

# *Introducing The Writings of Frithjof Schuon*

## **On Some of the Features of His Works**

THE WRITINGS OF FRITHJOF SCHUON are characterized by essentiality, universality and comprehensiveness. They have the quality of essentiality in the sense that they always go to the heart and are concerned with the essence of whatever they deal with. Schuon possesses the gift of reaching the very core of the subject he is treating, of going beyond forms to the essential formless Center of forms whether they be religious, artistic or related to certain features and traits of the cosmic or human orders. To read his works is to be transplanted from the shell to the kernel, to be carried on a journey that is at once intellectual and spiritual from the circumference to the Center.

His writings are universal, not only because the formless Essence *is* universal, but also because even on the level of forms he does not confine himself solely to a particular world, period or region. His perspective is truly universal in the sense of embracing all orders of reality from the Divine to the human and on the human level worlds as far apart as that of Abrahamic monotheism and the Shāmanic heritage of Shintoism and the North American Indian religions. It is also of course universal in the metaphysical sense of always being concerned with either the meaning of the Universal as such or the particular in the light of the Universal. For him the particular at once veils and manifests the Universal as form hides and reveals the Essence and as the phenomenon, while opaque in

itself, is, as symbol, the gate to the noumenal world which is none other than the universal order.

Schuon's works are also comprehensive and all-embracing in the sense that they include practically the whole mountain of knowledge understood in the traditional sense, ranging from its metaphysical peak which touches the infinite expanse of the heavens to particular fields such as formal theology, anthropology and psychology, which are the foothills along with the trails which lead from these foothills to the exalted peak. Amidst this century of the segmentation of particular branches of knowledge and the proliferation of usually unrelated bodies of information which have made the vision of the whole well nigh impossible for those who begin from the parts rather than the whole and who remain rooted only in a knowledge of an empirical order, Schuon demonstrates with blinding evidence the possibility of an all-embracing knowledge. This knowledge is rooted, however, not in the scattered multiplicity of the world of the senses but in the unity of the intellect which Schuon understands in its traditional sense and as it has been used by a Meister Eckhart. Schuon is at once metaphysician, theologian, traditional philosopher and logician, master of the discipline of comparative religion, expositor of traditional art and civilization, authority in the science of man and society, spiritual guide and a critic of the modern world in not only its practical but also philosophical and scientific aspects. His knowledge, moreover, embraces East and West, the ancient medieval civilizations as well as the modern world, German literature as well as Hindu sculpture. From the point of view of sheer scholarly knowledge combined with metaphysical penetrations, it is hardly possible to find a contemporary corpus of writings with the same all-embracing and comprehensive nature combined with incredible depth. As a result of this quality in addition to the essentiality and universality which characterize Schuon's works, it can be said that these writings demonstrate in a unique fashion not only the unity of the Divine Principle but also the unity within diversity of the multiple recipients of the messages which have issued from the Divine Principle in the form of religions and civilizations and cultures which the manifestations of that Principle have brought into being. His works depict upon a vast canvas the descent of all that exists from the One, the multiplicity and richness within the human order as a result of this descent, and finally the reintegration of this multiplicity back into the One. In achieving this enormous task across religious,

theological, philosophical and cultural borders, Schuon has accomplished a synthesis which could in fact have been brought about only in this day and age when the normal barriers between human collectivities are becoming weakened or even falling apart. His synthesis is an antidote, issuing from the fountainhead of grace, for the ills of chaos, confusion, relativism, skepticism and nihilism which have befallen many people in the modern world precisely as a result of the erosion and in many places collapse of the traditional structures which have, over the ages, provided meaning for human beings during their earthly journey.

## The Study of Religion

The vast writings of Schuon are concerned most of all with religion. But for him religion is not reduced to that truncated reality with which so many modern authors who treat the subject called religion are concerned. For him religion is still related to *religio*, to all that binds man to God, to the Ultimate Principle. Religion for Schuon is not reducible to the limited category of modern thought bearing that name and not even to much of what passes for theology in the West today, divorced as religion in this sense has become from the other domains of human thought and action, alienated from both the cosmos and human society, and exiled to a corner of man's life in a world which is being secularized to an ever greater degree. Schuon, needless to say, is perfectly aware of this process and the sad state into which religion and religious studies have fallen in the modern West, but he does not accept this state as the norm or "reality" with which he must grapple as a theologian like so many modern religious thinkers who have conceded defeat even before beginning the battle against all that threatens religion today.

Nor is Schuon satisfied with the study of religion in terms of any other category of thought or discipline. While being fully aware of the unfolding of each religion in history, he is strongly opposed to historicism or the reducing of the reality of a religion simply to its history. While emphasizing the central role and importance of faith, he refuses to reduce religion to only faith with total disregard for the element of doctrine or truth seen as an objective reality. While being aware of the significance of every phenomenon in the traditional universe, he does not limit the study of religions to mere

phenomena divorced from their universal reality and the total sacred universe within which religious phenomena reveal their meaning *qua* religious phenomena. While being fully aware of the role of a religiously structured society, its stratifications and ethnic elements in religion, he stands totally opposed to reducing religion to its sociological component. While being a master of religious psychology and having written some of the most illuminating pages on the transformations which the religious and spiritual life bring about in the psyche of those who follow such a life, he distinguishes clearly and categorically between the spiritual and the psychic and criticizes severely those who would reduce religion to religious psychology.

One can summarize his approach to the study of religion by saying that for Schuon religion is the principle reality of human existence not to be reduced to any other category although it is related to all other categories and domains of human thought and action. One of the main reasons in fact why Schuon has been so much neglected in circles concerned with religious studies in the modern world is that for most of them he takes religion too seriously while many modern religious thinkers and theologians, although purporting either to study religion or to think in theological categories, function in a world in which the light of religion has already become dim. To face an intellectual and spiritual universe in which religion shines once again as the central sun which illuminates and orders all things is too daring and awesome an experience which few are willing to face. The glare appears too blinding to those accustomed to semi-darkness. Better to act as if such a universe did not exist while studying religion in terms of non-religious categories. Better to discuss religion in terms of abstract concepts depleted of all sacred content to the extent possible than to enter a fire which consumes the whole of one's being.

The singular neglect of Schuon's writings in both academic and nonacademic circles concerned with religion, there being some notable exceptions, is precisely because these writings are so seriously concerned with religion that one cannot even take cognizance of their presence and take their challenge seriously without having to change one's own halfhearted engagement with the religious world, without questioning the skeptical and secularized world of modern man and replacing it with one based on religious certitude while possessing the greatest intellectual rigor. If finally today after such long neglect of Schuon's writings, there is a much greater interest in his works,

it is because many people who possess the necessary perspicacity are finally tired of halfway solutions and are willing to face the challenge of his writings whatever might be the consequence for their own intellectual and spiritual life. It is because many an intelligent person who is attracted to the study of religion is no longer satisfied with the reduction of the study of religion to its history, or phenomenology, or sociology. One cannot study the writings of Schuon on religion without taking religion and man's religious nature seriously and thereby without developing an attitude toward the whole reality of religion and religious studies different from what most modern men are presented with today not only in their course of education, but also in many cases by theologians and religious philosophers and thinkers of their religious community.

Schuon is concerned with both the study of religion and religions, with the reality of religion as such and with the relation between the many religions which exist and have existed on the global scale. These two concerns are in fact related together in his perspective for he writes for a world in which the journey across religious frontiers has already become a profound reality and where for many people the study of religions affects in one way or another their own participation in and understanding of religion in itself. Schuon, while accepting and in fact honoring and respecting in the profoundest sense the diversity of religions which is willed by Heaven, emphasizes both the inner unity within this diversity and the religious significance of this diversity itself. He has written over and over again on how each religion is *the* religion, how to have lived any religion fully is to have lived religion as such and therefore in a sense all religions, how each religious universe is absolute for those who live within that universe and yet only the Absolute Reality which stands above all manifestation and particularization is the Absolute as such, how the sun of each religious cosmos is for that cosmos *the* sun while being a star in that spiritual firmament which symbolizes the Divine Infinity.

Schuon emphasizes the spiritual genius and originality — in the etymological sense of the word as being related to the Origin — of each religion along with the civilization, social structure, art and culture which it brings into being. He also emphasizes perennial religion, or *religio perennis*, that he also calls the religion of the heart, which resides at the center of every particular religion and also at the center and in the very substance from which man is made. If

man were able to penetrate to the center of his own being, to enter the inner kingdom, he would reach that *religio perennis* or *religio cordis* which lies at the center of revealed religions. But because of the fall of man and its effects upon his soul, it is in fact not possible to enter the heart save with the aid of the grace which issues from those objective manifestations of the Divine Logos which are the revealed religions. The emphasis upon the perennial and universal religion of the heart, far from destroying or diminishing the significance of the religious traditions of mankind, accentuates their Divine Origin, sacred character, absolute necessity for the human order and indispensable nature in making possible access to that *religio perennis* which lies at the center of all religions.

The usage of the term religion by Schuon and his expansion of the boundaries of its meaning far beyond the confines that modern readers are accustomed to associating with it can be better understood by turning to the word "tradition", another key concept which Schuon uses very often in his works usually in close conjunction with the term religion. The writings of Schuon can in fact be characterized as being before anything else traditional. He considers himself a traditional metaphysician and religious "thinker", if such a singularly modern term can be transposed into the traditional context. Therefore, if we were able to understand what is meant by tradition as used by him and other writers of this school, we would be able to gain a profound insight into the nature of his writings and world view.

Tradition, as used by Schuon and before him by such masters as René Guénon and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, is neither custom nor habit. Nor is it simply what has been believed or practiced for a certain period of time during the history of a particular civilization. Rather, it is a supraformal reality, hence impossible to define completely through delimitation. It is all that has its origin in Heaven, in revelation in its most universal sense, along with its unfolding in a particular spatio-temporal setting determined by the Source from which the tradition originates. It applies not only to this truth of celestial origin, but to the application of the principles contained therein to realms as disparate as law and art, as methods of meditation and the manner of cultivating a garden. There is therefore not only such a usage of this term in relation to metaphysics and religion, but there is traditional art, traditional social structure and the traditional sciences. In the words of a well-known expositor of the traditional perspective, Marco Pallis,

It will already be apparent to the reader that by tradition more is meant than just custom long established, even if current usage has tended to restrict it in this way. Here the word will always be given its transcendent, which is also its normal, connotation without any attempt being made, however, to pin it down to a particular set of concepts, if only because tradition, being formless and supra-personal in its essence, escapes exact definition in terms of human speech or thought. All that can usefully be said of it at the moment is that wherever a complete tradition exists this will entail the presence of four things, namely: a source of inspiration or, to use a more concrete term, of Revelation; a current of influence or Grace issuing forth from that source and transmitted without interruption through a variety of channels; a way of "verification" which, when faithfully followed, will lead the human subject to successive positions where he is able to "actualise" the truths that Revelation communicates; finally there is the formal embodiment of tradition in the doctrines, arts, sciences and other elements that together go to determine the character of a normal civilization. (*The Way and the Mountain*, London, 1960, pp. 9-10).

The full impact of the term "tradition" becomes evident when it is contrasted to all that lies outside of its embrace, namely the modern world which is at once modern in the temporal sense and antitraditional in nature. The traditional writers distinguish between the traditional and the modern not because of the particular period of history in which certain patterns of thought or forms of art happen to have been prevalent but because of the nature of those patterns and forms. Traditional therefore does not mean simply ancient and medieval or old and modern postmedieval and new. Not all that is old is traditional, late Graeco-Roman art and philosophy being an example. Nor is all that is new or postmedieval modern as the poetry of Angelus Silesius or present day Navaho sand paintings exemplify. That is why within this perspective a clear distinction is made between modern and contemporary. One can be contemporary yet opposed to all that characterizes the modern world as such and distinguishes it from all the traditional, and from the perspective of Schuon and those who share his perspective, normal civilizations of East or West. To stress the crucial term tradition is to provide the means with which one can discern between truth and error, between all that comes from Heaven and that is in conformity with the spiritual



nature of man, and all that is simply of human origin, based on the negation of the supra-human, and because of this limitation ultimately sub-human. To neglect the meaning of tradition is to lose sight of the centrality of the concern for Truth as such in the writings of Schuon and those who belong to the traditional school. To lay aside this basic concept in order to avoid causing an affront to various proponents of modernism is to be forced to face the dangerous forest of confusion and chaos which characterizes the modern world without the light of discernment that alone can save man from becoming lost and finally devoured by the beasts lurking in this forest. The result of the negation of tradition cannot but be the weakening of the will to know the truth and become attached to that truth. It cannot but lead to half-truths if not pure error and the penetration of the secular into the precinct of the sacred itself. To refuse to accept the category of tradition and significance of the traditional, is to be disarmed against the dangers of the antitraditional which has withered away the religious life and thought of Western man since the Renaissance and of Oriental man since the last century and now threatens to undo religion from within.

To comprehend the message of Schuon, therefore, it is essential to gain a clear understanding of the meaning of the term tradition and its applications. Perhaps no other concept is so crucial for the understanding of his writings. Schuon is first and foremost an expositor of traditional teachings and wants to be known as such. Both his expounding of religion, metaphysics, art, etc. and his criticism of the modern world and its aberrations are based on the meaning of tradition. Not only does Schuon write about aspects of things human and divine in the light of tradition, but he also criticizes philosophy, art, science, social structures and other thoughts and activities related to human existence in the light of that truth of which all traditions are embodiments. Schuon is traditional in all that he writes as both expounder of the truth and critic of error.

A second basic characteristic of the writings of Schuon, especially as it concerns religion, is orthodoxy. Schuon considers himself strictly orthodox and the defender of orthodoxy. It might therefore appear as somewhat strange for those who identify orthodoxy with limitation and narrowness that under the umbrella of orthodoxy, Schuon should defend not only a Meister Eckhart within the Christian tradition but also both the exoteric and esoteric dimensions of other religions, while in the name of the same principle criticizing



pseudo-yogis and other syncretic modernists within Hinduism. For Schuon orthodoxy is related at once to Truth and the formal homogeneity of a particular traditional universe. To speak of the Truth is also to speak of the possibility of error. To be orthodox is to be on the side of the Truth. But since the Truth has revealed itself not once and in only one formal language but many times in different 'worlds' possessing their own formal homogeneity and language of discourse, the question of being on the side of the truth involves also the formal world in question. Schuon therefore defends Christianity as orthodox in itself while being heterodox from the point of view of Jewish orthodoxy and he explains why Buddhism is an orthodox religion, that is an embodiment of the Truth and means "provided" by that Truth to attain the Truth, while it is considered as heterodox from the perspective of Brahmanism.

Within a single religion also, he explains why an esoteric school such as Sufism in Islam is strictly orthodox in itself while being sometimes misunderstood as a heterodox phenomenon by the exoteric authorities and why also within Sufism there have been those who have deviated from orthodoxy. He also points out the significance of the criterion of orthodoxy even on the esoteric level for the evaluation of certain individualistic or aberrant manifestations which can take place and in fact have taken place even in traditional worlds as far apart as medieval Japan and Europe. For Schuon orthodoxy does not mean limitation. Rather, it is like form which is not opposed to the illimitable expanses of the Formless but is the indispensable gate which opens inwardly unto the Formless. The limitations imposed by orthodoxy are there to prevent man's falling into error. They are rails on the two sides of the straight path of correct doctrine (*orthodoxa*) and correct practice (*ortho-praxis*) which prevent the seeker from falling into the abyss of ignorance, error and finally disintegration. They are not to prevent him from marching upon the path which leads ultimately to complete freedom and liberation from all limitation and constraint either in this life or the next. For Schuon orthodoxy is not only not opposed to the loftiest metaphysical knowledge or spiritual realization but is a necessary condition for their attainment, the exceptions being there only to prove the rule and to re-affirm the truth that, "The Spirit bloweth where it listeth." In his study of religion, as of other domains, Schuon must be characterized as being orthodox as he is traditional, if both of these terms are understood in the universal sense which he himself, along with

other expositors of the traditional perspective, have given to them.

Schuon's works are concerned at once with the elements which constitute a religion and the relation between religions. He deals with the components of religion in itself such as the meaning of revelation, hermeneutics, theology, ethics and mysticism and also with different religions as they are related to each other and the problems which the multiplicity of religions poses for the reality and significance of religion in itself. He does not deal so much with the history of religions as currently understood which means the reduction of the reality of religion to its history and temporal unfolding. He is also not concerned with the sociology or philosophy of religion if these terms are understood in their usual academic sense which reduces religion to a social phenomenon or introduces the categories of a profane philosophy to understand and explain the verities of religion. Nor is he concerned with the psychology of religion if again one understands by this term the psychologization of religion and its reduction to simply a psychic phenomenon. But he is interested in all of these aspects of religion from the point of view of the primal and principal reality of religion. He deals extensively with the manner whereby the reality of a particular religion manifests itself in different times and places. He has devoted many studies to the applications of the teachings of religion to the social order. His studies are replete with the exposition of the intellectual dimension of religion and are concerned with the "philosophy of religion" in the profoundest sense of this term if only philosophy were to be understood in the traditional sense. Likewise some of the most far-reaching discussions of the effect of the reality of religion upon the human psyche are to be found in his writings for Schuon is a master of the traditional science of psychology which in order not to be confused with the modern field bearing the same name should perhaps be called pneumatology for it is concerned not so much with the psyche as with the pneuma and with the psyche itself to the extent that it becomes wed to the pneuma in that sacred union from which is born the gold of spiritual alchemy.

In any case there is hardly a branch of religious studies with which the contemporary discipline bearing this name is concerned that is not treated amply in the writings of Schuon with both amazing metaphysical and religious insight and science and scholarship. Only the point of view is radically different from what is found in most modern works on various aspects of religion. That is precisely

why without being a historian, philosopher, sociologist or psychologist of religion, Schuon brings the profoundest insight into all these fields, namely, the history, philosophy, sociology and psychology of religion. His works are like the morning wind, which breathes new life into a stifling, closed space wherein religion is imprisoned in the modern world and especially within the academic disciplines which are supposed to be concerned with it. He deals with religion in a manner which brings out the primacy of religion and demonstrates its relation to facets and aspects of human thought or experience without subordinating it to these facets and aspects.

Schuon is also a theologian of great import without being just a theologian for he is concerned most of all with a metaphysics or *scientia sacra* which stands above theology as this term is usually understood in Christianity. But he does concern himself with theology as such and displays amazing knowledge of not only the major traditional Christian schools of theology such as the Augustinian, Thomistic, Palamite and also Lutheran but also of the various schools of Islamic theology or *kalām*. His discussion of the Trinity or the question of the two natures of Christ within the context of Christian theology, or of free will and determinism in Ash'arite *kalām* as found in such a work as *Logic and Transcendence*, reveal his mastery in the treatment of classical theological issues with intellectual rigor and at the same time on the basis of certitude. In studying his theological expositions one realizes how little theology is actually left in the works of some of the most famous modern theologians who, in their desire to placate what they consider to be the imperative demands of modern rationalism and empiricism, have practically depleted theology of its theological nature and thereby destroyed its very *raison d'être*.

Being the outstanding metaphysician and expounder of the intellectual aspects of religions that he is, Schuon is nevertheless also deeply concerned with the practical aspects of religion as it is crystallized in ethics. Although he has not written a separate opus on ethics any more than he has on theology, his works on religion, such as *Esoterism as Principle and as Way* and *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Fact*, are replete with passages which concern ethics. He deals with morality in its relation to the principles of each religion and also to the spiritual virtues which are inward embellishments of the soul but related in an inextricable manner to the domain of morality. Schuon seeks to demonstrate at once the necessity of morality for the religious life, the relativity of moral injunctions within each

religion in relation to other religions, and at the same time the absoluteness of the inner content of these injunctions as they concern the spiritual virtues and their effect upon the human soul.

Speaking from the metaphysical perspective, from the Center of the circle of existence which is at once above forms and at the heart of things, Schuon is of course concerned with inwardness without which there is no spirituality. The essentiality characteristic of his works to which we have already referred necessitates dealing also with the essential or inward aspect of religion which is usually called mysticism. In order to avoid the ambiguities and ambivalence surrounding the term "mysticism" which many equate with vagueness rather than clarity and passivity rather than activity, Schuon has been very careful in the way in which he has used this term. Rather, he has based his treatment of the whole subject of mysticism upon the fundamental traditional distinction between the exoteric and esoteric dimensions or aspects of religion and has written numerous works to elucidate their fundamental nature and rapport, as well as complementarity and opposition.

Religion issues from the Source or the Ultimate Reality which is at once transcendent and immanent, completely beyond and here at the center of things. But man lives in the world of forms, of multiplicity and of opacity which is a subjectivization if the Ultimate Reality is considered as the Supreme Object, the Transcendent One; or an objectivization and superimposition if that Reality is considered as the Supreme Subject, the Immanent Self. In either case the very principle of manifestation requires the acceptance of the distinction between Essence and form, between the inward and outward, between the noumenon and phenomenon, religion being no exception since like the cosmos itself, it issues from and is created by that Ultimate Reality which is the source of all that is. Moreover, being the direct revelation to man, religion is itself the key for the understanding of the inner reality of the cosmos as well as man seen as the microcosm.

Religion is like a walnut, to use the Sufi image, with both a shell and the core or fruit which can grow and possess existence only within the shell. The purpose of the shell is to protect the fruit but without the shell there would be no fruit. Likewise, the final end of religion is to guide man to God, to enable man to be delivered from the bondage of limitation which is the goal of esoterism here in this life and which even exoterism aspires to in future life. Exoterism is,

however, absolutely necessary to make the attainment of this end through esoterism possible even when man lives in this world. Without the exoteric, no esoterism could survive and be efficacious. But also without esoterism religion would be reduced to only its external aspects without means of providing a way for those whose nature is such that they must follow the esoteric path in order to follow religion. Such a situation would also leave religion without the means of responding to certain challenges of an intellectual order which only the esoteric is capable of answering with the result that cracks would appear in the wall of even the exoteric aspect of religion and threaten the very existence of the religion in question.

Schuon has gone to great pains not only to distinguish exoterism from esoterism and to show their necessity and Divine Origin within each tradition, but also to make a clear distinction between esoterism and occultism, individualistic mysticism and especially all the pseudo-esoteric movements of modern times which claim authenticity without recourse to exoterism or to traditional orthodoxy and which would seek to open the gates of Heaven without the aid of those plenary manifestations of the Universal Logos to whom alone such a key has been given. In this context Schuon provides not only an unrivaled exposition of the various aspects, elements and manifestations of esoterism in itself and within different religions but also a chart with which one can navigate upon the dangerous waters of the present day scene where on the one hand man is faced with so many religious institutions and teachings shorn of their esoteric dimensions and on the other hand with so many pseudo-esoteric cults and groups. Schuon's aim is to substantiate the reality of esoterism not as a vaguely defined reality by itself, but within each orthodox religion, thereby strengthening religion as such and even exoterism as considered in itself and independent of the esoteric. Schuon always defends the most outward and limited exoterist who has faith in God and His revelation against any pseudo-esoterist with the wildest metaphysical and esoteric claims who in the name of a supposedly "higher truth" rejects the traditions which have guided men over the ages.

Within the context of the Christian tradition where the term mysticism has gained a rather special meaning, Schuon has turned over and over again to the elucidation of the message of those concerned with mysticism, whether these mystics be Catholic or Orthodox and including also certain Protestant mystics. He has distinguished between the three fundamental types of Christian mysticism,

namely Christian gnosis as represented by a Clement of Alexandria or Meister Eckhart, Christian love mysticism of a St. Bernard or St. Francis and finally the passionate mysticism of the Renaissance and later periods represented by such figures as St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila. With the discernment and lucidity which are characteristic of his works, Schuon clarifies the differences between not only the ways of knowledge and love within the Christian mystical tradition, but also the intrusion of the passionate and individualistic elements characteristic of the Renaissance into Christian mysticism thereby creating a mode different from traditional Christian mysticism yet nevertheless capable of producing saints because it still remained within the orthodox Christian tradition.

Schuon's treatment of the modes and forms of esoterism in other traditions which could also be called mysticism, if this term were to be understood as that which is concerned with the Divine Mysteries, is imbued with the same profundity, subtlety and lucidity. He has a direct sense of the sacred and the understanding of the meaning of sanctity which can only issue from experience and which enables him to discern the presence of sanctity wherever and whenever it is to be found. In the complex domain of esoterism in general and mysticism in the more particular sense given to it in the Christian tradition, he provides guidance of unparalleled luminosity and universality. To experience the perfume of his writings is to experience something of the presence of sanctity itself. That is why a contemporary traditional Catholic could write, "If in the *Transcendent Unity* he [Schuon] speaks of the way of Grace as one who understands that Divine economy in relation to the esoteric and exoteric paths of Islam, and in principle, in relation to exotericism and esotericism as such, in *Spiritual Perspectives* he speaks of Grace as one in whom it is in operation and as it were in virtue of that operation. The book has a fullness of light which we have no right to find in the twentieth century, or perhaps in any other century." (*Dominican Studies*, vol. 7, 1954, 265.)

### **The Multiplicity of Religions and the Method of their Study**

As already mentioned, the study of religion for Schuon is almost always carried out in the light of the multiplicity of religious forms which has become an undeniable reality for the life of modern man.



In fact if there is one really new element in the religious life of men and women today to the extent that they and their society are touched by the forces and influences of the modern world, it is the presence of other religions which pose a most profound challenge to one's own religious faith and threaten that faith if they are not taken seriously. The reality of other religions may not be of "existential" concern for those who still live in what remains of traditional worlds, whether this be a Moroccan town, an Indian village or even some faraway hamlet in the countryside in Spain or Italy. But the multiplicity of religious forms cannot but be of crucial concern for men who no longer live in a homogeneous traditional ambience and yet thirst for the certitude of faith and the beatitude of the spiritual life. It is to this category of human beings that Schuon addresses his studies of the multiple religious universes within which humanity lives today, providing an indispensable key for the understanding of these worlds in religious terms without relativizing or weakening one's own religion. In fact his exposition of the inner or transcendent unity of religions as contained in such works as *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* and *Formes et substance dans les religions*, not only does not place a tool in the hands of the materialists and relativizers who want to destroy the absoluteness of religion by pointing to the multiplicity and relativity of religious forms and external practices, but provides an indispensable support for the protection of religion itself. As depicted and described by Schuon, other religious worlds become a divine compensation for the loss suffered by religion in the modern world as the result of the incessant attacks made against the very structure of religion in the West since the Renaissance by such forces as humanism, rationalism, empiricism, materialism, Marxism and the like.

The use of the term transcendent unity of religions by Schuon emphasizes the fact that this unity is not to be sought on the level of external forms. Each religion lives within a world of forms and yet is based upon and issues from the formless Essence. It also possesses an esoteric dimension which is in fact concerned with the inner reality above forms and an exoteric dimension which governs, orients and sanctifies the domain of multiplicity and forms within which human beings live and act. The unity of religions can only be found on the level of the formless, the inward, the esoteric. On the exoteric level there can be polite conversation and diplomatic harmony but not unity. As he has said, it is only in the divine strato-



sphere and not in the human atmosphere that the real harmony and ultimate unity of religions can be sought.

Each religion comes from the Absolute and possesses an archetype which determines its earthly reality. Within the universe created by each religion the manifestation of the Supreme Logos is central and “absolute” whereas metaphysically only the Absolute as such is absolute. Nevertheless, the concept of the “relatively absolute”, a term often used by Schuon, is indispensable for the understanding of the absoluteness of a religion even in its formal order within its own universe while in reality only the One is Absolute in Itself. Each religion contains within itself the absolute truth and at the same time is a method and means, or *upaya*, to use the Buddhist term, for the attainment of that truth. As an *upaya* it is based on opportuneness to save human souls rather than on the Truth as such. To move from the level of religion as opportune truth to the Truth which resides at its heart, to penetrate into the meaning of forms and to reach their Essence, to see beyond the multiplicity of religious forms which come from Heaven and are most precious precisely because they are willed by God to the unity which transcends these forms without destroying them requires a dimension of inwardness, a profound spirituality and a metaphysical knowledge which belong to the esoteric domain properly speaking. As Schuon has written more than once, if ecumenism about which there is so much discourse today is to become anything more than either a tool for diplomacy or an aid to the forces of modernism to secularize religion even further, it must be based on the esoteric perspective. The only legitimate ecumenism is esoteric ecumenism. In fact ideally speaking, only saintly men and women possessing wisdom should and can engage in a serious manner in that enterprise which has come to be known as comparative religion. The works of Schuon are like a gift from Heaven in this crucial enterprise for they have carried out this esoteric ecumenism with a depth and also expansion in the geographic sense to embrace all the major religions of the world providing those who are of a religious nature but who cannot carry out such an enterprise themselves indispensable keys for the understanding in depth of these religions without doing any injustice to any particular religion. Schuon has both elucidated the various religious traditions with unparalleled spiritual sensitivity and metaphysical insight and provided a vision of that perennial religion, the *religio perennis*, which lies at the heart of each religion.

Schuon's study of what has come to be known as comparative religion has not involved only the analysis, description and penetration into the meaning of the messages or the manifestations of the Absolute but also the human receptacles which color and condition the Heavenly messages. In a number of essays he has dealt with the ethnic, linguistic and temperamental characteristics of various human collectivities, characteristics which alongside the primary archetypal realities of different religions are responsible for the diversity to be observed among religions and even within a single religion. With his mastery of the science of man in its many aspects, he has dealt with the human margin which is responsible for certain ambiguities and even apparent contradictions which one sees not only in the perspective of comparative studies but even within the traditional structure of each religion. In dealing with the human margin in religion and more generally speaking the veil in the metaphysical sense (the Arabic *al-ḥijāb* and the Sanskrit *māyā*) which conditions all cosmic manifestation, he has for the first time brought a crucial element to bear upon the study of religion in the contemporary context, an act which can only be called ingenious.

It is indeed amazing that in the modern West and especially in the English speaking world where there is so much interest in comparative religion and endless debates about the theological significance of the presence of other religions, the traditional point of view as expounded by Guénon and Coomaraswamy and especially in its most perfect and complete form by Schuon is not considered more seriously. If there had been satisfaction with the prevalent methodologies and philosophies revolving around historicism, phenomenology and the like, one would understand this almost total neglect. But seeing how dissatisfied are in fact some of the most perceptive religious thinkers today with prevalent theories and practices of ecumenism and the study of comparative religion, one would think that at least a serious attempt would be made to make an in-depth study of Schuon's point of view. Of course it is true that the understanding of this perspective requires much more metaphysical knowledge and also devotion to religion itself than the other methods and schools prevalent in academic and religious circles these days.

It can be said with certainty, however, that the desert of desolation which characterizes the religious scene today, especially as it pertains to comparative studies, is forcing many to search more desperately and with greater effort for that oasis which contains the

salutary spring of life. In such a situation despite deliberate neglect on the part of some scholars in the field and unintentional neglect on the part of others, the traditional approach to the studies of religion in general and that of Schuon which crowns the traditional school in particular are bound to find finally their way as at least one of the recognized paths of charting a course in the turbulent waters of contemporary religious studies. As for those who fully understand his message, the way provided by him cannot in fact but be the only way which can present the dazzling beauty and majesty of other religions without in any way belittling or relativizing one's own so that the very study of comparative religion becomes a religious study which abets one's own religious and spiritual life rather than becoming a detriment to the intellectual understanding and even practice of religion itself.

Schuon has of course not only written about how to study diverse religions but also carried out in practice such a study in the case of the major religions of present day humanity as well as many religions of historic significance whose light has ceased to shine upon the earthly plane.

Of the major families of religions it is the Abrahamic one consisting of Judaism, Christianity and Islam that has received, along with Hinduism, the greatest attention in Schuon's works. He has dealt with the reverential love for God reflected in the Psalms, with the dazzling peaks of Kabbalistic esoterism as well as with Talmudic Law and the *Mishna*. He has written of the covenant of the people of Israel with God, of the sacred nature of the Torah and the reasons for the rejection of Christianity by orthodox Judaism. His treatment of the Old Testament has turned on many occasions to the Songs of Solomon whose esoteric significance he has sought to resuscitate. Although he has not devoted a separate book to Judaism, the significance of the first of the Abrahamic religions in the whole history of the monotheistic faiths as well as its relation both exoterically and esoterically to Christianity and Islam appear in many of his works starting with *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* wherein he dealt for the first time in a systematic fashion with the relation between exoterism and esoterism within the Abrahamic traditions. There is a kind of concrete presence of the spirituality of the traditional Semitic world in Schuon's writings which give a particular flavor to his study of Judaism as seen in relation to the universal Abrahamic monotheism before its particularization or "Israelization" in historic Juda-

ism while at the same time he reveals the profound significance of this particularization for the religious history of later humanity.

Although only his book *Christianisme/Islam* contains the name Christianity in its title, Schuon has been concerned with nearly every aspect of the Christian tradition in practically all of his works some of which, like *Gnosis—Divine Wisdom*, contain major sections devoted to Christian spirituality. Schuon has tried to defend the integral Christian tradition from the attack of skeptics from without and modernists from within and to resuscitate the esoteric and metaphysical teachings of the Christian tradition which have been eclipsed or forgotten during the past few centuries. He has also sought to distinguish between Christianity and modern European civilization with which certain Christian thinkers have been only too anxious to identify themselves with catastrophic consequences for the Christian religion.

On the doctrinal level Schuon has sought to resurrect sapiential teachings of Christianity as contained in the works of such figures as Origen and Clement of Alexandria as well as Dante and Meister Eckhart. He has been especially keen to emphasize that although Christianity is an esoterism which became an exoterism when called upon to save a whole civilization, that although Christianity is essentially a way of love and that even if Christianity did incorporate such pre-Christian esoteric doctrines as Platonism and Hermeticism into its structure, Christian esoterism in general and Christian gnosis (which is used by Schuon as principal knowledge which liberates and not in its sectarian sense) in particular is Christian in the most basic sense of this term in that it comes from Christ and the Christic message.

Schuon also defends the various schools of traditional Christian theology, whether they be Augustinian, Bonaventurian, or Thomist. He defends these schools rigorously against those modern critics who reject them because they simply fail to understand them, while he points to the limitation of these theological formulations, especially the medieval Scholastic syntheses, in the light of that pure wisdom or *sapientia* which lies at the heart of the revelation. For obvious reasons Schuon rejects strongly such modernistic "theologies" as Teilhardism while pointing to the reason for the reaction against the Church in the Reformation and the existence of a certain type of Christian spirituality within Evangelism and especially among certain Protestant mystics.

There are also many pages devoted by Schuon to Orthodox theology and spirituality, especially works such as the *Philokalia* concerned with quintessential prayer. There is something of the "Oriental" doctrine of the saving grace of beauty, of the mystery of icons, of the Hesychast prayer of the heart, of the apophatic theology of a St. Gregory of Palamas and of the luminous skies above Mt. Athos in the writings of Schuon. Many have, in fact, been led to the discovery of Orthodoxy through his works, as others have been guided by them to the rediscovery of Catholicism or even traditional Lutheranism.

The concern of Schuon with the study of the Christian tradition has not been only doctrinal. Nor has it been only to situate it within the Abrahamic family of religions or to compare it with Hinduism and Buddhism. Rather, Schuon has also written extensively on the Christian rites, on prayer and litanies, and on Christian art. He has defended the traditional Christian rites, especially the liturgy, vigorously. He has written on the possibility of inward prayer, meditation and contemplation as Christian disciplines in the contemporary world where access to contemplative methods has become very difficult for most Christians, and he has composed some of the most illuminating pages on Christian sacred art distinguishing it rigorously from the worldly religious art of the Renaissance and the Baroque and demonstrating the crucial role of Christian sacred art for the Christian tradition.

Finally within the Abrahamic family of religions it is especially Islam with which Schuon has been concerned and to which he has devoted numerous studies. Already in *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, there is a sense of the presence of the grace or what in Arabic is called *barakah* of Islamic spirituality which could only come from intimate contact with the very essence of this tradition. It must be remembered that Schuon has journeyed extensively in the Islamic world and that he knows both the Arabic language and Arabic literature, especially as it has received the imprint of Sufism. One cannot read this work without taking seriously the reality of Islam as a religion willed by Heaven and seeing Islamic spirituality as one which possesses powerful and efficacious means that can aid contemporary man wherever he happens to live. Many a half-Westernized Muslim has returned to the practice of Islam as a result of the study of this treatise not to speak of Schuon's major opus on Islam entitled *Understanding Islam*. This latter work is his best known

book in the West and is as well known in the Islamic world from Senegal to Malaysia as any work on Islam in a European language. It is in the view of many leading Muslim thinkers the best book written to introduce Islam to the Western world.

While in *Understanding Islam* Schuon has explained the significance of the fundamental aspects of the Islamic tradition itself, namely the religion of Islam, the Quran, the Prophet and the Way or Sufism, in such other works as *Dimensions of Islam* and *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, he has dealt with some of the most difficult issues of Islamic metaphysics and cosmology such as God being both the Inward and the Outward or man being able to realize Divine Unity while remaining the "slave of God". He has also confronted such complex issues as the question of free will and determinism as discussed by the Ash'arites and other schools of *kalām*. He has, moreover, delved into the very spiritual substance of the Prophet to discover the roots of that dichotomy between Sunnism and Shi'ism which has marked all later Islamic history. He has also compared Islam extensively not only with Judaism and Christianity in nearly every one of his works on comparative religion but also with Hinduism. The chapter on Sufism and Vedanta in *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* is one of the masterpieces of comparative religion across that difficult-to-traverse boundary which separates the Abrahamic religions from the Indian ones.

As can be expected, since Schuon speaks from the point of view of the *sophia perennis*, it is especially Sufism that has occupied him more than any other subject in his studies on Islam. His intimate experience of Sufism and grandeur of vision has made him the foremost expositor of the verities of Sufism in the contemporary world. His knowledge of not only Sufi doctrine and practice but also the various schools of Sufism and the multifarious manifestations of Sufism within Islamic history are simply a source of wonder. While many of those who call themselves "traditionalists" in France and who claim to follow Guénon have gravitated around the teachings of Ibn 'Arabī as the sole and supreme authority of Sufism, Schuon has insisted on the presence, in Sufism, of many peaks and many major figures such as Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, pointing over and over again to the wealth of diversity manifested within the Sufi tradition. In his *Sufism, Veil and Quintessence*, which is a unique work in the annals of Sufism, he has penetrated into the writings of even the greatest masters of Sufism such as al-Ghazzālī and Ibn 'Arabī to reveal within



them a quintessential Sufism based on Unity (*al-tawhīd*) and invocation of the Divine Name (*al-dhikr*) to be distinguished from a more peripheral manifestation of Sufism which displays certain characteristics most difficult for Westerners with the best of intentions to comprehend. In writing with incomparable lucidity and depth about Divine Unity, the esoteric meaning of the Quran, the spirituality of the Prophet, the early saints of Islam, the inner life of prayer, the theophanies to be contemplated in virgin nature and art, the alchemical effect of love, poetry and music, Schuon has produced a corpus of writings on Sufism which are themselves among the most important and precious works of Sufism.

Altogether the works of Schuon on Islam are unique in the contemporary Western world. Not only do they reveal for the first time for the Western audience the depth and amplitude of the Islamic tradition in a way which cannot be found elsewhere and which force those scholars of religion who are serious to take a new look at the Islamic tradition long neglected by most of the scholars in comparative religion; but they also provide an indispensable intellectual weapon with which Muslims can defend themselves against the onslaught of modernism in its various forms as it threatens the very existence of the Islamic world, weapons without which they are faced with the tragic alternatives of some form of secularization or a blind fanaticism which paradoxically enough is simply the other side of the coin of modernism. His works are therefore as important for the Muslim intelligentsia in need of discovering intellectual means of preserving the identity of the Islamic world and of responding to various modern challenges as they are for Westerners to understand Islam.

Before departing from the Abrahamic world, it is important to mention the central role that the one female prophetic being in this world, namely the Virgin Mary, plays in the spiritual universe of Schuon. He has written eloquently about her role not only in Christianity and even in Judaism through the house of Aaron, but also in Islam where she is called the woman chosen by God among all other women of the world. Schuon speaks of the Virgin's inviolable purity and receptivity to the Divine Message, her primordial sanctity, her never-failing mercy, her embodiment of Divine Wisdom and her beauty which saves and infuses the soul with paradisaical joy and beatitude as one who has himself experienced the Marian grace. It is in any case impossible to understand his spiritual universe



without considering the importance of that feminine element of the Universal Logos of which Mary is the embodiment in the Abrahamic universe, casting a merciful and beatific presence within both the Christian and the Islamic worlds.

If one travels East from the lands which gave birth to the Abrahamic family of religions, one first traverses the Iranian plateau, the home of the Iranian religions such as Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism. Schuon has been less concerned with this group of religions than those born east and west of Persia, but he has mentioned in several of his works the significance of the ethical dualism of Zoroastrianism in the light of religious monotheism which is metaphysically satisfying but has difficulties, theologically speaking, in explaining the famous question of theodicy or the presence of evil in a world created by God who is absolute goodness. As far as the Iranian world is concerned, it is mostly with the Islamic culture of Persia, especially Sufism, that Schuon has been concerned rather than those ancient Iranian religions only one of which—namely Zoroastrianism—survives to this day.

The spirit of Schuon was drawn from his youth to the majestic peaks and rolling plains of India, to the battlefield where Kṛṣṇa taught Arjuna the truth of life and death, to the forests where the Ṛṣis received those metaphysical revelations known as the Upanishads. This interest has been preserved throughout his life, and he has referred often to the “miracle of India” about whose religions, art and society he has written so extensively. While *The Language of the Self* devoted mostly to Hinduism was published in India, and highly appreciated by some of the most important traditional authorities of Hinduism, Schuon has written many other studies devoted to various aspects of Hinduism ranging from yoga to Hindu art. In fact he considers Hinduism as a kind of religious museum wherein is to be found nearly every mode of religious teaching and path of initiation, of which the well-known division into the ways of knowledge (*jñāna*), love (*bhakti*) and work (*karma*) is only the most obvious.

Schuon finds in Hindu metaphysics, especially as expounded by Śāṅkara in the form that is known as Advaita Vedānta, one of the most complete and perfect expressions of metaphysics and therefore willingly uses some of its terminology in his own metaphysical expositions while also expounding the meaning of these teachings themselves with a firm mastery of Sanskrit religious and metaphysical terminology. An example is the term *māyā* which is not only used

in a very central and crucial manner by Schuon in his numerous studies on manifestation and the principle of “veiling” which accompanies it, but is also explained in a magisterial manner in several studies as both veil and divine creativity.

Schuon discusses both Hindu metaphysics and its social structure, rites and art. While being concerned mostly with the Vedanta, he strongly opposes those pseudo-Vedantists who separate the Vedanta from the traditional Hindu cadre within which it belongs. He is also a staunch defender of the traditional Hindu doctrine of caste within the particular traditional structure which Hinduism represents while recognizing many of the misdeeds and malpractices which are prevalent in India today. He defends the Hindu tradition in principle against all modernist deviations and deformations without neglecting, to say the least, that in this Age of Darkness or Kali Yuga Hinduism is certainly not in that state of perfection and vigor characteristic of the Golden Age. The result is the appearance of certain cracks within its structure without which in fact Islam could not have spread in India to the degree that it did.

As for the other major religion to have issued from India, namely Buddhism, it has been mostly with the northern or Mahayana school that Schuon's works have been concerned. Touched deeply by the manifestation of the Void in Buddhism and by the beauty of Buddhist art and spirituality, Schuon has set about in numerous essays and the major opus *In the Tracks of Buddhism* to explain the significance of this particular tradition based on silence concerning the nature of Ultimate Reality and the metaphysics of the Void and yet possessing an extremely elaborate cosmology and eschatology. He has also sought to remove misunderstandings concerning Buddhism in the West, such incredible misjudgements which cause some people to call Buddhism atheistic or even to claim that the Buddhists have no religion. He has also explained some of the most difficult elements of Buddhist doctrine such as the “mystery of the Bodhi sattva” and the presence of grace in Mahayana Buddhism.

It is especially Japanese Buddhism and in fact all things Japanese that have always been of great interest to Schuon. He sees in Japan a perfection of artistic forms, an awareness of beauty and a power of creativity related to wisdom and closely tied to the ethnic genius of a more or less homogeneous and secluded people that has made of Japanese civilization a unique and remarkable witness to the truth and beauty of tradition. He has in fact written a great deal more on things Japanese, including Buddhism, than on China whose

religions — not only Buddhism but also Confucianism and Taoism — he treats in a more summary fashion. On the basis of the belief that the Japanese tradition has survived more intact into the modern world than the Chinese, it is especially to Japanese religious and artistic forms that he has turned over and over again in his study of the religions of the Far East as living realities.

In the Japanese Buddhist world he deals with many aspects of Zen Buddhism whose very popularity in the West has caused numerous fads and pseudo-esoteric cults to be created around its name. While trying to save the Western reader from being attracted to Zen for the wrong reasons, Schuon explains the causes for the iconoclastic attitudes of certain Zen patriarchs and clarifies such major Zen practices as the use of the *koan* and various artistic activities connected with the perfecting of inner discipline. But he also deals with the much more neglected Jodo-Shin school and the practice of the *nembutsu*. In fact he considers this form of Japanese Buddhism to be more appropriate for most Westerners who are at present drawn to Zen.

As in India so in Japan, some of the greatest traditional authorities have found in Schuon's writings a masterly exposition of Buddhism and have espoused his works warmly. They have seen in his words the traces of the presence of the Void and the power of a mind which having stilled the waves of *samsāra* is finally able to affirm the identity of *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra*, of a mind which without falling into a crude mixing of tongues, can assert that the affirmation of such an identity in Buddhist terms means, for those breathing in the universe of Abrahamic revelation, "seeing God everywhere".

The interest of Schuon in Japan has caused him to delve also into the national religion of Japan, namely Shintoism, which complements Buddhism in the Land of the Rising Sun. In studying its complex cosmogony and mythology in *In the Tracks of Buddhism*, he has also dealt with the meaning of mythology and mythological language in general while providing what is perhaps the most accessible account of Shintoism in a Western language. He has also dealt through Shintoism with some of the general characteristics of the Shamanic family of religions to which Shintoism belongs, such characteristics as the apparent refusal to deal extensively with questions of eschatology.

The other branch of Shamanism which spread into America in the form of the North American Indian religions has also been amply treated by Schuon. In fact it can be said that as far as the religion of the nomads of the Plains in North America is concerned,

no one has presented the heart of the cosmological and metaphysical teachings of these Indians with the same light and lucidity as has Schuon. Drawn from early childhood to the courage, virility, nobility and beauty of the American Indians, he made a profound study of their religion and art and during two journeys to their homeland encountered some of the most important representatives of the tribes who still possessed a knowledge of their traditions. Schuon has been in fact received into one of the tribes and been actually present during the performance of the Sun Dance. The experience is reflected in his remarkable study of this central rite of the Indians while his intimate knowledge of the Indians is reflected in both his exposition of their teachings and his own painting of the traditional Indians and their religion. His descriptions of the majesty of mountains and contemplative calm of lakes, of the traceless flight of the eagle in the infinite expanse of the sky and the dispersing of the leaves of a flower in the morning breeze are reminiscent also and even reflect something of this American Indian spirituality which sees in the forms of nature the direct reflections of the Divine Presence, preserving something of the paradisaical vision of primordial man.

This introduction does not permit a complete analysis of all the facets of Schuon's study of religion and religions. Suffice it to say that he has dealt not only with religion as such and the major religions which govern the life of humanity today but also with the art, social structures and thought patterns created and molded by religion. He has sought the ultimate meaning of events in religious history in the light of the Ultimate Itself while exposing religions in themselves as means of attaining the Ultimate. With an encyclopedic knowledge of many religions and metaphysical penetration into the heart of each religion, Schuon has provided an unparalleled knowledge of the religions of the world while providing keys for the understanding of religion in its essence. But at the center of his concern has always lain that perennial religion which lies at the core of all religions and which can only be attained by a person who lives one of God's religions fully and realizes the meaning of religion as such. One can say that the works of Schuon have been written to cast light upon the path of religion in general and perennial religion in particular which lies at its heart and that his writings in their totality can in a sense be called by the title of one of his latest works, namely, *On the Trace of Perennial Religion*.

## Metaphysics

Whether it be the domain of religion, art, theology or epistemology, the perspective of Schuon remains always metaphysical. He is first and foremost a metaphysician concerned with the reality of religion, art, human society or the cosmic order. To understand the meaning of metaphysics as used by him, however, requires a new, and at the same time age old, appreciation of the connotation of this term. For Schuon, metaphysics is not a branch of philosophy concerned with what lies beyond physics. Nor is it in fact a purely human knowledge bound by the context and categories of the human mind. Rather, metaphysics, which some of his translators render as metaphysic in order to emphasize its non-multiple but unitary nature, is the science of Ultimate Reality, attainable through the intellect and not reason, of an essentially suprahuman character and including in its fullness the whole of man's being. It is a sacred science or *scientia sacra*, a wisdom which liberates and which requires not only certain mental capacities but also moral and spiritual qualifications. It is gnosis in the original non-sectarian meaning of the term, the *sophia* of the ancient sages and the *sapientia* of medieval ones. It is the *jñāna* of the Hindus and *al-ma'rifah* or *al-hikmah* of Muslims. It is light and presence and issues from the seat of the intelligence which is the heart while its elaboration is carried out by the mind. Its conceptual understanding, however, although of great importance, is one thing and its realization quite another.

Metaphysics as thus understood is therefore not at all a branch of philosophy. Rather, philosophy when it was still of a traditional character, corresponded to the theoretical and conceptual aspect of metaphysical knowledge as distinct from the operative methods for the realization of this principal knowledge. As stated in some of Schuon's earliest works such as *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, metaphysics is of a sacred character and therefore accessible in its fullness only within a traditional cadre which provides the appropriate means for the transmission of this knowledge much of which has in fact been kept in an oral form to this day. Schuon has mentioned often that if this knowledge is now being written in books, it is only because the modern world is in every way an anomaly when com-

pared the millennial civilizations which have guided mankind over the ages and one anomaly deserves another. For him metaphysics is inseparable from tradition, from traditional transmission, from spiritual realization. It lies at the heart of religion and even of the *religio perennis* and also at the heart of man himself where resides the Divine Intellect. Being of a sacred character, it requires of man all that he is. That is why in traditional worlds it is taught only after a long period of moral and intellectual preparation of those qualified to receive such knowledge.

Nevertheless, the modern world being what it is, namely a world in which normal channels for the transmission of such knowledge are no longer available for many who would be qualified to receive it, it is necessary to present this knowledge in the manner done by Schuon. There are always those with sufficient intellectual intuition to grasp its import. There are those whose minds and souls are in such a state that the spark of such type of knowledge even if contained in books can set them on fire, burning the obstacles which exist within them and which prevent them from seeking and attaining what Christ has called the one thing necessary.

Man's intelligence was made to know the Absolute and as Schuon has written often it is only the Absolute that man *can* know absolutely. Metaphysics, which is none other than this knowledge of the Absolute, resides in the very substance of the intelligence. Its fountainhead is to be found at the center of man's being himself. But this spring will not gush forth and the inner Logos will not be attained save with the help of that objective manifestation of the Logos which is revelation. That is why in normal civilizations where the tradition molds all things according to the principles contained in the celestial message ruling each civilization, metaphysics is always formed within the inward or esoteric dimension of the religion in question, in the Orphic mysteries, in the Kabbala, in the Dionysiuses, Erigenas and Eckharts of Western Christianity, in the writings of Sufis within the Islamic world. In the Oriental traditions also where the esoteric teachings are present often in a more open and direct fashion in the works of such men as Nāgārjuna and Śāṅkara, of Lao-Tzū and Chuang-Tzū, they are nevertheless found within certain circles of adepts qualified to receive them. To grasp the significance of metaphysics as expounded by Schuon, it is this traditional understanding of this supreme science, its content and significance that must be understood fully.



Schuon is not only a metaphysician of the highest order to be compared to the foremost metaphysicians of history, but he also possesses a knowledge of the metaphysical schools of many traditions. His studies of comparative religion nearly always reflect at their center a study of comparative metaphysics. He not only speaks of metaphysics as the science of the Real, but also juxtaposes, compares and contrasts the views of the metaphysicians of both East and West. Those who share the current interest in what is coming to be known as comparative philosophy—but most of which should be called, properly speaking, comparative metaphysics—will find an almost inexhaustible wealth in his writings wherein he brings his characteristic essentiality and universality to bear upon the discussions of the major themes and issues of this domain of comparative studies.

The metaphysical doctrine expounded by Schuon exposes for the contemporary reader the full range of metaphysics in a manner which has not been available in the West since the end of the medieval period save for the works of Guénon and Coomaraswamy whose metaphysical expositions might in fact serve as a basis for some, but not necessarily all, readers for the comprehension of the more all-embracing and spiritually vivid presentations of Schuon.

To gain a complete knowledge of Schuon's metaphysical expositions, it would be necessary to read over all his books and most articles because he returns to various metaphysical questions in nearly every study. Already in *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* and *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* one sees the clear distinction made between metaphysics and profane philosophy and comes to understand what is the nature of metaphysical knowledge, while in such later works as *Gnosis—Divine Wisdom* and *Stations of Wisdom*, many chapters deal with purely metaphysical subjects, as does his more recent *Logic and Transcendence*. But it is especially in *Esoterism as Principle and as Way* that he deals most directly with esoteric knowledge which is inseparable from metaphysics. The most important work of all in this field, however, is *From the Divine to the Human* which can be said to summarize Schuon's metaphysical teachings.

Metaphysics, as expounded by Schuon, does not begin with Being but with that Ultimate Reality which is at once the Absolute, the Infinite and the Perfect Good and which contains all the possibilities of manifestation. Beyond being in Itself, It is the Principle of Pure Being which is the first determination of the Beyond-Being



in the direction of manifestation and creation. Inasmuch as it is infinite, the Ultimate Reality must possess all possibilities including the possibility of the negation of Itself which is the world or manifestation. There is therefore a projection towards nothingness which constitutes the cosmogonic act and brings all things into existence. The Beyond-Being generates Pure Being, Pure Being generates Universal Existence and Universal Existence actualizes and externalizes the latent possibilities in the world of existence as usually understood. In a hierarchic fashion there is a descent in the direction of nothingness or non-existence without this limit ever being reached.

In a language which draws from the technical vocabulary and symbolic imagery of several traditions including not only the Platonic and Christian but also the Islamic, Hindu and Buddhist, Schuon depicts in a dazzling fashion and with a freshness which can result only from vision and realization, the traditional doctrine of the nature of the One, the descent through the cosmogonic act of the various levels of existence, the question of theodicy and the presence of evil, the role of the Logos in creation, the nature of eternity and the generation of time, causality and numerous other questions of a metaphysical nature turning at every moment to answer criticisms brought by various types of modern philosophy against traditional metaphysics and drawing from different traditions to both strengthen his metaphysical presentation and to accentuate the remarkable harmony which exists in various traditions once the symbolic language used for the presentation of such knowledge is fully grasped.

## Cosmology

Cosmology, as traditionally understood, is the application of metaphysical principles to the cosmic domain. It is not a generalization of an empirical physics as one finds in the modern world. It is a knowledge of the cosmos on all its levels of existence and not only the material. Although he has not written separate treatises on cosmology itself or on the cosmological sciences such as alchemy, as have some of the followers of his thought and teachings, Schuon has devoted many pages to the study of cosmology and its spiritual significance. He has devoted in-depth studies to Islamic cosmology and angelology to which it is closely related in his *L'Oeil du coeur* and