From the online library at www.worldwisdom.com

INTRODUCTION

The title of this book deserves careful thought, for the full measure of its implications may not at first be evident.

Some readers will be surprised by the words we have chosen,[1] thinking that the truth of the matter is just the opposite. Is it not man who fashions prayer? Prayer is an act, and human beings are the agents of that act; whether what they say is prescribed by a religious tradition or uttered spontaneously in a moment of sorrow or gladness, men and women themselves do the praying, and their prayers, be they only imprecations, reflect in some way the kind of persons they are, giving form to their aspirations and fears and affording insight into the quality of their inner life. How we pray—whether only reluctantly and in moments of crisis or according to a regular discipline, and whether our prayers are of a purely devotional and discursive kind or include as well a contemplative and methodic aspect—can be a revealing testimony as to who or what we really are.

Others may respond less with surprise than a ready acceptance. Of course prayer fashions man, they will say. More than a monologue, as unbelievers suppose, our expressions of petition and praise constitute a genuine communication with God, and the answers we receive can bring about real change in our life. As a sculptor fashions clay or a poet words—as the wind or a stream gives shape to a dune or a valley—so do a man's prayers, faithfully and persistently repeated over the course of his life, come in time to transform the substance of his soul, eliminating the faults in his character, providing him with an increasing strength and stability, and bringing him step by step with God's help toward the fulfillment of his vocation to perfection. Anyone who doubts this truth, refusing out of pride or despair to call upon Heaven, has only to consult that most dazzling of proofs which is the existence of saints.

Each of these perspectives contains an element of truth; prayer both fashions and is fashioned by man, and the writings here assembled will serve in part to corroborate and amplify these important

[1] They are in fact Schuon's own formulation; see "Spiritual Perspectives X", p. 182.

insights. But if we are to grasp the full scope of what follows, there is a further-reaching and more elusive fact to be noticed. Fashioning can refer to a process of shaping or forming, the existence of the thing fashioned being presupposed in this case; but the word also has a constitutive and not merely formative sense and can be used more profoundly, as it was often used in times past, to signify an act of creation, the bringing into being of something where there was nothing before—as God fashions man in His image and likeness.

As we shall discover, this deeper significance is central to this book. "The very fact of our existence is a prayer and compels us to pray," its author has written; "I am: therefore I pray; *sum ergo oro.*"[2] If we could see ourselves as we truly are, we would realize that human nature, made to serve as *pontifex* for the rest of creation, is itself a mode of prayer, and this being so it is impossible for us not to pray, whether well or ill; even more remarkably, it is only because, or insofar as, we do pray that we can truly be said to exist, human existence being derived, with or without our awareness, from the prior reality of prayer. Man's innermost being, and not just his personality or character, is in some mysterious way interwoven into the actual fabric of prayer, and without the generative force of his orisons, he would be "without form and void". In short, prayer fashions man in making him real. What this could mean, and how we might best make sense in our own experience of so striking a claim, are questions lying at the heart of the following meditations.

The author is uniquely qualified to aid us in our search for answers. Widely acknowledged as one of the twentieth century's foremost authorities on the world's religions, and the leading exponent of the traditionalist or perennialist school of comparative religious philosophy,[3] Frithjof Schuon was the author of over twenty books, as well as numerous articles, letters, texts of spiritual instruction, and other unpublished materials; the depth of his insights and the masterful quality of his early writing had brought him interna-

[2] *Understanding Islam* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1998), p. 155. The Latin phrase *sum ergo oro*, "I am: therefore I pray", is deliberately used as a corrective to the famous expression of René Descartes: *cogito ergo sum*, "I think: therefore I am".

[3] René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy, and Titus Burckhardt were also important figures in this school.

tional recognition while he was still in his twenties, and by the time of his death in 1998 at the age of ninety, his reputation among many scholars of mysticism, esoterism, and contemplative traditions was unsurpassed.

Schuon was more than a scholar and author, however. An accomplished artist and poet,[4] he was above all a man of prayer, whose fundamental message, whatever its particular thrust in any given article or chapter, was always linked to the importance of faith and spiritual practice. "Even if our writings had on average no other result than the restitution for some of the saving barque that is prayer," he once explained, "we would owe it to God to consider ourselves profoundly satisfied."[5] Whether his focus was metaphysics and epistemology, traditional cosmology, sacred art and symbolism, mysticism and esoterism, the modern world and its errors, human nature, or the spiritual path—Schuon wrote extensively on all of these subjects—his fundamental concerns were always of an operative or maieutic order, as he sought to lead readers, not simply to a deeper understanding of the religious traditions, but to a more lucid discernment of the presence of God in their lives. Never satisfied with a purely cerebral or academic approach, Schuon was well aware that "knowledge saves only on condition that it engages all that we are: only when it constitutes a path which works and transforms, and which wounds our nature as the plough wounds the soil".[6]

In the years since his death, a number of his close associates have begun to publish biographical memoirs, and it is now widely known that Schuon's own practice was undertaken within the con-

[4] The painting on the cover of the present volume is by Schuon. A number of his other works have been collected in *The Feathered Sun: Plains Indians in Art and Philosophy* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1990). Schuon's English poems, several of which are featured in this anthology, can be found in his book *Road to the Heart* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1995). During the last three years of his life, he composed nearly thirty-five hundred lyric poems in German; four volumes of these poems have been published to date: *Glück*, *Leben*, *Sinn*, and *Liebe* (Freiburg-im-Breisgau, Basel, Vienna: Herder, 1997). Bilingual editions of the poetry—German with an English translation—include *Songs for a Spiritual Traveler: Selected Poems* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 2002) and *Adastra and Stella Maris: Poems by Frithjof Schuon* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2003).

[5] *The Play of Masks* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1992), p. vii.

[6] See "Spiritual Perspectives II", p. 24.

text of Sufism and that he served for over sixty years as a master of the traditional Shadhiliyyah-Darqawiyyah lineage.[7] He himself did not speak of this role in his published writings, however, for he wished to distinguish very carefully between his function as a spiritual master, on the one hand, and his teaching as a metaphysician and philosopher, on the other—a teaching that is universalist in its scope and intention and worlds apart from any proselytizing, sectarian, or authoritarian aim. Born in Switzerland in 1907, where he was brought up as a Protestant before becoming a Roman Catholic, he knew that those who were aware of his background might falsely conclude that he had renounced Christianity and had "converted" to Islam. In fact, his Sufi affiliation was simply a matter of vocation, the result of his quest as a young man for a form of spirituality he had been unable to find in the Western Church, and it did not conflict with his remaining an adamant defender of traditional Christological doctrine and other essential Christian truths, nor with his having a special affinity for the Christian East and the Hesychast method of prayer. "Being *a priori* a metaphysician," he wrote, "I have had since my youth a particular interest in *Advaita Vedânta*, but also in the method of realization of which *Advaita Vedânta* approves. Since I could not find this method—in its strict and esoteric form—in Europe, and since it was impossible for me to turn to a Hindu guru because of the laws of the castes, I had to look elsewhere; and since Islam *de facto* contains this method, in Sufism, I finally decided to look for a Sufi master; the outer form did not matter to me."[8]

Although Schuon made a home for himself within this spiritual framework, he was in no sense an apologist for the Islamic tradition, but maintained close ties throughout his long life with authorities and wayfarers in a wide variety of orthodox religions, each of which, he insisted, is a saving expression of a single Truth, which he variously referred to as the *sophia perennis* or *philosophia perennis*, that is, the "perennial wisdom" or "perennial philosophy". Until his later years he traveled widely, from India to North Africa to America,

[7] This is an unbroken succession of Sufi *shaykh*s which traces its beginnings to the thirteenth-century master Abu al-Hasan al-Shadhili (1196-1258) and which includes among its subsequent branches an order founded in the early nineteenth century by Mawlay al-Arabi al-Darqawi (1760-1823).

[8] From a letter of January 1996.

and his personal friendships ranged from Hindu swamis to Native American chiefs and shamans, while hundreds of correspondents and visitors from nearly every religious background looked to him for advice. A traditional master in the midst of modern life, Schuon drew upon the insights and vocabularies of Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Plains Indian, and other spiritual patrimonies, and his books, by bringing the ancient teachings to life in a way that speaks directly, and deeply, to the problems and possibilities of contemporary men and women, continue to serve as a bridge between the great saints and sages of the past and our own experience in these opening years of the twenty-first century.

Our aim in this anthology is to give the reader some sense of the range and variety of Schuon's writings on prayer and the spiritual life, though the full scope of his doctrine on these momentous subjects can by no means be covered in a single volume. In a sense everything Schuon wrote was on the subject of prayer. Asked in a series of interviews during the last years of his life what his advice would be for people in general, he consistently replied by stressing the importance of prayer. "If you understand what is essential and what is absolute," he said, "you want to assimilate it; otherwise one is a hypocrite. . . . We may think that God is God: *Brahma satyam*. But it is not enough to think it; we must assimilate it—we must 'eat' it, just as the Christians eat the body of Christ and drink his blood. . . . And in order to assimilate the truth of the Absolute, you must pray. . . . I say to people, 'You must pray, always pray.' . . . To be a human being means to be connected with God; life has no meaning without this."[9]

There is no need to discuss Schuon's perspective in any detail in this context; the following pages will provide a clear and ample picture of his views, and it makes better sense to allow him to speak for himself. On the other hand, it will perhaps be useful, by way of anticipating one of his most fundamental ideas, if we provide at

[9] See "The Basis of Religion and Metaphysics: An Interview with Frithjof Schuon", *The Quest: Philosophy, Science, Religion, the Arts*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Summer, 1996), p. 78; also "Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy", a biographical video based on interviews with Schuon in 1991 and 1992 (forthcoming). The Sanskrit phrase *Brahma satyam* means "the Supreme Reality is the truth", or simply "God is real"; it is part of a formula, traditionally ascribed to the advaitic sage Shankara (788-820), which Schuon often cited in summary of his own metaphysical outlook: "God is real; the world is appearance; the soul is not other than God."

least a glimpse of what he says concerning the principal dimensions or levels of prayer. Some readers, hearing that the author was a spiritual master and supposing without examination that they know what this means, may mistakenly conclude that his writings are not for them—that his advice will be too exotic or "technical" to speak to their condition—while others, motivated by a taste for the exotic precisely and looking only for the most advanced of pranayamic or samadhic techniques, may be surprised to learn that Schuon always began from the premise that every man, whatever his spiritual temperament or degree of intelligence, must become "as a little child", placing himself under the sacramental aegis of an orthodox religion and building his spiritual life on a firm foundation of trust in God.[10]

It is true that the Schuonian message is intended above all for esoterists—for seekers, whatever their tradition, who are motivated by a desire for *gnosis* or knowledge, who have an innate affinity for the essential Truth in all traditions and a sensitivity to the sacred in virgin nature, and who find themselves naturally drawn to a life of inwardness and contemplative prayer—and such readers will be offered much by this book. But at the same time Schuon never forgets that the esoterist is still a human being, and that there are certain fundamental temptations, struggles, and confusions that must be dealt with first before anyone can hope to make real progress in the spiritual life. While his writings are certainly demanding and often difficult, they nonetheless include a practical, down-to-earth quality, featuring acute observations on men's foibles and fantasies, and refreshingly pragmatic advice on how to deal with the world and with life; it is our hope that this collection can therefore be a source of nourishment and encouragement for many.

The multidimensionality of Schuon's spiritual writing is well illustrated by his teaching that there are three basic levels or modes of prayer: personal prayer, canonical prayer, and invocatory prayer. In personal prayer, which is essentially free and spontaneous, the praying subject is the individual person, or "such and such a man";

[10] In a list of key features of his teaching, Schuon included the qualification of "childlikeness"; it is essential to "retain alongside metaphysical science a childlike faith", "not to be exclusively adult", and to cultivate "a childlike heart capable of delighting in little things" (from an unpublished document titled "Our Perspective in a Few Words").

in this case one stands before God as a particular human being with needs and concerns, and reasons for thanksgiving, all one's own. Schuon often pointed to the Psalms as models for the personal dimension of prayer, and he frequently stressed its fundamental importance in the spiritual life, strongly criticizing those pretentious enough to suppose that they need only some advanced method of meditation or concentration and can therefore bypass this most fundamental form of communication with Heaven. Having created us with the gift of speech, God speaks to us, and He expects us to respond, externalizing our thoughts and feelings and maintaining a continual conversation with Him. Schuon writes in his autobiographical memoirs of having prayed in this way as a matter of course when he was a little boy growing up in Basel, and once he was older he was surprised to learn that everyone had not cultivated the same sort of trusting relationship with God.

A second level of orison is canonical or liturgical prayer, which is distinguished from personal prayer by the fact that the praying subject is humanity in general, or "man as such"; whether prescribed in the scriptures of a given religion or by some other traditional authority, the words of a canonical prayer are meant to express the intentions and needs of other people as well as our own, and in this way they remind us that a man is to love his neighbor as himself because in fact, metaphysically, there is only one Self. This universal dimension can be discerned in the use of the first-person plural, as in the Jewish *Shema*: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord *our* God is one Lord" (Deut. 6:4); in the Christian Lord's Prayer: "*Our* Father who art in heaven . . . give *us* this day our daily bread, and forgive *us our* debts as *we* forgive *our* debtors" (Matt. 6:9, 11-13; *cf.* Luke 11:2, 3-4); and in the Muslim *Fâtihah*: "Thee (alone) do *we* worship; Thee (alone) do *we* ask for help; show *us* the straight path" (*Sûrah* "The Opening" [1]:4-5). Schuon noted that the Lord's Prayer is introduced in the Gospel with an imperative, "When ye pray, say" (Luke 11:2), implying that the canonical prayers of one's religion, far from being mere suggestions or options, are incumbent on all the faithful and should be treated as an obligatory part of everyone's spiritual efforts.

Finally, there is a third and highest mode of prayer, variously referred to by Schuon as quintessential prayer, Prayer of the Heart, ejaculatory prayer, and invocatory prayer; this is the capstone of the spiritual method he taught and the form of prayer he accentuated in all his published and unpublished writings. Like the first

two modes, invocatory prayer presupposes man's distinctive gift of speech, but its essential value lies not in the discursive meaning of what is said—not in the propositional significance of the formulations as such—but in the fact that the words enshrine a revealed Name of God, the Name in turn serving as a vehicle or embodiment of the Divinity. Even as the bread and wine of the Eucharist are the "Real Presence" of Christ, so also is the Name of God understood to be God Himself.[11] Thus, in contrast to the first two kinds of prayer, the subject or agency of invocation is not primarily human—it is neither the individual human person nor men in general who initiate the act—but rather divine, and it is for this reason that Schuon regarded invocatory orison as the most perfect and complete kind of prayer. Noteworthy examples of the practice include the Jesus Prayer in Christianity, the method of *dhikr* in Islam, the *nembutsu* in Pure Land Buddhism, and the various forms of *japa-yoga* in Hinduism, where the Names of Krishna and Rama can be found among a variety of invocatory *mantra*s. Building as it were on the two "lower dimensions" of prayer, invocation gives "solidity" to the spiritual life, providing seekers of every aptitude with that greatest of boons, which is to have arrived at the goal even while one is still in the midst of the journey. In Schuon's words:

> All great spiritual experiences agree in this: there is no common measure between the means put into operation and the result. "With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible," says the Gospel. In fact, what separates man from divine Reality is but a thin partition: God is infinitely close to man, but man is infinitely far from God. This partition, for man, is a mountain; man stands in front of a mountain that he must remove with his own

[11] Schuon liked to quote the words of the Hindu saint Ramakrishna (1834-86), "God and His Name are identical" (see Chapter 4, "Modes of Prayer", p. 60), but the same essential idea can be found throughout the world's religions, including traditions as diverse as Judaism, in which respect for God's holiness required that the sacred *Tetragrammaton*—the four Hebrew consonants (transliterated as YHWH) of the Name that God gave to Moses on Sinai (Ex. 3:14)—never be pronounced aloud except by the high priest on the day of Yom Kippur, and the Buddhist sect of *Jôdo-Shinshû*, where the efficacy of invocation is based on the vow of the Buddha Amida that all who repeat his Name will experience the blessings of his Pure Land. "Why speak at length?" asks Saint Gregory of Sinai, referring to the grace of the Name. "Prayer is God, who accomplishes everything in everyone" ("On Commandments and Doctrines", *The Philokalia*, ed. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware [London: Faber and Faber, 1995], Vol. IV, p. 238).

> hands. He digs away the earth, but in vain; the mountain remains. Man however goes on digging, in the Name of God. And the mountain vanishes. It was never there.[12]

The following chapters have been chosen from Schuon's published corpus of twenty-three books. Written originally in French,[13] the selections are here presented in a fully revised English translation; bibliographical details, including information about previous English editions, may be found in the list of Sources at the end of this volume. As it happens, most of Schuon's books are themselves anthologies, which he periodically assembled from articles that had been initially published, beginning in 1933 and continuing through 1997, in a variety of European, Persian, and American journals, including *Le Voile d'Isis*, *Études Traditionnelles*, *Studies in Comparative Religion*, *Sophia Perennis*, *Connaissance des Religions*, and *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies*.

Many of these articles were occasional in nature, having been composed in response to a broad range of questions and problems, often posed by those who sought the author's spiritual counsel. As a result, Schuon's writings are often more meditative than discursive in character, with any given essay ranging across a number of fascinating subjects and including illustrations drawn from an astonishing variety of sources. The selections presented here are filled with insights, not only on the subject of prayer itself, but on the presuppositions and goals of the spiritual life in general. Specific topics include the importance of self-domination as a prelude to self-transcendence, the differences between intrinsic morality and social benevolence, beauty and the aesthetic function of intelligence, the reason for trials and suffering, ontological levels in man and the cosmos, the relationship between method and grace, the interpenetration of knowledge and love, symbols and themes of meditation, the necessity of the virtues—above all, humility, charity, and veracity—for assimilating metaphysical truth, the spiritual significance of

[12] *Stations of Wisdom* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1995), p. 157. The scriptural quotation comes from Matthew 19:26 (*cf.* Mark 10:27).

[13] With the exception of his first book, which was written in German and has not been translated into English, *Leitgedanken zur Urbesinnung* (Zurich and Leipzig: Orell Fussli Verlag, 1935), all of Schuon's published writings were composed in French; some of the letters and other previously unpublished selections included in the Appendix to the present volume were also originally written in German.

the regions of the human body, initiation and initiatic or esoteric techniques of concentration, and the "two planes of relationship" between the servant and the Lord and the Intellect and the Self.

Because of the wide-ranging nature of Schuon's work and its poetic—one might say musical—quality, a firm categorization of his writings is impossible; he himself spoke of the "discontinuous and sporadic manner" of his expositions, acknowledging that while "there is no great doctrine that is not a system", there is equally none that "expresses itself in an exclusively systematic fashion".[14] As the chapters of this book unfold, the reader will be asked to traverse a spectrum of ideas extending from the prerequisites of the spiritual life as a whole to the ultimate aim of that life, namely, self-realization in God. But the movement is by no means strictly linear; we have chosen in fact to highlight the "discontinuous" style of the author by punctuating the text with several of his English poems as well as with two chapters of shorter, aphoristic reflections or *leitgedanken* that are of an especially "musical" character, the sections of these chapters being interspersed throughout the book in a numbered series of "spiritual perspectives".[15] As in our previous anthology of Schuon's writings,[16] the book concludes with an Appendix of previously unpublished materials, including spiritual texts written for his disciples; selections from his autobiographical memoirs, "Memories and Meditations"; and samples of his extensive correspondence with seekers from many different traditions.

The breadth of the author's erudition can be somewhat daunting, especially for those not accustomed to reading philosophical and religious works; his pages frequently contain allusions to ideas, historical figures or events, and sacred texts that illumine or amplify his meaning, but a citation or other reference is not usually provided. With this fact in mind and as an aid to the interested reader, we have included a series of Editor's Notes in this volume; in order

[14] *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*, trans. Gustavo Polit (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1986), p. 1.

[15] The chapters in question, "Knowledge and Love" and "The Spiritual Virtues", come from Schuon's book *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* (for bibliographical information, see p. 238-39); their style is reminiscent of the genre of "centuries" found among the Orthodox fathers of *The Philokalia*, whom Schuon frequently quotes in these chapters, and in such writers as Thomas Traherne (*c.* 1636-74).

[16] *The Fullness of God: Frithjof Schuon on Christianity* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2004).

to be as unobtrusive as possible, we have chosen not to interrupt Schuon's prose with asterisks or other symbols, leaving it to the reader to consult the notes when in need. It should be understood that this editorial apparatus does not presume to offer an interpretation of Schuon's teaching; as remarked above, we prefer to allow his writings to speak for themselves. Organized by chapter and tagged to the relevant page numbers, the notes are designed simply to provide helpful supports for those who may be unacquainted with the names of various philosophical writers and spiritual authorities or with certain religious and other traditional teachings. Chapter and verse citations are given for quotations from the Bible and other sacred texts; dates and biographical summaries are provided for historical figures; brief explanations are offered concerning the fine points of theological controversies and the principal doctrines of various schools of thought.

One final point should be mentioned. It is customary for Schuon to use a number of technical terms in his writings, drawn from a multitude of traditions and involving several classical languages, including Sanskrit, Arabic, Latin, and Greek, and a Glossary has therefore been provided as well; here one will find, in transliteration, foreign words and phrases appearing both in Schuon's text and in our editorial notes, together with translations and definitions.

James S. Cutsinger

Introduction to Prayer Fashions Man by James S. Cutsinger

Features in

Prayer Fashions Man: Frithjof Schuon on the Spiritual Life
© 2005 World Wisdom, Inc.

Selected and Edited by James S. Cutsinger,
Foreword by Philip Zaleski
All Rights Reserved. For Personal Usage Only
www.worldwisdom.com