gifts and visions that he received, including the Six Themes of Meditation; the special role in his spiritual life of the Holy Virgin Mary, and the foundation of the Maryamiyyah *tariqa*; the move from Europe to America, and the establishment of the Bloomington community; the influence of native American traditions; the misunderstandings about Schuon's universalism and personal life; and the remarkable outpouring of writings, poetry and paintings throughout, but particularly in the latter part of, his life) have been covered in other writings, in particular the biography *Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teachings* by Jean-Baptiste Aymard and Patrick Laude (NY, SUNY, 2004), and in articles published in *Sophia* and *Sacred Web*, including those written by Catherine Schuon, and Fitzgerald, in this journal,¹ and in volume 20 of *Sacred Web*, which was dedicated to Schuon and contained retrospective surveys of his life, thought, and influence. Similarly, there have been other publications on Schuon's thought, notably James S. Cutsinger's *Advice to the Serious Seeker: Meditations on the Teachings of Frithjof Schuon* (NY, SUNY, 1997) and Seyyed Hossein Nasr's *The Essential Frithjof Schuon* (republished by Bloomington, World Wisdom, 2005), these being only two among many other writings, most of which are included in the bibliographies of the new books.

Fitzgerald states in his Preface, that his biography of Schuon was "composed for the benefit of those who have encountered his written message", and is a companion to a forthcoming documentary film of Schuon. He notes that Schuon approved the biography and wrote out the title in his own hand, but asked that the two projects—biography and documentary film—be postponed until after his death. There are several singular aspects of this new biography that commend it to the reader, of which we will mention four.

¹ Catherine Schuon, "Frithjof Schuon: Memories and Anecdotes", *Sacred Web*, Volume 8, 2001, 35-60. Also, Michael Fitzgerald, "Frithjof Schuon: Providence without Paradox", *Sacred Web*, Volume 8, 2001, 19-34—which was, in part, a response to Patrick Ringgenberg, "Frithjof Schuon: Paradoxes and Providence", *Sacred Web*, Volume 7, 2001, 13-36.

First is its vantage. It is evident from the material included in the biography—personal photographs, private letters, and transcripts of interviews—that Fitzgerald has enjoyed privileged access to Schuon, and thereby offers the reader a uniquely vicarious insider's glimpse into the life of the book's subject. Fitzgerald as biographer has wisely chosen to largely remain in the background, offering commentary of his own and of other witnesses where appropriate—to supplement Schuon's own "self-witness"—and has allowed the spiritual and intellectual portrait of his subject to emerge from Schuon's own inspired and aphoristic writings and statements, which are displayed in the text in colored lettering. Fitzgerald notes that his aim has not been to offer a complete picture of Schuon, but like Hokusai's approach in his "Views of Mount Fuji", "a series of views of a towering figure within whose one life, many lives are contained."

Second is the Introduction—in which Fitzgerald organizes some of Schuon's key ideas about his essential message: "metaphysical truth, a life of prayer, moral conformity, interiorizing beauty"—and the Appendices—which contain Schuon's outline of "Sophia Perennis", an interview with Schuon regarding the basis of religion and metaphysics, and various selected texts by Schuon on the spiritual life. These passages emphasize the "message" of Schuon's inspired legacy rather than focusing on the kinds of mundane fact that any simply conventional biography would emphasize.

Third is the exploration of three "leitmotifs of Schuon's life: a view of his daily life; his special interest in the American Indians; and his artistic genius". The first of these—which quotes in part from Catherine Schuon's short memoir published in this journal, and from several other sources—provides the reader with a more intimate and personal view of the quality of holy childlikeness of this spiritually sensitive man. The second emphasizes the influence of native spirituality on Schuon, a bond which he likened to "a marriage with virgin nature." And the third links Schuon's natural artistic talents with his extraordinary aesthetic intuition. In the words of Titus Burckhardt, "He sees the archetypes inherent in all things and immediately understands the essence of the form and the entire culture from which it came."

Fourth is the loving care that has been lavished on the book's production. The quality of the book's materials and its presentation—for

example, the selection and vividness of the artwork and the photographs; the design and highlighting of Schuon's own words in the text—make this book a joy to handle, and are a fitting complement to the superlative aesthetic sensibilities that Schuon himself espoused.

Harry Oldmeadow's book is intended as a companion to Fitzgerald's biography. It includes—and substantially revises and updates—some material from one of Oldmeadow's previous books, *Traditionalism: Religion in the Light of Perennial Philosophy* (Colombo, Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies, 2000), and also contains several new chapters.² The book is divided into five parts, dealing with (1) the historical and biographical context of Schuon and Perennialism, (2) metaphysical/cosmological principles and Schuon's signature theme of the "transcendent unity of religions", (3) religious forms and sacred symbols, including an appraisal of Schuon's art (4) Schuon's criticisms of modernism, and (5) Schuon's spiritual anthropology. Oldmeadow summarizes these five thematic areas of his study pithily as follows: "context, principles, forms, errors, way."

As an organized compendium of certain key ideas found in Schuon's work, the book more than adequately fulfills its modest aim—to offer an introductory guide to Schuon's work. The essays are enhanced, particularly in the newly written chapters, by Oldmeadow's own insights and his ability to draw from other influences, such as Swami Abhishiktananda. Oldmeadow writes with particular passion and perspicuity when he addresses the errors of modernism—the corruption of esoterism; the hubris and folly of anti-traditional rationalism and scientism, in particular, neo-Darwinism; anthropomorphic humanism and spiritually impoverishing psychologism; and pseudo-religions.

It is easy to see from even a cursory encounter with Schuon's works that he has much to say not only about matters that pertain to religion, but especially—because his approach to these subjects is always principal—about matters relating to the concerns and issues of modern life. When Schuon reminds us of the importance of beauty, for example, he is speaking of an aesthetic sensibility that is inseparable in its interiority from virtue. He writes:

² Oldmeadow's article titled "Living in Truth: Virtue and Prayer: Frithjof Schuon on the Spiritual Life", appears in this volume of *Sacred Web*. It is a specially revised version of chapter 17 of his book, *Frithjof Schuon and the Perennial Philosophy*.

What I seek to express in my paintings—and indeed I cannot express anything other—is the Sacred combined with Beauty; thus, spiritual attitudes and virtues of the soul. And the vibration that emanates from my paintings must lead inward.

Given the elevated profundity of Schuon’s perspective, it should be of no surprise that Schuon’s teachings and personality have at times erupted in controversy. Fitzgerald, for example, has felt obliged to defend Schuon against his detractors, and has done so in the past in the very pages of this journal. Neither of the books under review rehearses these controversies or directly addresses defenses of Schuon—nor do they need to, for Schuon’s own message emerges eloquently from these works to refute any misunderstandings.

By way of illustration, we will address one misplaced criticism of Schuon, which relates to his alleged syncretism. It is not difficult to understand how “the transcendent unity of religions” could be considered a doctrinal stepping-stone to, on the one hand, a hyper-essentialism that effectively abandons forms, or, on the other, a syncretic universalism that embraces all forms indiscriminately as “a sort of religious Esperanto”. As both Fitzgerald and Oldmeadow have observed, these deviances were far from Schuon’s strict emphasis on orthodoxy. It is important to remind ourselves that Schuon’s understanding of religious unity was “transcendent” and supra-formal. It was, as Oldmeadow notes, “in no way an attempt to dispense with or bypass the exoterisms as such or to downplay the importance of the religious orthodoxies”. Fitzgerald also records that “Schuon deemed adherence to one of ‘the great and intrinsically orthodox religions’ as an unconditional human necessity, and he insisted that his disciples observe the indispensable legal requirements of their given religious form.” By contrast with the syncretism of, say, modern theosophy, which involved a devaluation of the fundamental perspectives of a religion by the dilution of its forms, Schuon permitted of what Oldmeadow refers to as “a legitimate and synthetic eclecticism whereby ideas and principles hitherto foreign are assimilated into a tradition to illuminate and corroborate the spiritual perspective in question.” In other words, forms of other religions, and inspirations from art and nature, were there to enhance the perspective of the Absolute presented in one’s own religion—they were not a substitute for it.

Fitzgerald notes that, while Schuon insisted on formal orthodoxy,

he nevertheless emphasized the rights of the Spirit over the letter. He writes, "At the same time, Schuon encouraged his disciples to place the emphasis on meditation and invocatory prayer rather than on the accumulation of meritorious practices, and in so doing, he upheld a principle espoused by spiritual masters of all times: that the essentializing practices of esoterism have certain rights over exoterism. It is here a question of the 'letter which killeth' giving way—when need be—to the 'Spirit that giveth life'". This is not a prescription for the forsaking of formal practices, rather an emphasis on the importance of interiority. No doubt, there are stations of elevation in which formal disciplines take on less significance, but these exceptional dispensations cannot be based on exemptions allowed by one's own self-appraisal of the degree of one's spiritual elevation—an enterprise that is fraught with danger, given the human propensity for self-delusion—but on the intimations of a higher authority. Schuon himself was an extraordinary man and his spiritual genius cannot be judged by ordinary standards. However, it is always the extraordinary that will challenge the ordinary to examine its own potential for self-transcendence—and in that Schuon challenges us to do this, therein lie his great legacy and the import of his message.

If these two books can serve—as they no doubt will—to introduce the reader to that reality and interiority which Schuon espoused as his message, and which elevated his own life, they will have fulfilled an immensely valuable function.