ABSTRACT

FRITHJOF SCHUON: THE SHINING REALM OF THE PURE INTELLECT

by Renaud Fabbri

This thesis provides an intellectual biography of the Perennialist philosopher and Sufi Shaykh Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998). I have argued that Schuon’s message is best understood as an autonomous path of knowledge (jnana-marga), ritually based on Islam but centered on the Religio Perennis. I have also compared and contrasted it to certain metaphysical doctrines and contemplative disciplines of the Hindu monastic traditions (Advaita Vedanta, Vishishtadvaita Vedanta, Samkhya-yoga, Kashmiri Shaivism, etc…) and certain Gnostic schools of Sufism (wahdat al-wujud, Shadhili ritual practice, etc…), to none of which can it be reduced in the last instance.
FRITHJOF SCHUON: THE SHINING REALM OF THE PURE INTELLECT

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Introduction

The work, a lifelong struggle—first
Youthful dreams: the True, the Beautiful,
The Sacred, and the Great. Then dreams
Come true, that the Word might be heard.

All this amid the shadows—will it shine or not?
Does destiny wish that the Word grow weary
And weaker throughout life? Fiat Lux—
God willed that it should flourish and remain.

In the book of my message you have read
And ask: from whence resounds the Master’s voice?
His substance is part Shankara, part Krishna—
Singing gnosis is the primordial essence.¹

The present work provides an intellectual biography of Frithjof Schuon and a study of his metaphysics and contemplative discipline at the confluence of Hinduism and Islam. I will argue that Schuon is the exponent of an original re-adaptation of traditional teachings, a spiritual master in his own right and independent of any particular school.

An intellectual biography of Schuon is particularly needed today because only a few works have been devoted to this important religious figure of the second half of the 20th century. While some books have been published on René Guénon over the last decades, including the now authoritative Jean Pierre Laurant’s Le Sens caché de l’Oeuvre de René Guénon,² only two books have specifically treated Frithjof Schuon.³ In my opinion, Mark Sedgwick’s Against the Modern World,⁴ more a detective story than an

⁴ Mark Sedgwick, Against the Modern World, the secret history of the 20th century (Oxford University
academic work, can hardly be considered as a reliable source. Its intellectual shortcomings and even factual errors prove to the contrary that no study of the Perennialist or Traditionalist school can be seriously pursued without first-hand knowledge of the Perennialist writings and a sufficient background on the traditions and doctrines to which the Perennialists refer. By contrast, Patrick Laude and Jean-Baptiste Aymard’s *Frithjof Schuon, Life and Teaching* is a very penetrating, erudite and well-informed portrait of Frithjof Schuon, written however from a perennialist point of view and for a small circle of knowledgeable readers. The authors of this pioneering study not only demonstrate a deep understanding of Schuon’s teaching, but they have also used for the very first time material largely unpublished before Schuon’s death. That is why, according to Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who has written the foreword, “this book will likely become a primary source in future years.” There is, however, no equivalent of Jean Pierre Laurant’s biography of Guénon: a good study of Frithjof Schuon written from an outsider’s perspective. Sedgwick’s book, while claiming academic objectivity and ideological neutrality, cannot be compared to Jean-Pierre Laurant’s work because Sedgwick’s negative, if not partial, judgments about Schuon too often reflect a very narrow definition of Islamic orthodoxy and a total ignorance of religions other than the three major monotheisms of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

It would be misleading for me to pretend that my approach is not sympathetic or that my interest in Schuon is purely biographical. In contrast with Patrick Laude and Jean-Baptiste Aymard’s all-encompassing presentation of Schuon’s teaching, which covers dimensions I will not address such as his aesthetics and his philosophy of nature, I

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6 The most important authors and their main writings are listed in the bibliography. Mark Sedgwick only refers to a small number of them in his own bibliography and his presentation of their philosophy is caricatured, disappointing, and misleading.
7 I am thinking particularly here of some key oriental texts that may have had a great impact on Guénon and Schuon at the time of their first translations into European languages. Such works include, in Sufism the *Fusus al-hikam* of Ibn Arabi and the *Risalat al-Ahadiyya* of Balyani, and in Hinduism, Sankara’s commentary of the *Brahma Sutra*. Sedgwick failed to make any substantial reference to these crucial sources.
9 *Ibidem*, Forward, xii.
will focus on the hermeneutic debates surrounding Schuon’s message and his personality, giving more attention than previous scholarship to the practical and contemplative dimension of his teaching. Broadly speaking, there are two types of interpretations of Frithjof Schuon’s life and teaching among his followers and the scholars already interested in Perennialism. The first one, exemplified by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, emphasizes the Islamic ground of his perspective. Schuon is more or less portrayed as an orthodox Sufi Shaykh living in the West.

It is important to bring out into the open his relation to the Islamic tradition within which he functioned as the spiritual teacher of a branch of one of the most important orders (turuq) into which Sufism crystallized after the early centuries of Islamic history. It is particularly important to deal with this subject because a misunderstanding can be created in the minds of certain people who read of his constant reference to the religio perennis and the primordial tradition and might therefore be unaware of his essential relation with Islam, a relation about which he did not write publicly. Schuon was of course the great expositor of the esoterism and the Sophia Perennis in his days and always spoke publicly in the name of that universal and perennial wisdom which he also called religio cordis. (...) His function to speak of pure esoterism should not, however, detract anyone one moment from thinking that he is anything other than a Muslim in the deepest sense of the term and that he practiced the tenets of the Islamic tradition, on both the levels of the Law and the Way. 10

Openings to other traditions will tend to be minimized by this first approach to Schuon and his legacy. References to other traditions are presented as either marginal or purely intellectual, and in either case are described in purely Islamic terms:

He was a Sufi Shaykh and, because of this, whatever might be his metaphysical vision and the scope of his principal knowledge, he was the product of the esoteric tradition of Islam. Even the non-Islamic dimensions of his function can be explained in the light of Sufism, that is the final revelation of first magnitude in the human history: as the characteristic of Islam is to integrate all the revealed truths preceding it, Sufism contains in itself all the possibilities of esoterism. 11

Without denying the legitimacy of such an interpretation, it seems to me that this first approach fails to a certain extent to take into account some controversial aspects of Frithjof Schuon’s religious life, such as his involvement with Native American practices, or his devotion to a Virgin Mary who displays much more the attributes of a Hindu

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11 Ibidem.
Goddess than those of a Semitic prophetess. These aspects may even be obscured rather than revealed by this Islamo-centric interpretation.

The second type of interpretation is advocated by Patrick Laude and Jean-Baptiste Aymard and is eventually shared by many disciples of the late Schuon. It is also mine. The “primordialist” approach, while recognizing Schuon’s essential connection with Sufism and his function as Shaykh, will insist more strongly on his reference to the Religio Perennis, the “timeless esoteric truth.” From this perspective, Islam represents only a sacramental and symbolic support for gnosis. For primordialists, many misunderstandings and misgivings about Schuon illustrated by Sedgwick’s book originated in the erroneous presupposition that he should be interpreted primarily as a Muslim figure.

Practically, my own work will rely essentially on textual analysis: first, on Schuon’s public writings, which include both doctrinal studies written initially in French and his didactic poems, now translated from German into French and English, second, on his unpublished autobiography Memories and Meditations, and the numerous letters that he wrote throughout his life to correspondents and disciples. In my view, if academic appraisal of Schuon has been sometimes controversial and his writings treated as peripheral, it is in large part due to the fact that scholars have not had access to key information until recently, not only information about his life but also about his contemplative discipline. In fact, before his death, Schuon’s initiatory function as a Sufi master was virtually unknown, and only the more “philosophical” dimension of his work was accessible, which has tended to distort his image. This study of Schuon intends to show that not only as a metaphysician but also as a major spiritual figure, he deserves more serious attention from the scholarly community. Until now, in academia, the voices

His poetry is complemented by his paintings that communicate an essential dimension of his message, revealing another dimension of his personality. For his paintings see: Frithjof Schuon, Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty: Paintings by Frithjof Schuon (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1992).
13 Frithjof Schuon, Memories and Meditations, unpublished.
14 His editor, World Wisdom, is in the process of translating and editing this correspondence.
of Huston Smith, James Cutsinger and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who advocate traditionalism as the best manner to approach religion, have remained somehow a minority.

While discovering Schuon, my reader will quickly be confronted with an original Weltanschauung, in which the Sacred is a reality and indeed the Reality. He will discover stories one would expect in the life of a medieval saint but certainly not of a 20th century author read by academics. My own approach to this Weltanschauung can be loosely labeled as “phenomenological” rather than “reductionist.” In the lineage of Mircea Eliade or Henry Corbin, I will not try to “demystify” this worldview, and will focus instead on its “meaning” for Schuon. I will also appeal to philosophical and theological systems because Schuon’s metaphysics combines elements of on the one hand the Advaita Vedanta’s autology, which professes the identity of the Self and the Absolute, and on the other the neo-platonist doctrine of One (“henology”). The organ of metaphysical knowledge in man is not the individual reason but the heart, which Schuon explicitly identified with the nous of Plato or the “uncreated and uncreatable” Intellect of Meister Eckhart. By the power of “reason”, one can “think about” transcendent truths, but for Schuon, it is with the Intellect that one “sees” the Absolute. To approach the operative aspect of his teachings, one should, however, turn his or her gaze toward Vedanta and Sufism, in particular the Advaita Vedanta of Shankara and the Gnostic Sufism of Ibn Arabi to which Schuon constantly refers. But if we were to label Schuon simply as a neo-Advaitin or a neo-Sufi, difficulties would quickly arise because as we will see in the second part, Schuon not only differed consciously on some crucial issues from classical Vedanta and historical Sufism, but he also seems to have developed a deeply original perspective.

My thesis is that Schuon’s perspective, both doctrinally and methodically, is better described as an autonomous path of knowledge (Gnosis or Jnana) ritually grounded in Islam and its fundamental symbols, but independent of any particular school, for it is centered on the Sophia Perennis. Vis-à-vis Akbarian Sufism or the Hindu

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16 In this respect, it is absolutely essential to understand that the identification of the Heart and the Intellect implies that the former is for Schuon not the organ of the sentiment and of the infra-rational or even “mystical” type of experience but a transcendent faculty of supra-rational and supra-individual character.
darshanas, it presents itself as an “(inspired) re-adaptation” of purely esoteric nature at a critical – if not apocalyptic - moment in history.

So far, I have used rather indiscriminately the labels “Perennialism” and “Traditionalism.” These two designations have, however, proved to be very misleading, even for scholars. In the United States, the topic of the Perennial Philosophy has been popularized by the novelist and counterculture leader, Aldous Huxley, whose spiritual eclecticism and emphasis on mystical experience are antithetical to Guénon and Schuon’s metaphysical and traditionalist starting point. The term “traditionalism” needs to be deployed with even more caution because of its heavy political connotation, associated with the French counter-revolution but also to the more recent traditionalist movement lead by the archbishop Lefebvre against the theological and ritual innovations introduced by the Vatican II Council. In France and in Italy, the term “Perennialism” is less used than “Traditionalism.” The former refers more specifically to Frithjof Schuon and his legacy but René Guénon remains there the pivotal authority. In the rest of Europe and in North America, it is the term “Traditionalism” that is less employed and Frithjof Schuon is recognized as the author who has given to the school founded by Guénon its definitive expression.

My work is devoted to Schuon, who, in my opinion too, is the final authority of the Perennialist school of thought. It divided into two parts. The first part, “The Messenger of the Religio Perennis,” provides a long sketch of Frithjof Schuon’s life. This biographical sketch will give me the opportunity to expose some of the most essential aspects of his teachings, shedding some light not only on his early contacts with René Guénon, the founder of the Traditionalist School, but also on his relationships with Native Americans, and the role of the Holy Virgin in his spiritual life. Due to the complexity of Schuon’s perspective, growing controversies erupted toward the end of his


18 A few luminary figures such as Jean Borella and Rama Coomaraswamy, the own son of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, were indeed associated with both the Perennialist School and the Catholic traditionalist movement, which may explain the confusion of Carl Ernst in his review article on some perennialist works See: Carl Ernst, “Traditionalism, the Perennial Philosophy, and Islamic Studies,” Middle East Studies Association Bulletin, 28, no. 2 (1998) 176-81.
life. As I will show, these controversies can help us *a posteriori* to understand the originality of his teaching.

In the second chapter, called “The Master,” I will compare and also contrast Schuon’s positions with the teachings of Hinduism. Particularly, I will show the connection between Schuon’s thought and the Advaita Vedanta of Shankara, the Vishishtadvaita Vedanta, the Samkhya-yoga, and a particular branch of Tantrism, Kashmiri Shaivism, which Schuon increasingly mentioned in his late writings. Although he referred to it as a paradigm for *gnosis*, Schuon is not always in agreement with Advaita Vedanta, developing a fresh perspective about Maya or the status of the jivanmukta. In the final portion of this chapter, I will also try to clarify a much more hotly debated issue - the relationship of Schuon, who was a disciple of the Algerian Sufi saint Ahmad Al-Alawi, with historical Islam and Sufism. I will demonstrate the importance of his distinction between average Sufism and Quintessential esoterism.

In my conclusion, I will show that Schuon, unlike Guénon, did not consider his function to be one of a “transmitter.” Rather, he saw himself as a “renewer” and also as a “sage” - a spiritual type different both from the “prophet” and the “saint.” In the appendix, I will give some additional elements about the larger influence of Schuon and the Perennialist movement, which although not central to my thesis, can nevertheless be valuable for scholars of religion.
The Messenger of the Religio Perennis

Frithjof Schuon was born on June 18, 1907 in Basel, Switzerland, in a Protestant family. His early readings were Plato, Emerson, the Qur’an, the Bhagavad-Gita and The Gospel of Ramakrishna. From his childhood, he could also remember the story of his grandmother’s friendship with an “Indian Chief,” who almost married her when she was traveling to Washington. After the death of his father, who had inspired in him his early interest for the East, he moved to Mulhouse, France, with his mother and his brother. They all converted to Catholicism, his brother later becoming a Cistercian monk. He himself discovered the religious atmosphere of the Tridentin Church prior to the reform of Vatican II, and became devoted to the Virgin. After some difficult years as a German-speaking immigrant in France between the two world wars, Schuon found the writings of the French metaphysician, René Guénon (1886-1951).

In France, Guénon is considered to be the founder of what would later be called the Traditionalist or Perennialist School. Thanks to his influence, Schuon’s intuitions, clearly reflected in his early writings and his correspondence from the time he was only an adolescent, were able to crystallize in a more doctrinal and dogmatic form. While reading books by Guénon such as Orient et Occident or L’Homme et son devenir selon le Vedanta, Schuon discovered the concept of Tradition and understood the necessity of receiving an orthodox initiation. Whatever their later divergences, any intellectual biography of Frithjof Schuon cannot be written without a presentation of the man Schuon.

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20 Schuon later defined orthodoxy as the following: “From our standpoint, orthodoxy is the principle of formal homogeneity proper to any authentically spiritual perspective; it is therefore an indispensable aspect of all genuine intellectuality, which is to say that the essence of every orthodoxy is the truth and not mere fidelity to a system that eventually turns out to be false. To be orthodox means to participate by way of a doctrine that can properly be called ‘traditional,’ in the immutability of the principles which govern the Universe and fashion our intelligence.” See: Dictionary of the terms used by Frithjof Schuon, edited by Deo Valodia, Sophia Perennis, http://www.frithjof-schuon.com/Glossary%20Schuon%20Revised.pdf, s.v. “Orthodoxy/Intellectuality” quoted from Frithjof Schuon, “Orthodoxy and Intellectuality” The Stations of Wisdom, (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1995). Schuon therefore insists on the intimate connection between orthodoxy and tradition because traditional regularity ensures the conformity to the metaphysical Principles and the contact of the initiate with the divine Origin.
constantly referred to as “an intellectual genius” and who certainly had the most long-lasting influence on him: René Guénon.
The Precursor: Réné Guénon, Witness of the Tradition

Schuon himself, in his memoirs, when referring to his illustrious predecessor, uses the term “precursor”. From the Loir–et-Cher, Guénon was, between 1906 and 1912, in contact with some initiatory or pseudo-initiatory groups in Paris. From 1906 to 1908, he attended classes at the Hermetic Circle, an “offshoot” of the occultist Papus’ movement. He then joined the Martinist Order. This order was also controlled by Papus but referred to the figure of Martines de Pasqually. Because of intellectual differences, in particular on the question of reincarnation, which Guénon rejected, he finally separated from Papus, and in 1908 founded a new group with some friends called “l’ordre du Temple rénové” (OTR, the order of the renewed Temple). During the following three years, Guénon was initiated into Freemasonry through the Lodge Thebah, directly related to “la Grande Lodge de France.” In 1909, Guénon simultaneously joined the Gnostic Church, a neo-catharist movement. He became archbishop under the name of Palingenius. As Jean-Pierre Laurant has shown in Le sens caché de l’œuvre de René Guénon and on the basis of the records of the OTR meetings, it is during this period that the seeds of the later Guénonian doctrine have been planted. In 1912, one year after the dissolution of the OTR, Guénon founded upon the initiative of Synesius, the Patriarch of the Gnostic Church, the journal Gnosis.

These neo-spiritualist movements played an important role in the formation of Guénon’s religious orientation. Through them, he met in particular with several individuals who had traveled to the East, and claimed that they have received its sacred knowledge. Albert de Pouvourville (1862-1939), alias Matgioi, was a French Officer in Tonkin, who had been initiated by a Taoist master. He is the author of one of the first translations of the Tao Te Ching. In 1912, Guénon was received in the North Africa Shadilliyya, a Sufi brotherhood, thanks to the Swedish painter Ivan Agueli (Abdul Hadi, 1869-1917). His spiritual master or Shaykh in that order was the Egyptian Elish Abderrahman el-Kebir, a personal friend of the Emir Abd el-Kader, the renewer of Ibn Arabi’s school at the end of the 19th century. After 1912, Guénon seems to have definitively

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22 Chapter IV of Jean Pierre Laurant, Le sens caché de l’Oeuvre de René Guénon.
broken with neo-spiritualism, although Schuon and others have always considered that
his conceptions about esoterism remained deeply influenced by this milieu. During that
period, Guénon also claimed that he met and received traditional teachings from some
unknown Hindu, associated with a Vedantic lineage.

From 1912 to 1930, Guénon lived in Paris on the “Ile-Saint-Louis,” working as a
high school professor. In 1915, he received a Licence degree from the Sorbonne for his
work on the principle of the Infinitesimal Calculus of Leibniz. It was published as a book
in 1946.\(^\text{23}\) In 1921, his thesis *Introduction générale à l’études des doctrines Hindoues* was
finally rejected by the Orientalist Sylvain Levi. This work later became his first book.\(^\text{24}\) From 1921 to 1929, Guénon published some of his major books such as *L’homme et son
devenir selon le Vedanta* and *Le Roi du Monde*. He criticized the modern world in *La
crise du monde moderne*, and neo-spiritualism in *L’erreur Spirite* and *Théosophisme,
histoire d’une pseudo-religion*.\(^\text{25}\) His articles were published in a Neo-thomist journal and
in the *Voile d’Isis*, which became in 1936 the famous *Etudes Traditionnelles*. Guénon
also wrote extensively about symbolism and the meaning of initiation, the qualification it
requires and the condition for its validity. Some of these articles were only published
posthumously.

After the death of his first wife, Guénon moved to Cairo, initially only to search
for Sufi texts. He stayed there till the end of his life. In 1931 and 1932, he published *Le
symbolisme de la Croix* and then *Les états multiples de l’être*. In 1945, he wrote his
prophetic masterpiece, *Régne de la Quantité et Signes des Temps*.\(^\text{26}\) As he lived in Cairo,
he became more and more Arabized and started practicing exoteric Islam, under the name
of Shaykh Abdel-Wâhid Yahya. In 1934, he married Fatma Hanem, the daughter of
Shaykh Mohammed Ibrahim. In 1949, he officially became Egyptian. His intellectual

\(^\text{25}\) *Man and his becoming according to the Vedanta* (Hillsdale NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001).
influence grew considerably during this final period of his life. He had a very abundant correspondence. One of his correspondents was Frithjof Schuon, who finally came to visit him twice in Cairo. He also exchanged numerous letters with the Ceylon-born erudite Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), another major figure of the Perennialist movement.

It could be argued that the doctrine of the Perennialist movement started to take shape as early as in Guénon’s first book, *Introduction générale à l’étude des doctrines hindoues* (1921). In this work, he started to criticize modernity on the basis of traditional metaphysics and particularly Eastern doctrines such as Advaita Vedanta. The crisis of the modern world, diagnosed by so many European intellectuals and the “great nihilism” prophesized by Nietzsche would find their origin in the Renaissance and in the humanistic tendency to reduce reality to the anti-metaphysical standpoint of the individual. The Western world, by closing itself to what Guénon characterized as “true intellectuality,” to “the metaphysical perspective” exemplified by the Neoplatonists or Christian esoterism, and by inaugurating with Descartes a purely secular and rationalist kind of philosophy, had progressively emptied its *Weltanschauung* of any transcendent meaning, losing access to the metaphysical truths that are inscribed in the “naturally supernatural Intellect”, to use later Schuonian terminology.

Dismissing the myth of progress and the enlightenment paradigm, Guénon portrayed modern civilization as an absolute oddity in the history of humanity, manifesting in fact the lowest possibilities of the *kali-yuga*, the fourth age of the Hindu cosmology. Moving against the main stream of positivism, rationalism and evolutionism, he claimed that modern man did not emerge victoriously at the summit of evolution, but is plunged into an age of spiritual darkness and social chaos, coinciding with the end of a cosmological cycle of first amplitude, prophesized by the sacred scriptures and traditional mythology, not only of Hinduism but also Ancient Greece (Hesiode) or Celticism (“the age of the wolf”).

In order to understand correctly the process of decadence as Guénon describes it, one needs to study his complex metaphysics of the multiple states of being. His views on

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the topic have been masterfully presented in *Le Règne de la Quantité et Signes des Temps*. Guénon radically differs with regard to the depth and the all-encompassing scope of his analysis from moralistic, political, and even religious critical appraisals of the discontents of modernity. Schematically speaking, the fallen state of man in our time can only be superficially described as the effect of human initiatives, of a Promethean revolt against Heaven. The collapse of human nature is the necessary consequence of an increasing materialization followed by sudden dissolution of the creation itself, of a progressive transition, or more precisely a spiraling downfall, from the essential and qualitative pole of reality, corresponding to the *Purusa* in the Samkhya or to the platonic *eidea*, to the substantial and quantitative one, the *prakriti* or platonic *khora*. The end of this process which Guénon identified with the “Reign of the Antichrist,” shall not be the triumph of the crude materialism of the 19th century Western Europe. It will rather coincide with an invasion of the intermediate world into our supposedly purely profane and desacralized human universe. The contemporary success of New Age spirituality and its dangerous confusion between the psychic and the spiritual can be understood as a sign, an anticipation of the dissolution of our world, already totally closed by the materialism of the last centuries to the protective influences descending from the heavenly realm.

To the modern error, Guénon opposed an everlasting wisdom of divine origin, “a Primordial Tradition,” whose most direct heritage would be the Hindu *Sanathana Dharma*. Transmitted from the very origin of humanity, the Golden Age or *satya-yuga*, this divine legacy is the historical origin of the various religious traditions. This hidden spring, however, remains unknown to the non-initiates and to those who can only understand the outward aspect of religion. It is already obvious that in this context, “Tradition” does not only imply the idea of transmission (*tradere*), nor does it refer in the first place to a social or political order. For Guénon and his followers, Tradition is sacred, having no human origin, and it can be defined as the everlasting metaphysical principles revealed from Heaven and binding man to his heavenly origin. There is a large range of religious traditions across the globe, each crystallizing into a variety of divinely ordained

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28 René Guénon, *Reign of the Quantity and the Signs of Time.*
29 Plato, *Timaeus.*
socio-economic and cultural structures, religious laws and artistic productions. But for Guénon, these traditions, considered from their inner aspect, their esoteric core, share the same heritage, representing various expressions of the universal and unanimous Tradition (with a capital letter).

The view of Guénon largely shared with later Perennialist authorities, is that Semitic religions have an exoteric/esoteric structure. Religious rites and a moral but also a dogmatic theology constitute Exoterism, the outward dimension of religion. The exoteric point of view is characterized by its “sentimentalist”, rather than purely intellectual nature and remains fairly limited. Based on the doctrine of creation and the subsequent duality between God and creation, exoterism does not offer a means to transcend the limitations of the human state. Its goal is only religious salvation, which Guénon defines as a perpetual state of beatitude in a celestial paradise. In Guénon’s view, esoterism is more than the complement of exoterism, the spirit as opposed to the letter, the kernel with respect to the shell. Esoterism has at least virtually a total autonomy with respect to religion, for its innermost substance is the Primordial Tradition itself. Schuon explained Guénon’s thesis as the following:

Guénon did not hesitate to say in the review "La Gnose" that the historical religions are "so many heresies" compared with the "primordial and unanimous Tradition", and he declares in "le Roi du Monde" that "true esoterism is quite another thing than outward religion and, if it has certain relationships with it, this can only be insofar as it finds a mode of symbolical expression in religious forms; it matters little, moreover, that these forms should belong to this religion or that...

Based on pure metaphysics - by which Guénon means a supra-rational knowledge of the Divine, a gnosis, and not a rationalist system or theological dogma - its goal is the realization of the superior states of being and finally the union between the individual self and the Principle. Guénon calls this union “the Supreme Identity.” By “Principle,” Guénon means more than the personal God of exoteric theology. It stands for the supra-personal Essence, the Beyond-Being, the Absolute, both totally transcendent and immanent to the manifestation. In Guénon’s view, the innermost essence of the individual

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31 It is nevertheless superior to purely profane philosophical systems because its starting point is not the human reason but a given revelation.
being is non-different from the Absolute itself. Guénon refers here to the Vedantic concepts of Brahman (Principle), Atman (Self) and Moksha (Deliverance).

Atma is identical with Brahma Itself. This is what may be called the “Supreme Identity”, according to an expression borrowed from Moslem esoterism, where the doctrine on this and on many other points is fundamentally the same as in the Hindu tradition, in spite of great differences of form. The realization of this identity is brought about through yoga, that is to say, thought the intimate and essential union of this being with the Divine Principle, or, if it is preferred with the Universal.\textsuperscript{33}

As we have said, this reference to Hinduism is not accidental, nor circumstantial. The great traditions of Asia play a paradigmatic function in Guénon’s writings, since for him, they don’t have an esoterism/exoterism structure, like the Semitic religions. This opposition and the disciplina arcana would have emerged only later in the historical cycle, at a time of growing spiritual decadence, when the vast majority of the people were no longer “qualified” to understand metaphysical truths and transcend the possibilities of the human state. More precisely, although the content of the Upanishads may have represented de facto an esoterism vis-à-vis the Vedic ritual, Guénon would nevertheless argue that it never constituted a “secret doctrine,” potentially in conflict with an established and rigid dogma. In Guénon’s view, it was less a question of secrecy than of social opportunity and intellectual capacity.\textsuperscript{34}

For Guénon, the author of the \textit{Crisis of the Modern World}, the end of this cyclical descent is modernity itself. Consequently it is virtually impossible for a spiritual seeker to receive a traditional initiation and to follow an esoteric path in the modern West. Although he had pleaded in his first books for a restoration of traditional intellectualty in the West on the basis of Roman Catholicism and Freemasonry, it is clear that Guénon, very early on, gave up the idea of a spiritual resurrection in the West on a purely Christian basis. Having denounced the lore of Theosophism and neo-occultism, two influential movements that were flourishing in his time, Guénon was initiated in 1912 into the Shadhili order and then moved to Cairo. To his many correspondents, he clearly designated Sufism as the most accessible form of traditional initiation for Westerners.

\textsuperscript{33} René Guénon, “the Seat of Brahma,” \textit{Man and his becoming according to the Vedanta}, republished in \textit{Vincit Omnia Veritas} II no2 (June 2006).
\textsuperscript{34} René Guénon, « Esoterism and Exoterism, » \textit{Introduction to the study of the Hindu doctrines}.
eager to follow a path of knowledge (Jnana) comparable to the Vedanta. For Guénon, Hinduism was closed to foreigners because of the caste system. For a long time he did not consider Buddhism as an orthodox tradition, nor did he believe that Christianity was able to offer a regular initiation to the spiritual seeker any longer.\textsuperscript{35} Islam, in his view, as the last revelation of our cycle, represented the only serious option for those pursuing an esoteric path.

The question has been asked why Guénon “chose the Islamic path” and not another; the “material” reply is that he really had no choice, given that he did not admit the initiatic nature of the Christian sacraments and that Hindu initiation was closed to him because of the caste system; given also that at that period Buddhism appeared to him to be a heterodoxy.\textsuperscript{36}

Frithjof Schuon, one generation younger than Guénon, was among his early readers. He accepted immediately Guénon’s criticism of modernity and defense of the Tradition, and became one of his collaborators in Guénon’s journal \textit{Les Etudes Traditionnelles}. For him, also, Islam appeared at the time as the only gate toward a genuine esoterism. In his first book in French, \textit{L’unité Transcendante des religions},\textsuperscript{37} published when Guénon was still alive, he wrote that Islam is not only a restoration of the primordial religion (\textit{din al-fitra}), but also represents within the monotheist cycle the paracletic perspective of knowledge or \textit{gnosis}. By contrast, in Judaism, it is fear that predominates, and in Christianity it is love. In the Koranic revelation, as he understood it, man is envisaged, not as a fallen being needing a miracle to save him, but as a theomorphic being endowed with an intelligence capable of conceiving the Unity of the Principle (\textit{Tahwid}).

\textsuperscript{35} On the basis of the teaching of Shankara, Guénon considered, in the first French edition of his \textit{Introduction to the study of the Hindu doctrines}, that Buddhism was a Hindu heresy. He did not change his mind till Ananda Coomaraswamy and Marco Pallis introduced him to Mahayana Buddhism. For Guénon also, the Christian Sacraments had lost their esoteric value at the time of the council of Nicea. Only Hesychasm in Eastern Christianity and the Masonic and Knight Templar initiations remained in the West, at least until the Renaissance. See: René Guénon, “Christianity and Initiation,” \textit{Insights into Christian Esoterism}, (Hillsdale NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001)


\textsuperscript{37} Frithjof Schuon, \textit{The Transcendent Unity of Religions} (The Theosophical Publishing House, 1993).
The foundation of a Western Sufi Brotherhood based on the Religio Perennis

While corresponding with Guénon, Schuon worked for several years as a textile designer in Paris, but finally lost his job in the aftermath of the 1929 economic crisis. At this time, he was convinced, as Guénon was, that it was not possible to find an authentic initiation within Western Christianity. In 1932, he traveled to Algeria, spending several months in Mostaganem. He became there the direct disciple of the Algerian Sufi Shaykh Ahmad Al-Alawi (1869 – 1934). He was initiated by the old Shaykh in January 1933, and received the Islamic names of Isa Nur Ad-Din, “Jesus Light of the Religion” and Ahmad, the celestial name of the prophet. In his unpublished autobiography, Schuon claimed that while he was in Mostaganem, he met twice with a mysterious stranger that he later identified as being possibly Khidr, the hidden master of the Afrad and the Batinists. In Jean-Baptiste Aymard’s opinion, Schuon’s sovereign independence with regard to formalism may result from these initiatory encounters with a highly esoteric figure.

Schuon could not stay long with the old Shaykh because of the pressures of the French colonial authorities, who were looking suspiciously at the presence of a German-native speaker among the Arabs. Eventually, he had to leave and could not return to Algeria before 1935, after the death of Alawi. Administratively, the Sufi brotherhood (tariqah) that Schuon organized in the mid-1930’s in Europe, after a spiritual retreat (kalwah) and his nomination as a moqqadem by Shaykh Adda Bentounès, the immediate

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38 Patrick Laude, Frithjof Schuon: Life and teaching, 67-70.
39 The Prophet Moses and Khidr, described in the Surat Al-Kaf as “one of Our servants, on whom We had bestowed Mercy from Ourselves and whom We had taught knowledge from Our own Presence” meet at “the confluent of the two seas.” Khidr allows Moses to become his companion only if he refrains from asking any questions. Moses agrees. After that Khidr has, successively, scuttled a boat, killed a young boy and repaired the wall of people who have not given them hospitality, they finally agree to separate and Khidr explains to Moses the secrets reasons of his behavior: “This is the parting between me and thee: now will I tell thee the interpretation of (those things) over which thou wast unable to hold patience. As for the boat, it belonged to certain men in dire want: they plied on the water: I but wished to render it unserviceable, for there was after them a certain king who seized on every boat by force. As for the youth, his parents were people of Faith, and we feared that he would grieve them by obstinate rebellion and ingratitude (to Allah and man). So we desired that their Lord would give them in exchange (a son) better in purity (of conduct) and closer in affection. As for the wall, it belonged to two youths, orphans, in the Town; there was, beneath it, a buried treasure, to which they were entitled: their father had been a righteous man: So thy Lord desired that they should attain their age of full strength and get out their treasure - a mercy (and favor) from thy Lord. I did it not of my own accord. Such is the interpretation of (those things) over which thou wast unable to hold patience.” (“Surat al-Kaf,” Qu’ran, 78-82)
successor of his Shaykh, was a branch of the Shadhiliyya Daqawiyiya Alawiyya order. The years immediately following his initiation by the Shaykh Alawi, when the influence of Guénon was still predominant, could be characterized by a certain type of “Islamic idealism”, reflected in particular in the style and topics of his articles published in *Les Études Traditionnelles*. This being said, even during this period, all the concepts and later thesis were already present, as is proven by his first book in German, *Urbesinnung – Das Denken des Eigentlichen*, written just before and immediately after his initiation.\(^{40}\)

At this time, Schuon also started to write *The Book of the Keys*, a series of one thousand and two hundred texts about the operative aspect of the path, only intended for his disciples. Excerpts have, however, been included in some of his books. According to Jean-Baptiste Aymard,\(^{41}\) this text, the equivalent of at least a three volume encyclopedia, represents an esoteric summa of first importance, which clearly shows the remarkable continuity in Schuon’s thought.

Guénon saw in the creation of the *tariqah* an opportunity for his many correspondents to receive a regular initiation and he started to recommend people to Schuon. Among them were the Romanian diplomat and later father of Akbarian Studies in France, Michel Valsan (1911-1974). However, because of the dissensions between the North African successors of the Shaykh, the beginning of the Second World War, and possibly the growing politicization of some sectors of the Alawiyya on the eve of the decolonization movement, the Sufi organization led by Schuon became more and more independent of its mother *tariqah*, now lead by the Shaykh al-Mahdhi Ben Tounès, whose both pan-Islamic and neo-spiritualist views were at odds with Schuon’s conceptions. Schuon also claimed to have received several signs of divine election during this period. On the day his Shaykh died, he experienced what he later described as the descent of the Divine Name on him. Furthermore, one morning in 1936, he woke up with the certitude that he had been chosen by Heaven to become a *Shaykh al-baraka*, a plenary spiritual master. Simultaneously, several of his disciples had dreams designating him as one of the successor of the Shaykh Alawi.\(^{42}\) He met Guénon for the first time in 1938 in

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\(^{40}\) Recently translated, this text will be published in the forthcoming *Sacred Web* 19 (Summer 2007).

\(^{41}\) *Si vous saviez*, Radio Suisse Romande, December 2001.

\(^{42}\) According to Martin Lings, the Shaykh Ahmad al-Alawi and other members of his *tariqah* had visionary dreams after the death of their own master Muhammad al-Buzidi, designating him as his successor.
Cairo. During his second trip to Cairo, he also received the blessing of the Qadriyyah brotherhood. It is worth mentioning that Schuon continued to have contact in the Islamic world after his break with the successors of the Shaykh Alawi. Between 1935 and 1975, he made no less than ten trips to Morocco, meeting with Sufi Shaykhs such as Shaykh Hassan, who prophesized that he would end his life in the Far-West.

In 1939, Schuon traveled briefly to India with some friends. A wealthy British friend John Levy financed the trip but Schuon was nevertheless forced to return to France with the invasion of Poland. Some of his friends stayed in India and became the disciples of a neo-Advaitin Guru, Sri Atmanda (Krishna Menon), author of *Atma Darshan*. After the French defeat in 1940, fearing that he would be enlisted in the *Wehrmacht*, Schuon fled to Switzerland, where he lived till 1980. In 1942, in a spiritual opening, he received the inspiration of his spiritual method, “the six themes of meditations,” which he was to develop over the years. In 1948, he published his first book in French, *L’unité transcendante des religions*, which still betrays a Guénonian imprint, at a both doctrinal and stylistic level.

The Schuonian group itself suffered from several crises in the late 1940’s and early1950’s. The friends who had accompanied Schuon to India finally returned to Europe, rejecting both Guénon and Islam, advocating a kind of neo-Vedanta based on the rejection of any form of traditional orthodoxy or method, and the primacy of the “direct experience” of the identity with *Atman*. For Schuon and Guénon, they had fallen under the influence of a fake guru with dangerous psychic power. Several letters were exchanged between them and Schuon, which help to clarify Schuon’s position with respect to Vedanta. At the same time, Guénon also warned some of his correspondents and visitors against what he saw as a profusion of fake masters, among whom he seemed to have later ranked Sri Aurobindo.

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The disciples of Krishna Menon have also created a website: *The Spiritual path of Vedanta*. [http://www.advaita.org.uk/](http://www.advaita.org.uk/).
With Michel Valsan’s declaration of independence from Schuon’s brotherhood, a much more dramatic crisis took place. Although he had accepted Guénon’s teaching on the “Primordial Tradition,” he later disapproved of Schuon’s universalism, reproaching him with “de-islamizing Islam”. Consequently, Michel Valsan created his own group in Paris, based exclusively on the teachings of Guénon, with a strong reference to the Akbarian Sufism of Ibn Arabi (rather than Asian non-dualism) and a growing emphasis on the *Shariah*.

This latter crisis also reflects the difference of perspective and temperament between Guénon and the Guénonians on the one hand and Schuon on the other. Toward the end of Guénon’s life, tensions arose about the Christian Sacraments. Guénon argued that Christianity was at the beginning a Jewish esoterism, but that it lost its esoteric dimension around the time of the conversion of Constantine and the Council of Nicea. Schuon, who knew Christian theology and western mysticism better than Guénon did, objected to this thesis in an article entitled *Mystères Christiques*, indirectly pointing out the shortcomings and contradictions of Guénon’s position. Although the relationship between them remained cordial till the death of Guénon, the incident proved that Schuon was no longer willing to accept any Guénonian thesis without question. It became clear also that Guénon had a very different idea of what a Western *tariqah* should be, advocating a far more confessional approach and much closer ties with the North-African Alawiyia. As a result of these polemics, after Guénon’s passing away in 1951, Schuon and the Guénonians, whether Muslims around Michel Valsan or Freemasons such as Jean Reyor alias Maurice Clavelle (1905-1988), evolved in different directions.

As he was progressively distancing himself from the Guénonian milieu, Schuon started to develop a more autonomous perspective, correcting what in his opinion were some of the major failures of Guénon, and clarifying some of his theses about religious pluralism. For instance, very early on, indeed immediately after his coming back from Mostaganem, he started to question Guénon’s Manichean opposition between East and

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West,\textsuperscript{47} as well as his static and schematic definition of the Tradition, a conception, based on a neo-occultist mythology of “the Center of the World” developed in \textit{le Roi du Monde},\textsuperscript{48} that does not really acknowledge the complex mixture of human and divine elements in historical religions and the irreducible differences between them. Instead of looking for an hypothetical “primordial tradition” and an historical continuity between this Ur-Religion and existing traditions, Schuon constantly insisted that it was purely at the metaphysical level that formal diversity could be reconciled.\textsuperscript{49} For him, all the true and orthodox religions have the same divine origin –they are not human-made- and are all grounded on the same metaphysical principles –even though these principles may be expressed in apparently conflicting ways. But there is no need to postulate an historical connection between them and the Primordial Religion of the Golden Age via a mythological \textit{Agartha}. As he wrote in private letters to Michel Valsan, Islam has “integrely descended on the Prophet during the \textit{Layla al-Qadr},”\textsuperscript{50} which amounts to saying without the assistance of the King of the World.

His “esoteric ecumenism” also needs to be distinguished from other non-secular but less rigorous and too often ierotic attempts to challenge religious separatism. In earlier writings, nourished by Guénon, it is the school of Shankara and Gaudapada that has provided him with a paradigm, for Vedanta represents in his view a pure perspective of knowledge (\textit{jnana marga}), superior to what we can ever find in the West. In addition, Schuon maintained as Guénon did that Vedanta is relatively more understandable for Westerners than Taoism and other Eastern traditions are. In the 60’s, Schuon developed the concept of \textit{Religio Perennis}. Contrary to what Jean Borella has thought, Schuon’s \textit{Religio Perennis} cannot be called a new religion with its own dogma and practices. For Schuon, the \textit{Religio Perennis} is the “underlying Religion,” the “Religion of the Heart” or the \textit{Religio Cordis}.

\textsuperscript{47} For instance René Guénon, \textit{East and West} (Hillsdale NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001).
\textsuperscript{48} René Guénon, \textit{The King of the World} (Hillsdale NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001). Guénon was profoundly influenced by Saint-Yves d’Alveydre’s \textit{Mission de l’Inde en Europe} and Ferdynand Ossendowski’s \textit{Bêtes, Hommes et Dieux} and the idea of an underground world (\textit{Agartha}).
\textsuperscript{49} “If the expression “transcendent unity” is used, it means that the unity of the religious forms must be realized in a purely inward and spiritual way and \textit{without prejudice to any particular form}.” See: \textit{Dictionary of the terms used by Frithjof Schuon}, edited by Deo Valodia, \textit{Sophia Perennis}, http://www.frithjof-schuon.com/Glossary%20Schuon%20Revised.pdf, s.v. “Transcendent unity of Religions” quoted from Frithjof Schuon, \textit{Transcendent Unity of Religions}, Preface.
\textsuperscript{50} Unpublished letter to Michel Valsan, 1964.
To paraphrase the well-known saying of Saint Irenaeus, the *religio perennis* is fundamentally this: the Real entered into the illusory so that the illusory might be able to return into the Real. It is this mystery, together with the metaphysical discernment and contemplative concentration that are its complement, which alone is important in an absolute sense from the point of view of *gnosis*; for the gnostic—in the etymological and rightful sense of that word—there is in the last analysis no other “religion.” It is what Ibn Arabi called the “religion of Love,” placing the accent on the element “realization.”

Schuon claims that Esotericists in every orthodox tradition have a more or less direct access to it but, in his perspective, it cannot be a question of practicing the *Religio Perennis* independently. Religious forms may be relatively transparent but religious diversity is not denied and its *raison d’être* is metaphysically explained. On the one hand, for Schuon, formal religions are what he called *upaya* (liberating mirages). They represent in this perspective superimpositions on the core-essence of the *Religio Perennis*.

In historical religions, an *upaya* serves as the vestment of the “naked truth,” the primordial, perennial and universal religion: symbolism transmits the heavenly Message and at the same time dissimulates the provisionally inassimilable mystery.

On the other hand, religious forms correspond to as many archetypes in the divine Word itself or “hypostatic faces” of the Divine.

The divine “I” that speaks to men – and of necessity to a “particular collectivity of men” – could never be the Divine Subject in a direct and absolute sense; (...) The particular divine “I” of a Revelation is not situated in the Divine Principle Itself, it is the projection, or emanation, of the Absolute Subject and is identified with the “Spirit of God,” that is, with the cosmic Centre of which it could be said that it is “neither divine nor non-divine”; this revelation-giving “I” “is God” in virtue of the ray attaching it directly to its Source, but it is not God in an absolute way, for it is impossible that the Absolute as such would start speaking in a human language and say human things.

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52 Schuon often uses this buddhist term to refer to the partial and confessional truth contained in a given religion but sufficient to bound souls to heaven and save them. For instance, the Christian claims that “only Christ is the savior” is an *upaya*, an “half-truth” because other manifestations of the Logos save but to believe sincerely in Christ is sufficient to be saved.
We recognize here, on the plane of religious forms, the two aspects of Maya in the Vedantic doctrine.\textsuperscript{55} Maya is both a power of illusion and a power of projection. Religions are simultaneously a light veiled and a veil of light, but it is important to realize that far from dismissing traditional orthodoxy, Schuon insisted that religious forms are “willed by God,” and that each religion corresponds to a particular and homogenous cosmos, characterized by its own perspective on the Absolute. From a different perspective, each revelation is a macrocosmic objectivation of the Intellect. For the men of the satya-yuga or the realized men of our age, intellection itself is a subjective revelation, the unveiling of truths that are virtually inscribed in the substance of our intelligence. A reference to the Religio Perennis is thus as much an appeal to the origin of every religion as an invitation to penetrate their inner meaning.

His perspective can thus been characterized as essentially metaphysical, esoteric and primordial but also traditional.\textsuperscript{56} For Schuon, there is no spiritual path outside of a revealed religion, which provides spiritual seekers with a metaphysical doctrine and a spiritual method, but also with an environment of beauty and sacredness. Schuon wrote that the Religio Perennis “is always and necessarily founded upon formal elements of divine institution.”\textsuperscript{57} A traditional form always represents an indispensable setting, even for the most esoteric spiritual journey.

Schuon also explained that there are two origins for the Religio Perennis and pure esoterism. The first source is horizontal and corresponds to an effluence of Grace and wisdom coming from the divinely inspired founder of a given religion, and transmitted throughout history by the tradition. It is, for instance, the initiation given by the prophet of Islam to some of his followers during the second meeting of Aqaba in 622. The second is a vertical inspiration that Schuon compared to the falling of the rain.

We can compare this particular mode of inspiration and orthodoxy that is esoterism to the rain falling vertically from the sky, whereas the river — the common tradition — flows horizontally in a continuous flow; that is to say that the tradition springs from a source, it declares itself connected with a given founder of a religion, whereas esoterism refers in addition, and above all a

\textsuperscript{55} We will discuss in the chapter two, his exact understanding of the doctrine of Maya.

\textsuperscript{56} This traditional nature of his perspective does not prevent Schuon from using freely concepts from different religious origin, his approach being not one of an historian of religion but rather of a philosopher.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibidem.
priori, to an invisible filiations, one which in the Bible is represented by Melchizedek, Solomon and Elijah, and which Sufism links to al-Khidr, the mysterious immortal. 58

Before Schuon and even Guénon, this universal and sacred knowledge has sometimes been referred to as the *philosophia perennis*, although Guénon never uses this expression and Schuon prefers the terms *sophia perennis* or *religio perennis* to designate its initiatory, operative and supra-rational aspect. It could be objected that such a universalistic perspective - and this is not a small paradox - more or less presupposes the conditions created by modernity and even the enlightenment. So far as it can be discovered, the term “*philosophia perennis*” is early modern, first appearing in the Renaissance. More precisely, though, the term is widely associated with the philosopher Leibniz, yet he himself found it in the writings of the sixteenth century theologian, Augustinus Steuchius.

One could certainly maintain that the idea of such a perennial wisdom is much older. For example, one could mention the golden chain (*seira*) of the Neoplatonist philosopher Iamblichus, or the transcendent philosophy of Molla Sadra (*Al-Hikmat Al-Ilahiyyah*), without forgetting the Qur’anic *Din al-Fitra* or the Hindu *Sanatha Dharma*. *Mutatis mutandi*, the belief in the universality of certain metaphysical truths, transcending cultural and religious boundaries, seems to have historically preceded the rise of the modern mentality, although such a possibility certainly contradicts the modern *grand narrative*, which maintains, in the lineage of Hegel and Husserl, that consciousness of the universal necessarily originates in post-medieval European culture. This being said, one could hardly find an equivalent in history to the all-encompassing doctrine of the transcendent unity of religions. Contrary to Guénon, Schuon had clearly identified and explicitly recognized the problem. Adopting a more “reflexive” posture than his illustrious predecessor, Schuon, followed on this question by Seyyed Hossein Nasr in *The Knowledge and the Sacred*, 59 was indeed willing to acknowledge that the rise of the Perennialist school and its uniquely universal scope cannot be explained without a

reference to the modern context and the particular needs of modern man - something that
we will need to keep in mind to understand the specific nature of Schuon’s message and
the initiatory organization he has directed. In an article written at the death of Guénon, he
wrote:

Now if on the doctrinal plane, Guénon’s work is of a unique kind, it is perhaps important to
specify that this does not stem from a more or less “prophetic” nature, a proposition which
Guénon himself, already rejected in advance, but from exceptional cyclical circumstances, whose
temporal aspect is this “end of a world” in which we live, and whose spatial aspect – as a function
moreover, of the cyclical aspect – is the forced bringing together of the different civilizations. (…)
Be that it may such a work would have been without object in a period such as the Middle Ages,
because the “end of a world” was still too far and wisdom was not neglected as it is today as a
result of modern tendencies; in addition, the spiritual perspectives of Asia were practically non-
existent for Medieval Europe.  

The modern civilization, at this end of the kali-yuga, by destroying the protective
borders between religious forms and by opening the West to India and Asian Non-
dualism, has in fact created a new spiritual environment with specific intellectual needs.

The truths ... expressed [by the Sophia Perennis] are not the exclusive possession of any school or
individual; were it otherwise they would not be truths, for these cannot be invented, but must
necessarily be known in every integral traditional civilization. It might, however, reasonably be
asked for what human and cosmic reasons truths that may in a very general sense be called
"esoteric" should be brought to light and made explicit at the present time, in an age that is so little
inclined to speculation. There is indeed something abnormal in this, but it lies, not in the fact of
the exposition of these truths, but in the general condition of our age, which marks the end of a
great cyclic period of terrestrial humanity -- the end of a maha-yuga according to Hindu
cosmology -- and so must recapitulate or manifest again in one way or another everything that is
included in the cycle, in conformity with the adage: "extremes meet"; thus things that are in
themselves abnormal may become necessary by reason of the conditions just referred to.

According to Schuon, the traditional science of religion – as opposed to the purely
profane disciple of our academia - the inner knowledge of the religious traditions and
their “transcendent unity,” were reserved to the end of time, for this moment in history,
when new intellectual keys, that only esoterism is able to provide, would be needed to
explain the plurality of the religious revelations and the limitations of the confessional
credos.

60 Frithjof Schuon. René Guénon: Some Observations, 4-5.
Exoterism is a precarious thing by reason of its limits or its exclusions; there arrives a moment in history when all kinds of experiences obliges it to modify its claims to exclusiveness and it is then driven to a choice: escape from these limitations by the upward path, in esoterism, or by the downward path, in the worldly and suicidal liberalism.\(^{61}\)

As we already said, whereas Guénon had almost exclusively an intellectual influence, Schuon was, since his initiation by Shaykh Al-Alawi and his nomination as a \textit{moqaddem}, not only a genuine metaphysician but also a spiritual master, a \textit{Shaykh} whose aura attracted many disciples. Western readers of Guénon but also born Muslims, touched by the modern influence, have found in this \textit{tariqah} based on the perspective of the \textit{Religio Perennis} not only a practical application and a complement to the doctrine exposed by Guénon, but also an opportunity to escape a too unsatisfactory and unrealistic “religious exclusivism.” Schuon also had disciples from religious traditions other than Islam, namely Christianity and Buddhism, to whom he did not give an initiation\(^{62}\) but a spiritual guidance in the path. Practically, their spiritual discipline was respectively based on the invocation of the name \textit{Jesus-Maria} and the \textit{nembutsu}, the equivalents of the Sufi \textit{dhikr}. Such a possibility, having disciples in several traditions, although very exceptional, was justified in his view by the universal nature of his perspective:

A question rises that has been often debated: can the function of a spiritual master cross the boundaries of a given religion? It is not possible to deny it categorically, but it represents a very precarious possibility because of the high spiritual degree it requires from the master and also because of the difficulty for him to control facts located in another traditional world. In his case, he acts as the vehicle of a foreign \textit{barakah} and this presupposes a spirituality that has concretely passed beyond forms. We say “concretely” because universalistic verbiage is different from the realization of the essence.\(^{63}\)


\(^{62}\) He could not because what he had received from the Shaykh Alawi was a Sufi initiation.

\(^{63}\) Frithjof Schuon, “Role and function of the spiritual master,” \textit{Logic and Transcendence}. On this question, Schuon added that such a possibility is conceivable only if both parties remain in their respective traditions. One could also refer here to the 20\textsuperscript{th} century examples of Shirdi Sai Baba (d.1918) and Ramana Maharshi (d.1950) who welcomed not only Hindus but also Christians and Muslims around them. On the same topic, Titus Burckhardt wrote: « A master whose spiritual perspective is limited to a particular form or to a particular traditional environment is not a plenary master (although a true master can in fact ignore other traditions than his tradition; and a master who rejects all forms is a false master (although a true master can reduce the traditional form to its essential elements and he will certainly do it).” See Titus Burckhardt, “Letter on the spiritual path,” \textit{The Underlying Religion}, edited by Clinton Minnaar and Martin Lings, (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2007).
Most Sufi orders in North Africa or the Middle East, particularly since the 19th century, and under the pressure of modernist and revivalist movements, have tended to remain very close to the exoteric and confessional mentality. In their teachings, they often mix what Schuon regards as truly esoteric elements and more problematic ideas, reflecting the shortcomings of a paradoxical “eso-exoteric symbiosis.” By contrast, his tariqah was clearly oriented toward “Quintessential esoterism.” As defined by Schuon, “Quintessential Esoterism” or “Integral Esoterism” -which coincides with the Religio Perennis but seen from the perspective of immanence rather than transcendence- is not based on confessional assumptions and theological speculations but on the fundamental meaning of the symbols in a given revelation, on its presiding idea, but also on the “nature of things.” By this “idée-force”, Schuon refers here to the central doctrine around which an upaya is organized and which when transposed metaphysically represents a gate toward the Religio Perennis. In Islam, it is the Tahwid, the unity of the Real. In Christianity, it is the Incarnation and the identification of Christ with the heart.

By “nature of things,” Schuon refers to the platonic essences as they are seen through the “naturally supernatural” intellect, the immanent Logos in man and independently of any moralistic or legalistic preoccupations. In Sufi and more existential terms, the “nature of things” corresponds for Schuon to the perspective of the fitra, “the primordial nature of man.” According to the Qu’ran, the fitra is the original state in which God creates humans. God creates children according to fitra, and their parents later make them Jews or Christians. As such, every child is born a Muslim. The concept of fitra is commonly invoked by Sufis, who often view their own quest as the means for restoring the original harmony of creation.⁶⁴ For Schuon, the fitra has an even more universal meaning. It refers to the primordial and esoteric perspective of the Religio Perennis as opposed to the particular creeds, including Islam.

Although Quintessential esoterism interested him most, Schuon was the first to recognize that historical esoterism hardly manifested itself in this pristine manner. He argued that there are on the contrary two kinds or degrees within esoterism: an absolute esoterism –quintessential esoterism properly speaking- and a relative esoterism. Relative esoterism, which coincides with most of the historical forms of Sufism and Christian

mysticism, suffers from a very problematic solidarity with the exoteric mentality. It prolongs it more or less harmoniously, justifying its very existence on the basis of a sublimate exegesis and a hyperbolic and fideist hagiography. Its price is the lowering of esoterism to the anti-metaphysic level of the volitional man -the psychics as opposed to the pneumatics, to use the Valentinian categories- and the inevitable mix between the values of the two domains: for exoterism, the aspiration of the soul to salvation and for esoterism the disinterested and uniting contemplation of the impersonal Truth. On the contrary, Quintessential esoterism transcends and sometimes even opposes exoteric religion.

The word “esoterism” suggests in the first place an idea of complementarily, of a “half” as it were: esoterism is the complement of exoterism, it is the “spirit” which completes the “letter”. Where there is a truth of Revelation, hence of formal and theological truth, there must also be a truth of intellection, hence of non-formal and metaphysical truth; not legalistic or obligatory truth, but truth that stems from the nature of things, and which is also vocational since not every man grasps this nature. But in fact this second truth exists independently of the first; hence it is not, in its intrinsic reality, a complement or a half; it is so only extrinsically and as it were “accidentally”. This means that the word “esoterism” designates not only the total truth inasmuch as it is “colored” by entering a system of partial truth, but also the total truth as such, which is colorless. This distinction is not a mere theoretical luxury; on the contrary, it implies extremely important consequences. Thus esoterism as such is metaphysics, to which is necessarily joined an appropriate method of realization. But the esoterism of a particular religion – of a particular exoterism precisely – tends to adapt itself to this religion and thereby enter into theological, psychological and legalistic meanders foreign to its nature, while preserving in its secret center its authentic and plenary nature, but for which it would not be what it is.65

To one of his correspondents66, Schuon once explained that such a pristine form of esoterism had the right to exist and even manifested sporadically in every religious climate because it is adapted to a certain type of man, the pneumatic. This authorized him to create, after his initiation by the Shaykh Alawi and within the framework of Islam, an esoteric organization of “Vedantic type” without falling into heterodoxy at least in the eyes of the esoterists. By the expression “Vedantic type” Schuon meant an organization based on universal metaphysics and more directly oriented toward “quintessential

esoterism” than most Sufi brotherhoods. This organization, which was, as we will see, placed under the patronage of the Virgin Mary, Sayyidatna Maryam in Islam, was destined to communicate the quintessence of all possible religion, even allowing sporadic openings to non-Semitic forms and foreign spiritual ambiance (*barakah*).
Among the Lakotas and the Crows

I am allowed to connect to three spiritual worlds:
The primordial world of the *Veda* and the Sufi milieu
And also, in the West, the world of the Indians.
Each humanity has something to teach
Because every cosmos shines in its own manner.
The metaphysics is the equivalent of the Vedic Word.
The Name of God is the World of the Sufis.
And our harmony with creation is
What satisfies the heart of the Indians.67

One of Schuon’s non-Muslim influences was the world of the Plains Indians. As a child, he and his brother had listened to the stories of their grandmother. After his entry into Islam, Schuon was profoundly moved by John Neihardt’s *Black Elk Speaks*68 and he sent his friend, the American anthropologist Joseph Epes Brown to look for Black Elk (1863-1950) and interview him. He helped him to write the famous *Sacred Pipe* and he composed the introduction of the French version, published under the title *Les rites secrets des Indiens Sioux*.69 According to Dr Nasr:

In fact, Brown was the link between Black Elk and Schuon who was himself so deeply attracted to the Native American traditions. For years it was Brown who through letters and journeys to Lausanne would speak of the Native Americans to Schuon and would create possibilities of exchange between Schuon and that world, exchanges that were to play an important role in the last period of the latter’s life.70

Black Elk was not the only direct informant of Schuon about the Native American traditions, at least as they survived in the 20th century. In the autumn of 1953, Schuon and his wife met with Thomas Yellowtail71 in Paris. The future Sun Dance Chief was then

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67 Frithjof Schuon, *Das Weltrad, la roue cosmique VI, VII, LXXXVII* (Lausanne: Editions des Sept Fleches)
69. The translation is mine.
71 About Schuon and the Native Americans, see:
making a dance tour. In his autobiography, Schuon explained how, after Yellowtail had performed a special rite, he had a visionary dream revealing to him certain aspects of the Plain Indian symbolism. Thomas Yellowtail remained his intimate friend till his death in 1993, visiting him every year after his settlement in Bloomington. During the visits of Yellowtail, Schuon and some of his followers organized what they called “Indian Days,” involving the performance of Native American dances.

During his two trips in North America in 1959 and 1963, Schuon successively met with Lakotas, Absarokas, Cheyenne, Crows and Blackfeet. He also attended Sun Dances and the All American Indian days in Sheridan as well as a ceremony of a Tobacco Society. He was eventually adopted in the Lakota and Crow tribes and received the names of Wambali Ohitika (Brave Eagle) and Wichahpi Wiyakpa (Bright Star). At this occasion he also met with Benjamin Black Elk, the son of Black Elk, with whom he had only exchanged letters before. It was Schuon’s conviction that he had to help the Native Americans to preserve the spirit of their traditions and he wrote a series of articles, later published in the Feathered Sun, to defend them and strengthen their faith. His relationship with the Plains Indians lasted till the end. On the day of his burial, the ceremony ended with the Crow Sun Dance Chief, John Pretty on Top, saying a prayer with a sacred pipe while accompanied by an American Indian song in Schuon’s honor.

Schuon’s involvement with Native American dances and practices have often been stigmatized, particularly by Muslims and French traditionalists, as a clear proof of his departure from Islamic orthodoxy. These criticisms increased after his settlement in Bloomington. Mark Sedgwick could thus write that, “by the time of Schuon's death in 1998, Sufism had become almost incidental to a wider enterprise that involved Christians

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While he was recording the Sacred Pipe, Epes Brown received this sacred object from Black Elk himself. He later gave it to Schuon who, as a measure of profound respect, offered it to Thomas Yellowtail in 1954.

The first reaction of secular academics, when informed of his interest in Native Americans, is to charge him with Romanticism, to suspect that he probably paid insufficient attention to the post-colonial context in which a certain revival of their traditional spirituality took place. They generally remark that contemporary Indian leaders, far from being passive informants about a pre-modern Weltanschauung, are indeed professing a much hybridized creed. Their beliefs, they say, have been deeply influenced by the dominant Christian culture and reshaped under the missionary pressures against which they had to adopt defensive strategies, insisting, for instance, on the monotheistic characteristic of their tradition. It cannot be denied also that in terms of rituals, the Sun Dance, to which Schuon participated several times, had been forbidden for decades in the US following the 1904 ban. Even if the practice has probably continued in an underground and sporadic manner during this period of prohibition, the Sun Dance as it was celebrated in the second half of the twentieth century was largely reconstructed and in striking contrast with the conditions prior to reservation life.

The scientific credibility of the information Schuon gathered needs also to be reevaluated, taking into account that recent scholarship has challenged the image of Black Elk transmitted by John G. Neihardt. According to the American writer, Black Elk was blessed at the age of nine (1873) by a great vision while being several days in a coma. At the age of nineteen, he underwent a series of initiatory rites (the horse dance, the dog vision and the Heyoka ceremony) to be recognized as a holy man (wicasa wakan) by the Oglala tribe. He was later involved in the Messianic movement initiated by Jack Wilson (1856-1932) who claimed to have received a vision of the Great Spirit (Waka Tanka) during an eclipse. As he was called among the Indian nations, Wovoka invited the various tribes, reduced to desperation by the progressive confiscation of their land, to perform a new rite, he called the Ghost Dance. He prophesized that this dance would bring an end to this world, the destruction of the White cities and the coming of a new world where the Native Americans would be reunited with their ancestors. This

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movement spread rapidly but tragically ended with the Wounded Knee massacre (1890): around 150 Indians perished when the US army opened fire onto a peaceful gathering. Neihardt’s retelling of Black Elk’s life ends just after the failure of this revival movement.

New biographical studies have appeared in recent years, however demonstrating that Neihardt wrote *Black Elk Speaks* as a piece of art but with limited anthropological concerns. Far from having been faithfully reported, his talks with Black Elk were very much colored by his subjectivity. Some passages, in particular the last pathetical chapter about “the end of the dream,” is a pure literary invention. In *the Sixth Grandfather*, Raymond J. DeMallie has also established, on the basis of the original transcripts, that many parts of the story have been simplified and rewritten. In particular Neihardt has intentionally diminished the combative implications of the great vision. R.J. DeMallie also suggested that Black Elk and Neihardt were much likely in disagreement about the viability of the Lakota Tradition: the idea that after the Wounded Knee massacre the Indian religion was virtually dead reflected Neihardt’s personal evaluation, not the position of the holy man.

Michael Steltenkamp, the author of *Black Elk Holy Man of the Oglala* made an even more disturbing discovery. Lucy Looks Twice, the older daughter of Black Elk, revealed to Steltenkamp that he converted to Catholicism in 1903. He worked as a Christian missionary for years. The sincerity of his conversion and his involvement in the traditional religion after this date have been hotly debated. In a synthesis of recent scholarship on the topic, Clyde Holler maintains that he probably kept a dual affiliation after his “conversion.” He thus considered both Christianity and his Lakota tradition as religions of equal validity. Portraying Black Elk as both a traditionalist Lakota and a Catholic, Clyde Holler made the hypothesis that, “Black Elk may have seen one thing – the sacred- where others see two things – traditional religion and Christianity” and remarked that “if Black Elk regarded these two traditions as two expressions of the same sacred reality, much of the tension that commentators have perceived in his dual

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participation is dissipated.” From this perspective, Black Elk’s attitude almost seems to prefigure the one of Schuon.

Others, like DeMallie, have however concluded to Black Elk’s increasing re-involvement with traditional religion during the last twenty years of his life, after what may well have been a Catholic parenthesis. The beginning of this return to Native practices coincided with his talks with Neihardt and, I would add, ended with his contacts with Frithjof Schuon via Joseph Epes Brown. On the basis of biographical material, to be published in a forthcoming biography of Schuon by Michael Fitzgerald, I would like to make the argument that not only Schuon’s understanding of the Native American traditions was informed by Black Elk, but also that Black Elk may have been helped to complete his return to his traditional religion by Schuon and his emissary.

Neihardt depicted Black Elk as a tragic figure haunted by his early vision and suffering from his inability to accomplish the mission the Great Fathers had assigned him on behalf of his people. He turned toward Jack Wilson for assistance but with disastrous consequences. Clyde Holler believed that this pathetical posture was not only the product of Neihardt’s imagination. He has argued that to reveal to Neihardt the content of his vision amounted to a “process of transmitting his sacred knowledge to [him],” along with the power and duties associated with it. This quasi-initiation “was itself a ritual which was punctuated with other rites.” It is therefore reasonable to formulate the hypothesis that Black Elk may have thought that his contacts with Schuon represented a final and nonetheless providential opportunity to fulfill God’s will. It is something that the letters of Epes Brown to Schuon from that period potentially corroborate. The young anthropologist wrote, for instance, that one of the reasons why the Lakota received him is

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77 Ibidem. 35-36. Regardless of what Clyde Holler said, we are forced to remark that such a possibility of dual religious affiliation may be encountered in several cultural climates and particularly in the Hindu-Muslim milieu of the Indian subcontinent. One could mention for instance the case of Kabir (d.1518) or more recently Shirdi Sai Baba (d. 1918), to whom one cannot assign firmly a given tradition. In addition, a person with a shamanic background is probably less opposed a priori to the recognition of the validity of different forms than a born catholic. In Schuon’s perspective of the “transcendent unity of religions,” a Black Elk, both Catholic and Lakota would then illustrate the possibility for a spiritual figure of first magnitude to transcend religious forms or at least to cross religious boundaries, particularly when he lives on a spiritual border.

78 Michael Fitzgerald, Frithjof Schuon, messenger of the Philosophia Perennis.

79 Clyde Holler, Black Elk’s Religion: The Sun Dance and Lakota Catholicism, 20.
that he had visions announcing the coming of “holy men from the East.”\textsuperscript{80} He would have also said to Epes Brown that he could now rest in peace, knowing that Schuon was taking care of his legacy. Michael Fitzgerald also mentions that during his final illness Schuon prayed for him and that the old man received mystical visitations of “a holy man from Europe.”\textsuperscript{81} Michel F. Steltenkamp also described this episode but he could hardly interpret it.

Black Elk knew that life’s circle was nearly complete, and he calmly awaited his passing. In assuring Lucy [his daughter] that he was prepared, the holy man reported the presence of a phantom visitor that was seen only by him. [Lucy remembered:] "As he waited for death, he told me, ‘Do not worry, there is a man who comes to see me everyday at three o’clock. He is from overseas, and he comes in to pray with me-so I pray with him.'"\textsuperscript{82}

Interestingly enough, the specialist of Iranian esoterism Henry Corbin has written about similar stories of supernatural encounters between spiritual men in Islam and Christianity.\textsuperscript{83} In his opinion, these mystical events, occurring not in our material world but in the \textit{barzakh}, this intermediate realm referred to by the Qur’an as “the confluent between the two seas,” should not be approached with the reductionist and iconoclast tools of historicism but with the more subtle eyes of a phenomenology as it struggles not to demystify the event but to understand its religious meaning.

The connection between Schuon and Black Elk may even be more profound. Schuon established a correspondence between the six themes of meditation, which he received in 1942, and the symbolism of space (North, South, East, West, Zenith, Nadir). This particular symbolism precisely played a structuring role in the pivotal episode of Black Elk’s vision. When he met with the council of the six Great Fathers, each one was associated with a direction:

The oldest spoke again: "Your Grandfathers all over the world are having a council, and they have called you here to teach you." His voice was very kind, but I shook all over with fear now, for I knew that these were not old men, but the Powers of the World. And the first was the Power of the West; the second, of the North; the third, of the East; the fourth, of the South; the fifth, of the Sky; the sixth, of the Earth. I knew this, and was afraid, until the first Grandfather spoke again: "Behold

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\textsuperscript{80} Unpublished letter to Frithjof Schuon, November 1947.
\textsuperscript{81} Unpublished to Frithjof Schuon, October 8 1954.
\textsuperscript{82} Michel F. Steltenkamp, \textit{Black Elk, Holy man of the Oglala}, 129.
them yonder where the sun goes down, the thunder beings! You shall see, and have from them my
power; and they shall take you to the high and lonely center of the earth that you may see; even to
the place where the sun continually shines, they shall take you there to understand.⁸⁴

Evoking Black Elk’s first cure in Black Elk Speaks, Neihardt also attributed to the
Oglala chief a description of the four quarters’ virtues.

You have noticed that everything an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because the Power of the
World always works in circles, and everything tries to be round. In the old days when we were a
strong and happy people, all our power came to us from the sacred hoop of the nation, and so long as
the hoop was unbroken, the people flourished. The flowering tree was the living center of the hoop,
and the circle of the four quarters nourished it. The east gave peace and light, the south gave
warmth, the west gave rain, and the north with its cold and mighty wind gave strength and
endurance. This knowledge came to us from the outer world with our religion.⁸⁵

Schuon certainly knew this text in 1942. Was it only to illustrate his practice of
meditation that he later referred to this symbolism, or were there more concrete
similarities between his own illumination and Black Elk’s vision? On this topic, we can
only speculate since, as far as I know, Schuon never described the exact content of his
experience.

It would be however an error to assume that Schuon, blinded by some dogmatic
presuppositions, was looking for an equivalent of Advaita or even the wahdat al-wujud
within the Native American world. In “Degrees and Scope of Theism,”⁸⁶ Schuon clearly
enumerates different kinds of approach to the Sacred, contrasting among others, the
metatheistic perspective of Advaita with Shamanism. Schuon claims that whereas purely
metaphysical traditions are centered on the adamantine Absolute, the Beyond Being,
Shamanists such as the Native Americans but also the Bon-To Tibetans or the Shintoists
start from the distinction between the visible and the invisible. As he understands their
perspective, they consider as sacred not only the pure Absolute and its heavenly
prolongations - the Personal God and the angelical domain – but also the animistic realm.
In this “pantheistic” perspective, the highest degrees tend to be veiled by the lowest
because the Sacred “penetrates [the world] and manifests Himself ‘consciously’ through

⁸⁵ Ibidem, 150.
⁸⁶ Frithjof Schuon, “Degrees and Scope of Theism,” To Have a Center (Bloomington: World Wisdom,
1990).
the angels and the spirits”. Therefore even though for Schuon, the supernatural realities are always the same, it would be very amazing to discover among the Lakotas any elaborated metaphysical doctrine of platonic or Vedantic type. Schuon, however, recognized a point of junction between the two approaches:

The metaphysician, who after all is not as Shamanist, nonetheless shares in this way of looking at things: for him, everything is integrated into the Universal substance, hence into Existence and then into the given Qualities, Faculties, or Functions, for “Everything is *Atman*.” (...) For “extremes meet” to understand the Divine essence is at the same stroke to understand the “indirect divinity” of all that not nothing (...) An authentic metaphysician spontaneously feels a certain respect, for natural phenomena inasmuch as they manifest universal Possibility, and which for that reason bear the signature of the Absolute.87

The metaphysician is also a cosmologist who can see the divine Names and Attributes reflected not only in natural things but also in the conditions of sensory or psychophysical existence: space, time, form, number, substance.

These conditions of our existence on earth have, each one of them, two ‘openings’ towards God: space implies, on the one hand, the geometric point or the ‘center’ and, on the other, limitless extension, the ‘infinite’; likewise time implies the instant or the ‘present’, as well as indefinite duration, ‘eternity’; in space we are as it were between the center and the infinite, and in time, between the present and eternity, and these are then so many dwellings of God which take us out of the two ‘dimensions of existence’; we cannot prevent ourselves from thinking of them when we are conscious of these conditions in which we live and which so to speak live in us. The center and the infinite, the present and eternity, are respectively the poles of the conditions of space and time, but equally we escape these conditions by these very poles: the center is no longer in space, strictly speaking, any more than the geometric point has extension, and the absolute present or the pure instant is no longer in duration: as for the infinite, it is in a way non-space as eternity is ‘nontime’.88

What Schuon finally claims to have discovered in Indian Shamanism, and in its sacerdotal aspect personified by Black Elk and Yellowtail, is two things: first, a spiritual antidote to the artificial and trivial ambiance of the modern world; second, an opening toward a contemplative and interiorizing experience of the divine Immanence. Modern man has lost the consciousness of the “metaphysical transparency of phenomena,” and this ability to see the archetypes in their effects can be restored in his eyes by the contact

with the “virgin nature” and a primo-mythological tradition. The “Indians days” - the Native American dances that Schuon organized after his moving to Bloomington, initially to honor Yellowtail - represented a mode of participation in this shamanic perspective, although they were never presented as new rites, corresponding rather to an existential and aesthetical complement offered to those vocationally attracted by the primordial ambiance of the Plains Indians.

Integral Esoterism, which coincides with total Truth, has its foundation in the nature of things and not in a limited viewpoint, although it recognizes the relative legitimacy of such a perspective.

Moreover, Integral Esoterism is aware of the metaphysical transparency of phenomena, hence the possibility of communication, through them, with the celestial archetypes; and this is exactly the meaning of beauty, music and dance. Seeing of beauty, hearing of music and performance of dancing is in itself neither a rite nor a cult; it is just a means of assimilating celestial Qualities. The condition of this is a metaphysical Doctrine, a spiritual Method and practice of Virtue, otherwise there can be no spiritual result.89

For Schuon, his perspective of Integral esoterism allows him to integrate in his practice some openings toward Shamanism but they nevertheless remain subordinated to the three pivotal elements of the Religio Perennis: the metaphysical doctrine, the contemplative discipline and the practice of virtue.

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89 From an unpublished paper. The underlines in the text were made by Schuon.
The greatest illumination of his life, as he later described it, was however associated with a very different *barakah* than the one of the Plains Indians. It took place in March 1965. While he was on a boat between Marseille and Morocco, he had a visionary experience of the Celestial Virgin. James Cutsinger described this event in his article “The Virgin:”

He was on his way to Morocco, and the ship had called at Port-Vendres along the French coast. Alone in his cabin, gazing into a bouquet of flowers, “I sought to explain to myself certain difficulties,” and “to imagine, with regard to Paradise, what is imaginable; it was as if I were in a waking dream; in my consciousness nothing remained save images of Paradise. Then all at once,” he continues, “the Divine Mercy overwhelmed me in a special manner; it approached me inwardly in a feminine form which I cannot describe, but which I knew to be the Holy Virgin; I could not think otherwise.” Later during the same trip, when he was staying in the Moroccan city of Tetuán, “the undreamt-of grace came to me anew,” once again in the form of an inner vision—“the heavenly consolation, streaming forth from the primordial femininity”—and as with all truly celestial experiences, it left him feeling “a new man,” forever changed for the better. “I was as if marked by Heaven. It was as though I lived in a special protective aura belonging already to Heaven, which at the same time carried with it an obligation.” He would later describe these moments as having afforded him “a mystical contact” with Mary and as signs of his “heavenly adoption” by her—an adoption and protection, he affirmed, through which the Virgin had become the patroness of his disciples as well.\(^\text{90}\)

About this “mystical contact,” Schuon later wrote the following poem:

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Port-Vendres, where the ship lay at anchor—
    I will never forget that golden day.
    I was alone in my room; the others
    Wanted to walk a little on the shore.
    They had brought me a bunch of flowers—
    I gazed into their bright splendor
    And thought of Paradise like a child;
Then came—a waking dream—the Virgin sweet,
    And remained, hidden deep within me
    With her grace, which never left me—
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\(^{90}\) James Cutsinger, “The Virgin,” *Sophia* 6, no 2 (Winter 2000). Quotations are from his unpublished autobiography *Memories and Meditations.*
Holy presence, luminous remembrance.
A picture come from Heaven; I gladly call it
The Stella Maris—my morning star.

Schuon described this spiritual experience as a Marial Grace and “a celestial adoption.” The Marial symbolism started to play an increasing role in his perspective, reflecting an evolution from a perspective of transcendence and pure metaphysics to a perspective of immanence and Beauty. After this mystical opening, he also added the title Maryamiyya to his tariqah to distinguish it from the North African Shadhili, and he interpreted this event as a heavenly “seal,” a divine blessing for his supra-confessional approach. In his last book, Martin Lings reported the following events:

Some twenty years later we asked the Shaykh to add another name to that of his Shaykh, the Shaykh Al-Alawi, to distinguish us from the African Alawis. We thought he would give us one of his names, but to our surprise he said: “Our tariqah is Maryamiyyah, that is, of Mary; and he told us that more than once she had made it clear to him that she had chosen us for herself, and that she was our protective patroness. He went so far as to say: “It is not we who have chosen her; it is she who has chosen us.”

When asked the reason for this election, he once answered:

A possible answer is this: she herself is a Jewish princess of the House of David; she is also the mother of the founder of Christianity; and she stands, in Islam, at the summit of the hierarchy of women. She loves all three of these religions and religion in general, as we do. Moreover, several of our men and women are of Jewish origin, and still more are of Christian origin, in addition to the many who were born and brought up in Islam; and like here, we are much more interested in what these three religions have in common than we are in what separates them from one another. So in a sense we stand on her territory.

According to Schuon, Maryam, to whom he attributes with a very few Qur’anic commentators the status not only of saint but also prophetess (nabiyyat), personifies the Religio Perennis itself. The message of the terrestrial Virgin, the mother of Jesus, is a message of humility, interiority and resignation to the Will of God. She incarnates the sanctified soul and the creature in its primordial state (fitra). In Sufi terms, she represents poverty (faqr), the recognition of the primordial servitude (ubudiyya) and the ontological nothingness of the creature in the face of God. On the operative plane, she is the

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91 Martin Lings, A Return to the Spirit, Questions and Answers (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2006) 6-7.
92 ibidem, p.10
93 Aliah Schleifer, Mary the Blessed Virgin of Islam (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 1997).
prototype of the pure heart, which having departed from the world and free from earthly illusions attracts God’s Mercy by invoking the divine Name without ceasing.

What Sayyidatnā Maryam asks of us is that we always remain in khalwah, in the midst of the world and of life; not so much in the khalwah which is obscure as in the one which is golden, which accompanies us everywhere like a protecting and blessed aura, as soon as we surrender ourselves to the Celestial Ray. In this state, man no longer feels any curiosity for the dissipating things of this world; he is no longer interested in things that are useless for him, and he is only concerned about remaining in the little golden garden of spiritual poverty. For Sayyidatnā Maryam is like crystal, into which nothing senseless or impure penetrates; that is why the Qur’an says that she kept her virginity intact, meaning her heart.94

In the perspective of Schuon, if Mary on earth symbolizes the perfect servant (abd) and the spiritual retreat (khalwah), in Heaven she is also the exalted mother of the avatara and the “Mother of the Book” (umm al-kitab). Schuon called her, after the Iranian Sufi Ruzbihan Baqli, “the mother of all the prophets and the prophecy and the substance of the original sainthood.”95 Symbolically, the Virgin transmits two messages: first, her son -who represents the manifested Logos and is like the paradigmatic prophet- and second her own message. By contrast with Jesus, she is the un-manifested Logos and the matrix of any divine message. Her domain is the mystical night (layla) of gnosis (haqiqa), prior to the promulgation of the religious law (shariah).

Religious life is a complex system that includes the whole of man and thus engages the soul, leaving nothing outside; this system is presented to us as an indispensable condition of salvation, outside of which there is nothing that could save us, although other systems, just as demanding and exclusive, coexist beside it. This being so, there must necessarily be a level where these systems as such lose much of their importance, and where by way of compensation the essential elements they have in common are affirmed, elements which, whether we like it or not, give the systems all their value; and we do not hesitate to define this as the domain of Mary, the Virgin Mother who, according to a symbolism common to Christianity and Islam, has suckled her children - the Prophets and sages - from the beginning and outside of time.96

Being the guardian of the liberating passage beyond the flow of forms, she gives us access to the primordial and trans-historical religion (din al-fitra). Her station

94 Unpublished text 838. Quoted by James Cutsinger in “The Virgin.”

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(maqam) is the non-legislative prophethood (nubuwwa 'amma). Certain Sufis such as Ibn Arabi - who have necessarily a lesser status than the Virgin- have claimed this station for themselves without ever departing from Islam, at least in the eyes of the esoterists. Non-legislative prophethood, which is the only kind of prophethood still accessible after the Qur’anic revelation and the risala of Muhammad, excludes the revelation of a new law (shariah) and coincides with the higher degree of Sainthood and the station of Proximity (maqam al-qurba). This universal and informal prophethood is traditionally attributed to Khidr, the prophet without community and the mysterious companion of Moses, but on the basis of the Qur’an and the sacred history, it is perfectly admissible to associate this kind of prophethood with the figure of Maryam. This symbolism is even more plausible if the Virgin is the terrestrial refraction of the Logos under its feminine aspect: the Sophia or the feminine Pneuma of the Gnostics.

Femininity is what surpasses the formal, the finite, the outward; it is synonymous with indetermination, illimitation, mystery, and thus evokes the "Spirit which giveth life" in relation to the "letter which killeth." That is to say that femininity in the superior sense comprises a liquefying, interiorizing, liberating power: it liberates from sterile hardnesses, from the dispersing outwardness of limiting and compressing forms. (...) it is consequently in this sense that Haqiqah, esoteric Knowledge, may appear as feminine. 97

Being virgin and mother, she is also merciful. Schuon identifies the divine Rahmah with the Vedantic Ananda. According to him, Rahman is not only an attribute of God (Allah), but also represents an intrinsic dimension of the Essence (dhat), that Schuon identifies with the Good (Agathon). 98 Schuon’s Mariology is not only a doctrine of the prophecy, of the Logos under its feminine aspect. It also constitutes a feminine metaphysics (“une métaphysique au féminin”) to use an expression of the French author Francois Chénique. 99

97 Frithjof Schuon, Roots of the Human Condition (Bloomington: World Wisdom) 40-41.
Being holy, the Virgin cannot but be identified with a divine Model of which she is reflection on earth. This divine Model is primarily an Aspect or Name of God, and it can therefore be said that in her supreme Reality or Knowledge the Virgin is this divine aspect itself.  

Ultimately for Schuon, it is the same divine aspect, which manifests as Mary in the Semitic world and as the Hindu Goddesses or the female Bodhisattva Tara. This Asian influence becomes even clearer if we turn our attention to his paintings. As it is well known since the publication of a couple of books dedicated to his art in the 80’s and 90’s, Schuon was not only a metaphysician but also a gifted painter. The subject of Schuon’s art is, on the one hand, the Plains Indians’ world, the sacerdotal and heroic figures of the Indian chiefs and on the other hand, especially after his 1965’s opening, the Virgin Mary and the mystery of divine and human femininity. About these latter paintings, Schuon seems to have acknowledged privately that they were the providential receptacle of some extra-semitic archetypes – shaktic to be more specific -, the tangible produce of his most universal and primordial inspirations.

In my paintings of the Virgin, a tendency towards Hinduism, towards Shaktism if you will, manifests itself, and towards the krita-yuga, and finally towards the proto-Semitic world, which is echoed in the Song of Songs (…) this was not my prior intention; it lies simply in the nature of things and likewise in the very kernel of my being.

During the last twenty years of his life, Schuon also painted a series of yoginis and devis. Schuon’s Marial illumination did not bring to an end his American Indian inspiration, but rather renewed it with fresh topics. Pte San Win, the white buffalo calf woman who brought down the Sacred Pipe in the Lakota mythology, also became a leitmotiv in Schuon’s iconography.

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101 Frithjof Schuon, Form and Substance in the Religions (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2002).
102 See Frithjof Schuon, The Feathered Sun, Plains Indians in Art and Philosophy (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1990) and Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1992). For a study of Schuon’s aesthetics, the reader can refer to the fourth chapter of Patrick Laude and Jean-Baptiste Aymard’s Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teaching.
103 From a letter of September 1981 quoted by James Cutsinger in “The Virgin.”
104 About Pte San Win, Schuon wrote: “A few centuries ago, perhaps- no one knows the time or place – she appeared on earth dressed in white or red, or completely naked, according to another tradition; the color white, like nudity, refers to primordiality and the color red refers to life, success, happiness. And it is always the goddess Wohpe who brings the smoke of the Calumet to Heaven, in that cloud containing mans offerings and prayers; offerings, because sacred tobacco is made of various ingredients symbolizing the elements of the universe, for the prayer of an individual must be implicitly that of the collectivity or even that of the entire world.” See: Frithjof Schuon, The Language of the Self (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1999) 160.
These paintings may not directly concern his *tariqah*. They were a support neither of concentration or nor of devotion, and Schuon explicitly forbade any practice of this type. Their very existence is nevertheless of the highest importance. In his representation of the Virgin and of her child, their traditional images are universalized and essentialized, as religious forms themselves, and Islam in particular, are universalized and essentialized in the contact of the *Religio Perennis*. The nudity of the mother of Jesus, as unusual as it may be for a biblical figure, symbolizes, in this very esoteric context, the nakedness of Total Truth itself. In most of Schuon’s painting, the eyes of the Virgin are closed, suggesting the mystery of mystical inwardness. Referring to this mystery, Schuon often quoted *The Song of Songs*. “I am black but beautiful.” Schuon wrote in *Treasures of Buddhism*, that *avataras* save not only by their message but also by their liberating beauty and it has been remarked more than once that by their *aura*, these icons of the Virgin exercise a merciful and liberating influence on the spectator. They communicate a kind of spiritual state (*hāl*) that would have remained purely private otherwise. From a Sufi perspective, they seem to be the product of some heavenly visions originating in the *malakut*. Henry Corbin made the Western public familiar with this “imaginal world,” described by Ibn Arabi and the Persian theosophists.

In short, that world is the world of "subtle bodies," the idea of which proves indispensable if one wishes to describe a link between the pure spirit and the material body. It is this which relates to the designation of their mode of being as "in suspense," that is, a mode of being such that the

The story is reported in *Black Elk speaks* and in *The Sacred Pipe*: “Early one morning, very many winters ago, two Lakota were out hunting with their bows and arrows, and as they were standing on a hill looking for game, they saw in the distance something coming towards them in a very strange and wonderful manner. When this mysterious thing came nearer to them, they saw that it was a very beautiful woman, dressed in white buckskin and bearing a bundle on her back. Now this woman was so good to look at that one of the Lakota had bad intentions and told his friend of this desire, but this good man said that he must not have such thoughts, for surely this is a *wakan* (holy or sacred) woman. The mysterious person was now very close to the men, and then putting down her bundle, she asked the one with bad intentions to come over to her. As the young man approached the mysterious woman, they were both covered by a great cloud, and soon when it lifted the sacred woman was standing there, and at her feet was the man with the bad thoughts who was now nothing but bones, and terrible snakes were eating him.

Behold what you see! The strange woman said to the good man. I am coming to your people and wish to talk with your chief Hehlokecha Najin (Standing Hollow Horn). Return to him, and tell him to prepare a large tipi in which he should gather all his people, and make ready for my coming. I wish to tell you something of great importance!” See: Jospeh Epses Brown, *The Sacred Pipe*, chapter 1.

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Image or Form, since it is itself its own "matter," is independent of any substratum in which it would be immanent in the manner of an accident.¹⁰⁵

However, as it has been remarked by Claude Addas¹⁰⁶ that there is a tendency in the works of Henry Corbin to overestimate the possibilities of the subtle realm and to ignore the informal states of being. There is also a strange blindness that leads him to reject any autology as “natural mysticism” or “pantheism.” In Schuon’s perspective, on the contrary, the Virgin represents the liberating passage beyond the subtle and even imaginal worlds and a direct opening toward the non-manifested (avyaka) and the Supreme Self (Atma). She therefore symbolizes the quintessence of the Schuonian perspective, which more implicit at the beginning revealed its true nature in 1965 and lasted till the very end of Schuon’s life.

¹⁰⁵ Henry Corbin, “Mundus Imaginalis, or the Imaginary and the Imaginal” (1964) http://www.hermetic.com/bey/mundus_imaginalis.htm
Last years and posthumous controversies

In 1980, some fifteen years after his greatest illumination, Frithjof Schuon and his wife left their house near the Lac Leman and immigrated to Bloomington, Indiana. This sudden move triggered intense speculations. As Jean-Baptiste Aymard has shown, several factors contributed to this decision. The suburb of Lausanne had become more and more populated and built. A large community of disciples was already living in Bloomington, at this time a small rural town. Finally, Schuon seemed to have obeyed an inner call when he crossed the Atlantic, accomplishing the prediction of an old Shaykh he had met in Morocco.

In Bloomington, Schuon, who used to be an urban person, experienced the country life for the first time. The last series of Schuon’s doctrinal books were published during this period and the translation of his works into English became more systematic thanks to the creation of a new publishing house: World Wisdom. At this time, the oeuvre of Schuon was already not totally unknown in the US because of a growing “Perennialist” movement in academia around figures such as Huston Smith and the journal Studies in Comparative Religion.

The publication in 1985 of an article entitled “Quelques remarques critiques” in which Schuon criticized some of Guénon’s thesis, while acknowledging his pneumatic substance, generated a new crisis with the Guénonian milieu leading to the disappearance of Les Etudes Traditionnelles and the creation of a new French journal Connaissance des Religions. Some of his disciples also disagreed with him when he wrote Christianity/Islam: Essay on Esoteric Ecumenicism and In the Face of the Absolute. In a couple of articles, he defended, against Guénon, the “intrinsic orthodoxy” of Lutheran Evangelism, while recognizing its limitations and inferiority vis-à-vis Tridentin Catholicism and even more Eastern Orthodoxy.

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107 Patrick Laude and Jean Baptiste Aymard, Frithjof Schuon: Life and teaching, 47.
108 Unpublished Memories and Meditations.
110 Refer to the Appendix.
111 Republished in Frithjof Schuon, René Guénon: Some Observations.
In the context of Bloomington, Schuon certainly felt more inclined to express the most universalistic aspects of his perspective. He organized in particular the already mentioned “Indian days,” expressing in a more visible manner his connection with the Native American traditions. Schuon, who had more than once acknowledged the difficulty of leading a tariqah in the modern world and of giving a collective expression to Quintessential Esoterism, had however still to experience a kind of backlash.

In 1991, in a context of growing tensions within his own community, a disciple accused Schuon of “misconduct” during collective gatherings. Schuon’s paintings as well as his interest in traditional dances were used as evidences against him. Bloomington’s attorney nevertheless rapidly got the charges dismissed and further investigations showed that the accuser had been previously condemned for false statements in another similar affair in California. In addition, the plaintiff was prosecuted for misuse of property and embezzlement. The local press called the case a travesty, and the attorney’s deputy who initiated the case had to resign from his office. Nevertheless, this scandal represented for Schuon, whose health was declining, a very emotionally painful trial, and he decided to retire in 1992, giving independence to his moqaddem throughout the world.

Despite his retirement, Schuon continued to write till the end. During the last three years of his life, he composed some three thousand and five hundred poems, in twenty-three separate collections. This truly prodigious flow ended just a few days before

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113 See: “Our Opinion: Schuon Case a Travesty,” Bloomington Herald Tribune. (1991/11/26), available online at http://www.geocities.com/luclablaw/schuon_case_news_file.htm, accessed on February 10th 2007. During the investigation preeminent scholar such as Huston Smith wrote articles in the local press to defend Schuon: “Ever since I came upon his writings 20 years ago, Mr. Frithjof Schuon has been the most important intellectual and spiritual influence in my life… I regularly begin each day by reading, first a passage from sacred scripture, and follow this with something written by Mr. Schuon, for he “feeds my soul,” as the saying goes, as does no other living religious thinker. During the last two decades I have sought out Mr. Schuon a number of times for intellectual and spiritual counsel, and though my visits have always been brief, I have become acquainted with a number of his followers in Bloomington and elsewhere who include in their ranks some of the most gifted and respected religious scholars of our day. As the author of the most widely used textbook on world religions for the last 30 years (The Religions of Man, now retitled The World’s Religions), I think I know enough not only about Mr. Schuon and his followers but about the subject generally, to say that the charge that he heads a “degenerate cult,” is bizarre in the extreme. The same holds, as far as I can tell, for the charge of “thought control.” Mr. Schuon has profoundly influenced my thought, but he has never attempted to control it.” See: Bloomington Herald –Times, November 1, 1991, quoted in Michael Fietzgerald, “Providence without Paradoxes,” Sacred Web 8, (Spring 2002).

114 On this question, Michael Fietzgerald, Frithjof Schuon, the Messenger of the Philosophia Perennis. It is important to add here that if he abandoned his administrative function, he constantly stressed that the initiatory link between him and his disciples could not be dissolved.
his passing away. These didactic poems, initially written in German, his mother tongue, cover every possible aspects of metaphysical doctrine, spiritual method, spiritual virtue, and the role and function of beauty. In addition, they deal with his personal memories. By their pristine simplicity and concision, they remind us of some Hindu Sutras or of Angelus Silesius’ poems. Their form and style differ from the traditional Arabic poetry and even from the few lyric poems Schuon had composed earlier in his life. They give to this swansong a purely universalistic meaning, their leitmotiv remaining the Atman-Mayamystery and the Supreme Identity between the Self and the Absolute.115 Frithjof Schuon died on May 5, 1998 at the dawn of a new day, invoking the Divine Name.

Almost ten years after Schuon’s passing away, it cannot be denied that considerable harm was done to the reputation of Schuon in 1991 and that he became a target for increasing criticism. Opponents to Perennialism hostile to ecumenical esoterism, ultra-orthodox Guénonians who for decades had seen in Schuon a deviated disciple of Guénon, or simply former followers who had left him for various reasons rapidly found in the 1991 scandal an unexpected opportunity to justify on the most dubious ground their objections.

In the Islamic world, and in the context of a growing anti-western fundamentalism, the reputation of Schuon and his order was tarnished. The legitimacy of his function has even been attacked. The contemporary Shaykh of the Alawiyya, the Shaykh Kaled Bentounés pretended, despite numerous testimonies, that Schuon had been initiated not by the Shaykh Al-Alawi but by his successor.116 These criticisms have

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115 These poems were initially published in a bilingual format (French and German) by Les Editions des Sept Fleches (Lausanne) in 10 volumes. They were later published in English by World Wisdom.
succeeded in shedding a shadow on Schuon’s last years, creating a kind of grey area around his organization. Critics suggest that the Maryamiyya, far from being one of the last authentic initiatory organizations in the West, the achievement of a century-old effort to restore some type of traditional intellectuality in the West, was indeed a kind of New-Age group.

The old Shaykh, saddened by the whole story and aware of the complexity of his non-confessional starting-point, chose not to respond to the flow of criticisms coming from confessional Muslims, conservative Christians or post-modern skeptics. After the end of the legal ordeal, however, a local journalist for a TV program interviewed him. This gave him the opportunity to introduce his “philosophy” to a larger public and to briefly counter the accusations against him.117

It is true also that when the scandal erupted, the situation was even more complicated because Schuon never intended to expose his private life to the public, insisting on the contrary on his right to privacy. Schuon has always rejected any kind of proselytism and in 1991, virtually nothing was known about the Maryamiyya and his spiritual function. Even the French Guénonians who had heard about his initiation by the Shaykh Alawi and his nomination as a moqqadem by Shaykh Adda, were relatively unfamiliar with the latest developments of his thought.

Following these events and even more after Schuon’s death, these controversies have been echoed in many articles published by traditionalist journals118 and in recent scholarly publications. According to French philosopher and Christian theologian Jean Borella, the author of Guénonian Esoterism and Christian Mysteries,119 the late Frithjof

117 Passages were quoted by Michael Fitzgerald in “Providence without Paradox,” Sacred Web 8 (Spring 2002).
Schuon, overwhelmed by an illusion of primordiality attempted to restore more or less the *Religio Adamica* and to institute the *Religio Perennis* as an autonomous and separated creed, a super-religion for the initiates. Approaching Schuon from a totally different angle, Mark Sedgwick in *Against the Modern World*,\(^{120}\) portrayed the Schuonian perspective as a kind of “neo-sufism,” whose interest for traditions other than Islam, especially the Native American spirituality, had brought him outside the pale of Muslim orthodoxy. For Sedgwick, “Schuon also developed Perennialism into a universal mission of his own that led ultimately to disaster.”\(^{121}\) Many opponents of Schuon share this opinion.

While disagreeing with these critics, I am however forced to recognize that because of the imbrications of religious influences, to locate Schuon within a particular lineage or even to assign him a single religion seems to be an almost impossible task. In the eyes of his followers, the authority of the master of the Maryamiyya did not rely primarily on his connection with the North African Alawiyya, but rather on the metaphysical discernment of his writings and his personal charisma.

Sympathetic scholars have countered the objections by speculating to what extent his mode and degree of spiritual realization implied a passage beyond forms (Seyyed Hossein Nasr)\(^{122}\) or by insisting on his supra-confessional starting point (Jean-Baptiste Aymard and Patrick Laude). In my opinion, what has not been done yet is to confront his doctrinal and practical teachings with traditional authorities of first magnitude within Hinduism and Islam,\(^{123}\) to establish that, far from representing an heterodox or syncretistic deviation, Schuon’s perspective constitutes an original and autonomous path of knowledge, a very elaborated and homogenous re-adaptation of traditional teachings to new conditions by a spiritual master in his own right.

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\(^{120}\) Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*.

\(^{121}\) *Ibidem*. 267.

\(^{122}\) Seyyed Hossein, “Frithjof Schuon and the Islamic Tradition.” According to Dr Nasr, he had “the knowledge of the language of the birds” by which he refers to an angelical type of knowledge.

\(^{123}\) Other comparison could be investigated, in particular with Neoplatonism, Hesychasm and Amidism. Sufism and Vedanta are, however, the two contemplative disciples to which Schuon referred the most to explain his perspective, both at the doctrinal and practical levels.
The Master

In a chapter of *Logic and Transcendence*, Schuon uses the Vedantic ternary *sat-cit-ananda* (Being, Consciousness and Beatitude) to describe the nature and function of a plenary “spiritual master,” who is in his own words like “a prolongation of the ego of the disciple” and the objectivation of the immanent Self (*Atman*). The element *sat* (Being) transmitted by the *guru* corresponds to the tradition and the initiatory organization by which he has been mandated. The initiation he provides is comparable to “a second birth,” “the gift of a new substance.” The element *cit* (consciousness) refers to the esoteric doctrine, the intellectual aspect. The last element (*ananda*, beatitude) is represented by the spiritual method and culminates in the unifying contemplation of the Absolute.

This chapter can be read as Schuon’s description of his own function as the spiritual master of an initiatory order. Schuon, in his role as Shaykh Isa Nur Ad-Din Ahmad, was transmitting the Islamic initiation of the Shadhiliyya Alawiyya order (the “*sat*-component”). Although ritually based on the Islamic tradition, his esoteric teaching was directly centered on the *Religio Perennis*, the metaphysical discrimination and the contemplative concentration, respectively the *cit* and the *ananda* components.

The doctrinal and metaphysical truths, the Supreme Identity between the self and the Principle, have to be first understood through meditations. By meditations, Schuon refers to an activity of the intelligence aimed at the assimilation of the doctrine and the awakening of the discriminative intuition. These meditations correspond in his own practice to the “six themes of meditation” that he has developed after his illumination in 1942. Schematically speaking, the themes represent the contemplative degrees through which the spiritual travelers need to ascend to realize the supreme state. They also correspond to the three paths of action (*karma/makalafat*), love (*bhakti/mahabat*) and knowledge (*jnana/marifat*) in Hindu and Sufi mysticisms.

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125 Refer to the first part, “the Foundation of a Western Sufi Brotherhood based on the *Religio Perennis.*”
The content of the six themes must be realized by the concentration on an initiatory symbol: the invocation of the divine Name *Allah*. The will is the feminine and dynamic complement of the intellect. Invocation starts as an effort of the will and it gradually determines a reorientation of man toward the Sovereign Good. Practically, Schuon teaches that the invocation needs to be introduced by a meditation, which provides “arguments” against distractions and defines one of the six fundamental “intentions” (*niyah* in Arabic) underlying the practice of the *japa*. Ultimately however, all duality will be consumed by this practice because according to a maxim of Ramakrishna that was constantly quoted by Schuon, “God and his Name are identical.” The Absolute and the Name are metaphysically non-different and the realization of the union with the Name leads the initiate to deification (*deificatio*) or deliverance (*Moksha*).

Man possesses not only intelligence and will, but also an immortal soul. To be saved, he must live in conformity with the Good and the Beautiful: he must pray to the personal God (*Ishvara* in Hinduism, *rabb* in Sufism) and practice the three fundamental virtues (humility, charity and objectivity). Contrary to Guénon, Schuon does not attribute a purely social value to the human virtues. At the deepest level, they represent a concrete means to assimilate the divine Qualities, and he considers that failure to incorporate them in one’s existence is far more disqualifying for the initiatory path than intellectual limitations.

In the following, I will describe in more detail his doctrine and his method by comparing them with the contemplative disciplines of Hinduism and Islam. I will start with Vedanta because Schuon explicitly wrote that, under its Advaitin modality, it represents his starting point. Furthermore, I do not want to suggest to my reader that his perspective should be interpreted -or worse justified- by a sole reference to Islam and Sufism.
Frithjof Schuon and the Hindu Tradition

Don’t believe that Sri Shankara was God
He was a man. He wanted to convince us
That two and two make four. In every respect,
We bow before his logic.

Whereas the goddess, who told him to teach,
By her dance has proved the Brahma Satyam. 126

Although he had read the Bhagavad-Gita, the Gospel of Ramakrishna and some translations of Shankara, it is in the writings of René Guénon that Schuon discovered the Vedanta of Shankara and the Hindu metaphysics. About the specific contribution of Guénon to his understanding of the importance of Vedanta he wrote:

Guénon was quite right to declare that the Vedanta is the most direct expression of pure metaphysics and, in a certain respect, the most assimilable; no attachment to any non-Hindu tradition obliges us to ignore it or to pretend to ignore it. 127

Schuon traveled to India only once in 1939, and his journey was rapidly interrupted by the beginning of the World War two. After the war, Schuon had the opportunity to meet in 1954 met with Swami Ramdas 128 and Hari Prasad Shastri while he was in London, thanks to his disciple Marco Pallis. Some of his followers also came into contact with the sixty-eighth Jagadguru of Kanchipuram, to whom Schuon dedicated his book entitled the Language of the Self. 129

Schuon has however always shown defiance vis-à-vis neo-Vedantists such as Vivekananda 130 and Sri Aurobindo, who pretended to have improved traditional doctrines by importing the modern ideas of progress and evolution into Hindu metaphysics.

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127 Frithjof Schuon, “A Note on René Guénon,” René Guénon: some observations, 8.
128 Ramdas described this meeting in his book World is God (Ananadashram: Bharatiy Vidy Bhavan, 1967). He depicted Schuon as “a prince among the saints”.
This neo-yogism, like other similar movements, pretends that it can add an essential value to the wisdom of our ancestors; it believes that the religions are partial truths which it is called upon to stick together, after hundreds or thousands of years of waiting, and to crown with its own naive little system. (...) The intellectual poverty of the neo-yogist movement provides an incontestable proof that there is no spirituality without orthodoxy.131

For Schuon, contemporary Hindu spirituality, which has emerged during the colonial period, places too much emphasis on the direct experience –on what he stigmatizes as “realizationism”- and often fails to realize the crucial importance of Hindu orthodoxy and metaphysical intellectuality.

A pernicious error that must be pointed out here -- one which seems to be axiomatic with the false gurus of East and West -- is what could designated by the term "realizationism": it is claimed that only "realization" counts and that "theory" is nothing, as if man were not a thinking being, and as if he could undertake anything whatsoever without knowing where he was going. False masters speak readily of "developing latent energies"; now one can go to hell with all the developments and all the energies one pleases; it is in any case better to die with a good theory than with a false "realization". What the pseudo-spiritualists lose sight of only too easily is that, according to the maxim of the maharajahs of Benares, "there is no right superior to that of the truth".132

His position even explains a certain ambivalence vis-à-vis Ramana Maharshi. He unmistakably recognizes in him “the incarnation, in these latter days and in the face of the modern activist fever, of what is primordial and incorruptible in India.”133 In Schuon’s eyes, he was exercising a true “action of Presence.” But at the same time, he insisted in his books and even more clearly in his correspondence that his spiritual instructions, the method exposed in the Upadesha Manjari, cannot be considered as a complete spiritual discipline: “Ramana Maharshi could reduce the whole problem of spirituality to the single question: ‘Who am I?’ Which does not mean — as some imagine — that this question can constitute a path.” Contrary to what Osborne has argued in his Ramana Maharshi and the Path of Self-Knowledge,134 these instructions cannot represent more than landmarks. As he explained in a letter to Martin Lings,135 the Maharshi having

131 Ibidem. 117-118
132 Frithjof Schuon, The Play of Masks, 13, note 7
133 Frithjof Schuon, Spiritual Perspectives and human facts, III,3.
135 Unpublished letter to Martin Lings, 1948. In this letter, he refers to him as a Fard, a solitary in the Sufi terminology.
experienced an almost spontaneous realization and having followed no initiatory method, could not provide any systematic teaching, nor transmit any formal and regular initiation.

Schuon does not hesitate either to stigmatize the shortcomings of neo-Advaitin solipsism, which claims that the world is a product of the individual mind. For Schuon, if at a certain level the universe can be depicted as “a dream,” this dream belongs to the “universal intellect.” The cosmic manifestation is both a subjective and objective illusion, in which our individual soul remains passively immersed.\textsuperscript{136} It is also an error to claim on the basis of this absurd solipsism that there is no real difference between the dream state and the waking state.

If the opinion which unconditionally confuses the states of waking and of dreaming were well founded and if these two states were equivalent precisely on the plane of relativity -- whilst in reality they are so only in the sight of the Absolute -- it would be indifferent whether a man was a sage dreaming he was a fool, or a fool dreaming he was a sage.\textsuperscript{137}

For Schuon, this theory illustrates the tendency among contemporary neo-Vedantins to look for “short cuts” to attain the Ineffable, while neglecting the meditations but also the religious and “human climate.”\textsuperscript{138} In general, this tendency leads to a unilateral emphasis on “experience” and contempt for doctrine. It can also conduct to the reverse, to a purely mental understanding of Vedanta and this aberrant “illusionism.”

At a different level, Schuon has also a lot to object against a sentimental form of universalism that shamelessly despises “separatist religions,” when it does not propose to abolish them as in the case of the founder of Auroville. Schuon’s views about religious pluralism should not be confused with the position of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century saint Ramakrishna.\textsuperscript{139} Not only did the devotee of Kali profess the convergence of the great religions, but having realized the supreme state as a Hindu, he successively followed the

\textsuperscript{136} Frithjof Schuon, “The doctrine of the illusion,” \textit{Gnosis, Divine Wisdom}.  
\textsuperscript{137} ibidem, 71. Schuon’s objections against the confusion of the two states is very similar indeed to Shankara’s \textit{in Brahma Sutra Bhasya}, when he criticizes Buddhist idealism (II,ii,29). On this question, Schuon adds: “The \textit{de facto} ambiguity of this question is in part explained by the fact that the Hindus, who knew what was implied in such matters, have never in their expositions, which are deliberately elliptical and centered on the essential, gone out of their way to offer precisions which seemed to them pointless; but one must not take dialectical syntheses fro mere simplifications and draw absurd conclusions from the doctrine of illusion, an error of which the ancient followers of Vedanta were clearly not guilty, or they would have been common solipsists. Schopenhauer was wrong in thinking that solipsism is logically irrefutable, but right in declaring solipsists to be ripe for the lunatic asylum.”  
\textsuperscript{138} Ibidem. 60-61  
\textsuperscript{139} A much nuanced chapter of \textit{Spiritual perspective and Human Facts} is dedicated to Ramakrishna and to his lineage.
Muslim and the Christian paths, establishing on a practical and existential ground their intrinsic orthodoxy and their convergence with traditional Hinduism. In an interview with Jean Bies, Schuon refers to him as an Eastern precursor of the Perennialist school, but it is clear that despite the great plasticity of his intelligence, Ramakrishna gave a bhaktic expression to the unity of religions.

By contrast, Schuon not only claims to have access to the underlying and common substance of every religion but also to have demonstrated their “transcendent unity” on the basis of pure metaphysics and a God-given science of the traditional upayas.

And in understanding religion, not only in a particular form or in a word for word way, but in its formless essence, we also understand the religions, that is to say, the meaning of their plurality and diversity; this is the plane of gnosis, of the religio perennis, where the extrinsic antinomies of dogma are explained and resolved. 141

Schuon clearly believes that he had ascended to their archetypes in divinis and that he revealed not only their mystical convergence but also the providential economy of religious forms in the purely objective and disinterested light of jnana.

Most of the students of Schuon have investigated and debated about his position vis-à-vis classical Sufism, a position Schuon has largely clarified in his book Sufism, Veil and Quintessence, published in 1979. He has argued in particular that he was differing from the latter because of his Advaitin inspiration, stressing more than once that his starting point was not a voluntaristic and anthropomorphic mysticism but the Vedanta.

His statements should not however be misinterpreted. In a series of articles written at the time of his debates with the disciples of Krishna Menon in the 50’s and published in Gnosis, Divine Wisdom, Spiritual Perspective and Human facts and the Language of the Self, he has denounced some of the neo-Vedantic thesis mentioned

140 “Jean Bies: If the end of the kali-yuga is near, what did Sri Ramakrishna mean when he predicted that he would come back within two hundred years? Frithjof Schuon: Two hundred years is symbolic. He probably meant that there would soon be a phenomenon analogous to his, that is, one that would emphasize the unity of religions, which is the essence of his message.” See: Jean Bies, “Frithjof Schuon: a Face of Eternal Wisdom,” Sophia, 4 no 1 (Summer 1998, 9).
above. His later writings thus do not reveal a blind dependence toward traditional Vedanta either. In the following, I will successively compare his positions with Shankara’s conceptions about the metaphysical doctrine, the spiritual path (sadhana) and the liberating goal (Moksha). I would like to show that he has approached many Shankarian and post-Sankarian issues, such as the doctrine of Maya or the condition of the jivanmukta in a very fresh manner, demonstrating a very unexpected autonomy vis-à-vis Advaita Vedanta but also and a posteriori a remarkable affinity with other branches of Vedanta and Kashmiri Shaivism.

The Absolute and the question of Maya

According to the Vedantic maxim: Brahma satyam, jagan mithya, jivo brahmaiva na'parah. For Schuon, the two first statements (“Brahman is real, the world is illusory”) constitute the quintessence of metaphysics and the third (the self is not different from Brahman) is the quintessence of the initiatory path. On the one hand, the empirical reality that we experience, as long as it is considered separately from the Absolute (Brahman), is totally illusory. The multiplicity of the things is a veil, masking the Real, the “One without a second.” On the other hand, the innermost essence of the individual self (jivatma) is non-different from the Absolute (Brahman).

The distinction between Atman and Maya, the supra-personal Self and the manifestation, which in its summit includes the Ishvara the personal God, qualified by attributes (saguna), represents for Schuon the corner-stone of a truly metaphysical perspective and is nowhere more clearly enunciated than in Advaita Vedanta. Only Atman is the Supreme (Para-Brahman), “Absolutely Absolute”, beyond any duality between subject and object, unity and multiplicity. With respect to Him, the Divine “I”, the Ishvara, is only “relatively Absolute” (Apara-Brahman), and the immediate cause of the world.

The essential distinction between God as Essence or Beyond-Being, and God as Creator or Being is that Beyond-Being is absolute Necessity in itself, whereas Being is absolute Necessity in respect of the world, but not in respect of Beyond-Being. Beyond-Being, or the Self, possesses the possible as an internal dimension and in virtue of its infinitude; at this level, the possible is precisely Being, or Relativity, Maya. We would say consequently that Being is not other than
Possibility; possibility necessary in itself, but contingent in its increasingly relative contents; and by definition non-absolute, in the paradoxical sense of a “lesser absoluteness” (apara Brahma). 144

From the standpoint of Atman, there is not other reality than Himself who is pure Being (sat), pure Consciousness (cii) and infinite Beatitude (ananda). God, as first Being, represents its primordial determination and the prototype of the whole manifestation.

Schuon repeatedly acknowledges the intrinsic superiority of Advaita vis-à-vis the more limited perspectives of monotheism and polytheism. These lesser windows on the Principle, including the “Logolatric” traditions in which the Logos is included in the Divine - such as in Christianity, Shi’ism and the Hindu cult of the avataras- are not, however, intrinsically false. They are susceptible to be reintegrated at their proper level into total Truth by the Gnostics.145 Given his inclusive outlook, also reflected in the way he conceives the relationship between the different darshanas,146 it is not surprising that Schuon has paid much more attention to the many than Shankara. His doctrine of the three hypostasis, the Absolute, the Infinite and the Perfect, that are not three absolutes, but three aspects of the Essence considered respectively (1) in itself (the Absolute), (2) as the root of multiplicity (the Infinite) and (3) as the prototype of all qualities in the world (the Perfect) points toward the pre-sankarian doctrine of Bhartrprapanaca,147 who admitted eight dimensions of Brahman and professed that Atman was both One and many, depending on the perspective.

The idea that the Supreme Principle is both absolute Reality and thus Infinite Possibility, can suffice unto itself, for it contains everything, in particular the necessity of a universal manifestation. From a lesser synthetic point of view however, and closer to Maya, we may consider a third hypostatic element, namely perfect Quality: being the Absolute, the Principle is


146 With respect to the relationship between Advaita and the other darshanas (and Samkhya in particular), his inclusivist perspective that he shared with Guénon, is in fact closer to later Advaita than to the Shankara of the Brahma Sutra Bhasya, who literally pulverizes the other schools to establish the authority of Advaita. Not only does Shankara criticize the other Vedic school (Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Shamkya, Yoga, Mimamsa), but he also condemns Buddhism as heterodox. This was the position of Guénon for a long time, reflected in the first edition of L’homme et son devenir selon le Vedanta. Contrary to Guénon, Schuon always considered against Shankara that the Buddhist dharma was genuine non-theistic tradition of its own.

thereby the Infinite and the Perfect. Absoluteness of the Real, infinitude of the Possible, perfection of the Good; there are the “initial dimensions” of the Divine Order.\textsuperscript{148}

Not only for Schuon is the many included in the One, but it also manifests through the cosmic cycles (the life and days of Brahma, the kalpas, the mahayugas and the yugas) and the multiple degrees of reality, that Schuon identifies to the states of Atman respectively “the waking states (vaishvanara), the dream state (taijasa), the state of deep sleep (prajna) and then the fourth state (turya) which corresponds to the absolutely unlimited Consciousness of the Supreme Self (paratman).”\textsuperscript{149} This doctrine seems to be directly corroborated by the Mandukya Upanishad and its commentary by Gaudapada on which Guénon relies when in L’homme et son devenir selon le Vedanta, he exposes the correspondence between the states of Atman and the monosyllable AUM.

All this is, indeed, Brahman. This Atman is Brahman. This same Atman has four quarters. The first quarter is called Vaisvanara, whose sphere of activity is the waking state, who is conscious of external objects, who has seven limbs and nineteen mouths and who is the experiencer of gross objects. The second quarter is Taijasa, whose sphere of activity is the dream state, who is conscious of internal objects, who is endowed with seven limbs and nineteen mouths and who is the experiencer of subtle objects. That is the state of deep sleep wherein one asleep neither desires any object nor sees any dream. The third quarter is Prajna, whose sphere is deep sleep, in whom all experiences become unified, who is, verily, a mass of consciousness, who is full of bliss and experiences bliss and who is the door leading to the knowledge of dreaming and waking. (…) The Fourth (Turiya) is without parts and without relationship; It is the cessation of phenomena; It is all good and non—dual. This AUM is verily Atman. He who knows this merges his self in Atman—yea, he who knows this.\textsuperscript{150}

Both Schuon and Guénon admit that these distinctions exist only from the standpoint of the relative (vyavaharika), not of the Absolute (paramarthika),\textsuperscript{151} but in their perspective they do possess an ontological and macrocosmic value. Scholars of Vedanta, however, have argued that these indications should not be too easily interpreted in the sense of a scalar ontology, and that a neoplatonist type of interpretation was


\textsuperscript{149} Frithjof Schuon, “Creation as divine Quality,” ibidem, 55-56.

\textsuperscript{150} Eight Upanishads with the commentaries of Shankaracharya, translated by Swami Gambhirananda (Calcutta: Advaita Asrama, 1989).

\textsuperscript{151} Reza Shah Kazemi, Paths to the Transcendence (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2006), 2.
susceptible to gravely distort one’s understanding of Advaita Vedanta. Swami Satchidanandendra Saraswati in his authoritative *Method of Vedanta* advocates a return to Shankara and Suresvara, whose positions would have been obscured by later commentators. Against them, he maintains that all these distinctions should not be understood as ontological claims. The true position of Shankara would be that “the Absolute can be revealed only through false attributions (*uppadhi*) followed by retractions.”

All the different approaches of *Atman* based on the five sheaths (*koshas*), the four states of consciousness, the distinction between the cause and the effect etc. can be reduced to this simple procedure. They are aimed not at communicating a metaphysical knowledge of *Brahman* or of the multiple degrees of the cosmos but simply at removing ignorance (*avidya*) about the self (*Atman*).

It would certainly be tempting to extend his criticism of the post-Sankarian commentators to Guénon and Schuon, whose conceptions about Vedanta have certainly been passively informed by these late interpretations. In fact, whatever might be the value of Swami Satchidanandendra Saraswati’s objections against the Vedantic scholastic, his remarks can help us to realize that the difference between Schuon and Shankara should not be *a priori* underestimated. In particular, Schuon clearly departs from pure Advaita when he touches the question of *Maya* and its relationship with *Atman*. In his view, another name of *Atman* is the Good (*agathon*). He identifies *Atman* with the Supernatural Sun in the Platonic *Republic*, whose power generates both beings and knowledge.

The Substance is not only Supreme Reality but, as Such, It is also the Supreme Good, as we have said; now “it is in the nature of the Good to communicate Itself”, and this ontological tendency provides an explanation, not only for Relativity—or “Ex-sistence”—as a hypostasis, which is

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153 For Jean Borella, Guénon, whose knowledge of Vedanta was based on oral transmissions in Paris, was much closer of the late synthesis between Advaita and Samkhya of the Vijnâna Bhikshu school (16th century) than he was of Shankara himself. See : Jean Borella, “René Guénon: pour le centenaire de sa naissance.”
154 “Therefore, you should also say that not only the objects of knowledge owe their being known to the good, but that their being is also due to it, although the good is not being, but superior to it in rank and power.” See Platon, *Republic*, 509 b.
therefore radiant and reverberant in God Himself, but also for cosmic existence, which by
definition is also radiant and reverberant, though “outside of God”.\textsuperscript{155}

In the Schuonian perspective, it is remoteness from God that produces illusion and ignorance (\textit{avidya}) on the individual plane, but this “cosmic shadow” is only the necessary counter-part of God’s self-disclosure. Therefore, \textit{Maya} is not reducible to the unreal and does not really oppose to the Real (\textit{Atman} or \textit{Brahman}). At a deeper level, \textit{Maya} is better described as God’s power (\textit{Shakti}) or the divine “art.”

\textit{Maya} is an exclusively Vedantic term, often rendered as “universal illusion”, or “cosmic illusion”, but she is also “divine play”. She is the great theophany, the “unveiling” of God “in Himself and by Himself” as the Sufis would say. \textit{Maya} may be likened to a magic fabric woven from a warp that veils and a weft that unveils; she is a quasi incomprehensible intermediary between the finite and the Infinite – at least from our point of view as creatures – and as such she has all the multi-colored ambiguity appropriate to her part-cosmic, part-divine nature.\textsuperscript{156}

Schuon also distinguishes sometimes between three levels of \textit{Maya}: a divine \textit{Maya}, identical with the \textit{Ishvara} himself, a celestial \textit{Maya}, corresponding to the \textit{buddhi}, and a terrestrial \textit{Maya}. Whereas the first two are incorruptible and static, the last one is dynamic and composed of \textit{rajas} and \textit{tamas}. There exist on the one hand “a ‘pure’ \textit{Maya} that projects the expanse of space-time and that is not other than the personal God (\textit{Ishvara})” and on the other “an ‘impure’ \textit{Maya} that brings about the diversification of the phenomena as well as existential ignorance (\textit{avidya}), and that most directly appears in the form of the individual soul (\textit{jivatma}).”\textsuperscript{157}

Schuon is fully aware that he differs from Shankara in a significant manner since in the article in which he distinguishes a pure and an impure \textit{Maya}, he made the point that ”\textit{Mâyâ} is not only “illusion” as the \textit{Advaitins} propose [emphasis added], but also the necessary concomitance of the Goodness inherent in the Absolute Real.” His position is, in fact, very close to the thesis of other “Vedantists,” the post-sankarian Vivarana school, according to which \textit{Maya} has fundamentally two aspects: it is both a power of projection and occultation. \textit{Maya} is the “magic” by which the \textit{Ishvara} creates the universes but it is also the macrocosmic aspect of ignorance. According to Swami Satchidanandendra


\textsuperscript{157} Frithjof Schuon, “Creation as divine Quality,” \textit{Survey of Metaphysics and esoterism}, 56
Saraswati, this distinction does not play a significant role in the genuine work of Shankara, who barely describes *Maya* as a power (*Shakti*) or a cause but far more frequently as simply the effect of ignorance. It is Pancapadika, one of his disciples, who would have first formulated a doctrine, which recognizes in the Absolute itself “the locus of Ignorance.” He would have then redefined *Maya* not simply as superimposition but positively as the material cause of the many, identified with the *Prakriti* of the Samkhya, and compared it to a screen on which the One is illusorily manifested as many.

It is however highly significant also that Schuon identifies *Maya* under its highest aspect to the *Mahashakti*.

The term *Shakti* means fundamentally the efficient energy of the Supreme Principle envisaged in itself or at a given ontological degree. For the Principle, or let us say the metacosmic Order, comprises degrees and modes in virtue of Universal Relativity, *Maya*, in which it reverberates. (…) In the Absolute, the *Shakti* is the aspect of Infinitude that coincides with All-Possibility and gives rise to *Maya*, the universal and efficient *Shakti*.\(^{158}\)

The *Shakti* conceived as Infinitude is for Schuon above Being, above the God qualified by attributes (*Ishvara*). She is the dynamic aspect of the “One without a second.” In my opinion, this identification reveals -much more than an unconscious dependence *vis-à-vis* later Vedantic scholastic- the highly significant presence of elements from Samkhya-yoga, and Tantraism.

**Samkhya, Shaktism and Tantraism**

Schuon inherited from Guénon’s *Introduction à l’étude des doctrines hindoues* et *L’Homme et son devenir selon le Vedanta* a positive appraisal of the Samkhya-yoga that Guénon describes not as an heterodox dualist schools contradicting Advaita Vedanta (as is essentially the opinion of Shankara in his *Brahma Sutra Bhasya*\(^{159}\)) but as a cosmological perspective compatible although subordinated to non-dualism. As a matter of fact, Schuon often refers to the couple *Purusha-Prakriti* of the Samkhya. This being said, his perspective the feminine principle cannot be reduced to a material principal.


opposed to consciousness. Schuon admits the opposition between the two, but in his view, Prakriti is only the cosmic prolongation or refraction of the feminine aspect of the Absolute, appearing in the onto-cosmological chain after the Ishvara.

We have spoken more than once about ontological projection and the bipolarization it implies. (...) The trajectory as a whole can be represented, geometrically, as a “descending” chain of triangles, which are alternatively upright and upside down. (...) The first triangle-symbol represents the Sovereign Good inasmuch as it comprises the two aspects of Absoluteness and Infinitude; this first bipolarity projects – so to speak- creative and personal Being. (...) Being itself gives rise in its turn to a new bipolarization namely creative Inspiration and receptive Substance which is both virginal and maternal; this is the couple Purusha and Prakriti, the Masculine and the Feminine at the level of Being.160

In no way should Prakriti, as Schuon understands her, be perceived as an independent principle, eternally distinct from the principle of consciousness or worse from a plurality of consciousness principles, as it is the case in the Samkhya-yoga.161 Schuon agrees with Advaita that there is ultimately only one subject, and Samkhya’s pluralism and dualism, if taken as a dogmatic and definitive position, is largely incompatible with his unitarian perspective. To this, it should be added that, for him, Liberation cannot be properly described as an isolation (Kavalaya) from the domain of Nature (mula-prakriti), first because duality finally vanishes for those who have realized the Supreme Self (Paratman). Second, if Prakriti appears to us as the universal substance or matrix, she is also a divine energy that needs to be transmuted and not simply neutralized or negated. For Schuon, she is both the source of bondage and the cause of liberating Grace.

In the domain of the spiritual life, the same term Shakti signifies the celestial energy that allows man to enter into contact with the Divinity, by means of the appropriate rites and on the basis of a traditional system. Essentially, this divine Shakti aids and attracts: She aids as “Mother,” and attracts as “Virgin”; Her aid descends upon us from Heaven, whereas Her attraction raises us towards Heaven. This is to say that the Shakti, as pontifex, on the one hand confers a second birth, and on the other offers liberating graces.162

161 For an academic presentation of the doctrine of Prakriti: A. Jacobsen Knut, Prakrti in Samkhya-yoga, material principle, religious experience, ethical implications (New York : Peter Lang, 1999) 167 and following.
There is an ambiguity of *Maya*, or the Goddess that seems to have been largely ignored by classical Samkhya-yoga, which rather sees her as an impersonal and unilaterally alienating power.

As the universal archetype of femininity, *Maya* is both Eve and Mary: “psychic” and seductive woman, and “pneumatic” and liberating woman; descendent or ascendant, alienating or reintegrating genius. *Maya* projects souls in order to be able to free them, and projects evil in order to be able to overcome it; or again: on the one hand, She projects her veil in order to be able to manifest the potentialities of the Supreme Good; and, on the other, She veils good in order to be able to unveil it, and thus to manifest a further good: that of the prodigal son’s return, or of Deliverance.\(^{163}\)

One should thus rather refer to the concept of “divine biunity,” first used by Ananda Coomaraswamy,\(^{164}\) to understand how Schuon conceived the couple *Atma/Maya*, in a manner that can be equaled neither to the couple *Purusa/Prakriti* nor to the Shankarian opposition between the real and the unreal. For Schuon, *Maya* is immanent in *Atman* as *Mahashakti* but *Atman* is also present within the conditioned realm through the universal Intellect (*buddhi*) and the divine descents (*avataras*). Representing the complementary dimension of Infinitude for the Absolute, *Maya* is the prefiguration of relativity in the Absolute itself: the “Mother” of the *Ishvara* and the matrix of the platonic archetypes.\(^{165}\)

In “Degrees and Scope of Theism”,\(^{166}\) Schuon contrasts two legitimate perspectives. First, there is the Biblical and Semitic one, which sees man as representing the Totality and woman as the part. Eve has been created from Adam and constitutes only a portion of him. In this “androtheist” perspective, God is masculine and the world is feminine. Second, there is the Shaktic perspective in which the woman is the “Mother” symbolizing the Infinite, the supra-formal as opposed to man who represents the limited,

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\(^{165}\) These heavenly prototypes, Schuon conceived them in a purely neoplatonist manner and not simply as *nama* and *rupa*, ontologically inconsistent “names” and “forms” at the surface of reality. For a defense of the platonic theory of forms, see: Frithjof Schuon, “Abuses of the notions of Concrete and Abstract,” *Logics and Transcendence*. On can however find in Shankara the seed of a “platonic examplarism” in his discussion on the creation and the dissolution of the world (*Brahma Sutra Bhaya*, II, I, 17-18).

\(^{166}\) Frithjof Schuon, “Degree and Scope of Theism,” *To have a center*, 118-119.
the manifested. In this second approach, the *Mahashakti* is superior to God as the creator, *Ishvara*,\(^{167}\) and represents a gate toward the Pure Absolute (*Para Brahman*). It was precisely the perspective of a Sri Ramakrishna, who could enunciate the cardinal difference between “the non-dualistic philosophy of Vedanta” and Shaktism in those terms:

> The Jnanis, who adhere to the non-dualistic philosophy of Vedanta say that the acts of creation, preservation and destruction, the universe itself and all its living beings, are the manifestation of *Shakti*, the Divine Power. If you reason it out, you will realize that all these are as illusory as a dream. (...) But though you reason all your life, unless you are established in Samadhi, you cannot go beyond the jurisdiction of *Shakti*. Even when you say, “I am meditating”, or “I am contemplating,” still you are moving in the realm of *Shakti*, within its power. Thus Brahman and *Shakti* are identical. If you accept the one, you must accept the other. It is like fire and its power to burn. If you see the fire, you must recognize its power to burn also. You cannot think of fire without its power to burn, nor can you think of the power to burn without fire. You cannot conceive of the sun’s rays, without the sun, nor can you conceive the sun without the rays. (...) Thus one cannot think of Brahman without *Shakti*, or of *Shakti* without Brahman. One cannot think of the Absolute without the relative, or the Relative without the Absolute. The primordial Power is ever at play. She is creating, preserving and destroying in play, as it were.\(^{168}\)

For Ramakrishna, *Brahman* and his *Shakti* are constantly associated and cannot be opposed to one another. In his article “Mahashakti,” Schuon writes that “for obvious reasons, there is a certain relationship between the idea of *Shakti* and Tantrism” which “presupposes the intuition of the metaphysical transparency of phenomena and thus the sense of the archetypal realities.” It is on this basis, he adds, that can be realized “the integration of natural and normal, hence legitimate pleasures into the Path”.\(^{169}\) In this context, he was thinking not only of the pleasure offered by aesthetical contemplation but also of sexual union, when it is sanctified by a religious tradition.\(^{170}\)

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\(^{167}\) To say that the *Mahashakti* is feminine and her son, the *Ishvara* is masculine does preclude another perspective, in which the *Ishvara* has masculine and feminine dimensions. For Schuon, the masculine aspect of the *Ishvara* corresponds to the *Trimurti* (Brahma, Vishnu and Siva) to which corresponds the feminine triad, Saraswati, Lakshmi and Parvati. See: Frithjof Schuon, “Mahashakti,” *Roots of the Human Condition*, 32.


\(^{170}\) See: Frithjof Schuon, “The Problem of Sexuality,” *Exoterism as Principle and Path*. Schuon often insisted that in Islam, as well as in Tantrism sexuality does not automatically mean sin. It can even represent a kind of “natural sacrament.”
Tantrism historically covers however a variety of doctrines and practices, in which the Goddess plays a more or less central role.\textsuperscript{171} The name of Abhinavagupta, who was the providential spokesman for Kashmiri Shaivism is frequently mentioned in the late poems of Schuon and a comparison with this particular Tantric school seems very worthy of consideration. As a non-dualist system, Kashmiri Shaivism proves to be as consistent as Advaita Vedanta, but this tradition is scripturally based not on the \textit{Upanishads} but on the \textit{Siva Sutra}, the \textit{Spanda Sastra} and the \textit{Pratyabhijna Sastra}.\textsuperscript{172} According to this non-Vedic corpus, Liberation is attained not by renunciation to the world but by union with the \textit{Shakti}. In the procession of the \textit{tattvas} - one could define as the onto-cosmic degrees of reality – the Goddess is described as superior to the personal God. Spouse of Lord Siva, she gives birth to the \textit{Ishvara}. She also personifies the Infinite and possesses three essential attributes: \textit{iccha} (will), \textit{jnana} (knowledge) and \textit{kriya} (activity). In the perspective of the Kashmiri Shaivism, Siva, the pure Absolute, remains in itself changeless, like the Vedantic \textit{Atman}, but he is also perpetually engaged into a five-fold activity (\textit{pancakrtyakara}) because of his association with the \textit{Shakti}. Not only do we find in Kashmiri Shaivism an identification of \textit{Maya} with the feminine aspect of the Principle but it could be remarked also that Schuon’s insistence on the scalar nature of reality (Beyond-Being, Being, Existence) and the plurality of the divine hypostasis (Absolute, Infinitude and Perfection) is much closer to the Kashmiri doctrine of the \textit{tattvas} than to the Vedantic “monism.”

For Schuon, the Tantric perspective of sublimation and integration represents a complement to the Advaitin path of renouncement, the two forms of non-dualism being symbolically reconciled in the lamarin figure of Lord Shiva, who is portrayed in the Hindu mythology as both an ascetic and the spouse of the Goddess Parvati.

\begin{itemize}
\item Shri Abhinavagupta was surrounded by devadâssis, with dance and music.
\item Shri Shankara was on the contrary an ascetic
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{171}In Hinduism, Tantrism represents a different tradition than the Veda, one directly revealed by Shiva and sometimes called the “fifth Veda.” This revelation is sometimes considered as more particularly addressed to the disharmonious men of the \textit{kali-yuga}.

\textsuperscript{172}See: Julius Evola, \textit{The Yoga of Power: Tantra, Shakti, and the Secret Way} (Inner Traditions, 1993).

And was seeking happiness in loneliness.

Two opposite poles in the sphere of the Divine –

And yet human beings on this poor earth

Often difficult to understand – and yet united

In the same Truth and from the same country. ¹⁷³

In the Sufi terminology, this polarity is sometimes referred to by conceptual couples such as *khalwah* (retreat) and *jalwah, bast* (dilatation) and *gabd* (contraction) or *tanzil* and *tashbih*. *Tanzih* and *tashbih* can respectively be translated by “remoteness” and “comparison” or “exaltation” and “similitude” and ultimately, if we follow this logic, “transcendence” as opposed to “immanence.” In Schuon’s teaching, the *tanzih* aspect, expressed for the most part in his metaphysical and doctrinal writings of Vedantic or Sufi type, has been the most unanimously acclaimed. From this first perspective of transcendence, God is the Real and the world is illusory. According to this second and complementary perspective (*tashbih*), God is not only radically transcendent but also totally immanent as *Shakti*. The world and the forms are the manifestations of the Principle that communicates to them a relative degree of reality. The creatural qualities and the forms reflect God’s perfections. This second and more controversial dimension was more particularly expressed in Schuon’s art and explains his devotion to the Virgin Mary, his intimacy with the world of the Native Americans and with the Tantra.

The initiatory journey presents two moral dimensions of primary importance, one exclusive and ascetical and the other inclusive and symbolist or aesthetic, if one may say so. Among aspirants to Liberation, there are first of all those who, in the name of Truth, withdraw from the world, such as monks or *sannyāsīs*; then there are those who, in the name of the same Truth, remain in the world and seek to transmute into gold the lead the world offers a priori, such as the adepts of the knightly and craft initiations. If Shankara recommended the ascetical path, that is because it is the surest, given human weakness; but he specified in one of his writings that the ”one delivered in this life,” the *jivanmukta*, can harmoniously and victoriously adapt himself to any social situation conforming to universal Dharma, as is shown at the highest level by the example of Krishna. On the one hand, one must see God in Himself, beyond the world, in the Emptiness of Transcendence; on the other hand and *ipso facto*, one must see God everywhere: first of all in the miraculous existence of things and then in their positive and theomorphic qualities; once Transcendence is understood, Immanence reveals itself of itself. ¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ Frithjof Schuon, *Das Weltrad III/La roue cosmique III*, IX, 10. The English translation is mine.
Within the lineage of the ten avatars of Vishnu, Krishna, the guru of Arjuna in the Bhagavad-Gita, seems to manifest the most directly a Tantric temperament. According to Schuon, the Puruna when describing the erotic play of the young Krishna with the Gopis points indeed in direction of the mystery of the Divine Essence, revealing itself through the forms of the world.175 The following excerpt from the 20th century Hindu authority Swami Karapatri supports this interpretation:

The attraction of the total Being for [universal] Nature is the divine Eros because the indivisible entity that is made of Being (sat), Consciousness (cit) and Beatitude (ananda) or better, the love of the supreme Being for his own form is represented by the attraction between Radha and Krishna. (…) Eroticism in the world is only a small part of the Divine Eros, whereas the Absolute Eros is an ocean of desire in which the Creator has put in own seed.176

Love symbolizes here, to use a more orthodox and Guénonian terminology, the aspiration of the individual toward the universal and the Supreme Identity. Schuon’s own use of Tantric forms was, however, purely contemplative and aesthetical through his paintings and his love for traditional dances and music. By contrast with the techniques of the Kundalini-yoga, Schuon never cultivated in his own practice the dynamic, energetic or even erotic aspect of the Shakti. He rather insisted on her dimension of “platonic” beauty and maternal mercy.

**Meditation and Invocation**

At first glance, Schuon’s reference to Advaita and Tantrism could be depicted as primarily doctrinal. This being said, it seems appropriate in the context of our investigations, to continue beyond the domain of metaphysics and symbolism and to compare and to contrast Schuon’s contemplative method to the practices of Advaita Vedanta. I will start with an overview of the Vedantic spiritual path. In Paths to the Transcendence,177 Reza-Shah Kazemi provides a succinct but very penetrating exposition

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of a practical dimension that has often been neglected by Western scholarship, partially because non-Hindus have a priori very limited access to it.\footnote{There are however a few exceptions and rules are sometimes broken or adapted. A famous example was the Indologist Alain Danielou (1907-1994) who was a correspondent of Guénon and became the disciple of Swami Karpatri (Harirahananda Saraswati) under the name of Shiva Sharan (“protected by Shiva”).}

At first glance, some of my readers may be surprised to learn that Shankara has developed a systematic method. Is not the whole path reducible to the realization of the One? Is not the existence of a method - necessarily articulated and progressive to some degree- in flagrant contradiction with the direct experience of non-duality? In fact, for Shankara the spiritual disciple only represents a preparation for the rise of intuitive and liberating knowledge of \textit{Brahman}. In his introduction to the \textit{Bhagavad-Gita},\footnote{\textit{The Bhagavad Gita: with the commentary of Sri Shankaracharya}, translated by Alladi Mahadeva Sastri (Madras: Samata Books, 1977).} Shankara starts from an axiomatic opposition between the \textit{jnana-marga} and the \textit{karma-marga} advocated for instance by the \textit{Mimamsa}. Whereas those following the path of the rites can only access to the world of the ancestors (\textit{pitris}) in the hereafter, those engaged in the path of knowledge can be delivered while still alive (\textit{jivanmukti}) or at the moment of death (\textit{videhamukti}). The world of the \textit{pitris} constitutes only a transitory celestial condition, where the good-doers are rewarded for their ritual actions before returning to the terrestrial world. Final liberation, accessible only trough the path of knowledge, implies a release from the slavery of transmigration, the cycle of birth and death. Between the state of the transmigrating souls and the unconditioned state, Shankara evokes in his commentary of the \textit{Brahma Sutra} a third possibility. Those who have followed the path of knowledge (\textit{j\text{n}\text{a}-marga}) but who have not yet realized formless contemplation and the Supreme Identity after death can still expect a gradual deliverance (\textit{kramamukti}), called the path of the gods (\textit{deva-yana}).\footnote{“Knowledge and action (…) are the means to the attainment of the paths of the gods (\textit{deva}) and the manes (\textit{pitris}).” See: Shankara, \textit{Brahma Sutra Bhasya}, III, 17.} They thus access to higher states of being, located beyond the individual domain itself, the end of this celestial journey being the \textit{Brahma Loka}, the supreme paradise of the non-Supreme \textit{Brahman} where the virtually liberated soul waits for the final dissolution of the world (\textit{pralaya}).

When the reabsorption of the effected Brahman world draws near, the souls in which meanwhile perfect knowledge has sprung up proceed, together with \textit{Hiranyagarbha} the ruler of that world, to what is higher than that i.e. to the pure highest place of Vishnu. This is the release by successive
steps, which we have to accept on the basis of the scriptural declarations about the non-return of the souls. For we have shown that the Highest cannot be directly reached by the act of going.\textsuperscript{181}

Shankara certainly admits the possibility for a born-\textit{Jnani} (literally a born-knower), to realize the Supreme Identity only by the hearing of the great Upanishads sentences (\textit{Mahavakya}). This being said, in the case of the vast majority of the students of Vedanta, the illusion can only be dissipated by the practice of the method and the gradual removal of the veils preventing the emergence of knowledge. In this perspective, the study of scriptures, religious rites and the practice of virtues -the root of all the virtues being humility and renouncement- have a preliminary function, and more precisely a role of purification of the mind. They destroy the poison of doubt but also worldly appetites.

This knowledge should be imparted only to him whose mind has been pacified, who has controlled his senses and is freed from all defects, who has practiced the duties enjoined by the scriptures and is possessed of good qualities, who is always obedient to the teacher and aspires only after liberation and nothing else.\textsuperscript{182}

If the study of the religious scriptures represents a prolongation and a complement of the \textit{guru}'s teaching, the practice of virtues largely corresponds to an interiorization of religious rites. Whereas acts are conditional and very early on in the path have to be abandoned, virtues seem to represent for Shankara permanent dispositions for the spiritual seeker.

The end should be kept in view; for it is only when one perceives the end of the knowledge that one will endeavor to cultivate the attributes which are the means of attaining that knowledge. These attributes –from humility to perception of knowledge of the truth- are declared to be knowledge because they are conductive to knowledge. What is opposed to this –viz, pride, hypocrisy, cruelty, impatience, insincerity and the like – is ignorance which should be known and avoiding as tending to the perturbation of \textit{samsara}.\textsuperscript{183}

In the \textit{Vivekacudamani}, Shankara enumerates the “qualifications,” both moral and intellectual, for the Advaita path: “ability to distinguish between the temporal and the eternal, dispassion for the enjoyment of the fruits of one’s actions both here and in the hereafter, attainment of the means of tranquility, self restraint and the like and the desire

\textsuperscript{181} Shankara, \textit{Brahma Sutra Bhasya}, IV, 3, 10-11.
of liberation.”184 These qualifications represent the existential and human ground for the threefold discipline of *svarana, manama* and *nididhyasana*. The sacred doctrine is first transmitted orally by the Guru (literally “heard”). Then the disciple needs to reflect on it, to analyze discursively its content on his own. Finally, he must meditate to realize an intuition perception of the Truth. *Jnana* is, however, not only the knowledge of the Absolute, but more deeply the knowledge of the Absolute by Himself, the unveiling of the Divine witness virtually present in the individual.

Between mental reflection and liberating knowledge is situated a whole panel of meditative and contemplative degrees. Shankara distinguishes in particular between the non-dualist meditations (*dhyana*) directly aimed at the rise of the knowledge of *Brahman* and the dualist meditations prescribed in the *sruti* (*upasana*). Dualist meditations start with the individual self and imply the methodological use of a material or mental support. They imply a ritual environment, colored by theist sentimentalism. Those meditations, sometimes prescribed by other Vedantists, cannot lead to the highest state but only to the *Brahma Loka*, the celestial abode of the *Ishvara*. In his commentary of the *Brahma sutra*, Shankara mentions different examples of these techniques, prescribed in the most ancient Hindu scriptures.

As for meditations on the qualified *Brahman*, a journey is mentioned in connection with some, as for instance, the *Paryanka-Vidya*, the meditation on the five fires (*pancagni*), the meditations of *Upakosala* and the meditation on the small space (*dahara*), but not so in connection with others, as for instance, the meditation the essence (*madhu*), the meditation of *Sandilya*, the meditation on *Brahman* with sixteen digits (*sodasakala*) and the meditations on *Vaishvarana*.185

On the contrary, in non-dualist meditations, the real subject is not the individual soul (*jiva*) but the universal Self (*Atman*). According to Reza Shah-Kazemi, whereas “the form of meditation in the action of the rites is called *upasana,*” it has to “be distinguished from the higher type of meditation, called *dhyana,* by virtue of the fact that *dhyana* is not so much a meditation on the Absolute as ‘other’, but is more an assimilation of the individual to his true Self”. Shankara defines *dhyana* as “the withdrawal of the outward-going perception of the senses into the mind, and the one-pointed focusing of the mind on


the source of consciousness.”¹⁸⁶ To withdraw from the outward and inward superimpositions, Shankara prescribes a radical method of double negation (neti, neti). By the gradual removal of the conditionings, the everlasting light of Atman is gradually revealed. The aim of this apophatic method is not the negation of the positive content of our experience but rather the negation of a negation in view of the self-manifestation of the underlying divine substance whose intrinsic nature is sat-cit-ananda, Pure Being, Pure Consciousness and Pure Beatitude.

By a process of negation of the conditionings (Upadhis) through the help of the scriptural statement ‘It is not this, It is not this’, the oneness of the individual soul and the Supreme Soul, as indicated by the great Mahavakyas, has to be realized. The body, etc., up to the “Causal Body” – Ignorance – which are objects perceived, are as perishable as bubbles. Realize through discrimination that I am the ‘Pure Brahman’ ever completely separate from all these.

Having removed the false-identification, the knower can then concentrate on his true Self. Here, the invocation (japa) of the sacred mantra “OM” can be used as a quasi-sacramental mean to actualize the everlasting Supreme Identity. In his commentary of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, Shankara explains that:

*Om* is used to serve as a means to the meditation on Brahman. As other scriptures say, “This is the best help (to the realization of Brahman) and the highest.¹⁸⁷ Shankara even writes that the sacred syllable is virtually identical with the Absolute itself, God and His Name being (metaphysically) non-different:

Although the words “Brahman,” “Atma,” etc. are names of Brahman, yet on the authority of the scriptures we know that *Om* is Its most intimate appellation. Therefore it is the best means for the realization of Brahman. (…) “It is so in two ways–as a symbol and as a Name. As a symbol: Just as the image of Vishnu or any other god is regarded as identical with that god [for purposes of worship], so is *Om* to be treated as Brahman. Why? Because Brahman is pleased with one who uses *Om* as an aid; for the scripture says, “This is the best help and the highest. Knowing this help one is glorified in the world of Brahman.¹⁸⁸

Interestingly enough, whereas other mantras are associated with different deities or aspects of the divine, there seems to be no limitation in the eyes of Shankara for the sacred syllable OM. Like for the name Allah, the Supreme Name in Sufism, it can

¹⁸⁶ Quoted in Reza Shah Kazemi, *Path to the Transcendence*, 24-25.
¹⁸⁸ ibidem
designate the pure Absolute itself and actualize directly the Divine presence at the center of the individual.

Whether the unconditioned Brahman or the conditioned Brahman, the Syllable Om becomes a means of realizing It. For another scripture has it, “The Syllable Om is the higher and lower Brahman.”

According to Reza Shah-Kazemi and Swami Satchidanandendra, another modality of dhyana is the adhyatma-yoga, the latter term being rather used in the Bhagavad-Gita. Shankara describes the adhyatma-yoga as a progressive re-absorption of the individual into the universal, of the different faculties and envelopes into the intellect (buddhi), the intellect finally merging into the Self (Atman) itself.\(^{189}\) Shankara describes the ascending process as the following:

...as the skin is the one goal of all kinds of touch [commentary] such as soft or hard, rough or smooth.... By the word 'skin', touch in general that is perceived by the skin, is meant; in it different kinds of touch are merged, like different kinds of water in the ocean, and become nonentities without it, for they were merely its modifications. Similarly, that touch in general, denoted by the word 'skin', is merged in the deliberation of the manas [mind], that is to say, in a general consideration by it, just as different kinds of touch are included in touch in general perceived by the skin; without this consideration by the manas it becomes a non-entity. The consideration by the manas also is merged in a general cognition by the intellect, and becomes non-existent without it. Becoming mere consciousness, it is merged in Pure Intelligence, the Supreme Brahman, like different kinds of water in the ocean. When, through these successive steps, sound and the rest, together with their receiving organs, are merged in Pure Intelligence, there are no more limiting adjuncts, and only Brahman, which is Pure Intelligence, comparable to a lump of salt, homogeneous, infinite, boundless and without a break, remains. Therefore the Self alone must be regarded as one without a second.\(^{190}\)

In adhyatma-yoga, the individual faculties are reintegrated step by step into the universal. Another point needs to be mentioned here before returning to Schuon. From

\(^{189}\) Trevor Legett defines Adhyatma as the following: “Adhyatma is a Sanskrit word meaning relating (adhy) to the self (atma). It is defined by Shankara in his commentary on Gita viii.3 as, Brahman the supreme Self, immortal universal consciousness, seemingly (1) related to each individual body/mind complex (2) manifesting as the Self of the Lord omniscient and omnipotent, and ultimately (3) Brahman-without-attributions, Supreme Self in its own glory. Adhyatma-yoga is a method of realizing Brahman, not knowing by the mind, but knowing by being. It is an expansion of consciousness from individuality to the absolute, not merely an intellectually or emotionally satisfying background idea.” See: Trevor Legett, “Adhyatma-yoga,” Adhyatma Yoga Teaching, 2007 http://www.adhyatma-teachings.org.uk/adhyatma%20frame.htm, accessed on February, 10th.

the viewpoint of realization, the intellect (buddhi) plays an “intermediate” role between
the domain of the relative and the Absolute (Atman) if one could say so. On the one hand,
the Intellect is a product of Prakriti and the source of bondage for it is by its power, that
the embodied self identifies itself with the mind and the body. On the other hand, the
intellect receives directly its light from Atman, the spiritual sun. The light of the intellect
is the light of the divine Witness itself.

The Atma does not shine in everything although He is All-pervading. He is manifest only in the
inner equipment, the intellect (buddhi): just as the reflection in a clean mirror. 191

In the ascending process of adhyatma-yoga, buddhi, being essentially non-different from Atman, represents the exit gate from the cosmic dream and the key to final liberation.

This image of an ascending movement should not prevent us from recognizing
however that what Shankara is advocating is a path leading to a sudden Deliverance -
Deliverance in this life (jivanmukti) or at the moment of death (videhamukti). By contrast, gradual deliverance (kramamukti) barely interests him, although he is sometimes forced to explain this possibility by the text he is commentating upon. In this context, rejection
of any dualistic means such as rites or meditations is required very early on from the
spiritual seeker. The perspective of Schuon on the contrary is rather “gradualist,”
insisting on the existence of intermediary stages and the importance of a whole range of
religious practices ranging from virtuous actions and prayer to the most advanced forms
of meditation, even for the gnostic. One could hardly find also in Schuon’s teaching,
which was not addressed to wandering sanyasin but to men and women living in the
world at the end of the kali-yuga192 - an axiomatic opposition between action (karma) and
knowledge (jnana). For Schuon, they are located on two different planes, but are not opposed like knowledge and ignorance or light and darkness. His refusal to totally
dismiss action and means of realization other than knowledge could be compared not

191 Shankara, Atmabodha (Aurea Vidya, 1993) 17.
192 For Schuon also, certain types of practices which were available to the men of the other ages are no longer accessible to the degenerated man of the 20th century and to believe that a direct access to the Absolute is still possible, is in own terms “the easiest means to go to hell and to stay there.” He was referring here, to the Hesychast techniques used to make the nous descend into the heart. See: “Frithjof Schuon: a Face of Eternal Wisdom,” Sophia 4 no 1, Summer 1998).
only to the position of most Bhaktis, but also to Mandana, for whom a combination of sustained meditations and ritualistic actions can lead to *Moksha.*

Schuon does not oppose either dualist and non-dualist meditations as sharply as Shankara, but for him the role of the meditations is limited to clear the ground for the concentration on the Real: they introduce and support the practice of invocation (*japa*).

Contrary to what is too often assumed, meditation cannot of itself provoke illumination; rather its purpose is negative in the sense that it has to remove the inner obstacles that stand in the way, not of a new, but of a pre-existent and “innate” knowledge of which one must become aware. Thus meditation may be compared not so much to a light kindled in a dark room as to an opening made in the wall of that room to allow the light to enter—a light that pre-exists outside and is in no way produced by the action of piercing the wall.

For Schuon, meditations are also aimed at reshaping one’s imagination, but more deeply at awakening the truths that are “inscribed in the very substance of our intelligence,” at operating a *metanoia.* In some respects, the meditations only serve to remove the veils that prevent the divine Self to shine and manifest itself but complete union with the Absolute cannot be the direct fruit of the meditations, which open man to the light of the Truth only through his intelligence. As he explained:

[In meditation] the contact between man and God here becomes contact between the intelligence and Truth, or relative truths contemplated in view of the Absolute . . . Meditation acts on the one hand upon the intelligence, in which it awakens certain consubstantial “memories,” and on the other hand upon the subconscious imagination which ends by incorporating in itself the truths meditated upon, resulting in a fundamental and as it were organic process of persuasion.

The necessary background for Schuon’s teaching on meditation is provided by his doctrine of the “naturally supernatural” Intellect. Between human intelligence and the divine Intellect, there are both continuity and discontinuity. The discontinuity results from the nature of *Maya,* the duality between the subject and the object. Human intelligence represents an individual faculty, comparable to a mirror. It refracts the reality. When man knows, it is the human “I” who knows and this individual substance is only a distant image of the divine Subject. Through meditation, one must assimilate the

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196 Contrary to the Arabic philosopher Averroes, at least in Thomas’ reading, Schuon does not ever dream of denying that man, as an individual, can think.
“Truth” that is initially purely theoretical and mental. This first perspective is predominant in the Semitic and dualist exoterism. This being said, there is a different and higher way of looking at the miracle of knowledge corresponding to the standpoint of Advaita. This later perspective predominates in these particular passages of Shankara where the intellect is not considered as the support of ignorance anymore but on the contrary as the locus for the manifestation of the divine consciousness:

The Hindu—or Alexandrian\(^{197}\)—perspective is more direct [than the Semitic one]: the intelligence is \textit{a priori} envisaged in its universal Essence, not in its human modes, and it is for this reason that it is “knowledge” by definition; it is truth, not by virtue of an object imposed on it apparently \textit{ab extra}, but thanks to the elimination of the microcosmic accidents that veil its true nature in an illusory manner. In other words the intelligence is “qualified” by its own supernatural essence, and its inherent object, which it involves by definition, is the divine Reality, even if microcosmic accidents reduce this object, by veiling it, to the appearances of the world.

To the samsaric perspective of existential discontinuity needs to be opposed the nirvanic and essential continuity between the individual intelligence and the Divine Self. Intelligence is fundamentally impersonal—or better transpersonal- and the human self is the illusory produce of the breaking into multiple pieces of the universal Intellect, which is only a particular, though direct, determination of \textit{Atman} in the realm of \textit{Maya}. \textit{Buddhi} irradiates through the entire reality, whose essence is Being, Consciousness and Beatitude.

The Intellect is not cerebral, nor is it specifically human or angelic; all beings “possess” it. If gold is not lead, this is because it better “knows” the Divine; its “knowledge” is in its very form, and this amounts to saying that its form does not belong to it in its own right, since matter cannot know. Nonetheless we can say that the rose differs from the water-lily by its intellectual particularity, by its “way of knowing”, and thus by its mode of intelligence. Beings have intelligence in their form to the extent that they are “peripheral” or “passive” and in their essence to the extent that they are “central”, “active”, “conscious”. A noble animal or a lovely flower is “intellectually” superior to a baseman. God reveals Himself to the plant in the form of the light of the sun. The plant irresistibly turns itself toward the light; it could not be atheistic or impious.\(^{198}\)

Intelligence being shared by every being in the universe, man can transcend through it the limitations of his individuality and realize the universal. This merging into

\(^{197}\) Schuon seems to refer here to these Christian theologians of the second century AC who interpreted the Bible from a neoplatonist perspective and among whom was St Clement of Alexandria, Schuon always considered as one of the most powerful exponent of esoterism within Christianity.

the one and only Self is precisely the purpose of Shankara’s adhyatma-yoga, which certainly represents the point of junction with Schuon’s pneumatology. As we have seen, this technique implies a gradual reintegration of the faculties into the buddhi and finally the buddhi into Atman. From this angle, man is like a crystal, refracting a light coming from above, and it is through the light that is given to him by Heaven that he can know the visible world around him but also the invisible truths. One can also easily see how Schuon’s perspective is in harmony with the position of the Vivarana school, which conceives jiva as a refracted image of Atman on the screen of the universal Nature, identical to Maya.199

In the Schuonian anthropology, man possesses in addition to Intelligence “four instrumental faculties, namely: reason, which is objective and discriminative; desire, which is subjective and unifying; imagination, which is active and creative; memory, which is passive and creative.”200 The Intellect dominates and ennobles these faculties and to a lesser extent the five senses, that correspond to as many crystallizations of this primordial and supra-individual light. We cannot go into too much details about these analyses, but I would, however, suggest that there exists a sufficient ground for a comparison with the anthropo-cosmic chain in the Samkhya-yoga, which describes how from the buddhi proceed the ego-sense (ahamkara), the mind (mana) and the ten organs of sensation and action.201

From the point of view of this subtle anthropology, the abode of this Intellect, the meeting point between the individual and the divine is not the brain, which corresponds only to the mind and the individual reason, but the heart. It is from the heart, considered not at the seat of the sentiment, but as the seat of Brahman that the principle of Intelligence and consciousness governs the whole human faculties. About the Vedantic symbolism of the heart, Guénon wrote in L’homme et son devenir selon le Vedanta:

It is said that it is Brahma which dwells in the vital centre of the human being. (…) This vital centre is considered as corresponding analogically with the smaller ventricle (guha) of the heart (hridaya); but it must not be confused with the heart in the ordinary sense of the word, that is to say with the physiological organ bearing that name, since it is in reality the centre not only of the

199 Swami Satcidandendra, The method of Vedanta, 752 and the following. This theory was developed in opposition with the theory of the delimitation (avaccheda-vada), exposed by the Bhamati school.
corporeal individuality, but of the integral individuality, capable of indefinite extension in its own sphere (which occupies, moreover, but one degree of existence), and of which corporeal modality constitutes only a portion, and indeed, as we have already stated, only a very limited portion. The heart is regarded as the centre of life, and in fact, from the physiological point of view, it is so by reason of its connection with the circulation of the blood, with which vitality itself is essentially linked in a very special way, as all traditions are unanimously in recognizing; but it is further considered as a centre of a higher plan and in a more symbolical sense, through its connection with the universal Intelligence (in the sense of the Arabic term El-Aql) as related to the individual. It should be noted in this connection that the Greeks themselves, and Aristotle among others, assigned the same part to the heart, also making it the seat of intelligence, if one may so express it, and not of feeling as the moderns commonly do; the brain, in actual fact, is only the instrument of the mental faculty, that is, of thought in its reflexive and discursive mode: and thus, in accordance with a symbolism which we have previously mentioned, the heart corresponds to the sun and the brain to the moon.202

As Guénon reminds us, it is Atman, the universal Self that dwells in the heart. To enter into it, into the abode of the Real, Schuon has developed a whole system of meditations to which we have already alluded, and that we shall present now with more details.

Every spiritual path, regardless of its mode or level, comprises three great degrees: purification, which causes “the world to leave man”; expansion, which causes “the Divine to enter into man”; and union, which causes “man to enter into God”. This might also be expressed somewhat differently; there is something in man that has to die, or has to be destroyed: this is soul-desire, whose existential limit is the sensorial body; there is something in man that has to be converted, or has to be transmuted: this is soul-love—soul-will— whose center of gravity is the ego; finally, there is something in man that has to become conscious of itself, that has to become itself, that has to be purified and freed of what is alien to itself, that has to awaken and expand and become all, because it is all—something that alone must be: this is soul-knowledge, that is, the Spirit, whose subject is God and whose object is likewise God.203

Each of the three degrees is divided into two -a passive and an active dimension- and is associated with an aspect of the human ternary: will, sentiment or intelligence. The first two themes correspond to the volitional dimension in man. The inward man must determine the outward man, full of fears and worldly desires. Man must abstain from evil (first theme) and accomplish the good (second theme). This is the path of action (karma in Hinduism) or fear (makalafat in Sufism), centered on the will and the purification of

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202 René Guénon, Man and his becoming according to the Vedanta (Hillsdale NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001).
the human receptacle. The two intermediate themes are related to love (bhakti or mahabat). The consciousness of the heavenly prototypes, the contemplation of beauty must bring peace (third theme) to the human soul. The pacified ego must also be consumed by faith and attract the divine mercy (fourth theme). Finally, man possesses a “naturally supernatural Intellect” and he can understand the Truth. To realize what is real, he needs first to discriminate between the reality and the appearance. The Vedantic discrimination (viveka) corresponds to the fifth theme. This latter theme synthesizes all the former themes and finally represents an opening onto the mystery of the Union (sixth theme) or the Supreme Identity between Atman and Brahman. The fifth theme culminates with the “extinction” of the individual subject into the Known or the divine Object. In the sixth theme, there is identification of the knower with the divine Subject.

On the plane of pure intellectualty, there is a negative attitude which corresponds to renunciation on the passionnal plane and which is as it were its core; but what is renunciation for the will becomes discernment for the intelligence: it is the distinction between the Real and the unreal and hence the negation of the world, including the “I”. From this perspective, God alone “is”; the world—the microcosm as well as the macrocosm—is merely illusion or “nothingness”; there is no need for renunciation, since nothing is; it suffices to know, through the Intellect, that nothing is real. The point of view that we have just set forth is discernment, hence separation between the Real and the unreal, and even annihilation of the unreal, and not directly union with the Real. Union is derived from a different point of view, which may be formulated thus: “outside God” nothing is except nothingness, and nothingness in no way is; now since I am not nothing, I am all; I am all That is, or in other words I am not other than He in my supra-individual Essence, of which the ego is merely a refraction and hence a symbol.204

Schuon prescribed the last two non-dualist themes only for very advanced and virtuous disciples because they can lead, if misunderstood by a Promethean mentality, to a Luciferian fall. For Schuon, the human condition differs from the one of pure and detached intelligences (the angels in the Abrahamic theology) and the metaphysical or intellectual certitude is located only halfway between faith and liberating gnosis. For union to be realized, the whole being needs to be “deified,” and that is why Schuon always insisted on the necessity to “reintegrate the psychic elements.”

The Intellect, since it is universal in essence, necessarily penetrates the entire being and embraces all its constituent elements; for to exist is to know, and every aspect of our existence is a state of

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204 Frithjof Schuon, “Meditation.” Prayer fashions Man.
knowing or—in relation to absolute Knowledge—a state of ignorance. If it is true that reason is the central mirror of the Intellect, whose organ is the subtle heart, the other faculties are nonetheless also planes of manifestation for the Intellect; the individual being cannot be reintegrated into the Absolute without all his faculties participating in due measure in the process. Spiritual knowledge, far from opposing any particular mode of conformity or participation, on the contrary brings into play all that we are, hence all the constituent elements, psychic and even physical, of our being, for nothing positive can be excluded from the process of transmutation; nothing can be destroyed, and therefore the psychic faculties or energies that form a part of our reality, and whose existence must have a meaning for us, have to be determined and channeled by the same governing Idea that determines and transforms thought. But this cannot be done without first placing oneself on the very level of the psychic faculties: it is not enough to consider these faculties by means of reason and in a theoretical light; one must realize the Idea, to the extent this is possible, on the plane of these faculties, by universalizing them as it were in virtue of the different symbolisms corresponding to them. Man must transpose onto a higher plane all the positive reactions that the surrounding reality provokes in him, remembering divine Realities through sensible things; it could also be said that if spiritual things have to be humanized in some way, then conversely human things have to be spiritualized; the first symbolic mode envelops Truth, and the second reveals it.²⁰⁵

The first four themes of meditation, which are neither metaphysical nor non-dualistic in their content, are precisely aimed at purifying and spiritualizing the human faculties during the ascending journey of the Intelligence toward the supra-formal Absolute (Paratman).

Let me add that Schuon claims for the six themes of meditation the same degree of universality as for the metaphysical truths he discerns at the heart of every traditional esoterism. These themes, far from being arbitrary, on the contrary “corresponds rigorously to the nature of things, and every possible spiritual attitude can be reduced in the final analysis to one of the points of view.”²⁰⁶ They represent the operative dimension of the Religio Perennis. Every religion, he writes, contains these six themes, but their spiritual economy is structured around a given combination of predominating themes. Schematically speaking, Christianity, at least in its mystical dimension, is closely akin to the first and fourth themes. Buddhism is based on the first and third themes, although Mahayana Buddhism also integrates the specific possibilities of the fourth, fifth and sixth

themes. Finally, at the heart of every gnosis -whatever might be its spiritual climate and the religious form (or upaya) in which it manifests- we should expect the fifth and sixth themes.

The Vedanta –and all gnosis- is founded on discernment between the Real and the unreal, and compensates the specifically intellectual –and compensates the specifically intellectual –and non-volitive- content of this perspective by the “existential” (or rather the supra-existential) concretization which is identification with the Self.  

As we have already explained, in the context of the Schuonian method, these six themes serve to introduce the invocation of the divine Name, which really represents the heart of his contemplative method. To understand this, we need to return to the most fundamental distinction, between Being and Beyond-Being, apra and para Brahman. Being is the first determination or the “Word” of the Beyond-Being as the world itself and the whole manifestation can be considered as the “Word” of the personal God. The human invocation is itself only an effect of a procession in divinis. To invoke the divine Name amounts to an act of “de-creation,” comparable to the yogic techniques of laya-yoga. Whereas Beyond-Being is more than Being, and Being is more than the manifestation, man is less than the divine Name.

There is a form of orison wherein God Himself is the subject in a certain way, and this is the pronouncing of a revealed divine Name. The foundation of this mystery is, on the one hand, that “God and His Name are identical” (Ramakrishna) and, on the other hand, that God Himself pronounces His Name in Himself, thus in eternity and outside all creation, so that His unique and uncreated Word is the prototype of ejaculatory prayer and even, in a less direct sense, of all orison. The first distinction that the Intellect conceives in the divine nature is that of Beyond-Being and Being; now since Being is as it were the “crystallization” of Beyond-Being, it is like the “Word” of the Absolute, through which the Absolute expresses itself, determines itself, or names itself. Another distinction that is essential here, one which is derived from the preceding by principal succession, is that between God and the world, the Creator and creation: just as Being is the Word or Name of Beyond-Being, so too the world—or Existence—is the Word of Being, of the “personal God”; the effect is always the “name” of the cause.

But whereas God, in naming Himself, first determines Himself as Being and second, starting from Being, manifests Himself as Creation—that is, He manifests Himself “within the framework of nothingness” or “outside Himself”, thus “in illusory mode”—man for his part follows the opposite

207 Ibidem.
movement when pronouncing the same Name, for this Name is not only Being and Creation, but also Mercy and Redemption; in man it does not create, but on the contrary “unmakes”, and it does this in a divine manner inasmuch as it brings man back to the Principle. The divine Name is a metaphysical “isthmus”—in the sense of the Arabic word *barzakh*: “seen by God” it is determination, limitation, “sacrifice”; seen by man, it is liberation, limitlessness, plenitude. We have said that this Name, invoked by man, is nonetheless always pronounced by God; human invocation is only the “outward” effect of an eternal and “inward” invocation by the Divinity.

This teaching, despite its neo-platonist style, displays many similarities with what has sometimes been called the doctrine of “the non-duality of the Word”, a doctrine that even Swami Satchidananendra characterizes as relatively conforms to Shankara’s views. In the divine Name, *Allah* or *OM*, virtually no distinction remains between the mean and the Goal. In its repetition, the Invoker (the individual being), the Invocation (the Name) and the Invoked (God) are already united, and the Supreme State (*Moksha*) is somehow prefigured.

The way of the invocation is understood as being so powerful, and its practice places so much emphasis on the divine Presence and Grace, that it is not uncommon to extend its prerogatives and effects to their ultimate consequences. There is a sense that nothing else matters, spiritually speaking, than the Name itself, the exclusive unicity of the means becomes virtually one with goal. It could even be said that the distinction between means and end becomes moot since “God and his Name are one”, as Ramakrishna has said. Even though this overemphasis might be ill-sounding to many who like to think of religion in psychological or moral terms, its must be acknowledged that is fundamentally no less than a full methodological recognition of the doctrine of the essential unity of Reality, such as is expressed in the Hindu Advaita Vedanta or in the Sufi “unicity of existence”, or simply – in more implicit and less metaphysical parlance – of the Absolute primacy of the Divine. On this level, the invocation is not only a prayer of the human to the Divine, it is also a prayer of the Divine to itself through a human intermediary.

But similarly to the sustained meditations (*dhyana*), the repetition of the Name (*japa*) is not what “produces” liberation. The remembrance of God by the individual is only an image in time of the process by which God knows his Essence in the eternity. The sixth and supreme theme represents precisely a meditation on God’s consciousness of Himself. The highest motive to invoke is that the Name is identical both to our true Self (*Atman*) and to the Absolute (*Brahman*). The Name is not a mean to “reach” the

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Absolute. It coincides with the Absolute itself, and any opposition between the mean and the Goal ultimately vanishes in the light of the non-dual Principle.

To a Brahman, Schuon wrote the following letter, which synthesizes his spiritual disciple in purely Vedantic terms:

The most diverse traditions agree that the best support for concentration and the best means to obtain Deliverance at the end of the kali-yuga is the invocation of a revealed divine Name, one that is destined by the Revelation itself for japa. Consequently, when I speak of “concentration on the Real”, I am thinking of japa.

One must enclose oneself in the divine Name as in a shelter during a tempest. One must also invoke it as if the Name were a miraculous sword during a battle, and thus vanquish the enemies we carry within ourselves. At other moments, it is necessary to rest in the divine Name and be perfectly content with it and to give oneself up to it with profound recollectedness, as if in a marvelously beautiful sanctuary full of blessings. And at still other times, one must cling to the divine Name as if it were a rope thrown to a drowning man; it is necessary to call upon God so that He hears us and may save us; we must be aware of our distress and of God’s infinite Mercy.

Another manner in which japa can be practiced is to concentrate on the idea that Atman alone is real, that neither the world nor ourselves are real; then it is as if we no longer existed, and the divine Name alone shines in us as if in a great void. Finally, it is necessary to unite to the divine Name as if we were but one substance with it; we then have no more ego, and it is the Name that takes the place of our heart; it is neither our body nor our soul, but rather the Name, that is “us”; and we are “ourselves” not in this or that thought, nor in this or that act, but uniquely in the divine Name, which is mysteriously identical to the Named, or in the sacred invocation, which unites us mysteriously to the Invoked.210

For Schuon, even at the end of the kali-yuga, the japa represents a means to realize nothing less than the identity with the Absolute (Atman), a means to attain the supreme state.

The Goal

It remains to us to compare the conceptions of Schuon and Shankara about this state. The goal of the spiritual discipline is paradoxically a non-goal for Shankara. As we have already explained, the Deliverance is not presented as something to attain by the foremost exponent of Advaita Vedanta. The everlasting Identity between the individual

210 Letter published in Frithjof Schuon, Prayer Fashions Man, 187-188.
self and the Supreme Principle needs simply to be realized. More precisely, the *Moksha*, which in essence is *Brahman* itself, can be described as the fruit of the spiritual discipline only from the point of view of the relative (*vyavaharika*). From the point of the view of the Absolute (*paramarthika*), the self is already delivered for there is nothing to know except the unique object of Knowledge, no subject to deliver except the *already* liberated divine Self.

For this conditioned *Brahman* can properly be a goal to be reached, since It has a locus. But with regard to the supreme *Brahman* there can be no such conceptions as an approacher, a goal, and progress towards It, for the Absolute is omnipresent and is so the inmost Self of the travelers.\(^{211}\)

Shankara, himself a liberated soul, remains in general very elliptical on the laminar state of the *jivanmukta*, of the one who is firmly established in the Self after the cancellation of ignorance. It is however possible to demonstrate that in his system the *jivanmukta* remains subordinated in his human form to the *apara Brahman*. Indirect evidences are the attribution by traditional biographers such as Madva-Vidyarana,\(^{212}\) of *bhakti* hymns celebrating the Goddess to Shankara himself, and the profound veneration for his guru, he expresses in the concluding salutation of his commentary of the *Karika*:

> I bow to that Brahman, destroyer of all fear for those who take shelter under It (…) I prostate to the feet of that Great Teacher, the most adored among the adorables.\(^{213}\)

At the end of the commentary of the *Brahma Sutra*, Shankara also explains that the power of creation remains forever the unique privilege of the *Ishvara*.

> It is proper that barring the power of creation etc. of the universe, the liberated souls should have all the other divine powers like becoming very minute etc… The power, however, of creation etc. of the universe can reasonably belong to God only who exists eternally.\(^{214}\)

In the same passage, Shankara discusses at length another issue: the doctrine of *karma*.\(^{215}\) Despite the fact that liberating knowledge has burned the karmic burden of the *jivanmukta*, the *prarabdha karma* -the portion of the total *karma* that has to be exhausted in this life- is active until final Deliverance at the moment of death. Consequently, the


\(^{212}\) Madva-Vidyarana, *Shankara Digvijaya, the traditional life of Sri Sankaracharya* (Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math).

\(^{213}\) Shankara, *Eight Upanishads with the commentary of Shankaracharya*, vol 1, ed. by Swami Gambhirananda, 405


\(^{215}\) The conceptions about the *karma* have been more elaborated however by Mandana and Vimuktatman. See: Swami Satchitdanandendra, *The method of Vedanta*.  

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jivanmukta, because he is “non-different” from Atman only in his innermost essence, can still experience some kind of pain. In such a case and contrary to the average man, he does not identify however with the suffering ego.\textsuperscript{216} The liberated soul can also be accidentally affected by residual ignorance, due to the force of impressions, but this does not imply any real return to bondage.

Awakening, through cancellation of wrong knowledge, to the fact that one is not an individual able to perform action, puts an end to action. But wrong knowledge, thought cancelled, may continue for a time tough the force of impressions (samskara), as in the case of double vision of the moon (where the patient, even after, he has been cured, may occasionally be haunted by recurring double vision of the noon which he does not take seriously.\textsuperscript{217}

Shankarian commentators generally agree that although liberation \textit{per se} is the immediate liberation, it is only after the death of the body, that the \textit{jivanmukta} will experience the total dissolution in the Absolute. Shankara presents the “return” to the \textit{Brahman nirguna} as different and superior to the celestial \textit{Brahma-loka}, the paradise of the \textit{Brahman saguna}, in which souls are not united in every respect with God and keep their separate individuality.

Immortality is logically possible in the supreme Brahm, but not in the conditioned Brahm, that being subject to the destruction. For the Upanishadic text runs thus, “Again, that in which one perceives a second entity is limited, it is mortal.”\textsuperscript{218}

Considering the position of Shankara on the supreme state, Guénon seems to provide a very orthodox description of the delivered condition in \textit{L’homme et son devenir selon le Vedanta}:

It should be noted that this realization ought not strictly speaking be considered as an “achievement”, or as “the production of a non preexisting result,” according to Sankaracharya’s expression, for the union in question, even though not actually realized in the sense here intended, exists none the less potentially, or rather virtually: it is simply a matter of the individual (for it is only in respect of the individual that one can speak of realization) becoming effectively conscious of what really is from all eternity.

\textsuperscript{216} One could take here the well-known example of Ramana Maharshi who had to suffer from a cancer at the end of his life. Speaking about a too compassionate devotee, Ramana Maharshi would have said: “My body is suffering but I am not suffering. When will he realize that I am not this body?” See: Arthur Osborne, “Mahasamadhi,” \textit{Ramana Maharshi and the Path of Self-Knowledge}, 181.

\textsuperscript{217} Shankara, \textit{Brahma Sutra Bhasya}, IV,1,15.

\textsuperscript{218} Shankara, \textit{Brahma Sutra Bhasya}. IV,iii,12. 882.
That is why it is said that it is *Brahma* which dwells in the vital centre of the human being; this is
ture of every human being, not only of one who is actually “united” or “delivered”- these two
words indeed denoting the same thing viewed under two different aspects, the first in relation to
the Principle, the second in relation to the manifested or conditioned existence.\(^{219}\)

For Guénon, the superiority of the Vedantic perspective over Christian mysticism
lies among other things in its recognition that Liberation is not contingency upon the
separation with the body. Although he agrees for the most part with Guénonian
Vedantism, Schuon has developed a more nuanced description of the end of the path,
ultimately rejecting the idea that the Supreme Identity would imply a destruction of the
human individuality. This might represent an important point of divergence with
Shankara but also a remarkable opening to Ramanuja’s Vishishtadvaita.

Schuon argues that there are, in a certain sense, two subjectivities in man: the ego
and the impassible knower. Rigorously speaking, the ultimate state (*Moksha*) does *not*
constitute a *possibility for the soul*.\(^{220}\) Only the Absolute can know Himself and the
Supreme Identity concerns, only the transpersonal intellect. As far as the human
subjectivity is concerned, it is only possible by the initiatory work to restore its
primordial perfection,\(^{221}\) but never to the point of abolishing the polarity “servant-Lord”.

Indeed, the “servant” (‘*abd*) as such can never cease to be the servant; consequently he can never
become the “Lord” (*Rabb*); the polarity “servant-Lord” is irreducible by its very nature, the nature
of the servant or creature being in a certain sense the sufficient reason for divine intervention
under the aspect of Lord.

Man cannot “become God”; the servant cannot change into the Lord; but there is something in the
servant that is capable—though not without the Lord’s grace—of surpassing the axis “servant-
Lord” or “subject-object” and of realizing the absolute “Self”. This Self is God insofar as He is
independent of the “servant-Lord” axis and of every other polarity: while the Lord is in a certain
manner the object of the servant’s intelligence and will, and inversely, the Self has no
complementary opposite; it is pure Subject, which is to say that it is its own Object, at once unique
and infinite, and innumerable on the plane of a certain diversifying relativity.\(^{222}\)

\(^{219}\) René Guénon, “the Seat of Brahma,” *Man and his becoming according to the Vedanta*, republished in
*Vincit Omnia Veritas* II no2 (June 2006).

\(^{220}\) Frithjof Schuon, “The two paradises.” *Forms and Substance in the Religions*.

\(^{221}\) Schuon also refers in this context to the adamic state of the biblical tradition and to the Lesser Mysteries
of the classical Antiquity. In Sufism, the restoration of the *fitra* coincides more particularly with the end of
the first stage of the spiritual journey and the reintegration into the Muhammadan norm.

\(^{222}\) Frithjof Schuon, “The Servant and the Union.” *Logic and Transcendence*. 

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For Schuon, the identity with the Self and the duality with the Lord coexist on two different and unequal planes of reality. In a letter about Ramana Maharshi, he gives a more concrete illustration of the limitations that cannot be abolished even by the liberating experience. For him, a *jivanmukta* remains not only a man but also less than an *avatara*. The Self is always the Self, but the outward and the inward men retain certain imperfections, unthinkable in the case of a divine descent.

You say in your letter that a *jivanmukta* is so to speak “absolute”, so there could be no “gradations between a *jivanmukta* of the *Krita-yuga* and another of the *kali-yuga*”; and you add that you cannot conceive of a being “superior”, for example, to Shri Ramana Maharshi. My answer is that this is easily conceivable when one knows all the aspects of the issue; the question is to know how to situate the gradations. For it is necessary to distinguish *a priori* between outward man and inward man, as Meister Eckhart might say; outward man—on pain of not existing—belongs to the realm of cosmic phenomena, whereas inward man pertains to the supernatural immanence of the Self in the soul. In concrete terms, I would say, to take one example, that Rama and Krishna are incomparably greater—as human phenomena or as major *Avatāras*—than any *jivanmukta* of our times; Shankaracharya too—as a minor *Avatāra*—is incomparably greater than any of his disciples who has realized *Moksha*; and no one is going to make me believe that any *jivanmukta* is as great as Christ.

This applies to the outward man, the man who is simply human, the cosmic phenomenon. But even from the point of view of the inward man, there is inequality, and this in parallel to equality: the Self is always the Self, certainly, but the human modality always remains the human modality and determines an indefinite number of variations with regard to the particular modality of the meeting between the human and the Divine. Hindu dialectic, which is always elliptical concerning the human aspect of things, hardly accounts for this diversity; it mentions only “identity”, which indeed is the only decisive element.

There is no need for the *jivanmukta* to be a perfect man in his constitution; certainly he is perfect as to his behavior, but not necessarily as to his physical form or his animic scope or gifts, whereas primordial man possessed constitutional perfection in all respects, which is also and *a fortiori* the case for the *Avatāras* and hence for all the founders of religions, as well as for the Virgin Mary. (…) When it is said that “the yogin is Brahma”, one ought to specify “in a certain respect”; if this is not done, it is because one wishes to offer a principal definition, not a description. The question of the *jivanmukta* pertains largely to what is inexpressible, for the simple reason that it is not possible to grasp mentally the nature of the Self.223

Deification does not abolish humanity and the *jivanmukta* should be reduced to a geometrical and impersonal figure. On this particular question, Schuon considers that the

perspective of Sufism is more explicit when it “emphasizes that ‘identity’ is the ‘overriding’ divine Presence in our center, but that the meeting between the Divine and the human takes place through an indefinite number of modes or combinations; otherwise identity would mean that man as such could be the Divine as such, which is impossible.”

For Schuon, deification should not be confused with a Luciferian and impossible divinization, nor does it imply the destruction of the individual and of his personality.

Schuon’s attention to the laminar condition of the delivered soul reflects up to a certain extent a tendency among post-shankarian scholastics (deplored by Swami Satchidanandendra). He nevertheless goes a step further, because he does not admit that the delivered soul, after the dropping of the body, has no participation to the *Brahmaloka*, the highest Paradise of the divine Person. *Jivanmuktas* have both realized the Supreme Identity and maintained a heavenly form in the upper paradises. One of the arguments he provides to support this thesis is that liberated souls and among them the Prophets and the *Avataras* can still appear after death. They have not vanished from the cosmos and so they must have not lost their distinct identity after their deliverance.

We do not believe that in the hereafter the delivered man—in the sense of the Sanskrit word *jivanmukta*—has quite simply disappeared after his union with the Self; it seems to us rather that he leaves in Paradise a form-symbol endowed with distinctive consciousness, which disappears only with the apocatastatic disappearance of Paradise itself—the *mahâpralaya*—when the whole Universe is reabsorbed or integrated into the divine Substance. In this we rejoin the doctrine of the three bodies of the Buddha: earthly, celestial, and divine; this is illustrated also by the example of Christ, whose earthly appearance did not for an instant abolish the divine Reality. The Prophet, during his “night journey” (*Laylat al-mi’râj*), met various Prophet predecessors in Heaven, who were nevertheless “delivered ones” by definition. Sleep is to death—and death to the Last Judgment—what *pralaya* is to *mahâpralaya*, what the Last Judgment is to the *apocatastasis*.

Interestingly enough, describing in his article “Universal Eschatology” the five posthumous conditions, namely the paradise, the lotus, the purgatory, the transmigration and the hell, Schuon does not even mention *Moksha* as a possibility distinct from

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224 *ibidem*  
225 *Ibidem.*  
226 “We have distinguished five posthumous exits from earthly human life: Paradise, the limbo-lotus, purgatory, limbo-transmigration, hell. The first three exits maintain the human state; the fourth brings one out of it; the fifth maintains it only to bring one out of it ultimately. Paradise and the lotus are beyond
paradise. He also severely criticizes those Sufis who claim with arrogance -or more likely excessive hyperbolism- that “for the Gnostic, the paradise is a jail.” In his eyes, the concept of paradise implies *a priori* no limitation whatsoever. The summit of the paradisiacal sphere is occupied by the “Paradise of the Essence” (*Jannat adh-dhat* in Arabic), “which corresponds directly to Nirvana.” Unlike Shankara, Schuon almost seems to suggest a continuity between paradisiacal states and deliverance.

In this respect, he may stand closer to Ramanuja. Certainly the idea that liberation does not lead to the dissolution of the individuality, to a frightening absorption into an impersonal and monistic Absolute is particularly dear to a “personalistic” and “separative” bhakti, which conceives beatitude in inter-subjective terms. This being said, Schuon, who constantly assigned to Vishishtadvaita a subordinate status *vis-à-vis* Advaita Vedanta, could not follow Ramanuja till the end and agree with his distinction between two types of deliverance. According to Ramanuja’s theistic system, those who have followed the path of *jnana* can realize a state of isolation (*kavalya*), identified -but rather unconvincingly- with the Shankarian *Moksha*. They are freed from the bondage of the *samsara*, but nevertheless deprived of the supreme felicity that is reserved to the devotees of the divine Personality. For Ramanuja, it is this “beatific vision” of the Lord, which represents the fulfillment of human existence. For Schuon, on the contrary, it is mistaken to conceive that the Vedantic notion of “Deliverance” evokes “the paradoxical image of a refusal of Paradise” or an alternative between two posthumous conditions. In his eyes, it is through knowledge (*jnana*) and not *bhakti* that the highest form of union can be

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suffering; purgatory and hell are states of suffering in varying degrees; transmigration is not necessarily a suffering in the case of the *bodhisattvas*, but it is a mixture of pleasure and pain in the other cases. Or again: there are two places of waiting for Paradise, one gentle and one rigorous, namely the lotus and purgatory; and there are two exclusions from Paradise, also one gentle and the other rigorous, namely transmigration and hell; in both of these latter cases, the human condition is lost, either immediately as in the case of transmigration, or ultimately, as in that of hell. As for Paradise, it is the blessed summit of the human state, and strictly speaking it has no symmetrical opposite, despite certain simplifying schematizations having a moral purpose; for the celestial world stems from the Absolute "by adoption", and the Absolute has no opposite, except in appearance.” See: Frithjof Schuon, “Universal Eschatology,” *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*, 85.

By lotus, he is referring to an intermediary state described in the *Sukhvati Sutra* a Pure Land Buddhist text.


228 Frithjof Schuon, “Understanding Esoterism.” *Esoterism as Principle and Way.*

achieved, although one does not exclude the other. The elect realize simultaneously the Supreme Identity and the heavenly beatitude.
Frithjof Schuon and the Islamic Tradition

While acknowledging the superiority of certain Sufi formulations, Schuon considers nevertheless that the authority of the Sufi masters, in terms of doctrine, including Ibn Arabi - the Shaykh Al-Akbar - is only conditional with respect to Advaita Vedanta and the Hindu doctrines. One of the reasons for this is that in Schuon’s opinion, proto-Sufism can be traced back to Muhammad, but its form was then limited to a vocational path of ascetism. To it was added relatively early on a distinctive dimension of Love (mahabat) personified by the saint Rabi’a, but Tasawwuf nevertheless tends to remain widely identified with asceticism.

The Prophet instituted two relatively different currents, at once solidary and divergent: the one legal, common obligatory and the other ascetical, particular, vocational. A question which arises is … if the most ancient testimonies of what later was called Sufism (tasawwuf) point to an asceticism and nothing else, and if in fact, Islamic esoterism recognizes itself in this asceticism, what is the relationship between the later and the realities of esoterism? The answer is simple once account is taken of the fact that all esoterism comprises a purgatory way. (…) The apparently problematic –but in fact elliptical- equation esoterism equals ascesis” means in substance: esoterism is the elimination of the individual obstacles, which prevent or “veil” the irradiation of the divine Self in the soul. (…) This insistence of a certain esoterism upon the ascetical dimension … could not be explained if this esoterism did not address to a large community.230

As a consequence, although Islam represents in Schuon’s view and within the cycle of monotheistic religions the third and Paracletic moment corresponding to knowledge, its Gnostic component emerged, however later in a distinctive manner, at the time of Ibn Massara, Niffari and Ibn Arabi, and was never able to develop totally independently from its legalistic and devotional milieu.231

In the following pages, I will compare the positions of Schuon about the doctrine of Reality (haqiqah) and the Path (tariqah) with historical Tasawwuf in order to have a

231 Frithjof Schuon, “Concerning Delimitations in Moslem Spirituality,” In the Face of the Absolute, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1989) 201. A legitimate objection is that a more intellectual and esoteric perspective can be found in the teachings of the Shiite Imams. For Schuon however, the emphasis of proto-shi’ism on the personality of the Imams and its political resonances were too problematic to allow them to incarnate in a plenary manner an early form of Islamic Gnosis. See: Frithjof Schuon, “Images of Islam”, ibidem.
better understanding of what distinguishes his perspective of “quintessential esoterism” and the “eso-exoteric symbiosis” characteristic of many turuq.

**Haqiqat and wahdat al-wujud**

From a strictly Islamic standpoint, adopted for instance by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Schuon could be included in the lineage of the great Sufi Gnostics, and in the lineage of Ibn Arabi in particular. Contrary to some French Guénonians like Michel Valsan, though, he never reduced Sufism to the teachings of the Shaykh Al-Akbar:

Schuon had also studied with reverence many great masters of the *Tasawwuf*, such as Junayd, the Sufi Arabic poet Niffari, the Shaykh Abu’l-Hassan al-Shadhili and many other masters from the Maghreb such as Ibn Mashish, Abu Madyan, Ibn Arabi and of course his own spiritual master the Shaykh Alawi, whom he was referring to as a “surhomme” and whom he quoted the works throughout his life. Schuon loved also Ibn Arabi and translated some of his poems into French in his youth. He refused however to reduce Islamic esoterism to Ibn Arabi alone.232

The doctrine of the *wahdat al-wujud*, variously translated by scholars as “Oneness of Being” or “Oneness of Existence,” has been depicted as the most sophisticated metaphysical system having flourished in the Islamic land.233 Ibn Arabi, “the seal of Muhammadan Sainthood (*khatm al-wilaya al-muhammadiyya*) translates the theological *Tahwid*, the religious dogma that “there is only one God,” into a metaphysical non-dualism. God (*Allah*) is the sole Reality (*wujud* or *haqq*) and the creatures represent as many locus of manifestation for the divine Names, the effects of his continuous self-disclosing (*tajali*). Individuals are predestined not according to a divine arbitrariness, as Ashari wrongly believed, but to their pre-existential predispositions (*al-isti’dad*) that are contained in the Most Holy Effulgence of the Essence (*al-fayd al-aqdasi adh-dhati*) or the Universal Imagination (*al-khayal al-mutlaq*).234 At the end of the spiritual journey, the Gnostic contemplates his personal archetype, his “true self” in the mirror of the divine

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232 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Frithjof Schuon and the Islamic Tradition.”

233 For a summary, Reza-Shah Kazemi. *Paths to the transcendence*. Chapter II.

234 The *al-khayal al-mutlaq*, in which preexists the totality of the manifestation including the angelical and informal states, should not be confused with the *al-khayal al-muqayya*, the cosmic imagination, which corresponds only to the intermediate world. See: William Chittick, *The Sufi path of Knowledge*, (New York: SUNY, 1989) 212.
Reality. This doctrine of the wahdat al-wujud, the leitmotiv of Ibn Arabi’s *Fusus al-hikam*, has been further elaborated by the later Islamic tradition, not only his immediate Sufi disciples such as Qunawi or Kashani, but also by the Iranian theosophists like Molla Sadra. It would not be too much to claim that his metaphysical vision represents the cornerstone of what Seyyed Hossein Nasr has called “the tradition of speculative gnostis” in Islam.

This being said, to the displeasure of many, including some of his close disciples, Schuon’s appraisal of Ibn Arabi has always been ambiguous. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr himself acknowledges, he seems to have been more attracted by the “subjective” expression of the metaphysical non-dualism than by the more “objective” Akbarian “monism.” He predominantly uses the Vedantic language of the Self (*Atman*) -which describes the “ demiurgic tendency” as a process of “objectivation”- rather than a more ontological mode of expression, which starts from the idea that God is the Supreme Object (referred to as “He,” *huwa*) and that the world is produced by the individuation of the universal Principle (*wujud*).

Schuon is also very critical toward some of the shortcomings of the akbarian exegetical inspirationism, which sometimes interprets the verses of the Qur’an by inverting their literal meaning. Similarly, he often points out what he sees as the weaknesses of Ibn Arabi’s treatment of the question of evil. For Schuon, Ibn Arabi too often gives the impression that that there is no evil, because “everything is willed by God.”

It was not as Gnostics but as a ‘thinker’ that Ibn Arabi treated the question of evil, explaining it by subjectivity and relativity with an entirely Pyrrhonist logic. What is serious is that practically

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236 According to Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the writings of Molla Sadra Shirazi have realized the definitive and harmonious synthesis between Shi’a *Irfan*, the illuminist philosophy of Suhrawardi and the wahdat al-wujud. See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic philosophy from origin to present* (New York: SUNY, 2006), 223.


238 Frithjof Schuon, “Paradoxes of an Esoterism,” *Sufism, Veil and Quintessence*, 83-84

abolishing evil –since it is reduced to a subjective point of view, one abolishes with the same stroke good, whether it was the intention or not. 240

In Schuon’s eyes, the reality of evil on his own plane cannot be denied so easily, in an almost Asharite manner. He argues that to understand the problem of evil in a subtler way, one has to make a two-fold distinction. First, between God and the world: the world cannot be free from evil because the manifestation is existentially “other” than the Principle. Second, one has to take into account two levels in the divine subjectivity, not systematically dissociated by Ibn Arabi: the Lord (rabb or Ishvara) and the Godhead (dhat). For Schuon as for the Vedantins, the divine Lawgiver is included in Maya, “the cosmic illusion.” He can oppose to a particular evil or turn it into a greater good, but he cannot oppose the possibility of evil as such. As for the Godhead or the Beyond-Being, Schuon identifies it with the Sovereign Good of Plato, the Agathon who wants to communicate itself and to unfold the all-possibility. The “desire” of the Essence to radiate is impersonal and undifferentiated, but to say “manifestation” amounts to saying that it becomes increasing remote from the Principle, thus causing relativity, imperfection, and starting with the animic realm, evil.

Infinitude, which is an aspect of the Divine Nature, implies unlimited Possibility and consequently Relativity, Manifestation, the world. To speak of the world is to speak of separation from the Principle, and to speak of separation is to speak of the possibility – and necessity – of evil; seen from this angle, what we term evil is thus indirectly a result of Infinitude, hence of the Divine Nature; in this respect, God cannot wish to suppress it; (…) However, the Divine Will opposes evil inasmuch as it is contrary to the Divine Nature, which is Goodness or Perfection; in this relationship of opposition – and in this alone – evil is intrinsically evil. God fights this evil perfectly since, on all planes, it is the good that is finally victorious; evil is never more than a fragment or a transition, whether we are in a position to see this or not. 241

For Schuon, it is not the same divine subjectivity -and thus the same “will”- who produces the relative as such and who prescribes the good to the believers.

Some have indeed questioned the depth of Schuon’s knowledge of Ibn Arabi. Whereas Shankara’s treatises are very homogenous, systematic and relatively fewer in number, Ibn Arabi, who died at a very advanced age, is the author of an enormous

corpus, developing his perspective on a far larger range of subjects, apart from pure metaphysics. For example, he wrote about the intermediate world (barzakh), the angelology or the science of the letters (ilm al-huruf) without mentioning the Muslim rites and laws. As we said, he also had a very diverse and rich posterity, in the Arabic world and beyond. Professor Caner Dagli, in an essay entitled “Islamic metaphysical and philosophical thought,” made the following observation that reflects a general impression among the Muslims scholars favorably inclined toward Perennialism:

Both Guénon and Schuon, two giants of perennialist thought, emphasized the Vedanta as a direct expression of pure metaphysics. In all fairness, I believe that, had they had more familiarity with the later developments in Islamic thought, they would have made similar statements with regard to it.242

By “later developments in Islamic thought,” he was referring specifically to Mulla Sadra who represents in his mind the “culmination” of “the tradition inaugurated by Ibn Arabi” and has certainly developed a more systematic version of the wahdat al-wujud than Ibn Arabi himself, less vulnerable to some of the Schuonian criticism.

Although his long-life friend Titus Burckhardt was the first translator of the Fusus and the Insan Kamil into French,243 there is no doubt that Schuon did not have an exhaustive and scholarly-informed knowledge of Ibn Arabi’s writings, leading him for instance to regard Balyani’s al-risala al-wahadiyya as a genuine expression of Ibn Arabi’s perspective.244 It is true also that he never claimed to be specifically an Akbarian. As a matter of fact, when writing about esoteric Islam, Schuon barely refers directly to Ibn Arabi or to the opinions of another school.

He rather starts from the fundamental formulations of Islam, as for instance the Muslim testimony of faith (shahada) that he qualifies as “a metaphysical key,” the equivalent of a mantra. For Schuon, to say that “there is no god but God” (lâ ilâha illâ

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243 These translations have later been retranslated into English: Ibn Arabi, The Wisdom of the Prophets, Cheltenham: Beshara Publications; Abdel Karim Al-Jili, The Universal Man, Cheltenham: Beshara Publications.
244 Later scholarship and in particular the annotated translation of Michel Chodkiewicz have shown that not only it was not a work of Ibn Arabi as Guénon, following Ivan Agueli believed, but that it even reflects the influence of a school of though largely opposed to Ibn Arabi: the school of Ibn Sabin, which is characterized in Chodkiewicz’s view by a less subtle ontology and a more philosophical orientation. See: Ahwad al-Din Balyani, Epitre de l’Unicité Absolue, translated and introduced by Michel Chodkiewicz (Paris: Les deux Océans, 1982).
'Llâh) means that the Principle is the reality and that the manifestation is illusory. The first part of the shahada (la ilaha illa-llahu) contains two sub-parts: a negative one (nafy) and a positive one (ithbat). The world is a dream and only the Absolute is real. It also contains four words: la, ilaha, illa, llahu. There exists a dimension of the world, totally removed from God and thus unreal (la) but there is also an aspect of Divine immanence (ilaha), metaphysically identical to the Spirit (Ruh). Cosmic relativity is prefigured in God and this prefiguration corresponds to the illah, which symbolizes the “Divine relativity” as opposed to the “Pure Absolute” (Ilahu).245

Now, esoterically speaking, the second part of the shahada (muhammadu rasulu-llahi) means that the Perfect (referred to as Muhammadu) is the manifestation (rasulu) of the Principle (Ilahi). Whereas the first part remains essentially an objective message of transcendence, Schuon interprets the second one as a development of the term illah. It represents more directly an opening to the mystery of the divine immanence and to the manifestation of the Spirit. The center of this statement is the term rasulu, literally “messenger,” which Schuon identifies with the Intellect (aql) or the Spirit (Ruh) of God and of whom the Prophets, the Saints and the Sages are the earthly projections.246 Muhammadu rasulu-llahi also represents the operative complement of the doctrine contained the first part: the true human being (Muhammad) can realize the Supreme Identity with God (Ilahi) because of the presence in his heart (qalb) of the “immanent prophet” (rasulu), the “naturally supernatural intellect,” that is the true mediator between the Real and the unreal.

245 From a more cosmological standpoint, each word of the first part of the shahada can be associated with a given hadrat, a divine presence of the Sufi cosmology (nasut, malakut, jabarut, lahut, hahut).

In the school of Ibn Arabi, Muhammad is regarded as the last manifestation of the “Muhammadian Reality” (haqiqa muhammadiyya). But whereas Ibn Arabi attributes an absolute superiority to Muhammad over the other prophets, reduced to the status of his deputies, Schuon does not endorse this hierarchy. Instead Schuon argues that every prophet or *avatara*—including the Virgin Mary—manifests a particular aspect of the universal *Logos*. He or she embodies a unique set of perfections and can then be legitimately depicted as “the best” (*khayr*) but only for a given “cosmic sector” and according to the criteria of a particular *upaya*. Within Akbarian *tasawwuf*, Muhammad is identified with the essence of the *Logos* and the other prophets to its attributes, but this confessional chauvinism should not be confused with the universal perspective of the *religio perennis*.

The dogmatic assertion—obvious in Islam—that the Prophet is “the best of men” or “of creation” (*khayr al-khalq*) or “the best of those whom God hath chosen (*khayru mani khtara Llah*) is in itself independent—and quite paradoxically so—of the conclusion that the other founders of religion could be inferior to him. Firstly, the designation of “the best” refers to the *Logos*, which is the prototype of the cosmos in the Principle, or of the world in God; and in this case the epithet does not refer to any man. Secondly, “the best” is Muhammad inasmuch as he manifests or personifies the *Logos*; but in this respect, every other “Messenger” (*Rasul*) is equally “the best”. Thirdly, “the best” is Muhammad inasmuch as he alone—in accordance with the framework of this perspective—manifests the whole *Logos*, the other Messengers manifesting it only in part, which amounts to saying that Muhammad is “the best” inasmuch as he personifies the Islamic perspective, or because he personifies it; within this perspective, the man who reveals it is necessarily “the best”, but as much can be said, of course of his own Message. Fourth, Muhammad is ‘the best’, inasmuch as he represents a quality of Islam by which it surpasses the other religions; but every integral religion necessarily possesses such an unequalable quality, lacking it would not exist.247

For Schuon, the Akbarian solidarity with a confessional standpoint is legitimate, but it proceeds from a partial insight on the Total Truth and the mystery of the Spirit.

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The Tariqah

We have already extensively presented Schuon’s spiritual discipline. By posing in metaphysical terms the identity of God and his Name (*Ism*), Schuon certainly goes much further than most Sufi masters. This identity also justifies, in his eyes, a reduction of the religious practices to the minimum, the emphasis being placed, like in Amidism, on the saving Grace of the Name. Schuon, however, insists on the importance of prayers, both canonical and individual, addressed by the individual to the personal God.

The aim of individual prayer is not only to obtain particular favors, but also the purification of the soul: it loosens psychological knots or, in other words, dissolves subconscious coagulations and drains away many a secret poison; it externalizes before God the difficulties, failures and tensions of the soul, which presupposes that the soul be humble and upright; this externalization – carried out in face of the Absolute – has the virtue of reestablishing equilibrium and restoring peace, in a word, of opening us to grace.  

In the individual prayer, the particular soul (*nafs*) enters in intimate contact with his Lord (*rabb*). In the canonical prayer, which has been revealed by a Prophet or an *avatara*, it is the whole humanity who speaks to his Creator. That is why Schuon could write that “the very fact of our existence is a prayer and compels us to pray, so that it could be said: I am, therefore I pray: *sum ergo oro.*” To be a human being is to pray.

In addition to advocating the importance of prayer, Schuon also taught to his community the *wird* of the Shaykh Al-Alawi. This litany, recited by the Sufis using a rosary, has a three-fold structure: first, the petition for forgiveness (*istighfâr*), then the prayer on the prophet (*salat an-nabi*) and finally the *tahlîl*, the recitation of the first part of the *shahada*. The *wird* synthesizes the three essential stages of the mystical journey to God: they correspond respectively to the purification of the soul, to the restoration of the primordial condition (*fitra*), and to the union (*ittihad*) with the Principle itself.

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In the eyes of Schuon, his tendency to reduce religious practices to the invocation (dhikr) of the divine Name Allah was prefigured in the teaching of the Shaykh Al-Alawi himself, according to whom “the sufficient reason of the rites is the remembrance of God, which contains all rites in an undifferentiated synthesis.” The Shaykh Al-Alawi is well known in the Shadhiliyya for having given a more formal setting to the practice of the spiritual retreat (khalwah), which along with the dhikr represents the core-essence of his own method. He codified it and instituted special places where the young disciples were placed under the guidance of elder “spiritual guides.” To Abd al-Karim Jossot, he once gave the following definition of the khalwah:

It is a cell in which I place the recipient after he has sworn not to leave it, if needed before forty days. In this oratory, his unique occupation is to repeat, without ceasing, day and night, the Name of God, prolonging the last syllable till the extinction of the breath. Before, he must recite seventy-five thousand times the formula of the shahada. During the day, he fasts rigorously and breaks it only in the evening.

Schuon himself practiced this type of retreat and prescribed it to his disciples. Apart from the Name Allah and the first part of the shahada often used as an alternative mean of invocation in many turuq, Schuon also practiced the invocation of the Names of Mercy (Rahman, Rahim). Whereas the name Allah designates the Divine Essence, the pure Absolute without any determination, the Name Rahman refers to the aspect of intrinsic Goodness of the Principle, comparable in his eyes to the Vedantic Ananda.

Rahmah is integrated into the Divine Essence itself, inasmuch as it is fundamentally none other than the radiating Infinitude of the Principle; an identity that the Qur’an expresses by saying: “Call upon Allah or call upon Ar-Rahman, to Him belong the most beautiful Names” . . . For one cannot appeal to the One without Mercy responding.

Schuon constantly insists that to be valid -to be a dhikr Allah, an invocation of God, and not a dhikr as-shaytan, an invocation to the devil- this practice must be

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254 ibidem, the translation is mine.
accompanied by spiritual poverty (*faqr*). *Faqr* does not only represent a state of moral humility, but more profoundly the ontological condition in which we have been created. It is our *fitra*, our primordial Nature, which implies a perfect receptivity toward Heaven. According to the Islamic tradition, Muhammad was *ummi*, illiterate, which is not unrelated to this spiritual poverty. Muhammad and the Muslim saints waking in his footsteps are said to be *arif bi-Allah* ("knower through God") because they owe their science only from the divine influx in their heart, which has been previously emptied from anything other than God. *Faqr*, transposed to the highest level, is not other than an anticipation of *Fana*, of the spiritual extinction in the Principle. For Schuon, the invocation can be superimposed on any virtuous act. In the case of the advanced *faqir*, invocation becomes perpetual, the vibration produced by the *dhikr* continuing even after the end of the formal practice, a possibility acknowledged not only by the Sufis but also by Hesychasm.²⁵⁷

The combination of the *dhikr* with the meditations (*fikra*) is also commonly practiced in the Shadhiliyya. According to the late Shadhili Shaykh Muhammad al-Hibri:

> My brother, remain centered both in private life and in public on the invocation of Allah. Place concentration (*fikra*) in your invocation for *dhikr* is the light and *fikra* is its ray and clarity without light cannot lead to vision. You can observe this with the devotees in seclusion who pray for months or years. They harvest only sterility because they don’t care for the shining of their invocation.²⁵⁸

At the most basic level in this *tariqah*, the meditation can take the form of visualizations associated with the control of the breathing:

> It is proper to invoke the Supreme Name in a state of quietness, gravity and veneration, giving up everything to Allah. This invocation needs to be done by prolonging the second vowel (*Allâââh*) to stop with the exhaustion of the breath. The person needs to invoke while visualizing the five letter of the name *Allah* and to keep by the vision of the heart the first *alif*, the two *lam*, the second *alif* and the *hâ*, without written support.²⁵⁹

More sophisticated meditative techniques seem to have been elaborated within the Qadiriyyah, the Naqshbandiyya and the Chishtiyya. In his *Contemplative Disciplines in

²⁵⁷ It is referred to in *The Way of the Pilgrim* as “ceaseless spiritual prayer, which is self-acting in the Heart.” See: *Pray without ceasing*, edited by Patrick Laude, 47.
²⁵⁹ *Ibidem*. It is an instruction from the Shaykh Daraqawi.
Sufism, the Indian scholar Dr Mir Valiuddin, has listed four main stages that the murid of these orders successively passes through to attain the sacred knowledge (marifat).

1. **Tadhikiya-i Nafs** or ‘Purification of the evil.’ This means cleansing the sensual self from its vile, blamable, animal propensities and embellishing it with laudable and angelic attributes.

2. **Tasfiyya Qalb** or ‘Cleansing of the heart.’ This means the erasing from the heart its love for the ephemeral world and its worry over grief and sorrow and establishing in their place an ardent love for God alone.

3. **Takhlīya-i Sirr** or ‘Emptying of the Sirr’ from all thoughts that would divert attention from the remembrance of God.

4. **Tajliya-i Ruh** or ‘Illumination of the Spirit’. This means filling the spirit with the effulgence of God and the fervor of his love.  

   The two stations of the nafs and the qalb seem to be comparable to the first four stations of fear (makhalafat) and love (mahabat) in Schuon’s system. The “emptying of the Sirr” implies an extinction of the soul in the face of the Real (fifth station), ultimately leading to the final “illumination by the spirit” (sixth station). In the Naqshbandiyya, which is more particularly known for its insistence on a silence invocation, dhikr is also supported by the concentration on the six latifas, corresponding to subtle centers in the body.  

   The first four (latifa al-qalb, latifa al-ruh, latifa-i-sirr, latifa-i-khafi) are associated with the four elements and the “world of the creation” located below the Throne (arsh). With the realization of the latifa-i-Akhfa and the conquest of “the world of the command,” the seeker experiences what is called baqa ba’da al-fana or “abiding after annihilation” and passes beyond the realm of the possibility (daira-i-imkan). He then enters into the three spheres of the Sainthood - the minor sainthood (daira-i-wilayat-i-sughra), the major sainthood (wilayat-i-kubra), the Saintships of the Angels (wilayat-i-mala’ika)- for which are prescribed more advanced types of meditation. This process leads to the realization of the last subtle center, the latifa-i-nafs. Finally, the faqir assimilates the perfections of the divine Word -the perfection of Prophethood (Muraqaba-i-Kamalat-i-nubuwva), the perfection of the Apostles (Muraqaba-i-Kmalat-i-Risala), the perfection of the ulul-Azm, the reality of the Ka’ba (Muraqaba-i-Haqiqat-i-Kaba), the reality of the Qur’an (Muraqab-i-Haqiqat-i-Qur’an), the reality of the Prayers


261 ibidem, 70-71.
(Muraqaba-i-Haqiqat-i-salat) and the pure Worshipability (Muraqaba-i-Ma'budiyat-i-Sirfah) - beyond which subsists no duality, only the Holy Essence (Dhat). Schematically speaking, this Naqshbandi path can be described as an ascension through degrees which are both subjective and objective, corresponding on the one hand to spiritual stations (maqam) and on the other hand to the degrees of the reality or the divine presences (hadrat).

Similarly, in the six themes of meditation discussed above, the subjective microcosm cannot be disconnected from the objective macrocosm, the spiritual psychology from the divine dimensions and the qualities of the Word (haqiqah muhammadiyya). The fifth and sixth themes correspond to the divine Essence (dhat), which is both Absolute and Infinite, and the first four themes to the divine Perfection or to the level of the attributes (sifat). God in his Essence is Pure Being (Wujud) and Absolute Subject (Shahid). He is also divine quaternary: “Dhul-Jalal, Dhul-Ikram, El-Hayy and El-Qayyum, the possessor of Majesty, Generosity, the Living and the Immutable.”

Following a private remark of Schuon, the six themes also represent “the portrait the Prophet.” Each one can be related to one of his traditional names (nabi, rasul, habib, abd, ahmad, Muhammad) and their combination represents, according to Schuon, the formless and universal content of the Sunna. It is important to insist here that contrary to some modernist Sufi orders in the West, Schuon, far from rejecting the prophetic model, stressed more than once its importance in his own path.

The Prophet is the human norm in respect to both of his individual and of his collective functions, or again in respect of his spiritual and earthly functions. Essentially he is equilibrium and extinction: equilibrium from the human point of view and extinction in relation to God. As a spiritual principle, the Prophet is not only the Totality of which we are separate parts or fragments, he is also the Origin in relation to which we are so many deviations; in other words, the Prophet as Norm is not only the “Whole Man” (al-Insan al-Kamil) but also the “Ancient Man” (al-Insan al-Qadim).
In this respect, the Shadhiliya to which the Shaykh Al-Alawi belonged has sometimes been labeled as a *muhammadiyya* *tariqah*. According to Zakia Zouanat, this type of *turuq* historically tends, by their sobriety, to remain closer to the Islamic mainstream, and attached to the prophetic model. Geographically speaking, he argues that they were dominant in the Western part of the Islamic world and were opposed to the more Eastern *Ahadiyya* *turuq*, centered on the mystery of the divine Unity. Despite his connection with the Shadhiliyya and keeping in mind the relative schematicism and arbitrariness in this terminology, the perspective of Schuon, because of his metaphysical starting point, can certainly be characterized as *Ahadiyya* rather than *Muhammadiyya*. This being said, I do not see any reason to disagree with Seyyed Hossein Nasr when he wrote that some articles of Schuon and even his personal aura testified to a very rare penetration and degree of intimacy with the Prophet. In fact, Schuon’s reference to Muhammad, although less totalitarian than in the *Muhammadiyya* *tariqah*, is important. It is, however, located at a somewhat different level than for pious Muslims, and even most Sufis, for whom faithfulness to the Prophet often implies legalistic formalism and submission to a very ethnically colored code of behavior.

The concrete content – and thus the origin – of Islamic spirituality is the spiritual Substance of the Prophet, the Substance. (…) The mystical “traveler” (*salik*) may “follow the example of the Prophet” in a way that is either formal or formless, hence indirect or direct; for the Sunna is not

“Ye have in the Messenger of God a beautiful example’, the Koran says, and not for nothing. The virtue one can observe among pious Muslims including the heroic modalities that these give rise to among the Sufis, are attributed by the Sunnah to the Prophet: now it is inconceivable that these virtues could have been practiced throughout the centuries all the way to our day without the founder of Islam having personified them in thee highest degree; likewise it is inconceivable that the virtues would have been borrowed from elsewhere – one would have wonder from where- since their conditioning and style are specifically Islamic. For Muslims, the moral and spiritual worth of the Prophet is not an abstraction nor a conjectural matter; it is a living reality, and this is precisely what proves, retrospectively, its authenticity; to deny this amounts to claiming that there can be effects without a cause. The Muhammadan character of the virtues explains, moreover, the more or less impersonal bearing of saints: there are no other virtues than those of Muhammad; thus they can only be repeated by those who imitate his example; it is through them that the Prophet lives on in his community.(…) In the case of a Christ or a Buddha, it may be said that their sanctity is proven outwardly by the perfection of their form; whosoever fails to realize a perfect form, as they possess, is not a saint. On the hand, in the case of a Krishna, an Abraham, or a Muhammad, it may be said that everything they did was precious or infused with holiness, not owing to the form, but owing to the substance; it is the substance which makes the act legitimate and ennobles it, and which makes of it a positive sign and an element of benediction.” See: Frithjof Schuon, “Insights into the Muhammadan Phenomenon,” *Forms and substances in the Religions*, republished in *Vincit Omnia Veritas* I no 1 (January 2005).


just the multitude of precepts, it is also the “Muhammadan Substance” of which these precepts are the reflections at various levels, and which coincides with the mystery of the “immanent Prophet.” In principle or in themselves the intrinsic qualities are independent of outward comportment, whereas the latter’s entire reason for being lies in the former.  

For Schuon, the concrete means to assimilate “these intrinsic qualities” is the practice of the fundamental virtues. At the beginning of his career, he had sometimes been shocked by the pettiness and the pretensions of some Guénonians, Freemasons in particular but also neo-Vedantists, infatuated by the idea of an “intellectual elite.” He reacted by constantly insisting on the necessity to practice of virtue (ihsan) in an esoteric climate. He was, however, not a moralist, for he clearly distinguished between on the one hand supernatural virtues and on the other natural or social virtues, which insures nothing with respect to the hereafter.

It is important to understand that the natural virtues have no effective value save on condition of being integrated into the supernatural virtues, those precisely which presuppose a kind of death. Natural virtue does not in fact exclude pride, that worst of illogicalities and that preeminent vice; supernatural virtue alone – rooted in God – excludes that vice which, in the eyes of Heaven, cancels all the virtues.

For Schuon, the practice of supernatural virtues amounts to an alchemical process, by which the soul (nafs) is morally transformed and it has been described by Ahmed ibn al-Arif or by Ghazzali in his *Kimiya-i-Sa'adat*. For Schuon, all the ethical perfections are virtually contained in the spiritual poverty (faqr), the three main virtues being humility, sincerity (al-iklas) and veracity (as-sidq), which correspond respectively to the purity of the soul, the generosity of the free will and the conformity to the truth. Virtues should not be presented, however, as individual acquisitions, on the pain of provoking a Luciferian fall. They are fundamentality impersonal; they are like “the air” for the sanctified soul because they originate in the divine Qualities themselves. That is why Schuon, criticizing implicitly Guénon’s intellectualism, has rejected the opinion that to practice of virtues would be of secondary importance or needed only at the beginning of the spiritual path. To be virtuous is already to partake to the Divine, but in an existential

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manner. Our animic substance, having been polished by the spiritual work, can then become a receptacle for the Divine disclosure (*tajālī*).

Virtue is the conformity of the soul to the divine Model and to the spiritual work; conformity or participation. The essence of the virtues is emptiness before God, which permits the divine Qualities to enter the heart and radiate in the soul. Virtue is the exteriorization of the pure heart.\(^{271}\)

In his article on “The Mystery of the Prophetic Substance”\(^{272}\) about Muhammad and in “The Seat of Wisdom” about Maryam,\(^{273}\) Schuon also associated the six stations of wisdom and the six directions of space. The North represents the inviolable Purity and the negative perfection (first theme) as opposed to the positive and vivifying perfection of the South (fourth theme). The message of the West is that of peace and passive perfection (third theme) as opposed to the message of the East, which is fervor and active perfection (second theme). The Zenith corresponds to the Transcendent and Objective Truth (*haqiqa*, fifth theme) whereas the Nadir is the Immanent Self (*huwa*, sixth theme). This symbolism, already alluded to in the first part,\(^{274}\) may have a deep significance for the understanding of Schuon’s relationship with the Native American traditions. However, it can also be interpreted in the light of the Sufi doctrine of the “Universal Man” who is not only the microcosmic model for human perfections - the “perfect man” as such (*insān kāmil*) - but also the macrocosmic prototype of the whole universe, the “great man” (*insān kabīr*), whose nature synthesizes all the levels of the creation, including the angelical realm.\(^{275}\)

To illustrate the way Schuon can use Sufi concepts but also revaluate and reinterpret them, it may be worth mentioning here his article “Diversity of Paths,”\(^{276}\) in


\(^{272}\) Frithjof Schuon, “The Mystery of the Prophetic Substance,” *Form and Substances in the religion*.


\(^{274}\) See above, part I, “Among the Lakotas and the crows.”


“Allah brought the entire universe into existence through the existence of a form fashioned without a spirit (*rūh*), like an unpolished mirror. Part of the divine decree is that He does not fashion a locus without it receiving a divine spirit, which is described as being “blown” into it. (…) The angels are some of the faculties of that form which is the form of the universe, which the Sufis designate in their technical vocabulary as the Great Man (*al-Insān al-Kabīr*), for the angels are to it as the spiritual (*rūḥānī*) and sensory faculties are to the human organism. (…) This being was called both a human being (*insān*) and *khalif*. As for his humanness, it comes from the universality of his organism and his ability to embrace all of the realities.” On this question, see: René Guénon, “The Universal Man,” *The Symbolism of the Cross* (Hillsdale NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001).

\(^{276}\) Frithjof Schuon, “Diversity of the Paths,” *In the face of the Absolute*. 

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which he examines the classical distinction between two modalities of progression in the path: the stations (maqamat) and the divine attraction (jadhb).

The first path is systematic and proceeds from stage to stage under the vigilant eye of a master (murshid) –there may be several of them- whereas the second is subject to no rule other than the spiritual intuition of the mystics (dhawq) and the divine Aid (tawfiq) or Grace (ramah) that answers it and at the same time provokes it.²⁷⁷

In the Sufi literature, the path of discipleship is described as a journey (suluk) for the soul (nafs), struggling to restore its Adamic status as a servant (abd) and a representative (khalifa) of God on earth. “Fallen man” suffers of an innate hypocrisy (nifaq) and is guilty of associating (shirk) another reality to the sole Reality of God (Allah la-sharik lahu). To cure his sick heart, the faqir must realize the virtue of trust (tawakkul), detach himself from the “superstition of the secondary causes”, which represent as many veils (hijab, pl. hujub) dissimulating the first Cause (as-Sabab al-Awwal). In the eyes of Schuon however, rejection of the secondary causes is essentially a temporary mean and it may lead in a context of voluntaristic mysticism to the most problematic extravagances, for which Schuon does not have a lot of indulgence, although he admits that “it is better to be absurd than to be impious.” For Schuon, “to see God everywhere” the spiritual seeker does need to deny that the sun illuminates, or that the fire burns on the pretext that God does it all,²⁷⁹ nor does he have to believe that an evil is a good because “it is willed by God.” By the eye of the heart (ayn al-qalb), the Sufi sees the First Cause acting through the secondary causes, the coincidence between phenomenal and horizontal causality and the noumenal and vertical fiat-lux.²⁸⁰

⁴²⁷ Ibidem, 173
²⁷⁸ Ibidem, 175
²⁷⁹ This is the position advocated by the Asharite Kalam against the Arabic philosophers but also defended by some Sufis. See: Abramov Binyamin, “Al-Ghazili’s theory of causality,” JSTOR: Studia Islamica, 67, 75.
²⁸⁰ This question of the articulation of the first and secondary causes is not limited to the Sufi. Schuon’s position is very comparable to the one of Saint Thomas Aquinas. See: Etienne Gilson. Le Thomisme (Paris: Vrin, 2003).
intuitions concerning modalities that are in the ordinary way imperceptible. (…) The sage sees causes in effects, and effects in causes; he sees God in all things, and all things in God.\textsuperscript{281}

To the path of the \textit{maqamat} is traditionally opposed the path of attraction (\textit{jahdab}), in which emphasis is given to ecstatic “states” (\textit{hal}) and mystical “tastes” (\textit{dawq}). To this classical dichotomy, Schuon although adds another dimension. If at one extreme, the “attracted” can be a \textit{majdhub}, a “fool of God,” whose behavior situates him more or less outside of the realm of the Law (\textit{shariah}) but also of human society (\textit{umma}), at the other, “the man who conforms to the primordial nature (\textit{fitrah}), the knower through God (\textit{arif bi-Llah})” also follows the divine attraction. This second path is therefore not reducible to an emotional mysticism but culminates with pure \textit{Gnosis}:

The path of liberating attraction can be the fact, not only of a Grace coming as it were from without and from above, and which occasionally can cloud the mind, it can also act \textit{ab intra} and through the pure Intellect – uncreated center of the immortal soul – and bring about an awakening made of clarity or evidence.\textsuperscript{282}

Certainly, such a path cannot be prescribed, for it implies a kind of “divine election,” but the identification by Schuon of the path of attraction and the path of the pneumatics and even the \textit{afrad} (the solitaries),\textsuperscript{283} nevertheless clearly suggests from where proceeds his own inspiration and which type of spiritual realization he thinks he has obtained.

\textbf{Average Sufism and Quintessential Esoterism}

A common terminology and comparable techniques of meditation within Schuon’s \textit{tariqah} and Sufi \textit{turqu} should not lead us, however, to underestimate the gap separating historical Sufism from a perspective centered \textit{a priori} on the \textit{Religio Perennis} and Quintessential esoterism. Whereas Schuon did not deny that gems of pure esoterism were contained more or less sporadically in the \textit{Tasawwuf}, he constantly regretted that they remained mixed with exoteric ideas. To refer to the produce of this combination, he used the pejorative term “average Sufism.” Furthermore he could assert that historical Sufism amounts, \textit{de facto}, to a sector of Islamic exoterism.

\textsuperscript{282} Frithjof Schuon, “Diversity of the paths,” \textit{In the face of the Absolute}, 185
\textsuperscript{283} \textit{Ibidem}. footnote 9.
Esoterism is without a country and it establishes wherever it can. Historical Sufism is *grosso modo* a sector of the exoterism in which esoterism has found refuge; esoterism is not like the branch of a tree, but like mistletoe, descended from Heaven and placed on the branch.284

By contrast, he described the perspective of the Maryamiyya, as vocationally centered on the pure or integral esoterism: the metaphysical Truth and the invocation of the Name. This orientation necessarily required a broader definition of orthodoxy than the one generally accepted by Muslims.

So, what distinguishes us above all from Moslem born or converted individuals—“psychologically” one could say—is that our mind is a priori centered upon universal metaphysics (Advaitin Vedanta, *Shahada, Risalat Al-Ahadiyah*) and the universal path of the divine Name (japa-yoga, *nembutsu, dhikr*, prayer of the heart); it is because of these two factors that we are in a traditional form, which in fact—but not in principle—is Islam. The universal orthodoxy emanating from these two sources of authority determines our interpretation of the *shari‘ah* and Islam in general, somewhat like the moon influences the oceans without being situated on the terrestrial globe; in the absence of the moon, the motions of the sea would be inconceivable and so to speak “illegitimate”. What universal metaphysics says—as does also the “onomatological” science connected to it—holds decisive authority for us, a fact which once earned us the reproach of “de-islamization of Islam”; it is less here a matter of conscious applications of principles formulated outside of Islamism and by metaphysical traditions from Asia, than that of inspirations that are in conformity with these principles; in a situation such as ours, the spiritual authority—or the soul which is its vehicle—becomes like a point of intersection of all the rays of truth, whatever their origin might be.285

For Schuon, esoterism has precedent over Islam, which represents a providential but nevertheless contingent “mean” to realize the supra-formal Truth symbolized in this passage by the moon over the ocean. Because Schuon assigns such a preeminent and transcendent status to esoterism, his position seems partly irreconcilable with the perspective of most *turuq*, including the Shadhiliyya,286 which has an image of equilibrium and sobriety and has attracted into its orbit so many jurists and theologians.287

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285 Private letter, *ibidem, 134-135*
286 The situation of extraterritoriality of Schuon *vis-à-vis* the Shadhiliyya has generated harsh debates during a recent colloquium in Egypt between Mark Sedgwick (“The ‘Traditionalist’ Shadhiliyya in the West: Guénonians and Schuonians”) and the French Islamologist Jean-Louis Michon (“Remarques à propos de l’article de Mark Sedgwick”). The two articles were later published in *Une voie soufie dans le monde: La Shadhiliyya.*
287 Eric Geoffroy, “Entre esoterisme et exoterisme, les shadhilis, passeurs de sens (egypte – XIIe – XVe siècle),” *ibidem.* Sporadic openings to a more radical form of esoterism are however noticeable and their inspiration may be traced in particular to a pivotal and inspirational figure for this brotherhood: al-Hakim
This divergence is not limited to the eso-exoteric dialectic but also directly informs the distinctive way Schuon conceives the spiritual path. For Shaykh Isa Nur Ad-din, exoteric ritualism and pious observances, so widely spread in historical Sufism, remain largely incompatible with an authentic *jnana marga* and on this question, he clearly disagrees with most Sufis. This includes Ibn Arabi, for whom the strict observance of the religious law (*shariah*) is an essential dimension of the mystical path (*tariqah*). For Ibn Arabi, who is diametrically opposed in this respect to the most radical schools of Isma’ilism, the assimilation of the *haqīqa*, the esoteric truth, does not lead beyond the realm of the *shariah*, because the fulfillment of our religious obligations is in last instance the best manner to realize what the pre-existent servitude of the created (*ubudiyā*) means. It was one of the great achievements of Michel Chodkiewicz’s works to have established against Henry Corbin that for Ibn Arabi, “Law is not the symbol of the *haqīqa*, it is the *haqīqa*. “ As a disciple of Michel Valsan, he was also taking a position against Schuon’s conception of “a chemically pure esoterism.” As it is proved by a series of letters between Schuon and Chodkiewicz, the master of the Maryamiyya perfectly knew Ibn Arabi’s position, but he did not hesitate to stigmatize an idea that was highly problematic in his view.

We have just noted that the “exteriorization of esoterism” is the reduction of esoterism to religious zeal, especially to legal scrupulousness, and to asceticism. This simplification or this confusion necessarily goes hand in hand with an “esoterization of exoterism,” namely the mystical sublimating of ritual acts –their assimilation to “degrees of contemplation.” (...) All the errors under consideration here result from the strange idea that “the common Law (*Shariah*) is esoterism (*Tariqah*),” an idea in which mystical sublimism meets legalistic scruple and confessional zeal.

Schuon denounces this “reduction of esoterism to religious zeal” but it needs to be pointed out that in his eyes, exoteric rites are needed: he was not preaching a radical anominalism, and he and his disciples practiced the rites of Islam, even if they were

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al-Tirmidhi, the author of “the Seal of the Saints” (*Khatm al-awilaya*), who is also credited for a distinction between a lesser (*sughra*) sainthood, largely opened to the pious believers and a greater (*kubra*) sainthood, the initiatory path properly speaking. About him see: Geneviève Gobillot, “Présence d’al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi dans la pensée shadhili,” *ibidem*.

288 In particular the Isma’ili of Alamut. See: Henry Corbin, *Cyclical Time and Isma'ili Gnosis* (Kegan Paul International Ltd. 1985).

289 Michel Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean without Store*.


291 Frithjof Schuon, “Transcendence and immanence in the Spiritual Economy of Islam,” *In the face of the Absolute*, 188.
reduced to a minimum that most Sufis would certainly consider insufficient. For Schuon, when they are combined with initiatory techniques, those rites represent means to “eliminate” “the individual obstacles which prevent the irradiation of the divine Self in the soul.”

But such a karma-marga remains largely superimposed and exterior to what constitutes the very essence of esoterism. In his opinion also, the God-realized men, even if they do not feel the need to abandon religious rites, are not bound any more by legal observances, a situation alluded to in the Qur’an by the meeting between Moses and Khidr.

To understand Schuon’s position, one has also to take into account two possibly antinomic dimensions, not always clearly distinguished in Sufism: God’s Nature - the Beyond-Being, the Supreme Self- and the divine will (irada). Above all, God wills Himself, he wills his own Essence (dhat). But at a more relative level, the divine will refers more specifically to the “relatively Absolute,” the creative Being and to a given “hypostatic Face.” It is this “divine Relativity” that is the origin of the shariah, this divine “I” who speaks through the Prophets and the religious lawgivers. For Schuon, the haqiqa proceeds, on the contrary, from the colorless Essence. If Gnosis has precedent and is largely independent of religious prescriptions, it is because the supra-personal Beyond-Being transcends the personal Being.

Schuon has also observed that what predominates in Islam, and even in Sufism, is the existential standpoint. In Islam, every creature is above all a servant (abd), submitted to God and his Law (shariah). The Islamic community (umma) is ideally egalitarian rather than hierarchical, and therefore the Muslim society tends to paradoxically restore by its structure the conditions existing at the beginning of the cycle when following the Hindu Puruna, there exited a single caste, the hamsa. Schuon contrasts this egalitarian perspective with the standpoint of the intellect, exemplified with Hinduism and reflected in the social sphere by the caste system (varna) with an emphasis on the differences and the fundamental inequality between the individual natures.

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293 It has been remarked by Henry Corbin that the starting point of Ibn Arabi’s metaphysics is ontological -a doctrine of the wujud-, whereas the most radical Isma’ilis (like Schuon) start from the Non-Being, a difference that may have its importance to understand Ibn Arabi’s position about the shari’a. See: Henry Corbin, History of the Islamic Philosophy (Kegan Paul International, 2001).
The advantage of the Hindu system is that it greatly favors the purity of esoteric spirituality; in the absence of such a system, esoterism becomes too closely linked with the average collective mentality, which cannot be proportionate to the demands of a disinterested perspective or, in other words, cannot be entirely free from denominational narcissism.  

For Schuon, the brahmanic and contemplative spirit, normative in Hinduism, does not have the upper hand in Islam but instead a more narrow mentality, characteristic of the warriors (ksatryas) and even the merchants (vaishyas), for whom what comes first are neither the “nature of things” nor the truth, but the activity and the individual interest.  

Islam, like Christianity, is not exclusively addressed to the higher human categories, and this goes without saying, since it is a question of religions; moreover, it does not envisage “contemplatives” separately from “actives,” or “hylics” separately from “psychics,” which amounts to saying that in practice it puts ksatriyas of contemplative tendencies in the place of the brahmanas and vaishyas of hylic tendencies in the place of the shudras. This being so, Moslems accentuate, in their language and psychology, the vaishya element more than the ksatrya element, because the vaishya is the average, practical, reasonable, and balanced man; his way, quite naturally, is karma-marga, the way of works and merit, thus of fear, and this is why the language of Sufism—which nevertheless is “brahmanical” or ‘pneumatic” by its nature- are paradoxically molded by the mentality of the vaishya and the way of karma, even though, within this framework, they combine with the ksatriya spirit, hence with an element of combativeness and of bhakti.  

Schuon has pointed out more than once the difficulty for a Brahmanic esoterism to remain faithful to itself in a bhaktic climate where such moralistic and voluntaristic values unilaterally dominate. By contrast, he considered that his own teaching—a long with his personality— was “Aryan” and not “Semitic,” which amounts to saying that for him everything starts with pneumatic “intellection.” Correlatively, religious revelation only represents in his eyes a macrocosmic and objective projection of the latter, its function being to actualize a kernel of certitudes, the buried truths in the Heart.  

For the Semite, everything begins with Revelation, and consequently with faith and submission; man is a priori a believer and consequently a servant: intelligence itself takes on the color of obedience. For the Aryan on the contrary—and we are not thinking of the Semiticized Aryan—it is intellection that comes first, even if it be kindled thanks to a Revelation; Revelation here is not a commandment which seems to create intelligence ex nihilo while at the same time enslaving it, but appears rather as the objectivation of the Universal Intellect, which is both transcendent and 

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295 Ibidem, 75.  
immanent. Intellectual certainty has here priority over obediential faith; the Veda does not give orders to the intelligence, it awakens it and reminds it of what it is.297

Responding indirectly to French Guénonians criticizing the “irregular” perspective of his tariqah, he also made the following observation, which although very schematic, goes to the root of the divergency, not only between Aryans and Semites, but also between his spiritual community and the majority of Muslims, including the esotericists.

A Westerner desirous of following an esoteric way would find it logical first of all to inform himself of the doctrine, then to enquire about the method and finally about its general conditions; but the Moslem of esoteric inclination — and the attitude of the Kabbalist is doubtless analogous — has definitely the opposite tendency: if one speaks to him of metaphysics, he will find it natural to reply that one must begin at the beginning, namely with pious exercises and all sorts of religious observances; metaphysics will be for later. He does not seem to realize that in the eyes of the Westerner, as also of the Hindu, this is to deprive the pious practices of their sufficient reason— not in themselves of course but with a view to knowledge — and to make the way almost unintelligible; and above all, the Semitic zealot does not see that understanding of doctrine cannot result from a moral and individualistic zeal, but that on the contrary it is there to inaugurate a new dimension and to elucidate its nature and purpose.298

In Schuon’s opinion, whereas the “ideal Semite” will a priori see the organic and substantial solidarity in a religious tradition, what will comes first to the mind of the “ideal Westerner” as well as the “ideal Hindu” will be the discontinuity between the intellectual layers in a given upaya and the hierarchy between the various darshana.

Some defenders of Frithjof Schuon, beginning with Seyyed Hossein Nasr, have nevertheless tried to identify Islamic precedents to Schuon’s universalism and, as a matter of fact, supra-confessional statements are to be found among those Sufi masters who have realized what Ibn Arabi called the “non-station” (la-maqam) and the state of the Perfect man (insan kamil). One has, however, to remark that universalism was, in most cases, the unexpected result of a degree of realization or the effect of a providential contact with a foreign religious climate such as in the case of Sufis in India. As Patrick Laude has remarked:

298 Ibidem.
Nasr tends to equate Schuon’s universalist perspective with that of famous Sufi like Ibn ‘Arabi or Rûmî. Such an identification is only partially valid however, as Schuon has explained himself in *Sufism, Veil and Quintessence*. The traditional Sufi leaning toward universality must be situated in the context of love’s abolition of boundaries and limitations, and not necessarily interpreted literally as a full recognition of the transcendent unity of religions, a recognition that would have been anyway highly problematic in a homogeneous traditional context.299

By contrast with those Sufis, universalism was for Schuon a point of departure. His spiritual journey was not from a particular religion, namely Islam, to esoteric ecumenism but from theoretical universalism, which he first discovered in the writings of Guénon, to realized universalism. He saw the Islamic *baraka*, personified by the Shaykh Alawi as certainly providential to actualize this universal wisdom. He truly needed it to pass from speculative knowledge to *gnosis* but Schuon’s situation was nevertheless quite different from Muslim-born saints. Whereas in their case, universality shines from an inward state and finally from the relatively subjective dimension of “Presence,” associated with their personal charisma, with Schuon, universality seems to have a perfectly objective content, related to the more impersonal dimension of “Truth.”300

Schuon has also proceeded to a reevaluation of the *falsafa*, which reveals his personal affinity with a sector of the Islamic tradition often attacked by the Sufis and the

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299 Patrick Laude, “Seyyed Hossein Nasr in the context of the Perennialist School,” *The Beacon of Knowledge*. Footnote 19. Schuon was also clearly aware of the difference. About Ibn Arabi, he made the following observation:

“In his *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq*, Ibn ‘Arabi sings: “My heart has become receptive to every form . . . a temple for idols, a kaaba for a Moslem pilgrim, the tablets of the Torah and the book of the Qu’ran. I adhere to the religion of love. . “All religious forms, Ibn ‘Arabi comments, unite in the love of God, and yet: “No religion is more excellent than the one founded on the love — and the need — of God . . . This religion of love is the prerogative of the Moslems; for the station of the most perfect love has been imparted to the Prophet Mohammed exclusively, and not to the other prophets; for God accepted him as his wellbeloved friend.” The extenuating circumstance for this abrupt and unintelligible denominationalism is the fact that for each religion, the Prophet who founded it is the sole personification of the total, and not the partial, *Logos*; however, one might expect an esoterist not to enclose himself in this concept-symbol, but to make mention, since he has opted for the essence, of the relativity of forms—even those that are dear to him — and to do so in an objective and concrete, and not merely metaphorical manner; or else to remain silent, out of pity.” See: Frithjof Schuon, “The Exo-esoteric symbiosis,” *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2007) 40, note 29.

300 About this distinction: “The saving manifestation of the Absolute is either Truth or Presence, but it is not one or the other in an exclusive fashion, for as Truth It comprises Presence, and as Presence It comprises Truth. Such is the twofold nature of all theophanies; thus Christ is essentially a manifestation of Divine Presence, but he is thereby also Truth: “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” No one enters into the saving proximity of the Absolute except through a manifestation of the Absolute, be it *a priori* Presence or Truth.” See: *Dictionary of the terms used by Frithjof Schuon*, edited by Deo Valodia, *Sophia Perennis*, http://www.frithjof-schuon.com/Glossary%20Schuon%20Revised.pdf, s.v. “Truth and Presence” quoted from Frithjof Schuon, “Truth and Presence,” *Forms and substance in religions.*
theologians. Whereas some traditionalist authors, following Guénon himself, have denied the importance of the Muslim philosophers, Schuon, “tracing the notion of philosophy,” recognized in it a manifestation of a sapiential type of thought.\textsuperscript{301}

According to Pythagoras, wisdom is a priori the knowledge of the stellar world and of all that is situated above us; \textit{sophia} being the wisdom of the gods, and \textit{philosophia} that of men. For Heraclitus, the philosopher is one who applies himself to the knowledge of the profound nature of things; whereas for Plato, philosophy is the knowledge of the Immutable and of the Ideas; and for Aristotle, it is the knowledge of first causes and principles, together with the sciences that are derived from them. In addition, philosophy implies for all of the Ancients moral conformity to wisdom: only he is wise, \textit{sophos}, who lives wisely. In this particular and precise sense, the wisdom of Solomon is philosophy; it is to live according to the nature of things, on the basis of piety — of the “fear of God” — with a view to that which is essential and liberating.

All this shows that, to say the least, the word “philosopher” in itself has nothing restrictive about it, and that one cannot legitimately impute to this word any of the vexing associations of ideas that it may elicit; usage applies this word to all thinkers, including eminent metaphysicians— some Sufis consider Plato and other Greeks to be prophets — so that one would like to reserve it for sages and simply use the term “rationalists” for profane thinkers.\textsuperscript{302}

With the Arabic philosophers, such as Ibn Sina or Ibn Rushd, who were for the most part believers, he shares the primacy of the Intellect (\textit{aql}), conceived not as a natural faculty, unable to access the supernatural truths -a position sometimes maintained by Ibn Arabi\textsuperscript{303}- but as a direct emanation of the Spirit (\textit{Ruh}).\textsuperscript{304} He argues that on the one hand these philosophers are open to the heritage of the Greek sages (Plato, Plotinus via the \textit{pseudo-Theology} of Aristotle, but also Hermes)\textsuperscript{305} and on the other, they benefit from the influx of grace associated to the Islamic Revelation, without mentioning the possibility for them to benefit from genuine inspirations.\textsuperscript{306} That is why for Schuon, the difference

\textsuperscript{301} In this respect he largely agreed with Henry Corbin. He was on the contrary highly critical of his identification of Shi’ism with Islamic esoterism.

\textsuperscript{302} Frithjof Schuon, “Tracing the notion of philosophy,” \textit{Sufism, Veil and Quintessence}, 89.


\textsuperscript{304} According to Henry Corbin, the neoplatonist philosophers in the Islamic world, as well as the Illuminists, the heirs of Sohravardi, have identified the Angel of the Revelation (\textit{Jibril}) and the first intellect. See: Henry Corbin, \textit{Histoire de la Philosophie Islamique}, Paris: Folio Essai, 85.


\textsuperscript{306} Letter to Titus Burckhardt, partially reproduced in the Appendix of \textit{Sufism, Veil and Quintessence}, 136-137.
between *Gnosis* (hikmat), theology (kalam) and philosophy (falsafa) should not be regarded as absolute but as merely relative, as he explains it in the following passage:

In a certain respect, the difference between philosophy, theology and *gnosis* is total; in another respect, it is relative. It is total when one understands by “philosophy,” only rationalism; by “theology,” only the explanation of religious teachings; and by “*gnosis,*” only intuitive and intellective, and thus supra-rational, knowledge; but the difference is only relative when one understands by “philosophy” the fact of thinking, by “theology” the fact of speaking dogmatically of God and religious things, and by “*gnosis*” the fact of presenting pure metaphysics, for then the genres interpenetrate.  

In this sense, Schuon could argue that “the most illustrious Sufis,” and by extension pneumatic esoterists, while being “Gnostics” by definition, are at the same time to some extent theologians and to some extent philosophers. He therefore rejects the manner some Sufis have ostracized the philosophers, on the pretext that their inspiration was more intellectual than religious and did not only proceed from the Qur’an and the Islamic Revelation.

As we have shown in this second part, Schuon, far from adopting a passive posture of informant vis-à-vis Hinduism and Sufism, has on the contrary a creative role, often underestimated by previous scholarship. He actively and consciously reappropriates for his perspective concepts (*Atman*/*Maya*) and reconfigures structures of meaning (*haqiqah, tariqah, shariah*), operating synthesis and reconciliations between not only schools (Vedanta, Samkhya, Kashmiri Shaivism), but also disciples (falsafa, tasawwuf). He finally provides original responses to traditional questions (the status of the *jivanmukta*) but also contemporary problems, such as the difficulty to follow a spiritual path in the modern world, by developing a new contemplative discipline. Considering its extension (the universality of the *religio perennis*) and its depth (a radical path of *gnosis*), his teaching may represent a unique phenomenon in the contemporary period, the work not only of a gifted soul but possibly of a spiritual authority of first magnitude. It was at least the opinion of Martin Lings, a disciple of Schuon and well-known author of a

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307 Frithjof Schuon, “Tracing the notion of philosophy.” ibidem.
biography of Muhammad, who described his first reaction when he encountered Schuon in 1938 as those terms:

I knew when I was in his [Schuon’s] presence that I was in the presence of a true saint and also the spiritual master that I was seeking. When I say ‘true saint,’ I don’t mean just a saintly man but a true saint of the first magnitude, such as one cannot expect to meet in the twentieth century. I mean a saint of the magnitude of St. Bernard, St. Francis or St. Augustine in Christianity; of Ibn Arabi or Rumi in Sufism, of Shankara in Hinduism and of Milarepa in Buddhism. I knew this with a certainty.

Martin Lings’ conviction was certainly shared by many followers of Schuon, although we may wonder whether the category of “sainthood” adequately applies to the type of Gnostic spirituality personified by Schuon.

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308 Martin Lings, Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 1987).
Conclusion: Prophets, Saints and Sages

In this study, I have argued that Schuon’s message is best understood as an autonomous path of knowledge, ritually based on Islam but centered on the Religio Perennis. I have also compared and contrasted it to the metaphysical doctrines and contemplative disciplines of the Hindu monastic traditions and the Gnostic schools of Sufism, to none of which it can be reduced in last instance. In my opinion, many misunderstandings about him, illustrated by Mark Sedgwick’s Against the Modern World, come in the first place from an error of perspective: the idea that he should be analyzed as essentially a Muslim phenomenon. I hope that my research will encourage scholars to approach Schuon with fresh and renewed eyes, focusing on the very substance of his message and not on peripheral polemics.

Schuon seems to have been fully aware of his very singular posture. In an article, already quoted about Guénon, he explained that his predecessor’s “role consists essentially in a function of transmission and commentary and not of inspired readaptation.”³¹⁰ We have reasons to believe that Schuon considered that his own role was precisely to accomplish a “readaptation” of traditional teachings, that he was a kind of “renewer,”³¹¹ whose inspiration, because of the particular cyclical conjuncture, did not stem from an already existing religion, but directly from the source of all religions, the Religio Perennis. It was precisely for this reason that his message has been qualified by his long-life student Leo Schaya as “Eliatic,” referring to the prophet Elias who according to the Kabbala will come back just before the end of time to reveal the esoteric meaning of Judaism and the other religions.

Elias, the Tishbite, he has left no prophetic work, but appears, as we have seen, in the Book of Kings: he represents, among the prophets, the type of the “hidden Master”, he who initiates the elect of Israel into the esoteric and universal wisdom of the Torah. (...) “Elias” signifies not only esoterism and its influence on Jewish exoterism, but also esoterism in its universality, which links

³¹⁰ Frithjof Schuon, René Guénon: some observations, 5.
³¹¹ As Guénon, Schuon subscribes to a cyclical vision of history in which religious forms themselves evolves according to a non-linear model. After the initial revelation, which institutes a new religion, the tradition needs periodical renewal. As providential renewers, Schuon would mention Shankara in Hinduism, Nagarjuna in Buddhism or Ibn Arabi in Islam.
the Mysteries of the Torah with those of all the authentic traditions of the East and West. (…) With the Messiah or the “Lord’s Anointed” (ha-Mashiah in Hebrew, al-Masih in Arabic, Christos in Greek) there will descend from heaven the new unanimous Tradition of humanity that Elias is summoned to prepare for in his role as immediate precursor of the Savior; he himself descends from heaven to “pave the way” for the Messiah, while Moses - or Mosaism - has acted above all as the “herald” of the Anointed One.\textsuperscript{312}

It is, however, important to insist that Sedgwick’s allegations that Schuon was wondering, “whether he was Elijah returned”\textsuperscript{313} represents a grossly materialistic distortion. This distortion relies, in fact, “upon an oblique reference in Schuon’s autobiography, Erinnerungen und Betrachtungen, to a conference in Houston, Texas at which [this particular] paper on Elijah was presented by Leo Schaya.”\textsuperscript{314} To speak for a batinist of filiations with an everlasting “Eliatic current” amounts to saying that his posture in the face of religious upaya is quite different from a believer, including a saint. In this respect, a batinist is really the heir of Elias in Judaism, Khidr in Islam, John the Baptist in Christianity.

One aspect peculiar to the universal function of Elias resides in the fact that this function can be exercised by others than Elias. In fact his mission, emanating from him by means of his universal influence, may be carried out not only by Elias himself but also by delegation, with the assistance of representatives of the elect of the various religions… The possibility of his multiple personification is made evident in the Gospel, which identifies John the Baptist with him who “crieth in the wilderness and prepareth the way of the Lord” (Matth. III, 3; Luke III, 4-6; John I, 23). … John the Baptist refused to be confused with him; however, he affirmed that he was the one of whom Isaiah spoke, and by this apparent contradiction he made it quiet evident that, without being Elias in person, he exercised in his own time and orbit the Eliatic function.\textsuperscript{315}

In his didactic poems, Schuon has defined three “spiritual types,” namely the prophet, the saint and the sage. This triad can be used as a phenomenological key to understand Schuon’s personality.

Prophets, saints, and sages:

The prophet brings a form of faith — a religion;  
The saint lives it; the sage opens  
A luminous realm of Pure Spirit  
Beyond form. Prophets are also wise men,

\textsuperscript{313} Mark Sedgwick, Against the Modern World, 170.  
\textsuperscript{314} Wilsom Eliot Poindexter, Review of Against the Modern World by Mark Sedgwick, 165.  
\textsuperscript{315} Leo Schaya, “The Eliatic Function,” 35-36.
Yet about the highest Truth they speak softly;
To the sage, holiness bestows light.

God and our heart are united in eternity.  

Schematically speaking, we could define the Schuonian prophet (rasul or nabi), the equivalent mutatis mutandi of a “major” avatara like Rama or Krishna as the transmitter of a divine dictate, “a law-giving and obligatory Message of overriding force,” addressed to a whole sector of humanity. As far as he is concerned, the saint comes after the prophet. He “lives through [a religion],” immersed, as he is, in its devotional climate. A saint does not receive a revelation, at least not of the same strength but particulars inspirations and therefore he cannot “add one syllable to the Veda.”

In the revelation, as Schuon defines it, the words proceed directly from God whereas in the inspiration, only the content, not the form, has a divine origin. Saint Augustine in Christianity, Ghazzali in Islam, Ramanuja in Hinduism were unmistakably saints of first rank but their role was not a priori to formulate the most pristine esoterism. The personality of a saintly man is dominated by the powers of will and love. Reason, in this voluntaristic perspective, operates at a much lower and instrumental level, imposing from the outward a coherent expression to the divine influx. The crucial contrast between the posture of a saint and the posture of a sage is described in the following poem:

With the true sage there is always holiness,
But a holy man is not always a sage.
Noble character they have in common;

316 Frithjof Schuon, Songs without Names XII / XVI (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2007). The importance of this poem to understand Frithjof Schuon’s function has already been remarked by a Muslim scholar who wrote “Frithjof Schuon: le Sceau des Sages” (Dossier H: Frithjof Schuon, edited by Jean Baptiste Aymard and Patrick Laude, Lausanne: Editions de l’Age d’Homme, 2002).

317 About the distinction between major and minor avatara: “A ‘great incarnation’, who conforms to cyclic laws and in whom Deity is manifested in a direct and active way, differs totally, not only of ordinary men, ‘geniuses’ included, but even from a ‘lesser incarnation’, such as takes place through a human receptacle where the divine manifestation is in a sense ‘indirect’ and ‘passive’.” See: Frithjof Schuon, “Vicissitudes of spiritual temperaments,” Gnosis: Divine Wisdom (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2007) 44. Schuon also distinguished between solar and lunar avatars.

318 A text like the first chapter of the Fusus al-hikam and some expressions, such as St Irenaus’s “God became God, so that man can become God” or Hallaj’s “Ana al-Haqq” (I am the Real) were considered by Schuon as secondary revelations.

319 Frithjof Schuon, “Vedanta,” Language of the Self (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1999) 38. In his own case, we would said, that if his doctrine was the fruit of “intellection”, his method was due to an “inspiration.”
But different is the spirit’s journey.

The saint is rooted in will and love;
The sage, in knowledge and intelligence.
Certainly, the saint also can have wisdom —
There are many paths in the Spirit’s land.320

In the case of the sage, the “driving force” of mystical inspiration has been replaced by “reason” if he has an earthly nature like Aristotle321 or by intellective intuition if he is a “true sage” like Plato. This intellection, leading to transcendent “knowledge,” springs “from that immanent divine spark that is the Intellect,” whereas inspiration depends of an outward illumination and a preexistence revelation, playing the role of “an intellection for the collectivity.”322 From the viewpoint of the “true sage, “the return to God is inherent in the fact of existence: our being itself offers the way of return (...) passing through the strata of our ontological reality, all the way to pure Substance, which is one.” It is thus that he becomes totally himself, realizing “what he knows: a full comprehension—in the light of the Absolute—of relativity dissolves it and leads back to the Absolute.”323

Given the purely esoteric and intellectual nature of his perspective, Schuon clearly had the profile of a sage. This interpretation is supported by a very brief article,

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321 “A man such as Aristotle provides a classic example of a qualification that is exclusively intellectual and, by this very fact, unilateral and necessarily limited, even on the level of his genius, since perfect intellection ipso facto involves contemplation and interiorization. In the case of the Stagirite, the intelligence is penetrating but the tendency of the will is exteriorizing, in conformity moreover with the cosmolatry of the majority of the Greeks; it is this that enabled Saint Thomas to support the religious thesis regarding the “natural” character of the intelligence, so called because it is neither revealed nor sacramental, and the reduction of intelligence to reason illumined by faith, the latter alone being granted the right to be “supernatural” (Frithjof Schuon, “Real and apparent rationalism,” Logic and Transcendence).
322 “There are here three possibilities: firstly, men dominates the passional element, everyone lives spiritually in his inward revelation; this is the golden age, in which everyone is born an initiate. Second possibility: men are affected by the passional element to the point of forgetting ceratin aspects of the Truth, whence the necessity -or the opportuneness- of revelation that while being outward are metaphysical in spirit, such as the Upanishads. Thirdly: the majority of men are dominated by passions, whence the formalistic, exclusive and combative religions, which communicate to them on the one hand the means of challenging the passional element with a view to salvation, and on the other hand the means to overcoming it in view of total Truth, and thereby transcending religious formalism which veils it while suggesting it in an indirect manner. Religious revelation is both a veil of light and a light veiled.” See: Frithjof Schuon, The Essential Frithjof Schuon, 89.
extremely elliptical in his style, entitled “Frithjof Schuon: le sceau des Sages,” in which a
Muslim scholar reports that Schuon attributed to himself a very specific function:

According to Frithjof Schuon, the sage comes before the saint in the spiritual hierarchy, and so immediately after the avatara himself. (…) Responding to questions about one of his poems on the Kalki-Avatara, he made the following statement: “… as far as I am concerned, I am the seal of the sages, khatamu’l’hukama.”

As it is well known, the Muslim faith depicts Muhammad as the last prophet before the Day of Judgment (yaum ad-din), as the seal for the prophecy (khatam-an-nabiyyin). In the 10th century, Khidr however revealed to Al-Hakim Al-Tirmidhi the existence of an analogous seal for the Saints (khatm al-wilaya). Ibn Arabi identifies the Jesus of the second coming to the seal of “universal” sainthood and claims for himself the status of seal of the “muhammadan” sainthood, meaning that he is the last heir (wirth) of the muhammadan wisdom (hikma muhammadiyya) and the possessor of the esoteric secrets specific to the Qur’anic revelation. The author of the Fusus also affirms the superiority of sainthood to prophethood; but in order to counter radical Isma’ilis, he assigns a higher status to the prophets because in their person they combine the outward perfection of the nubuwwa and the inward perfection of the wilaya.

The Muslim scholar quoted above seems to have introduced here a third dimension, to allude to the existence of a new sphere of wisdom (hikma) encompassing by its universality the nubuwwa and the wilaya. This universality can be deduced from the fact that in the Schuonian system, the sage embodies a metaphysical principle: the immanence of total Truth in the “naturally supernatural” intellect that is “potential” in every man and women but “actualized” only for the sage. The latter does not bring to

324 "Frithjof Schuon: le Sceau des Sages," 388-389. The translation is mine. Another testimony is due to Whitall N. Perry: “Schuon always rejected efforts made to label his intellectual or spiritual role in the world. “I do not know who or what I am,” he insisted; “it is Heaven that knows.” The closest he came to definitions was to say that he represented the compendium or “seal” of wisdom for our moment in the cosmic cycle. And yet if someone claimed for him a wisdom greater than what a Shankara or a Plato possessed, his rejoinder was that he benefited from an insight available at this point in the history which those coming earlier did not have at their disposal.” See: Whitall N. Perry, “Perspectives,” Sophia 2 no 2 (Winter 1998).

325 Shiism has a different doctrine of the Seals centered on the figure of the 12th Imam. On the question of the seals, see: Michel Chodkiewicz, The Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn ‘Arabi (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993).


327 In another poem also quoted in "Frithjof Schuon: le Sceau des Sages," Schuon wrote:
“All that is written in the good ancient books
human beings a divine law (*shariah*), this function being assumed by the prophet. Nor does he exemplify as the saint religious perfection in the eyes of the believers. Rather, he is “born with a state of knowledge” and his role is “to open a luminous realm of Pure Spirit” to create a “liberating passage” toward the Self (*Atman*). Speaking about René Guénon but also indirectly about himself, Schuon used the Valentinian category of “pneumatic” to describe the quality of a born-gnostic who is more or less independent of religious forms.

A pneumatic is in a way the “incarnation” of a spiritual archetype, which means that he is born with a state of knowledge which, for other people, would actually be the goal, and not the point of departure; the pneumatic does not “go forward” towards something “other than himself”; he stays where he is in order to become fully what he himself is — namely his archetype — by ridding himself, one after the other, of veils or outer surfaces, shackles imposed by the ambience or perhaps by heredity. He becomes rid of them by means of ritual supports — “sacraments,” one might say — not forgetting meditation and prayer; but his situation is nonetheless quite other than that of ordinary men, even prodigiously gifted ones. From another point of view it must be recognized that a born gnostic is by nature more or less independent, not only as regards the “letter” but also as regards the “law”; and this does not make his relation with the ambience any simpler, either psychologically or socially (…). In any case, the pneumatic is situated, by his nature, on the vertical and timeless axis — where there is no “before” or “after” — so that the archetype which he personifies or “incarnates”, and which is his true “himself” or “his very self” can, at any moment, pierce through the contingent, individual envelope; it is therefore really “himself” who is speaking. The real gnostic does not attribute any “state” to himself, for he is without ambition and without ostentation; he has a tendency rather — through an “instinct for holding back” — to disguise his nature inasmuch as he has, in any case, awareness of “cosmic play” (*lila*) and it is hard for him to take secular and worldly persons seriously, that is to say, “horizontal” beings who are full of self-confidence and who remain, “humanists” that they are, below the vocation of man.³²⁸

For the religious man, the “real Gnostic” necessarily represents a source of scandal – and crisis has unmistakably erupted in Schuon’s life- particularly when the “archetype” suddenly pierces through the envelope and the “cosmic play,” revealing the true personality behind the mask.


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About Being and the entire universe
God has inscribed it in my innermost heart.”
Appendix:
Remarks on the influence of Perennialism

Mark Sedgwick had the merit to be the first investigating the larger impact of the perennialist movement. In the post 9/11 context, however, he too unilaterally depicts traditionalism as a reactionary movement, having inspired radical groups (in Europe and Russia) opposed to modern democracy and liberalism. Sedgwick pays a somehow disproportionate attention to the marginal phenomena of “political perennialism,” which can be traced back to the name of a single man, Julius Evola (1898-1974), whose ideas often diverge to the extreme of mainstream traditionalism.

The Italian baron quotes Guénon and selectively uses some of his theories, along with Nietzsche and Oswald Spengler but Guénonians and Schuonians barely refer even to his non-political writings about philosophy, eastern and western traditions, magic etc. More significant, his own theories about the modern world, initiation and the relationship between action and contemplation came under the direct criticism of René Guénon, Titus Burkhardt and Frithjof Schuon.

Jean Biès: Do you think that a “recovery” has already begun on the side and that this “recovery” may have its origin in the West, as Julius Evola, for example has suggested?

Frithjof Schuon: One does not see any sign of an actual “recovery”; Evola places the ksatrya above the brahmana, he confuses the role of the East for that of the West and chooses Mussolini.

Whereas the Perennialist perspective is contemplative and Gnostics, Evola glorifies power and professes the superiority of action, developing his own political

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329 A marketing strategy that has insured for the author a favorable review in the New York Time, in which Edward Rothstein seems to draw a dubious parallel between Traditionalism and the war on terror: “Traditionalism declared a war in which modernity itself was the enemy. Only in the total destruction of democratic individualism and liberal humanism could the lost wisdom be restored. In some arenas, that is the battle still being fought.” See: Edward Rothstein, “Those Who Were Inspired to Hate the Modern World,” New York Times (July 10, 2004).


332 Jean Biès, “Frithjof Schuon: a Face of Eternal Wisdom.”
theories and philosophy of history based on the writings of J. Bachofen. In Evola’s view, there is not one Primordial Tradition, but two: a lower tradition that is matriarchal and a higher that is patriarchal, Aryan and polar by its geographical origin. Evola has also cultivated a very anti-Christian rhetoric and influenced neo-pagan movements, whose efforts to restore the cults of Antiquity are unanimously denigrated by genuine Perennialists.

By contrast with Evola’s involvement with Fascism and the SS after 1943, Guénon and Schuon clearly avoided any political engagement, although both of them were probably conservatively inclined. Guénon’s *Autorité spirituelle et pouvoir temporel*, can be incidentally read as a refutation of the political ideas of Charles Maurras (1868-1952), the leader of the *Action Francaise*, a French monarchist league which was advocating political activism and violence to restore a traditional order in France. Coomaraswamy’s only political engagement was connected to the Indian anti-colonialist movement and resulted in his exile to the US.

Sedgwick’s understanding of the intellectual history of the movement has often proved to be very rudimentary, but his scholarly methodology reveals even more clearly its shortcomings, when he turns to the post-evolian political groups “deriving from traditionalism” such as the Neo-Eurasian political party headed by Alexander Durgin or the English feminine-separatist group, Aristasia. As Wilson Eliot Poindexter remarks, Sedgwick seems unable to make even a theoretical distinction between “a traditionalist thinker and non-traditionalist anti-modernists who exhibit familiarity with traditional writings” and this fact should lead us to seriously question the validity of his category of “political perennialism.”

The following are some remarks about the influence of Perennialism in Comparative Religions, which may interest academics in the field.

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334 Mark Sedgwick, “Fascism” and “Terror in Italy,” *Against the Modern World*.


During his investigation about Eranos, a discussion group on comparative spirituality inspired by the Swiss psychologist Karl Jung, Steven Wasserstrom, who was obviously very unfamiliar with the writings of René Guénon, has incidentally discovered that Perennialism played a significant role in the intellectual life of Henry Corbin (1903-1978) and Mircea Eliade (1907-1986). I would argue that some of the most enigmatic aspects of their works are better understood as crypto-perennialist thesis. Both of them shared with the traditionalist movement a similar disillusionment with the achievements of modernity and their own research has been largely motivated by a similar quest of a perennial wisdom which could represent an answer to a spiritual crisis of modern man, Eliade described as a process of desacralization.

(T)he completely profane world, the wholly desacralized cosmos, is a recent discovery in the history of the human spirit... (D)esacralization pervades the entire experience of the nonreligious man of modern societies and that, in consequence, he finds it increasingly difficult to rediscover the existential dimensions of religious man in the archaic societies.

In the case of the Romanian scholar, the intellectual influence of Guénon seems much stronger in his early writings but central concepts of his thought such as the opposition between traditional and modern man, the notions of anthropocosmic correspondence, sacred center, the cyclical quality of traditional time, human construction as a repetition of the cosmogony, sacrifice as reintegration, androgyny, and archetype are directly borrowed from Guénon, particularly from *Le Roi du Monde* and *Les Symboles de la Science Sacrée*. When Eliade writes in *Le mythe de l’Éternel Retour*, that “the cardinal problems of metaphysics could be renewed through a knowledge of archaic ontology, “ he seems to share at this point Guénon’s expectation for a restoration of traditional intellectuality in the West through the rediscovery of the “unanimous Tradition”. For Eliade as for Guénon, the so-called “primitive” man should be depicted as a primordial man because he lives closer to the Sacred.

The man of archaic societies tends to live as much as possible in the sacred or in close proximity to consecrated objects. The tendency is perfectly understandable, because, for primitives as for the man of all premodern societies, the sacred is equivalent to a power, and, in the last analysis, to

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340 René Guénon, *Symbols of Sacred Science* (Hillsdale NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001). This book was published posthumously. The articles were initially published in *Les Etudes Traditionelles* between the 20s and the 40s.
reality. The sacred is saturated with being...(R)eligious man deeply desires to be, to participate in reality, to be saturated with power.\textsuperscript{341}

When in the same book Eliade makes the point that “archaic ontology” -the equivalent of Guénon’s “traditional metaphysics”- doesn’t originate in Greece and that Plato has simply reformulated a much older wisdom, initially expressed through symbols, he simply repeats ideas expressed by Guénon as early as in \textit{Introduction générale à l’étude des doctrines Hindoues} about the so-called “Greek miracle.”\textsuperscript{342}

Obviously, the metaphysical concepts of the archaic world were not always formulated in theoretical language: but the symbol, the myth, the rite, express, on different planes and through the means proper to them, a complex system of coherent affirmations about the ultimate reality of things, a system that can be regarded as constituting a metaphysics.\textsuperscript{343}

The “phenomenology of the Sacred” in some respects at least, often seems to have served as a Trojan horse for some traditionalist ideas about religion. For Eliade, the rejection of reductionism and naturalism was intended to open the way for a far more ambitious project of “re-sacralization” of the modern civilization. Because of his strong Christian background, Eliade nevertheless disagrees with Guénon on some issues, even in his most traditionalist-inclined works, attributing for instance a preeminent position to the Abrahamic religions and their linear conception of time.

Christian thought tended to transcend, once and for all, the old themes of eternal repetition, just as it had undertaken to transcendent all the other archaic viewpoints by revealing the importance of the religious experience of faith and that of the value of the human personality.\textsuperscript{344}

He also reduces the cyclical conception of time to an ambiguous “fear of history,” whereas for Guénon, it is not a matter of psychology but simply of cosmology and objective truth. In return, Guénon’s review of \textit{Le mythe de l’Eternel Retour} remains ambivalent, for he sees in Eliade a scholar whose commitment to traditionalist ideas is not fully consistent.\textsuperscript{345} Later in his career, Eliade, while recognizing that Guénon offered an original perspective on esoterism,\textsuperscript{346} has even more clearly diverged from him.

\textsuperscript{341} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{342} René Guénon, “The classical prejudice,” \textit{Introduction to the study of the Hindu doctrines}.
\textsuperscript{343} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{344} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{345} Review republished in René Guénon. \textit{Traditional forms and cosmic cycles} (Hillsdale NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001).
defining the Sacred in a purely psychological and anti-metaphysical manner as “a structure of human consciousness,” whereas for Guénon, as well as Schuon, the Sacred is necessarily objective and “supra-human” or it is not.

The case of the phenomenologist Henry Corbin is in a sense the opposite. As a disciple of the French Orientalist Louis Massignon (1883-1962), he was initially very hostile to Guénon’s “intellectualism.” For him also, Hindu doctrines tend to fall under the neothomist category of “natural mysticism.” It is only later, possibly through his personal contacts with Seyyed Hossein Nasr in the Iranian Academy of Philosophy (Tehran), that he moved closer to the Perennialist perspective to the point that toward the end of his life his personal engagement in esoterism had become an “open secret.” Another remarkable influence upon him may have been the late Shiite scholar, Allameh Tabatabaei (1892-1981).

In his later years he would often hold study sessions with Henry Corbin and Nasr, in which not only the classical texts of divine wisdom and gnosis were discussed, but also a whole cycle of what Nasr calls comparative gnosis, in which in each session the sacred texts of one of the major religions, containing mystical and gnostic teachings, such as the Tao Te Ching, the Upanishads and the Gospel of John, were discussed and compared with Sufism and Islamic gnostic doctrines in general.

Through the study of Shiite Gnosis, Ismailism and the theosophy of Ibn Arabi, Molla Sadra and Sohravardi, Henry Corbin has developed the concept of “Prophetic philosophy” and the idea of a supra-confessional fraternity between the initiates of the three religions of the Book. In his last works, he treats not only Islamic esoterism, but also refers to a large variety of religious movements such as the Knight Templar or the Covent of Green Island founded by Rulman Merswin (1307-1382) in Strasbourg. This

latter “spiritual center for the Johannic knights,” as he called it, was under the spiritual guidance of a “friend of God (Gottesfreunde) from the Upper-Land,” and Corbin draws a parallel between this invisible initiator and the twelfth Imam in Shi’ism or Melchissedic in Judaism. As Wasserstrom suggests, it is possibly with the idea of restoring the Temple that he created the St John Academy in Jerusalem and his contributions to Eranos clearly carried a message for the potential representatives of western initiatory orders.

Corbin also develops a very severe critique of modernity and the enlightenment, asserting that the eviction of the mundus imaginalis from late medieval philosophy, at the time of the Latin Averroism in the late 13th century, and the closure of the soul to the domain of visionary experience represent a crucial factor in the emergence of the anti-traditional spirit.

The function of the mundus imaginalis and the imaginal Forms can be defined by their intermediate and mediating situation between the intelligible word and the sensory world. On the one hand, it materializes the sensible forms, and on the other it « imaginalizes » the intelligible forms to which it gave a shape and a dimension. The imaginal world symbolizes for one part with the sensible forms and for the other with the intelligible forms. It is this intermediate situation that imposes to the imaginative power a necessary disciple that has been degraded [in the modern period] into mere « fantasy », producing only imaginary forms, irreality susceptible of any extravagances.

In his eyes, the task of the “true religious scholars” is to provide the modern man, haunted by nihilism, with a new access to the Sacred. “Illuminated scholars,” as Wasserstrom names them, are here to profess a new gnosis rooted in traditional esoterism but that could give an adequate answer to the “Death of God,” the death of the personal God of our exoteric theologies. In this respect,

It is striking that both Scholem and Corbin claimed that phenomenology was anticipated by the mystics whom they studied. (...) “Pure phenomenology,” he [Corbin] explained was that “analysis which discloses the intention hidden beneath a phenomenon, beneath what is apparent, beneath the Zahir. So phenomenology is exactly kashf al-mahjub, kashf al-asrar (a revealing of the concealed, a revealing of secrets).
His sensibility to the theophanic power of beauty and to the message of the *Fideli d’Amor* places Corbin in a significant position of interlocutor for Schuon. He also shares with the master of the Maryamiyya a more pluralistic conception of the Tradition than Guénon and a certain defiance *vis-à-vis* institutionalized Churches, although he went much further in his rehabilitation of historical Gnosticism and his opposition between the “Church of Peter” and the “Church of John.” It should be remarked however that his famous analysis about Shi’ism never totally convinced Schuon, who also reproached him for reducing metaphysics to a mystical hermeneutic:

> It is aberrant to have the esoterism of Islam coincide with Shiite “imamology” and “gnoseology”, as Corbin would have it; then to reduce metaphysics to an inspirationist exegesis, as if intellection—which is supernatural- did not exist or had a role to play. Authentic esoterism stems from the nature of things and not from a dynastic institution; its seeds are everywhere present, sparks can flash everywhere; to make esoterism result from a religious program and a theological argument is a contradiction in terms. Of course fundamental truths were expressed initially by those whom the Shiites consider to be imams; however, Sunnite Sufism refers to these sages, not insofar as they are supposed to be imams in the theological sense of Shiism, but insofar as they are “poles” (*qutb*, pl. *aqtab*) of Islam as such, outside all confessional interpretation or annexation.

In France, a journal such as *Connaissance des Religions* still guaranties a certain academic audience for the Perennialist ideas. In North America, *Studies in Comparative Religion* played a similar function and was later replaced by *Sophia* edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr and *Sacred Web*. In 1982, the debate about the merits of Perennialism for the academic study of religions emerged in the annual AAR meeting: from 1984 to 1990 there used to be a program unit called “Esotericism/Esotericism and

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356 By contrast, Frithjof Schuon wrote: “As for Gnosticism, whether it arises in a Christian, Moslem or other climate, it is a fabric of more or less disordered speculations, often of Manichean origin; and it is a mythomania characterized by a dangerous mixture of exoteric and esoteric concepts. Doubtless it contains symbolisms that are not without interest — the contrary would be astonishing — but it is said that “the road to hell is paved with good intentions”; it could just as well be said that it is paved with symbolisms.” See: Frithjof Schuon, “Gnosis is not just anything,” *To Have a Center*, 67.

357 Frithjof Schuon, “Diversity of paths,” *In the face of the Absolute*, 174


Perennialism”, chaired by James B. Robinson.\textsuperscript{361} In this context, Steven T. Katz published two articles, in which he asserts that there is no perennial philosophy, because experience is socially constructed and societies differ:

The single epistemological assumption that has exercised my thinking is that there is NO pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences. Neither mystical experience nor more ordinary forms of experience give any indication, or any grounds for believing, that there are mediated … All experience is processed through, organized by, and makes itself available to us in extremely epistemological ways.\textsuperscript{362}

Huston Smith, who had discovered the writings of Schuon in 1969 during a trip to Japan\textsuperscript{363} and became since then an academic spokesman for perennialism, responded in an article entitled “Is there a perennial philosophy?”\textsuperscript{364} He began by pointing out, that “in aiming his critique of the perennial philosophy at mystical identities, Katz sets out on the wrong foot.” Katz’s objections against Perennial Philosophy, he says, start from a confusion between the metaphysics of the “transcendent unity of religions” and the phenomenology of the mystical experiences developed by Aldous Huxley, Zaehner, Stace and James. For Huston Smith, the Perennial philosophy has nothing to do with any assumptions about “mystical experience,” but instead relies (1) on metaphysical intuitions (not theology), (2) on the “minority position” of the esoterists. Because of their esoteric outlook, Perennialists are people very sensitive to communality between religious forms, but they discern a rigorous unity only at the level of the Absolute (the \textit{Nirguna Brahma} of Shankara).

Strictly speaking, this negative, apophatic, neti-neti aspect of the Absolute –metaphysically counterpart of the unmediated mystical experience that Katz goes after- is the only point where perennialists see the traditions converging indistinguishably. Thereafter revelation fractionates like light through a prism, and what the perennial typology spreads before us is correspondence.\textsuperscript{365}

His response to Katz was clearly a restatement of Schuon’s teaching on how the “Pure Absolute,” \textit{Atman}, manifests itself through a multiplicity of religious \textit{upaya} that

\textsuperscript{363} Huston Smith, \textit{Beyond the postmodern Mind, the place of meaning in a Global Civilization} (Illinois: Quest Books, 2003) 44. Huston Smith is also the board of the directors of \textit{Sophia} along with Seyyed Hossein Nasr.
\textsuperscript{365} \textit{Ibidem} 564.
represent both a “veil of light” and a “light veiled.” By his positions, Huston Smith, along with Seyyed Hossein Nasr, is certainly among the academics of first rank that have most explicitly assimilated the perennialist doctrine. Like Eliade and Corbin, he has integrated the Guénonian criticism of the modern world, but he also agrees with Schuon on the primacy of pure metaphysics.
Selected Bibliography

Books in English by Frithjof Schuon


World Wisdom is in the process of publishing revised translations of Frithjof Schuon’s works. WW often does not mention the name of the translators.


Original Books by Schuon Not Yet Published in English

Autumn Leaves & The Ring: Poems by Frithjof Schuon.
Memories and Meditations.

Anthologies of Frithjof Schuon’s Writings


Other Perennialist authors


**Books about Frithjof Schuon and the perennialist School**


**Sufism**


**Vedanta**


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Native American
Neihardt, John, Black elk Speaks: being the life story of a holy man of the Oglala Sioux, University of Nebraska Press, 2000.
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