

## Concerning religious forms

© 2007 Timothy Scott

Originally published as 'Concerning religious forms' (*Sacred Web* 8, 2001)

---

### **Mutability of forms**

To question the mutability of religious forms is to question their absoluteness, for to say immutable is to say absolute. Religion is the language between the Divine and the human, or between the Absolute and the Relative. Each religion is inspired by Revelation and prolonged by Tradition. Here Revelation expresses the immutable Essence, which touches upon the Absolute, while Tradition manifests the salvational continuity of the religion in the human Substance. The Divine Essence is of itself supraformal, yet its irruption—merciful and necessary—into the formal Substance allows its perception by the human receptacle. Were Revelation to remain supraformal there would be no dialogue between God and man, which is tantamount to saying that Creation would not be, for the principal Revelation is the Word 'through which all things came into being', the Islamic *kun*, 'be!' This, moreover, would be to deny the Absolute nature of God, for the Absolute by definition includes the Infinite and the infinity of God requires His affirmation, which is the Word made flesh.<sup>1</sup>

'Revelation' as Schuon says, 'speaks an absolute language, because God is absolute, not because the form is; in other words, the absoluteness of the Revelation is absolute in itself, relative in its form.'<sup>2</sup> Revelation is both supraformal and formal; it is the mysterious isthmus between the Divine and the human, the Islamic *barzakh*, the half-divine, half-cosmic frontier separating, and in another sense uniting, Manifestation and the Principle. Again, each Religion is the absolute and supraformal Truth revealed in a relative and formal language.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.166.

<sup>2</sup> Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, 1990, p.26.

The forms that constitute the tradition of a religion are relative by dint of their manifestation. Nevertheless the Relative contains something of the Absolute, for if it did not relativities could not be distinguished qualitatively from one another.<sup>3</sup> The essence of all traditional forms is the essence of the revelation they express; the essence of a revelation is the essence of Revelation *per se*, and this is the supraformal Essence, the taste of the Absolute. The traditional forms of a religion are, in the strictest sense, immutable in essence and mutable in substance.



### **Authorship of forms**

To admit the mutability of forms, albeit contingently, is to question the guarantee of their authorship. If the forms manifest—and necessarily so—in the language of man, how then is their Divine origin and authority to be recognised as such? How are we to know Divine intervention delivered through a human instrument as opposed to purely human invention? Considered further this question applies itself equally to the initial institution of a religious Tradition as it does to changes made to religious forms throughout the lifespan of a tradition. And this is to question the very guarantee of Revelation itself.

This line of thinking supposes a fundamental error, namely, that it is man who recognises the Divine in the Revelation. In truth it is the Divine in man that senses something of Itself in the Revelation.<sup>4</sup> This remembrance, the Platonic *anamnesia*, is affected by adequation, a “making equal to”, rather than any rational assessment. The human does not grasp the Divine, rather the Divine asserts itself in the human.<sup>5</sup> This is the “sense of the sacred” and it is this that guarantees the Divine authorship of

---

<sup>3</sup> Schuon, *Language of the Self*, 1999, p.17. As Ibn al ‘Arabi says, ‘Were it not that the Reality permeates all beings as form, and were it not for the intelligible realities, no determination would be manifest in individual beings’ (*Fusus al-hikam* Ch. ‘Adam’, tr. Austin, 1980, p.57).

<sup>4</sup> ‘In the face of the Message of Truth, man could not legitimately pose the question of credibility if he were not himself a form of truth, hence of conformity to the True’ (Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, 1982, p.118).

<sup>5</sup> It is this Divine presence that is referred to in the *hadith*: ‘Perfect piety is that you adore God as if you were seeing Him, and if you do not see Him, He nonetheless sees you.’

Revelation and the traditions that issue from it.<sup>6</sup> Schuon: ‘the sense of the sacred is an adequation to the Real, with the difference however, that the knowing subject is then the entire soul and not merely the discriminative intelligence.’<sup>7</sup> ‘The sacred’ says Schuon, ‘is the projection of the Immutable into the mutable’. He continues to remark that ‘the sense of the sacred consists not only in perceiving this projection, but also in discovering in things the trace of the Immutable, to the point of not letting oneself be deceived and enslaved by the mutable.’<sup>8</sup> The “sense of the sacred” is the innate consciousness of the presence of God: it is to feel this presence sacramentally in symbols and ontologically in all things.<sup>9</sup> Truth affirms by Its own nature.<sup>10</sup> Here, as Schuon is wont to remark, we are far from scholastic arguments, yet there is an argument nonetheless. The “sense of the sacred” may be ignored—for it is the nature of man to be free even unto his own detriment—but it cannot be manufactured nor perverted, for it is beyond what man can affect.

Revelation is the Word of God directed to man for human salvation. God wills the salvation of man. This, as Schuon remarks, is the essential purpose of religion: ‘the divine wish to save men steeped in passion’, not necessarily to present an explanation of universal Principles and of the world, but necessary precisely to save.<sup>11</sup> Man does not save himself: the Word precedes man’s reading of It.<sup>12</sup> The forms of a religion are mutable contingent on their salvational efficiency. This efficiency is judged precisely by God, for man could not rise above himself to know what he lacked. The lesser cannot contain the greater. Man’s salvation comes in relinquishing his control, abandoning himself to the Divine Mercy. Salvation comes from above, not below.




---

<sup>6</sup> See Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, 1982, ‘The Sense of the Sacred’, pp.103-115; cf. Schuon, ‘The Sense of the Absolute’: Ch.1, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, 1990.

<sup>7</sup> Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, 1982, p.103.

<sup>8</sup> Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, 1982, p.105.

<sup>9</sup> Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, 1982, p.104.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Truth by her own simplicity is known’ Robert Herrick (1591-1674, English lyric and spiritual poet) cit. in Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.574.

<sup>11</sup> Schuon, *In The Face Of The Absolute*, 1989, p.110.

<sup>12</sup> ‘In truth I tell you, before Abraham ever was, I am’ (Jn.8:58).

### Diversity of Revelation<sup>13</sup>

‘Intrinsically’ says Schuon, “‘orthodox’” dogmas, that is, those disposed in view of salvation, differ from one religion to another; consequently they cannot all be objectively true. However, all dogmas are symbolically true and subjectively efficacious, which is to say that their purpose is to create human attitudes that contribute in their way to the divine miracle of salvation.’<sup>14</sup> Schuon again: ‘Seeing that there is but one truth, must we not conclude that there is but one Revelation, one sole Tradition possible? To this our answer is, first of all, that Truth and Revelation are not absolutely equivalent terms, since Truth is situated beyond forms, whereas revelation, or the Tradition which derives from it, belongs to the formal order, and that indeed by definition; but to speak of form is to speak of diversity, and so of plurality; the grounds for the existence and nature of form are expression, limitation, differentiation. What enters into form, thereby enters also into number, hence into repetition and diversity; the formal principle—inspired by the infinity of the divine Possibility—confers diversity on this repetition.’<sup>15</sup> Diversity is a metaphysical necessity of Creation; diversity of Revelation is God’s merciful recognition of man’s remoteness.

Schuon observes that 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 the ordinary human understanding: the essences of revelation—or enlightenment—is one, but human nature requires diversity.’<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere he remarks that ‘what determines the difference among forms of Truth is the difference among human receptacles.’<sup>17</sup> In the words of an Indian saying, ‘He takes the forms that are imagined by His worshippers.’<sup>18</sup> Humanity,

---

<sup>13</sup> Dr. Kenneth Oldmeadow recognises this as one of the *leitmotifs* of Schuon’s work on religion (*Traditionalism: Religion in the Light of the Perennial Philosophy*, 2000, p.69); by way of examples see Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*; *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, Ch.2 ‘Diversity of Revelation’; *In The Face Of The Absolute*, ‘Diversity of Paths’.

<sup>14</sup> Schuon, *In The Face Of The Absolute*, 1989, p.110.

<sup>15</sup> Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, 1990, p.25. Again, Meister Eckhart: ‘...everything that falls away from the One, the First of all things, immediately falls into two and into the other numbers by means of duality’ (*Comm. Gen. prop.26*).

<sup>16</sup> Schuon, ‘No Activity Without Truth’: Needleman (ed), *The Sword of Gnosis*, 1974, p.4 .

<sup>17</sup> Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, 1990, p.25.

<sup>18</sup> As per Ananda Coomaraswamy, ‘Sri Ramakrishna and Religious Tolerance’, *Selected Papers* vol.2 ‘Metaphysics’, 1977, p.36. Again: ‘The colour of the water is the colour of the vessel containing it’

according to Schuon, is divided into several fundamentally different branches, which constitute so many complete humanities, more or less closed in on themselves.<sup>19</sup> To speak of each tradition being “closed in on itself” is to recognise the “relative absolute”<sup>20</sup> nature of each of the diverse revelations. Schuon remarks that ‘God, when he speaks, expresses Himself in absolute mode; but this absoluteness relates to the universal content rather than the form’<sup>21</sup>.

The “sense of the absolute”—the criteria for any true religion—asserts itself on the exoteric level of a particular religion by evoking a quasi-exclusivist posture. At the esoteric heart of a tradition the “sense of the absolute” leads one to the “transcendent unity of religion”. The relative truth of each of these levels acts to balance the error potential in the other: the illusion of diversity at the exoteric level is balanced by the unity in the esoteric heart; the erroneous denial of the Relative in the face of the unity of the Absolute is tempered by the Divine institution of the diverse forms. The totality of a tradition demands both the esoteric and exoteric levels. Moreover, the recognition by the esotericist of the Absolute in the Relative and the moral conformity to the contingent forms of a tradition, recognised as a mode of the Absolute, means that the esotericist must submit, almost without exception, to the exoteric forms. ‘Forms’ says Huston Smith in his introduction to Schuon’s, *Transcendent Unity of Religions*, are to be transcended by fathoming their depths and discerning their universal content, not by circumventing them.’<sup>22</sup>

‘A religion’ remarks Schuon, ‘is a form, and so also a limit, which contains the Limitless, to speak in paradox; every form is fragmentary because of the necessary formal exclusion of other possibilities; the fact that these forms...each in their own way represent totality does not prevent them from being fragmentary in respect of

---

(Abu ‘I-Qasim al-Junayd). Coomaraswamy adds, ‘Very surely He is not to be thought of as confined by or fully expressed by any of these forms, Who is Himself the single form or every form, and transcendent with respect to each and every form’.

<sup>19</sup> Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, 1990, p.25.

<sup>20</sup> Schuon coins this “ill-sounding yet metaphysically useful” expression with reference to the theological perspective and the reality to which it refers (see *In The Face Of The Absolute*, 1989, p.57).

<sup>21</sup> Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, 1990, p.26.

<sup>22</sup> Smith, Intro. to *The Transcendent Unity of Religion*, 1993, p.xxv.

their particularisation and reciprocal exclusion'<sup>23</sup>. Again: 'to speak of form is to speak of limits and at the same time therefore of the virtuality of error'.<sup>24</sup> And this is to say that 'the formal homogeneity of a religion requires not only truth but also errors—though these only in the form—just as the world require evil and a Divinity implies the mystery of creation by virtue of its infinity.'<sup>25</sup> These "errors" are the illusion of Relativity or *Maya*, yet they are precisely illusions and suppose no integral error in either their essence or their efficient purpose.



### **Spiritual typologies and possibilities**

To speak of the "difference of human receptacles" is to recognise distinction both between individuals and between collectivities. Man is created in the image of the Divine: transcendent and immanent, absolute and relative. The absolute inherent in the human being allows for qualitative distinction. The Infinity of the Absolute is mirrored on the ontological plane by the indefinitude of possible individuals. Relativity manifests itself in the human collectivity in terms of certain limitations applicable to humankind as a whole. The notion of limitation implies, at least in modern thought, a negative sense, yet to say limitation is equally to say orientation, which recognises the positive notion of "order". These human collectivities may be ordered or mapped according to temporal and geographical dictations. At a deeper level they can be mapped according to the notions of "race" and "caste".<sup>26</sup> A person is absolute in terms of their individuality and relative in terms of the limitations that place them in a particular human collectivity or humanity. Without such orientation the human psyche either flounders in a sea of relativism or is lost in uniformity, which, in the end, amounts to the same thing.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, 1976, p.144.

<sup>24</sup> Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.70.

<sup>25</sup> Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.73.

<sup>26</sup> See Schuon, *Castes and Races*, 1989.

<sup>27</sup> This constitutes the fate of the modern quantitative mentality. One should see here Guénon's 'The Principle of Individuation' and 'Uniformity and Unity', Chs.6 & 7 respectively, *The Reign of Quantity & The Signs of the Times*, 1972.

The diversity of human collectivities requires the diversity of Revelation. Each revelation, and the tradition that arises from it, is like a different language; the Truth spoken in these languages remains one even if its expression differs. Schuon remarks that the “apparent anomalies” between traditions are ‘like differences of language or of symbol; contradictions are in human receptacles, not in God; the diversity in the world is a function of its remoteness from the diverse Principle, which amounts to saying that the Creator cannot will both that the world should be, and that it should not be the world.’<sup>28</sup> Each language is specific to the psychological and spiritual needs of the collectivity to which it is directed; moreover it constitutes a “holy strategy”, what the Buddhists call *upāya*, “skillful means”. To talk of such a “strategy” is to recognise a “strategist” whose intention is precisely salvation. ‘One has to realise’ says Schuon, ‘that outward religion is not disinterested; it wants to save souls, no more no less, and at the cost of the truths that do not serve its holy strategy.’<sup>29</sup> It is thanks to the efficient intention of a tradition’s “strategy” that all orthodox dogmas are justified and are in the final analysis compatible despite their apparent antagonisms.

That the exotericism of a tradition is somewhat bound to “misunderstandings” concerning the validity of different traditions derives from the fact that given its mission it ‘has to take into account the weakness of men, and thus also, be it said without euphemism, their stupidity; like it or not, it must itself take on something of these shortcomings, or at least it must allow them some room, on pain of not being able to survive in human surroundings.’<sup>30</sup> This again recognises that form implies limits and at the same time therefore the virtuality of error.<sup>31</sup>

To say the diversity of human collectivities requires the diversity of Revelation admits a certain causal relationship. This is allowed from a certain perspective; however, in truth it is Revelation that precedes human diversity. This is to return to the idea of Revelation as the cosmogonic Word. Hence, the diverse human

---

<sup>28</sup> Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, 1990, p.26.

<sup>29</sup> Schuon, *In The Face Of The Absolute*, 1989, p.22.

<sup>30</sup> Schuon, *In The Face Of The Absolute*, 1989, p.26.

<sup>31</sup> Coomaraswamy remarks that the exclusive attachment to any one dogma, however pertinent, entails the error of idolatry: ‘the Truth itself is inexpressible’ (‘Sri Ramakrishna and Religious Tolerance’, 1977, p.37).

collectivities manifest the principal possibility of diversity prefigured *in divinis* by the differentiation between the ‘Absolute as such and the Absolute relativized in view of a dimension of its Infinitude’<sup>32</sup>. And this manifestation is necessitated precisely by the Divine will to reveal Itself, which is to say, by Revelation *per se*. The apparent reversal of this relationship at the terrestrial level accords perfectly with the “law of inverse analogy”.<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, the manifestation of diversity accords with precise metaphysical logic. Formal manifestation implies limit but Manifestation is not arbitrary limitation, for Creation is the “image” of God and thus of Divine Order; this is to say that the limitations inherent in Manifestation are precise according to their symbolic efficaciousness. By way of example: it is said that there are seven fundamental traditions: the Primordial or Mythological Tradition—of which the Koori peoples of Australia and the Plains Indians might be said to have represented large scale vestiges well into our “modern” or post-mythological age—, the Chinese Tradition, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.<sup>34</sup> With Islam it is said that the age of Revelation came to a close, which is simply to deny the instigation of another great Tradition. The limitation placed on the number of revelations has nothing arbitrary about it but rather expresses at the deepest level the fundamental symbolic structure of Being, which manifests in the six spatial directions of the symbolic sphere from the seventh “Primordial” point or centre, both origin and end. This centre point is

---

<sup>32</sup> Schuon, *In The Face Of The Absolute*, 1989, p.73.

<sup>33</sup> On the “law of inverse analogy” see Schuon, *Treasures of Buddhism*, 1993, p.84, n.2; *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.106, n.1; *Language of the Self*, 1999, pp.35-6; Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity & The Signs of the Times*, 1972, Ch.25; *Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, Chs.52 & 53; *The Great Triad*, 1994, Ch.7. These ideas are outlined in my ‘Understanding “Symbol”’: *Sacred Web* 6, 2000, pp.91-106.

<sup>34</sup> See for example Dr. Oldmeadow’s diagram, *Traditionalism: Religion in the Light of the Perennial Philosophy*, 2000, p.77. Other schema have been suggested such as the presentation by William Stoddart (*Outline of Hinduism*, Foundation for Traditional Studies, 1993, p.11 and *Outline of Buddhism*, Foundation for Traditional Studies, 1998, p.10) of three fundamental traditional lineages: the Hyperborean Shamanisms (Taoism, Confucianism, Shinto, Siberian Shamanism, Bon, and American Indian religion); the Aryan Mythologies (Hinduism, Buddhism, Graeco-Roman religion, ancient Germano-Celtic religion, Jainism, and Zoroastrianism); and the Semitic Monotheisms (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). Here it is not a matter of disagreement between two schema but rather a matter of an emphasis, which is far from arbitrary, but expresses a precise symbolic structure; and here it is enough to say that the ternary is associated with the process of manifestation at a particular level just as the septenary is.



expressed by the Primordial Tradition. The six “historical” revelations manifest in temporal succession the six symbo-spatial directions of Being.

The differences in human types are fundamentally mapped by race and caste.<sup>35</sup> ‘Race’ remarks Schuon, ‘is a form while caste is a spirit’.<sup>36</sup> Race implies horizontal distinction whereas caste expresses vertical graduation. Again, this is to say that caste exists throughout race. Spiritual typologies can also be classified according to either a contemplative or active tendency. Again the division can be made between exoterists and esoterists. These distinctions are not exclusive but exist in each human collectivity. Each religion must, according to its relatively absolute nature, accommodate all spiritual possibilities.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, the lines of demarcation between all the above typologies are never absolute, existing as they do in the formal plane. This means, as Schuon observes, that the ‘recognition of sufficiently homogeneous human groups or spiritualities does not prevent some individuals from being able to leave their framework, for the human collectivity never has anything absolute about it.’<sup>38</sup>



### Orthodoxy and Grace

In the final analysis the sense of the sacred guarantees or “proves”<sup>39</sup> the Divine authorship of a traditional form. With regard to the initial revelation of a religious tradition it is the “proximity of the Divine”<sup>40</sup> that makes the sense of the sacred somewhat undeniable. The miraculous growth of the great religions is evidence, if

---

<sup>35</sup> Schuon is careful in discussing these terms to recognise the accretions of meaning imposed upon them by human passions (*Castes and Races*, 1989, pp.7-9). In using these terms Schuon has in mind sacred institutions expressing metaphysical principles.

<sup>36</sup> Schuon, *Castes and Races*, 1989, p.37.

<sup>37</sup> ‘A religion by definition must satisfy all spiritual possibilities.’ (Schuon, *Language of the Self*, 1999, p.154).

<sup>38</sup> Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, 1990, p.25.

<sup>39</sup> Schuon: ‘In order to clarify the function of metaphysical proof, one must start from the idea that human intelligence coincides in its essence with certainty of the Absolute’ (*Logic and Transcendence*, 1975, p.57). Again: ‘In the intellectual order logical proof is only a quite provisional crystallisation of intuition, the modes of which...are incalculable’ (*Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1969, p.10).

<sup>40</sup> Of course the Divine is always immediate—“closer than your jugular”—; to talk of “proximity” is to talk of the illusion of separation engendered by relativization; it is man who believes himself “near” or “far” from God.

not proof, of this fact. However, religion is precisely necessitated by the degeneration in our ability to recognise the sacred.<sup>41</sup> This is to say that were man fully conscious of the sacred there would be no need of religious forms to guide them back to God, for they would “see God everywhere”, which, amounts to saying—and quiet rightly too—that Creation is the form or “image” of God.<sup>42</sup> The movement away from the Divine source—concurrent with manifestation—comes with a decline in our sense of the sacred; this effectively means that there needs be an “efficient guarantee” of the forms. This is orthodoxy. The orthodoxy of a tradition is the conformity of the forms to the principles revealed. As René Guénon remarks, the necessary and sufficient condition of orthodoxy is the ‘concordance of a conception with the fundamental principle of the tradition’<sup>43</sup>. Similarly, Schuon says that ‘orthodoxy is the principle of formal homogeneity proper to any authentically spiritual perspective’.<sup>44</sup>

Schuon remarks that there are two principal modes of orthodoxy, ‘one being essential or intrinsic and the other formal or extrinsic: the latter concerns its accordance with truth in some particular revealed form, the former its accordance with essential and universal truth’.<sup>45</sup> These two modes may sometimes oppose another outwardly. He gives the example of Buddhism which, ‘on the one hand is extrinsically heterodox in relation to Hinduism, because it is separated from the basic forms of the latter, and on the other hand it is intrinsically orthodox because it accords with the universal truth from which it derives.’<sup>46</sup> Thus Hinduism is able to recognise the Buddha as an *avatar* of Vishnu.<sup>47</sup> ‘By contrast’ continues Schuon, ‘the Brahmo-samaj, like every other form of “progressive” neo-Hinduism, is heterodox twice over, firstly in relation to Hinduism and secondly in relation to truth itself, heterodox

---

<sup>41</sup> Jesus said: ‘It is not those that are well who need the doctor, but the sick. I have come to call not the upright but sinners to repentance’ (Lk.5:31-32). Again: ‘For the Son of man has come to seek out and save what was lost’ (Lk.19:10).

<sup>42</sup> In a sense Religion serves to create the abyss between the Divine and the human which it then sets out to cross; see my ‘Preliminary Remarks on Reclaiming the Meaning of “Religion”’: *Sacred Web 7*, 2001, p.64.

<sup>43</sup> Guénon, *Man and his becoming*, 1981, p.15.

<sup>44</sup> Schuon, *Language of the Self*, 1999, p.1, see Ch.1 ‘Orthodoxy and Intellectuality’.

<sup>45</sup> Schuon, *Language of the Self*, 1999, p.1.

<sup>46</sup> Schuon, *Language of the Self*, 1999, p.1.

<sup>47</sup> On the relationship between Buddhism and Hinduism see Schuon, *Treasures of Buddhism*, 1993, Ch.2 ‘The Originality of Buddhism’.

therefore both from the particular point of view of form and from the universal point of view of essence.’<sup>48</sup>

Orthodoxy binds Tradition to its principle, however Tradition is not bound by orthodoxy. Rather orthodoxy is an element of Tradition. Schuon: ‘There are two elements in tradition: orthodoxy and grace.’<sup>49</sup> God sometimes intervenes independently of orthodoxy, and this is grace; but, as Schuon stresses, orthodoxy could not make up for the absence of God.<sup>50</sup> In this sense Schuon observes: ‘The Pharisees possessed orthodoxy and regularity, but possessed neither grace nor the virtues. They did not possess grace because in practice they put their orthodoxy and regularity in place of their living God. They did not possess virtues because they replaced human values—the moral qualification—by outward observances which, being thus isolated, lost their efficacy.... Christ did not deny their authority—“they sit in Moses’ seat”—but in spite of this he condemned them.’<sup>51</sup> Orthodoxy reduced to formalism puts the effect before the cause thus severing the link to the Principle. Formalism, in this sense, differs from true orthodoxy in the manner of being its counterfeit and parody.

Tradition is guaranteed concomitantly by orthodoxy and grace, in respect of its salvational efficacy. As an aspect of Tradition grace allows for the mutability of the forms. Schuon: ‘Without ever contradicting orthodoxy grace gives new forms of expression, as circumstance may dictate’<sup>52</sup>. In truth grace precedes orthodoxy, moreover in the final analysis, grace instigates Tradition. In a certain sense it may be said that Tradition is a proof of Grace or the Divine Mercy, for Religion and each religion is given by the Grace of God for the sake of human salvation.

Orthodoxy can be verified in the extrinsic mode by recourse to scriptural criteria and in the intrinsic mode in light of metaphysical truth; moreover the former is always, in its essence, concordant with the latter. Where scripture appears to

---

<sup>48</sup> Schuon, *Language of the Self*, 1999, pp.1-2.

<sup>49</sup> Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.83.

<sup>50</sup> Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.82.

<sup>51</sup> Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.83.

<sup>52</sup> Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.83.

contradict metaphysics—such as the insistence of a particular religion’s exclusive salvational quality—this indicates a limitation of the human intellect placed hand in hand with the priority of grace over orthodoxy.



### **Providence**

The Divine All-Possibility requires that God know Himself as “other than God”. As it is said in the words of the famous *hadith qudsi*: ‘*Kuntu kanzan makhfian fa ‘ahbibtu ‘an ‘ur ‘afa, fakhalaqtu ‘khalqa lakai ‘urafa* (I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be known, so I created the creation in order that I might be known).’ Again, Schuon: “God unfolds his possibilities in differentiated mode and He creates man in order to have a witness to this unfolding; in other words, He projects Himself into relativity in order to perceive Himself in relative mode.”<sup>53</sup> Man’s efficient purpose is the realisation of God, where, in the words of Ibn al-‘Arabi, it is not a question of “becoming one” with God, rather becoming conscious of the Divine Unity which is.<sup>54</sup> But for God to perceive Himself through man man must first perceive himself as separate. It is thus that man must suffer the Fall and, equally, that he must be redeemed.<sup>55</sup> And all this in accordance with the Divine Will.

That man should be willed to “return to God”<sup>56</sup> means that Revelation, Tradition and religious forms are divinely willed. As Schuon remarks, in the elements of orthodoxy and grace dwells a third element, which in reality comes first, and this is the Divine Will, ‘of which man can never grasp all the dimensions at one at the same time.’<sup>57</sup> Orthodoxy and grace manifest the intention of the Divine Will to salvation.

<sup>53</sup> Schuon, *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, 1976, p.185.

<sup>54</sup> ‘God cannot know himself without me.’ – ‘He hath brought me forth in the image of His eternal fatherhood, that I should also be a father and bring forth Him’ Meister Eckhart, both citations from Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000 p.50.

<sup>55</sup> ‘Man could not not fall, since God ‘could not not create’ (Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.216).

<sup>56</sup> Here we recognise the doctrine of the *Apocatastasis*. This area requires further consideration which we hope to return to one day.

<sup>57</sup> Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.83.

To talk of the Divine Will is to talk concurrently, in the words of Boethius, of Providence and Fate: 'Providence is the divine reason itself. It is set at the head of all things and disposes all things. Fate, on the other hand, is the planned order inherent in things subject to change through the medium of which Providence binds everything in its own place. Providence includes all things at the same time, however diverse or infinite, while Fate controls the motion of different individual things in different places and at different times.'<sup>58</sup> The relationship between the ever-changing course of Fate and the stable simplicity of Providence is like that between that which is coming into being and that which is, between time and eternity, or between the moving circle and the still point in the middle.<sup>59</sup> From the central point of Providence God is afforded total and immediate knowledge of all the possibilities that do, or do not, eventuate in the manifest realm of Fate. God is both immanent and transcendent, allowing at the same time man to have free will without the burden of predestination. All destinations are allowed for virtually if not efficiently.<sup>60</sup> Eteinne Gilson summarizes this by stressing the name of "providence": 'He does not foresee, he provides; his name is not "foresight" but "providence".'<sup>61</sup>

God provides according to human need. Human need changes according to man's remoteness from the Divine. Considered with respect to the macrocosm, man's remoteness is measured according to a pattern of cyclic degeneration.<sup>62</sup> The Divine Providence "knows" these patterns in the manner of being their principle. The degeneration of human intelligence and the corresponding adaptation of the forms to meet this are prefigured *in divinis*. The forms are providential; they adapt according to requirement, manifesting as such in the realm of Fate, yet these manifestations are far from arbitrary, preexisting as they do in Providence. That certain manifestations of truth may appear to contradict earlier manifestations simply reveals, in the words of Martin Lings, that 'the needs of the eleventh hour are not the same as those of the

---

<sup>58</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, tr. Chadwick, 1990, p.135.

<sup>59</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, tr. Chadwick, 1990, pp.136-37.

<sup>60</sup> 'If you wish to consider, then, the foreknowledge or prevision by which He discovers all things, it will be more correct to think of it not as a kind of foreknowledge of the future, but as the knowledge of a never ending presence' (Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, tr. Chadwick, 1990, p.165).

<sup>61</sup> Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, 1955, p.103.

<sup>62</sup> The most precise formulation of this exists with the Hindu doctrine of cycles (*Manvantara*).

sixth or seventh.’<sup>63</sup> Again this is to realise that ‘all contradictory truths are unified in the Truth.’<sup>64</sup>



### **The meeting of forms**

With the movement away from the unified Source there is a corresponding fragmentation into diversity. In what seems paradoxical but is really just this movement viewed from another perspective, the fragmentation into diversity corresponds to a dissolution of manifestation into nondistinction. The Sun is one but its rays are projected indefinitely; in distancing themselves from the Sun the rays lose the luminosity of their source, until they vanish into the darkness. This darkness is one. The distinction between the Sun and the dark is analogous to that between Essence and Substance. In reality Essence and Substance are One.<sup>65</sup> As Schuon remarks, Essence and Substance are almost synonymous in practice, differing only in that substance refers to ‘the underlying, immanent, permanent and autonomous nature of a basic reality, whereas essence refers to the reality as such, that is, as “being,” and secondarily as the absolutely fundamental nature of a thing.’ He continues, ‘The notion of essence denotes an excellence which is as it were discontinuous in relation to accidents, whereas the notion of substance implies on the contrary a sort of continuity.’<sup>66</sup>

It is said: ‘I being one become many, and being many become one.’<sup>67</sup> Cosmologically, this refers, in part, to the cyclic nature of manifestation. However, the movement towards nondistinction at the end of an age should not be mistaken for a qualitative movement towards Unity, for, as Guénon has remarked, this is a

<sup>63</sup> Lings, *The Eleventh Hour*, 1987, p.34.

<sup>64</sup> ‘Abd al-Karim Jili, cited in Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.835.

<sup>65</sup> Thus the Greek term *ousia* is translated variously as ‘essence’ and ‘substance’ (see Burckhardt, *Alchemy*, 1974, p.36, n.3). Similarly the Arabic term ‘*ayn*’ (see Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, 1976, p.62, n.1).

<sup>66</sup> Schuon, *In The Face Of The Absolute*, 1989, p.53, n.1.

<sup>67</sup> *Samyutta-nikaya*, II.212, cit. in Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000 p.272, to offer but one such example of this formula.

movement into Uniformity, which is “the Great Parody” of Unity.<sup>68</sup> This is simply in keeping with the principle of inversion proper to any cycle.

One effect of this leveling of diversity is the revealing of the analogy between forms. This has both beneficent and maleficent results according to the perspective adopted, which is to say, whether it is viewed from the point of view of truth or that of error. Beneficially, the analogy of traditional forms reveals the essential or transcendental unity of the forms, while at the same time affirming the Divine Infinitude in the diversity of form. Thus the analogy of two forms acts to enrich each form without ever denying the specific nature of either form.<sup>69</sup> Mircea Eliade remarks, ‘We compare or contrast two expressions of a symbol not in order to reduce them to a single, pre-existing expression, but in order to discover the process whereby a structure is likely to assume enriched meanings.’<sup>70</sup>

In our age it may happen that the understanding of a traditional form can become muddled by the decline in the human intelligence, which is itself somewhat inevitable given the cyclic movement away from the Source. In such cases drawing analogy between forms can serve to clarify. Guénon: ‘The concordances between all traditional forms may be said to represent genuine “synonymies”; that is how we regard them, and just as the explanation of certain things may be easier in one language than in another, so one of these forms may be better fitted than others for expounding certain truths and rendering them easier to understand.’<sup>71</sup> Coomaraswamy remarks: ‘every tradition is necessarily a partial representation of the truth intended by tradition universally considered; in each tradition something is suppressed, or reserved, or obscured which in another may be found more extensively, more logically, or more brilliantly developed. What then is clear and full in one tradition can be used to develop the meaning of what may be hardly more than alluded

---

<sup>68</sup> See Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity & The Signs of the Times*, 1972.

<sup>69</sup> This is to say with Adrian Snodgrass that ‘adequation is not equality’ (*Architecture, Time and Eternity* Vol.1, 1990, pp.48). Paul Tillich observes that every symbol has ‘a special function which is just *it* and cannot be replaced by more or less adequate symbols’ (*Religious Symbols and Our Knowledge of God*, 1973, p.482). See my ‘Understanding “Symbol”’: *Sacred Web* 6, 2000.

<sup>70</sup> Eliade, ‘Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism’: Eliade & Kitagawa, *The History of Religion*, 1959, pp.86-107.

<sup>71</sup> Guénon, *The Symbolism of the Cross*, 1975, pp.xi.

to in another.’<sup>72</sup> Such clarification and enrichment might well occur at any stage of a cycle; the understanding of a form need not become lost before it can be enriched.

There are two principal dangers in the analogy of forms: reductionism and syncretism. Reductionism amounts to a denial of the integrity of the forms. Adrian Snodgrass remarks that, ‘the multivalent nature of the symbol precludes a reductionist methodology.’<sup>73</sup> As Eliade says, ‘If we retain only one of its significations, in declaring it the only “fundamental” or “first” or “original” signification, we risk not grasping the true message of the symbol.’<sup>74</sup> Snodgrass stresses this point: ‘An exegesis that does justice to the fullness of the symbol in both its horizontal and vertical dimensions will leave its meaning “open” and not confine it within the limiting configuration of a closed hypothesis’<sup>75</sup>.

‘Syncretism’ as Guénon remarks, ‘consists in assembling from the outside a number of more or less incongruous elements which, when regarded, can never be truly unified; in short, it is a kind of eclecticism, with all the fragmentariness and incoherence that this always implies.’ He contrasts this with synthesis, which, ‘on the other hand, is carried out essentially from within; by this we mean that it properly consists in envisaging things in the unity of their principle, in seeing how they are derived from and dependent on that principle, and thus uniting them, or rather becoming aware of their real unity, by virtue of a wholly inward bond, inherent in what is most profound in their nature.’<sup>76</sup> ‘Syncretism,’ says Guénon, ‘is something purely outward and superficial; the elements taken from every quarter and put together in this way can never amount to anything more than borrowings that are incapable of being effectively integrated into a doctrine worthy of the name.’<sup>77</sup> In contrast, the synthetic analogy between forms in no way indicates “borrowings” but pertains to ‘the Primordial Tradition from which these forms have issued either directly or indirectly.’<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>72</sup> Coomaraswamy, ‘Sri Ramakrishna and Religious Tolerance’, 1977, p.40.

<sup>73</sup> Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stupa*, 1985, p.8.

<sup>74</sup> Eliade, *Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts*, 1992, p.5.

<sup>75</sup> Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stupa*, 1985, p.8.

<sup>76</sup> Guénon, *The Symbolism of the Cross*, 1975, pp.x.

<sup>77</sup> Guénon, *The Symbolism of the Cross*, 1975, pp.x.

<sup>78</sup> Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, p.27.



There is a further danger particular to our age, being as Guénon called this, the “Reign of Quantity”. It happens that the modern love affair with quantity leads to a situation where man can become lost in an overwhelming sea of analogy. The accumulation of analogous forms is far from the appreciation of the truth that underpins them all.<sup>79</sup> Sensing this truth in all the diverse forms man is unable to give himself wholly to any. We are left knowing *about* the forms rather than knowing the truth. ‘If you do not know the whole operation from beginning to end, you know nothing at all.’<sup>80</sup>



### **The Primordial Tradition**

We have made mention of the “Primordial Tradition”, moreover we have said that examples of the Primordial or Mythological Tradition are, or at least were, recognisable in our day and age in the Koori peoples of Australia and the Plains Indians. In saying, as Guénon does, that the forms have “issued” from the Primordial Tradition we in no way intend to imply that the forms of “later” traditions were derived, as it were, from the forms of these “earlier” primitive traditions. These primitive traditions represent a mentality wherein, as Mircea Eliade observes, ‘nature is a hierophany, and the “laws of nature” are the revelation of the mode of existence of the divinity.’<sup>81</sup> This mentality represents the normative mentality of the human condition, the state of original perfection and unity in which God is seen everywhere. These traditions express the Primordial Tradition not by any singularity of form but by the integrity of being unencumbered by the obscurations of a dualistic perspective and the reflection, in the human plane, of principial eternity itself.<sup>82</sup>

---

<sup>79</sup> Such seductive accumulation of forms can be seen only too well in the “occult” movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries, particularly in the writings of H. P. Blavatsky and the endless tables of Alister Crowley.

<sup>80</sup> Helvetius, ‘Golden Calf’, in Waite, *The Hermetic Museum*, 1999, (vol.2) p.288.

<sup>81</sup> Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, 1974, p.59.

<sup>82</sup> Guénon, *Aperçus sur l’Initiation*, p.278, cit. here from Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000 p.561.

The Primordial Tradition refers to the “primordial state”. This, in the final analysis, is none other than Substance, *materia prima*, *mulaprakrti*, hyle, etc.. Substance, as Schuon remarks, ‘is represented at each ontological or cosmic level in appropriate mode; and *a fortiori*, pure Substance or Substance as such underlies each of its secondary manifestations.’<sup>83</sup> To talk then of the Primordial Tradition is to talk of the continuity between a particular mode of Substance with its underling reality. As such one can say that all traditions born of Divine Revelation are, in their essence and origin, the Primordial Tradition. Likewise the perfection of each tradition coincides with the Primordial Tradition.

The forms of the traditions are manifest in Substance and manifest precisely as “things”. Here Schuon remarks, ‘Things are coagulations of universal Substance, but Substance is not affected (this is crucial) by those accidents in the slightest degree. Substance is not things, but things are it, and they are so by virtue of their existence and of their qualities’<sup>84</sup> The Primordial Tradition is thus the underlying reality of form without itself being a formal manifestation *per se*.

To talk of the reestablishment of the Primordial Tradition in any sort of temporal or historical sense is, properly considered, simply to talk of the recognition of unity and purity in the forms of an orthodox tradition. The recognition, by a qualified intellect, of the Primordial Tradition in diverse religious forms is a recognition of the eternal substratum of Reality. It is a recognition of that which was lost but now is found.<sup>85</sup> The idea of a recreation of a “Primordial Tradition”, in the sense of a new religion is simply a syncretic illusion. Such a singular tradition could never have existed, given precisely that existence is manifestation and this is distinction and diversity. Moreover it is incorrect to think that one could “recreate” the Primordial Tradition in any sort of a-temporal or metaphysical sense either, for it is the very basis of creation

---

<sup>83</sup> Schuon, *In the Face of the Absolute*, 1989, p.56.

<sup>84</sup> Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, 1965, p.77.

<sup>85</sup> In the story of the prodigal son (Lk.15) it is the younger or second son that became lost. This may seem to contradict the idea of the Primordial Tradition—that which has become lost—as being the first tradition, however, here we have another example of the law of inverse analogy. Of course, from the Divine perspective the Primordial Tradition is never lost but remains with the father, whereas, it is the younger traditions that become “lost” in the flux and degeneration of creation.

itself. In the words of the alchemist, Michael Sendivogius, ‘Let no one presume that he can make the first matter.’<sup>86</sup>



### **The Message and the messenger**

God is the Author and man is the word made flesh. God is the Hand that guides and man is the pen. God is the Creator and man is creation. God is immutable Essence and man is mutable form. God is the Message and man is the messenger.

God as Message manifests the divine aspiration to Unity. The divine Message is the message of salvation; to be effective it must submit itself to being delivered on the formal plane, it must be humbled, as with Christ’s *kenosis* (Ph.2:1-11), so that it might be “raised on high”.<sup>87</sup> Man as messenger delivers the supraformal Message in formal language so that he himself might recognise in this Message his own essence and be released from the bonds of form. To cite a well-known formula: ‘God became man so that man could become God.’

Schuon: ‘One cannot understand the meaning of the divine Message without knowing the nature of the human receptacle; he who understands man, understands all the supernatural and cannot help but accept it. Now man is made to contemplate the Absolute starting from the contingency; the Absolute is conscious of Itself in Itself, but It also wishes to be conscious of Itself starting from an other than Itself; this indirect vision is a possibility necessarily included in the Infinitude belonging to the Absolute. ...Fundamentally, this Message comes from “himself,” not of course from his empirical “I” but from his immanent Ipseity, which is that of God and without which there would be no “I,” whether human, angelic, or any other; credibility of the message results from the fact that it is what we are, both within ourselves and beyond

<sup>86</sup> Sendivogius, ‘The New Chemical Light’, in Waite, *The Hermetic Museum*, 1999, (vol.2) p.95.

<sup>87</sup> See my ‘Withdrawal, Extinction and Creation: Christ’s *kenosis* in light of the Judaic doctrine of *tsimtsum* and the Islamic doctrine of *fana*’: in *The Essential Sophia*, (ed.) S.H. Nasr & K. O’Brien, Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 2006, 58-77 (originally published in *Sophia*, Vol.7 No.1, 2001).

ourselves. In the depths of transcendence is immanence, and in the depths of immanence, transcendence.’<sup>88</sup>

The question of the relationship between Message and messenger is, in the final analysis, the question of identity. To say that the Message is pre-eminent over the messenger is to recognise the absolute discontinuity between the Essence and Substance or between God and man. ‘Why do you call me good?’ demanded Christ, ‘No one is good but God alone.’ The human being is a tool in the hand of God, through which and to whom Revelation is delivered. This tool is necessarily imperfect, or else man would be God. At the same time man is made “in the image” of God; thus there is in man the perfection of the Divine. Here, in the words of a well known Islamic formula, it is perfectly true to say that ‘he who has seen the Prophet has seen God.’ As Schuon says: ‘That we are conformed to God,—“made in His image,”—this is certain; otherwise we should not exist. That we are contrary to God, this also is certain; otherwise we should not be different from God. Without analogy with God we should be nothing. Without opposition to God we should be God.’<sup>89</sup> ‘No one is good but God alone.’ ‘He who has seen the Prophet has seen God.’ Between these two positions lies the mystery of Revelation.

The perfection of the divine Message is, from the point of view of Manifestation, measured by the perfection of its messenger and then again by the perfection of its recipient. Of course the Message is of Itself Absolute yet for it to be effective it must accept the limitations of the human receptacle. It is in this sense that Schuon places esotericism beyond the “Message”, in that esotericism, as he comments, ‘is not a religious Message and derives from the Intellect more than from Revelation’<sup>90</sup> Here of course esotericism is, from a certain perspective, identical with the pure Message. The “Word made flesh” remains the Word.

The *avatar* is the meeting of the messenger and the Message. The Gautama Buddha, Jesus Christ and Muhammad each manifest this role supremely, so that the

---

<sup>88</sup> Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, 1982, pp.152-53.

<sup>89</sup> Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.167.

<sup>90</sup> Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, 1982, p.136.

essence of their doctrinal orthodoxy rests in the being of their lives. Here messenger and Message are one, with the former being imbued with the perfection of the latter, and the latter accepting the limitations of the former—‘Taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are’ (Phil.2:7)—with such perfect detachment so as to effect the perfection and salvation of form itself. ‘There is nothing that distinguishes samsara from nirvana’ teaches Nagarjuna.<sup>91</sup> In the *avatar* Message and messenger are one: “true God and true man”.

This means that even in the *avatar* the virtual illusion of “error” exists, and this is simply to say that not everybody is qualified to accept the pure truth; were this otherwise there should be no question of belief. This is again to say that the Absolute includes the contingent by definition and on pain of contradiction; that the perfection of the Infinite includes the possibility of illusion. This is only a contraction from the perspective of illusion.

Thus even in the perfection of the *avatar* there must be, not contractions but paradoxes.<sup>92</sup> Between Jesus’ injunction to “turn the other cheek” and his violent expulsion of the money lenders from the Temple there is the appearance of contradiction—if not hypocrisy—yet here this very paradox serves as a key to the merciful truth of Divine Judgment.<sup>93</sup> Again, Schuon remarks: ‘The Bible, whose perspective is above all legalistic since it is moral, reproaches Solomon for having constructed temples for the divinities of his foreign wives, but it adds nonetheless that Solomon “slept with his fathers,” a formula which is also used in speaking of David and which refers to posthumous Beatitude. It would be contradictory, to say the least, to doubt the salvation of an author whose writings are included in the Bible; if there

---

<sup>91</sup> *Madhyamakakarika*, xxv. 19-20. As Schuon observes, ‘the Bodhisattva, since he realizes the “emptiness” of things, thereby also realizes the “emptiness” of the samsara as such and at the same time its nirvanic quality. If on the one hand all is “emptiness,” on the other hand all is Nirvana, the Buddhist notion of vacuity being at one and the same time negative and positive’ (*Treasures of Buddhism*, 1993, p.139).

<sup>92</sup> Schuon: ‘ “Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is God,” said Christ; which signifies that every manifestation, even if divine, implies imperfection; it implies it because it is manifestation, and not on account of its content, since the latter may be divine, and therefore “absolute” ’ (*Language of the Self*, 1999, p.13).

<sup>93</sup> ‘If I create the world only with the attribute of mercy, sins will multiply beyond all bounds; if I create it only with the attribute of justice, how can the world last? Behold, I will create it with both attributes; would that it might endure!’ (Gen. R. xxii. 15).

are differences of opinion on the subject of Solomon, it is because of a conflict of levels and not because of an ambiguity situated on one and the same plane.’<sup>94</sup>

On the one hand it is enough to say that God chooses His messengers; the incidental imperfection of the messenger cannot possibly effect the essence of the Message. It is simply beyond the power of man to do damage to God in any real sense. On the other hand the imperfection of the messenger is both precise and providential. It is a measure of the mystery of Transcendence and Immanence.<sup>95</sup> At the same time it is a guard against the false attribution of the Message to the messenger; the merciful protection against the error of idolatry.

God moves in mysterious ways. What appears inexplicable to man accords with Divine Providence. To question the imperfection of the messenger in light of the perfection of the Message is both to confuse the Relative with the Absolute and to question the Divine Intention.



### **A note on Frithjof Schuon**

Patrick Ringgenberg’s article, ‘Frithjof Schuon–Paradox and Providence’, in *Sacred Web* 7 (2001), questioned the role of Schuon the individual in the face of the divine message which he enunciated. Mr.Ringgenberg maintains the orthodoxy of Schuon’s writings while suggesting a deviancy in Schuon’s personal character that lead Schuon’s own spiritual life to suffer from “primordialist delusions”.

There are things to commended in this timely article. However we must tread carefully in any critique of a spiritual master, and Ringgenberg is happy to admit Schuon’s mastership and authority.<sup>96</sup> In an age desperate for “gurus” and only too susceptible to the illusion of idolatry it is right that it should be stressed that Schuon was not an *avatar*, nor a prophet, in the strict sense. “Schuonism”, as with

---

<sup>94</sup> Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, 1982, p.131, n.20.

<sup>95</sup> As Schuon remarks, ‘apparent ineptness is often the measure of the supernatural’ (*From the Divine to the Human*, 1982, p.132).

“Guénonism”, smacks of a lack of any real intelligence on the behalf of those who adhere to such cults of personality.

Schuon was, it seems, a man of qualified intellect; a man of his time whose divinely inspired *raison d’être* was precisely focused on this time, while remaining, at the heart of its message, timeless. Schuon’s message is a corrective and a pointer; his enunciations on the *religio perennis* intend and serve to direct man towards one of the paths of the religious traditions. They never attempt to usurp the religions with some sort of “pure esoterism”,<sup>97</sup> which for that matter is an impossibility.

A few comments on this point. Esoterism, says Schuon, ‘is not, in its intrinsic reality, a complement or a half; it is so only extrinsically and as it were “accidentally”<sup>98</sup>. This is simply to say that Essence is beyond what Contingency can affect. At the same time, esoterism is, for the sake of man, necessarily joined to an appropriate method of realization. Schuon: ‘esoterism on the one hand prolongs exoterism—by harmoniously plumbing its depths—because the form expresses the essence and because in this respect the two enjoy solidarity, while on the other hand esoterism opposes exoterism—by transcending it abruptly—because the essence by virtue of its unlimitedness is of necessity not reducible to form, or in other words, because form inasmuch as it constitutes a limit is opposed to whatever is totality and liberty.’<sup>99</sup> Again we recall Huston Smith, ‘forms are to be transcended by fathoming their depths and discerning their universal content, not by circumventing them.’ Further to this point, Schuon remarks: ‘Exoterism does not come from esoterism; it comes directly from God. This reminds one of Dante’s thesis according to which the Empire comes from God and not from the papacy. ‘Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s.’<sup>100</sup>

---

<sup>96</sup> Ringgenberg, ‘Frithjof Schuon—Paradoxes and Providence’: *Sacred Web* 7, 2001, p.25.

<sup>97</sup> Schuon favours the terms “esoterism” and “exoterism” over “esotericism” and “exotericism”. Given that we are presenting the Schuonian perspective we will continue with his usage from here in.

<sup>98</sup> Schuon, *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*, 2000, p.115.

<sup>99</sup> Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, 1981, p.26.

<sup>100</sup> Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.80.

All this is simply to agree with Mr. Ringgenberg, who sees Schuon's fundamental theses as 'fundamentally correct'<sup>101</sup>. It is not in Schuon's writings that Mr. Ringgenberg sees deviancy but in what he calls Schuon's 'abuses and pseudo-initiatic claims.'<sup>102</sup> Mr. Ringgenberg associates these abuses primarily with Schuon's role as spiritual master of his *tariqah*.

If Schuon's writings represent esoterism his practical teaching could not have done so in any pure sense by virtue of the exoteric plane on which all practice takes place. Here he must have incorporated the very contradiction of exoterism and of form. To admit this is not to challenge Schuon as a spiritual master. To teach is to communicate and this sometimes means taking account of the weakness of the pupil. Between God and man the same relationship exists, as we have noted with Schuon above. It would be unjust in the extreme to criticise Schuon for acting "in the image of God". Moreover, to teach is far more than simple discourse and the role of paradox is a well-known tool, especially in the sphere of spiritual edification. Here one thinks of the often bizarre and occasionally morally ambiguous antics of some Buddhist masters. The koans of Zen can offer unorthodox lessons. The Bible is full of apparent contradictions. Christ, as we have noted, offered a lesson on Mercy in his violence at the Temple. Again, as noted above, it is often the seeming weakness of the master that carries the greatest lesson. Here one recalls the "foolishness" of the Sheikh who played with children in Rumi's story.<sup>103</sup>

It is precisely in the practical role of spiritual master of his *tariqah* that Schuon most faced the danger of his followers becoming idolaters. It is precisely here that a corrective might have been needed. Mr. Ringgenberg recognises this very point: 'If Schuon's work was willed by God, his personal deviation was also willed in a certain way. ...it was necessary that the deviation developed sufficiently to engender a crisis that could constitute a purification and durable and efficacious warning.'<sup>104</sup> Again:

---

<sup>101</sup> Ringgenberg, 'Frithjof Schuon—Paradoxes and Providence': *Sacred Web* 7, 2001, p.20.

<sup>102</sup> Ringgenberg, 'Frithjof Schuon—Paradoxes and Providence': *Sacred Web* 7, 2001, p.20.

<sup>103</sup> *Mathnawi* II, 2338-42, 2384-85, 2400-2430, 2436-38, 2442 (Nicholson, 1925-1940); II, 2577-83, 2644-73 (Gupta, 1995). See Lynn C. Bauman's delightful essay, 'Initiatic Grace in the Masterwork of Jala ud-din Rumi' from *Sacred Web* 6, 2000.

<sup>104</sup> Ringgenberg, 'Frithjof Schuon—Paradoxes and Providence': *Sacred Web* 7, 2001, p.30.



‘If Schuon was the means of a work that is unique in the intellectual landscape of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, we must conclude that the Spirit that was manifested through this simultaneously contradictory and noble receptacle knew what it was about, and that the complete journey of this man constitutes a significant whole that should arouse a discriminating and critical intelligence as much as the consciousness of the riches that we have been offered.’<sup>105</sup> These comments offer some valuable insights into the relationship that can exist, in some instances, between the Message and the messenger. Still, we must be careful as to how we leap from these insights to assumptions of Schuon’s guilt. Mr. Ringgenberg begins with Schuon’s “personal deviation” and, to an extent, excuses this as being the work of the Spirit that “bloweth where it please”. The relative validity of the insights might then lead one to the assumption that the entire statement is correct. However, the actual case against Schuon rests on the judgments of people whose right to judge might well be questioned. ‘Judge not, that you be judged.’

If Schuon, or more importantly the Spirit that moved him, manifested certain paradoxes—and this is far from accusing him of “personal deviations”—then these provide the key to a deeper understanding of the message expounded through him. If these paradoxes appear to contradict certain orthodox principles then we must recall that ‘if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law.’ (Gal.5:18). Again, this is to realise the primacy of grace over orthodoxy. However, at the same time such paradoxes must be resolvable in the light of esoteric truth.

To the charge of syncretism leveled at Schuon. Traditionally, the integrity of the path is well recognised. ‘You should keep to one place, one master, one method, and one system of yoga. This is the way which leads to positive success.’<sup>106</sup> Yet as Martin Lings observes, ‘the needs of the eleventh hour are not the same as those of the sixth or seventh.’ This, however, is no excuse for syncretism. Still, in an age where the convergence of traditions is inevitable one must, for the sake of the people of this

---

<sup>105</sup> Ringgenberg, ‘Frithjof Schuon—Paradoxes and Providence’: *Sacred Web* 7, 2001, pp.23-24.

<sup>106</sup> Swami Sivananda, *La Pratique de Meditation*, 1950, p.77, cit. Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.290.

age, take account of this situation. This meeting of traditions can either be maleficent or beneficial.

As to the question of the “Primordial gatherings” that form the basis of much of Mr. Ringgenberg’s criticism of Schuon. Can it be said that Schuon claimed that the introduction of the “Primordial gatherings” constituted a new religion? No. In fact they were not intended as rituals but were allowed by Schuon to honour the visits of the Crow Medicine Man and close friend of Schuon, Thomas Yellowtail.<sup>107</sup> Certain people close to Schuon have revealed that these Red Indian celebrations were permitted on the strict understanding that they were recreational, not ritual in intent.<sup>108</sup> Schuon never apparently intended these pow-wows to be understood as ritualistic or part of his “method”, and he was apparently very upset when he heard how some people regarded them.

‘Is it right to receive investiture from the hands of more than one?’ asked Muhammad ibnu `l-Munawwar, ‘Yes, it is right, provided that the second investiture is not accompanied with the intention of annulling the first.’<sup>109</sup> Can it then be said that Schuon’s recognition of other truths, such as we see in his art, was intended as an annulling of the essential path of his “method”, that is the path of Islam, the recognition of the Divine Unity and an acceptance of Muhammad as the Prophet? It has been reported that some members of the Bloomington community do not regard themselves as Muslims. Be this as it may, there is no evidence that, after accepting Islam, Schuon ever considered himself other than Muslim.<sup>110</sup> Finally, can it be said

---

<sup>107</sup> For Titus Burckhardt’s account of Schuon’s introduction to and relationship with Thomas Yellowtail see Burckhardt’s *Mirror of the Intellect*, 1987, Ch.16 ‘The Sun Dance’.

<sup>108</sup> On the charges of sexual impropriety it has been admitted that an element of partial nudity was allowed during these gatherings. The initial setting of the dances was intimate and included a small circle of close friends. Eventually, however, the circle grew as word spread and more people were trusted by being allowed to attend. It goes without saying that no improprieties ever occurred. Nudity and the symbolism of the human form is common in many traditional cultures and the fact that this became the basis for an attack on Schuon suggests that the real issue of Schuon’s teaching had little about it that could be truly attacked.

<sup>109</sup> Muhammad ibnu `l-Munawwar from Nicholson: *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, 1921, p.23, cit. in Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000 p.295

<sup>110</sup> By way of an aside: in a recent article it was noted that the Australian traditionalist, Harold Stewart, felt that the Traditionalism associated with Schuon and with the journal, *Studies in Comparative Religion*, was becoming “a kind of front” for Islamic Sufism (Bendle, ‘Traditionalism in Australia: An Overview’ *Australian Religion Studies Review*, vol.14, n.1). What this fails to recognise is that Traditionalism does not and cannot stand alone as a spiritual path. If Schuon’s Traditionalism was

that Schuon's references to the Primordial Tradition meant anymore than his recognition of the Truth in the universally orthodox forms?<sup>111</sup>

Coomaraswamy has remarked that 'however a religion may be self-sufficient if it be followed to the very end to which it is directed, there can hardly be supposed a way so plain that it could not here and there be better illuminated by other lights than that of the pilgrim's private lantern, the light of any lantern being only a refraction of the Light of lights.'<sup>112</sup> There is little argument that this age has fallen into such darkness that all such lanterns should be welcomed.

---

flavoured by Sufism it was because he chose the Islamic path, or more to the point, it chose him. If, as Bendle says, Stewart found this alarming then this most likely reflected a lack of a clear path of his own at that time. In 1963 Stewart became a practicing Shin Buddhist and remained one for the rest of his life, and here we might remark that his poetry became primarily flavoured by his path (see the biography of Stewart by Peter G. Kelly, <http://mugeko.senet.com.au/HSbio.htm>).

<sup>111</sup> A final point that deems no more than a footnote: It is suggested by Ringgenberg, among others, that Schuon's deviancy manifested itself in his later years (see 'Frithjof Schuon-Paradoxes and Providence': *Sacred Web* 7, 2001, p30). An interesting question arises here, and one that demands further treatment beyond any consideration of Schuon. What is the relationship between intellectual discernment and the decline of the human body/mind? What of the saintly person who's declining mental state leaves them cursing God? And is this even possible?

<sup>112</sup> Coomaraswamy, 'Sri Ramakrishna and Religious Tolerance', 1977, p.41.