

Book Review

Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teachings

by Jean-Baptiste Aymard & Patrick Laude, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004. Foreword by Seyyed Hossein Nasr.

Review by Harry Oldmeadow, published in Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies (Washington DC) 11.1, Summer 2005, 197-204.

Some years ago Seyyed Hossein Nasr wrote of the Integrated Man of Sufism:

His thoughts and actions all issue from a single centre and are based on a series of immutable principles. He has been cured of that hypocrisy in which most men live and therefore, since the veil of otherness which hides the inner light in the majority of men has been removed, like the sun he reflects his light wherever he happens to be. In him, the Islamic ideal of unifying the contemplative and active ways is realized... And because by virtue of his becoming integrated he reflects Divine Unity and has become the total theophany of the Divine Names and Qualities, he acts and lives in such a manner that there is a spiritual fragrance and beauty about all he does and says. Somehow he is in touch with that *barakah* which runs through the arteries of the Universe. (*Sufi Essays*, 1972, p.50)

Such a one was Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998), whose life and teachings are the subject of the volume at hand. Readers of this journal will need no introduction to Schuon, at once the most sublime and the most profound metaphysician of our era. However, Schuon covered his own life with the cloak of anonymity, maintaining a deliberate obscurity which ensured that only those prepared to make the necessary effort could seek him out. Like his predecessor René Guénon, Schuon had no interest in noisy public acclaim, nor was he in any sense the worldly “intellectual” — quite the contrary. But now that Schuon has departed this life it is meet and proper that two who knew him well, equipped with the formidable qualifications that such a task demands, should furnish us with an intellectual and spiritual biography of one of the most remarkable figures of the modern era. The present work comes in the wake of a glittering collection of essays gathered together by Aymard and Laude in *Frithjof Schuon: Les Dossiers H* (2002), an anthology as yet only available in French.

The book is structured in four parts: a biographical narrative and a “spiritual portrait”, followed by essays on “Esoterism and Tradition” and “Metaphysical and Spiritual Aesthetics”. One cannot speak of the “evolution” of Schuon’s work in the normal sense: his intuitive and seemingly spontaneous understanding of metaphysics marked his work with a rare authority from the outset, and the “immutable principles” remained implacable from beginning to end. Nonetheless, there is a certain pattern of development and of unfolding in his work, traced in the first two chapters by M. Aymard. The first, “A Biographical Approach”, provides a more or less chronological sketch of Schuon’s life, tracking his intellectual and spiritual trajectory, and giving some account of the various influences which exerted themselves at different times. Among the many fascinating things in this narrative we find vignettes of his family life and friendships with such figures as Titus Burckhardt, Martin Lings and Marco Pallis, his wartime

experiences, the early and potent attraction of the East and the formative influence of Vedanta, the changing and sometimes difficult material circumstances of his outer life, his meetings not only with the masters of the Sufi tradition to which he was ineluctably drawn and towards which he was propelled, so to speak, by his revulsion for the modern West, and his meeting with scholars and representatives of the many religious traditions about which he was to write so prolifically and with such sovereign authority over half a century — among them, Louis Massignon, Fathers Anthony Bloom and Sophronios, Inayat Khan, Lhobsang Lhalungpa, Swami Ramdas, Shojun Bando, Thomas Yellowtail, and Shaykh Hassan of Morocco. Here and there we catch fleeting glimpses of some of the younger men who came within Schuon's orbit and who, in turn, were to play their own part in unveiling the spiritual treasures of the world's traditions — Leo Schaya, Joseph Epes Brown and Jean Biès to mention a few. More sustained treatment is given to several biographical threads: the decisive sojourn in North Africa and the initiation into the order of Shaykh Ahmad 'al Alawi; Schuon's relations with René Guénon; the tangled and sometimes unhappy interactions of various French Sufi groups; his extraordinary engagement with the Plains Indians of North America to whose primordial heritage he was so strongly attracted and which he himself did so much to illuminate at a time when many Westerners could only look at such cultures through the grotesque distortions of racial and progressivist prejudices. There is also a useful conspectus of the whole written corpus.

Two modest criticisms of this chapter might be advanced. Perhaps the account of the various machinations and internecine frictions of various European Sufi groups is too detailed — though this subject will be of compelling interest to some, and it might well be argued that it was incumbent on M. Aymard to set the record straight. But, for this reader at least, this subject was given disproportionate attention. Secondly, one would have been glad to see more explicit tribute paid to those who have laboured so valiantly to bring the work of Schuon to a wider audience. One thinks not only of his many translators but also of those who have toiled to break down the barriers of incomprehension and suspicion which Schuon's work has so often met in Anglophone academia — one is thinking primarily of Professors Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Huston Smith and James Cutsinger. More mention might also have been made of the steadfast loyalty and support of his wife Catherine and of his close friend Whitall Perry. But these, after all, are small quibbles next to the imposing achievement of the chapter, anchored in a painstaking and discriminating examination of a very wide range of sources, many of them previously inaccessible, and informed by both an intelligence and a sympathy without which we might have been presented with no more than the husk of a life. One might also observe in passing that this profile rigorously eschews both the trivial and often sordid gossip and the impudent psychologizing with which the modern biographical genre is littered.

The second chapter, somewhat overlapping the first, presents a “spiritual portrait” of Schuon — that is to say, a representation in which certain aspects of the subject are thrown into sharp relief so that they are more strikingly apparent. This is an altogether fascinating rendition in which the author draws us much more deeply into a proper appreciation not only of “the contours of [Schuon's] complex spiritual personality” but into his significance as a spiritual luminary in the crepuscular modern era. Here we can do no more than mention some of the governing themes of this chapter: the contemplative

and pneumatic cast of this “pilgrim of the Absolute”, and his thirst for the Divine Essence which characterizes the true gnostic and which, with the grace of God, allowed the rapid transformation from troubled and romantic adolescent to fully-fledged *jnanin*; those qualities of intelligence, will and spiritual disposition which fuelled the “untiring quest for Primordiality and Beauty, the Essential and the True” and which equipped Schuon to fashion afresh the keys with which to open “the truths written in an eternal script in the very substance of man’s spirit” (p. 66); the recuperation of the sense of Immanence and of “the metaphysical transparency of phenomena”; Schuon’s place in the company of the *fedeli d’amore*, for whom the contemplation of the Feminine is as “initiatic wine”; his intimate attachment to the Blessed Virgin and the Marian *leitmotif* in his work.

In this essay Aymard identifies three “spiritual paternities” each linked with the Vedantic ternary of *sat* (Being), *cit* (Awareness) and *ananda* (Bliss) which correspond to “dimensions” of Schuon’s personality: respectively, Shaykh Al-‘Alawi, Guénon, and, most interestingly, an elusive manifestation of the enigmatic figure of Al-Khidr who, in the words of Henri Corbin, “is always experienced simultaneously as a person and an archetype” (p. 70). An “explanation” of this mystery of the Spirit and its role in Schuon’s life lies beyond our present scope but it is not the least interesting strand of this chapter and helps to explain Schuon’s aptitude for theophanic vision. Aymard also elaborates an arresting and persuasive parallel between Schuon and Ruzbihan Baqli Shirazi, the Persian Sufi of the 12th century.

Patrick Laude’s two dense, erudite and beautifully nuanced essays, comprising the second half of the book, draw out some of the most distinctive aspects of Schuon’s role — as expositor of metaphysical principles and doctrines, as the era’s champion *par excellence* of the *Religio Perennis*, as spiritual master, artist and poet. Laude writes with something of the same analytical precision which marked Schuon’s own expositions. He accents Schuon’s work as an esoterist, and alerts us to the limitations implicit in categorizing Schuon as simply one in a line of “traditionalists”. He also shows how the intellectual standpoint, actualized in Schuon, must in some respects be “independent from the traditional and even religious point of view” (p.82). This is dangerous terrain indeed, fraught with all manner of possible hazards; M. Laude is to be commended for not shirking the issue, for giving due weight to the several perspectives from which the matter might be considered, and for holding fast in insisting that, ultimately, “quintessential esoterism” is answerable to nothing but Truth Unqualified, if one may so express it. Or, to put it another way, esoterism is “nothing less than the most direct and comprehensive language of the Self” (p.106), regardless of what scandals might ensue in a climate of over-heated religious fervour. In expounding the nature of esoterism, Laude remains faithful to both the letter and the spirit of Schuon’s teachings. It is in the nature of the case that Laude should pay less attention to what, for the majority of readers, will be a much more immediate, compensatory and operationally pertinent theme in Schuon’s writings: his untiring insistence on the rights of religious orthodoxy, and his dismissal of any purely theoretical interest in metaphysics, unaccompanied by an integral spiritual practice. To be sure, the question of the relationship of esoterism to both Tradition — in the fullest amplitude of the term — and to religion, must remain, for most of us, a rather rarefied one and need be of little practical concern.

“Esoterism and Tradition” also includes a commentary on the five “points of view” from which “the distinction between the Divine and what lies outside it” might

legitimately be envisaged, namely: meta-theistic metaphysics such as we find in Advaita Vedanta or Taoism; a monotheistic theology which emphasizes the “fundamental hiatus” between God and his Creation; the Logocentric outlook pre-eminent in Christianity and in the Avataric perspective of Hinduism; angelolatry and various forms of so-called polytheism in which angels/deities “essentially represent Divine aspects”; and, lastly, primordial Shamanism which calls for “an ecological participation in the supernatural vocation of Nature” and a thorough-going integration of psychic energies and powers into the spiritual life. The plasticity of Schuon’s spiritual sensibility (in some respects reminiscent of that of Paramahansa Ramakrishna) enabled him, according to the exigencies of the moment, to take the viewpoint of each of these perspectives. Further, as Laude observes elsewhere, “There is no author more categorical than Schuon when the dazzling evidence of principles imposes itself, but there is no one more attentive to the paradoxes, the compensations and the complex play of necessary exceptions... (p. 120).”

The closing chapter of the book concerns “Metaphysical and Spiritual Aesthetics”, and turns on the fact that “If sapiential intelligence is the directing principle of Schuon’s work, beauty is its main mode of manifestation and assimilation (p. 125).” A linkage is again made with the *sat-cit-ananda* ternary, which our authors use as the “interpretive key” to Schuon’s spiritual personality. Beauty itself entails three dimensions, each of which is readily apparent in the life, teaching and handiwork of Schuon: “a doctrine of Beauty which pertains to the domain of metaphysical consciousness” (*cit*); “a methodical and spiritual awareness of the beautiful as a means of grace” (*sat*); “a creative joy, a dimension of beatitude (*ananda*), which is expressed by [Schuon’s] poetical and pictorial productions and by a contemplative receptivity to feminine beauty as a privileged mirror of the Divine (p. 108).”

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A good deal of confusion, obfuscation and discord has accumulated around the person, the spiritual function and the written work of Frithjof Schuon. Here we can leave aside the inevitable incomprehensions and hostilities of those who are quite incapable of understanding even the simplest messages of Tradition, let alone grasping the esoteric wisdom which Schuon was ever expressing anew. This book is more concerned with the tensions, controversies and polemical eruptions which have arisen within the “traditionalist” or “perennialist” camp. Some of the forces at work here include over-zealous and misguided attempts to isolate René Guénon as the exclusive master of metaphysics in our time, and the final arbiter on all matters pertaining to tradition; the “passional blindness” and pious extravagances of some representatives of religious orthodoxy who believed, wrongly, that Schuon had compromised the integrity of religious forms; and the squalid calumnies levelled at this noble soul by some lost individuals under the sway of a malevolence which thinks nothing of defiling the reputations of the most saintly of men and women. (The authors remind us of analogous cases involving no less than St Theresa of Ávila, Padre Pio and Ramana Maharshi. They also cite Schiller’s sombre observation that “the world seeks to blacken what shines and to drag into the dust what is sublime”, p. 51) Each of these groups is quietly disarmed through a sober consideration of the facts of Schuon’s relationship to Guénon (many of which have not previously come to light in published form), and through an explanation

of the somewhat different roles that each providentially fulfilled; through a careful and persuasive explication of Schuon's stance in regard to religious forms; and through an affirmation of those qualities which made Schuon quite incapable of the offences with which his detractors had vilified him. It is one of the signal achievements of the book that it is able to show how Schuon's work, particularly in the domain of religious forms and of "metaphysical and spiritual aesthetics", surpassed that of Gu  non — this without in any manner detracting from the singular vocation to which the French metaphysician-*extraordinaire* was called. Indeed, readers not in the grip of intractable prejudices may well find, as I did, that their admiration of *both* figures is enhanced — though in my own case this had scarcely seemed possible! In this way the book can contribute to a spirit of truth, unity and concord which has sometimes been conspicuously absent amongst the partisans of apparently divergent schools of "perennialism". (Here, one does not preclude the possibility of serious but well-motivated disagreements such as remained between Gu  non and Schuon — though one must stress that these were infinitely outweighed by their extraordinary unanimity on metaphysical and cosmological principles, a salient fact which some so-called "Gu  nonians and "Schuonians" might more readily bear in mind. The melancholy fact that these absurd appellations have gained some currency is a tell-tale of the befuddlement which reigns in some quarters!)

Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teachings is unlikely to race up the best-seller charts. It is addressed to that small readership capable of metaphysical understanding. Apart from the biographical story, it assumes an intellectual sophistication in the reader which allows our authors to plunge headlong into some deep waters. Whilst the first chapter might be enjoyed by any intelligent reader the rest of this volume will only be easily assimilated by those already familiar with the perennialist outlook. It conforms to the most stringent scholarly protocols and is thoroughly documented throughout. Seyyed Hossein Nasr's lucid Foreword provides a context for the book which is also buttressed by extensive annotations. The Index and Bibliography will be highly useful to future scholars. But the key point: as the subject demands, this is much more than a work of scholarship, being itself a work of acute metaphysical discernment, of doctrinal explication and, if one may so put it, of interiorized and spiritualized aesthetic perception. It would be too much to claim that it vindicates Schuon's life and teachings for the simple reason that, whatever misunderstandings might have arisen, such a figure needs no vindication. But we can confidently assert that this book will perform an invaluable service in dispelling the clouds of confusion and ignorance which have hitherto sometimes occluded its subject. Whilst not all of the authors' interpretations and assessments will necessarily attract our unqualified assent, they certainly command our respectful attention. As Professor Nasr notes in his Foreword, the life and works of a great sage are always amenable to many different readings and are, in a sense, inexhaustible. Moreover, such figures often confront us with certain salutary enigmas and paradoxes, refractory to even the most assiduous investigation. No doubt, in the fullness of time, other works will appear which will render the life, personality and the vocation of Schuon in different colors. But this in no way mitigates our gratitude for this splendid work which gives us not only the first detailed and authoritative biography, but a most accomplished exegetical and hermeneutical commentary.

In the face of the achievements of this book I hope it will not seem churlish to voice one minor disappointment. The material production of this book — clearly *not* the

responsibility of the authors — falls far short of its content. One surmises that “commercial imperatives” explain the poor quality of the photographic reproductions, the rather murky cover and the mediocre quality of the paper. Certainly, in these times one must be grateful for publishers prepared to take on works which might not wrest much “market share”. Still, one cannot but regret the discrepancy between the content of this poised and elegant work and its somewhat humdrum material vehicle. A pity!

Those seeking books by which they may be led firmly but gently into the boundless and unfamiliar world of Tradition, the *Religio Perennis* and quintessential esoterism would do better to start with less demanding works. For those embarking from the pier of ignorance Lord Northbourne’s *Religion in the Modern World* and Martin Lings’ *Ancient Beliefs and Modern Superstitions* are most serviceable. For the more seasoned traveler this volume can take an honourable place next to several other works which provide points of access to Schuon’s *oeuvre*: *The Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon* (1986), including Seyyed Hossein Nasr’s magisterial introduction, *Religion of the Heart* (1991), edited by Nasr and William Stoddart, James Cutsinger’s *Advice to the Serious Seeker: Meditations on the Teachings of Frithjof Schuon* (1996), the Memorial Issue of *Sophia*, (4:2, 1998), and *Frithjof Schuon; Les Dossiers H* (2002).
