From the online library at www.worldwisdom.com

What Sincerity Is and Is Not

by

Frithjof Schuon

Source: *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 9, No. 4. (Autumn, 1975). © World Wisdom, Inc.
www.studiesincomparativereligion.com

Editor's note: The following is a recent translation of the essay, approved by the estate of Frithjof Schuon. The essay has appeared in the books Esoterism as Principle and as Way *(Perennial Books, 1981), and in* Prayer Fashions Man: Frithjof Schuon on the Spiritual Life *(World Wisdom, 2005).*

How often one reads or hears it said that someone is gravely mistaken or vicious or criminal, but that he is "sincere" and is therefore "seeking God in his own way"—and other euphemisms of the sort—when what is really meant is this: there need be no fear of his making the slightest effort either for truth or for virtue. The opinion in question, which is strictly perverse, is one manifestation among others of modern subjectivism, according to which the subjective, however contingent it may be, takes precedence over what is objective, even in cases where the objective is the very reason for the subjective and thus determines its worth. In other words, the now fashionable cult of sincerity, far from being moral or spiritual, is simply a more or less cynical individualism: an individualism moreover with democratic overtones, since it believes that to wish to master and transcend oneself is to wish to be more than other people—as if the effort to perfect oneself somehow prevented others from doing the same.

Both cynicism and hypocrisy are forms of pride: cynicism is the caricature of sincerity or frankness, whereas hypocrisy is the caricature of scrupulousness or self-discipline, or of virtue in general. Cynics believe that sincerity consists in exhibiting shortcomings and passions and that to hide them is to be a hypocrite; they do not exercise self-control and still less do they seek to transcend themselves; and the fact that they take their fault for a virtue is clear proof of their pride. Hypocrites believe, on the contrary, that it is virtuous to make a display of virtuous attitudes or that the appearances of faith suffice for faith itself; their vice lies not in manifesting forms of virtue—which is a rule that must apply to everyone—but in believing that the manifestation is virtue itself and above all in mimicking virtue in the hope of being admired: this is pride, because it is individualism and ostentation. Pride is overestimating oneself and underestimating others, and this is what the cynic does just as much as the hypocrite, in a blatant or subtle way as the case may be.

All this amounts to saying that in cynicism as in hypocrisy the autocratic and therefore tenebrous ego takes the place of the spirit and light; the two vices are acts of theft by which the passional and egoistic soul appropriates what belongs to the spiritual soul. Moreover, to present a

vice as a virtue and, correspondingly, to accuse virtues of being vices, as is done by cynicism posing as sincerity, is nothing but hypocrisy, and it is a particularly perverse hypocrisy.

As for pride, it was defined very well by Boethius: “All the other vices flee from God; only pride sets itself up against Him”; and by Saint Augustine: “Other vices attach themselves to evil that evil may be accomplished; pride alone attaches itself to good that good may perish.” When God is absent, pride necessarily fills the void: it cannot fail to appear in the soul when there is nothing there to relate to the Sovereign Good. Without doubt the virtues of worldly men or unbelievers have their own relative worth, but the same is true of physical qualities at their own level; the only qualities that contribute to the soul’s salvation are those that are quickened by the Truth and the Way; no virtue cut off from these foundations has the power to save, and this proves the relativity, and the indirect importance, of purely natural virtues. A spiritual man does not sense that he owns his virtues; he renounces vices and extinguishes himself—actively and passively—in the divine Virtues, Virtues as such. Virtue is that which is.

* * *

A virtuous man conceals his faults for the following reasons: first because he does not concede them any right to exist and because, after each failing, he hopes it will be the last; a man cannot really be reproached for concealing his faults because he is striving not to sin and to behave correctly. A second reason is conformity to the norm: in order to be rid of a fault, one must not only have the intention of eliminating it for the sake of God and not just to please men, but one must also enter actively into the mould of perfection; and if it is clear that this must not be done just to please men, it is no less clear that it must be done to avoid scandalizing them and setting a bad example; this is a charity that God demands of us, since love of God requires us to love our neighbor.

When so-called sincerity breaks the framework of traditional—or simply normal—rules of behavior, it thereby betrays its prideful nature; for the rules are venerable, and we have no right to disdain them or put our subjectivity above them. It is true that saints sometimes break these rules, but they do so from above not below: by virtue of a divine truth not a human sentiment. In any case, if a man of tradition effaces himself behind a rule of behavior, this is certainly not out of hypocrisy, but out of humility and charity: humility because he realizes that the traditional rule is right and better than he is; charity because he does not wish to thrust on his neighbors the scandal of his own shortcomings: quite the contrary, he intends to manifest a salutary norm even if he has not yet himself attained its level.

* * *

The noble man is one who masters himself and loves to master himself; the base man is one who does not master himself and shrinks in horror from mastering himself.[1] The spiritual man is one who transcends himself and loves to transcend himself; the worldly man remains horizontal and hates the vertical dimension. And this is important: one cannot subject oneself to a constraining ideal—or seek to transcend oneself for the sake of God—without bearing in one's soul what psychoanalysts call "complexes"; this means in fact that there are complexes which are normal for a spiritual man or simply for a decent man and that, conversely, the absence of "complexes" is not necessarily a virtue, to say the least. Undoubtedly primordial man or man deified has no complexes, but to have no complexes is not enough to make a man deified or primordial.

The root of all true sincerity is sincerity toward God, not toward our own good pleasure; this means that it is not enough to believe in God, but that all the consequences of belief must be drawn in our outward and inward comportment; and when we aspire to a perfection—since God is perfect and wills for us to be perfect—we seek to manifest it even before we realize it, and in order to realize it.

A man who submits to outward and inward norms, and who is thus striving along the way of perfection or in eliminating imperfections, knows very well that among those who do not make this effort there are some who surpass him in natural qualities; but endowed as he is with intelligence, without which he would not be a man, he cannot fail to realize that he is, whether he likes it or not, necessarily better than worldly men with respect to metaphysical truth and spiritual effort, and that any effort made for the sake of God infinitely outweighs a merely natural quality that is never turned to spiritual account. Besides, worldly people are always looking for accomplices in their dissipation and ruin, and for this reason spiritual people keep their distance from them as far as possible, unless they have an apostolic mission; but in this case they will be most wary of imitating the bad behavior of the worldly, thus being the opposite of what they preach.

* * *

By way of summary, we may say that the content of sincerity is our tendency toward God and our consequent adherence to the rules that this tendency imposes upon us, and not our nature pure and simple with all its shortcomings; to be sincere is not to indulge in vice before men, but to be virtuous before God and to enter accordingly into the mould of virtues as yet unassimilated, whatever may be the opinions of men. It is true that certain saints—the "people of blame" in

[1] It may be added that the noble man looks at what is essential in phenomena, not at what is accidental; he sees the overall worth in a creature and the intention of the Creator—not some more or less humiliating accident—and he thereby anticipates the perception of divine Qualities through forms. This is what is expressed by the words of the Apostle: "Unto the pure all things are pure."

Sufism—have sought to create scandal in order to be despised, which really amounts to despising others, but moral or mystical egoism is unaware of this; this attitude is nevertheless a two-edged sword, at least in extreme cases—those precisely that make it legitimate to speak of egoism—though not when it is simply a question of neutral attitudes intended to veil a perfection or desire for perfection. However, the imperatives of a particular mystical subjectivity cannot prevent the normal attitude, which is to practice the virtues in equilibrium and dignity; and it is important not to confuse equilibrium with mediocrity, which arises out of lukewarmness, whereas equilibrium arises out of wisdom. The essence of dignity is not only our deiformity but humility joined to charity; these two virtues compensate for the risks that come from being made in the image of God, while at the same time they participate in divine Virtues, which integrate them into our theomorphism. This quality could well make us arrogant and egotistical, but when we grasp its true nature we see that it binds us, on the contrary, to the perfections not only of the Lord but also of the servant; the whole mystery of the human *pontifex* lies in this complementarity.

It may be added, by way of supplement to these considerations of principle, that rules of behavior are at times subtle and complex, even paradoxical: for an old man to play with children involves no loss of dignity if he holds fast to the dignity of man as such; for a litigant to plead his right is not contrary to charity, provided he does not become unjust in his turn and is not motivated simply by meanness.[2] Charity does not preclude holy anger, any more than humility precludes a holy self-respect or dignity holy joy.

* * *

We have seen that hypocrisy consists, not in adopting a superior mode of behavior with the intention of actualizing and affirming it, but in adopting it with the intention of seeming to be more than one is. It therefore lies not in behavior that may well be above the level of our present state, but in the intention to appear to be above others, even in the absence of witnesses and for the sake of private satisfaction; the virulence of the error of sincerism moves us to make this self-evident *distinguo* once more. If the mere fact of adopting a form of model behavior were hypocrisy, it would be impossible to make any effort in the direction of goodness, and man would not be man.

Sincerity is the absence of falsehood in inward and outward behavior; to lie is deliberately to mislead; one can lie to one's neighbor, to oneself, to God. Now a pious man who wraps his weakness in a veil of rectitude does not mean to lie, and *ipso facto* he is not lying; he does not mean to manifest what in fact he is, but he cannot help manifesting what he wishes to

[2] The basis of charity is not only to understand that other men are ourselves—every man being "I"—but also to desire our own good; for if our immortal personality were not worthy of love, then neither would be that of our neighbor. "Hate thy soul" means: hate in yourself what harms your ultimate interests.

be. And it is in the nature of things that he ends up being perfectly truthful; for what we wish to be is in a certain sense what we are.

Veil of hypocrisy, veil of rectitude: in the first case the veil is opaque and dissimulating; in the second it is transparent and transmitting. The "lowering of the veil" (*zawâl al-hijâb*) in the first case is a rejection of hypocrisy; in the second it is a relinquishing of effort, or rather a forgetting of the symbol, thanks to the liberating presence of the Real.