

FOREWORD

Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998), the most important twentieth-century exponent of the *philosophia perennis*, came to wide public attention in the English-speaking world with the publication in 1953 of his first major work, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*. What drew many to this book was the endorsement of T. S. Eliot, who had received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948, the same year that Schuon's book had appeared in its original French edition. "I have met with no more impressive work in the comparative study of Oriental and Occidental religion," wrote the great poet, who had himself read deeply in the religious literature of East and West. Those who not only purchased but actually read Schuon's book discovered it to be all that Eliot promised: a masterful examination of the metaphysical and historical roots and flowerings of the world's revealed religions in the light of exoteric and esoteric teaching and practice.

Crucial to Schuon's exposition in *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* is the central importance that he accords to prayer. He concludes his study by speaking of prayer's role in "perfecting the natural participation of the human microcosm in the divine Metacosm"—that is, deification, or perfect union with God. In context, this remark refers specifically to the quasi-miraculous action of the Jesus Prayer, "a divine act in us and thus the best of all possible acts". But Schuon's observation may be taken to apply, in one way or another, to all prayer, for all prayer brings us to God, which is in the final analysis the only thing that matters in life (and in death). "Prayer fashions man" runs the title of the volume you hold in your hands; one could go even further and say that prayer *is* man, at least insofar as man is man—that is, insofar as he accepts his nature as image and likeness of God, answers the divine call, and thus fulfills his obligation to worship, praise, and, under grace, participate in divine life. The man who does not pray is half a man, the possessor of a truncated mind and a wounded heart, and this great truth Schuon has put in the forefront of his teaching.

Hence the importance of this landmark compendium of writings on prayer, skillfully assembled by James S. Cutsinger from the vast range of Schuon's published and unpublished work. Some of the material collected here, it should be noted at once, makes strong

demands upon the reader. Schuon's thought can be complex, multi-leveled, elusive—in keeping with the material that he presents. A close reading of Professor Cutsinger's excellent introduction, in which he explains the author's tripartite division of prayer into personal, canonical, and invocatory modes, will help bring out the main themes, which focus upon man's tasks both as knower and lover in relation to God. Even if we occasionally find it difficult to thread our way through Schuon's tightly woven thought, we gain much from his brilliant aphorisms and aperçus, which illuminate many difficult matters. Consider his definition of faith as a cognitive act that involves the entire person: "Faith is nothing other than the adherence of our whole being to Truth, whether we have a direct intuition of that Truth or an indirect idea"; or his dismissal of the cult of suffering: "Clearly what matters is not that man should suffer, but that he should think of God." This sort of penetrating, practical insight reaches its apotheosis in the lengthy appendix, drawn from Schuon's letters, memoirs, and other private writings. In these previously unpublished extracts, we hear Schuon speaking in a new key, more personal and tender, although hardly less authoritative. Who cannot benefit from his counsel when beginning a new way of prayer: "One must dedicate oneself to a discipline that is not above our strength—that may even appear to be beneath it—but one must dedicate oneself to it totally. And one will then see, over time, that it is above our strength, but that everything is possible with God's help; nothing is possible without it"; or from his advice on how to overcome sorrow: "To fight sadness, we have no other means than to fix the gaze of the intelligence and the soul on the Infinite, which contains everything that is perfect and lovable." I earnestly hope that more of Schuon's unreleased writings will appear in public in the near future; we will all benefit thereby.

This is not to say that Schuon's teachings will not present problems for some readers. I myself, as a Roman Catholic, find it difficult to reconcile orthodox Christian theology with Schuon's belief that the personal God is the "relative Absolute", beyond which lies the "pure Absolute". Adherents of other religions may encounter similar difficulties, as is so often the case when encountering a profound attempt to describe an overarching *sophia perennis et universalis*. This caveat notwithstanding, *Prayer Fashions Man* offers a bounty of penetrating insights into the nature and purpose of prayer and deserves to be welcomed into the library of everyone who wishes to understand how a man or woman, faced with the degradations and distractions

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of modern life, may yet remain faithful to God and become what he or she was created to be, chosen “before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him” (Ephesians 1:4).

Philip Zaleski

The Foreword to *Prayer Fashions Man*
by Philip Zaleski

Features in

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