

## FOREWORD

Indisputably, Frithjof Schuon ranks among the foremost representatives of the perennialist current. He is certainly the major spokesman for this school in the United States, whereas his main predecessor, who heralded the movement and brought it to a head, is René Guénon (1886-1951), the best known perennialist writer in Europe, especially in France. Common to the proponents of the perennialist point of view, also sometimes called the “traditionalist school”, is a belief in the existence of a “primordial tradition”, which runs throughout the apparent diversity of religions, and in a “transcendent unity of religions”, which is understood to overarch the various spiritual traditions of the world. Derived from the Latin phrase *philosophia perennis*, or “perennial philosophy”, perennialism may be traced back to the Renaissance, but it was not until the nineteenth century, and mostly and mainly in the twentieth, that it developed to the point of becoming a widespread approach to the history and essence of “religion(s)”. Over the last several decades it has been the object of debate among various religiously oriented people, as well as among philosophers and historians of religions, both secular and non-secular.

In the late 1980s, I had the privilege of participating in a series of such debates with James S. Cutsinger and other scholars, including Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Huston Smith. These discussions, which were held within the framework of the American Academy of Religion, gave me the occasion to familiarize myself with the works of these writers and to develop a long-standing friendship with Professor Cutsinger. In asking me to write a Foreword for the present anthology, he honors me all the more since he knows that, as a historian with a secular approach to the study of religions, I am not myself a proponent of perennialism. I have accepted his invitation as a token of his intellectual honesty, and I see in it an opportunity to state the reasons why I welcome this publication.

This is not the first anthology of Schuon’s work—Professor Nasr’s collection of *The Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon* is a must

for any library claiming to hold the major perennialist publications—but it is the first to focus on a specific religion. This choice is felicitous, particularly since the religion in question is one which is historically and theologically laden with dogmatic elements. This fact enables us to inquire more conveniently whether, and if so how far, Schuon's view of a transcendent unity of religions is compatible with the specificity of Christianity—and, by extension, with that of any other monotheistic religion. This issue has a wide bearing, not least in view of Schuon's privileged position within the traditionalist school.

That perennialist "unity" honors diversity is a generally admitted fact, but "honoring" could be a merely passive form of tolerance. In fact, however, a careful reading of the texts here assembled has had the effect, I confess, of helping me to realize that Schuon is interested in more than just "honoring"—that he is not content with simply exhibiting a tolerant attitude toward various traditions or with finding similarities or commonalities between Christianity and other religions. For him it is more a matter of understanding and experiencing, out of his own soul and in his intellect, the inner core of what is Christianity-specific. Interestingly enough, despite the presence of certain observations that lie outside the scope of Christianity proper—such as his belief in "the cyclical decadence of the human race"—some pages in this collection give the impression of having been written by a Christian who was desirous of putting forward arguments in favor of the truth of his faith. A comparative study of Guénon's and Schuon's approaches in this regard would prove rewarding and would lead, no doubt, to a clearer appreciation of their differences.

A reliable assessment of the place that Christianity actually occupies in Schuon's work would admittedly require going beyond the pages presented by Professor Cutsinger, and putting them into the context of that work taken in its entirety. In so doing, and in view of the fact that Schuon deals similarly with other religions, it is possible that we would discover a slightly different picture of his understanding of Christianity from the one that seems to spring from these pages. Be that as it may, and however interesting the nature of that larger picture might be, what is clear is that Schuon stands out as a remarkable "contextualizer", and in this respect he differs from many other perennialists insofar as he is keen to bring out and compare the various orientations that a given religion has followed over

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the sweep of centuries. Readers interested in the comparative study of Christian churches and denominations cannot but appreciate his ability to deal with the various branches of this religion. Although some historians might dispute certain of his interpretations, as unavoidably happens when a writer sets out to encompass a field so wide and variegated, these interpretations are always cogently documented.

Schuon focuses on what makes these churches and denominations so different from one another and pays tribute to most of them, and he does so in a way that does not seem to be biased by—or subservient to—the idea of a transcendent principle uniting them invisibly behind the veil of their multifarious differences. The same is true when he compares, not just branches within one religion, but “great” religions with one another, whether they are those of the “Book” or of the Far-East, and in this he proves to be—at least in the present anthology, and perhaps more so than Guénon—a comparativist who must be taken seriously by academe. Within the history of the History of Religions, Schuon appears to belong to the phenomenological school, exemplified by such scholars as Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade. Like them, he is committed to defending an essentialist idea of what “religion” *per se* is all about, as for example in the present volume when he writes that “the essence of all religions is the truth of the Absolute”. Of course, the phenomenological approach comes in for its share of criticism by researchers involved in other orientations—the proponents of the various historicist schools, for example. But this should not prevent a scholar with an open mind from admitting that such an approach, within the general field of religious studies, has been and still is a fruit-bearing one, were it only in view of the illuminating, though often risky, parallels which are sometimes drawn, and in which Schuon’s work abounds.

In some measure, it is because of my research in the history of “esoteric currents in modern and contemporary Europe” (fifteenth to twentieth centuries) that Professor Cutsinger has asked me to contribute this Foreword, and it may therefore be opportune to offer a few remarks relevant to these currents, which include perennialism.

Except for a brief reference to the “Cabalists”, the absence of Jewish and Christian Cabala in this volume is conspicuous, and one notes as well that Schuon’s speculations on numbers are strictly lim-

ited—notably, to 2, 3, and 6—serving only to illustrate metaphysical concepts. “Alchemy” remains a purely metaphorical term for him—as when he uses the phrase “alchemically speaking”—and while he says that he is employing the word “theosophy” in the “ancient and true sense of the word”, the theosophical current typified by Jacob Böhme and his successors is obviously not the object of his interests. Meanwhile, the passages that Schuon devotes to Sophia, who is for him an equivalent of “absolute Truth” and whom he tellingly connects to the *sophia perennis*, remain deliberately outside the scope of the Böhmanian tradition. These differences, of course, are not unique to Schuon, but are typical of perennialists in general. Whereas other esotericists—alchemists, Christian Cabalists, Rosicrucians, Hermeticists, theosophers, and so forth—have been borrowing from each other for centuries, thus accumulating a quasi-mandatory referential corpus, the perennialists, in the wake of Guénon, have preferred to remain aloof from these currents. Significantly, in order to differentiate themselves, they have preferred to use the term “esoterism” instead of “esotericism”. Keen as they are to separate the wheat from the chaff, they consistently evince a marked tendency to deal with “metaphysical principles” rather than with what otherwise constitutes the essentials of Western esotericism. Reflective of this position is the fact that, as Schuon tells us here, “esoterism” is for him synonymous with *gnosis*.

At least two reasons account for this perspective: a negative attitude toward modernity, on the one hand, and the relatively minor place granted to Nature, on the other. In the first place, since modernity is understood by the perennialists to be a “dark age”, the esoteric currents that appeared within it as early as the Renaissance often come in for their share of suspicion. We cannot help thinking that the quizzical thunderbolts that Schuon hurls at the baroque in these pages hit by the same token certain esoteric currents—including most alchemical and theosophical productions—which are part and parcel of this same baroque. Second, for those of a perennialist persuasion, nature is more or less an illusion. Indeed for Guénon it has “even less reality than the shadow of our body on a wall”. Schuon grants here that, contrary to Calvin’s view, “transcendence can tolerate immanence”, but he also informs us—in Chapter 10, “Evidence and Mystery”—that “our world is but a furtive and almost accidental coagulation of an immense beyond, which one day will burst forth and into which the terrestrial world

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will be reabsorbed when it has completed its cycle of material coagulation". Hardly any statement could be further from the aforementioned esoteric currents, in which Nature plays a primary role within the economy of a holistic conception of the relationship between God, Man, and Nature. There are doubtless other sides to Schuon's teaching, which come to the fore when he is discussing, for example, the spirituality of the Native Americans, but what we can say, with respect to this volume at least, is that the interests of Schuon are a far cry from those of the Paracelsians. Hence his marked preference for theologians, who are generally more germane to his purpose. The pages of this book are thus replete with quotations from Augustine, Tertullian, Thomas Aquinas, and others, and of course from Far-Eastern metaphysicians.

Needless to say, these comments are not meant to be judgmental. They are simply intended to situate Schuon's worldview within its Western cultural and historical context. Nor are they meant to take anything away from his writing itself, which is such a pleasant respite from that of so many esoteric, theological, or metaphysical treatises. The clarity of his style, devoid of jargon, cannot be divorced from the clarity of his thought. Besides, he delights us with original metaphors well-fitted to spur on our reflections, as when, for example, he presents Catholicism as a "star" and Protestantism as a "circle", or when he imagines the Catholic Mass as a "sun", and the Lutheran Communion as a "ray" of the sun.

One closing remark. Our pleasure in reading and contributing to this collection is enhanced by the editorial work of Professor Cutsinger, which is evident throughout. The scholarly apparatus he has presented spares us the task of searching for a number of references, while inciting us in turn to venture further into the philosophy of Frithjof Schuon.

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