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The Milk of the Virgin: The Prophet, the Saint and the Sage

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Prophets, saints, and sages:
The prophet brings a form of faith — a religion;
The saint lives it; the sage opens
A luminous realm of Pure Spirit
Beyond form. Prophets are also wise men,
Yet about the highest Truth they speak softly;
To the sage, holiness bestows light.

God and our heart are united in eternity.

(*Frithjof Schuon*)[1]

There have been a few controversies in the last decade about the teaching and personality of the 20th century Perennialist author and founder of the *Maryamiyyah* Sufi order, Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998),

[1] Frithjof Schuon, *Songs without Names XII / XVI* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2007).

also known under the name of Sheikh Isa Nur Ad-Din Ahmad. These controversies have been reflected to various degrees in articles published by traditionalist journals as well as in recent scholarly publications. In the following paper, it will be argued that Frithjof Schuon is best understood neither as the founder of a new religion (a prophet in the classical sense of the word) nor as a Muslim saint, but as a universal sage, a spokesman for the *religio perennis* whose connection with Islam, although providential, remains secondary in the context of his message of esoterism, universality and primordiality.

Before we engage in an attempt at defining a sage, we will need to refute two types of criticisms against Schuon. Religious exclusivists have argued that Frithjof Schuon succumbed to a primordialist illusion. He attempted more or less consciously to restore the Adamic religion and to institute the *religio perennis* as an autonomous and separate creed, a "meta-religion" for the initiates. A few academics have also portrayed the Schuonian perspective as a kind of "neo-Sufism," ultimately falling outside the scale of an Islamic orthodoxy that they conceive in a very rigorist, almost Salafi manner. These two interpretations point in the same direction. They call into question the authority of Frithjof Schuon as a religious philosopher and as a spiritual master.

The first and second parts of this article will successively refute both of the aforementioned interpretations. As we will show, Schuon never regarded the *sophia* or *religio perennis* as a substitute for a revealed religion. It would also be inadequate however to characterize Schuon simply as a Sufi master open to the other religions. Even though his message was providentially manifested within the Sufi framework and not superimposed on it, Schuon was consciously and from the very beginning centered on the *sophia perennis*, the everlasting and informal wisdom and not on Islam. In the third part of this article, we will finally propose a different characterization of Schuon. On the basis of a tripartite division suggested by Schuon himself between the prophet, the saint and the sage, we will conclude that Sheikh Isa possesses the stature and the function of a sage, of a Platonic or Hindu type. For this reason, it is impossible to attribute to him a particular religion. Those who reproach him for usurping the prophetic function show that they have

not fully understood who he was as well as the Marian wisdom he was charged to formulate in our time. Given the nature of our topic, we will have to touch in the course of our study upon a large variety of questions, returning more than once to the same question, each time from a different perspective. In fact, it can hardly be otherwise when analyzing a figure as multidimensional as Frithjof Schuon.

This study relies primarily on Schuon's public and private writings as well as on the book, *Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teaching* by Jean-Baptiste Aymard and Patrick Laude.[2] In our mind, this book represents a unique biographical and doctrinal synthesis, which brilliantly demonstrates, if at all needed, that in the case of Schuon it is futile to oppose the message and the messenger. Our interpretation offered below is much indebted to their work.

Part One: Prophethood and the *Religio Perennis*

Before examining the reason why some may have wrongly believed that Schuon claimed for himself the rank of a prophet or even a revealer, it is first essential to remark that according to the unanimous teaching of all the surviving faith traditions, the possibility of a new revelation is *a priori* excluded till the end of the present (final) cycle. It would thus be bizarre in the extreme for Schuon to claim, like so many New Age gurus that he had come to institute a new form of religion or even to restore the primordial religion, before the apocalypse and the coming of the Redeemer. In fact, Schuon never attempted to return to the Adamic religion and to present himself as the agent of this restoration. His appeal to the *religio perennis* was rather inspired by the disinterested recognition of "what already is," of an everlasting and objective set of truths. He regarded his mission as being to recall to "those who have ears to hear." As Olivier Dard has rightly argued, Schuon conceived of the *religio perennis* as a vertical and archetypical Reality rather than as of a distant historical origin (Guénon's Primordial Tradition) or as a promise for the future (a new Golden Age). We could add that his

[2] Jean Baptiste Aymard and Patrick Laude, *Frithjof Schuon, Life and teaching* (Albany: Suny Press, 2004).

reference to it amounts to an opening to a primordial and universal inspiration, taking place in the context of a purely esoteric and *jnanic* path.

As a *religio* and not solely as a *sophia,* this perennial wisdom certainly affects the manner of practicing one's religion and of living one's faith but this *religio perennis* or *religio cordis* never represented in Schuon's eyes a totally autonomous and self-sufficient means of salvation or deification. In its name, he never rejected nor downplayed God-instituted forms. On the contrary, he constantly stressed the importance of both orthodoxy and orthopraxy, and this even for esoterists. Schuon provided a four-fold definition of the *religio perennis* that clearly shows that it does not represent a substitute for a revealed religion and cannot be identified with the primordial religion practiced by Adam and Eve before the fall. The four elements of the *religio perennis* are: (1) the discrimination between the Real and the unreal, between *Atma* and *Maya;* (2) the concentration on the Real (*Atma*); (3) the practice of fundamental virtues; (4) the belonging to a traditional and revealed religion.[3]

Schuon did not frame this notion of *religio perennis* as a new religion, with its own dogma and rites. Esoterists in every orthodox tradition have a more or less direct and conscious access to this "underlying religion" but according to the Schuonian perspective, it cannot be a question of practicing the *religio perennis* as a separate form. It is however legitimate to use the word *religio* because, in the etymological sense, the *religio perennis* "relates" man to Heaven and ultimately to the Absolute. It refers to a primordial heredity and to what binds mankind to God in the deepest sense.

In Schuonian thought, the appeal to this perennial connection goes hand with hand with an effort to penetrate the inner meaning of each particular form. Religious forms may be more or less "metaphysically transparent" but Schuon was always very attentive to their phenomenological diversity. He was never content to reduce them to the simplicity of a unique diagram. On the contrary, he often returned to the *raison d'être* of this diversity in his writings. On the one hand, for

[3] Frithjof Schuon, "Religio Perennis," *Light on the Ancient Worlds* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1984).

Schuon, formal religions are *upayas* ("celestial strategies"), providential superimpositions or veils on the core-essence of the *sophia perennis*. They serve "as the vestment of the 'naked truth,' the primordial, perennial and universal religion."[4] On the other hand, religious forms correspond to as many archetypes in the "divine Spirit" itself or hypostatic faces of the "divine Subject." They anticipate in the divine order the plurality of the historical and ethnical receptacles.

We recognize here, on the plane of religious forms, the two aspects of *Maya* in the Vedantic doctrine. *Maya* represents both a power of illusion and a power of projection. Religions are simultaneously a veiled light and a veil of light but they are nevertheless equally "willed by God." Each religion creates a homogenous cosmos, characterized by its own spiritual laws and its particular perspective on the Absolute. From a more sapiential viewpoint, revelation also corresponds to a sudden and macrocosmic objectivation of the universal Intellect. Schuon explained that religions providentially supply for the lack of spiritual intuition in fallen man. Unlike the primordial human being of the *satya yuga* or the *jivanmukta*, the average man of the *kali yuga* does not benefit anymore from a subjective revelation. He does not receive spontaneous unveilings of truths virtually inscribed in the substance of his intelligence. For this reason, he needs what religion offers to overcome the force of *samsara*.

Schuon wrote not only about the *religio perennis*, but also of "quintessential esoterism." The two coincide to some extent, although the latter is more akin to the perspective of immanence. This "quintessential esoterism" is not based on some sort of theological or mystical speculation but has objective premises: the "presiding idea" of a given revelation. By this, Schuon means the fundamental symbols and rites, governing its spiritual economy. In the case of Christianity, it is the idea of Divine manifestation: the complementarity between the mysteries of the Incarnation and Redemption and the identification of Christ with the Heart. Another source for "quintessential esoterism" is the "nature of things," by which Schuon refers to the essences as they are seen through the "naturally supernatural" Intellect, the immanent Logos in man.

[4] Frithjof Schuon, "Plays of the Mask," *The Play of Masks* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1992).

Schuon is however forced to recognize that there exist *de facto* two degrees within esoterism: an absolute esoterism—quintessential esoterism—and a relative esoterism. Relative esoterism, which coincides with most of the historical forms of Sufism and Christian mysticism, is characterized by a very problematic solidarity with the exoteric mentality. It prolongs exoterism more or less harmoniously, "radicalizing or redefining it in a certain way, but only insufficiently perceiving its relativity."[5] Relative esoterism also tends to justify its existence and its positions thanks to an inspirationist exegesis and a hyperbolic and fideist hagiography. The price attached to this attitude is the lowering of esoterism to the anti-metaphysic level of volitive man—the *vaisyas* and the *ksatriyas* rather than the *brahmanas* to refer to the Hindu caste system- and the inevitable mix between the values of the two domains. For exoterism, the driving force is the aspiration of the soul to salvation. For esoterism, what counts above all is the disinterested and unifying contemplation of impersonal Truth. The human spirit is attracted by the celestial ray and wants to return to its heavenly origin.

Schuon insisted more than once on the Aryan and Brahmanical character of his perspective. As a consequence, his teaching is often much closer to Asian non-dualism than "soufisme moyen" or conventional Sufism, even though, in the Semitic domain, a pristine esoterism cannot fail to manifest sporadically and bearing in mind also that all Sufi esoterism was not reduced to writing.[6] To one of his correspondents, Schuon once explained that such a radical form of esoterism necessarily exists in every religious climate because it is adapted to pneumatic natures. This gave him the right to create an esoteric organization of a "vedantic type," that is to say based on universal metaphysics, within the framework of Islam, and this without

[5] Frithjof Schuon, "The Exo-Esoteric Symbiosis," *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2007) 22.

[6] "The general impression given by Sufi literature must not cause us to forget that there were many Sufis who left no writings. …It may be that certain minds instructed in the "vertical" way—which refers to the mysterious filiation of Khidr—…may have voluntarily abstained from formulating their thought in such an environment." See: Frithjof Schuon, *Sufism, Veil and Quintessence*, 103. Khidr is not absent from Schuon's life. He possibly met him twice while he was in Mostaghanem and may have even received his blessing at this occasion.

falling into heterodoxy. To this he added in the same letter, that his exceptional situation is intimately connected to the cyclical conditions and the end of the *kali yuga*. In general Schuon constantly stressed the terminal character of esoterism, symbolized in Judaism by the return of Elijah,[7] although he never succumbed to the temptation of "millenarianism." According to Schuon, the traditional science of religion, the inner knowledge of the religious traditions and their "transcendent unity" could not become the object of a new prophetic revelation. Such a science was nevertheless reserved to the end of time, for that moment in history when boundaries between religious forms would ultimately collapse and when new intellectual keys, which only esoterism is able to provide, would be needed to explain the plurality of the religious revelations and the limitations of their confessional credos.

The Catholic author Jean Borella has opposed a relativistic and hermeneutical definition of esoterism to Schuon's "quintessential esoterism." [8] He has argued that the notion of an "absolute esoterism," beyond confessional denominations and identical to pure metaphysics is a dangerous abstraction because in the post-Adamic state, man is not qualified to follow a metaphysical path as Schuon conceives it. Fallen man has lost his capacity to know universal essences directly and he can perceive them only through a "semantic experience" defined as a confused intuition of meaning, of an intelligible unity. As a consequence, for Borella, what differentiates concrete esoterism from exoterism remains a question of degree. Esoterism only provides a deeper understanding of a given historical revelation but ultimately even a metaphysical approach like Vedanta is reducible to a particular, although eminent form of religious hermeneutics.

Borella's starting point here is clearly not a pristine non-dualism but a Semitic mythology, a dynamic and historicist *upaya* structured around a

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[7] Leo Schaya, "The Eliatic Function," *Studies in Comparative Religion* (Winter-Spring 1979) 33. It is precisely because of the terminality of esoterism that Schuon's message has been qualified by his long-life student Leo Schaya as "Eliatic," referring to the prophet Elijah who according to the Kabbalah will come back just before the end of time to reveal the esoteric meaning of Judaism and the other religions. It is, however, important to insist that what Leo Schaya had in view was less an individual incarnation than a collective and intellectual function.

[8] Jean Borella, *Guenonian Esoterism And Christian Mystery* translated by John G. Champoux (Sophia Perennis et Universalis, 2005), I, 2-3.

volitive eschatology. It is precisely the religious nature of this perspective that leads him not only to wrongly identify the *religio perennis* with the *religio adamica* but also to derive absolute conclusions from the Fall of man, ultimately downplaying the human ability for unifying contemplation. On this latter question, we agree with Borella that mere intellectual intuition should not be confused with ontological identification between the knower and the known. Only pure knowledge of the unconditioned Absolute is absolute and beyond duality. By contrast, knowledge of the relative is relative, and a duality thereby persists between the subject and the conditioned object, even for the most sanctified soul. But none of the traditionalist authors suggested otherwise—not even Guénon when he misquoted Aristotle. However, we do not believe that it is possible to reduce the sapiential intuition to merely a vague and speculative "semantic experience." To do so is to deny, along with the possibility of supra-rational knowledge of the essences, the possibility for fallen man to transcend the duality between the subject and the object and to attain a metaphysical type of realization. By limiting knowledge as Kant proposes, we thereby close the door to an authentic path of gnosis that culminates in a deifying union with the non-dual Reality (*Paratman*). At the summit of Supreme Reality, Schuon teaches, it is not man who knows the Absolute or the All-possibility, but it is the Absolute which knows Itself in the mirror of the human soul, and the question of limitations affecting the individual receptacle becomes secondary.[9]

Let us add that some of these criticisms largely reify Schuon's more subtle dialectic, which constantly insists on the gap existing between

[9] It is noteworthy that the same author who criticizes Schuon's understanding of esoterism praised him before for having restored "a theophanic conception of the intelligence," even calling the Schuonian oeuvre "a miracle," insisting on Schuon's "realism" and his capacity "to perceive the problems as they are." See: Jean Borella, "Frithjof Schuon ou la Sainteté de l"intelligence," *Religion of the Heart, essays presented to Frithjof Schuon on his eightieth birthday,* edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr and William Stoddart (Washington: Foundation for Traditional Studies, 1991) 19-34. A few years later, he apparently sees this "miracle" under a very different light and he has even recently formulated "theoretical objections" against the doctrine of the "transcendent unity of religions," suggesting that Christianity was superior to the "cosmolatric" religions from the East. See: Jean Borella, "The Problematic of the Unity of Religion", *Sacred Web* 17 (Spring 2006) 157-182.

intellectual knowledge and spiritual union as well as on the need to integrate the psychical elements during initiatory work. In fact, it is plain that fallen man, even if he is an Advaitin, necessarily starts from a given revelation in his journey to God. Shankara in his *Brahma-Sutra Bhasya* explains that man may attain the supreme state without observing the prescribed rites because of his attention perpetually concentrated on *Brahman*. But he nevertheless insists on the necessity of Vedic revelation in order to acquire true divine knowledge and Schuon never dreamt of contesting such a truth. Far from taking religious revelations lightly, Schuon liked to paraphrase the well-known saying of Saint Irenaeus and to explain that at the time of a revelation, it was *Atma* itself that entered into *Maya* so that *Maya* might be able to return into *Atma*. That being said, in the Vedantic perspective adopted by Schuon, a revelation is ultimately considered a means to burn away the empirical and egotist envelopes, in order to actualize a pre-existent and incorruptible knowledge inscribed in the Heart-intellect. As far as individual intellect (*buddhi*) is concerned, it belongs to man only from the standpoint of ignorance (*avidya*). But approached from the standpoint of the highest truth, intelligence is the reverberation of *Atma* at the center of the human microcosm. Geometrically speaking, "the Intellect is a ray rather than a circle; it 'emanates' from God rather than 'reflecting' Him."[10] The goal of sapiential esoterism is for the individual to merge into the universal Spirit by following this celestial ray.

As we have mentioned previously, some have regretted that Schuon does not pay more attention to the hermeneutical dimension of esoterism. It is true that for obvious reasons, Schuon is less interested by scriptural exegesis than by universal metaphysics. However, Schuon's quintessential esoterism, to the extent that it penetrates the inner meaning of every possible *revelatum* and identifies its "presiding idea," can also be characterized as hermeneutical in a plenary manner. What Schuon has to offer to us is a hermeneutics of the Sacred *as such* and in a far more rigorous and universal sense than Mircea Eliade's phenomenology. Its vocation is to understand the "language of the Self" and to teach us, to the extent that is humanly possible, the "grammar of

[10] Frithjof Schuon, "*Maya*," *Light on the Ancient Worlds*.

the Divine." Schuon prudently observes however that the traditional "science of religions," although necessarily inspired by God and not elaborated by human reason, is more contingent than gnosis itself, crystallizing only in providential and exceptional circumstances.

At this point, it might be interesting to contrast briefly Frithjof Schuon's esoteric ecumenism with Ramakrishna's universalism. Along with his reading of René Guénon and the *Bhagavad-Gita,* it is through his reading of the *Gospel of Ramakrishna* that Schuon initially discovered Hinduism. A chapter of *Spiritual perspectives and Human Facts*[11] is dedicated to Ramakrishna and to his ambivalent posterity. Not only does the Hindu saint, who was a fervent devotee of the Divine Mother, profess the convergence of the great religions, but having realized the supreme state as an Hindu, he followed the Muslim and the Christian paths, establishing on a practical and existential ground their intrinsic orthodoxy and their convergence with traditional Hinduism. In an interview with Jean Bies,[12] Schuon refers to Ramakrishna as an Eastern precursor of the Perennialist school, but it is clear that despite the great plasticity of his intelligence, Ramakrishna embodies the "unity of religions" in an essentially *bhaktic* way. By contrast, Schuon not only sees the underlying and common substance of every religious form. He also understands the meaning of their diversity as well as demonstrates their "transcendent unity" on the basis of pure metaphysics and a God-given science of their archetypes *in divinis.* In his perspective, the providential economy of sacred forms and their mystical convergence are illuminated by the purely objective and disinterested light of *jnana.* If both Schuon and Ramakrishna pass beyond religious forms, the liberating point is nevertheless located at two different levels. In Ramakrishna's experience, their outer shells are broken under the pressure of Divine love, whereas in Schuon's perspective, the outer shells are first restored in their divine transparency. Ultimately, the outer religious forms have to vanish in the light of the Inner Self but only after revealing their celestial *raisons d'être*. Those who believe that human

[11] Frithjof Schuon, "The Vedanta," *Spiritual Perspectives and human facts (*Bloomington*:* World Wisdom, 2007).
[12] Jean Biès, "Frithjof Schuon: A Face of Eternal Wisdom," *Sophia*, 4 no 1 (Summer 1998, 9).

intelligence is too weak to know God's intentions will probably object that this Schuonian doctrine of the transcendent unity of religions is excessively kataphatic. All that we should reasonably admit is that there exists a plurality of religions, inspired to some degree by God but it would be impossible to know their *raisons d'être* and the precise nature of their relationships. Schuon was however not a profane philosopher like Hegel. He never claimed to have exhausted the Divine Mystery with his thought—the doctrine of the transcendent unity of religions is not "the philosophy of the Absolute Spirit"—but only to have better explained than others what can be conceptually expressed about the logic underlying religious diversity.

Schuon defines the level where religious divergences are reconciled as the domain of the Virgin Mary, Sayyidatna Maryam in Islam. Along with the Russian Sophiologists,[13] Schuon identifies the Virgin with the Wisdom of the *Proverbs* and the *Ecclesiastes*. He even identifies her with the *religio perennis* itself. Schuon's "mystical contacts" with the Virgin explain the very special place she occupied in his spiritual life and her role as the patroness of his community.[14] In 1965 while on a boat at Port-Vendres between the French coast and Morocco, "the Divine Mercy overwhelmed [Schuon] in a special manner; it approached [him] inwardly in a feminine form … which [he] knew to be the Holy Virgin."[15] Schuon later described the coming of the Virgin as a sign of his "heavenly adoption" and after these moments of Grace, Schuon added "*Maryamiyyah*" to the names of his *tariqah* to distinguish it from the North African Alawi *tariqah*. By her living presence, the Virgin Mary initiated a new chapter in Schuon's life, communicating a

[13] Sergei Bulgakov, *Sophia, the Wisdom of God: an outline of Sophiology* (Hudson: Lindisfarne Books, 1993)

[14] Since the end of the French revolution and with the collapse of what remained of traditional Europe, the Virgin seems to have been particularly active (Rue du Bac, Lourdes, Fatima, Garabandal etc…) transmitting messages that were often both merciful and apocalyptic. Schuon's contacts with the Virgin took place in an esoteric climate very different from late Catholic mysticism, but he also insisted on the eschatological function of the Virgin.

[15] Quoted from Schuon's unpublished autobiography by James Cutsinger, "The Virgin," *Sophia* 6, no 2 (Winter 2000) republished as "Colorless light and pure air" on James Cutsinger's website:
http://www.cutsinger.net/pdf/colorless_light_and_pure_air.pdf

more *shaktic* dimension to his message, complementary to his intellectual and more masculine insights on the metaphysical truth.

With this mariophany, it is even more difficult to follow those who would like to reduce Schuon's *religio perennis* to the level of a mental abstraction. Some readers might nevertheless express fears that this growing interest in the Holy Virgin, by introducing an *avataric* intermediary distinct from the Prophet of Islam, represented a step toward the foundation of a new religion. Schuon made it clear however that by bestowing her Grace on him, Mary did not intend to inspire another religion or a "new religious movement." He interpreted her coming as a heavenly "seal" and a blessing for his supra-confessional perspective. For Schuon, the terrestrial Virgin, the mother of Jesus, transmits a message of humility, interiority and resignation to the Will of God. She incarnates the sanctified soul and the creature in its primordial state (*fitra*). In Sufi terms, she perfectly realizes "holy poverty" (*faqr*) as well as the primordial servitude (*ubudiyya*) of the creature in the face of God. On the operative plane, she is a model for those who remain in spiritual retreat (*khalwah*) and who invoke the divine Name in order to purify their heart.

If Mary symbolizes on earth the faithful servant (*abd*) and the spiritual retreat, in Heaven she is exalted as the mother of the *avatara* and the "Mother of the Book" (*umm al-kitab*). Schuon calls her, after the Iranian Sufi Ruzbihan Baqli, "the mother of all the prophets and the prophecy and the substance of the original sainthood"[16] and along with a few Sufis and Islamic theologians,[17] he attributes to her the status of a prophetess (*nabiyyah* and even *rasulah*). In general, Schuon distinguishes "four categories of incarnation, two of them 'major' and two 'minor,' each of the two groups comprising a 'plenary' [or solar] and a 'partial' [or lunar] incarnation." The major *avataras* are the "founders of religions, or in circumstances where the question of a renewal of form could not arise, the supreme dispensers of grace, such as Rama or Krishna." The great sages and saints "who within the framework of a given tradition and consequently, on a lesser scale,

[16] Frithjof Schuon, "The Koranic Message of Sayyidna Isa" and "The Virginal Doctrine," *Form and Substance in the Religions* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2002).
[17] Aliyah Schleifer, *Mary the Blessed Virgin of Islam (*Louisville: *Fons Vitae*, 1997).

repeat the function of the major *avataras*" are the minor incarnations.[18] There exist also feminine *avataras* or *shaktis*, whose role is "always relatively secondary, whatever the level of their manifestation."[19] Mary is virtually the only feminine *avatara* of the Semitic world.[20] She pertains to the category of the major *avataras* of the lunar type, although when she is conceived as the feminine aspect of the *Logos* and even as its essence, her wisdom necessarily transcends these distinctions.

Whereas the Prophet of Islam represents the path and the deployment of all the perfections and Jesus the wisdom of the inward, the Virgin incarnates the non-legislative and primordial wisdom. By contrast with the wisdom of Solomon, which is at once "encyclopedic, cosmological, metaphysical and also practical," the wisdom of Mary "does not embrace certain contingent orders." It is "of necessity metaphysical, mystical and eschatological", and "thereby contains in virtuality every possible science, as the one and colorless light contains the varied and colored hues of the rainbow."[21] It follows that her *risalah* is not the *risalah* of her son, but her son himself, who symbolizes in this context the *Logos* as such. If religious life is "a complex system" presented to us as "an indispensable condition of salvation, outside of which there is nothing that could save us," there must necessarily be "a level where these systems as such lose much of their importance." This is not other than "the domain of Mary, the Virgin Mother who, according to a symbolism common to Christianity and Islam, has suckled her children—the Prophets and sages—from the beginning and outside of

[18] About the distinction between major and minor *avataras*, Schuon adds: "A 'great incarnation', who conforms to cyclic laws and in whom Deity is manifested in adirect and active way, differs totally, not only of ordinary men, 'geniuses' included, but even from a 'lesser incarnation,' such as takes place through ahuman receptacle where the divine manifestation is in asense 'indirect' and 'passive'." See: Frithjof Schuon, "Vicissitudes of spiritual temperaments," *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2007) 44.

[19] Frithjof Schuon, "Manifestations of the Divine Principle," *Stations of Wisdom* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1995) 86.

[20] Some more minor manifestations are nevertheless to be found such as Bilqis and Fatima.

[21] Frithjof Schuon, "The Seat of Wisdom," *The Fullness of God,* edited by James Cutsinger (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2004) 138-139.

time."[22] In the secret of the mystical night (*layla*), the profound peace (*sakina*) descends on the hearts of those she has elected to receive her perennial wisdom as well as the heritage of the primordial religion (*din al-fitra*).

In Islamic terms, the Holy Virgin occupies the station of the non-legislative prophethood (*nubuwwa 'amma*). As it is well known, certain Sufis such as Ibn Arabi, who have necessarily an infinitely lesser status than the Virgin, claimed to have realized this station. For them, it is the only kind of prophethood still accessible after the Koranic revelation and the *risalah* of Muhammad. This degree excludes the revelation of a new law (*shariah)* and coincides with the highest degree of Sainthood and the station of Proximity (*maqam al-qurba*). But for Schuon, the Virgin was not only a *nabiyyah* but also a *rasulah*. Because of this supereminent perfection, indispensable for her role as "Coredemptress," the Virgin could not just be one among those who have attained this station. It is sometimes said that the *avatara* was "created before creation." Similarly, it can be said in the case of the Virgin that she occupied this *maqam* "before creation." Thisuniversal and informal prophethood is traditionally symbolized by Khidr, the prophet without community and the mysterious companion of Moses. But on the basis of the Koran and the sacred history, it seems perfectly plausible to associate it with the figure of Maryam especially if following Schuon we recognize in the Virgin the terrestrial reflection of the *Logos* under its feminine aspect and identify her with esoteric knowledge (*haqiqa).*

Being virgin and mother, Maryam also gives a human form to divine Mercy. Usually, the soul is considered as feminine in the face of God but in this new perspective, the spiritual traveler is masculine in the face of the feminine *Rahmah.* He becomes the son of the Holy Virgin. According to Schuon, *Rahmah* is not only an attribute of God (*Allah*) but is "integrated into the Divine Essence inasmuch as it is fundamentally none other than the radiating Infinitude of the Principle"[23] or the All-Possibility which prefigures relativity in the Absolute itself. It results from this doctrinal point that it is impossible to reduce the Schuonian

[22] Frithjof Schuon, "Alterations in Semitic Monotheism," *Christianity/Islam: Essays on Esoteric Ecumenicism* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, Bloomington, 1985).
[23] Frithjof Schuon, "Hypostatic Dimensions of Unity," *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence*.

Mariology to the level of a prophetology. Schuon's insight on the Marian mystery culminates with her exaltation beyond the domain of the Logos, to the degree of a "Name" of God.[24] In Schuon's universal perspective, it is the same Name that manifests in different religious climates as the Hindu Goddesses, the female *Bodhisattvas* or the Holy Virgin. Mary may even be identified vertically with the divine Reality itself that the Sufis sometimes designate by the feminine word *Dhat*, meaning the Essence.

This brief survey of Schuon's Mariology shows that Virginal Mystery is truly located at the core of his message of essentiality and universality and it is therefore impossible to speak of the *religio perennis* as a pure abstraction and without mentioning the merciful personification of the Holy Mother. To conclude on the notion of *religio perennis*, it is also worth making the following comment. To attribute to Schuon a prophetic status—a status that he never claimed for himself—might be acceptable, but only if we are referring to the non-legislative prophethood in Sufism. As we have already remarked, this degree is directly related to the Marian wisdom. But the realization of the sage who has become, by virtue of a particular election, "his own prophet" precisely excludes the revelation of a new religion. The history of Sufism also proves that such a claim, even if exoterically unacceptable, would not represent a move toward the institutionalization of the *religio perennis* or the creation of a *religio schuonica.*

Part Two: Islamic Sainthood and Quintessential Esoterism

In the first part of this article, we frequently referred to Sufi notions to explain Schuon's teaching. It cannot be denied however, that when he deals with gnosis and the religious Law (*shariah*) or the meaning of religious pluralism, Schuon frequently departs from the opinion of the Muslim esoterists including so revered a saint as Ibn 'Arabi.[25] In fact, if

[24] Frithjof Schuon, "Nirvana," *Treasures of Buddhism* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1993) 91-92.

[25] Interestingly enough in this respect, Schuon has remarked in private that his perspective is sometimes much closer to Rumi, Niffari or Shabistari than to Ibn 'Arabi.

Schuon's relationship with Islam needs to be acknowledged—he was a Sufi Sheikh in one of the great Sunni brotherhoods—a too close assimilation of Schuon's message with historical Sufism is potentially detrimental to the understanding of his perspective. Some interpretations of Schuon using unilaterally the criteria and values of Islamic hagiography have even already proved to be very misleading.

In his book *Against the Modern World,*[26] Mark Sedgwick has depicted Schuon as the leader of a syncretistic Islamic brotherhood. In his opinion Schuon who was initiated into orthodox Sufism by the Sheikh Ahmad Al-Alawi progressively abandoned authentic Islam, first by breaking his ties with the North African successors of his master and then by opening his *tariqah* to foreign influences, introducing in particular Native American rites after his settlement in Bloomington in 1980. This viewpoint relies on two and intimately related presuppositions about Schuon, *false* in our opinion: (1) the substance of his teaching has fundamentally changed over the years; (2) as a religious philosopher and as a spiritual master, he should be approached primarily as a Sufi phenomenon.

Against the typically modernist and psychological temptation to delineate Schuon's evolution, we are going to insist on the contrary on the underlying continuity in his personality. Schuon's interest in the Shamanic *Weltanschauung* began in Europe when he was only a child and in his first book *Leitgedanken zur Urbesinnung* ("*Primordial Meditation: Contemplating the Real*"), Schuon adopted the same universal and metaphysical perspective as in his later books, despite a style comparatively less developed than in his more mature works. Even the contemporary debate regarding the balance between the *sophia perennis* and the Islamic forms in his teaching was somehow prefigured in his controversy in the late 1940's, early 1950's with his former disciple, the neo-akbarian scholar Michel Valsan about what a western *tariqah* should be.[27] It follows that Schuon's evolution is better described in our opinion as a progressive unveiling of certain

[26] Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford University Press, 2004) chapters 6, 7 and 8.
[27] About this episode, Patrick Laude and Jean Baptiste Aymard, *Frithjof Schuon, Life and Teachings*, 27-34.

potentialities, culminating with his doctrinal writings in the 1980's and his didactic poems during the last three years of his life. In this perspective, the growing emphasis of the late Schuon on primordiality and universality did not represent a deviation but corresponded to a final, yet perfectly natural crystallization revealing that, to some degree, Schuon's connection with Islam was not absolutely essential.

By this statement, we do not intend to deny that the providential framework of Schuon's initiatory teaching was Islam. As is now well documented,[28] the Sheikh Ahmad Al-Alawi offered Schuon an initiation as well as the concept of the supreme Name and its invocation during his journey to Mostaghanem in 1932. Schuon later received from the Sheikh Adda Bentounès the function of *moqqadem* and directly from Heaven the status of Sheikh al-barakah, which gave him the right to organize a regular branch of the *Shadhiliyya Alawiyya* order in Europe. This "election" from above clearly suggests that it was less Schuon who chose Islam than Heaven that chose Islam for him. Within the monotheist cycle, this particular tradition is characterized, at least in its symbolism, by the predominance of knowledge, as opposed to love in Christianity and fear in Judaism, and also by the absence of a highly organized priesthood, favoring a relative independence for the esoterists. In Islam, extremes also meet. The "primordial religion" (*Din al-Fitra*), whose most direct heritage remains Hinduism, is brought back to its simplest expression, the divine Unity (*Tawhid*) and it is therefore beyond doubt significant that the last religion of the cycle provides the liturgical support for a final manifestation of total truth in "the Latter Days."

We do not underestimate Schuon's contribution to Islamic traditional intellectuality and we would like to take this opportunity to insist that in his understanding of Islam, Schuon did not superimpose foreign ideas or practices. On the contrary, even more than any other traditionalist author, Schuon was always very respectful of the symbolism of Islam's essential rites and beliefs. For him, the intrinsic orthodoxy of Islam resulted from its Message, synthesized by the "five pillars" and in particular the twofold testimony of faith in which all wisdom is virtually

[28] *Ibid.* 15-24.

contained as in a sort of *mantra* or *Upanishad*.[29] Even his reference to the Holy Virgin may be traced back to the Sufi notion of "prophetic heritage." According to Ibn Arabi, every Muslim saint, in addition to being a recipient of the Muhammadan *barakah*, is placed under the patronage of a pre-Islamic prophet.[30] The Marian Grace that descended on Schuon in 1965 only revealed his spiritual predisposition, his profound nature as a *maryami*. Schuon's *tariqah* is *maryami* by adoption and *shadhili* by origin. In a private text,[31] Schuon wrote that the coincidence between the two qualities is not accidental: according to the Imam Shadhili, the faithful *foqara* of his lineage are preserved from the fire of hell and the Koran teaches that Maryam and her descendants are protected from the power of Satan.

In our opinion, this undeniable connection of Schuon with Islam did not mean however that his message was intrinsically Islamic or that Islamic categories should be employed as the primary vehicle for a presentation and interpretation of his teaching. In fact, to prevent Schuon's message of essentiality and universality from being obscured, his association with Islam has to be put in a proper perspective, one that first and foremost recognizes that Schuon was not a convert in the sense that he never burned what he had adored, that is to say rejected Christianity in the name of Islam. As he once wrote to Benjamin Black Elk, his adhesion to Islam was essentially motivated by his desire to find a spiritual master and a contemplative method that no longer existed in Western Christianity and that was inaccessible to him under its Hindu form.[32]

For the same reasons, many Western readers of Guénon but also Muslims touched by modernity have found in Schuon's teachings, a practical application and a complement to the doctrine presented by Guénon, but also an unique opportunity to escape a too unsatisfactory and unrealistic religious exclusivism by the upward path of esoterism. Because of its orientation and origin, the Maryamiyah *tariqah* could not

[29] For Schuon's interpretation of the *shahadah* and the five pillars, see: Frithjof Schuon, "The Quintessential esoterism of Islam," *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence*.
[30] Michel Chodkiewicz, *The Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the doctrine of Ibn Arabi,* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993) 74.
[31] Unpublished text number 619.
[32] Unpublished letter to Black Elk, October 7th, 1947.

be a *tariqah* like the others. In his correspondence, Schuon wrote that, "according to the nature of things and therefore in the eyes of God" it would be completely abnormal if he and his followers were "Muslims exactly the same way as born Muslims, including the esoterists." Men objectively and subjectively in their situation necessarily have "contents of consciousness" and experiences that native Muslims do not have, which give them "some sense of perspective with regard to the most particular aspects of Islam."[33] In the same letter, having referred to the Hindu doctrine as their "immovable point of departure," he added that what distinguishes them psychologically from converted individuals is that their mind is "*a priori* centered upon universal metaphysics" and "the universal path of the divine Name."

> It is because of these two factors that we are in a traditional form, which in fact—but not in principle—is Islam. The universal orthodoxy emanating from these two sources of authority determines our interpretation of the *sharî'ah* and Islam in general, somewhat like the moon influences the oceans without being situated on the terrestrial globe; in the absence of the moon, the motions of the sea would be inconceivable and so to speak "illegitimate". What universal metaphysics says—as does also the "onomatological" science connected to it—holds decisive authority for us, a fact which once earned us the reproach of 'de-islamization of Islam.'[34]

Responding indirectly to those French Guénonians who reproached him for "de-islamizing Islam," he made somewhere else the observation that it is often difficult for a Muslim of esoteric inclination to understand the approach of a Westerner (or a Hindu) desirous of following an esoteric way. Whereas the latter "would find it logical first of all to inform himself of the doctrine, then to enquire about the method and finally about its general conditions," the Semitic Zealot will spontaneously "reply that one must begin at the beginning, namely with pious exercises and all sorts of religious observances; metaphysics will

[33] Unpublished letter to S. Abdallah, 1956.
[34] Quoted in the appendix of Frithjof Schuon *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence,* 134-135.

be for later." By adopting this attitude, the latter demonstrates that he is not capable of seeing "that understanding of doctrine cannot result from a moral and individualistic zeal, but that on the contrary it is there to inaugurate a new dimension and to elucidate its nature and purpose."[35]

Underlying Schuon's point here, we recognize not only the axiomatic opposition between two religious mentalities but also the distinction already established by Guénon between "esoteric Islam" and "Islamic esoterism," between a perspective that places Islam first and conceives esoterism as its inner aspect and another which sees the *haqiqa*, the esoteric Truth first and then attributes to the *shariah* the limited role of a contingent framework. Schuon has particularly insisted in *Sufism, Veil and Quintessence,* on the problematic nature of "esoteric Islam" as it has developed historically in the Arabic and Arabized world. Schuon certainly felt very little empathy for the pietistic attitudes that Muslim saints have frequently encouraged in the name of a poorly-defined esoterism. It was Schuon's view that far from representing a pristine gnosis, as other Perennialist authors have been willing to describe it, *Tasawwuf* has on many occasions taken the form of a "massified" esoterism, which clothes sapiential esoterism with the narrow categories of a moralistic, legalistic and individualistic theology. As a result, the perspective of asceticism and religious observances and a sort of *karma marga* have too often predominated over metaphysical knowledge.[36] Schuon saw this very ambiguous eso-exoteric symbiosis as largely incompatible with pure and disinterested esoterism and as quite specific to the last revelation of our cycle.[37] By contrast with average Sufism,

[35] Frithjof Schuon, "Paradoxes of an Esoterism," *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence,* 67.
[36] For Schuon, even the Sheikh Al-Akbar did not totally escape from the pitfall of average Sufism. Too often, in the latter's writings, the exteriorization of esoterism goes hand with hand with "an esoterization ofexoterism, namely the mystical sublimating of ritual acts—their assimilation to degrees of contemplation." For Schuon, who did not preach however the abolition ofthe Law, all the errors under consideration "result from the strange idea that 'the common Law (*shariah*) is esoterism (*tariqah*),' an idea in which mystical sublimism meets legalistic scruple and confessional zeal." See Frithjof Schuon, "Transcendence and immanence in the Spiritual Economy of Islam," *In the face of the Absolute* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1994), 188.
[37] Paradoxically, Islam is the "last" religion, both *positively* and *negatively*: positively, because the Muhammadan revelation represents a direct restoration of the *Din al-fitra;* negatively, because its terminality implies that its message is addressed to the man of the "Latter Days," by definition the least qualified for sapiential esoterism.

Schuon always placed the Essence above the form, Wisdom above religion, and the universal substance of his message sometimes contradicted its religious envelope, generating misunderstandings and misgivings against a noble soul who always remained faithful to himself.

The exceptional situation of Schuon is concretely illustrated by the fact that he had followers in religions other than Islam, namely Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and Judaism, to whom he offered a spiritual guidance in the context of their respective traditions. On this last question which represented a point of disagreement with Guénon, Schuon acknowledges that for a spiritual master to cross religious boundaries represents "a very precarious possibility because of the high degree of spirituality it requires of the master, and also because of the possible difficulty, for him, of verifying facts situated in a traditional world other than his own." About such a possibility, Schuon observes that the spiritual master will act as "the vehicle of a foreign *barakah* and this, precisely, presupposes a spirituality which had concretely transcended the world of forms."[38]

Some defenders of Frithjof Schuon have nevertheless tried to identify precedents to Schuon's universalism in the Sufi tradition, and ecumenical statements are to be found among those Sufi masters who have realized what Ibn 'Arabi called the "Non-Station" (*la maqam*) and the state of Perfect Man (*insan kamil*). One has however to remark here that universalism was, in most of such cases, the unexpected result of an inspiration or the effect of a providential contact with a foreign religious climate as for some Indian Sufis. By contrast, universalism was *a point of departure* for Schuon. His spiritual journey did not start from a particular religion, namely Islam, but from a theoretical universalism he first discovered in the writings of Guénon, and ended with supra-confessional gnosis. The Islamic *barakah*, personified by the Sheikh Al-Alawi was certainly providential to actualize this universal wisdom. But other powerful spiritual influences also converged on him and Schuon's

[38] Frithjof Schuon, "Role and function of the spiritual master," *Logic and Transcendence* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1984). On this question, Schuon added that such a possibility is conceivable only if both parties remain in their respective traditions. One could also refer here to Rumi or to the 20th century examples of Shirdi Sai Baba (d.1918) and Ramana Maharshi (d.1950) who welcomed not only Hindus but also Christians and Muslims around them.

situation was in any case quite different from the one of born-Muslim saints. Whereas for the latter, universalism stemmed from a mystical state and finally from the relatively subjective dimension of "Presence," in the case of Schuon, universalism had a perfectly objective content, related to the more impersonal dimension of "Truth." To explain the universality of his perspective, it has been argued that during his life, Schuon gradually ascended through degrees of universality all the way to the supreme viewpoint of the unconditioned *Logos*. But those who support this view should nevertheless acknowledge at the same time that, in this ascent, Schuon was progressively unveiling an innate and primordial wisdom and that he never lost sight of his universal starting point. It follows that Schuon's case remains quite unique with respect to the Islamic norms and in our opinion it was clearly not so much in virtue of his degree of spiritual realization that the function of Sheikh Isa crossed the boundaries of Islam. It overflowed beyond Islam, because from the beginning it was centered on the *sophia perennis*.

Similarly, we have mentioned how Schuon's celestial adoption by the Holy Virgin may be understood in Islamic terms. It would be through the *barakah* of the Prophet that Schuon entered in contact with Sayyidatna Maryam and became a saint of Maryami type. The Marian wisdom was handled down to him in a similar manner as the Sufis of the past received the wisdom of the pre-Islamic prophets. In this perspective, Sayyidatna Maryam only personifies an aspect of the Muhammadan Reality (*haqiqa muhammadiyya)* and in Schuon's life she acted as a *shakti* of Muhammad. Schuon was certainly not adopted "despite" his Islam. Numerous texts testify of his profound insights and mystical intimacy with the Prophet[39] and as we wrote previously Schuon often referred to this Sufi notion of prophetic heritage. It can nevertheless be remarked that from the perspective of the *sophia perennis*—which is not a religion in itself but the origin of every religion—the Virgin also symbolizes the essence of the *Logos*, its unconditioned dimension before any particularization as Muhammad, Jesus, Krishna or Buddha. As the celestial Mother, she appears greater

[39] Frithjof Schuon, "The Mystery of the Prophetic Substance," *In the Face of the Absolute*.

than any of her "sons," the masculine prophets and *avataras.*[40] It was precisely not as a dimension of the Muhammadan *Logos* or as the mother of the Koranic Jesus that the Holy Virgin came to Schuon. He saw her under a primordial form more or less independent from the specific laws governing the Islamic sector, combining in her person Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. We say "more or less" because the plurality of the "avataric faces" should not lead us to lose sight of the fundamental oneness of the *Logos*: it would be absurd to oppose the Virgin to Muhammad whereas Schuon has frequently compared the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin to the illiteracy of the Prophet Muhammad.[41] Schuon was also perfectly aware that he was not living in the Golden Age: a mariophany, even of first magnitude, cannot totally abolish the delimitations between the religious sectors.

The category of *fard* has frequently been applied to Schuon to account for the apparent irregularity of his perspective. The "solitaries" are Gnostics who are born initiated. They do not follow the path of the average spiritual travelers (*salikun*), because like the *majdhub* they are "attracted" and are largely independent with regard to the religious law. Schuon was probably a "solitary" within Islam but he was also largely independent of the Islamic domain itself. Unlike other traditionalist authors such as Guénon, Schuon's role did not consist in a passive function of transmission and commentary. He was not a "doctor" but a plenary spiritual master. *Vis-à-vis* the wisdom traditions of the ages, what Schuon offered was an inspired and active re-adaptation of these traditions that was of a purely esoteric nature, and particularly needed at this critical moment in the cosmic cycle. By contrast with Islamo-centric portraits of Frithjof Schuon, which are anxious to establish the orthodoxy of his views, our view is that Schuon did not emerge from a

[40] About the various prophetic manifestations, Schuon teaches that any prophet or *avatara* vehicles an element of absoluteness and represents a quality by which he appears "greater" than the other messengers. He may therefore be identified metaphysically with the essence of the *Logos* and the other divine descents with its attributes. Because, she is an *avatara*, the Virgin herself may also be assimilated vertically with the *Logos* as such. In this case, she will be the prophetess of the *sophia perennis*. See: Frithjof Schuon, "The idea of 'the best' in religions," *Christianity/Islam: Essays on Esoteric Ecumenicism*.

[41] Frithjof Schuon, "Christianity and Islam," *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*. For Schuon, both of them belong to the same category of the major *avataras* of lunar type.

Muslim matrix but was providentially situated at a point of intersection for virtually all the rays of truth, whatever their origin. We strongly disagree with those who pretend that to give birth to "the intensely spiritual climate" of his doctrine, Schuon simply borrowed tonalities or atmospheres from "already existing religions" and that he transposed them "aesthetically onto the level of a (re)constituted *sophia perennis*."[42] The *jnanic* synthesis made by Schuon is not reducible to a superficial syncretism. Schuon did not incorporate rites of other traditions in his method. His teaching does contain a self-professed aesthetical dimension but the latter manifests on the plane of forms a particular aspect of the *hikmah Maryamiyyah*: "God is beautiful and He loves beauty." As for Schuon's openings to "already existing traditions" other than Islam, they reflect a spiritual possibility corresponding to an exceptional degree of esoterism and universality.[43] But the *sophia perennis* will never stem from any artificial and laborious combination: for the blossoming of the Schuonian synthesis, this primordial wisdom had to come first and to play the role of an "organizing principle."

To understand this process, we also need to recall the distinction Schuon establishes between the two sources of the *sophia perennis*: (1) the horizontal effluence of grace and wisdom coming from the divinely inspired founder of a given religion, and transmitted historically by the tradition like a continuous flow; and (2) a vertical inspiration that Schuon compares to the falling of the rain and associates with Khidr or the Holy Virgin. In the second case, the Spirit will descend to illuminate a religious "matter"—originally more or less diverse and solidified—that is thereby essentialized and universalized. In his books, Schuon may

[42] Jean Borella, "The Problematic of the Unity of Religions," *Sacred Web* 17 (Spring 2006) 166.

[43] A remark is needed here about the intra-traditional interactions. By contrast with Guénon who tends to maintain administrative separations between religions, Schuon is willing to admit the possibility of influences between esoteric forms. He also admits the possibility that a new religion favors or determines the blossoming of pre-existent elements in a more ancient one. In any case, one may wonder, why an esoterist, having realized the inner unity of religions, would not cross certain religious boundaries and draw certain conclusions from his contacts with several living traditions? Such a possibility is historically exemplified by the interactions between Muslims and Hindus in India or American Indians and Christians in Northern America, not to mention Muslims and Zoroastrians in Iran.

alternatively speak as a Vedantist or a Sufi, when he addresses the question of the doctrine or the initiatory method but the notions and symbols potentially "borrowed" are largely transformed because ultimately they serve as occasional vehicles for a sacred knowledge that transcends the limits of both Hinduism and Islam.

With respect to the doctrine, Schuon was blessed as a child by an intuitive knowledge of certain principles of the universe that nevertheless had to crystallize under the more geometrical and dogmatic influence of René Guénon. The French metaphysician gave him the essential concepts of Advaita. He encountered the same non-dualist doctrine again, at least under an elliptical form, while he was in Mostaghanem, among the *foqara* of the Sheikh Al-Alawi, through whom the Gnostic legacy of Ibn 'Arabi—of the school of the *wahdat al-wujud*—was communicated to him. At this moment of his life, it was however already a matter of confirmation, rather than actualization or discovery and the imprint was certainly more ontological than intellectual because it is the Hindu doctrine that always remained Schuon's starting point. In a memorial article on René Guénon and his intellectual legacy, Schuon declares that "Guénon was quite right to declare that the Vedanta is the most direct expression of pure metaphysics" and that "no attachment to any non-Hindu tradition obliges us to ignore it or to pretend to ignore it."[44] This does not mean however that Schuon is dependent on the particular positions of Shankara, who, as he reminds us, did not invent Vedanta but was only its providential spokesman. Schuon insists for instance in a quite unique manner on the interplay between the "dimensions" of *Atma* and the manifested.[45] He also stresses the creative and theophanic power of *Maya.* By doing so, Schuon somehow departs from Shankara, for whom *Maya* is without origin and brings about existential ignorance (*avidya*). In what he writes about *Maya*, Schuon really stands on his own ground and this even though his conception of *Maya* has similarities with the views of the

[44] Frithjof Schuon, "A note on René Guénon," *René Guénon: Some Observations* (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2004).
[45] Frithjof Schuon, "Dimensions, Modes and Degrees of the Divine Order," *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism* (World Wisdom: Bloomington, 2000).

post-Shankarian Vivarana school,[46] not to mention the Tantric doctrine of the Divine bi-unity.[47] Concerning eschatological matters, Schuon adopts a more nuanced position than Shankara, arguing that, after the dropping of the body, the delivered soul keeps a heavenly form in the *Brahma-loka* till the *pralaya*.[48] All this shows that for Schuon even Vedanta is only a means to express what he knows directly, thanks to the miracle of direct intellection.

If we turn to the orthopraxy of the Schuonian method, Schuon shares with the Sheikh Al-Alawi and the North African *Shadhilis* the insistence on *dhikr* as the center of the initiatory work. But his technique of meditation synthetically presented in the *Stations of Wisdom*[49] has no direct equivalent within Sufism.[50] It was revealed to him in 1942, almost a decade after the death of his master. At this time, he had a spiritual experience, which he accepted as a "gift," an inexhaustible revelation[51]

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[46] About the post-Shankarian schools see: Swami Satchidanandendra, *The Method of Vedanta,* translated by Alston (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1989). Swami Satchidanandendra has convincingly argued that the description of *Maya* as a power (*Shakti*) of *Atma* and its identification with the *prakriti* of the Shankhya may be traced back not to Shankara but to Padmapada (*ibid.* 385-469) whose perspective inspired the Vivarana branch of Advaita (*ibid.* 752-856) and the famous *Panchadashi* of Swami Vidyaranya.

[47] Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "The tantric Doctrine of divine biunity," *Perception of the Vedas,* ed. by Vidya Nivas Misra (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts and Manohar, 2000).

[48] One of the arguments Schuon provides to support this thesis is that the prophets and the *avataras* can still appear after their death. They have therefore not vanished from the cosmos and must have left in Paradise "a form-symbol endowed with distinctive consciousness, which disappears only with the apocatastatic disappearance of Paradise itself—the *mahâpralaya*." See: *Prayer Fashions Man* edited by James Cutsinger, 203. Ramanuja criticized Shankara because he believed that Advaitin liberation should lead to a "frightening" absorption into an "impersonal" and monistic Absolute. Schuon's position would have pleased him much more. This being said, for Sheikh Isa, it is wrongly that the Vedantic notion of "Deliverance" evokes "the paradoxical image of a refusal of Paradise" and he did not agree with the Vaishnavist distinction between two types of Deliverance, one for the *jnani* and one for the *bhakta*.

[49] Frithjof Schuon,"The Stations of Wisdom," *The Stations of Wisdom*.

[50] By contrast, even the complex meditation techniques developed in the *Naqshbandiyya* or other eastern brotherhoods are less universal in their content and more determined by the Islamic *upaya*. See: Mir Valliudin, *Contemplative Disciplines in Sufism* (London: East West Publications, 1984).

[51] Schuon always made a clear distinction between intellection, inspiration and revelation. "Intellection, inspiration, revelation. These three realities…are distinct one from another, but none can be reduced simply to a question of realization. The realized

from God Himself and not from a human intermediary. Titus Burckhardt called it using an Islamic term, a *nafath ar-Ruh*. According to Jean-Baptiste Aymard, the descent of the "primordial themes of meditation," which in Schuon's view summarize all the "stations" that a spiritual method may offer to realize, coincided with a renewed interest in Hinduism. In fact, their universal character became a point of disagreement with both Guénon and Valsan, especially because Schuon made it clear that their content should be replaced in a larger context than Islam alone. He often refers for instance to the Prayer of the Heart of the Eastern Church and to the Hindu *Japa-yoga*. In the Far East, Schuon frequently mentions Honen. The Japanese master is a preeminent figure of the Buddhist school of Pure Land. His invocatory path (*nembutsu*) that flourished in medieval Japan, finds its distant origin in China but Honen gave a new impulse to it, insisting more unilaterally on the trust in the mercy of the Buddha Amida and the saving power conveyed by his Name.[52] Schuon's connection with this Buddha seems to have been very profound. While he was performing a *khalwah* of several days in Mostaghanem under the direction of the Sheikh Adda, Schuon saw with the Eye of the Heart golden images of this emissary of Mahayana Buddhism, side by side with Semitic prophets.[53]

As has already been mentioned, many of those who mistakenly believed that Schuon had created a kind of syncretism were focusing on his relationship with the Native American world. In fact, it is through Joseph Epes Brown that Schuon came into contact with Black Elk, a holy man of the Oglala Lakota. His personal friendship with the Sun Dance Chief Thomas Yellowtail lasted forty years till the death of the

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man can have inspirations that are—as to their production—distinct from his state of knowledge, but he could not add one syllable to the Veda." See: Frithjof Schuon, "Vedanta," *The Language of the Self,* (Bloomington: World Wisdom). Schuon nevertheless mentioned the possibility for the sage, even without prophetic mandate, to receive not only inspirations but also "personal revelations." See: Frithjof Schuon, "The Human Margin," *In the Face of the Absolute,* 104-105.

[52] Because of this, he is known as the theorist of the "Power of the Other" (*tariki*). See: Frithjof Schuon, "The Vow of Dharmaka," *Logic and Transcendence;* "David, Shankara, Honen," *To Have a Center* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1990).

[53] The episode is mentioned in Schuon's unpublished autobiography.

latter.[54] Schuon was eventually adopted in the Lakota and Crow tribes and received the names of *Wambali Ohitika* (Brave Eagle) and *Wichahpi Wiyakpa* (Bright Star). What Schuon claims to have discovered in Native American Shamanism, and in its sacerdotal aspect personified by Black Elk and Yellowtail, are two things: (1) a spiritual antidote to the artificial and trivial ambiance of the modern world; (2) an opening to a contemplative and interiorizing experience of the divine Immanence. Modern man has lost the consciousness of the "metaphysical transparency of phenomena," and this ability to see the archetypes in their effects may be restored in his eyes by the contact with "virgin nature" and a primo-mythological tradition. The "Indian days"—the Native American dances that Schuon organized after his moving to Bloomington to honor Yellowtail—represented a mode of participation in this shamanic perspective, although they were never seen as new rites, corresponding rather to an existential and aesthetic complement offered to those vocationally attracted by the primordial ambiance of the Plains Indians.[55] In "Degrees and Scope of Theism," Schuon also explains that "the metaphysician, who after all is not as Shamanist, nonetheless shares in this way of looking at things: for him, everything is integrated into the universal Substance, hence into Existence and then into given Qualities, Faculties, or Functions for everything is *Atma*."[56]

To this, we should add that although Hinduism represents the most direct heritage of the Primordial Tradition, the Native American traditions, as with all ancient religions that have not fallen into a state of total decadence, are still able to communicate to the esoterist a primordial *barakah*, a perfume from the Golden Age itself. That is why for Schuon, to have been adopted by Indian tribes amounts symbolically speaking to having been adopted by the Primordial Tradition itself.

Considering the diversity of spiritual influences converging on Schuon, it seems at least misleading to depict him as a Sufi Sheikh in a non-Islamic land (*dar al-harb)* and to present his *tariqah* as an

[54] About Schuon and the Native Americans, see: "Frithjof Schuon and the American Indian Spirit: Interview with Michael Fitzgerald," *Vincit Omnia Veritas* III no 2 (July 2007). http://religioperennis.org/articles.html#fitzgerald

[55] About the "Indians Days" see Michael Fitzgerald, "Providence without Paradox," *Sacred Web No. 8* (December 2001).

[56] Frithjof Schuon, "Degrees and Scope of Theism," *To Have a Center,* 113.

illustration of *Tasawwuf's* adapting to non-Arab circumstances. This type of approach reflects an optical illusion that is likely to obscure who Schuon was and to distort what was essential in his message. On the contrary, if we see Schuon not as a Muslim saint but as a primordial sage many tensions will vanish and his function may even appear in a new light.

Part Three: The Sage and the Goddess

In the first and second parts of this article, we addressed some fears about Schuon's status as well as common misunderstandings about his teachings. Schuon was neither a new prophet nor a Muslim saint in the classical sense. The crucial contrast between the posture of a saint and the posture of a sage is described in the following poem:

With the true sage there is always holiness,
But a holy man is not always a sage.
Noble character they have in common;
But different is the spirit's journey.

The saint is rooted in will and love;
The sage, in knowledge and intelligence.
Certainly, the saint also can have wisdom —
There are many paths in the Spirit's land.[57]

Schematically speaking, we may define a prophet, as the equivalent *mutatis mutandis* of a "major" *avatara* like Rama or Krishna and as the transmitter of a divine dictat, "a law-giving and obligatory Message of overriding force," addressed to a whole sector of humanity. As far as he is concerned, the saint comes after the prophet. He is immersed in a religious climate and depends on an outward illumination and a pre-existent revelation. What a saint receives are inspirations from Heaven or revelations of a secondary order.[58] In the revelation as Schuon defines

[57] Frithjof Schuon, *World Wheel I / XXXVII* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2007).
[58] Schuon saw in the first chapter of the *Fusus al-Hikam* and in some formulae like St. Irenaus's "God became God, so that man may become God" or Hallaj's "*Ana al-Haqq*"

it, it is God who speaks whereas in the inspiration, the Holy "Spirit guides man in accordance with the divine intention and on the basis of the capacities of the human receptacle."[59] Saint Augustine in Christianity, Ghazzali in Islam, Ramanuja in Hinduism, were unmistakably saints of first rank but their role was not *a priori* to formulate the most pristine esoterism. The personality of a saintly man is dominated by the will and the emotional element. Reason operates only *a posteriori* to canalize the celestial influx. On the contrary, in the case of the sage, the "driving force" of mystical inspiration is replaced by reason if he is only an "earthly sage" like Aristotle or by intellectual intuition if he is a "true sage" like Plato.[60] This intuition, leading to transcendent "knowledge," springs from an inward and more or less independent source, from that immanent divine spark that is the Intellect.

All we know about Schuon indicates that he had the profile of a sage and according to a testimony emanating from one of his disciples, he claimed for himself a very specific function:

> According to Frithjof Schuon, the sage comes before the saint in the spiritual hierarchy, and so immediately after the *avatara* himself.… Responding to questions about one of his poems on the *Kalki-Avatara*, he made the following statement: "…as far as I am concerned, I am the seal of the sages, *khatamu'l'hukama.*"[61]

Before examining this enigmatic claim, we need to recall that many

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(I am the Real) secondary revelations. Schuon received the six primordial themes of meditation as a personal revelation.

[59] Frithjof Schuon, "The Human Margin," *Form and Substance in the Religions*.

[60] Needless to say, Semites also have their sages. Solomon is traditionally seen as the greatest among them and his name is associated with the "wisdom literature" of the Old Testament. Christian theology has also identified his throne with the Virgin (Frithjof Schuon, "The Seat of Wisdom"). The *Shaktic* dimension of Solomon's wisdom, as well as his religious tolerance, apparently clashed with the Jewish orthodoxy and these tensions find a direct echo in the *Book of the Kings* (I-11, 1-4). "Now king Solomon loved many foreign women…For it came to pass, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not perfect with Jehovah his God, as was the heart of David his father."

[61] *Frithjof Schuon,* edited by Patrick Laude and Jean-Baptiste Aymard (Paris-Lausanne : L'Age d'homme, 2002) 388-389. The translation is ours.

controversies have erupted about the Islamic doctrine of the seals, opposing Shiites to Sunnis and Sufis to theologians. If all the orthodox schools of Islam agree to see Muhammad as the "seal of the prophets," the existence and identity of a "seal of the saints" who would close the cycle of the "friends of God" have been fiercely debated. The first to introduce this notion was the 10th century Sufi saint Al-Hakim Al-Tirmidhi. Ibn 'Arabi later made the distinction between two seals of sainthood: a "seal of the universal sainthood" he identified with Jesus and a "seal of the Muhammadan sainthood." Sainthood is superior to prophethood but the prophets stand above the saints. Ibn 'Arabi justified this paradox arguing that prophets too have realized holiness. They combine the outward perfection of the *nubuwwah* and the inward perfection of the *walayah* but their spiritual degree is veiled by their function because they incarnate the legalistic and outward religion.

To speak of a "seal of the sages," who would be like the compendium for the wisdom of the ages,[62] introduces a third concept in this Sufi cyclology. It suggests the existence of an intermediate sphere of wisdom (*hikmah*), of a *barzakh* between prophecy and holiness, occupied by the minor *avataras* of Shiva and the sages who have become "their own law." In Shi'ism, it is Fatima who symbolizes the confluence of these two seas. She was both the daughter of Muhammad and the spouse of 'Ali, the first of the holy Imams. But her traditional title of *Maryam al-kubar* also shows that in the life of the prophet of Islam, she was like an *avataric* prolongation of the Holy Virgin and in the Schuonian

[62]The function of "seal of the sages" may have some connections with the mysterious figure of the "seal of the progeny" mentioned only once—to our knowledge—in Ibn 'Arabi's writings, in the second chapter of *the Fusus al-Hikam.* According to Ibn 'Arabi, he will be accompanied by afemale figure, by "a sister" and will be "born in the footsteps of Shith," the son of Adam. Both of them will be "from China," speaking the language of this country. The seal will call people to Allah in vain. After his passing away, sterility will spread in men and women and those who remain will be "like beasts." This comparison suggests that sterility in this context certainly needs to be understood in a spiritual and not a biological sense. According to this interpretation supported by Abd Al-Qadir (*Kitab al-Mawaqif, Mawqif* 353), the seal will be the last "true man"—that is to say fully faithful to his theomorphic nature—before the coming of the Hour. Interestingly enough, China and more generally the Far East symbolize the seat of the primordial wisdom in some *ahadith* ("Seek knowledge, though it be in China") and they are associated with beauty in the Moslem culture. China (*Sîn*) and Isa also have the same numerical value (150) suggesting a Christian origin to this seal.

perspective, this realm of immaculate wisdom may only belong to Mary, the feminine face of the Logos. It is under the mantle of the "mother of all the prophets" and the "substance of original holiness" that the major *avataras,* the Semitic prophets as well as the saints may gather in the eternal present.

It follows that in some respects the sphere of Mary is also the most universal. "A holy man is not always a sage" but his wisdom necessarily originates in Her domain. Even the prophecy only exteriorizes the possibilities synthetically contained in the divine Sophia. Religion is a solidified wisdom. As for the sage who has drunk Her milk, his case shows that "the return to God is inherent in the fact of existence," that our being itself offers the way of returning all the way to pure Substance "passing through the strata of our ontological reality."[63] However, a veil separates the average man, whose intelligence is merely "potential," from the Reality of Truth. He needs a religious messenger to be saved from the *samsaric* wheel because he does not know that he bears everything within himself. But the sage knows this and follows a different path. The sage does not bring a religious Law to humanity. This mission belongs to the prophets. Nor does he exemplify moral perfections in the eyes of the believers like the saints. The true sage is a messenger of the Self and he lives and speaks in the name of the naked Truth.

Plato is an example of one of these providential masters of wisdom in the Western Antiquity, and Schuon had privately compared the Platonic message to his own. Whereas some traditionalist authors, following Guénon, denied the importance of Greek philosophy, reducing it to schematizing, freethinking and skepticism, Schuon singled out Plato, Plotinus and to a lesser degree Aristotle as authentic sages, as spokesmen of a path of knowledge opposed to Greek naturalism. These Ancient thinkers should not be included under the heading of rationalism, despite their rationalistic style of dialectic because they expressed by means of reason certainties "seen" or "lived" by the immanent Intellect that they communicated to their descendants in the

[63] Frithjof Schuon, "The Dialogue between Hellenists and Christians," *The Fullness of God*, ed. by James Cutsinger, 65.

Semitic world. [64]

In the case of the highest sages however, this type of impulse—a contact with ancient traditions of wisdom either from Greece or from India—only serve to awaken latent truths, because they are already born with "a state of knowledge." Schuon's poems sometimes evoke explicitly the phenomenon of innate wisdom, probably because they are less technical and more direct than many of his metaphysical books. They transmit to the reader a "being" and "spiritual presence," as well as original insights on his thinking and life. The following poem in particular resonates like a personal testimony: "All that one finds in good old books/ Regarding Being, and the question of the universe, /God has inscribed in the substance of my heart."[65] Schuon was intrinsically a "pneumatics of *jnanic* type." In a commemorative article about Guénon, [66] he explained that the pneumatic is in a way "the 'incarnation' of a spiritual archetype." He "does not 'go forward' towards something 'other than himself'; he stays where he is in order to become fully what he himself is—namely his archetype—by ridding himself, one after the other, of veils or outer surfaces, shackles imposed by the ambience or perhaps by heredity" by "means of ritual supports—'sacraments,' one might say—not forgetting meditation and prayer." His situation differs from that of ordinary men and Schuon frequently came back on how the pneumatic relates psychologically and spiritually to his environment. The difference between a pneumatic, a psychic and a somatic is quite clearly not of the sensorial order. The pneumatic is "situated, by his

[64] The identification of the Angel of the Revelation (*Jibril*) and the Intellect ('*aql*) by the Arab philosophers also recalls a fundamental tenet of sapiential esoterism and Schuon always defended them against those who wished to reserve for the Sufis or the theologians a monopoly of spiritual knowledge. On the one hand these philosophers, for the most part believers, were exposed to the influx of grace flowing from the Islamic Revelation. On the other, they received the Aryan heritage of the Greek sages. This double impulse favored the blossoming of genuine intellectual intuitions and put them in a very different situation than profane thinkers but quite similar to Schuon. See: Frithjof Schuon, "Tracing the notion of philosophy," *Sufism, Veil and Quintessence* (Word Wisdom: Bloomington) and a letter to Titus Burckhardt partially reproduced in the Appendix 136-137. Interestingly enough, some Arab philosophers trace philosophy back to the divine revelation received by Hermes-Idris. See: William Chittick, "Islamic Philosophy," *The Heart of the Islamic Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2001) 107.

[65] Frithjof Schuon, *World Wheel VII / CXXIX, (*Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2007).

[66] Frithjof Schuon, "A note on René Guénon," *René Guénon: some observations*, 6-10.

nature, on the vertical and timeless axis—where there is no before or after." He also perceives the cosmic containers as well as the play of the universal *Maya*. It follows that even in the torments of the *samsara*, he always remains perfectly "himself," at least in his innermost center, because he is aware of the unreality of the individual self and does not identify with his psychic substance. For him, what is the most concrete is the universal Self: pure Being, immaculate Consciousness, and infinite Bliss. The pneumatic may certainly feel emotions and even suffer but this does not really affect his contemplative state. In his eyes, our world resembles a broken mirror of Paradise and he continues to see things in their angelical prototypes and in a sort of simultaneity parallel to their phenomenality.

The born *jnani* is also orthodox by nature although he is "more or less independent, not only with regard to the letter but also with regard to the Law" and, in his case, a fundamental deviation is inconceivable. Even when the pneumatic seems to have broken religious laws, his transgression is motivated by a more profound imperative: the *fitra*, his primordial and theomorphic nature. "The real Gnostic" is finally the reverse of a mundane intellectual and he "does not attribute any 'state' to himself, for he is without ambition and without ostentation; he has a tendency rather—through an 'instinct for holding back'—to disguise his nature." Visitors and disciples of Schuon have talked about Schuon's discernment in face of the cosmic shadows as well as his total absence of ambition. Some have even reported that he constantly discouraged—with more or less success—speculations about his "state" among his community.[67] Schuon's characterization as a "pneumatic" can answer many of the questions about the outward irregularity of his spiritual path and can shed a new light on some incidents of his life when the transcendent archetype suddenly "pierces through the contingent, individual envelope."

The quality of pneumatic comprises degrees as well as modes.

[67] Whitall N. Perry wrote: "Schuon always rejected efforts made to label his intellectual or spiritual role in the world. 'I do not know who or what I am,' he insisted; 'it is Heaven that knows'." See: Whitall N. Perry, "Perspectives," *Sophia* no 2 (Winter, 1998). If Schuon is truly "the seal of the sages," his decision not to answer to some criticisms against him may be interpreted as a desire to maintain a protective veil on his cyclical function.

Schuon mentions the difference between the pneumatics of *jnanic* and *bhaktic* types. Whereas in the former case, it is the light of the Truth that initially strikes the elect, bringing about an awakening made of clarity or evidence, in the latter case, Heaven attracts the soul by a supernatural love, and the life of the *bhakta* may be inaugurated by a spiritual wedding between the soul and the Spirit.[68] Another important distinction can be established between pneumatics following a more masculine or a more feminine path, although the two are necessarily combined and Patrick Laude has remarked on an inner polarity of this order in Schuon's personality.[69]

This polarity corresponds to the Sufi concepts of *tanzih* and *tashbih*. *Tanzih* and *tashbih* can respectively be translated by "remoteness" and "comparison," or "exaltation" and "similitude," and ultimately "transcendence" and "immanence." In Schuon's teaching, the *tanzih* aspect, expressed for the most part in his metaphysical and doctrinal writings of Vedantic or Sufi type, has been the most unanimously acclaimed. From this first perspective of transcendence and discontinuity, God is the Real and the world is illusory. According to the second and complementary perspective (*tashbih)*, God is not only transcendent as *Brahman* but also immanent as divine Power (*shakti*). The world and its forms are the manifestations of the Principle that communicates to them a relative degree of reality. "The existence of things" is derived from the Absolute; "their containers, their diversity and their multiplicity, thus space, time, form, numbers are derived from the Infinite." Finally "their qualities, whether substantial or accidental are derived from Perfection."[70] The first perspective of discontinuity between the Divine center and the circumference of the manifested is balanced by another, which corresponds geometrically speaking to the continuity between the center and the radius. If the All-Possibility

[68] A famous example of pneumatic of *bhaktic* type was certainly the extraordinary visionary saint Anne Catherine Emmerich. She married Jesus the day she was baptized. Her life was later blessed by countless visions of the life of Christ, the Holy Virgin as well as the Mountain of the prophets. See: M.T. Loutrel, *Anne-Catherine Emmerick, racontée par elle-même et ses contemporains* (Paris: Pierre Téqui, 1992) 107.
[69] Patrick Laude and Jean-Baptiste Aymard, *Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teachings,* 120.
[70] Frithjof Schuon, "Dimensions, Modes and Degrees of the Divine Order," *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism,* 26.

prefigures the manifestation at the level of the Principle, God also makes Himself present in the world, directly as divine *Logos* and through the divine descents (*avataras*) as well as more indirectly in the creatures themselves.

In fact, the presence of this more feminine element within Schuon's *jnanic* perspective should not surprise us too much. As early as in *Gnosis, Divine Wisdom*, Schuon had explained that whereas in the case of a *bhakta*, a "feminine" devotion is balanced and canalized by the more masculine religious orthodoxy provided by the traditional surrounding, the *jnani* follows an apparently more virile path that nevertheless requires a feminine complement associated with beauty, both at the level of the soul and the environment.[71] In Schuon's life, the Virgin Mary, whose heavenly beauty is attested by the oldest Christian sources[72] as well as by the icons, initiated him into the secrets of Divine immanence. Schuon was always very interested by the meaning and alchemical power of sacred art but his writings and even his style unmistakably show a deeper awareness of what he called "the metaphysical transparency of phenomena" after 1965. After his celestial adoption, Schuon also manifested a particular sensibility to the pacifying and interiorizing virtue of feminine beauty, a beauty that finds its prototype in the new Eve.

Jean-Baptiste Aymard has rightly stressed the affinities between Schuon and the medieval *fidele d'amore,* such as Dante in Christianity or Ruzbihan Baqli in Islam,[73] their communality in terms of inspiration when they approach the mystery of the sacred femininity. In the case of

[71] Frithjof Schuon, "Vicissitudes of Spiritual Temperaments," *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom,* 36.

[72] "Mary scarcely appeared in the first coming of Jesus Christ so that men, as yet insufficiently instructed and enlightened concerning the person of her Son, might not wander from the truth by becoming too strongly attached to her. This would apparently have happened if she had been known, on account of the wondrous charms with which Almighty God had endowed even her outward appearance. So true is this that St. Denis the Areopagite tells us in his writings that when he saw her he would have taken her for a goddess, because of her incomparable beauty, had not his well-grounded faith taught him otherwise." See: St Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort, *Treatise on true devotion to the Blessed Virgin.*

[73] Patrick Laude and Jean-Baptiste Aymard, *Frithjof Schuon: Life and teachings,* chapter II; Ruzbehan Baqli, *Le Jasmin des fidèles d'Amour* (Paris: Verdier, 1991) and Henry Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, Vol 3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1991).

the young Schuon, his unhappy love for a young girl called Madeleine in his autobiography amounted to a burning experience of beauty and femininity. The end of this story, which had been lived not as profane romance but as an initiatory trial, coincided with the revelation of the six themes of meditation in 1942. Having renounced the earthly woman, Schuon was subsequently initiated into her heavenly archetype by the celestial Virgin, of whom Madeleine was only a mundane image.

Considering Schuon's exaltation of the "Eternal Feminine" to the degree of a divine hypostasis, we will insist here on a different connection and another religious gate to the mystery of Divine immanence and femininity. In many ways, Schuon's Virgin displays more the distinct attributes of a Hindu Goddess than those of a Semitic prophetess and this Asian influence becomes even clearer when we turn our attention to his paintings. As is well known since the publication of a number of books dedicated to his pictorial art[74] in the 80's and 90's, Schuon was not only a metaphysician but also a gifted painter. The subject-matter of Schuon's art is, on the one hand, the Plain Indians' world, the sacerdotal and heroic figures of the Indian chiefs, and on the other hand, especially after his Marian adoption, the Virgin Mary and the divine and human femininity. About the latter paintings, Schuon seems to have acknowledged privately that they were the providential receptacle of some extra-semitic archetypes—*shaktic* to be more specific—, the tangible products of his most universal and primordial inspirations.

> In my paintings of the Virgin, a tendency towards Hinduism, towards Shaktism if you will, manifests itself, and towards the *Krita-Yuga*, and finally towards the proto-Semitic world, which is echoed in the Song of Songs…this was not my prior intention; it lies simply in the nature of things and likewise in the very kernel of my being.[75]

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[74] Frithjof Schuon, *The Feathered Sun, Plains Indians in Art and Philosophy* (Bloomington: World Wisdom,1990) and *Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty* (Bloomington: Abodes, 1992).

[75] From a letter of September 1981 quoted by James Cutsinger in "The Virgin".

These paintings may not directly concern his *tariqah* and Schuon explicitly forbade that they became a support of concentration or devotion. Their importance should not be underestimated however. In his representations of the Virgin and her child, their traditional image is universalized and essentialized, as the religious forms themselves in the contact of the *religio perennis*. The nudity of the mother of Jesus, unusual for a biblical figure, symbolizes in this esoteric context the nakedness of total truth. In most of Schuon's paintings, the eyes of the Virgin are closed, suggesting the mystery of inwardness and this passage from *The Song of Songs*: "I am black but beautiful." By their interiorizing beauty, these icons of the Virgin exercise a merciful and pacifying influence on the spectator. As James Cutsinger remarked, they communicate a kind of mystical state (*hal)* that would have remained purely private otherwise, and would have certainly been lost forever after Schuon's passing away. While irresistibly attracting our attention to their heavenly *aura*, these icons seem to have the miraculous ability to reverse the centrifugal tendency of our soul and to protect us from the influence of the lower *Maya*. In their presence, our hearts are capable of being cured from many secret poisons and the celestial vibrations they provoke seem to emanate directly from the *nirvanic* center of all things. Schuon wrote that *avataras* save not only by their message but also by their liberating beauty.[76] Schuon's depictions of the Holy Virgin are like an open window on a blue and pristine sky, illuminated by the light of *Atma*. They invite us to a Platonic *metanoia*, possibly because Schuon did not portray the Virgin according the rules of religious art but as he saw her with the "Eye of the Heart" in a form beyond confessional oppositions.

Henry Corbin has studied in depth the phenomenon of heavenly visions and the role played by what he called the "imaginal world" in the theosophy of Ibn 'Arabi and in Persian mysticism. It has been remarked however that Corbin has a tendency to overestimate the possibilities of the subtle realm and to ignore the informal states of being. A strange limitation also leads the Iranologist to reject the Vedantic doctrine of the transpersonal Self as "natural mysticism" or "pantheism." In Schuon's

[76] Frithjof Schuon, "Treasures of Buddhism," *Treasures of Buddhism,* 7.

perspective, on the contrary, the presence of the Virgin is not restricted to a particular degree of contemplation. She is able to guide the soul through the liberating passage beyond the formal order because she symbolizes not only the beauty of the *malakut* but also the night of non-manifested (*avyakta*).

Schuon's Marian images were somehow prepared by a series of earlier representations of Pte San Win, the white buffalo calf woman who brought down the Sacred Pipe in the Lakota mythology. It is possibly less widely known that they were also prolonged by a series of *yoginis* and *devis*[77] that Schuon painted mostly between 1980 and 1998. These female figures as well as the frequent references in his German poems to Abhinavagupta and Krishna clearly reflect Schuon's growing interest for the universe of the *Agamas* and the *Tantras* toward the end of his life.

Tantrism is often misrepresented in Western popular culture. Far from being reducible to hedonism, it gave birth, in the context of medieval Kashmir, to an original non-dualist school, whose perspective is surprisingly very close to Schuon's. The doctrine of the *Trika*, whose exponents were precisely Abhinavagupta and his disciple Ksemaraja, finds its origin in a late Shaivite revelation that claims to be more adapted to the disharmonious man of the *kali yuga* than the *Vedas*. The *Shiva Sutras*[78] places the notion of *Shakti* at the heart of a cosmogonic process, presented in the light of an adamantine non-dualism, not entirely similar however to Shankara's. In this metaphysical system, *Shiva* and *Shakti* are not opposed like the Real and the unreal but they correspond to the two facets of Ultimate Reality. It is by the creative power of the *Shakti,* that *Shiva*, the absolute Consciousness unfolds the three fundamental hypostases—will (*iccha),* knowledge (*jnana*) and activity (*kriya*). At a later step, this divine interplay also initiates the procession of the *tattvas* that one may define as the macrocosmic and microcosmic degrees of reality. *Shakti* creates the world but she also reintegrates it into the Principle. At the time of Liberation, the individual

[77] Frithjof Schuon, *Images of Primordial and Mystical Beauty,* 203-227.
[78] *Siva Sutras, the yoga of Supreme Identity,* translated by Jaideva Singh (Delhi: Motilal Barnarsidass publishers, 2003). See also: Ksemaraja, *The Doctrine of Recognition,* translated by Jaideva Singh (New York: SUNY, 1990).

returns to *Shiva* and realizes union with Him but for the Shaivists, the Supreme Identity cannot be attained by the mere act of renounciation but by the grace of the descent of the *Shakti* upon the sage.

As we said, Kashmiri Shaivism and Advaita Vedanta differ in several respects. The doctrine of the *Trika* does not see the world as an illusion but rather as the expression of God's Power. Its perspective is also more dynamic because it focuses on the creative and redeeming Energies operating within manifestation as well as on their prefiguration in the divine order. However, these differences did not prevent many sages and saints from recognizing the ultimate compatibility between the two schools. Beyond formal disagreements—possibly originating in a conflict of *upayas* within Hinduism itself—and a difference of mentality—ascetic in the case of Advaita, more alchemical for Kashmiri Shaivism—they both share a *jnanic* orientation. As spiritual paths, they also culminate in the same experience of the non-dual Absolute and are placed under the patronage of *Shiva* that the Hindu mythology portrays as simultaneously an ascetic and the spouse of the Goddess *Parvati*.

Advaita Vedanta and Tantric metaphysics are also intricately intertwined in the Goddess literature. Its underlying assumption is the identification of *Mahadevi*, the great Goddess synthesizing all the particular female deities of the Hindu pantheon, with the *Maya* of Vedanta, the *Shakti* of the Tantric Godhead and even with *Brahman*.[79] In "Degrees and Scope of Theism",[80] Schuon has contrasted the masculine perspective of Semitic monotheism and the feminine perspective of Shaktism. The former sees man as the totality and woman as the part: Eve has been created from Adam and is only a portion of him. In this "androtheist" perspective, a masculine God faces a feminine universe. By contrast for Shaktism, woman is the "Mother" symbolizing the Infinite, the supra-formal as opposed to man who incarnates the limited, the manifested. In the onto-cosmological chain, She precedes the

[79] David R. Kingsley, *Hindu Goddesses, visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition* Berkeley (Los Angeles, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1988) 132-137. The *Vashista's Yoga* that Schuon praised highly, although not a Shaktic scripture *per se,* also harmoniously combines the categories of Tantrism, Shaktism and Vedanta.

[80] Frithjof Schuon, "Degree and Scope of Theism," *To have a center,* 118-119.

"relatively Absolute" or the personal God [81] but She is also present at every step in the cosmogonic trajectory: at the level of Being as the efficient energy of the *Isvara*; in the archangelic realm as the trinity *Sarasvati-Lakshmi-Parvati* and below the manifested as the receptive substance (*prakriti*). In the spiritual life, She finally aids the *shakta* as his "Mother" and attracts him as "Virgin," personifying the celestial energy that allows man "to enter into contact with the Divinity" and as well as the sacred knowledge (*Brahma vidya)* that confers "a second birth." [82] According to the *Deva Gita,* "through her power of ignorance, She shows herself as the world, like a rope appearing as a serpent" and "through her power of knowledge, She dissolves the world back into Herself" rescuing her devotees from "the troubled ocean of the *samsara*."[83]

For Ramakrishna to whom Schuon often refers, even the *jnani* adept of the Advaita cannot leave the realm of the universal relativity and ignorance without the assistance of her Grace.[84] If in Islamic terms Schuon was a *maryami*, in Hindu terms he was not only an Advaitin but also a *shakta* like Ramakrishna and his unpublished autobiography frequently alludes to the presence of Hindu Goddesses. Schuon's dual reference to the Goddess and to Vedantic metaphysics may be disappointing for those unfamiliar with the non-Abrahamic traditions. But as we have suggested it finds more than a single anticipation in the land of the *Sanatana Dharma*. Not only do we find in Kashmiri Shaivism and in the Goddess tradition an identification of the Vedantic *Maya* with the feminine aspect of the Principle and a doctrine of the Divine Bi-unity but it may also be remarked that Schuon's insistence on the scalar nature of reality (Beyond-Being, Being, Existence) and the plurality of the divine hypostases (Absolute, Infinitude and Perfection) is much closer to the Kashmiri doctrine of the *tattvas* than to the Vedantic

[81] Frithjof Schuon, "The Onto-cosmological Chain," *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism,* 61-62.
[82] Frithjof Schuon, "Mahashakti," *Roots of the Human Condition* (Bloomington: World Wisdom: 1991) 29-45.
[83] *The Song of the Goddess, The Devi Gita: Spiritual counsel of the Great Goddess,* translated by C. Maczenzie Brown (New York: SUNY, 2002) 48-49.
[84] Swami Nikhilananda, *The Gospel of Ramakrishna (*Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center: Rei edition, 2000) 134.

"monism." Both Schuon and Abhinavagupta see the Principle as simultaneously static and dynamic: profound peace and radiating Good, begetting the multiple degrees of being and consciousness, a vision that has already led some to reproach Schuon of giving too much weight to kataphatic expressions. Schuon also shares with Shaktism a certain trust in the Mercy of celestial femininity.

To this we should add that the spiritual meaning of beauty interests both Schuon and the master of the *Trika*. We have already mentioned Schuon's artistic gifts. It is less known that unlike Shankara, Abhinavagupta wrote in addition to his theological treatises, important commentaries on dance, music and literature, his major contribution to Indian aesthetic remain his doctrine of *rasa*.[85] For him, as for Schuon, two sages whose point of departure is neither legalistic nor moralistic but the "nature of things," the listening to music, the performance of dance and the aesthetical contemplation, permit to assimilate—in a quasi-alchemical way—celestial qualities. Beauty not only attracts angelical influences but also communicates a spark of the divine Bliss (*Ananda*) as well as an intuition of the plenitude of *Atma*. Schuon once explained that "in beauty man 'realizes,' passively in his perception and externally in his production of it, that which he should himself be,"[86] providing a key for the understanding of the Hindu notion of *darshan*. The message of Beauty and the language of the Self do not compete with one another. They are like "two opposing poles within the Godhead's spheres."

Shri Abhinavagupta was surrounded
By *devadassis*, and with dance and music;
Shri Shankara on the other hand was an ascetic,
Who sought his happiness in solitude.

Two opposing poles within the Godhead's spheres —
And yet two human beings on this poor earth,

[85] On this concept see: Patrick Laude, *Singing the Way: Insights in Poetry and Spiritual Transformation* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2005) 15-24.
[86] *The Essential Frithjof Schuon,* edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2005) 371.

Often difficult to understand — but nonetheless united
In One Truth, and at the same hearth.[87]

Within the lineage of the ten *avataras* of Vishnu, it is Krishna, the *guru* of Arjuna in the Bhagavad-Gita who incarnates most directly the Tantric attitude. According to Schuon, when the *Srimad Bhagavatam* describes the *rasa-lila,* the dance of the *gopis* around Krishna, it alludes to the mystery of the Veil and the loss of individuality in ecstasy. "Fundamentally every love is a search for the Essence or the lost Paradise"[88] and the human soul is like a *gopi* secretly burned by an unlimited desire for her Lord. It is however necessary to insist that Schuon's affinity with Tantric wisdom was confined to a purely contemplative and aesthetic level. By contrast with the techniques of the *Kundalini-yoga,* Schuon never cultivated the dynamic, energetic or even erotic aspect of the *Shakti*. He rather insisted on her dimension of maternal mercy or of "platonic" beauty and he loved to repeat the maxim of the greatest among the Greek sages: "Beauty is the splendor of the Truth."

Polemics inevitably surround to some degree the life of spiritual figures of first magnitude. It is even more true in a time of extreme confusion like ours, in which the prince of darkness makes his power felt more heavily than ever and in which human discernment is weaker than it was in previous ages. Our intention in this article was nevertheless to dispel some frequent misunderstandings that have obscured the message of Frithjof Schuon: the allegation that he claimed to be the prophet of a new religion and the distortions produced by the unilateral superimposition on his message of too narrow Islamic criteria. As we have argued, in our apocalyptical age, Frithjof Schuon was like the paracletic spokesman of the *sophia perennis.* He assumed the function of "a sage for the times" and his message of primordiality, essentiality and universality has touched people with very diverse religious backgrounds. Seen from a Western perspective, he belonged to the sapiential lineage of Plato and the neo-Platonists: he was in the noble sense a philosopher,

[87] Frithjof Schuon, *World Wheel III / X* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2007).
[88] Frithjof Schuon, "The problem of sexuality," *Esoterism as Principle and as Way* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1990).

a lover of the Divine Sophia. From a Hindu viewpoint, he was intrinsically a Shaivist and a Shaktist, rather than a Vaishnavist, a man of *jnana* rather than religious observances. In his nature, the sense of Beauty and the devotion to the Goddess went hand in hand with the most pristine Vedantic non-dualism. As Schuon has repeated more than once, the religions revealed by the prophets and lived by the saints are not perfect because they are totally immersed within the domain of relativity. Even their celestial matrix is still included in the *Maha moha* or the "Relatively Absolute" and that is why sages exist. By breaking the outer shell of relativity, they open our hearts to "the luminous realm of the Pure Spirit" that radiates from the One Self.

* * *

Life's work

The work, a lifelong struggle—first
Youthful dreams: the True, the Beautiful,
The Sacred, and the Great. Then dreams
Come true, that the Word might be heard.

All this amid the shadows—will it shine or not?
Does destiny wish that the Word grow weary
And weaker throughout life? *Fiat Lux*—
God willed that it should flourish and remain.

In the book of my message you have read
And ask: from whence resounds the Master's voice?
His substance is part Shankara, part Krishna—
Singing gnosis is the primordial essence.[89]

[89] Frithjof Schuon, *Adastra & Stella Maris* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2004) 234-235.

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Sacred Web 20

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