

The following is the first chapter of the book *Frithjof Schuon and the Perennial Philosophy* (World Wisdom, 2010), by Harry Oldmeadow.
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Frithjof Schuon: A Sage for the Times

The remembrance of God is our true homeland.¹

A Biographical Sketch

Frithjof Schuon was born in Basle, in 1907, the second son of German parents. His father, Paul Schuon, was an accomplished concert violinist and a professor at the Basle Conservatory of Music. The Schuon brothers were raised in an atmosphere redolent of medievalism, German romanticism, and Lutheran piety. Late in life Frithjof Schuon recalled the ambience of the family home, “nurtured by the Middle Ages, at once chivalrous, enchanted, and mystical. . . . Almost every evening our parents read to us stories of knights or Red Indians, as well as fairy tales and myths”.² Erich, the elder brother, became a Trappist monk and spent most of his life in the Abbaye Notre Dame de Scourmont in Belgium. Frithjof was schooled in both French and German but left school at sixteen to work as a textile designer in Paris.

Even as a young schoolboy Schuon evinced a deep spirituality, recounting that “on the long way to school”—alongside the Rhine—“I talked to God, and I thought that everyone else did the same.”³ By the age of ten he was reading Plato. From an early age he devoted himself to a study of philosophy, religion, and metaphysics, reading the classical and modern works of European philosophy, and the sacred literatures of the East. Amongst the Western sources, Plato and Eckhart left a profound impression while the *Bhagavad Gita* was his favourite Eastern reading.⁴ Of Schuon’s youthful writings, one of his biographers has remarked:

His own discourse was rather of a mystical nature and in his intimate diary one sees a great melancholy, a feeling of irrepressible solitude, a nostalgia for the Eternal Feminine, an unutterable aspiration toward the Beautiful and the Sovereign Good.⁵

¹ Letter to Leo Schaya, March 1983, quoted in J-B. Aymard and P. Laude, *Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teachings*, 27.

² *Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy*, 2.

³ *Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy*, 3.

⁴ B. Perry, *Frithjof Schuon: Metaphysician and Artist*.

⁵ J-B. Aymard and P. Laude, *Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teachings*, 11.

Frithjof Schuon and the Perennial Philosophy

After the death of his beloved father in 1920, and a period of intense suffering, Schuon entered the fold of the Catholic Church. In his *Memoirs* he writes:

In Catholicism I loved the liturgical manifestation of the sacred, the beauty of the Mass in the Gothic-style churches, the worship of the Blessed Virgin and the rosary; but I could not stop with this, for I had early read the *Bhagavad Gita* and profoundly experienced the sacred art of the Far East.⁶

He felt at home in this religious milieu but was alienated by the narrow-mindedness and calcified exclusivism of the Latin Church. Nonetheless, even after his formal commitment to Islam he retained a mystical affinity for both Christ and His Mother, in 1965 experiencing the overwhelming presence of the Blessed Virgin.⁷

In 1924, through his friend Lucy von Dechend, Schuon came into contact with the writings of René Guénon “which served to confirm his own intellectual rejection of the modern civilization while at the same time bringing into sharper focus his spontaneous understanding of metaphysical principles and their traditional applications.”⁸ He had for several years immersed himself in the texts of the Vedanta as well as other Eastern scriptures, finding in them the metaphysical wisdom to which he was thenceforth to devote his life. He felt a particular affinity to both the Hindu tradition and to Taoism which he found “peerless and unique.”⁹ From his earliest years Schuon was also fascinated by traditional art, especially that of Japan and the Far East. One commentator has drawn attention to the importance of aesthetic intuition in Schuon’s extraordinary understanding of traditional religious and social forms: “It suffices for him to see . . . an object from a traditional civilization, to be able to perceive, through a sort of ‘chain-reaction’, a whole ensemble of intellectual, spiritual, and psychological ideas.”¹⁰ This may seem an extravagant claim but those who have read Schuon’s work will not doubt it for a moment. Nor is it any surprise that Schuon was himself a distinguished painter, drawing his subjects and themes from the spiritual traditions of both East and West, from the heritage of the American Indians, and from his own mystical visions.

⁶ Frithjof Schuon, quoted in *Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy*, 11-12.

⁷ On these experiences and Schuon’s veneration of the Virgin see J-B. Aymard and P. Laude, *Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teachings*, 41-42.

⁸ B. Perry, *Frithjof Schuon: Metaphysician and Artist*. See also W. Perry, “The Revival of Interest in Tradition” in *The Unanimous Tradition*, ed. R. Fernando, 14-16.

⁹ Unpublished writings, courtesy of World Wisdom.

¹⁰ B. Perry, *Frithjof Schuon: Metaphysician and Artist*.

After working for a time in Mulhouse, in Alsace, Schuon underwent a year and a half of military service before returning to his design work in Paris. There, in 1930, his interest in Islam prompted a close study of Arabic, first with a Syrian Jew and afterwards at the Paris mosque.¹¹ Of his own spiritual trajectory he later wrote:

Being *a priori* a metaphysician, I have had since my youth a particular interest in Advaita Vedanta, but also in the spiritual method of realization of which Advaita Vedanta approves. Since I could not find this method—in its strict and esoteric form—in Europe, and since it was impossible for me to turn to a Hindu guru because of the laws of the castes, I had to look elsewhere. . . . I finally decided to look for a Sufi master; the outer form did not matter to me.¹²

After a series of providential signs, in 1932 Schuon found himself in Mostaghanem in Algeria, at the feet of Shaykh Ahmad al-Alawi, the Sufi sage and founder of the Alawi order.¹³ Schuon has characterized this modern-day saint as

someone who represents in himself . . . the idea which for hundreds of years has been the life-blood of that [the Islamic] civilization. To meet such a one is like coming face to face, in mid-twentieth century, with a medieval Saint or a Semitic Patriarch.¹⁴

Early in 1933 Schuon was formally initiated as a Sufi and given the traditional name Isa (Jesus) Nur ad-Din (“light of the religion”).¹⁵ In late 1936 a series of profound experiences revealed to Schuon his role as a spiritual guide; already in 1935 he became a *muqaddam* and in late 1936 was invested as a Shaykh.¹⁶ Although he never proselytized, from this time on he fulfilled

¹¹ B. Perry, *Frithjof Schuon: Metaphysician and Artist*.

¹² Frithjof Schuon, letter of January 1996, quoted by James Cutsinger in *Introduction to Prayer Fashions Man*, xviii.

¹³ On the Shaykh al-Alawi see M. Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*. There is a moving portrait of the Algerian Shaykh by Schuon, facing page 160. See also M. Valsan, “Notes on the Shaikh al-Alawi, 1869-1934”.

¹⁴ Frithjof Schuon, “*Rahimahu Llah*”, *Cahiers du Sud*, 1935, quoted in M. Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, 116.

¹⁵ As his biographer explains, “Following the Sufi custom, the new name of Schuon’s *Tariqah* was added to his personal name. Schuon’s complete traditional name thus became Shaykh Isa Nur ad-Din Ahmad ash-Shadhili ad-Darqawi al-Alawi al-Maryami. The term Shaykh refers to his spiritual function; the name Isa (Jesus) was received when he entered Islam in Mostaghanem; the name Nur ad-Din (“light of the religion”) when he was initiated into Sufism; and the name Ahmad during his second trip to Mostaghanem in 1935; next follow the names of the three major figures in the history of his spiritual lineage; and finally the name of his *Tariqah*—the *Maryamiyyah*.” (*Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy*, 100).

¹⁶ This is how Michael Fitzgerald, and Schuon himself, have described this investiture: “Then, at the end of 1936, the twenty-eight year old Schuon awoke one morning with the unshak-

the role of a spiritual master, and various communities grew up under his leadership. Although his teachings were universal and esoteric, and although he accepted disciples from different traditions, he always insisted that his followers cleave to an orthodox religious tradition within which they could observe the essential rites and disciplines.

In the years before the war Schuon several times visited North Africa, sometimes in the company of his close schooldays friend, Titus Burckhardt, spending time in Algeria, Morocco, and also Egypt where he met René Guénon, with whom he had been corresponding for some years. In many respects Schuon's work was to be a restatement and elaboration of principles first given public expression by Guénon, and their application in many domains beyond Guénon's reach.¹⁷ It was in these years that Schuon launched his public writings as an expositor of metaphysical doctrines and of religious forms.

The contemplative climate of India exercised a strong attraction but a visit to the sub-continent was cut short by the outbreak of war, which obliged Schuon to return to Europe. He served for some months in the French army before being captured by the Germans. His father had been a native of southern Germany while his mother had come from German-Alsatian stock. Such a background ensured some measure of freedom but

able certitude that he had been invested with the function of spiritual guide. 'This happened, moreover, at a time when I least expected such a thing. . .'. During the same night, several of his friends had had visionary dreams of Schuon, all of which confirmed the receipt from on high of this new role. It was not Schuon but others who first announced this new function. 'When next I went to Basle, the friends there told me, one after the other, that they had seen in the clearest of dream-visions that I had become Shaykh.' Schuon was initially hesitant to accept the responsibility of guiding spiritual seekers in their lives of prayer. When René Guénon learned of Schuon's experience, he encouraged him to overcome his reluctance and accept the responsibility of aiding those who wished to follow him on a path towards God. Schuon, in writing of some of the reasons for his initial hesitation, also wrote of his ultimate certainty regarding his new function: 'I sometimes asked myself if I have the right to be Shaykh. I had forgotten, in those moments, that this function did not depend at all on my choice, that it had been placed on me at a given moment and completely unexpectedly. I became Shaykh at a providential time when I was in doubt about any spiritual possibility in the West, and when I was ready to give up everything. Heaven placed the function on me suddenly, without transition, like a ray of light falls in a dark room; it was totally contrary to my state of mind, but it was irresistible. . . . When I ask myself the question of knowing whether I am worthy of my function, the problem is unsolvable for me; but when I remember that this function was placed on me by Heaven, as also our method, there is no longer room for any uncertainty; praise be to God.' Frithjof Schuon thus acceded to the responsibility of spiritual guide conferred on him by the providence of Heaven." (*Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy*, 39).

¹⁷ Martin Lings: "There is nothing in Guénon that is not to be found in Schuon. There is much in Schuon that is not to be found in Guénon" (quoted in *Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy*, 54).

when the Nazis threatened to forcibly enlist Alsatians in the German army, Schuon seized an opportunity to escape across the rugged Jura Mountains into Switzerland. He was detained by the Swiss military until he could verify that he had been born in Basle. He settled in Lausanne and, some years later, took out Swiss nationality.¹⁸

Two of the most profound books of the century—unsurpassed in unraveling some of the darkest enigmas of our times—appeared within a few years of each other. The first, in 1945, was René Guénon's *magnum opus*, *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*; the second, appearing meteor-like in 1948, was *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, Schuon's first major work in which he spells out the metaphysical foundations of the *religio perennis*. We will return frequently to this book, but for the moment it is worth noting that Schuon's book exposed several divergences from Guénon, particularly concerning Christian esoterism and the efficacy of the sacraments.¹⁹ It was perfectly apparent that whatever debts Schuon owed to the elderly French metaphysician, with whom he remained on cordial terms despite some strenuous disagreements, he had attained full intellectual independence. It was also now evident that Schuon was embarking on a program even more far-reaching than that of Guénon, namely, not only the exposition of metaphysical and cosmological doctrines but, in their light, the penetration of religious forms and sacred art from around the globe and from all the major religious and sapiential traditions.

In 1949 Schuon married Catherine Feer, the daughter of a Swiss diplomat. It was she who introduced him to the beauties of the Swiss Alps.²⁰ Schuon's love of nature, which runs through his work like a haunting melody, was further deepened during two periods which the couple spent with the Plains Indians of North America. "For Schuon, virgin nature carries a message of eternal truth and primordial reality, and to plunge oneself therein is to rediscover a dimension of the soul which in modern man has become atrophied."²¹ Schuon himself, writing in the context of Red Indian receptivity to the lessons of nature, said this:

Wild Nature is at one with holy poverty and also with spiritual childlikeness; she is an open book containing an inexhaustible teaching of truth and beauty. It is in the midst of his own artifices that man most easily becomes corrupted, it is they who make him covetous and impious; close to virgin Nature, who knows neither agitation nor

¹⁸ B. Perry, *Frithjof Schuon: Metaphysician and Artist*.

¹⁹ On the divergences of Guénon and Schuon see *Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy*, 54-57, 192-194.

²⁰ See C. Schuon, "Frithjof Schuon: Memories and Anecdotes", 47-48.

²¹ B. Perry, *Frithjof Schuon: Metaphysician and Artist*.

falsehood, he had the hope of remaining contemplative like Nature herself.²²

Schuon and his wife had previously developed friendly contacts with visiting Indians in Paris and Brussels in the 1950s. During their first visit to North America in 1959, the Schuons were officially adopted into the Red Cloud family of the Lakota tribe, that branch of the Sioux nation from which came the revered “medicine-man” Black Elk (Hekaka Sapa).²³ Schuon, Coomaraswamy, and Joseph Epes Brown were all instrumental in efforts to preserve the precious spiritual heritage of the Plains Indians.²⁴

During the forty years he lived in Switzerland Schuon traveled in Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and the United States, maintaining close friendships with representatives of all the great religious traditions. Amongst those whom he counted as close personal friends were the perennialists Titus Burckhardt, Leo Schaya, and Whitall Perry, and Chief Thomas Yellowtail of the Crow Indians. Martin Lings and Seyyed Hossein Nasr were amongst his best-known Islamic disciples, each to make their own distinctive contribution to the perennialist “school”. Of the many distinguished scholars, teachers, and spiritual leaders with whom Schuon came into contact we may mention the Russian Archimandrite and later Archbishop Anthony Bloom, Staretz Sophrony of Athos, Father Thomas Merton, Shaykh Hassan of Morocco, the renowned Hindu saint Swami Ramdas, Pandit Hari Prasad Shastri, Shin and Zen Buddhist priests and masters such as Shojun Bando, Sohaku Ogata, and Shinichi Hisamatsu, the Tibetan teacher Lobsang Lhalungpa, and Marco Pallis, who was often to act as Schuon’s emissary in the East. Schuon also had a special relationship with the Jagadguru of Kanchipuram, the living representative of the spiritual tradition that stretches back through sixty-eight generations to the great Vedantic sage Shankara. It is also worth noting that Schuon experienced several intense dreams and visions in which he encountered such figures as Ramakrishna and Ramana Maharshi, two of the most lucent sages of the recent Hindu tradition.

Two elements became increasingly important to Schuon during the Swiss years, and he continued to advocate them until his death: *dhikr* (remembrance of God), also known as “invocation” or “prayer of the heart”,

²² *Light on the Ancient Worlds* (1965), “The Shamanism of the Red Indians”, 84.

²³ For some account of the Schuons’ personal experiences with the Plains Indians see *Feathered Sun*, Parts 2 and 3, *Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy*, 84-94, 204-208, and J-B. Aymard and P. Laude, *Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teachings*, 40-41.

²⁴ See R. Lipsey, *Coomaraswamy: His Life and Work*, 227-228.

and the *khalwah* (retreat).²⁵ This was perfectly in accord with the quintessential esoterism which he explicated in his writings.²⁶

Schuon moved to the United States in 1980, making his home in Bloomington, Indiana. He devoted his later years to his voluminous metaphysical writings and poetry, to the guidance of the Sufi community of which he was the spiritual master, and to counseling many seekers of different faiths from around the world. Schuon crossed to the further shore in 1998. The funeral ceremony included the recitation of a couplet he wrote a few years before his passing:

Because I made my heart a holy shrine,
My soul belongs to God, and God is mine.

His tomb, attended by deer, is in the lovely woods in which he had walked and meditated daily.

Schuon's daily life, governed by a rigorous spiritual discipline, remained much the same throughout his adult years. His wife Catherine has afforded us some glimpses of his daily routines in Lausanne, and thereby reveals something of his temperament and disposition:

[Frithjof Schuon] was leading a highly disciplined life, punctuated by times of prayer; ever hard on himself, he was on the contrary indulgent with his disciples, taking into account the difficult work conditions of the modern world. He never changed his habits during all the years we lived together. He would get up at dawn and perform his prayers. "As long as one has not said one's prayers, one is not a human being." After a simple breakfast, he would walk down to the lake alone. . . . He had a strict need for these hours of solitude outdoors. At ten o'clock he would receive visitors and in the afternoon, after having retired for an hour, he would write articles or letters. He answered all his mail with admirable patience and generosity. . . . Often he would write until late at night and would get up and go back and forth in his room, less to ponder what he wished to express than to remember God. Every day he would read one page in the Koran (in Arabic) and he also loved to read the Psalms—Psalms 23, 63, 77 and 124 were his favourites. . . .

We would eat sitting either on the floor or at a small Moroccan table or in the kitchen, in silence. "One should respect the food." . . . When seated, he would never lean back. . . . He would always walk in a straight, upright fashion, even during the last months of his life. . . . He would wash only with cold water; to take a hot bath occurred to him as little as to smoke a hookah! If it is true that some of his habits stemmed from the fact that we had always been poor, they correspond

²⁵ See J-B. Aymard and P. Laude, *Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teachings*, 27.

²⁶ Concerning some controversy surrounding Frithjof Schuon's methods, see *Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy*, 52-53, 189-192.

on the other hand to his ascetic nature. Everything he did, he would do well, without hurry, with recollected mien.²⁷

Of Schuon's personal qualities, William Stoddart has written this:

Schuon was a combination of majesty and humility; of rigor and love. He was made of objectivity and incorruptibility, coupled with compassion. In meeting with him many times during a period of nearly five decades, the immediate personal qualities which constantly struck me were his infinite patience and infinite generosity.²⁸

Huston Smith, who met with many spiritual masters from all over the world, stated: "With the possible exception of the Dalai Lama, Frithjof Schuon is the only person I have known who invariably made me feel, on leaving him, that I had been in the presence of a different order of human being."²⁹

In *The Conference of the Birds*, the great Sufi mystic, Farid ad-Din Attar, enjoins the spiritual seeker to "Put on the mantle of nothingness". Schuon covered his own life with the cloak of anonymity, maintaining a deliberate obscurity and detachment from public affairs.³⁰ In a letter to a friend he spoke of "holy solitude", explaining that

A relationship with God leads to a certain solitude, because God is not the world, and the world is not God; in this solitude there is a sweetness from the next world, because God is the supreme Good. It is in this sense that an old proverb says *O beata solitudo, o sola beatitudo*.³¹

Like Guénon, Schuon had no interest in noisy acclaim, nor was he in any sense the worldly "intellectual"—quite the contrary. In one of his early books we find the following:

The more serious among [Eastern] spiritual teachers are showing an increasing tendency to withdraw themselves as far as possible from the public gaze in order that the wisdom they have to impart may become sufficiently hard of access to filter out, as it were, the unqualified,

²⁷ C. Schuon, "Frithjof Schuon: Memories and Anecdotes", 53-54.

²⁸ W. Stoddart, Foreword to *Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy*, xv. Schuon's wife confirms that "humility was at the base of his character" ("Frithjof Schuon: Memories and Anecdotes", 38).

²⁹ H. Smith, "Providence Perceived: In Memory of Frithjof Schuon", 31.

³⁰ His biographer tells us that Schuon resisted the entreaties of his friends and followers to publish his autobiographical work of the early 1970s, *Memories and Meditations* (also often referred to as *Memoirs*). By his own wish they remain unpublished (*Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy*, 173-174). It is also a striking fact that Schuon delivered only one public address in his entire life, in Basle in 1935.

³¹ Frithjof Schuon, letter to Leo Schaya, March 23, 1983, quoted in *Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy*, 164.

leaving the door open to those only who, guided thither by the divine Grace, are prepared to pay the proper price.³²

This seems to have been the posture that Schuon himself adopted, one not excluding friendly relations with other spiritual teachers and representatives of the different traditions.

From one point of view it would be quite impertinent for an outsider, such as the present author, to mount any “assessment” of Schuon’s role as a spiritual guide: only those blessed to be his disciples, in some more or less direct sense, are in a position to understand and comment on Schuon’s spiritual function. Furthermore, much of his spiritual teaching remains unpublished, given only to those who sought him out for spiritual advice.³³ On the other hand, it is possible to make a few modest observations, based on the published sources. It is clear that Schuon was a personal guide to adherents of different faiths, who sought him out despite his relative anonymity. Such individuals had a close relationship with him and often committed themselves to the life of perpetual prayer. At the same time Schuon was also an impersonal spiritual guide to many people in the wider world; his work served to guide people back to their own religions and to the life of prayer as practiced respectively in these different traditions. From an interview with Mrs. Schuon:

Q: What is his function in the world?

A: His function in the world is really to bring people back to practice their religion, which is so important, and to bring them back to a path that leads to God. And he has done it through his books. I know that many, many people have gone back and practiced their religion very seriously after having read his books. He wants to help people to go back to where we belong. Here we are only passing on this earth.³⁴

As Schuon himself remarked in one of his later works, “Even if our writings had on average no other result than the restitution, for some, of the saving barque that is prayer, we would owe it to God to consider ourselves profoundly satisfied.”³⁵

In recent years much confusion, obfuscation, and discord has accumulated around the person and the role of Frithjof Schuon, not to mention the inevitable incomprehensions and hostilities of those who are incapable of

³² *Language of the Self* (1959), “Self-Knowledge and the Western Seeker”, 50.

³³ Readers interested in this facet of Schuon’s life are directed to the several sources which have become available since his passing. In particular see J-B. Aymard and P. Laude, *Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teachings*, M. Fitzgerald, “Frithjof Schuon: Providence without Paradox”, and R. Fabbri, “The Milk of the Virgin: The Prophet, the Saint, and the Sage”.

³⁴ Film interview conducted by Michael Fitzgerald.

³⁵ *Play of Masks*, “Foreword”, vii.

understanding even the simplest messages of Tradition, let alone grasping the esoteric wisdom which Schuon was ever expressing anew. However, various tensions, controversies, and polemical eruptions have arisen within “perennialist” circles, calling for some comment. Some of the forces at work here include: over-zealous and misguided attempts to isolate René Guénon as the exclusive master of metaphysics in our time, and the final arbiter on all matters pertaining to tradition; the “passional blindness” and pious extravagances of some representatives of religious orthodoxy who believed, wrongly, that Schuon had compromised the integrity of religious forms; and the squalid calumnies leveled at this noble soul by some lost individuals under the sway of a malevolence which thinks nothing of defiling the reputations of the most saintly of men and women. Jean-Baptiste Aymard, one of Schuon’s biographers, reminds us of analogous cases involving no less than St. Theresa of Ávila, Padre Pio, and Ramana Maharshi. He also cites Schiller’s somber observation that “the world seeks to blacken what shines and to drag into the dust what is sublime”.³⁶ In Aymard and Laude’s biography each of these groups critical of Schuon is quietly disarmed through a sober consideration of the facts of Schuon’s relationship to Guénon (many of which had not previously come to light in published form), through an explanation of the somewhat different roles that each providentially fulfilled, through a careful and persuasive explication of Schuon’s stance in regard to religious forms, and through an affirmation of those qualities which made Schuon quite incapable of the offences with which his detractors had vilified him.

Schuon’s *Oeuvre*

Before turning to a conspectus of Schuon’s writings I offer a brief reminiscence which may strike a chord with some of his other readers. Some thirty and more years ago, browsing through a magazine in rather desultory fashion, my eye caught a review of *The Sword of Gnosis*, an anthology of writings on “Metaphysics, Cosmology, Tradition, Symbolism”, edited by Jacob Needleman. The review was sufficiently arresting for me to seek out a copy of the book. It was with growing excitement that I first encountered the writings of several figures whose work I would come to know well over the years ahead—René Guénon, Titus Burckhardt, Martin Lings, Marco Pallis, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, among others. But the effect of Frithjof Schuon’s several essays in this anthology was quite mesmerizing: here, in the exposition of traditional doctrines and principles, was a clarity, a radiance, and a depth which seemed to me, as indeed it still does, to be of a more or less miraculous order. Nasr has written of the appearance of Guénon’s first book (*Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines*, 1921), in these terms:

³⁶ J-B. Aymard and P. Laude, *Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teachings*, 51.

It was like a sudden burst of lightning, an abrupt intrusion into the modern world of a body of knowledge and a perspective utterly alien to the prevalent climate and world view and completely opposed to all that characterizes the modern mentality.³⁷

This, precisely, is how Schuon's essays struck me. My own intellectual and spiritual life was changed forever. At that time, Schuon's books were not easily available in Australia. It was in the face of some difficulties that I rapidly accumulated not only Schuon's works but those of other perennialists. I soon felt the force of Ananda Coomaraswamy's remark that, "if you ever really enter into this other world, you may not wish to return: you may never again be content with what you have been accustomed to think of as 'progress' and 'civilization'."³⁸ And so it proved!

Schuon's published work forms an imposing corpus and covers a staggering range of religious and metaphysical subjects without any of the superficialities and simplifications which we normally expect from someone covering such a vast terrain. His works on particular religions have commanded respect from leading scholars and practitioners within the traditions in question. Over five decades he was a prolific contributor to journals such as *Études Traditionnelles*, *Connaissance des Religions*, *France-Asie*, *Islamic Quarterly*, *Tomorrow* and its successor, *Studies in Comparative Religion*, and *Sophia Perennis*. All his major works, written in French, have now been published in English. Since his death Schuon's prodigious poetic output, as well as some of his correspondence, has appeared in English translation. The corpus available in English, leaving aside the poetic collections, amounts to some thirty-odd books.

Schuon's works are governed by an unchanging set of metaphysical principles. They exhibit nothing of a "development" or "evolution" but are, rather, restatements of the same principles from different vantage points and brought to bear on divergent phenomena. Schuon's vision was complete from the outset. The recent translation and publication of his first book, which he commenced in 1927 and which was published in German in 1935, makes this perfectly evident. In the words of his biographer, "A comparison of this early book to his later works demonstrates that Schuon's foundational principles were already fully formed."³⁹ When considering Schuon's writings one is immensely impressed by his learning, but there is something here far

³⁷ S.H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 101.

³⁸ A. Coomaraswamy, "Medieval and Oriental Art", in *Coomaraswamy 1: Selected Papers, Traditional Art and Symbolism*, 45-46.

³⁹ *Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy*, 29. The book in question was *Leitgedanken zur Urbesinnung*; the English translation by Gillian Harris appears in *Sacred Web* 20, 2008, under the title *Primordial Meditation: Contemplating the Real*.

beyond mere “erudition”: Schuon not only knows “about” an encyclopedic range of religious manifestations and sapiential traditions but understands them “from the inside”, in a way which, for want of a better word, we can only call intuitive. His writings in the limitless field of metaphysics, cosmology, and religion are without equal. Nonetheless, his intuitions took place in cooperation with an immense learning acquired through reading as well as direct personal encounters and experiences. It is worth noting that Schuon was fluent, in both written and spoken form, in German, French, English, and Arabic, could converse in Italian, read Sanskrit and Latin, and had a working familiarity with Greek, Spanish, Lakota, and Chinese.⁴⁰

All of Schuon’s work is concerned with a re-affirmation of traditional metaphysical principles, with an explication of the esoteric dimensions of religion, with the penetration of mythological and religious forms, and with the critique of a modernism which is either indifferent or nakedly hostile to the Wisdom of the Ages. Traditionalists are, by definition, committed to expounding the *sophia perennis* which lies at the heart of the diverse religions and within their manifold forms. Schuon’s general position—or better, the position to which Schuon adhered—was defined in his first work to appear in English, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (1953), a book of which T.S. Eliot remarked, “I have met with no more impressive work in the comparative study of Oriental and Occidental religion.”⁴¹ In peerless fashion this book elaborated the distinction between the exoteric and esoteric dimensions of religious traditions and, by uncovering the metaphysical convergence of all orthodox religions, provided a coherent and irrefutable basis for a properly constituted religious ecumenism—one might well say the *only* possible basis.

Much of Schuon’s work has been explicitly directed to the Islamic tradition to which he has devoted four books: *Understanding Islam* (1963), *Dimensions of Islam* (1969), *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy* (1976), and *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence* (1981),⁴² while *Christianity/Islam: Essays on Esoteric Ecumenicism* (1985) and *In the Face of the Absolute* (1989) cover

⁴⁰ Frithjof Schuon: *Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy*, 179.

⁴¹ Quoted by Huston Smith, Introduction to *Transcendent Unity of Religions* (1975), ix.

⁴² In regard to two of these books Michael Fitzgerald has noted: “In accordance with [Schuon’s] preference we [i.e., his publishers] have not listed either *Dimensions of Islam* or *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy* among his English language compilations.” According to Schuon, “My doctrinal message is in my French books and their translations. It is only indirectly and imperfectly in the English compilations *Dimensions of Islam* and *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, which were produced for contingent reasons and do not correspond to my intentions” (Unpublished document, quoted in *Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy*, 221). The essays from these two books can be found in revised form in the more recent editions of his other books, particularly in the posthumously published *Form and Substance in the Religions* (2002).

Christian and Islamic traditions. *Understanding Islam* was one of only a few Schuon works conceived as a book (rather than as a collection of articles). Seyyed Hossein Nasr, himself an eminent Islamicist, wrote of it, "I believe his work to be the most outstanding ever written in a European language on why Muslims believe in Islam and why Islam offers to man all that he needs religiously and spiritually."⁴³

Whilst many of Schuon's works have a Sufic fragrance, his work has by no means been restricted to the Islamic heritage. Two major works explore Hinduism and Buddhism: *Language of the Self* (1959) and *In the Tracks of Buddhism* (1969).⁴⁴ It is worth noting that although Schuon's destiny led him to a Sufi spiritual master and thus to Islam as his religion, his intellectuality found its deepest inspiration in Advaita Vedanta, particularly in the *Upanishads* and in the teachings of the eighth-century sage Shankara. However, Schuon's exposition of the *religio perennis* knows no boundaries and there are countless illuminating references in his work to all manner of religious phenomena and doctrines, drawn from all over the world.

Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts (1954) is a collection of aphoristic essays including studies of Vedanta and sacred art, and a meditation on the spiritual virtues. My own most conspicuous memory of first reading this book, apart from a sense of its crystalline beauty, is of Schuon's compelling contrast between the principles which govern all traditional art and the pomposity, vacuity, and grotesqueness of much that masquerades as art in the post-medieval world and which has long since ceased to "exteriorize either transcendent ideas or profound virtues".⁴⁵ Schuon's writings on art are often embellished with striking epigrams. Who could forget one as telling as this:

When standing before a [medieval] cathedral, a person really feels he is placed at the center of the world; standing before a church of the Renaissance, Baroque, or Rococo periods, he merely feels himself to be in Europe.⁴⁶

Gnosis: Divine Wisdom (1959), *Logic and Transcendence* (1975), and *Esotericism as Principle and as Way* (1981) are largely given over to the exposition of metaphysical principles. The first includes a resplendent section on the Christian tradition while *Logic and Transcendence* contains Schuon's

⁴³ See S.H. Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, 10. Nasr has been no less emphatic in commending later works. See his Prefaces to *Dimensions of Islam* and *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy* and his Introduction to *Essential Frithjof Schuon*.

⁴⁴ The latter appeared in revised and expanded form and newly translated as *Treasures of Buddhism* (1993).

⁴⁵ *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, "Aesthetics and Symbolism in Art", 32.

⁴⁶ *Transcendent Unity of Religions*, "Concerning Forms in Art", 65n.

most explicit refutation of some of the philosophies and ideologies of the modern West. His early arraignment of such characteristically modern philosophies of negation and despair as relativism, rationalism, “concretism”, existentialism, and psychologism put us in mind of the sword of discriminating wisdom wielded by the Bodhisattva Manjushri! The later parts of the book concern aspects of the spiritual life, culminating in this passage:

To the question of what are the foremost things a man should do, situated as he is in this world of enigmas and fluctuations, the reply must be made that there are four things to be done or four jewels never to be lost sight of: first, he should accept the Truth; second, bear it continually in mind; third, avoid whatever is contrary to Truth and the permanent consciousness of truth; and fourth, accomplish whatever is in conformity therewith.⁴⁷

Schuon suggested some years ago that *Logic and Transcendence* was his most representative and inclusive work.⁴⁸ That distinction is perhaps now shared with *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, which includes Schuon’s most deliberate explanation of the nature of esoterism, and with *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism* (1986), which is a masterly work of metaphysical synthesis.

Stations of Wisdom (1961) is an exploration of certain religious and spiritual modalities while *Light on the Ancient Worlds* (1965) includes a range of essays on such subjects as the Hellenist-Christian “dialogue”, shamanism, monasticism, and the *religio perennis*. The last decade of Schuon’s life was astonishingly productive, seeing the appearance of *To Have a Center* (1990), *Roots of the Human Condition* (1991), *Echoes of Perennial Wisdom* (1992), *The Play of Masks* (1992), *The Transfiguration of Man* (1995), and the translation of an early work, *The Eye of the Heart* (1997). The later writings exhibit a masterly lightness of touch and a style that is increasingly synthetic and poetic. The title chapter of *To Have a Center* furnishes us with Schuon’s only extended statement concerning the literary and artistic “culture” of the last two hundred years. Other essays in these books cover such subjects as intellection, prayer, integral anthropology, and art. *Echoes of Perennial Wisdom* is a compilation of epigrammatic passages and apophthegms taken mainly from works which at that time were still unpublished.

Schuon’s effulgent writings on the spiritual treasury of the Plains Indians have been collected, together with reproductions of some of his paintings, in *The Feathered Sun: Plains Indians in Art and Philosophy* (1990). This is one of Schuon’s most “personal” books, textured as it is with direct references to his own experience. A further token of this aspect of the book is

⁴⁷ *Logic and Transcendence*, “Man and Certainty”, 265-266.

⁴⁸ Schuon’s comment about *Logic and Transcendence* is recorded in Whitall Perry’s review in *Studies in Comparative Religion*, 9:4, 1975, 250.

that one cannot imagine any of his predecessors or contemporaries writing anything like it. The book, in both text and image, is also pervaded by the pathos which marks the disappearance of a spiritual economy and a way of life of exceptional beauty and nobility. There is a peculiar poignancy in the fact that Schuon was adopted into both the Crow and Sioux tribes, remembering their heroic resistance to the encroachments of “civilization”. Furthermore, one cannot but see in Schuon himself precisely those qualities which he extolled in the Indians—“a stoical and combative heroism with a priestly bearing [which] conferred on the Indian of the Plains and Forest a sort of majesty at once aquiline and solar”.⁴⁹

Patrick Laude has noted five “points of view” from which “the distinction between the Divine and what lies outside it” might legitimately be envisaged, namely: meta-theistic metaphysics such as we find in Advaita Vedanta or Taoism; a monotheistic theology which emphasizes the “fundamental hiatus” between God and his Creation; the Logocentric outlook pre-eminent in Christianity and in the Avataric perspective of Hinduism; angelolatry and various forms of so-called polytheism in which angels/deities “essentially represent Divine aspects”; and, lastly, primordial Shamanism which calls for “an ecological participation in the supernatural vocation of Nature” and a thorough-going integration of psychic energies and powers into the spiritual life.⁵⁰ The plasticity of Schuon’s spiritual sensibility (in some respects reminiscent of that of Paramahansa Ramakrishna) enabled him, according to the exigencies of the moment, to take the viewpoint of each of these perspectives. Further, as Laude observes elsewhere, “There is no author more categorical than Schuon when the dazzling evidence of principles imposes itself, but there is no one more attentive to the paradoxes, the compensations, and the complex play of necessary exceptions.”⁵¹

In the last few years of his life Schuon composed twenty-three collections comprising around 3,200 short poems in German, and nearly 100 in English, adding to a body of poetry written earlier in Arabic and German. In these poems, the principles and insights expressed in his other writings find a lyric voice in the most simple and concise form. This long cycle of poems has been compared to Rumi’s *Mathnawi* and to the Psalms of David. As William Stoddart has observed:

They are an expression of nostalgia, of mankind’s longing for, and ultimate satisfaction in, the Lord. . . . They are an inexhaustible, and

⁴⁹ *Feathered Sun*, “The Shamanism of the Red Indians”, 39-40.

⁵⁰ J-B. Aymard and P. Laude, *Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teachings*, 98-103. See also *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*, “Outline of Religious Typologies”, 103-113.

⁵¹ J-B. Aymard and P. Laude, *Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teachings*, 120.

ever new, purifying fountain—a crystalline and living expression of the *religio perennis*. They epitomize truth, beauty, and salvation.⁵²

Many of Schuon's paintings are reproduced in *The Feathered Sun and Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty: Paintings by Frithjof Schuon* (1992). His earliest works, in the main, were sketches of the heads of men from different ethnic backgrounds whilst in mid-life he produced a magnificent series of canvases depicting the mythology and ceremonial life of the Plains Indians of North America. His favourite subject in his later years was the Virgin, sometimes rendered in a visual style somewhat reminiscent of Hindu art. "The subjects treated by Schuon", Laude observes, "are essentially of two types":

The world of the American Indians envisaged in its sacerdotal hieratism and heroic dignity, and the world of femininity, from its virginal innocence in the genre of Gauguin to the mysterious inwardness in the icons of the Virgin.⁵³

Jean-Baptiste Aymard cautions that

One will understand nothing of Schuon's teachings if one is unaware of the importance for him of the sacred and beautiful, and his inclination—as with every "visual" type, towards anything that manifests Beauty as such. An important part of his message is the following: in a centrifugal world of mediocrity and ugliness, the contemplation of beauty is a concrete response, a source of interiorization, a door to the True.⁵⁴

Both Schuon's poetry and his visual art recall the vital role of Beauty. As one of his biographers has suggested, "If sapiential intelligence is the directing principle of Schuon's work, beauty is its main mode of manifestation and assimilation."⁵⁵ Beauty itself entails three dimensions, each of which can be linked with the Vedantic ternary, *Sat-Cit-Ananda*, and each readily apparent in Schuon's life, teaching, and handiwork: "a doctrine of Beauty which pertains to the domain of metaphysical consciousness" (*Cit*); "a methodical and spiritual awareness of the beautiful as a means of grace" (*Sat*); "a creative joy, a dimension of beatitude (*Ananda*), which is expressed by his poetical and pictorial productions and by a contemplative receptivity to feminine beauty as a privileged mirror of the Divine."⁵⁶

⁵² W. Stoddart, Introduction to *World Wheel Volumes I-III: Poems by Frithjof Schuon*, xiv-xv.

⁵³ J-B. Aymard and P. Laude, *Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teachings*, 117.

⁵⁴ J-B. Aymard and P. Laude, *Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teachings*, 52.

⁵⁵ J-B. Aymard and P. Laude, *Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teachings*, 125

⁵⁶ J-B. Aymard and P. Laude, *Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teachings*, 108.

In the last few years several thematic anthologies of Schuon's writings have been published, including *René Guénon: Some Observations* (ed. William Stoddart, 2004), *The Fullness of God: Frithjof Schuon on Christianity* (ed. James Cutsinger, 2004), *Prayer Fashions Man: Frithjof Schuon on the Spiritual Life* (ed. James Cutsinger, 2005), and *Art from the Sacred to the Profane: East and West* (ed. Catherine Schuon, 2006). There is now also a burgeoning literature on Schuon's life and work. Readers are directed to the following: *The Essential Frithjof Schuon* (1986, 2005), which includes Seyyed Hossein Nasr's magisterial introduction; *Religion of the Heart* (1991), a *festschrift* compiled for Schuon's eightieth birthday, edited by Nasr and William Stoddart; James Cutsinger's *Advice to the Serious Seeker: Meditations on the Teaching of Frithjof Schuon* (1997); the Frithjof Schuon Memorial Issue of *Sophia* (4:2, 1998); *Frithjof Schuon: Connaissance et Voie d'Intériorité, Biographie études et témoignages*, edited by Bernard Chevilliat (1999); *Frithjof Schuon: Les Dossiers H* (2002), edited by Jean-Baptiste Aymard and Patrick Laude; *Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teachings* (2004) by Jean-Baptiste Aymard and Patrick Laude; *Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998): Notas biográficas, estudios, homenajes*, edited by Josep Prats and Esteve Serra (2004); the Winter 2007 issue of *Sacred Web* dedicated to Schuon on the occasion of his birth centenary; and a more intimate biography based on his diaries, letters, and other personal writings, *Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy* (2010), by Michael Fitzgerald.

* * *

In *Understanding Islam* Schuon had this to say about the nature of sacred Books:

That is sacred which in the first place is attached to the transcendent order, secondly, possesses the character of absolute certainty and, thirdly, eludes the comprehension and power of investigation of the ordinary human mind. . . . The sacred is the presence of the center in the periphery, of the immutable in the moving; dignity is essentially an expression of it, for in dignity too the center manifests outwardly; the heart is revealed in gestures. The sacred introduces a quality of the absolute into relativities and confers on perishable things a texture of eternity.⁵⁷

Without wishing to make any extravagant claims such as might conflate Schuon's writings with holy Scriptures, I do not think it too much to avow that these qualities are everywhere manifested in his own *oeuvre*. The pervasive sense of the sacred, the love of prayer, of sacred symbols and of the

⁵⁷ *Understanding Islam*, "The Koran", 45.

“modes of Divine Presence”, the miraculous sensitivity to “theophanic manifestations” and “celestial perfumes”, the discernment of the “metaphysical transparency of phenomena”, the capacity to grasp the “principal within the manifested”, to see “the vertical ray”, to see God everywhere—these qualities overflow in Schuon’s work and constitute a providential and incomparable gift to an age apparently determined to turn its back on the sacred.⁵⁸

A fitting epitaph for Frithjof Schuon’s life is provided by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, writing of the “integrated” man of Sufism:

His thoughts and actions all issue from a single center and are based on a series of immutable principles. He has been cured of that hypocrisy in which most men live and therefore, since the veil of otherness which hides the inner light in the majority of men has been removed, like the sun he reflects his light wherever he happens to be. In him, the Islamic ideal of unifying the contemplative and active ways is realized. . . . And because by virtue of his becoming integrated he reflects Divine Unity and has become the total theophany of the Divine Names and Qualities, he acts and lives in such a manner that there is a spiritual fragrance and beauty about all he does and says. Somehow he is in touch with that *barakah* which runs through the arteries of the Universe.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ The quoted phrases are Schuon’s and come from fragments of correspondence published in *Transfiguration of Man*, 113.

⁵⁹ S.H. Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, 50.