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FOREWORD

Although almost all of Frithjof Schuon's books have been available in English for many years, one can hardly say that his name is a household word. To people with special interests, however, in such fields as philosophy, theology, comparative religion, and the spiritual life, a great deal has been known about him for a long time.

The present biography provides, in an engaging and fascinating manner, a detailed background to his life, his writings, and his ideas, but I will summarize here some of the essentials in order straightway to give a hint as to the nature and character of this man.

Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998) was born in Basle, Switzerland of German parents. His parents were of Catholic origin, but did not practice, and they sent their son to a Lutheran school. Throughout his long life, Schuon remained profoundly grateful to a beloved school teacher of his early years for his "wonderful Bible lessons". At the same time, the child Schuon was enthralled by reading the Arabian Nights and folk tales from all over the world. Also as a child, he was already aware that what he admired and yearned for above all were the four universal qualities: "the holy, the noble, the beautiful, and the great". At about the age of 11 or 12, he unexpectedly had a deep and lasting spiritual experience when he viewed, and was overwhelmed by, the three great Japanese Buddhist statues in the Ethnological Museum in Basle. This experience was pivotal for him, and taught him how wisdom and holiness are inseparable from beauty, and how they can be conveyed to the heart of man by the peaks of sacred art.

After the death of his father in 1920, his mother and her two sons moved to Mulhouse (Mülhausen) in Alsace, which had been annexed by France in 1918. His father's death and the move to Alsace were extremely traumatic for the young Schuon, but at Mulhouse he attended a convent school run by aristocratic French nuns, under whose influence the young adolescent happily and willingly became a Catholic. At the same time he learned French, the language in which he was destined to write his many philosophical books.

Throughout these adolescent years Schuon continued his yearning for the four universal qualities mentioned above; and, even without explicit teaching, the youthful Schuon had developed a profound grasp of metaphysical, theological, and spiritual realities. But explicit teaching was also at hand. He eagerly read all holy Scriptures, and especially the *Bhagavad Gītā*, which was for him a revelation in every sense of the word. However, in all his understanding, inborn and acquired, he was alone. He was misunderstood

by his family and acquaintances, and suffered much as a result. He continued to love his childhood Protestantism and his youthful Catholicism but, as he grew into adulthood, he loosened his attachment to them, and lived almost entirely in the uncompromising and implacable intellectual aura of Vedanta and Platonism.

In 1924, at the age of 17, he discovered the books of the magisterial French philosopher and orientalist René Guénon (1886-1951). This was for Schuon an immense consolation. Not only did he find in Guénon's writings a full confirmation of the views which he already profoundly held; he also found in them the precise metaphysical vocabulary and terminology with which to clothe and express his own understandings and insights. Some years later there began between Guénon and Schuon a prolific correspondence, which continued until the end of Guénon's life.

Several significant events and experiences in Schuon's life took place in the late 1920s and early 1930s, amongst them, his military service, his earliest travels, and finally his decisive encounter with the Algerian Sufi master the Shaykh al-'Alawī. But I will leave the details of these crucial and seminal events to the biographer, who deals with them copiously, and turn to the important matter of Schuon's long and intimate intellectual association with René Guénon.

René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon were the originators of what has subsequently become known as the "Perennialist" or "Traditionalist" school of wisdom. Guénon was the pioneer, and Schuon the fulfillment or quintessence. Schuon pointed out the analogy here with two other wisdom schools which had dual originators and expositors, namely, those associated with Socrates and Plato in fifth century B.C. Athens, and with Jalāl ad-Dīn Rūmī and Shams ad-Dīn at-Tabrīzī in thirteenth century Turkey.

Basically, the point of view of Guénon and Schuon is that of the "perennial philosophy". This term was made familiar to English-speaking readers by the publication in 1945 of Aldous Huxley's book of the same name.[1] The central idea of the perennial philosophy is that Divine Truth is one, timeless, and universal, and that the different religions are but different languages expressing that one Truth. The symbol most often used to convey this idea is that of the uncolored light and the many colors of the spectrum which are made visible only when the uncolored light is refracted. In the Renaissance, the term betokened the recognition of the fact that the philosophies of Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus incontrovertibly expounded the same truths as lay at the heart of Christianity. Subsequently the meaning of the term was enlarged to cover the metaphysics and mysticisms of all of the great world religions, notably, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam.

In point of fact, Huxley was not the first exponent of this idea in modern times. It had already been propounded by the Bengali saint Ramakrishna (1836-1886), who was intimately familiar—and at a much deeper level than Huxley—, not only with Hinduism, but also with Christianity and Islam. Given the "exotism" and unfamiliarity of the great Ramakrishna, however, and also the dubious religious credentials of the rather superficial and syncretistic Huxley, the term and the idea of the "perennial philosophy" did not get off to a good start with conservative religious seekers, Christian and other.

But a development that no one could have foreseen occurred. In the 1920s, the books of the French philosopher René Guénon began to appear. These expounded, in irrefutably Platonic fashion, the oneness of supra-formal Truth, and the multiplicity of the formal expressions thereof. From this one could perceive that the reason for being of the different religions is not that they are "all the same", but, precisely, that they are *all different*! The *essence* (concerning God, man, and salvation) is of course the same, but the *forms* are significantly different. Each religion—not only Christianity—makes an absolute claim, for the precise reason that it is an expression of the Absolute; this is its justification and its *sine qua non*. Red, yellow, and green are not darkness; on the contrary, each one of them is a refraction of the uncolored light. The principle of religious unity lies in God alone, and it is a rash man who declares that God has expressed Himself in only one language!

Guénon's works were followed, from the 1930s onwards, by the long series of articles and books by Schuon, who carried to incredible heights the exposition of timeless truth, *and its saving quality*. Schuon's message was indeed one of truth, beauty, and salvation.

It is difficult to dispute the profundity and genius of these two authors who were the originators of the current of intellectuality and spirituality known as the "Perennialist" or "Traditionalist" school.[2] Nothing can take away from the originality of vision of Guénon and Schuon, but it is appropriate to mention some of the great precursors to whom they most frequently refer. These include Shankara (Hinduism), Plato (Ancient Greece), Eckhart (Western Christianity), and Ibn 'Arabī (Islam). Yet the Perennialist vision does not require lengthy expression: it is summed up in the words of Christ: "Ye shall know the Truth, and the Truth shall make you free." For the perennial philosophy, this is indeed the whole story: timeless truth, and its liberating quality.

Perhaps because of the superficiality of early-twentieth-century Huxley and the fantasies of late-twentieth-century "new-age" ideas, the Perennialist school, with its universalist theses and extra-Christian references, is still in some quarters regarded with suspicion. Some people indeed tend to confuse

two opposites: "new-age" ideas and the perennial philosophy.[3] Others, again, think that the perennial philosophy has to do only with something which is pejoratively referred to as "Eastern mysticism", forgetting that the term itself is of Christian origin, and that it was brought into service in the first place by the Christian recognition of the eternal truths of Platonism. These eternal truths are precisely what the perennial philosophy is all about.

The perennial philosophy is not for fools, and it is precisely this that the modern sophisticated man needs to know. The perennial philosophy—which is true universalism and true ecumenism—is a recognition of the divine origin of each religion. The essence of each religion is pure truth, and the various religious forms clothe that truth in garments of different designs and colors. "In my Father's house are many mansions." This saying of Christ applies not only to Heaven, but also to earth. The function of the various religions is to express the truth, and to offer a way of salvation, in a manner suited to the needs of the different segments and ethnicities of mankind. Each religion comes from God, and each religion leads back to God. Each religion, moreover, comprises a doctrine and a method, that is to say, it is an enlightening truth coupled with a saving means. Were this not so, it would not be a question of religion, but of an empty man-made ideology (such as Freudianism, Jungianism, Teilhardism, and many others) that can save no one.

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Frithjof Schuon sometimes summarized his message in a highly succinct fashion. For example:

His complete teaching in four words: Truth, Prayer, Virtue, Beauty.

The three concomitants of the Love of God: Virgin Nature, Sacred Art, Holy Company.

The *doctrine* of Shankara, the *method* of Hōnen, and the *primordiality* of the Red Indians.

As regards the last of these summaries: Shankara was the pinnacle of Hindu wisdom, a master of universal metaphysics in the form of *Advaita Vedānta* ("non-duality"); Hōnen, a Japanese Amida Buddhist Master, was the preeminent exemplar of total trust in the saving power of the revealed Name; as for the great Indian Chiefs, they evoke the qualities of dignity, courage, frugality, sacrifice, and closeness to Virgin Nature.

In Christian terms this ternary is: the *doctrine* of Meister Eckhart, the *method* of Saint Bernardino of Siena, and the *love of nature* (the *primordiality*) of Saint Francis of Assisi.

In Islamic terms it is: *Tawhīd* (the doctrine of unity), *Dhikr* (the remembrance of God), and *Fitra* (primordial nature or the state of the *hanīf*).

Each of the various expressions of each of the three components of this ternary (doctrine, method, and primordiality) derives from the same (respective) archetype. The first example mentioned above (referring to Shankara, Hōnen, and the Red Indians)—formulated by Schuon himself—is a particularly felicitous, evocative, and memorable expression of the three archetypes concerned.

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Personally, Schuon was a combination of majesty and humility; of rigor and love. He was made of objectivity and incorruptibility, coupled with compassion. In meeting with him many times during a period of nearly five decades, the immediate personal qualities which constantly struck me were his infinite patience and his infinite generosity.

May this informative and well-documented biography successfully convey to readers the precious and unique phenomenon that was Frithjof Schuon.

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NOTES

[1] The first person known to have used the term "perennial philosophy" was the Vatican librarian Agostino Steuco in the sixteenth century. It was also adopted, in the seventeenth century, by Baron Gottfried von Leibnitz. The term was brought to Aldous Huxley's attention by Ananda Coomaraswamy who, in a letter to him dated August 10, 1944, spoke of the *philosophia perennis* or "perennial philosophy". It seems very probable that it was due to this that Huxley adopted it as the title of his anthology. The sacred texts quoted by Huxley are irreproachable, but unfortunately his commentary on them is lacking in depth.

[2] Two other writers (called by Schuon "continuators") who have contributed to the explication of this school are the Anglo-Indian Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) and the German Swiss Titus Burckhardt (1908-1984).

[3] We may note in passing that the "new-age" meanderings are a shallow and syncretistic hodgepodge. They are a parody of authentic, or esoteric, universalism. If I may paraphrase the words of Psalm 46: Instead of saying: "Be still and know that HE is God", the "new age" says: "Be still and know that YOU are God"! One doesn't know whether to laugh or cry.

The text above is the Foreword to the book
Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy
by Michael O. Fitzgerald.
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