

Letters to the Editor

On the place of Love in Schuon's teachings

After reading, in *Sacred Web 1*, Seyyed Hossein Nasr's glowing eulogy on Frithjof Schuon, who passed away in May of 1998, I was moved to respond.

The unity of Schuon's thought is so profound that it is hard not to become enchanted into accepting a mere fragment of it, implicitly denying other aspects in the process. Most particularly, I believe that the place of love in Schuon's teachings has often been misunderstood. My comments on love all come after having read for years the exalted and incomparable writings of Schuon on the Divine Wisdom. I am writing especially for those like myself who have been deeply influenced by these teachings. I worry that some of us may believe that we can realize Divine Wisdom apart from human love and human concerns.

There is Divine Love as well as Divine Wisdom; but since all duality has its roots in the illusory world, these are not two but One. Sometimes we name this One "Wisdom", sometimes "Love." I want to talk about what happens when we, the readers of Frithjof Schuon, call the One by the name "Love" —we who have carried within ourselves so much hope in the resurgence of the vision of Divine Wisdom in our times.

Our mother religion has been Christianity and this tradition, in its attempt to distance itself from dangerous heresies, has also put a veil over true gnosis, that is, Divine Wisdom. Of course gnosis has always been in the heart of our religion. It has been in its own way the light which shines in the darkness. For a long time, however, that gnosis has been rarely spoken of.

We are grateful to Frithjof Schuon because he has finally broken silence about the wisdom which we have been waiting for in our heart of hearts. Divine Wisdom is the pearl of great price which we cannot overvalue. We are wrong, however, to look upon her as a proud secret, and Love as an intruder. After all, it is Divine Love Who is her Bridegroom, and not we ourselves.

We do not recognize Divine Love because of the shapes in which it appears to us. Knowledge is the crown of Being and its glory is self-evident. Love, however, leaves its footprints in the most unlikely aspects of our soul. Sometimes, because of Love, we—like Dante—have to see Hell for the first time. Without the love and intercession of Beatrice, for example, not only would Dante never have seen Hell, he would never have encountered either Purgatory or Paradise.

When Love draws near to us we fear chaos, because Divine Love can stare chaos in the face, in a way that Divine Knowledge is never asked to do. This is why we have the tradition of Christ harrowing Hell. When we see Christ descending into Hell so that our own hells may be transformed, we experience an event of unutterable Beauty—a Beauty which would bind the faculties of the soul were Love not there to set us free.

We claim that since the gnostic knows the world through Divine Wisdom, he is able to see the Beauty therein, especially in the realm of nature. But as Frithjof Schuon has said many times, Divine Beauty is inseparable from Love. How then can we, once having seen this otherworldly Beauty, denigrate Love in any form? Hasn't the lover at least begun to know all that he loves? In Schuon's words, from *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*,

Fundamentally, we would say that where there is Truth, there is also Love. Each Deva possesses its Shakti; in the human microcosm, the feeling soul is joined to the discerning intellect, as in the Divine Order Mercy is joined to Omniscience; and as, in the final analysis, Infinitude is consubstantial with the Absolute. [Note: "It is not good that man should be alone" says Genesis. And let us recall here that there is no *jnana* without an element of *bhakti*.]

I am concerned when some of Schuon's followers, in the name of Divine Beauty, seem to exalt love of nature over love of one's neighbour. Other human beings, however—our brothers and sisters in the human state—are the crown of nature in this visible world. The last ves-

tige of Hell would be to present us with a vision of Beauty without Love. If this danger is not understood, we may be tempted to over-identify with mental intelligence, since a Beauty without Love inevitably becomes a possession of the ego, dragging the Intellect down with it to a purely mental level. And an ego-identification with mental intelligence leads us unthinkingly into worldliness, particularly since, in our times, it is mental expertise and agility which confer social prestige.

Schuon and his generation had to break with the prevailing worldliness—secular humanism and sentimental materialism—in order to expound their doctrines. Today, however, it is all too easy for these doctrines, poorly understood and misinterpreted as religious syncretism, to lead us into the camp of the global élites. Love can save us from this fate by drawing us toward those aspects of God which the world is ashamed of.

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On the opposition of Tradition and Modernity

Any reader of *Sacred Web*, like this one, who views the world and the universe through lenses ground by the Primordial Tradition, should have no disagreement with the basic content and essence of the Editor's statement as set forth in "*The Importance of Spiritual Literacy*" (*Sacred Web* 2). It is a well conceived and cogent message. There is, though, a single sentence in that statement which invites discussion and, from our perspective, a fuller explication. In the paragraph that spans pages 8 and 9, the Editor juxtaposes "Tradition" and "Modernity" and argues, as to the former, that Tradition "proceeds outwards from God [and] perceives reality as integrated, and knowledge as derived from the transcendent..." This is both a proper description and reification—if not apotheosis—of the immutable and immemorial first principles of the Tradition, and presents no point of disagreement.

However, the Editor's description of Tradition's opposite, or "Modernity," does present cause for further consideration. It is certainly understandable that those of us who are students of the *philosophia perennis* need a concise and perhaps even shorthand way of describing Modernity, otherwise our discourse on these subjects would be protracted and unnecessarily repetitious. Yet we must also be vigilant not to ascribe a form to something amorphous; characteristics to something uncharac-

teristic. We read on page 8 that

The approach of Modernity, which proceeds outwards from man (who is at its center, and in search of a source and origin), is to believe that man can define the Infinite and know the Unknown, thereby denying the transcendent, and limiting reality to that which is contingent.

This approach of Modernity is further described as an “enterprise.” Taken together, these descriptions comprise a subtle but no less real hypostatization of “Modernity.”

There is a risk, perhaps even a danger, in juxtaposing or describing Modernity as simply the opposite or inverse of Tradition. The danger lies by so doing in giving Modernity a structure, an identity, a cogency, through this parallelism which it does not have and consequently increasing the potential to misdiagnose the true nature of the problems with which we are all faced today. To the extent that things are defined by their opposites, the actual opposite of Tradition, or primordial wisdom, is chaos. Tradition is order, and stands for the proposition expressed in the Masonic axiom *ordo ab chao*. By the editorial’s describing the first principles of Traditional metaphysics, and then describing the opposite or antithesis of those principles as being the modern approach or as Modernity itself, the reader may be left with the idea—whether cognizant of it or not—that there is in fact some structure or order, a neatness or meaningfulness—albeit secular, rationalistic, and materialistic—in the prevailing world-view of Modernity. This reader suggests, to repeat, that the prevailing world-view or “philosophy” of Modernity is chaos. “Modernity” doesn’t really know what it is or what it stands for; in lieu of any unanimity or consensus, there is only competitive and confused relativism.

Instead of any single prevailing world-view or “philosophy” of Modernity, there are only scores of unallied combatants in a colossal battle of verisimilitude. There is an almost rapacious competition among modern Western analytical philosophers, using ratiocination alone as their method, to outthink and thus subordinate all the rest; to have the latest and best and brightest answers to the perennial issues of mankind, while unable to understand or refusing to acknowledge the simple truth of André Gide’s statement that *Toutes choses sont dites déjà*. The proximate result of this is schools of philosophical thought (using the term loosely) often pitted against each other espousing positivism, material-

ism, relativism, existentialism, nihilism, deconstructionism, rationalism, postmodernism, amalgams of two or more of these, and everything in between. Today's academic philosophical journals, for example, publish a steady stream of monographs reflecting this philosophic chaos and are commensurably unintelligible—the “confounded language of all the earth.” If there is an approach to Modernity, even one that begs description as a philosophy for utilitarian purposes, it is wholly amorphous and best described as chaotic. For in the Modernity so well indicted by René Guénon, we have indeed arrived—in the terms of revelation—at that corresponding state of Babel:

Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.

(Genesis 11:9)

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On Descartes' “Stop”

With “*The Moment of Modernity*,” published in *Sacred Web 2*, Professor Appelbaum has certainly provided the readers of this journal with a vast opportunity for an endless discussion. His basic claim (that traditionalists have failed to accept modernity as a valid “adaptation of an ancient approach”) is by no means something new. What is new is the proposition that Descartes is part of the beginning of that “adaptation.”

If we are right in assuming that Appelbaum's claim is to be located in the field of consciousness, then it would be appropriate to recall that Robert E. Ornstein, in *The Mind Field*, was already drawing our attention in 1975 to the fact that, by clinging too blindly to the texts of ancient wisdom, many are missing a variety of modern texts which, without being openly “metaphysical,” can help us to develop a more comprehensive awareness of ourselves and of life. It is interesting to note that Ornstein makes this observation as he is concluding his remarks about “ancient descriptions of ‘sight’”; “interesting” because, in order to better understand Appelbaum's claim, we must turn to one of his books, *The Stop* (1995), in which he writes extensively about “the cessation of the turning of thought,” something he detected in Descartes' *La Dioptrique*. This book, Appelbaum argues, appears to deal with problems of optics,

though in reality it points to the need for the practice of arresting the habit of uncritical thinking, a practice that he names “the Stop.”

But with regard to the theme of consciousness, we may still go further back in time, to 1924, when Gurdjieff first showed Americans what he called the “Stop exercise,” which is mentioned by P.D. Ouspensky in his book, *In Search of the Miraculous*, published in 1949. According to Ouspensky, the purpose of the “Stop exercise” is to break the old automatism and allow for a new way of knowing ourselves and the world.

The element common to Gurdjieff, Ornstein and Appelbaum is that, while speaking of consciousness, none of them, even though they draw on Sufism and/or Hinduism, refer to a Tradition on which to base the validity of their ideas. Indeed Ornstein and Appelbaum in particular give the impression that they are capable of discerning where the updated version of Tradition is to be found. For Appelbaum the updated version takes its definitive shape with Descartes.

Is, then, this “Stop” of Descartes, this cessation of mechanical thinking, actually a true adaptation of any ancient wisdom? To be sure, to support such an assertion, one can—as Appelbaum does—quote Pantajali and the Upanishads. But in point of genuine consciousness, can we really say that the Cartesian “Stop” is comparable with the inner activity of the second bird whose role it is to watch the action of the first in the *Mundaka Upanishad*? In the matter of authentic consciousness, if we may insist, closer now to the core of our issue, can we say that the contemplation ascribed to the second bird, which in the Hindu Tradition stands for Paramatma (Supreme Self), has anything at all to do with the faculty of arresting mechanical thinking? Are we not perhaps confusing awareness with true consciousness, the human with the divine plane? With regard to the former, if we just limit ourselves to read Descartes’ work, is it not obvious that all his “Stop” does is to allow him a certain mental clarity to build a philosophy based on human reason?

If there is something unequivocal in Descartes’ writings, it is that he is determined to break with traditional schools. But what is “traditional” in Descartes? “Traditional” in Descartes is that which appears to him to have been accepted without questioning its rational validity. We must, furthermore, bear in mind that, as Guénon points out in *The Great Triad*, Descartes is primarily concerned with “physics” (the study of the natural order); the method by which he establishes his “physics,” however, is

highly significant, for he chooses “deductive reasoning, using mathematics as a model.” But this is scientism, not ancient wisdom. Briefly put: by resorting to scientism, the father of modern philosophy has decided that he does not need metaphysics to build his “physics.”

The “Stop”, says Appelbaum, is brought about so that “the attention can rejoin its source and the subject remember its existence, the *sum* or *I am*.” We submit to the readers that there is no possible *sum* to be remembered if metaphysics has not first been established. In metaphysics, *I am* is the very foundation of (Universal) Being of which one can have *consciousness* (knowledge of or participation in) provided he has attained union with it. You can only remember what you have previously known or possessed. In the Platonic system, as understood by Albinus, *remembrance* is twofold: the first is that which refers to the *ideas* seen before the soul entered the body; the second refers to the *ideas* seen afterwards. In the Christian Tradition, the former type of *remembrance* is *Memoria* (Memory) viewed as a part of the *imago Dei*, the metaphysical ground of the individual. If it is a matter of technique, then we could speak about the Sufi *dhikr* or about the *prayer of the heart* of the *Philokalia*, for instance. The advantage of these two over some “modern” techniques is that with Sufism or Byzantine spirituality, one is within the sacred, a dimension that is easily misunderstood for the simple reason that we think we can understand it before we learn how to correct whatever it is that we assume we understand. Had Descartes done that, he might have been able to give us a real modernity. It is not a question of nostalgic antiquarianism, then; it is a question of finding the support which best “re-minds” you (relates you to your Mind or Intellect, the seat of *vision*). If anyone finds in modernity elements which bring to his or her Mind any trace of the sacred, then by all means he or she should use modernity. We all are bound to make our mistakes, regardless of the road we choose. What is ultimately important is the correction of our mistakes.

In this light, if what Descartes is trying to remember is something of the order of the rational (to stop thinking in a habitual pattern about reality in order to think in a fresh manner), then his “source” is one that may be classified as human wisdom. If that is the case, we have no cause for rushing after the Cartesian *now*; we simply sit and wait. It will eventually disappear in smoke—to be replaced by another. Human wisdom,

understood as that which has no divine revealed basis, is, as Socrates said, “of little or no value.” Descartes is not solving the problem; he is part of the problem he is trying to solve. To be sure, certain parts of the *perennial philosophy* must be adapted to every period of history. But can we see that such an operation requires that the individual must in turn adapt his understanding to the version he needs?

If we look carefully around, we could see that some fragments of the *perennial philosophy* have long since been adapted to our times. Enough at least to start the highly difficult task of understanding what we think we already know, especially if we keep in mind that, as the teacher of Rumi put it, we all have “an inverted knowledge” if we are “upside down in relation to Reality.”

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