

**Frithjof Schuon and Sri Ramana Maharshi:
A survey of the spiritual masters of the 20th century**

by Mateus Soares de Azevedo

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Among the most important pillars of spiritual wisdom in the 20th century, Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998) and Sri Râmana Maharshi (1879-1950) clearly occupy a prominent place. Both were “universalists”, that is, they believed in and, in the case of Schuon, explicitly taught, the “transcendent unity of the religions”; both expounded the purest (and also the most intrinsically orthodox) form of perennial gnosis, but each in his own way; both attracted admirers from all the major religions. Schuon in fact was a sage in the double capacity of a pure metaphysician—in the lineage of Shankara, Pythagoras, and Plato—and of an “extra-confessional”, sapiential spiritual guide, with a profound love for all authentic religions, but without attachment to their more “formalistic” and “nationalistic” aspects. Schuon was a teacher of the Uncolored Truth, of the Truth beyond form.¹

There are of course distinctions to be made in the scope, completeness, and universality of the metaphysical doctrines which Schuon and the Maharshi expounded, and in the methods of spiritual realization which they advocated. We shall consider these distinctions in what follows.

In selecting the German “philosopher” (in the original sense of “lover of wisdom”)—who was also an inspired poet and painter, as his productions in these fields richly show—and the Hindu sage as the main objects of this study, we do not forget the immense importance (especially in the domain of traditional metaphysics, religious symbolism, and the critique of the modern deviation in all its aspects) of the remarkable French metaphysician and esoterist René Guénon (1886-1951).

Guénon was, in a sense, the founder of the traditionalist or perennialist school, a “school” in which Schuon’s works are the complete and final flowering. If Guénon is unquestionably the originator of this unique phenomenon—an unprecedented influx of intellectual and spiritual light in an epoch almost completely impervious to true intellectuality and spirituality—Schuon is its apogee and fulfillment. The French esoterist was the seed, and the German metaphysician is the flower and the fruit. Guénon was the pioneer and Schuon the consummation; Guénon was like a river and Schuon like an ocean—so profound and diversified are the metaphysical doctrines which he expounded, the spiritual counsel which he imparted, and the poems and paintings which he produced.

In surveying the spiritual lights of our time, we will refer to illustrious representatives of the various great religions. Through Schuon’s “universalism”, the essential messages of these figures, unknown outwardly to each other, are brought inwardly together. Each of the mystics referred to below brings to us the particular “color” of his or her own religion of origin, while Schuon endows their messages with a unity through the “uncolored Light” of the *sophia perennis*.

Commencing with Western Christianity, we call to mind especially two spiritual descendants of the great Francis of Assisi, both of them Italian capuchins: Padre Pio da Pietrelcina (1887-1968) and Sister Consolata Betrone (1903-1946).

Padre Pio, who was a stigmatist,² taught and practiced the invocation of the Holy Name, and was the spiritual director of thousands of Catholics; it was in this sense that Schuon could write in a letter to an Italian correspondent of the 1950s, Signor Guido di Giorgio, that Padre Pio was “une protection, sinon bien plus” for the Christian world. Sister Consolata (a successor, in a sense, to the 19th century saint, Theresa of Lisieux³) was a pious and devoted soul who was directly taught by Christ regarding the way of ejaculatory prayer and the perpetual invocation of the Holy Name—a way which was viewed by Schuon as the quintessence itself of all spirituality.

Pope Pius XII (1939-1958) must also have a place here, because of his excellence, of course, but particularly now in view of the cowardly calumination he has undergone by the enemies of tradition (for he was the last traditional pontiff of the Catholic Church), whose main weapon is the false allegation that he was indifferent to the fate of European Jewry during World War II⁴. But the truth is that, in contrast to many of the secular leaders of the period, who did almost nothing to help the Jews, Pius XII clearly acted in their defense during the war.⁵

When vicious anti-Semitism was rampant, it was he who boldly declared: “We are all Semites!” Here he had in mind the Abrahamic monotheistic tradition that is common to Jews, Christians and Moslems. In this respect, it is important to recall that, in 1942, many thousands of Jews were being sheltered in convents, monasteries and schools under the auspices of the Supreme Pontiff. Vatican City itself harbored many of them, and Castelgandolfo, the summer residence of the popes, sheltered more than 15,000 Jews. In 1944, Pius XII put the papal seal on the entrance to the main Roman synagogue before the city was invaded by Nazi troops, in order to protect its sacred contents. And, in 1946, no less than the chief rabbi of Rome, Israel Zolli, embraced Catholicism, with all his family, saying that one of the reasons for this spectacular change of religion was precisely Pius XII’s defense of his people during the war. Moreover, the rabbi took as his Christian name “Eugenio”, which was the baptismal name of Pius XII. These facts alone should suffice to show that the accusations leveled against him do not have any concrete basis, and have in fact an ideological and political motivation, namely that by attacking Pius XII, one attacks the traditional Church (which, in our opinion, has been destroyed by the Vatican II Council and its sequelae).

Let us say a little more about this topic. Two years before becoming pope in 1937, when he was the Vatican’s Secretary of State, he collaborated with the then pope Pius XI⁶ in the drafting of his famous encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge*, which strongly condemned Nazi racist ideology. And when some critics allege that the encyclical was not strong enough, one should remember that until well towards the end of the war, not even Jewish organizations knew fully that the Nazi persecutions had in view the complete extermination of the Jewish people. Moreover, in the case of Pius XII, he was sometimes obliged to moderate his voice or maintain a prudent silence, when the opposite could have dangerously and cruelly aggravated the situation.⁷

Pius XII, so orthodox and traditional in doctrinal, ritual and moral matters, and profoundly compassionate and humble as a human being, had a particular gift for the teaching and transmitting of a vast corpus of doctrinal guidance on a vast number of themes. He was also

deeply conscious of the dignity, not only of his function as Supreme Pontiff, but also of man as such, as God's representative on earth. This can be seen in the pictures that allow us to witness his dignified gestures (one might use the Hindu term "*mudrās*"!)—especially as he gave his papal blessing to the faithful—reminiscent of the gestures of the greatest of the Hindu or Buddhist masters.⁸

Let us turn now to the world of Islam. Perhaps the greatest figure of modern times is the Algerian Shaykh Ahmed al-'Alawi (1869-1934). He is highly relevant to the Guénonian and Schuonian phenomenon, in that he was a master of gnosis and of the spiritual method of "Godremembrance". He was also profoundly interested in other religions, especially Christianity. At a certain moment, the Shaikh al-'Alawi is said to have had more than 200,000 disciples throughout the Islamic world, which caused his spiritual order (or "brotherhood") to be influential even in cultural and political matters. What a contrast to contemporary pseudo-Islamic leaders, such as Khomeini and Gadhaffi, or anti-Muslim secularists such as Saddam Hussein and Hafez Assad, who have shamelessly exploited religion for their own personal and political ends! Schuon had personal knowledge of the Shaykh Al-'Alawi, and has written wonderfully about him:

“ The idea which is the secret essence of each religious form, making each what it is by the action of its inward presence, is too subtle and too deep to be personified with equal intensity by all those who breathe its atmosphere. So much the greater good fortune is it to come into contact with a true spiritual representative of one of those forms, to come into contact with someone who represents in himself, and not merely because he happens to belong to a particular civilization, the idea which for hundreds of years has been the very life-blood of that civilization.

To meet such a one is like coming face to face, in mid 20th century, with a medieval saint or a Semitic patriarch, and this was the impression made on me by the Shaykh Al-Hajj Ahmad Bin-'Alawi, one of the greatest masters of Sufism... In his brown jelaba and white turban, with his silver-gray beard and long hands which seemed, when he moved them, to be weighed down by the flow of his *baraka* (spiritual radiance), he exhaled something of the pure archaic ambience of the Prophet Abraham... His eyes, which were like two sepulchral lamps, seemed to pierce through all the objects, seeing in the outer shell merely one and the same nothingness, beyond which they saw always one and the same reality—the Infinite. Their look was very direct, almost hard in its enigmatic unwaveringness, and yet full of charity... The cadence of the singing, the dances and the ritual incantations seemed to continue vibrating in him perpetually; his head would sometimes rock rhythmically to and fro, while his soul was plunged in the unfathomable mysteries of the Divine Name, hidden in the *dhikr*, the Remembrance... He was surrounded at one and the same time, with all the veneration that is due to saints, to leaders, to the old, and to the dying.⁹ ”

Moving now further East, we find in India a great precursor of Sri Râmana Maharshi, and also of the perennialists, in the figure of Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886), known as the *Paramahansa* ("the supreme swain"), the highest denomination for a mystic in the Hindu tradition. Ramakrishna was a forerunner of the universality of revelation, as later expounded by Guénon and Schuon. To mention one particular instance of his uniqueness and importance: at different periods in his life he willingly practiced, profoundly and sincerely, two non-Hindu religions, namely Christianity and Islam, fully recognizing their spiritual validity; and thus he manifested, by direct personal participation, the metaphysical concept of the "transcendent unity of religions"—a thesis later developed by Schuon in an influential book

bearing that title. As William Stoddart notes in his excellent outline of Hinduism,¹⁰ Ramakrishna was the first spiritual authority in modern times explicitly to teach this idea. He too was a practitioner of the spiritual method of the invocation of the Divine Name, a technique traditionally considered—and also emphasized by Schuon—as the best-suited for the end of the Kali Yuga, which seems (but God knows best!) to be our own period. Ramakrishna had a saying that Schuon would later expound in manifold forms, namely that “God and His Name are one”.

One cannot leave India without mentioning two important figures. The great *bhakta* (“devotee”, “divine lover”) Swami Ramdas (1884-1963) and the 68th Jagadguru (“universal teacher”, in Sanskrit) of Kanchipuram (1894-199). Like the “Russian pilgrim” in the 19th century, Swami Ramdas traveled as a wandering monk through the whole of the Indian subcontinent, always invoking the Sacred Name, in which he had an unshakable trust as a privileged means of attaining to God. Moreover, during his only visit to the West, he had occasion to meet Schuon who made a deep impression on him. After that meeting, Ramdas wrote of the German sage: “*The tall and stately figure [of Schuon] stood out in great prominence above us all—a very prince among saints*”.¹¹ Concerning the Jagadguru of Kanchipuram, he was an authentic and traditional descendant of the greatest exponent of the sapiential way (gnosis) in India, Sri Shankaracharya (from the 9th Century). Teacher of *jnana* for 90 years (he assumed his function as early as 1907, the same year Schuon was born), the Jagadguru was dedicated one of Schuon’s best books, *Language of the Self*—proof of the high esteem in which Schuon was held. (Besides being an official representative of *Advaita Vedanta*, Schuon was an universalist well versed in Christianity, Islam and even in the old religion of the Indians of North America, being an admirer of the Sioux visionary Black Elk.)

Finally, in the primordial world of the shamanist tradition of the American Indians, one must mention the extraordinary figure of the holy man from the Oglala Sioux, the chief and medicine-man Hekaka Sapa (Black Elk) (1862-1950). A man of deep contemplation, he received many visions from the spiritual world, and explained to new generations of Indians the meaning of their religion and the utility of its ancient rites. In a series of penetrating essays, especially in *The Feathered Sun – Plains Indians in art and philosophy*, Schuon showed his understanding and love for the Red Indian spiritual patrimony and demonstrated its universality and convergence with the other great religions, proving thereby its intrinsic truth and orthodoxy. Interestingly, Black Elk, by the end of his long life was revered not merely as a kind of prophetic figure by the American Indians, but also as a holy man by the Christian missionaries, who taught him the love of Jesus Christ, a love which in a sense he incorporated in his native religion of the Sun Dance and Sacred Pipe.

As two much earlier precursors of Schuon and Guénon, one calls to mind the great figures of Muhyi ’d-Dîn ibn ‘Arabî in Islam (died 1240) and Cardinal Nicolas of Cusa in Western Christianity (1401-1464). Ibn ‘Arabî is particularly renowned for the declaration he made in one of his poems:

“ My heart has opened unto every form; it is a pasture for gazelles, a cloister for Christian monks, a temple for idols, the Kaaba of the pilgrim, the tables of the Torah, and the book of the Koran. I practice the religion of love; in whatsoever directions its caravans advance, the religion of love shall be my religion and my faith. ”

Surely an inspired confession both of “universality” and of the love of God by the greatest of the Moslem “gnostics”!

For his part, Cardinal Nicolas of Cusa wrote, amongst other things, a commentary on the Koran, as well as an imaginary dialogue between followers of different religions, entitled *De Pace Fidei* (“On peace between the faithful”), in which he advocated an understanding between the different faiths of the world.

From the particular perspective of this article, we will focus our attention on Schuon and the Maharshi, each the very epitome of spirituality in this century. In this connection, one must consider Guénon and Schuon as belonging to one and the same spirit—having nevertheless different functions and styles—of traditional metaphysics, intrinsic and universal orthodoxy, and a radical and devastating critique of modern mentality, culture, art and science, which they castigate as materialistic, relativistic, inconsequential and harmful to man and the ambience. As mentioned earlier, Guénon and Schuon are the two *chefs d’école* of the traditionalist or perennialist school of thought, the difference between these teachers being that the French esoterist was like the embodiment of intellectual or metaphysical doctrine, whereas his German counterpart was a master of both intellectuality and spirituality. Guénon never wished to have disciples. As Schuon himself has aptly written: “The work [of Guénon] is ‘theoretical’ since it does not directly envisage spiritual realization, and even refrains from assuming the rôle of a practical teaching ... The rôle of René Guénon was to state principles rather than to show how to apply them...” He states further: “Guénon was like the personification, not of spirituality as such, but uniquely of metaphysical certainty...”¹²

Turning our attention once more to Sri Râmana Maharshi, in reality he was not a spiritual master in the strict sense, for the reason that he was a *fard* (a “solitary”), a term which we borrow from Sufism. This means that he was one of those saints who did not have a spiritual master to teach him the Way, but gained his exceptional condition purely by grace, by direct divine illumination.¹³ Not having been the disciple of a master, he was not himself a master of disciples. He thus did not teach a spiritual method properly so called. His permanent and constantly reiterated preoccupation was the self-inquiry, “Who am I?”, in which he pointed to the Self, the Divine Being as our authentic center.¹⁴ In the Maharshi’s case the divine was, as it were, in his powerful spiritual presence. His “spiritual way”, if one may put it thus, consisted in his own radiant inner presence; through his *darshan*, he blessed all those who sought his *barakah* (another applicable Sufi term); he was a born contemplative and a born gnostic, arguably the most extraordinary spiritual teacher that India has produced in the 20th century.

This sage, who lived on and around the sacred mountain of Arunâchala, near Tiruvannamalai in South India, used to give his blessings through his contemplative silence, not only to the followers of the *Sanâtana Dharma* (Hinduism), who came to him from all over India, but also to Europeans and Americans, Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Buddhists and Moslems, and even to persons without a religious affiliation. This aspect of the Maharshi’s life could be considered problematical, for, since he did not explicitly require from his visitors a traditional affiliation (the purpose of which is to guarantee a structure or framework for the spiritual journey), his non-Hindu followers for the most part remained without ritual and doctrinal support, and therefore did not prepare themselves to attain something solid and permanent in the spiritual way.

Most probably Schuon had this in mind when he included the following in his long cycle of poems:

“ Ein Weiser sagte: fragt euch wer bin Ich?
Dies ist kein Weg. Der Weise meinte sich,
Beschrieb sein Geisteswesen, gottgeschenkt;
Es ist nicht euer, weil ihr Gleiches denkt.

Man kann nicht ohne Gott die Welt verbrennen—
“*An seiner Frucht wird man den Geist erkennen.*”

A sage said: ask yourselves—who am I?
But this is not a spiritual way. The sage referred to himself,
He described his spiritual state, granted by God;
This state is not yours, just because you think the same.

One cannot overcome the world without God—
“*Ye shall know the Spirit by its fruits.*”

Be that as it may, Schuon has more to say about this Indian saint, and we conclude our section on the Maharshi with the following profound words of Schuon:

“ With the Maharshi, one encounters ancient and eternal India (...) The spiritual function which can be described as ‘action of presence’ is found in the Maharshi its most rigorous expression. Sri Râmana was, as it were, the incarnation in these latter days and in the face of modern activist fever, of all that is primordial and incorruptible in India. He manifested the nobility of contemplative ‘nonaction’ in the face of an ethic of utilitarian agitation (...) The great question ‘Who am I?’ appears with him as a concrete expression of a reality that is lived, if one may so put it, and this authenticity gives to each word of the sage a flavor of inimitable freshness—the flavor of truth when it is embodied in the most direct way. The whole of the Vedanta is contained in the Maharshi’s question ‘Who am I?’ The answer is: the Inexpressible.¹⁵”

As regards Frithjof Schuon himself, the spiritual method he taught was far from ignoring the question of traditional affiliation, since, for him, the *sine qua non* for receiving spiritual guidance was the commitment to practice with sincerity and discernment an orthodox religion. In his circle of admirers and followers were Moslems, Christians (Catholics, Orthodox and traditional Protestants), Jews, Buddhists, and members of the religion of the Sun Dance and the Sacred Pipe.

Those to whom destiny gave the opportunity of meeting this remarkable man—a man who was considered by many as the one who best embodied in our time the prototype of the “traditional man” and of the “sage”, as understood by all the ancient civilizations that molded the life of humanity for millennia—invariably left the encounter as if walking above the clouds, even though, more often than not, they required weeks or months of reflection and meditation in order to digest everything that he had imparted.

Implacable discernment, infinite nobility, sincere courtesy, unfailing good sense: these are some of the recurrent expressions that have been used to describe him following such encounters. Every question put to him, be it regarding philosophy, religion, mysticism, esthetics, or even of contemporary life and personal life—even the most simple—was received with interest and answered with brilliance. Of course he did not gladly suffer presumptuous or pedantic people, nor stupid questions. It was as if Schuon’s extraordinary

discrimination was a magical sword which, in the most efficient and painless way, cut the Gordian knot of our illusions. One would arrive at his house as a poor orphan and leave as if walking on air. A profound gratitude was the main sentiment of all those whom Schuon's love and intelligence marked, and it is with this sentiment that now I end this rough and very incomplete appraisal of a sage whom many consider to be one of the greatest of our time.

With the death of Frithjof Schuon, the 20th century was deprived, in its twilight, of its most penetrating and inspired intelligence, a philosopher, poet, and painter whose lucidity confronted our time, obsessed as it is with banal novelties, with the permanent truth and beauty of the *sophia perennis*. Through his writings, he taught us, his readers, how to think with objectivity, how to see the causes of things in their remote effects, and how to foresee the remote effects of present causes. Schuon the man has gone, it is true, but his books, poems and paintings remain. His message, paradoxically, seems to become more and more relevant with the passage of time, as if to confirm its oneness, precisely, with the "perennial philosophy" which he so staunchly embodied. His message is thus at the disposition of all those, be they from the East or from the West, who genuinely seek the profound reason of things, who seriously wish to plumb the "why" of the world and of men, and who deeply desire true certainty and serenity, which alone are the bases of that peace of spirit that is so lacking in the agitated and anxious contemporary world.

1 In the world of Christianity, Schuon could be viewed as belonging to the lineage of the "gnostics" (the term is not here used in a sectarian or heretical sense), such as St. John the Evangelist, St. Clement of Alexandria, Angelus Silesius, and Meister Eckhart. In Islam, he belongs to the line of Rumi and the Shaikh al-'Alawi.

2 Padre Pio is the only stigmatized priest in the history of the Catholic Church (St. Francis also bore the stigmata of Christ, but he was not a priest). It may be of interest to note that Padre Pio was from the same generation as, and a contemporary of, Guénon, and that he had a marked facial resemblance to Schuon.

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4 One must assume that the reason he has recently been attacked is precisely because he was the last papal representative of the traditional Roman Catholic Church, being therefore a privileged target for the enemies of the Old Church. Interestingly enough, the main source of these attacks—disguised, of course—is those modernist and revolutionary elements that have taken control of the Vatican since the time of John XXIII, Paul VI, and the Vatican II Council. Vatican II established, so to speak, a "new religion", a religion of "Man" and the "World", in opposition to the old and perennial religion of God and eternal life. In spite of the fact that some call him a "conservative", it is this control by the "revolutionary" elements that is currently maintained by John Paul II. In the words of Cardinal Suennens, Vatican II was the "French Revolution in the Church", and according to the well-known theologian, later also a cardinal, Yves Congar, it was like "the October 1917 revolution".

5 As was the case with the populist leaders Getúlio Vargas in Brazil and Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina, and even to a certain extent Franklin D. Roosevelt in the United States, who until 1942 did not agree with pleas from Pius XII to accept more Jewish refugees from Europe.

6 Achille Ratti, pope Pius XI (Roman pontiff from 1922 to 1939), also deserves a place in this synthesis. Beyond his work of clarifying Christian social doctrines with his vigorous condemnations of Fascism (1931), communism and Nazism (1937), he was clearly a great man also for pronouncing the following bold “universalistic” words to his *Nuncio* to Lybia: “Do not think you are going to a country of heathens. Muslims attain to salvation. The ways of God are infinite.”

7 Some readers may be interested to know that Pius XII once granted a private audience to Titus Burckhardt in Castelgandolfo, during which they talked about the sacred art of the Middle Ages. The pope must surely have appreciated the conversation and presence of an eminent representative of the Guénon-Schuon current of spirituality—just as Burckhardt appreciated the pope’s—for the pontiff’s final words to Burckhardt were: “I bless you, your colleagues, your family, and your friends.” Surely a wonderful and blessed link between traditional Catholicism and the exponents of the *philosophia perennis*.

8 The gesture of folding the hands when praying is a typical Christian “*mudrá*”.

9 *Râhimahu 'Llâh*, by Frithjof Schuon. In *Cahiers du Sud* (Paris), août-septembre, 1935. Quoted in Lings, Martin: *A Sufi Saint of the 20th century*, University of California Press, 1973, pp. 116-117.

10 *Outline of Hinduism*. Washington, DC, Foundation for Traditional Studies, 1993, p. 90.

11 See *World is God*, by Swami Ramdas. Anandashram, P.º Anadashram, Via Kanhangad, South India, p. 107.

12 Both quotations are from Schuon’s appreciation: “René Guénon: L’Oeuvre” in *Études Traditionnelles*, Paris, juillet—novembre 1951), English translation: “René Guénon: Definitions” in *Sophia*, vol. 1, No.2, Winter 1995.

13 Apart from this last aspect, Guénon as well can be considered in a sense a “*fard*”

14 This fundamental aspect of the Maharshi’s message converges perfectly with Schuon’s teaching, being in fact its finality.

15 Frithjof Schuon, *Perspectives Spirituelles et Faits Humains*. Paris, Maisonneuve & Larose, 1989, pp. 164-65.

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