

# Conforming to the Real: Frithjof Schuon on Morality

By Magnus Bradshaw

Some do what they read in the law;  
For others the law is the nature of things,  
The pious call good what the Most High loves;  
The wise call good what derives from Being.

Not everyone is a penitent in the desert,  
Nor a Krishna who kissed the gopis.  
There are diverse viewpoints in the spirit's realm -  
The paths that God blesses are of equal value.

*World Wheel* I: XX<sup>1</sup>

Whilst it is well known that the virtues and their role in the spiritual life is a major theme of Frithjof Schuon's writings, the related topic of morality has attracted less attention. Nonetheless, it is hard to think of a spiritual teacher of recent times who has emphasized the connection between esoterism and morality to the same extent. Indeed, for Schuon, morality is a category that not only includes virtue and the aesthetic in a broad sense, but also cannot be separated from an understanding of integral human nature and spiritual life in general.<sup>2</sup> When considering his views on morality, account thus needs to be taken of this wider context for as he tells us, 'morality, in the widest sense of the term, is in its own order a reflection of true spirituality'.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *World Wheel*, Volumes I-III, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2006, p.8

<sup>2</sup> As Jean-Baptiste Aymard and Patrick Laude note, 'Schuon's interest in morality does not primarily relate to the conformity of actions, nor even to the social and collective conformity of actions; rather it pertains to the very definition of an integral spiritual life', Jean-Baptiste Aymard and Patrick Laude, *Frithjof Schuon, Life and Teachings*, Albany: State University Press of New York, p.97; "Without the qualities of morality and aesthetics", he [Schuon] writes in a letter, "I cannot conceive any metaphysical wisdom or operative science.... It goes without saying that I speak of intrinsic and not merely social morality, and of integral and not merely profane aesthetics. In a word, one cannot be a metaphysician with impunity without being at the same time a moralist and an aesthete in the deepest meaning of these terms, something that is proven by all traditional civilizations, the climate of which is compounded of virtue and beauty." Michael Fitzgerald, *Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy*, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2010, p.68

<sup>3</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, Wheaton, Ill.: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1993, p.51

Yet morality is a subject that has received relatively little attention in traditionalist writings.<sup>4</sup> At first glance this may seem surprising, given the critique of the modern world with which this school is associated. In the case of René Guénon, this can be explained by the fact that he saw in his time a predominance of sentimentalism over intellectualism<sup>5</sup> whereby religion had been reduced to a moralism with little place for doctrine.<sup>6</sup> Part of his role was to rectify this situation, such that morality was peripheral to this central concern.<sup>7</sup> Whilst sharing Guénon's understanding of the nature of moralism, Schuon sought to broaden and deepen this approach to morality.

The intention here is simply to clarify in broad terms Schuon's views on what is a significant theme in his overall *oeuvre*. Throughout the half-century during which he produced the main body of his writings, his teachings on morality remained remarkably consistent. Nonetheless, given that his writings form an organic whole, and that there can be no substitute for a close study of the original texts, to take the theme of morality out of context risks being somewhat misleading. This topic in particular, however, may be worth elucidating in this way since references to it are scattered throughout Schuon's writings such that the whole picture is not easily brought together.<sup>8</sup> Whilst his words are largely allowed to speak for themselves here, some invite comment and contextualisation. This is largely provided in footnotes so as to distinguish Schuon's views from any commentary on them.

<sup>4</sup> Some examples of studies include: Tage Lindbom, "Virtue and Morality" in *The Underlying Religion: An Introduction to the Perennial Philosophy*, eds. Martin Lings and Clinton Minnaar, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2007; Tage Lindbom, *The Tares and the Good Grain*, Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1983; Mark Perry, 'Beyond Good and Evil' in *The Mystery of Individuality*, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2012

<sup>5</sup> René Guénon, *Introduction to the Study of Hindu Doctrines*, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1993, pp.104-106

<sup>6</sup> René Guénon, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, London: Luzac, 1975, p.62

<sup>7</sup> Aymard and Laude, op. cit. p.97

<sup>8</sup> Chapters in Schuon's books that focus on the subject of morality to a greater or lesser extent include the following: 'Transcendence and Universality of Esoterism' in *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*; 'Contours of the Spirit' and 'The Spiritual Virtues' in *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*; 'A View of Yoga' in *Language of the Self*; 'Vicissitudes of Different Spiritual Temperaments' in *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*; 'Complexity of the Concept of Charity' in *Stations of Wisdom*; 'The Path' in *Understanding Islam*; 'The Ancient Worlds in Perspective' and 'In the Wake of the Fall' in *Light on the Ancient Worlds*; 'The Problem of Qualifications' and 'The Contradiction of Relativism' in *Logic and Transcendence*; 'The Supreme Commandment' in *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*; 'To Refuse or To Accept Revelation' in *From the Divine to the Human*; 'The Problem of Moral Divergences' in *Christianity/Islam: Essays in Esoteric Ecumenicism*; *Mahabakti in Roots of the Human Condition*; 'Delineations of Original Sin', 'On Intention' and 'Remarks on Charity' in *The Play of Masks*; 'Concerning the Principle of Sacrifice' in *The Transfiguration of Man*; and 'Transgression and Purification' in *The Eye of the Heart*.

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