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“Standing Unshakably in the True”: A Commentary on the Teachings of Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998)¹

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Now as I write, I am ninety years old;

See, how time passes.

Passes—what does this mean? Nothing to him

Who stands unshakably in the True.

For real is that we are with the Most High—

It is indifferent why time passes away.

(Frithjof Schuon: *World Wheel: Third Collection, VII*)

Truth and virtue; beauty and love;

If these alone remained to me,

The world could sink into the waters—

Let me drink only from the beautiful and true.

(Frithjof Schuon: *World Wheel: Fifth Collection, IX*)

¹ This essay was the Editorial for *Sacred Web*, Volume 20, published in November, 2007, as a special volume commemorating the birth centenary of Frithjof Schuon. All the quotations cited in this article are from the series of poems originally written by Frithjof Schuon in his native German, which have been translated into English, and published by World Wisdom Books in two volumes under the title “*World Wheel*” (Bloomington, Indiana, 2006) with an Introduction by William Stoddart and a Foreward by Annemarie Schimmel.

Precisely one century ago, the great metaphysician and proponent of the *religio perennis*, Frithjof Schuon, was born in Basel on the Rhine, near the area known as the Rhineland, home to many great mystics and sages. About his birthplace he writes in one of his poems: “I was born on the Rhine...The green Rhine is a symbol—it is the soul/ Moving toward the Limitless...” and in another poem he writes: “Ye think I was born on the green Rhine—/ Ye know not the place of my birth./ I myself knew it not—till one day/ The Most High spoke: be what thou truly art!” These two statements provide some vital clues to the understanding of the Schuonian worldview. The ontological roots of the soul’s Origin (to “be what we truly are” is to discover our spiritual birthplace), and the soul’s journey of Return (the soul flows inexorably into the Limitless Void, drawn by the oceanic pull of Mercy, symbolized here by the “green” hue of the soul’s very substance)—these are the main themes of the Schuonian message. Reiterating this theme of the Return to the Origin, he explains elsewhere: “...what I have in mind in all my efforts/ Is a homeland, deep in God’s Peace.”

The centrality of this defining message is one of the keys to understanding Schuon, both as a teacher and as a man. Reflecting the viewpoint of all traditional teachers, Schuon emphasizes that the meaning of life is nothing less than the quest for the Face of God in the midst of life. It is the quest for the Truth that resides within each of us, for, as Schuon states: “We carry our homeland deep in our heart.” It is the Return to this homeland, to the heart-consciousness of the Divine Presence, which constitutes the very essence of life. It is the lived reality of this consciousness that gives a human life its value. As Schuon notes: “Life is a Path from God to God—/ Otherwise it is nothing.../ Each day should be a Path from God to God.” This Path requires man to transcend the human condition of “chatter all around” by seeking “God deep in the heart”: “Blessed repose in the midst of human agitation./ The fate of man, and the life of the wise”. It requires from us the effort to rise above the average: “What is the average man? Only late does he notice/ That life’s to-and-fro cannot go on forever...In reality, he has never been a human being.” For, to be human means to have “consciousness of God” because “Man was created for eternity.” “We are made/ For God, and for life beyond time.” Schuon emphasizes: “Man’s reason for existence is to be a mirror/ Of the Real, the Divine. Nothing takes/ Precedence over this.” It is this “God-consciousness” or the spirit’s mirroring of its eternal substance that constitutes mankind’s nobility, the human ability to fulfill its existential purpose, for “Man is a door to Paradise”, reflecting the teaching that the kingdom of Heaven is within our deepest Self. “Is not man the door/ To the meaning of existence, and so to bliss?/ God grant that the human condition lead us not astray./ God awaits us; be ye ready for Him.”

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Though Schuon was influenced in his life by various faith traditions—in particular, the spiritual worlds of the Vedas (which were the main influence of his metaphysical outlook), the Sufis (which, through the practice of *dhikr*, influenced his method of divine invocation), and the

Native Indians (which influenced his views of harmony in nature and the created world)—and though he regarded all revealed faiths as united by a transcendent Truth comprising a Primordial Wisdom that alone, from the perspective of Truth, was orthodox, yet he was not a syncretist. He emphasized the validity of each orthodox faith tradition, stating: “There are diverse viewpoints in the Spirit’s realm—/ The paths that God blesses are of equal value.” Or again: “God’s House has more than one door.”

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Pared down to its essentials, the quintessential Path for Schuon comprised a doctrine of Truth or Reality, and a method of Integration or Realization through Prayer leading to inner beauty or Virtue, or outer goodness or Beauty. This schematic of Truth-Prayer-Virtue-Beauty, and its variations, is reiterated throughout Schuon’s writings. A few examples will suffice to illustrate this teaching:

“There are principles I constantly repeat,/ Because they belong to the sage who is without fault./ First comes the doctrine concerning God;/ Then the invocation of the Highest Name,/ Which purifies and liberates the heart;/ Then comes the beauty of all virtue, nobility of soul;/ And finally the sense of forms, inward and outward./ These are the four principles—/ God grant that they never be violated.”

“Three things are sacred to me: firstly Truth;/ Then, in its wake, primordial prayer;/ And then virtue—nobility of soul which,/ In God, walks all the paths of beauty.”

“...truth, virtue and beauty;/ With these three, thou canst build a bridge—/ Only these three make life worth living.”

“*Vedanta*, and with it *japa*, are for me/ The quintessence of all religions.”

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Dealing with the first of the elements in the Schuonian schematic, namely Truth, Schuon writes: “Blessed is he who sees his path in the True./...Know thy Lord, and know what thou art.” This concise comment contains several key messages. First, Truth can be known. Second, we are subservient to Truth, which (as our “Lord”) is greater than us, and therefore transcendent. Third, Truth is also within us, therefore immanent, being what we are, and therefore our ontological substance.

Echoing traditional epistemological teachings through the ages, Schuon writes: “If thou knowest thy Lord, thou also knowest man;/ If thou knowest man, thou also knowest thy Lord.” Recalling the Platonic teaching that knowledge of Truth is innate because it is inscribed within our very substance, Schuon writes: “Knowledge and certitude are inborn in thee.” The source of certitude is our very spiritual substance, our Pure Being: “Certitude is Reality become Spirit—/ Whoever possesses it, has gained Pure Being.” Intellectual knowledge is therefore ontological, and a process of Self-discovery. The journey of Self-discovery, however, entails faith, because Truth, though immanent, is also transcendent. Faith is receptivity to the inner Self, to our own spiritual substance and innate intelligence. Therefore, “in the realm of the wise:/ Faith and knowledge are the same./ In faith there is also this meaning:/ With love, I strive towards Thee.” Schuon cautions, however: “Distinguish well between mere opinion/ And that which, through the Spirit, is the presence of the Lord—/ That which, beyond all doubt, is the seed of Pure Truth.” The criterion for distinguishing Truth from its counterfeit is “the Pure Intellect”—that is, not merely the created intellect but the transcendent intelligence that corresponds to the spiritual substance of man: “In *tasawwuf* it is said that the Sufi/ Is not created; the Intellect proves this./ Both created and uncreated is the wise man’s heart—/ As is the kingdom of Heaven.” It is this “Pure Intellect” that is endowed with the ability to perceive Truth in all its manifold aspects: “To see things in God,/ To see God in things;/ To see things in themselves,/ To stand with God above them—/ This is the book of the world,/ There is no other;/ The reader is thy heart—/ There is no other light.”

To know God (the “Lord”) is to know the Absolute. Such knowledge is possible only to the extent that man transcends himself by looking with “the eye of the heart”. Yet, the “Lord” cannot be reduced to merely that which is transcendent nor that which is immanent: “God is for us the highest Other;/ And within us, He is the deepest Self—/ Thus highest “Thou” and deepest “I”./ Both and neither is the Lord in Himself.” He is both “Being” and “Self”, the “highest Outward” and the “deepest Inward”, the Supreme Reality that infuses and transcends existence. Too great for us to conceive (“Drink from the primordial source of the True—/ Do not force the True under your narrow bonnet.”), the Absolute opens us into the realm of wonder and mystery: “Thou canst not put silence into words—/ Thou canst not speak of the inexpressible./ The soul would like to sing of that which has no limit—/ But thou must leave this song to the Most High.” And yet the transcendent Intellect can know the ineffable, which is its own uncreated spiritual Substance: “Thou contemplatest the Impersonal in the Intellect;/ The Intellect, like What it sees, is uncreated—/ It knows, from the beginning, what thou knowest not.” It is in this knowledge that resides the intimacy and nearness of God. For Truth is, by virtue of this knowledge, also Presence.

“The Lord is Reality and Presence.” Schuon notes that God’s Presence “dwells within thee” and “has its throne in thy heart’s deepest chamber.” The reality of the Divine Presence within us is the affirmative “yes” which is our highest purpose (“Our ‘yes’ to God in the kernal of our soul/

Is our path, and the star of our existence”) and the source of our deepest happiness (“remain still in the proximity of the Most High—/ Thy happiness lies in the deepest folds of thy heart”). It is the means of transcending transient evanescence in the timelessness of Pure Being: “the stream of time/ Can do nothing against the kernel of eternity.” The realization of the Divine Presence is also the affirmation of meaning, testifying to “the Highest Good”—“born of the yes alone”—and is, through such affirmation, the means of our liberation from the bonds of “psychic clutter”. To affirm God means to die a psychic death: “If thou wishest to serve Truth, extinguish thyself—/ The ego has no right to blur the meaning of Pure Being.” The Divine Presence is therefore both the embracing of nothingness in the ‘vacare Deo’ of psychic death (the Sufi ‘fana’) and simultaneously the blessing of spiritual plenitude that is its compensation (the Sufi ‘baqa’): “*Vacare Deo*. Seemingly pure nothingness,/ Paired with the Highest Fullness.”

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As Schuon explains, the Path in any authentic faith tradition is more than a mere doctrine of Reality: it is also a method of Realization, of Integration, of Union. He writes: “Happy the man who does not find only half the Truth—/ Who unites it with the beauty of his soul.” The purpose of religion, then, is Integration: man must transcend his humanity to be one in Spirit with the Divine Reality that infuses all Reality. The doctrine of Truth teaches us verticality, to “look Upwards”; the method of Realization teaches us transcendence, to “be Upright”. This is the Path of Wisdom and Beauty, the “Path from God to God”.

Two essential steps on the Path are commitment and prayer. Commitment is an act of “resignation” and “trust”, sealed in a pact of “initiation”—to commit to God’s Will and to one’s inner Self. Schuon explains: “Initiation is a pact with God/ With a view to the Highest Reality: a promise/ That the initiate be faithful unto death,/ And betray not his word to the Most High—/ His word to himself. God never says ‘no’ to a soul,/ Except when this soul itself chooses to break its word.”

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Prayer is the bridge between man and God. For Schuon, the “prayer of the heart” through the invocation of the Divine Name is the quintessential prayer. Thus he writes: “Doctrine, and prayer of the heart: the two poles/ Of the way to the goal.” And again: “Firstly, the Name, which is the whole Truth,/ And which measures the values of earthly life;/ Then resignation and trust—/ May God build for thee the bridge.” Prayer is the means of centering oneself in the Spirit, it is the cardinal virtue: “Remaining at the center should be thy virtue.../ Flowing towards the Inward should be thy Path—/ There is no better bridge to Heaven.” Sincere prayer is the effective means of invoking the Divine Presence, which is why Schuon can write: “The Name, O Lord, is Presence of God.” Or again: “Where Thy Name is, there are Thy Truth and Presence./ There is nothing more in this world.” In the quintessential prayer of the heart (which Schuon

distinguishes from the canonical prayer and prayers of petition or thanksgiving), “God Himself speaks in the deepest folds of thy heart.” Such prayer is “God-consciousness” or “God-remembrance”—in effect the Self-realization of Truth *as* Presence. This is the source of all certitude and serenity. Schuon writes: “What is God-remembrance? It is impassibility/ Within the din of the world, and trust in the Inward./ Serenity, certitude: thou shouldst remember them/ Wherever, whenever, and however thou art.” Schuon cautions against insincere invocation (“the one whose heart pronounces not Thy Name”) but, in a verse that contains an echo of Tolstoy’s story of “The Three Hermits”, he portrays the miraculous powers of sincere prayer: “A woman from Senegal could hardly pray./ Arabic was too difficult for her. People thought/ She was too stupid even for religion; No wonder people laughed at her./ But one day—who could accompany her?/ She was seen singing, walking on the water.”

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Prayer is the means of transcendence, that is, the mirroring of the Divine Reality through Virtue. To be virtuous is to offer oneself and one’s actions to God: “The *a priori* of all activity/ Is *vacare Deo*...to be empty for the Most High.” It is to accept “what pertains to the duty of thy function” with humility, gratitude, and generosity. “Truth demands virtue” because “God made the good in the world from Truth.” Nobility is the crown of virtue because “Noble I-consciousness transcends itself.” Schuon defines a noble man as “one who knows himself,/ And dominates himself.” The character of virtue manifests in conduct that is rooted in spiritual-consciousness according to the principle of “noblesse oblige”: “*Noblesse oblige*. The outward is good/ Only has meaning if the heart reposes in the Most High.”

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The fourth element in the Schuonian schematic of Truth-Prayer-Virtue-Beauty proceeds directly from the metaphysical “sense of forms” and the conception of Virtue as nobility. Schuon explains: “What is the sense of forms? That one understand/ What the shape of everything means;/ Every form has something to say—/ The noble form wills to transmit light from Heaven./ Form and content: the latter justifies the former.” Schuon often quoted the Platonic dictum that “Beauty is the splendor of the True,” explaining that “Truth is the essence of the beautiful.” As human beings are created of the Spirit, so beauty is a reflection of our inner Substance and therefore, he states: “Every spiritual consciousness/ Has an element of beauty, which we can feel.” This sense of beauty is esoteric, pointing us to Heaven: “Beauty is esoteric: it enlightens/ Only those who can see beyond worldly pleasure./ Beauty’s path is holy—for it will show thee/ How thy soul should ascend towards Heaven.” Beauty is therefore also a means to transcendence, and a potentially efficacious means to experience Truth *as* Presence. In this sense, Beauty approaches Prayer as a bridge between man and God. Beauty is not only the radiance of the eternal within the translucence of form, but is also the reflection of “holy

longing” for union—of love (“love follows from beauty”). For this reason, it tends towards integration, to purity and simplicity, which are hallmarks of the Sacred.

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There are three specific themes that flow from Schuon’s understanding of Beauty, and he touches on these time and again in his teachings: these are the themes of Art, Woman, and Nature. Art is that which expresses Beauty, which in turn reflects Truth. Artistic creativity and artistic interpretation begin with the attunement of the soul to the Spirit. In the case of creativity, the alignment is ontological: “What, in art, one has to offer,/ One must be.” The point of art is to extinguish the self for the greater glory of God. While profane art may aim at “originality” (in the conventional sense of this term), sacred Art is a reminder of the Origin: “It is not originality that is decisive,/ But the value itself, whoever the creator may be./...The goal is not individual glory—but the Truth.” It is Truth, not the individual norm or preference, which dictates the content and value of authentic Art: “Style is a God-willed norm.” Both the expression and interpretation of Art must have recourse to symbols to point us to transcendence: “The soul must rise to the realm of symbols;/ Only then can art give joy to the spirit.” Schuon distinguishes symbols from mere signs: “A symbol is not only a sign, it is the thing itself:/ It is an aspect of what it means.” Symbols are the cosmological reflections of Truth, containing the “sparks of God’s Presence”. When these sparks ignite within the soul, they inspire us and fill us with joy. Thus Schuon explains: “Art exists to rejoice the soul—/ And above all to sow in our world seeds of the Divine.”

Consistent with his conception of Beauty, Schuon regards the human form in symbolic terms and finds in Woman the quintessence of Beauty. Thus he states: “woman’s beauty is a message/ That gilds all earthly things—/It is Heaven kissing the earth.” One must be careful to place Schuon’s remarks about Woman strictly in the context of his symbolic conception of Beauty. Schuon extols the beauty of the female form and depicts Woman in her naked simplicity in his masterful paintings, but all this must be understood within the Schuonian framework of the metaphysical theory of forms. His love of Woman represents his love of the archetype of the “eternal feminine”, which he is careful to distinguish from the profane “enjoyment of women”. In one of his poems, for example, he clearly distinguishes between “two kinds of men: those who want to enjoy women, and those who love the eternal feminine”, and in another he writes: “Beauty is one thing; procreating is another;/ Do not think that the second is the reason for the first.” The archetype of the “eternal feminine”, which informs Schuon’s Marian tradition, is also a reflection of the connection between Beauty and Wisdom. Schuon cautions that beauty should be experienced symbolically and “should not remain outward or sensual” but should “show God’s essential intention”, testifying to the Highest Good and the True. This entails an ethical approach towards beauty: “What counts is not only that one should see the beautiful—/ But also that one should reject the ugly,/ Both outwardly and inwardly.” One must strive to experience the

inward dimension and inner meaning of beauty: “One can experience the beautiful like a thief;/ Nobly experienced beauty is the True!/ If thy soul does not strive towards the Inward,/ The most beautiful thing in the world will give thee nothing.” Because “all beauty conveys profundity’s meaning” and “praises the Lord”, Beauty is the quintessential form of Wisdom: “In God wisdom and beauty are related./ That which testifies to the Highest Good is beautiful;/ In the beautiful, the spirit should see the True—/ Happy the man who sees the one within the other.”

Related to his conception of Beauty is Schuon’s teaching about the harmony of Nature and the regenerative power of the beauty of the natural world. The language of Nature is akin to that of Revelation, which is “a space/ Through which the Holy Ghost has passed.” Therefore, he writes: “Beauty is first and foremost in nature—/ Everywhere thou seest the trace of the Creator.” It is through the natural world that we are able to universally experience the proximity of Divine Presence and to be rejuvenated by its signs. Schuon writes of this experience, for example, in the following poem: “I praise the eagle and the swan,/ Lightning from Heaven and peace on the pond;/ By night, the owl, in early morn, the cock—/ The Creator has given us rich teachings here below./ .../ Heaven saw that I did not feel well—/ In the book of nature it allowed me to read.” And he invites us to find uplift in our hearts from nature: “Learn from the song of the birds in the air,/ From the sound of the wind in the forest, from the fragrance of flowers;/ The languages God gave to nature,/ May they rejoice and uplift thee—/ Thou canst, O heart of man, learn from everything:/ From the flowers by day, from the stars by night.”

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Though Schuon emphasizes Truth, and therefore the path of knowledge, it would be a misconception to regard Schuon’s approach as that of a “dry” metaphysician. On the contrary, it is integral to his conception that Truth entails “adherence to the True” through centering Prayer, which replenishes the Spirit, so that the True resonates within us and is reflected as Virtue and Beauty. Schuon reminds us that Truth is not a mere abstraction, but is the Supreme Reality of Pure Being, which is our Origin and “homeland”—the Limitless Ocean to which we are intrinsically drawn and to which we will inevitably and mercifully return. Schuon’s message is that Truth *is* Presence—“Reality become Spirit”: the firm ground on which we stand, and the unshakable Substance of our Being—and therefore knowledge is nothing if it is not also love—that is, the heart’s deepest longing for union with the Divine Presence, for the “moist” immersion of the soul in the baptismal font of the Spirit.