

The Heart of the *Religio Perennis*: Frithjof Schuon on Esotericism

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Exotericism consists in identifying transcendent realities with the dogmatic forms, and if need be, with the historical facts of a given Revelation, whereas esotericism refers in a more or less direct manner to these same realities. (*Frithjof Schuon*)¹

If we can grasp the transcendent nature of the human being, we thereby grasp the nature of revelation, of religion, of tradition; we understand their possibility, their necessity, their truth. And in understanding religion, not only in a particular form or according to some verbal specification, but also in its formless essence, we understand the religions... the meaning of their plurality and diversity; this is the plane of gnosis, of the *religio perennis*, whereon the extrinsic antinomies of dogmas are explained and resolved. (*Frithjof Schuon*)²

Introduction

Generally speaking, "esotericism" refers to a field of "spiritual" knowledge and practice which is secret, arcane, and initiatory; the term

encompasses movements as diverse as hermeticism, alchemy, Rosicrucianism, theosophy, freemasonry, Eastern Tantras and various psycho-physical disciplines, Shamanism, Christian mysticism, Kabbala, and Sufism as well as a plethora of modern occult and para-psychological movements gathered around disparate charismatic figures—Aleister Crowley, Madame Blavatsky and G.I. Gurdjieff might be cited as representative figures. Today esotericism, ancient and modern, is a burgeoning field of academic study. Scholars from fields as diverse as religious studies, history, psychology and art history (to name only a few) are exploring a terrain which earlier remained largely the province of "occultists" of various mien. Witness the recent proliferation of ambitious but sober and rigorous scholarly studies and the appearance of academic journals such as *Esoterica: The Journal of Esoteric Studies*.³

Many modern movements which claim access to some kind of "esoteric" knowledge are in fact concerned only with the study and manipulation of psychic and extra-sensory phenomena and have no necessary connection with religion. A vast spiritual wasteland is populated by psychic, spiritualist and "esoteric" groups which concern themselves with auric eggs, astral bodies, ectoplasmic apparitions, vibrations, mind waves, death lights, Rochester knockings and, in Whittall Perry's words, "sundry other emergences and extravagances of hideous nomenclature..."⁴

This article is concerned neither with any particular esoteric movement nor with the modern efflorescence of "pseudo-esotericisms" but with the perspective of a group of thinkers who can be gathered together under the rubric of "traditionalism" and for whom esotericism comprises the heart of the great religious traditions of both East and West. In his essay "The Pertinence of Philosophy" Ananda Coomaraswamy suggested that

...if we are to consider what may be the most urgent practical task to be resolved by the philosopher, we can only answer that this is... a

¹ F. Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*, New York, 1975, p. 144.

² F. Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, London, 1966, p. 142.

³ See, for instance, W. J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: esotericism in the mirror of secular thought*, Albany, 1998; A. Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, Albany, 1994; *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, ed. A. Faivre & J. Needleman, New York, 1995; *Esoterica: The Journal of Esoteric Studies* at www.esoteric.msu.edu.

⁴ W. Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, London, 1971, p. 437.

control and revision of the principles of comparative religion, the true end of which science... should be to demonstrate the common metaphysical basis of all religions...¹

This statement adumbrates the agenda of the traditionalists. The traditionalist outlook was first publicly articulated by the French metaphysician, René Guénon.² Since the time of Guénon's earliest writings, soon after the turn of the last century, a significant traditionalist "school" has emerged with Guénon, Coomaraswamy and Frithjof Schuon acknowledged within the group as its pre-eminent exponents.

The traditionalists, by definition, are committed to the exposition of the *philosophia perennis* which lies at the heart of the diverse religions and behind the manifold forms of the world's different traditions. However, unlike some of those who have sought to popularize the "perennial philosophy"—Aldous Huxley, various neo-Hindus and some Aquarian "New Agers" amongst them—the traditionalists are also dedicated to the preservation and illumination of the traditional forms which give each religious heritage its *raison d'être* and guarantee its formal integrity and, by the same token, ensure its spiritual efficacy.

This article focuses on the writings of Frithjof Schuon. After a brief introduction to his life and work we will turn to Schuon's understanding of esotericism and its relationship to religious exotericism. Attention will be drawn to the traditionalist perspective on both mystical experience and metaphysical science. Some consideration will also be given to the unprecedented exposure of traditional esoteric wisdom in the contemporary world.

The Life and Work of Frithjof Schuon

Frithjof Schuon was born of German parents in Basle in 1907.³ He was schooled in both French and German but left school at sixteen to

¹ *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, ed. S. Radhakrishnan & J.H. Muirhead, London, 1952, pp. 158-159.

² Guénon's most significant writings include *Man and His Becoming According to Vedanta* (1925), *The Crisis of the Modern World* (1927), and *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times* (1945).

³ For biographical information on Schuon see B. Perry, *Frithjof Schuon, Metaphysician and Artist*, Bloomington, 1981, and K.S. Oldmeadow, *Traditionalism: Religion in the Light of the Perennial Philosophy*, Colombo, 2000, Ch 4.

work as a textile designer in Paris. From an early age he devoted himself to a study of philosophy, religion and metaphysics, reading the classical and modern works of European philosophy, and the sacred literatures of the East. Amongst the Western sources Plato and Eckhart left a profound impression while the *Bhagavad Gita* was his favourite Eastern reading.⁴ Even before moving to Paris Schuon came into contact with the writings of René Guénon "which served to confirm his own intellectual rejection of the modern civilisation while at the same time bringing into sharper focus his spontaneous understanding of metaphysical principles and their traditional applications."⁵ From his earliest years Schuon was also fascinated by sacred art, especially that of Japan and the Far East.⁶

After working for a time in Alsace, Schuon underwent military service before returning to his design work in Paris. There, in 1930, his interest in Islam led him to a close study of Arabic.⁷ Schuon's personal spiritual development is veiled in obscurity but it seems probable that it was in this period that he formally committed himself to Islam. In the 1930s Schuon several times visited North Africa, spending time in Algeria, Morocco and Egypt where he met Guénon, with whom he had been corresponding for some years. In many respects Schuon's work was to be an elaboration of principles first given public expression by Guénon. However, Schuon himself was a disciple of the Shaikh Ahmad Al 'Alawi, the Algerian Sufi sage and founder of the 'Alawi order.⁸ Schuon has written of the Shaikh:

...someone who represents in himself... the idea which for hundreds of years has been the life-blood of that civilisation [the Islamic]. To

⁴ Barbara Perry, *op.cit.*, p. 2.

⁵ *ibid.* See also W. Perry, "The Revival of Interest in Tradition" in *The Unanimous Tradition*, ed. R. Fernando, Colombo, 1991, pp. 14-16.

⁶ In an unusual personal reference in one of his works Schuon tells us of a Buddha figure in an ethnographical museum. It was a traditional representation in gilded wood and flanked by two statues of the Bodhisattvas Seishi and Kwannon. The encounter with this "overwhelming embodiment of an infinite victory of the Spirit" Schuon sums up in the phrase "veni, vidi, victus sum". F. Schuon, *In the Tracks of Buddhism*, London, 1968, p. 121.

⁷ B.Perry, *op.cit.*, p. 3.

⁸ See M. Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, Berkeley, 1971, and M. Valsan: "Notes on the Shaikh al-'Alawi, 1869-1934", *Studies in Comparative Religion*, V:i, 1971.

meet such a one is like coming face to face, in mid-twentieth century, with a medieval Saint or a Semitic Patriarch.¹

Schuon himself was eventually to become the Shaikh of a *tariqa* based first in Switzerland and later in Indiana in the USA.

India held a strong attraction for Schuon but a visit to the subcontinent was cut short by the outbreak of World War II which obliged him to return to Europe. Schuon served for some months in the French army before being captured by the Germans, subsequently escaping to Switzerland where he was briefly imprisoned before being granted asylum. He settled in Lausanne and, some years later, took out Swiss nationality.²

Schuon and his wife developed friendly contacts with visiting American Indians in Paris and Brussels in the 1950s. During their first visit to North America in 1959, the Schuons were officially adopted into the Red Cloud family of the Lakota tribe, that branch of the Sioux nation from which came the revered "medicine-man" Black Elk.³ As well as making visits to America Schuon travelled again in North Africa and the Middle East. Although living in reclusive circumstances in Switzerland Schuon maintained on-going friendships with representatives of all the great religious traditions. He spent his later years in America until his death in May, 1998.

Schuon's published work forms an imposing corpus and covers a staggering range of religious and metaphysical subjects without any of the superficialities and simplifications which we normally expect from someone covering such a vast territory. His works on specific religious traditions have commanded respect from scholars and practitioners within the traditions in question. As well as publishing over twenty books he was a prolific contributor to journals such as *Etudes Traditionnelles*, *Islamic Quarterly*, *Tomorrow*, *Studies in Comparative Religion* and *Sophia Perennis*. All of his major works, written in French, have now been published in English.⁴

¹ F. Schuon, "Rahimahu Llah", *Cahiers du Sud*, Aug-Sept 1935, quoted in M. Lings: *op.cit.*, p. 116. There is a moving portrait of the Shaikh by Schuon, facing page 160.

² B.Perry, *op.cit.*, p. 3.

³ For some account of the Schuons' personal experiences with the Plains Indians see F. Schuon, *The Feathered Sun: Plains Indians in Art and Philosophy*, Bloomington, 1990.

⁴ Schuon's books in English translation are listed at the end of this article.

Schuon's writings are governed by an unchanging set of metaphysical principles. They exhibit nothing of a "development" or "evolution" but are, rather, re-statements of the same principles from different vantage points and brought to bear on divergent phenomena. His work is concerned with the re-affirmation of traditional metaphysical principles, with an explication of the esoteric dimensions of religion, with the penetration of mythological and religious forms, and with the critique of a modernism which is indifferent (or openly hostile) to the principles which inform all traditional wisdoms. His general position was defined in his first book to appear in English, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (1953), of which T.S. Eliot remarked, "I have met with no more impressive work on the comparative study of Oriental and Occidental religion."⁵

Multiple Revelations and the Principle of Orthodoxy

Four *leitmotifs* run through Schuon's work on religion: the necessary diversity of Revelations and thus of religious forms; the principle of orthodoxy; the distinction between the exoteric and esoteric domains, and the relationship between these outer and inner dimensions of religion; and the transcendent unity of religions. Before focusing on Schuon's perspective on esotericism let us briefly consider the first two of these themes in his work.

Schuon's view of religion turns on the axiomatic notion of multiple and diverse Revelations; the principle is a kind of linch-pin in his work. Schuon perceives humankind neither as a monolithic psychic entity nor as an amorphous agglomerate but as being divided into several distinct branches, each with its own peculiar traits, psychological and otherwise, which determine its receptivities to truth and shape its apprehensions of Reality. Needless to say there is no question here of any kind of racialism or ethnocentrism which attributes a superiority or inferiority to this or that ethnic collectivity. Nor, however, is there any sentimental prejudice in favour of the idea that the world's peoples are only "superficially" and "accidentally" different. "We observe the existence, on earth, of diverse races, whose differences are 'valid' since there are

⁵ Cover of the revised edition of *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, New York, 1975.

no 'false' as opposed to 'true' races."¹ Each branch of humanity exhibits a psychic and spiritual homogeneity which may transcend barriers of geography and biology. An example: that shamanism should extend through parts of Northern Europe, Siberia, Mongolia, Tibet and the Red Indian areas betokens, in Schuon's view, a certain temperament shared by the peoples in question, one quite independent of physical similarities and leaving aside the question of migrations, "borrowings" and "influences".²

To the diverse human collectivities are addressed Revelations which are determined in their formal aspects by the needs and receptivities at hand. Thus,

...what determines the differences among forms of Truth is the difference among human receptacles. For thousands of years already humanity has been divided into several fundamentally different branches, which constitute so many complete humanities, more or less closed in on themselves; the existence of spiritual receptacles so different and so original demands differentiated refractions of the one Truth.³

In a sense the Revelations are communicated in different divine languages. Just as we should balk at the idea of "true" and "false" languages, so we need to see the necessity and the validity of multiple Revelations.⁴

The principle of multiple Revelations is not accessible to all mentalities and its implications must remain anathema to the majority of believers. This is in the nature of things. Nevertheless, from a traditionalist viewpoint, anyone today wishing to understand religion as

¹ F. Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, Bedfont, 1959, p. 32.

² F. Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, p. 72.

³ See F. Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, London, 1979, p. 29. For a mapping of these branches and some account of their differences see Schuon's essay "The Meaning of Race" in *Language of the Self*, Madras, 1959, pp. 173-200. This essay should be read in conjunction with "Principle of Distinction in the Social Order" in the same volume. (These essays can also be found in F. Schuon, *Castes and Races*, London, 1982, the latter essay appearing under the title "The Meaning of Caste".)

⁴ F. Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, p. 30. The comparison of religions and languages is a common and long-standing one. For some examples see M. Müller, "Chips from a German Workshop" in *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. J. Waardenburg, The Hague, 1973, pp. 88-89; R. Zwi Werblowsky, "Universal Religion and Universalist Religion", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, II:i, 1971, pp. 10-11.

such and the inter-relationships of the various traditions must have a firm purchase on this principle.

As each religion proceeds from a Revelation, it is, in Seyyed Hossein Nasr's words, both

...*the* religion and *a* religion, *the* religion inasmuch as it contains within itself the Truth and the means of attaining the Truth, *a* religion since it emphasises a particular aspect of Truth in conformity with the spiritual and psychological needs of the humanity for whom it is destined.⁵

In other words each religion is sufficient unto itself and contains all that is necessary for man's sanctification and salvation. Nevertheless, it remains limited by definition. The recognition and reconciliation of these two apparently antagonistic principles is crucial to the traditionalist perspective. Schuon:

A religion is a form, and so also a limit, which "contains" the Limitless, to speak in paradox; every form is fragmentary because of its necessary exclusion of other formal possibilities; the fact that these forms—when they are complete, that is to say when they are perfectly "themselves"—each in their own way represent totality does not prevent them from being fragmentary in respect of their particularisation and their reciprocal exclusion.⁶

Further, as Nasr reminds us,

...every religion possesses two elements which are its basis and its foundation: a doctrine which distinguishes between the Absolute and the relative, between the absolutely Real and the relatively real... and a method of concentrating upon the Real, of attaching oneself to the Absolute and living according to the Will of Heaven, in accordance with the purpose and meaning of human existence.⁷

Plainly this kind of definition is not acceptable to everyone. It is incompatible with many of the definitions which have been in vogue at

⁵ See S. H. Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, London, 1966, p. 15.

⁶ See F. Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, London, 1976, p. 144. See also F. Schuon, *Dimensions of Islam*, London, 1969, p. 136.

⁷ S.H. Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, p. 15.

one time or another amongst scholars from several different academic disciplines. It is not our present purpose to debate the merits of various formulations about religion but simply to make the traditionalist position clear. It hardly needs be said that there is a yawning chasm between the traditionalist view and those rationalistic and reductionist models which diminish religion to a "cultural production" of merely human provenance.

One criterion of religion derives from the principle of orthodoxy. Schuon articulates the principle thus:

In order to be orthodox a religion must possess a mythological or doctrinal symbolism establishing the essential distinction between the Real and the illusory, or the Absolute and the relative... and must offer a way that serves both the perfection of concentration on the Real and also its continuity. In other words a religion is orthodox on condition that it offers a sufficient, if not always exhaustive, idea of the absolute and the relative, and therewith an idea of their reciprocal relationships...¹

Elsewhere Schuon affirms that

Traditional orthodoxy means being in accord with a doctrinal or ritual form, and also, and indeed above all, with the truth which resides in all revealed forms; thus the essence of every orthodoxy is intrinsic truth...²

In yet another passage he writes,

For a religion to be considered intrinsically orthodox—*an extrinsic orthodoxy hangs upon formal elements which cannot apply literally outside their own perspective*—it must rest upon a fully adequate doctrine...then it must extol and actualise a spirituality that is equal to this doctrine and thereby include sanctity within its ambit both as concept and reality; *this means it must be of Divine and not*

*philosophical origin and thus be charged with a sacramental or theurgic presence...*³

The ramifications of these claims will become clearer as our discussion proceeds.

What of the attitude of one orthodoxy to another? The key is in Schuon's reference to "formal elements which cannot apply literally outside their own perspective". From the exoteric vantage point of any particular tradition there can only be one orthodoxy, i.e., the one determining the outlook in question. Thus, for example, from a Hindu viewpoint Buddhism must appear as heterodox, the test of orthodoxy here being the acceptance of Vedic authority.⁴ The exclusivist or alternativist perspective belongs firmly in the domain of religious exotericism. However, as we shall see, the terrestrial conditions now prevailing dictate that we must turn to esotericism to see how the demands of religious orthodoxy can still be respected whilst also understanding the potentially destructive effects of a sterile literalism.

Exotericism & Esoterism: Outer Forms & Inner Essence

We can now turn to our main subject: the distinction, first made explicit by Guénon but fully elaborated by Schuon, between the exoteric and esoteric dimensions of any religious tradition. Generally we are accustomed to drawing sharp dividing lines between the religious

³ F. Schuon, *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, London, 1976, p. 14. (Italics mine.) See also commentary by L. Schaya in *Traditional Modes of Contemplation and Action*, ed. Y. Ibish & P.L. Wilson, Tehran, 1977, pp. 462ff.

⁴ Here the Hindu viewpoint is both "right" and "wrong". This paradox is resolved in an illuminating passage from Schuon: "What makes the definition of orthodoxy rather troublesome is that it presents two principal modes, the one essential or intrinsic, and the other formal or extrinsic: the latter is being in accord with a revealed form, and the former the being in accord with the essential and universal truth, with or without being in accord with any particular form, so that the two modes sometimes stand opposed externally. To give an example, it can be said that Buddhism is extrinsically heterodox in relation to Hinduism, because it makes a departure from the basic forms of the latter, and at the same time intrinsically orthodox, because it is in accord with that universal truth from which both traditions proceed; on the other hand the Brahmo-Samaj, like every other variety of "progressive" neo-Hinduism, is doubly heterodox, first in relation to Hinduism itself and secondly in relation to truth unqualified...". F. Schuon, *Language of the Self*, p. 1. See also S.H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, New York, 1981, pp. 78-80.

¹ F. Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, p. 138.

² F. Schuon, *Language of the Self*, p. 1.

traditions. The differences here are, of course, palpably real and Schuon has no wish to blur the distinctions. Indeed, his vigorous defence of the principle of orthodoxy should preclude any misunderstanding on this point. However, this notwithstanding, Schuon draws another kind of dividing line which in some senses is much more fundamental: that between the exoteric and esoteric.

In the exoteric domain, we see the separate, distinct religious traditions each cleaving to an ensemble of formal elements deriving from a Revelation. These formal elements include scriptures, dogmas, rituals and other spiritual practices. In the esoteric domain *within the circumference*, so to speak, of the formal exotericisms, the different traditions converge on the Truth (the Centre) through a variety of means—esoteric doctrines, initiations and spiritual disciplines, intellection, the plenary experience. The *necessity* and the formal integrity of the different traditions is in no way compromised under this view which fully respects the formal differences between the religions on the plane where such distinctions, even antagonisms, find their proper place.

It is crucial to note that, under this view, it is only *through* the exoteric realm that the esoteric can be reached. At a time when it is sometimes suggested that the esoteric dimension can exist *in vacuo* or that it can be detached from the formal tradition in question, this is a point which needs some stressing.¹ The universality of every great spiritual patrimony rests "on a foundation of divinely instituted formal elements".² Furthermore, we cannot too often be reminded that "Truth does not deny forms from the outside but transcends them from within."³

In discriminating between the exoteric and the esoteric we are, in a sense, speaking of "form" and "spirit". Exotericism, or "religious externalism", rests on a necessary formalism:

Exotericism never goes beyond the "letter". It puts its accent on the Law, not on any realisation, and so puts it on action and merit. It is essentially a "belief" in a "letter", or a dogma envisaged in its formal exclusiveness, and an obedience to a ritual and moral Law. And, further, exotericism never goes beyond the individual; it is centred on heaven rather than on God, and this amounts to saying that this difference has for it no meaning.⁴

It follows that exotericism must thereby embody certain inevitable and in a sense therapeutic limits or "errors" which from a fuller perspective can be seen in both their positive and negative aspects. Religion, in its formal aspect, is made up of what the Buddhists call *upaya*, "skillful means" which answer the necessities of the case, what Schuon calls "saving mirages" and "celestial stratagems".⁵ The limiting definitions of exoteric formalism are "comparable to descriptions of an object of which only the form and not the colours can be seen".⁶ Partial truths which might be inadequate in a sapiential perspective may be altogether proper on the formal exoteric plane:

The formal homogeneity of a religion requires not only truth but also errors—though these are only in form—just as the world requires evil and as Diversity implies the mystery of creation by virtue of its infinity. Absolute truths exist only in depth, not as a surface. The religions are "mythologies" which, as such, are founded on real aspects of the Divine and on sacred facts, and thus on realities but

¹ This kind of assumption is evident in the pretensions of people who claim to be "Sufis" without being Muslims. See S.H. Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, London, 1972, p. 169, n11, and S.H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, p. 77. However, it must also be conceded that, in exceptional circumstances, it is possible for an integral esoteric movement to develop more or less independently of a religious tradition: hermeticism and alchemy furnish two conspicuous examples.

² F. Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, p. 137. It is, of course, precisely because the formal elements of tradition are divinely instituted that the traditionalist must treat them with such respect. See S.H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, pp. 293-294.

³ F. Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, London, 1967, p. 112.

⁴ F. Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, 76. Huston Smith has offered a useful gloss on Schuon's elucidation of the exoteric-esoteric distinction in these terms: "For the exoteric God's personal mode is his only mode; for the esoteric this mode resides in one that is higher and ultimately modeless... For the exoteric the world is real in every sense; for the exoteric it has only a qualified reality... For the exoteric God is primarily loved; for the esoteric He is primarily known; though in the end the exoteric comes to know what he loves and the esoteric to love what he knows." Huston Smith in Introduction to F. Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, p. xxvi. See also F. Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, p. 110.

⁵ F. Schuon, *Survey of Metaphysics and Esotericism*, Bloomington, 1986, p.185,n2. See also F. Schuon, *The Transfiguration of Man*, Bloomington, 1995, p. 8: "In religious esoterisms, efficacy at times takes the place of truth, and rightly so, given the nature of the men to whom they are addressed."

⁶ F. Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, p. 80.

only on aspects. Now this limitation is at the same time inevitable and fully efficacious.¹

In other words, the forms of religious exotericism constitute certain accommodations which are necessary to bring various truths within the purview of the average mentality. As such they are adequate to the collective needs in question. Just as there exists within each tradition an exoteric and an esoteric dimension so too there exist corresponding spiritual dispositions. It is in the nature of things that only a small minority will be blessed with the contemplative intelligence necessary to penetrate the formal aspects of religion. For the normal believer the exoteric domain is the only domain.

The statements of a formal exotericism can thus be seen as partial truths, as intimations of Truth, as metaphors and symbols, as bridges to the formless Reality.² Herein lies the point of Schuon's repeated affirmations of orthodoxy, such as this: "Orthodoxy includes and guarantees incalculable values which man could not possibly draw out of himself."³ But if "exotericism consists in identifying transcendent realities with dogmatic forms" then esotericism is concerned "in a more or less direct manner with these same realities".⁴ Esotericism is concerned with the apprehension of Reality as such, not Reality as understood in such and such a perspective and "under the veil of different religious formulations".⁵ While exotericism sees "essence" or "universal truth" as a function of particular forms, esotericism sees the forms as a function of "essence".⁶ To put it another way, exotericism particularises the universal, universal, esotericism universalises the particular:

¹ F. Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, p. 70. A specific example of an exoteric dogma might help to reinforce some of the points under discussion. In discussing the Christian dogmas about heaven and hell, Schuon has this to say: "We are made for the Absolute, which embraces all things and from which none can escape; this truth is marvellously well presented in the monotheistic religions in the alternative between the two "eternities" beyond the grave... the alternative may be insufficient from the point of view of total Truth, but it is psychologically realistic and mystically efficacious; many lives have been squandered away and lost for the single reason that a belief in hell and in paradise is missing." *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, p. 22

² F. Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, p. 110.

³ F. Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, p. 113. See also F. Schuon, *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, p. 5.

⁴ F. Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*, p. 144. See also F. Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, London, 1981, p. 37.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 19.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 37.

What characterises esoterism to the very extent that it is absolute, is that on contact with a dogmatic system, it universalises the symbol or religious concept on the one hand, and interiorizes it on the other; the particular or the limited is recognised as the manifestation of the principial and the transcendent, and this in its turn reveals itself as immanent.⁷

Mysticism, Metaphysics and Theology

Mystical experience and metaphysical science constitute the subjective and objective poles of esotericism. Mysticism comprises three aspects: the mystical experience itself, the formulations about the nature of Reality which issue from such experiences, and the spiritual methodology which creates a climate, so to speak, in which mystical experiences might more readily and more fruitfully occur. In brief, mystical experience, mystical doctrine, and the mystical path. In the traditionalist lexicon mystical doctrine is nothing other than metaphysics, the formal articulation of that which is realised in the mystical state. In the words of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Metaphysics, which in fact is one and should be named metaphysic... is the science of the Real, of the origin and end of things, of the Absolute and in its light, the relative".⁸ Similarly, "metaphysical": "concerning universal realities considered objectively".⁹ Mysticism, as an experience, on the other hand, concerns "the same realities considered subjectively, that is, in relation to the contemplative soul, insofar as they enter into contact with it".¹⁰ Esotericism is "situated" on the plane of mystical experience, of intellection and realisation.

As Guénon observed more than once, metaphysics cannot strictly be defined, for to define is to limit, while the domain of metaphysics is the Real and thus limitless. Consequently, metaphysics "is truly and

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ S.H. Nasr, *Man and Nature: the Spiritual Crisis of the Modern World*, London, 1976, p. 81.

⁹ Frithjof Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*, p. 204,n9.

¹⁰ *ibid.* Schuon is, of course, not unaware of the linguistic and connotative ambiguities surrounding the term "mysticism". See *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, p. 86fn. See also S.H. Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, p. 26,n5. For an extended traditionalist discussion see W. Stoddart, "Mysticism" in *The Unanimous Tradition*, pp. 89-95.

absolutely unlimited and cannot be confined to any formula or any system".¹ Its subject, in the words of John Tauler, is "that pure knowledge knowledge that knows no form or creaturely way".² This should always be kept in mind in any attempt at a "definition" which must needs be provisional and incomplete. Nasr explains the nature of traditional metaphysic and its relationship to religious exotericism this way:

It is a science as strict and as exact as mathematics and with the same clarity and certitude, but one which can only be attained through intellectual intuition and not simply through ratiocination. It thus differs from philosophy as it is usually understood. Rather, it is a *theoria* of reality whose realisation means sanctity and spiritual perfection, and therefore can only be achieved within the cadre of a revealed tradition. Metaphysical intuition can occur everywhere—for the "spirit bloweth where it listeth"—but the effective realisation of metaphysical truth and its application to human life can only be achieved within a revealed tradition which gives efficacy to certain symbols and rites upon which metaphysics must rely for its realisation. This supreme science of the Real... is the only science that can distinguish between the Absolute and the relative, appearance and reality... *Moreover, this science exists, as the esoteric dimension within every orthodox and integral tradition and is united with a spiritual method derived totally from the tradition in question.*³

This view of metaphysics accords with the traditional but not with the modern conception of philosophy. It is attuned, for instance, to the ancient Greek understanding of *philo-sophia*, the love of wisdom as a practical concern. Metaphysics encompasses infinitely more than can be comprehended by the instruments and procedures of modern so-called philosophy. The cleavage between metaphysics and philosophy (as rational enquiry) only appears in modern times.⁴ The ultimate reality of metaphysics is the Supreme Identity in which all oppositions and dualities

are resolved, those of subject and object, knower and known, being and non-being; thus a Scriptural formulation such as "The things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God".⁵ As Coomaraswamy remarks, traditional philosophy, or metaphysics, provided the vision, and religion the way to its effective verification and actualisation in direct experience.⁶

Under the traditionalist view, a Divine Revelation is always the fountainhead of any orthodox religion while metaphysical insight derives from intellection—which is to say from the intuition of superphenomenal realities by the Intellect. Let us pause to clarify two crucial terms: *intellection* and *gnosis*. Recall Meister Eckhart's statement: "There is something in the soul which is uncreated and uncreatable...this is the Intellect".⁷ It is, in Schuon's words, "a receptive faculty and not a productive power: it does not 'create'; it receives and transmits. It is a mirror."⁸ The Intellect is an impersonal, unconditioned, unconditioned, receptive faculty, whence the objectivity of intellection. It is "that which participates in the divine Subject".⁹ Marco Pallis reminds us that the belief in this transcendent faculty, capable of a direct contact with Reality, is to be found in all traditions under various names.¹⁰ The Intellect gives access to gnosis, which "refers to supra-rational and thus purely intellectual, knowledge of metacosmic realities."¹¹ Its Sanskrit equivalent is *jñāna*, knowledge in its fullest sense, what Eckhart calls "divine knowledge".

The dichotomy between Revelation and intellection is more apparent than real, the former taking the place of intellection for the human collectivity in question. This is a principle not easily grasped but

¹ R. Guénon: "Oriental Metaphysics" in *The Sword of Gnosis*, pp. 43-44.

² Quoted in C.F. Kelley, *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge*, New Haven, 1977, p. 4.

³ S.H. Nasr, *Man and Nature*, pp. 81-82. (Italics mine.) See also Coomaraswamy's undated letter to "M" in *Ananada Coomaraswamy: Selected Letters*, ed. R. Coomaraswamy & A. Moore Jr, New Delhi, 1988, p. 10: "...traditional Metaphysics is as much a single and invariable science as mathematics."

⁴ For a detailed discussion of the differences between metaphysics and modern philosophy see K.S. Oldmeadow, *Traditionalism: Religion in the light of the Perennial Philosophy*, Ch.8.

⁵ *1 Corinthians* II.xi. The Absolute may be called God, the Godhead, nirguna Brahman, the Tao, and so on, according to the vocabulary at hand. See F. Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, pp. 96-9, n1 for a commentary on the use of "God".

⁶ A.K. Coomaraswamy: "A Lecture on Comparative Religion" quoted in Roger Lipsey, *Coomaraswamy: His Life and Work*, Princeton, 1977, p. 275. Also see "Vedanta and Western Tradition" in A.K. Coomaraswamy, *Coomaraswamy, Selected Papers 2: Metaphysics*, Princeton, 1977, p. 6.

⁷ Quoted in M. Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, p. 27.

⁸ F. Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom*, p. 21.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 88.

¹⁰ M. Pallis quoted in W. Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, p. 733.

¹¹ F. Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, p. 115. It must not be confused with the historical phenomenon of gnosticism, the Graeco-Oriental syncretism of latter classical times. See F. Schuon, *To Have a Center*, Bloomington, 1990, pp. 67-68, and *Roots of the Human Condition*, Bloomington, 1991, pp. 10-11.

without it the apparent antagonisms of theology and metaphysics cannot be resolved. Schuon defines the relationship between Revelation and intellection in this way:

...in normal times we learn *a priori* of divine things through Revelation, which provides for us the symbols and the indispensable data, and we have access *a posteriori* to the truth of these things through Intellection, which reveals to us their essence beyond received formulations, but not opposing them... Revelation is an Intellection in the Macrocosm, while Intellection is a Revelation in the microcosm; the *Avatara* is the outward Intellect, and the Intellect is the inward *Avatara*.¹

It might be said, then, that intellection appears in a more "subjective" mode, but only with this qualification:

It is subjective because empirically it is within us. The term "subjective", as applied to the intellect, is as improper as the epithet "human"; in both cases the terms are used simply in order to define the way of approach.²

The traditionalists, always alert to the dangers of a reductionist psychologism, insist that the truth to which intellection gives access is beyond all spatio-temporal determinations. As Schuon points out, Biblical formulations such as "the Kingdom of Heaven is within you" certainly do not mean that Heaven, God or Truth are of a psychological order but simply that access to these realities is to be found through the centre of our being.³

Religion itself, flowing from the Divine, must carry principial or metaphysical knowledge but this will be veiled by the forms in question. For instance,

The message of Christ, like that of the Bible, is not *a priori* a teaching of metaphysical science; it is above all a message of salvation, but one

that necessarily contains, in an indirect way and under cover of an appropriate symbolism, metaphysics in its entirety.⁴

The metaphysical emphasis varies from one tradition to another. Buddhism, for example, is primarily a spiritual therapy rather than a metaphysical system but one which of necessity requires a metaphysics while Hinduism is, in the first place, a metaphysics which implies, under the same necessity, a spiritual therapy.⁵ Doubtless there are those who will be quick to asseverate that Buddhism is indifferent to metaphysics, pointing to the Buddha's refusal to answer the indeterminate questions. The traditionalists would simply remind us of Nagarjuna's statement that the Buddha taught two levels of truth and that an understanding of the distinction, not possible without a metaphysical doctrine, is preconditional to a full understanding of the *dharma*.⁶ "There is no science of the soul," says Schuon, "without a metaphysical basis to it and without spiritual remedies at its disposal."⁷

The relationship of theology to metaphysics is that of exotericism to esotericism. Exotericism is "unable of itself to take cognisance of the relationships whereby, at one and the same time, it is justified in its claims and limited in its scope."⁸ Theological dogmatism is characterised by its insistence on elevating a particular point of view, or aspect of reality under a specific formal guise, to an absolute value with exclusive claims. As we have seen already, what characterises a metaphysical esotericism, on the other hand, is its discernment of the universal in the particular, of the essence in the form. This distinction can be hinged on the terms "belief" and "gnosis", or similarly, "faith" and "certitude". The difference between these, writes Schuon, is

...comparable to the difference between a description of a mountain and direct vision of it; the second no more puts us on top of the mountain than the first but it does inform us about the properties of the mountain and the route to follow; let us not however forget that

¹ F. Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, p. 10. See also S.H.Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, pp. 148-149.

² F. Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, p. 57,n2.

³ F. Schuon: "Keys to the Bible" in *The Sword of Gnosis*, pp. 356-358.

⁴ F. Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*, p. 86.

⁵ F. Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, p. 55.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ F. Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*, p. 14.

⁸ F. Schuon, *In the Tracks of Buddhism*, p. 46.

the blind man who walks without stopping advances more quickly than a normal man who stops at each step.¹

Elsewhere Schuon refers to the theologies as taking upon themselves the contradiction of being "sentimental metaphysics":

...being ignorant of the differentiation of things into aspects and standpoints they have therefore to operate on the basis of arbitrarily rigid data, the antinomies of which can only be solved by going beyond their artificial rigidity; their working has moreover a sentimental slant and this is described as "thinking piously".²

Such remarks should not be construed as an attack on the theological perspective but only as a caution about the limits of dogmatism and the dangers of a theological totalitarianism when it enters an arena where it is inadequate. As Marco Pallis so neatly puts it,

What one always needs to remember is that traditional forms, including those bearing the now unpopular name of dogmas, are keys to unlock the gate of Unitive Truth; but they are also (since a key can close, as well as open a gate) possible obstacles to its profoundest knowledge...³

If gnosis as such is under consideration then the question of orthodoxy cannot arise, this being a principle which is only operative on the formal plane:

If the purest esotericism includes the whole truth—and that is the very reason for its existence—the question of "orthodoxy" in the religious sense clearly cannot arise: direct knowledge of the mysteries could not be "Moslem" or "Christian" just as the sight of a mountain is the sight of a mountain and not something else.⁴

Nevertheless, the two realms, exoteric and esoteric, are continually meeting and interpenetrating, not only because there is such a thing as a

"relative esotericism" but because "the underlying truth is one, and also because man is one".⁵ And, let it be repeated, even if esotericism transcends forms, it has need of doctrinal, ritual, moral and aesthetic supports on the path to realisation.⁶

In a felicitous metaphor Schuon compares the religions to the beads of rosary, gnosis being the cord on which they are strung. In other words, the religious orthodoxies, or more specifically theologies, are only able to fulfil their function when they remain attached to the principal knowledge which is preserved in the esoteric dimension of each tradition.

Given the factors which have been mentioned it is not surprising that the exoteric elements in a religious tradition should be protected by authorities whose attitude to esotericism will be, at best, somewhat ambivalent, at worst openly hostile. In addressing itself to the defence of the *credo* and of the forms which appear as guarantors of truth the exoteric "resistance" to esotericism is entirely positive. The esoteric can see and respect this guardianship of the "incalculable values" of orthodoxy. On the other hand,

...the exoteric's assessment of the esoteric is likely to be less charitable, not because exoterics are less endowed with that virtue, but because a portion of the esoteric position being obscured from him, he cannot honour it without betraying the truth he does see.⁷

It is in this context that we should understand Ananda Coomaraswamy's remark, frequently made in his correspondence with "exoterics": "even if you are not on our side, we are on yours."⁸ But sometimes the exoteric defendants of orthodoxy overstep themselves and in doing so beget results that are both destructive and counter-productive, especially when a religious tradition is endangered by a preponderantly exoteric outlook:

¹ F. Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, p. 148.

² F. Schuon, *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, p. 39.

³ M. Pallis, "Foreword" to W. Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, p. 10.

⁴ F. Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, p. 139. See also F. Schuon, *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence*, Bloomington, 1981, p. 112.

⁵ F. Schuon, *Esotericism as Principle and as Way*, p. 16.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 29.

⁷ Huston Smith, Introduction to F. Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, p. xv.

⁸ For one of many instances where Coomaraswamy uses this phrase see Letter to Joachim Wach, August 1947, *Selected Letters*, p. 13.

The exoteric viewpoint is, in fact, doomed to end by negating itself once it is no longer vivified by the presence within it of the esotericism of which it is both the outward radiation and the veil. So it is that religion, according to the measure in which it denies metaphysical and initiatory realities and becomes crystallized in literalistic dogmatism, inevitably engenders unbelief; the atrophy that overtakes dogmas when they are deprived of their internal dimension recoils upon them from outside, in the form of heretical and atheistic negations.¹

How much of post-medieval Christian history bears witness to this truth?² As to the theological ostracisms (or worse) that have befallen some of the mystics and metaphysicians seeking to preserve the esoteric dimension within their respective religious traditions, Schuon reminds us of Aesop's fable about the fox and the grapes, a story which "repeats itself in all sectors of human existence".³

Metaphysical Discernment and the Spiritual Life

The hierarchic superiority of gnosis to all other forms of knowledge and of metaphysical doctrine to all other kinds of formulations should not be allowed to obscure the interdependent relationship of the esoteric and the exoteric, of the metaphysical domain and the rest of any religious tradition. Three general points need to be made in this context. They concern the ineffectiveness of intellection outside a traditional framework, the distinction between doctrinal understanding and realisation, and the relationship between metaphysical discernment and the spiritual life in general.

There are, writes Schuon,

no metaphysical or cosmological reasons why, in exceptional cases, direct intellection should not arise in men who have no link at all with

revealed wisdom, but an exception, if it proves the rule, assuredly could not constitute the rule.⁴

In more normal cases

Intellection has need of tradition, of a Revelation fixed in time and adapted to a society, if it is to be awakened in us and not go astray... the importance of orthodoxy, of tradition, of Revelation is that the means of realising the Absolute must come "objectively" from the Absolute; knowledge cannot spring up "subjectively" except within the framework of an "objective" divine formulation of Knowledge.⁵

Thus, although intellection can occur as "an isolated miracle" anywhere, it will have neither authority nor efficacy outside tradition.⁶ (In this context the case of Ramana Maharishi is not without interest, remembering how the Sage of Arunacala had to cast his own mystical insight into the moulds of classical Vedanta in order to be able to communicate it.⁷)

The distinction between doctrinal understanding and even intellection itself on the one hand, and realisation on the other, is a crucial one. Contemplative intelligence and metaphysical insight, in themselves, do not save, "do not prevent Titans from falling".⁸ There must be a participation of the will in the intelligence, or as one scholar glossed Meister Eckhart, "The intellective center is not truly known without involving the volitive circumference."⁹ Here the will can be defined as "a prolongation or a complement of the intelligence"¹⁰ while intelligence itself refers to a contemplative receptivity rather than any mental cleverness, an intelligence which "differs as much from mental virtuosity as the soaring flight of an eagle differs from the play of a

¹ F. Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, p. 9.

² A spiritually alert minority has recently given much thought to the implications of this principle. The intuition and affirmation of its lessons was perhaps the most important aspect of the work of the late Thomas Merton. Merton's work has too often been seen as an enterprise in dialogue, which indeed it was, without any thought as to what end this was to be directed. The end Merton had in view was, of course, precisely the revivification of the contemplative and esoteric dimension within the Catholic tradition.

³ F. Schuon, *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, p. 46.

⁴ F. Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, p. 15.

⁵ F. Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, p. 130.

⁶ F. Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom*, p. 57.

⁷ The best introductory account of the life of the sage is T.M.P. Mahadevan, *Ramana Maharshi, The Sage of Arunacala*, London, 1977. See also F. Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, p. 122.

⁸ F. Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, p. 138.

⁹ C.F. Kelley: *op.cit.* (Kelley's book clearly owes a great deal to Schuon whose aphorisms are repeated almost word for word but nowhere in the book can we find any acknowledgement of Schuon or any of the other traditionalists.)

¹⁰ F. Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, p. 136. See also *Logic and Transcendence*, p. 199.

monkey".¹ Morality and the virtues, love, faith—these must be integrated with metaphysical insight if full realisation is to occur, which is to say there must be a merging of intellectual and volitive elements in a harmonized unity.²

The spiritual life, which can only be lived in conformity with a way provided by tradition, forms both a precondition and a complement to intellection. As Aquinas put it, "By their very nature the virtues do not necessarily form part of contemplation but they are an indispensable condition for it."³ Moreover, sanctity itself may or may not be accompanied by metaphysical discernment: one may be a saint but no metaphysician, as history repeatedly demonstrates. To expect, as a necessity, metaphysical wisdom of the saint is to confuse different modes of spiritual perfection. As Schuon reminds us,

To say "man" is to say *bhakta*, and to say spirit is to say *jñānin*; human nature is so to speak woven of these two neighbouring but incommensurable dimensions. There is certainly a *bhakti* without *jñāna*, but there is no *jñāna* without *bhakti*.⁴

The perspectives of Ramanuja and Sankara might be cited by way of illustrative examples.⁵

If metaphysical discernment is to transform one's being then intellection alone is insufficient for "Human nature contains dark elements which no intellectual certainty could, *ipso facto*, eliminate."⁶ Here the role of faith is of critical importance:

A man may possess metaphysical certainty without possessing "faith"... But, if metaphysical certainty suffices on the doctrinal ground, it is far from being sufficient on the spiritual level where it

must be completed and enlivened by faith. Faith is nothing other than our whole being clinging to Truth, whether we have of truth a direct intuition or an indirect idea. It is an abuse of language to reduce "faith" to the level of "belief".⁷

In another context Schuon emphasises this point in even more unequivocal terms. The following passage is one of the most arresting in the whole Schuonian corpus, one made all the more so by the uncharacteristic personal reference:

One can meditate or speculate indefinitely on transcendent truths and their applications (that is moreover what the author of this book does, but he has valid reasons for doing it, nor does he do it for himself). One can spend a whole lifetime speculating on the suprasensorial and the transcendent, but all that matters is "the leap into the void" which is the fixation of spirit and soul in an unthinkable dimension of the Real... this "leap into the void" we can call... "faith"...⁸

The Transcendent Unity of Religions

Many thinkers have posited the "essential" unity of the religions and have attempted to reconcile formal religious antagonisms under an array of different philosophical and theological canopies—theosophy, "anonymous Christianity", "natural religion", "universal religion", and the "perennial philosophy" as espoused by the likes of Aldous Huxley and the redoubtable Swami Vivekananda. As Coomaraswamy has remarked, these aspirations to a universal religion amount to a kind of religious Esperanto — with about as much chance of success! We shall certainly not find in Schuon's work, nor in the writings of other traditionalists, any Procrustean attempt to find a unity on a plane where it does not exist nor an insipid and sentimental universalism which asserts a unity of no matter what elements as long as they lay some claim to being "religious" or "spiritual". To really understand the essential or transcendent unity of religions requires a proper recognition of the exoteric-esoteric relationship and a subordination (*not* an

¹ S.H. Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, p. 21.

² It should also be remembered that although the Intellect is "situated beyond sentiment, imagination, memory and reason... it can at the same time enlighten and determine all of these since they are like its individualized ramifications, ordained as receptacles to receive the light from on high and to translate it according to their respective capacities." F. Schuon, *The Transfiguration of Man*, Bloomington, 1995, p. 25.

³ Quoted in F. Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, p.133,n2.

⁴ F. Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, p. 22.

⁵ See F. Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, pp. 103ff. For a European example of "*bhakti* without *jñāna*" one might cite St Theresa of Lisieux — but the history of Christianity furnishes many examples.

⁶ F. Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, p. 139.

⁷ *ibid.*,127. On the relationship of intellection and realisation see also S.H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, pp. 310ff.

⁸ F. Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*, p. 202.

annihilation) of exoteric dogmatism to the metaphysical principles preserved by the mystical traditions.

The principles which determine the transcendent unity of religions have now come into view. The supra-human origin of a religious tradition in a Revelation, an adequate doctrine concerning the Absolute and the relative, the saving power of the spiritual method, the esoteric convergence on the Unitive Truth—all these point to the inner unity of all integral traditions which are, in a sense, variations on one theme. However, there remain certain puzzling questions which might stand in the way of an understanding of the principal unity which the *religio perennis* discloses.

One frequently comes across formulations such as the following: "It is sometimes asserted that all religions are equally true. But this would seem to be simply sloppy thinking, since the various religions hold views of reality which are sharply different if not contradictory."¹ This kind of either/or thinking, characteristic of much that nowadays passes for philosophy, is in the same vein as a dogmatism which

reveals itself not only by its inability to conceive the inward or implicit illimitability of a symbol, but also by its inability to recognise, when faced with two apparently contradictory truths, the inward connection that they apparently affirm, a connection that makes of them complementary aspects of one and the same truth.²

It is precisely this kind of incapacity which must be overcome if the transcendent unity of the religions is to be understood.

Let us rehearse some of the points made earlier through the following passage from Schuon:

A religion is not limited by what it includes but by what it excludes; this exclusion cannot impair the religion's deepest contents—every religion is intrinsically a totality—but it takes its revenge all the more surely on the intermediary plane... the arena of theological speculations and fervours... extrinsic contradictions can hide an

intrinsic compatibility or identity, which amounts to saying that each of the contradictory theses contains a truth and thereby an aspect of the whole truth and a way of access to this totality.³

Examples of "contradictory" truths which effectively express complementary aspects of a single reality can be found not only across the traditions but within them. One might instance, by way of illustration, the Biblical or Koranic affirmations regarding predestination and free will.⁴

From an esoteric viewpoint the exclusivist claims of one or another religion have no absolute validity. It is true that "the arguments of every intrinsically orthodox religion are absolutely convincing if one puts oneself in the intended setting".⁵ It is also true that the theological dogmatisms are entitled to a kind of "defensive reflex" which makes for claims to exclusivism. However, and this is crucial,

The exoteric claim to the exclusive possession of a unique truth, or of Truth without epithet, is... an error purely and simply; in reality, every expressed truth necessarily assumes a form, that of its expression, and it is metaphysically impossible that any form should possess a unique value to the exclusion of other forms; for a form, by definition, cannot be unique and exclusive, that is to say it cannot be the only possible expression of what it expresses.⁶

The argument that the different religions cannot all be repositories of the truth because of their formal differences and antagonisms rests on a failure to understand this principle. The lesson to be drawn from the multiplicity of religious forms is quite different:

The diversity of religions, far from proving the falseness of all the doctrines concerning the supernatural, shows on the contrary the supra-formal character of revelation and the formal character of

¹ O. Thomas: "Introduction" to *Attitudes to Other Religions*, London, 1969, quoted by Huston Smith, Introduction to F. Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, p. xiii, n.

² F. Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, p. 3. See also S.H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, p. 281.

³ F. Schuon, *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, p. 46.

⁴ F. Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, p. 4.

⁵ F. Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, p. 14.

⁶ F. Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, p. 17.

ordinary human understanding: the essence of revelation—or enlightenment—is one, but human nature requires diversity.¹

In connection with this need for diversity, which is explained by the fact that humanity is divided into different branches, we might mention in passing Junyad's maxim that "...the color of the water is the color of the vessel containing it".² Or, if a more abstract formulation be preferred, this from Aquinas: "...the thing known is in the knower according to the mode of the knower".³

In former times, just as man appeared as "man" and not as "yellow man" or "black man", and just as each language seemed to its practitioners to be language as such, so too each religion, for most believers, appeared as "religion" without further qualification. However, the inter-relationships of the religions today is an issue which has taken on a new urgency in the cyclical conditions in which we live. The imperative need for an esoteric resolution of the apparent incompatibilities of the different religious traditions is a matter of the utmost consequence—a resolution which can only be achieved by recourse to the principles articulated by Schuon and his fellow traditionalists. The main obstacle on this path is the tenacity with which many representatives of an exoteric viewpoint cling to a belief in the exclusive claims of their own tradition and to other "pious extravagances".⁴ As Schuon remarks,

When one has experienced the usual pious sophistries of voluntaristic and moralistic doctrines, it becomes quite clear that gnosis is not a luxury, and that *it alone* can extricate us from the impasses of alternativism that is part and parcel of the confessional spirit.⁵

A Note on Esotericism and "Elitism"

¹ F. Schuon: "No Activity Without Truth" in *The Sword of Gnosis*, p. 4. See also M. Pallis, *A Buddhist Spectrum*, p. 157.

² Quoted in A.K. Coomaraswamy: "Sri Ramakrishna and Religious Tolerance" in *Selected Papers 2: Metaphysics*, p. 37.

³ *ibid.*, p. 36.

⁴ The phrase is from Schuon's essay "Deficiencies in the World of Faith", *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*, p. 125.

⁵ F. Schuon, *To Have a Center*, p. 70. (Italics mine.)

We are not here directly concerned with the "political" issues which arise from the so-called elitism of some esoteric movements. Nonetheless, given the general theme of the present volume it might be as well to devote a few words to the subject within the present context. Richard Bush, launches a criticism of Schuon's work that is both ideologically and morally motivated when he writes of Schuon's vision of the transcendent unity of religions:

I am impressed neither by the unity envisaged nor with the possibilities for communication of it, and moreover, am deeply troubled because of the further division between an elite few... and the masses of human beings who cannot participate in the transcendent unity. A metaphysical dualism has been avoided at the cost of an epistemological and anthropological dualism, both of which are grounds for a subtle arrogance which is hardly becoming in those who desire religious unity.⁶

This is a veritable hornet's nest of misconceptions, most of which will here be left aside.⁷ However, a couple of points will not be out of order, order, especially in view of the fact that the charges of "arrogance" and "elitism" have been made by other commentators as well.⁸

Bush loses sight of several important facts in his references to "the elite few" and to "an epistemological and anthropological dualism". He refers here to Schuon's distinction between the exoteric and esoteric dimensions of religion and between the different spiritual types to whom they are addressed. Firstly, it is not a question of satisfying this or that sentimental prejudice (egalitarianism, "democracy", "open religion" or whatever) but of dealing with human actualities. To pretend, for example, that everyone is capable of the spiritual disciplines and the metaphysical discernment which the esoteric path demands is to fly in the face of palpable human realities. (There is, of course, that mean

⁶ R. Bush, "Frithjof Schuon's The Transcendent Unity of Religions; Con", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, XLIV: iv, 1976, pp. 716-717.

⁷ Huston Smith has devoted an article to answering Bush's criticisms of *The Transcendent Unity of Religion* and this article is easily available. See H. Smith: "Frithjof Schuon's The Transcendent Unity of Religions; Pro" in the same issue of *JAAR*, pp. 721-724. See also S.H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, p. 319.

⁸ The charge is lurking, for example, in a remarkably shallow review of Schuon's *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* by R.C. Zaehner in *The Journal of Theological Studies*, VI, 1955, pp. 340-342.

mentality which would then argue that esotericism therefore has no right to exist—the-dog-in-the-manger attitude masquerading as some kind of "egalitarianism".) Secondly, it should be emphasised that neither salvation nor sanctification has any necessary connection with the esoteric domain: many of the saints of all traditions are there to prove it! Thirdly, an esoteric receptivity, like everything else, is a gift from God which neither implies nor confers any particular moral merit, this depending on what use one makes of one's endowment. Esoterics are not necessarily more holy or righteous than more exoteric types. Fourthly, the attainment of esoteric wisdom depends on certain "contours of the spirit" such as preclude arrogance of any kind whatsoever. And finally, the authenticity of Schuon's vision in no wise depends on the quantitative possibilities of its communication. These points might all profitably be kept in mind by those who indulge in over-heated polemics about "elitism" in the esoteric domain. To talk of an "open" or "egalitarian" esotericism is, simply, to talk nonsense! Nonetheless, there are certain recent developments which oblige us to consider why it is that much of what previously lay hidden within the religious traditions is now on more or less open view.

The Contemporary Exposure of Esoteric Wisdom

We live in anomalous times. Nowhere is this more graphically demonstrated than in the fact that in the most irreligious and impious period in human history the esoteric wisdoms preserved by the religious traditions are more widely and easily accessible than ever before. Sapiential truths which previously had remained extrinsically inexpressible and which had been protected by those few capable of understanding them are now on public display, as it were. The traditionalists themselves have played a significant role in bringing esoteric wisdoms within the purview of a greater number of people. This calls for some explanation.

The erosion of the protective barriers which previously enclosed traditions has, in part, been caused by historical factors which, in a sense, are "accidental".¹ There are also innumerable cases where a garbled

version of half-understood secret doctrines has been thoughtlessly and carelessly put into public circulation. The Biblical verse "For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed..." has sometimes been taken as a licence for all manner of excesses in the popularising of esoteric doctrines. The warnings about false prophets might often be more to the point.

In the case of the traditionalists the unveiling of some esoteric teachings has been considered and prudent. What sorts of factors have allowed this development? Firstly, there are certain cosmic and cyclic conditions now obtaining which make for an unprecedented situation. In discussing the fact that what was once hid in the darkness is now being brought into the light, Schuon writes,

there is indeed something abnormal in this, but it lies, not in the fact of the exposition of these truths, but in the general conditions 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.²

Secondly, from a more expedient point of view,

...it must be admitted that the spiritual confusion of our times has reached such a pitch that the harm that might in principle befall certain people from contact with the truths in question is compensated by the advantages that others will derive from the self-same truths.³

Schuon reminds us of the Kabbalistic adage that "it is better to divulge Wisdom than to forget it."⁴ And thirdly there is the fact already mentioned: esoteric doctrines have, in recent times, been so frequently "plagiarised and deformed" that those who are in a position to speak

Hinduism to subvert the esoteric status of these Scriptures which became available to anyone and everyone.

² F. Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, p. xxxi.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ F. Schuon, *The Transfiguration of Man*, p. 10.

¹ One might cite the exposure of the Upanisadic Scriptures as a case in point; here certain historical factors, such as the introduction into India of cheap printing presses, combined with a degree of imprudence on the part of some of the "reformers" of

with authority on these matters are obliged to give some account of what "true esoterism is and what it is not".¹ As Schuon has more than once and somewhat tersely remarked, "gnosis is not just anything!"

From another perspective it can be said that the preservation, indeed the very survival, of the formal exotericisms may depend on the revivifying effects of an esotericism more widely understood:

exoterism is a precarious thing by reason of its limits or its exclusions: there arrives a moment in history when all kinds of experiences oblige 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 a worldly and suicidal liberalism.²

It is just this kind of suicidal librealism which is manifest in many recent and contemporary "reformist" movements in which there is a good deal of talk about the traditional religions being "played out", "inadequate to the problems of the age", "irrelevant to contemporary concerns" and so on. "New solutions" are needed, "appropriate to the times". This kind of thinking is by no means restricted to those who are openly hostile to religion; it is to be found amongst many people who, being deeply concerned about our spiritual welfare, sense that something has gone wrong. The traditionalists are the first to agree that we have indeed gone astray. However, the solution is not to be found in any "program" which has as its starting-point the belief that the religions must be "reformed" in order to meet "the needs of our times":

Nothing is more misleading than to pretend, as is so glibly done in our day, that the religions have compromised themselves hopelessly in the course of the centuries or that they are now played out. If one knows what a religion really consists of, one also knows that the religions cannot compromise themselves and they are independent of human doings... The fact that a man may exploit a religion in order to bolster up national or private interests in no wise affects religion as such... as for an exhausting of the religions, one might speak of this if all men had by now become saints or Buddhas. In that case only could it be

admitted that the religions were exhausted, at least as regards their forms.³

At a time when "the outward and readily exaggerated incompatibility of the different religions greatly discredits, in the minds of most of our contemporaries, all religion",⁴ the exposure of the underlying unity of the religions takes on a deep urgency. This task can only be achieved through esotericism. The open confrontation of different exotericisms, the extirpation of traditional civilisations, and the tyranny of secular and profane ideologies all play a part in determining the peculiar circumstances in which the most imperious needs of the age can only be answered by a recourse to traditional esotericisms. There is perhaps some small hope that in this climate and given a properly constituted metaphysical framework in which to affirm the "profound and eternal solidarity of all spiritual forms",⁵ the different religions might yet "present a singular front against the floodtide of materialism and pseudo-spiritualism".⁶

The hazards and ambiguities attending the exposure of esoteric doctrines to an audience in many respects ill-equipped to understand them have posed the same problems for representatives of traditional esotericisms the world over. Joseph Epes Brown writes of the disclosure of traditional Lakota wisdom, to choose one example, in terms very similar to those used by Schuon:

...in these days those few old wise men still living among them say that at the approach of the end of a cycle, when men everywhere have become unfit to understand and still more to realise the truths revealed to them at the origin... it is then permissible and even desirable to bring this knowledge out into the light of day, for by its own nature truth protects itself against being profaned and in this

¹ *ibid.*

² F. Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, p. 19.

³ F. Schuon: "No Activity Without Truth" in *The Sword of Gnosis*, ed. J. Needleman, Baltimore, 1974, p. 29. See also F. Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom*, London, 1980, p. 11.

⁴ F. Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, p. xxxi.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ F. Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, p. 12. See also W. Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, p. 22fn.

way it is possible it may reach those qualified to penetrate it deeply.¹

It is no accident that the few remaining holy men amongst the American Indians and traditionalists like Schuon should see this matter in the same light.

Works by Frithjof Schuon in English Translation

(dates of first publication in English)

- 1953 *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*
- 1954 *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*
- 1959 *Language of the Self*
- 1959 *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*
- 1961 *Stations of Wisdom*
- 1963 *Understanding Islam*
- 1966 *Light on the Ancient Worlds*
- 1968 *In the Tracks of Buddhism* (Revised edition: *Treasures of Buddhism*, 1993.)
- 1969 *Dimensions of Islam*
- 1975 *Logic and Transcendence*
- 1976 *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*
- 1981 *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*
- 1981 *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence*
- 1982 *Castes and Races*
- 1982 *From the Divine to the Human*
- 1985 *Christianity/Islam: Essays on Esoteric Ecumenicism*

- 1986 *The Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon* ed. S.H. Nasr,
 - 1986 *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*
 - 1989 *In the Face of the Absolute World*
 - 1990 *The Feathered Sun: Plains Indians in Art and Philosophy*
 - 1990 *To Have a Center*
 - 1991 *Roots of the Human Condition*
 - 1992 *The Play of Masks*
 - 1992 *Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty: Paintings by Frithjof Schuon*
 - 1992 *Echoes of Perennial Wisdom*
 - 1995 *The Transfiguration of Man*
 - 1995 *Road to the Heart: Poems*
 - 1997 *The Eye of the Heart: Metaphysics, Cosmology, Spiritual Life*
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¹ J.E. Brown, *The Sacred Pipe* (Uni Oklahoma Press), 1953, Norman, p. xii. (This passage was omitted from the later Penguin edition.) See also Schuon's "Human Premises of a Religious Dilemma" in *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence*, pp. 97-113.