

“Made in the Image”: Schuon’s theomorphic anthropology

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‘The man is not he who realizes his Lord. The Man is he who realizes his own entity.’ (Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Futūhāt*, II 74.6)

Introduction

The theomorphic nature of man is a central theme in the œuvre of Frithjof Schuon. The keys to Schuon’s theomorphic anthropology may be found in his book, *From the Divine to the Human*, which, as Seyyed Hossein Nasr remarks, serves as a summary of these ideas in ‘a very condensed and concentrated form’¹. Of particular importance here are the essays ‘Outline of a Spiritual Anthropology’ and ‘The Message of the Human Body.’ Among Schuon’s other dedicated writings on the subject are: ‘Prerogatives of the Human State’ and ‘Man in the Cosmogonic Projection’ (*The Play of Masks*), ‘The Ternary Aspect of the Human Microcosm’ (*Gnosis—Dive Wisdom*), ‘Faculties and Modalities of Man’ (*The Transfiguration of Man*), ‘Man as Divine Manifestation’ (*Stations of Wisdom*),² ‘Man in the Universe’ (*Light on the Ancient World*), ‘Survey of Integral Anthropology’ (*To Have a Center*), and the second chapter of *Esoterism as Principle and Way* entitled ‘Spiritual and Moral Life,’ which includes the essays ‘The Triple Nature of Man,’ ‘The Problem of Sexuality’ and ‘Dimensions of the Human Vocation.’ This list is by no means exhaustive and references to the meaning and symbolism of man can be found interspersed throughout his writings.

Schuon considers man in terms of intelligence, sentiment, volition, psychology, sexuality, and form, this last being primarily concerned with

¹ Nasr, *Introduction to The Essential Frithjof Schuon*, 2005, p.39.

² This is the title given in *The Essential Frithjof Schuon*; this piece forms part of the chapter entitled ‘Manifestations of the Divine’ in *Stations of Wisdom*.

the symbolism of the human body.³ In his writings he offers insight into the meaning of the body, although it might well be said that it is with his paintings that he most eloquently elucidates the symbolism of the human form. This is to be expected given that this symbolism is primarily visual;⁴ “primarily” because the human form also includes symbolisms associated with the senses that are variously expressed through the arts; for example, the human form manifests an auditory symbolism that is most eloquently realized in song, and a symbolism of kinētics that is most eloquently realised in dance.⁵

In the following survey we take as an expedient point of departure the symbolism of the human body, providing an overview, far from exhaustive, of some of Schuon’s key theomorphic teachings while touching upon the symbolism of the body and man in the wider context. We shall restrict ourselves to a narrow consideration of man’s theomorphic form, which is to say, the body. Here a more detailed work begs to be undertaken if one were so inclined to examine the symbolic import of the various elements of the human form; one can well envisage chapters on the meaning of hair, the mouth, the eyes, and so on. For our part we will simply consider three topics: 1) man’s divinity and animality, 2) the symbolism of the sexes, and 3) the meaning of nudity. This last topic plays an important and yet controversial part of Schuon’s work. In recognizing that nudity has

³ As Nasr observes: ‘The theomorphic nature of man is not reflected only in man’s intelligence and will nor even in the intelligence alone together with the sentiments which can be transmuted through the alchemy of Divine Love. This nature is also reflected in the human body, both the male and the female bodies possessing an innate perfection which could not possibly have been the result of some kind of evolution by chance or struggle’ (*Introduction to The Essential Frithjof Schuon*, 2005, p.35).

⁴ Schuon notes that when it comes to metaphysics there is a difficulty that ‘lies in the fact that the heaviness of language requires almost endless prolixities ... The extreme opposite of the inevitable complication of abstract dialectics is visual symbolism, or simply symbolism, which exhibits all the aspects of a problem at once, but without thereby furnishing the keys allowing everything to be deciphered’ (*In The Face Of The Absolute*, 1989, p.37 & n.1).

⁵ Schuon: ‘The human being is compounded of geometry and music, of spirit and soul, of virility and femininity: by geometry, he brings the chaos of existence back to order, that is, he brings blind substance back to its ontological meaning and thus constitutes a reference point between Earth and Heaven, a “sign-post” pointing towards God; by music he brings the segmentation of form back to unitive life, reducing form, which is death, to Essence—at least symbolically and virtually—so that it vibrates with a joy which is at the same time a nostalgia for the Infinite’ (*Stations of Wisdom*, 1995, p.80).

proven controversial let me say that it is not my intention to present an apology or defence of Schuon, which is hardly needed for those with understanding, but rather an exposition of a symbolism that by the very nature of its immediacy and universality is fundamental in understanding what it means to be “made in the image of God.”

Universal Man

Metaphysical Man is the prototype of the universe, which in turn is synthesized in individual man. The various world traditions offer numerous examples of this idea which might be succinctly summed up by the Islamic maxim: ‘the universe is a big man and man is a little universe.’ In his introduction to al-Jīlī’s treatise, *Al-Insān al-Kāmil*, Titus Burckhardt remarks, ‘With regard to its internal unity, the cosmos is ... like a single being;—“We have recounted all things in an evident prototype” (Qur’an 36). If one calls him the “Universal Man,” it is not by reason of an anthropomorphic conception of the universe, but because man represents, on earth, it’s most perfect image’⁶. At the same time the geometric parallels between the human body and the ratios that underpin both space and time go some way to justifying just such an anthropocosmic vision. As Robert Lawlor observes,

The human body contains in its proportions all of the important geometric and geodesic measures and functions. The ancient Egyptian cubit, which is a time-space commensurate measure (1/1000th of the distance that the earth rotates at the equator in one second of time), the foot, the fathom, the ancient Egyptian equivalent to the metre, all these measures are commensurate with the size or movements of earth. The relationship of Φ is given by the navel. In the ideal proportions of Man the arm-span in relation to the total height gives the chord-arc relationship to the total height as the volume of a sphere is to the volume of its circumscribing cube (1:1.90983). Also the height of the upper body is to the height of the pubic arch as $\pi/3:1$ or 1.047:1. Thus the proportions of ideal man are at the centre of a circle of invariant cosmic relationships.⁷

⁶ Burckhardt, intro. *Al-Insān al-Kāmil*, 1983, p.iv.

⁷ Lawlor, *Sacred Geometry*, 1989, p.92.

The relationship between the cosmos and man is found, *mutatis mundis*, with *Adam Kadmon* of the kabbalistic tradition, *al-Insānul-Kāmil* (“Universal Man”) of Islamic esotericism, the *Wang* (“King”) of Taoist tradition, and *Ādibuddha* in Tibetan Buddhism. In the Hindu tradition man is regarded as the *axis mundi* with the duty of holding earth and heaven together.⁸ In the Chinese “Great Triad”—*T’ien* (Heaven), *Ti* (Earth) and *Jen* (Man)—Man is none other than cosmic existence.⁹ Now, the term “Universal Man” is more than an epitaph for the cosmos: Universal Man is the cosmogonic principle *per se* and it is only right that cosmological existence reflects this principle at all levels. Viewed *ad intra* these reflections concentrate the universe in the human form; viewed *ad extra* the universe is an unfolding of the principle inherent in every human being. In the words of the physicist, Robert Dicke: “The right order of ideas may not be, “Here is the universe, so what must man be?” but instead, “Here is man, so what must the universe be?””¹⁰.

The cosmos is almost universally¹¹ said to be composed of the “three worlds”: earth, midspace, heaven; an example of this idea is found in the Hindu *Tribhuvana*: *Bhu* (earth), *Bhuvas* (air) and *Svar* (heaven).¹² The triple structure of cosmic existence manifests in microcosmic man as the ternary *corpus, anima, spiritus* or, *soma, psyché, pneuma*.

⁸ *Atharva-Veda* 10:7.

⁹ Heaven and Earth are the ontological principles, Essence and Substance, *Purusha* and *Prakriti* in the Hindu tradition.

¹⁰ Cited in Lawlor, *Sacred Geometry*, 1982, p.92. ‘The entire Universe is condensed in the body, and the entire body in the Heart. Thus the heart is the nucleus of the whole Universe’ (Ramana Maharshi, *Talks With Sri Ramana Maharshi* Vol.3, 1955, p.247); ‘My earth and My heaven contain Me not, but the heart of My faithful servant containeth Me’ (*hadīth qudsī*); ‘The kingdom of God is within you’ (Lk.17:21).

¹¹ Admittedly different cultures speak of different numbers of worlds but this is a matter of symbolic emphasis (see my ‘Concerning number symbolism’: *Sacred Web* 16, 2006, pp.141-165).

¹² A certain awkwardness arises here, as René Guénon observes, inasmuch as we are obliged to use the terms “heaven” and “earth” in reference to both the supra-formal and gross realms of manifestation. However, as Guénon remarks, ‘to justify this dual application or connotation of the same terms we need only point out that the supra-formal realm of manifestation is clearly the realm in which celestial influences are predominant, while terrestrial influences will obviously predominate in the gross realm. ... We can also say—and this amounts to saying the same thing in a different way—that the supra-formal realm is closer to essence while the gross realm is closer to substance, although of course this in no way entitles us to identify them with universal Essence and universal Substance themselves’ (*The Great Triad*, 1994, pp.70-71).

Microcosmically man is formed of the ternary *corpus, anima, spiritus*; macrocosmically, Universal Man, is formed, *ad extra*, of the ternary Earth, Air, Heaven. In His Essence, Universal Man is none other than Being, the Hindu *Atmān*, which is recognized at the principal level as the *Trimurti* (“Triple Manifestation”): *Sat* (Being), *Cit* (Consciousness), *Ānanda* (Bliss); here of course it is a matter of a tri-unity, hence *Saccidānanda*. The “three worlds” of the universe, which is to say man’s macrocosmic form (earth, midspace, heaven) are not directly equivalent to the three aspects of the Principle, for, in the first place, they pertain to a lower level of existence, and in the second place, an “image” is always less than its source.

The triune Principle resides in the Heart-Intellect of man, manifested by the tri-unity: Will, Intelligence, and Love. Man, and by extension the Universe, is tripartite by virtue of being made “in the image” of the Principle. In this context, Schuon observes,

The human being, when defined or described according to the principle of duality, is divided into an outward man and an inward man ... When defined according to the principle of trinity, he is divided into intelligence, will and sentiment; according to the principle of quaternity, he will be composed of reason, intuition, memory and imagination ... it is the principle of trinity that takes precedence, in the sense that it is the happy medium between synthesis and analysis: more explicit than duality and more essential than quaternity; being closer to unity than the even numbers, trinity reflects directly Being itself.¹³

Will, Sentiment, Intelligence; Activity, Love, Knowledge: these are the principles behind the three *margas* (“ways”) of the Hindu tradition, respectively, *karma, bhakti, jñāna*. These can again be found in the Christian tradition in Christ’s commandment to ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart (*bhakti*), with all your soul (*karma*), and with all your mind (*jñāna*)’ (Mt.22:34).¹⁴ Schuon:

This doctrine of the three human dimensions can be expressed in a quite simple and immediately plausible way as follows: the good

¹³ Schuon, *The Play of Masks*, 1992, pp.12-13.

¹⁴ See Schuon, ‘The Supreme Commandment’: *Esoterism as Principle and Way*, 1981.

that man is capable of knowing he must also will in so far as this good can be the object of the will; in addition he must love this good and at the same time the knowledge of it as well as the will towards it; just as he must will and love the earthly and contingent reflections of this good according to what is required or permitted by their nature. One cannot devote oneself to knowledge without loving it and willing it, any more than one can will something without knowing it and loving its realization; and one cannot love without knowing an object or without wishing to love it. This interdependence shows that the immortal soul is one and that its modes have one and the same significance, that of manifesting God by realizing Him.¹⁵

The analogical relationship between man and the universe, and *a fortiori* between man and the Principle forms a key to understanding Schuon’s writings on man’s entelechy, for this relationship goes to the very heart of the meaning and purpose of Existence itself. For Schuon this is summed up in the Patristic formula: ‘God became man so that man might become God.’¹⁶ Schuon rephrases this: “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.”¹⁷ Man is an image of God, where an image is simultaneously the Object imaged and not the Object imaged. This leads Schuon to observe: “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 is also 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.”¹⁸

‘God became man so that man might become God.’ God wishes to know Himself as other so he created man who in turn might know God by returning to Him through the unifying Realization in which

¹⁵ Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and Way*, 1981, p.95.

¹⁶ Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.109. Schuon again: ““Union” (yoga): the Subject (*Ātmā*) becomes object (the *Veda*, the *Dharma*) in order that the object (the objectivized subject, man) may be able to become the (absolute) Subject’ (ibid); ‘*Ātmā* became *Māyā* so that *Māyā* might become *Ātma*’ (*Light on the Ancient Worlds*, 1965, p.96).

¹⁷ Schuon, *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, 1976, p.185.

¹⁸ Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.167.

knowledge, love and will are one. Schuon pauses to pose a rhetorical “why” with respect to this entire process: ‘Why should God, who knows Himself in himself, wish to know Himself also through man? Because, as a *hadīth* tells us, “I was a hidden treasure and I wished to be known; hence I created the world.” Which means that the Absolute wishes to be known from the starting point of the relative. And why? Because this is a possibility pertaining, as such, to the limitlessness of Divine Possibility; a possibility, and thus something that cannot but be, something whose “why” resides in the Infinite.’¹⁹ God created the cosmos so that He could realize Himself as “other” because this is a possibility that must be met to satisfy the Infinite. To see this as a constraint on God’s freedom is to misunderstand the nature of ultimate Liberty. Schuon: ‘Necessity—not constraint—is a complementary quality of Freedom ... Liberty is related to the Infinite, and Necessity to the Absolute’²⁰. ‘I was a hidden treasure and I wished to be known so I created the cosmos’: The cosmos is the mirror image of the Divine, and this is summed up in man, *imago Dei*, who is both the principle of creation and its entelechy. As Schuon says, ‘the circle of *Māyā* closes in the heart of the deified man. In this respect the end result of the cosmogonic projection is man, or more specifically, the intellect perceiving the Absolute, and then the will drawing the consequences from this perception’²¹.

Human objectivity and animality

‘All “anthropology”’ says Schuon, ‘depends on a “theology” in the sense that every science of man must prolong a science of God, for: “Let us make man in Our image, in the likeness to Us.” To speak of a “spiritual anthropology” is already a pleonasm—to say man is to say spirit—but it is justified in a world which, having forgotten the divine, no longer can know what is human.’²² To this Schuon adds the following note: “Image”—taken in the sense of something “relatively absolute”—denotes that man, on account of his deformity, can in no way be a relative degree of animality; “likeness,” on the contrary, means that in another respect the analogy between God and man can only be relative,

¹⁹ Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, 1993, p.155.

²⁰ Schuon, *In the Face of the Absolute*, 1989, p.57.

²¹ Schuon, *The Play of Masks*, 1992, p.19.

²² Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, 1982, p.76.

otherwise precisely, god would not be the Absolute.’²³ This is another way to phrase the quote, noted above, about man being both conformed and contrary to God. In a similar sense, Richard Woods, discussing Meister Eckhart’s idea of the “image,” remarks that ‘we are created both *Imago Dei* and *ad imaginem Dei*, the second as creatures distinct from but wholly dependent upon God for our existence, and the first as identical with the Word of God and thus with but indistinct from God in the depths of the divine nature itself.’²⁴

According to a traditional view, the cosmos is a *corpus symbolicum*, ‘one vast complex *Mythos*, or symbolic representation,’ as Coleridge put it; thus in the Zohar we read: ‘God made this world in the image of the world above; thus, all which is found above has its analogy below ... and everything constitutes a unity.’²⁵ This “world,” as we have said, is modelled on man who, in turn, is “made in the image of God.” This means that all “things” are theophanies, not only man *qua* man but also the nature world and all that it contains, including the animal kingdom with which man shares a particular relationship. Now it is obvious that animals have in fact served as symbols of the divine—one thinks of the Tetramorph as an example²⁶—just have any number of natural phenomena, and this raises the question: in what sense is man distinct from the animals, in terms of his divinity? The answer, according to Schuon, is man’s ability to realize objectivity:

When we speak of man, what we have in mind first of all is human nature as such, that is, inasmuch as it is distinguished from animal nature. Specifically human nature is made of centrality and totality, and hence of objectivity; objectivity being the capacity to step outside oneself, while centrality and totality are the capacity to conceive the Absolute.²⁷

Again: ‘Total intelligence, free will, sentiment capable of disinterestedness: these are the prerogatives that place man at the

²³ Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, 1982, p.76, n.1.

²⁴ Woods, ‘Eckhart’s Imageless Image: Art, Spirituality, and the Apophatic Way’: *Eckhart Review* No.12, 2003, p.11.

²⁵ *Zohar* II, 20a, *Midrash ha-Ne’elam*.

²⁶ On the animal symbols of Christ see Louis Chabonneau-Lassay’s *The Bestiary of Christ*.

²⁷ Schuon, *To Have a Centre*, 1990, p.39.

summit of terrestrial creatures.’²⁸ This ability to realize objectivity is a realization of the truth that the ego is not and that only the divine Self is; it is recognition of our individual impermanence and our immortality in God. As Schuon notes, this gives rise to an essential trait that distinguishes man from animals: ‘man knows he must die, whereas animals do not. Now this knowledge of death is a proof of immortality; it is only because man is immortal that his faculties enable him to take cognizance of his earthly impermanence.’²⁹

Man differs from the animals in his capacity to realize objectivity and hence to transcend himself. Schuon: “Noblesse oblige”: the “human miracle” must have a reason for being that is proportionate to its nature, and it is this that predestines—or “condemns”—man to surpass himself; man is totally himself only by transcending himself³⁰. This capacity for transcendence is symbolised in man’s verticality. Schuon: ‘What above all distinguishes the human form from animal forms, is its direct reference to absoluteness, indicated by its vertical posture’³¹. Again: ‘the message of both human bodies, the masculine and the feminine: message of ascending and unitive verticality in both cases, certainly, but in rigorous, transcendent, objective, abstract, rational and mathematical mode in the first case, and in gentle, immanent, concrete, emotional and musical mode in the second.’³²

The two-fold symbolism of centrality and verticality is developed in the distinction and relationship between Primordial Man, or Pre-Adamite Man (*al-insān al-qadīm*), and Universal Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*). This, *mutatis mutandis*, is the distinction, in the Chinese tradition, between True Man (*chen jen*) and Transcendent Man (*chün jen*), which is the same as that between “virtual immortality” and “actually realised immortality.” As René Guénon remarks:

“Transcendent man,” “divine man,” or “spiritual man” are alternative names for someone who has achieved total realisation and attained the “Supreme Identity.” Strictly speaking he is no longer a man in an individual sense, because he has risen above

²⁸ Schuon, *The Play of Masks*, 1992, p.1.

²⁹ Schuon, *The Play of Masks*, 1992, p.12.

³⁰ Schuon, *To Have a Centre*, 1990, p.39.

³¹ Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, 1982, p.87.

³² Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, 1982, p.100.

humanity and is totally liberated not only from its specific conditions but also from all other limiting conditions associated with manifested existence. He is therefore, literally, “Universal Man,” whereas “true man”—who has only reached the stage of identification with “primordial man”—is not. But even so, it can be said that “true man” is already “Universal Man,” at least in a virtual sense.³³

In realising (in the sense of “making real”) the state of True Man, the human occupies the centre of the horizontal plane of existence that constitutes the human condition; in realising the state of Transcendent Man, the being actualizes the vertical Divine Ray (the Hindu *Buddhi*) that connects all the states of the being to the Centre of Being.³⁴ Like Dante, one travels inwards to the centre of the “terrestrial world” before ascending the mountain (*axis mundi*; ladder or tree) through the levels of Paradise.

The verticality of man speaks of transcendence and alludes to his celestial origin. ‘The ambiguity of the human state’ says Schuon, ‘is that we are as it were suspended between God—our Essence—and the human form, which is “made of clay”; we are so to speak a mixture of divinity and dust.’³⁵ Being “made of clay,” man is corruptible, whence the necessity for redemption, namely, the possibility of a “return to God.”³⁶ Again this is summed up in the teaching ‘God became man so that man might become God.’ In “becoming man” God gives of Himself in an act of absolute Freedom; man’s “return” to God rests upon his reflected freedom (“made in the image”) to know and admit that there is only God and that he, the individual, is not. As Schuon says, ‘To know that the relative comes from the Absolute and depends on It is to know that the relative is not the Absolute and disappears in the face of It’³⁷.

Theologians question why God might “choose” to give of Himself. The answer is variously given that this is because of

³³ Guénon, *The Great Triad*, 1994, p.124. On the “Supreme Identity” see Guénon, *Man and his Becoming According To The Vedānta*, 1981, Ch.24.

³⁴ See Guénon, *The Symbolism of the Cross*, 1975, Chs.23 & 24.

³⁵ Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom*, 1995, p.75.

³⁶ Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom*, 1995, p.74, see n.5.

³⁷ Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, 1976, p.65.

God’s nature as Mercy, Love or Goodness, where, as it is said, the Good diffuses itself (*bonum diffusivum sui*). Metaphysically speaking, the Absolute, as Schuon remarks, ‘must by definition and on pain of contradiction include the Relative’³⁸; which is to say: ‘If the relative did not exist, the Absolute would not be the Absolute.’³⁹ As noted earlier, this type of explanation seems to question the freedom of God, but as Schuon has explained, Necessity in no way places a limit on the Absolute; the Absolute is Necessary by definition; the Infinite expresses Freedom by virtue of its Totality. Man, “made in the image,” has free will; human free will is the image of the divine Freedom, which is a condition of the Infinite. This liberty is a direct consequence of the human capacity for objectivity. According to Schuon, the human form manifests liberty in our gait:

...to speak of the human body is almost to speak of man as such. Our bodily form would in fact be unintelligible if it were not for our faculties of intelligence and liberty ... What constitutes the theomorphism of the human body is its quality of totality and its nobility: its totality is shown above all in the richness—or universality—of its faculties insofar as this determines bodily structure; and its nobility, by its verticality—and so celestial—position and its gait which is free and sovereign because detached from the ground.⁴⁰

Elsewhere Schuon talks of the verticality of the Virgin, as portrayed in his Marian paintings, as expressing her actuality: ‘the upright—or vertical—posture of the Holy Virgin ... this is her actuality; and thus also her inner activity, her remembrance of God or invocation. For, if the posture of man is vertical and not horizontal, this is because he is created for God-remembering Now... As is the case of the Buddha image, the upright posture of the Virgin also represents motionlessness; it represents devotion before the motionless Centre; and also resignation to the Divine Will. Inwardness, resignation and devotion.’⁴¹ Buddhist art

³⁸ Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.108.

³⁹ Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.108.

⁴⁰ Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom*, 1995, p.77.

⁴¹ Schuon, private correspondence to M.S., Oct.11th 1981.

also depicts the Buddha lying on his right side; here the emphasis is on his having overcome the horizontal plane of *Samsāra*, upon which he now rests like the primordial lotus upon the waters of creation.

The nobility and superiority of man over animals resides in man’s capacity for objectivity and transcendence. This does not deny the theophanic nature of animals; as Schuon observes, ‘It is true that the noble animal—such as the stag, the lion, the eagle, the swan—also expresses a given aspect of the divine Majesty, but it does not manifest the liberating return of the form to the Essence; it remains in the form, whence its “horizontality.” The human body on the contrary is “vertical”; it is a sacrament, whether it be masculine or feminine’⁴². Still, as Schuon recognises, animals ‘by their form and mode of passive contemplativity ... participate adequately and innocently in a celestial archetype’, which leads him to declare that, ‘in a certain respect, a noble animal is superior to a vile man’⁴³. As he says, ‘there are animal species which in their way are nobler than given human individuals, which is perfectly evident.’⁴⁴

Schuon is not one to make of animals unfeeling brutes subject to a utilitarian will of man:

Besides his objective intelligence, free will and capacity for disinterestedness, the human being is distinguished by thought and language, and as to his bodily form, by the vertical position; memory, imagination and intuition he has in common with animals. Reason, however, belongs to man only; we say reason and not intelligence, for on the one hand intelligence cannot be reduced to reason, and on the other hand, it is also to be found in the animal kingdom. Incontestably, animals also possess will and sentiment; the difference between them and men is absolute and at the same time relative: it is absolute with respect to the specifically human prerogatives, and relative with respect to the faculties as such.⁴⁵

The animal kingdom, like all of Nature, is in a sense “closer to God” than man precisely because its lack of reason and active objectivity

⁴² Schuon, *The Play of Masks*, 1992, pp.21-22.

⁴³ Schuon, *To Have a Centre*, 1990, p.39.

⁴⁴ Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, 1982, p.76, n.1.

⁴⁵ Schuon, *The Play of Masks*, 1992, p.11.

means that it participates in the divine scheme in a manner that is both passive and direct.

The fact that animals—like angels—have intuition but not reason gives rise to the curious phenomenon of zoolatry, more especially as in them horizontal intuition is often more developed than in men, so that they appear like traces of celestial archetypes, or like their “mediums” so to speak. It may be noted that there are animals sensitive to spiritual influences, so much so that they are able to vehicle them and thus be receptacles of *barakah*.⁴⁶

To say reason is to say “the Fall”; it is reason that distinguishes man but also condemns him.

It is not out of place here to consider Schuon’s view of the destiny of animals in the afterlife.

We cannot pass over in silence another aspect of the problem of destinies beyond the grave; it is the following: theology—Islamic as well as Christian—teaches that the animals are included in the “resurrection of the flesh”: but whereas human beings are sent either to Paradise or to hell, animals will be reduced to dust, for they are not supposed to have an “immortal soul.” This opinion is founded on the fact that the Intellect is not actualized in animals, whence the absence of the rational faculty and of language. But in reality, the infra-human situation of the animals could not mean that their subjectivity is not determined by the law of karma and thus engaged in the “wheel of births and deaths”; this law also concerns, not a given isolated plant, but the vegetable species, each of which corresponds to an individuality, although it is not always possible to distinguish between the limits of a species and groups which merely amount to modalities of it.⁴⁷

When Schuon talks of the “infra-human situation of animals” he refers to the idea that all creaturely existence resides in principle in Universal Man. There are “two” accounts of the creation of man in the story of *Genesis*; rather than being separate accounts these are in fact two complementary expressions of the anthropomorphic cosmogenesis

⁴⁶ Schuon, *The Play of Masks*, 1992, p.12.

⁴⁷ Schuon, *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*, 2000, pp.84-5.

viewed respectively *ad extra* (Genesis Ch.1) and *ad intra* (Genesis Ch.2). These correspond to the two “contradictory” theories in contemporary embryology: “recapitulation” and “neoteny.” In Chapter 1 Adam is the summation of the “evolutionary” process. In Chapter 2 Adam is the principle; conceived as the schematic organization of the cosmic metabolism, he names all the animals and plants inasmuch as he ‘recognises each species as an offshoot of his own central trajectory,’⁴⁸ inasmuch as they are so many actualizations of his potentiality.

If theology denies animals a “soul” it is because the Intellect is not “actualized” in them; Schuon does not say that the Intellect does not exist “in” them for this would be to say that they do not exist; in fact, to talk of the Intellect “in” animals or humans is to view the situation inside out, so to speak, for it is more precise to say that it is we who exist in It. The Intellect is not actualized in animals, rather it is virtual. To talk of the Intellect is to talk of the capacity for objectivity; so to say that the Intellect is virtual in animals is to say that they live in the objective Now, in a state of objectivity, which somewhat paradoxically is expressed by a pure subjectivity, a subjectivity “closed in on itself.” As Schuon observes, ‘To say that man is endowed with sentiment capable of objectivity means that he possesses a subjectivity not closed in on itself, but open unto others and unto Heaven’.⁴⁹ This, on the one hand, is why Nature is closer to God than “fallen” man; on the other hand, this virtual objectivity means that animals cannot know objectivity as such, rather they simply live in it. It is man’s capacity to *know* that which is other, to *actualize* the Intellect, that raises him above the animals and the angels. To say man is to say Intellect, which is the organ of knowing. ‘Knowing’ says Plotinus, ‘demands the organ fitted to the object’;⁵⁰ man is the organ fitted to the knowledge of God wherein the knower, the known, and the knowing are one.

Sexual symbolism

The distinction between the Absolute and the Infinite, inasmuch as it might be granted, expresses the two fundamental aspects of the Real, that of essentiality and that of possibility. This, as Schuon remarks, ‘is

⁴⁸ Lawlor, *Sacred Geometry*, 1982, p.90.

⁴⁹ Schuon, *The Play of Masks*, 1992, p.1.

⁵⁰ *Enneads*, 5.5.12.

the highest principial prefiguration of the masculine and feminine poles.’⁵¹ Schuon does not say that these are the principial masculine and feminine poles; rather, this is precisely a “prefiguration.” Elsewhere he remarks that ‘Being absolute, the supreme Principle is *ipso facto* infinite; the masculine body accentuates the first aspect, and the feminine body, the second.’⁵² Again, the sexes “accentuate” within themselves aspects of the Principle, but this is different from saying that the Principle is either male or female or both. With respect to the Absolute, it is inappropriate, if occasionally symbolically profitable, to assign gender. Thus Guénon remarks that ‘*Wu Chi* corresponds to the neuter, supreme *Brahman* of Hindu tradition (*Para-Brahman*)’⁵³. According to the symbolism of the *Sefirotic* Tree, *Keter*, the “Crown,” presupposes *Keter Elyon*, the “Supreme Crown,” which like *Wu Chi* and *Para-Brahman* must be considered as neuter. It is only with *T’ai Chi* or, in the Hindu tradition, *Īśvara* (*apara-Brahman*) that we can talk of gender. Nevertheless, the prefiguration of the masculine and feminine poles in the distinction between Absolute and Infinite gives rise, at the ontological level, to Being as the Divine Androgyne, neither masculine nor feminine yet “implying the distinction” (*savishesha*) of the principial ontological complementary, Essence and Substance, *Purusha* and *Prakriti*, masculine and feminine.

According to Schuon there are ‘two ways in fact of situating the sexes, either in a horizontal or in a vertical sense: according to the first perspective, man would be to the right and woman to the left; according to the second, man, would be above and woman below. On the one hand, man reflects *Atmā* according to Absoluteness, and woman reflects it according to Infinitude; on the other hand, man alone is *Atmā* and woman is *Māyā*; but the second conception is relatively true only on condition that one also accepts the first’⁵⁴. This is all a matter of adequate symbolic emphasis and a question of perspective that is precise and descriptive. Schuon uses both of these conceptions throughout his writings as the need arises, but it must always be kept in mind that he does so as a matter of precision and adequacy, rather than from any sexist motivation.

⁵¹ Schuon, *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*, 2000, p.16.

⁵² Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, 1982, p.87.

⁵³ Guénon, *The Great Triad*, 1994, p.19, n.7.

⁵⁴ Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, 1982, p.90.

When considering the creative process it is entirely appropriate that a sexual symbolism come into play. Thus, Macrobius, for example, says: ‘The One which is called Unity is both male and female’⁵⁵; and in the Hindu tradition we find: ‘He divided his body into halves, one was male and the other female. The male in that female procreates the universe.’⁵⁶ Examples of this type can be found in every tradition. Being contains both the masculine and feminine principles in principial non-distinction, *in divinis*. This is Being envisaged as the Divine Androgyne.⁵⁷ The Hindu *Purusha* and *Prakriti* are coeval as *Īśvara*. Śiva appears united in a single body with Śakti, his spouse—he the right and she the left—in the manifestation known as *Ardhanārīśvara*, “the Half-Woman Lord.” According to the symbolism of the Kabbalah, *Keter* comprises Father (*Hokhmah*; wisdom) and Mother (*Binah*; intelligence). This is again the Hermetic King and Queen. In Buddhist tradition the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (male) manifests as the feminine Kwan Yin in Chinese Buddhism. The Great Original of Chinese chronicles, the holy woman T’ai Yuan, combines in her person the masculine *yang* and the feminine *yin*.⁵⁸ According to Plato, Eros, the first of the gods, is both male and female.⁵⁹ *Genesis* tells us that ‘God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them’ (Gen.1:27). The Midrash explains this: ‘When the Holy One, Blessed be He, created the first man, He created him androgynous.’⁶⁰ The *Zohar* adds, “‘He blessed him and called his name Adam.’” A human being is only called Adam when male and female are as one.’⁶¹

Sexual symbolism is also evident in the fundamental cosmological aspects of space and time. According to Hindu cosmology, ‘the power of deliberation (*vimarśa*) and the power of expression (*prakāśa*) first manifest themselves respectively in “the determinant of space,” the point-limit (*bindu*) from which manifestation begins, and “the determinant of time,” the primordial-vibration (*nāda*). Space is

⁵⁵ *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, 1.6.7-9.

⁵⁶ *Manu Smṛti* 1.32.

⁵⁷ For various mythological examples of the Androgyne see Mircae Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 1958, p.420; also Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 1975, pp.128-29; *Primitive Mythology*, 1982, p.103-8.

⁵⁸ Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 1975, p.128.

⁵⁹ *Symposium* 180E.

⁶⁰ *Genesis Rabba*, 8.1.

⁶¹ *Zohar* 1:35b.

represented as female, time as male. Their union in the Hermaphrodite is known as Lust (Kāma).⁶²

While the *sefirah Keter* is intrinsically androgynous it is nevertheless extrinsically masculine. It is Macropropus, the “Crown” or “King,” where these two terms are synonymous. There is then a relationship between *Keter* (“King”) and *Malkhut* (“Queen”), who is also *Matrona*, the “inferior Mother” (the Supernal Mother is *Binah*), the Bride of Micropropus. This relationship is the “Marriage of Heaven and Earth,” the Chemical Wedding of Alchemical tradition, and it is from this that the androgynous “Son” is born. In the Greek tradition this is Hermaphrodite, born from the union of Hermes and Aphrodite.⁶³ Moreover, as Joseph Campbell observes, ‘Hermes, too, is androgyne, as one should know from the sign of his staff.’⁶⁴

Malkhut is synonymous with the *Shekhinah*, which, remarks Leo Schaya, is ‘the immanence of *Keter*, the presence of divine reality in the midst of the cosmos.’⁶⁵ Thus, according to the point of view adopted, the *Shekhinah* is identifiable with either the female *Malkhut* or the male *Keter*.⁶⁶ The androgynous nature of both the Principle and Manifestation explains the apparent divergences between traditions with respect to the gender of the Divine Immanence. Thus the *Shekhinah* is commonly regarded as female, yet *Īśvara* (“Lord”), which is the immanent personification of Being in the Hindu tradition, and Christ, who is the “Word made flesh” (i.e. “immanent”) are male. Furthermore, the *Shekhinah* is identified with the male *Metatron*, whose name has as one of its principal meanings that of “Lord,”⁶⁷ the same with *Īśvara*, demonstrating that in talking of the *Shekhinah* and of *Īśvara* we are talking about the same principle seen from alternate perspectives. From the celestial perspective the Divine Immanence resides in the Principle

⁶² Karapātrī, “Śrī Śiva tattva,” *Siddhānta*, II, 1941-42, 114, cited in Daniélou, *The Myths and Gods of India*, 1985, p.203.

⁶³ *Anthologia Graeca ad Fiden Codices*, Vol.II; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, IV, 288 ff.; et al, cited in Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 1975, p.128, n.88.

⁶⁴ Campbell, *Primitive Mythology*, 1982, p.417. Of course, Hermes’ counterpart in the Norse tradition is Loki whose androgynous nature is demonstrated by the story of his transformation into a mare so as to seduce the stallion, Svadilfaeri, the end result of which is the eight-hooved horse, Sleipnir.

⁶⁵ Schaya, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, 1971, p.68.

⁶⁶ ‘So shall the last be first, and the first last’ (Mt.20:16).

⁶⁷ Guénon, *The Lord of the World*, 1983, p.15; see ‘Shekinah and Metatron’, Ch.3.

(*Ātman*), which is to say the active or male Essence. From the terrestrial perspective the Divine Immanence is recognised in the play of cosmic potentialities within the passive or female Substance (*Māyā* envisaged as *līlā* or “cosmic play”).⁶⁸

The *Shekhinah* is the source of spiritual inspiration, a trait that leads Alan Unterman to consider Her as interchangeable with *ruach ha-kodesh* (“the holy spirit”).⁶⁹ In fact the Hebrew word *ruach* is feminine. Yet Guénon asserts that, where one must talk of sexual attributes with respect to the Persons of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit is ‘fundamentally masculine and “paternal”’.⁷⁰ Of course this involves a difference between the symbolism of the Judaic and Christian traditions, which is itself connected, on the one hand, with the ambiguity of the Spirit as “mediating principle,” and, on the other hand, with the mystery of the Trinity. Concerning the Trinity, Schuon remarks,

The Trinity can be envisaged according to a “vertical” perspective or according to either of two “horizontal” perspectives, the former of them being supreme and the other not. The “vertical” perspective—Beyond-Being, Being and Existence—envisages the hypostases as “descending” from Unity or from the Absolute—or from the Essence it could be said—which means that it envisages the degrees of Reality; the supreme “horizontal” perspective corresponds to the Vedantic triad *Sat* (supra-ontological Reality), *Cit* (Absolute Consciousness) and *Ananda* (Infinite Bliss), which means that it envisages the Trinity inasmuch as it is hidden in Unity; the non-supreme “horizontal” perspective on the contrary places Unity as an essence hidden within the Trinity, which is then an ontological Trinity representing the three fundamental aspects or modes of Pure Being, whence we have the triad: Being, Wisdom, Will (Father, Son, Spirit).⁷¹

⁶⁸ On *līlā* as “cosmic play” see Coomaraswamy, *Selected Papers Vol.2: Metaphysics*, 1977, ‘Līlā’ (pp.148-158).

⁶⁹ Unterman, *Dictionary of Jewish Lore & Legend*, 1991, p.181.

⁷⁰ Guénon, *The Great Triad*, 1994, p.14. Guénon remarks that ‘certain more or less heterodox Christian sects have made the Holy Spirit out to be feminine—often with the specific intention of providing it with characteristics comparable to those of the Mother [of the ternary Father, Mother and Son]’ (pp.13 & 14); see Ch.1.

⁷¹ Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, 1976, p.54.

It is fair to say that Schuon’s explanation of the Trinity goes beyond the exoteric theology of Christianity, but not necessarily beyond Christian esoterism; a full consideration of this, however, is beyond the scope of our current considerations. To talk of the Holy Spirit as a “mediating principle” envisages the Trinity from a vertical perspective. By this I mean that any horizontal description of the Trinity places the three “aspects” upon the same level, so their “equality” means that there can be no meaningful talk of mediation, unless this is a matter of symbolic qualifications between “left” and “right,” and then mediation is a matter of extent, which is to say greater or lesser degrees, which is still a “vertical” description. According to the Christian tradition the mediating Spirit is masculine, acting as it does upon the feminine Virgin, who here equates with Existence. If one had to assign sexual symbolism to Schuon’s “vertical” Trinity, where Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are Beyond Being, Being, and Existence, then one would say that Beyond Being is neuter, Being is intrinsically androgynous (containing within itself the masculine Spirit and the feminine Virgin), and Existence is extrinsically either male or female according to whether it is envisaged in relation to the Essence (male) or Substance (feminine).

Schuon has taken up the somewhat controversial idea that the Holy Spirit might be considered as extrinsically feminine in recognizing the identification between the Holy Spirit and the Virgin: ‘an equation which is linked to the feminization, in certain ancient texts, of the divine Pneuma.’⁷² Schuon:

According to an interpretation which is not theological in fact, but is so by right and finds support in the Scriptures, the “Father” is God in Himself, that is as Metacosm; the “Son” is God insofar as He is manifested in the world, that is, in the Macrocosm; and the “Holy Ghost” is God insofar as He is manifested in the soul, that is, in the Microcosm. From another point of view, the Macrocosm itself is the

⁷² Schuon, *Christianity/Islam*, 1985, p.95. As an example of such an ancient example Schuon refers to the expression “My Mother the Holy Ghost”; the English translation of *Christianity/Islam* cites this as being from the Epistle of the Hebrews, however this is an error on the behalf of the translator; the French original refers to the Gospel of the Hebrews. The Gospel of the Hebrews can be found in *New Testament Apocrypha Vol.1*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher; the citation is from Frag.3 (p.177); see Origen, *Comm. In 11.12*; *Hom. On Jer. XV 4*; Jerome. *Com. On Micah 7:6*; *Com. On Is. 40:9*; *Com. On Ezek. 16:13*.

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“Son,” and the Microcosm itself—in its primordial perfection—is identified with the “Holy Ghost”; Jesus is equal to the Macrocosm, to the entire Creation as divine manifestation, and Mary is equal to the “pneumatic” Microcosm...⁷³

Mary is Virgin, Mother, Spouse: Beauty, Goodness, Love; their sum being Beatitude. Mary is Virgin in relation to Joseph, Man; Mother in relation to Jesus, God-Man; Spouse in relation to the Holy Spirit, God; Joseph personifies humanity; Mary incarnates either the Spirit considered in its feminine aspect or the feminine complement of the Spirit.⁷⁴

All of this draws attention to the special place of the Eternal Feminine in Schuon’s dialectic and particularly his spiritual aesthetic. This subject has been treated by numerous commentators and critics, with varying success. Probably the most important article among the many is James Cutsinger’s, ‘The Virgin’ (originally published in *Sophia* 6, 2), in which he presents an examination of Schuon’s Mariology. The value of this essay is twofold. Firstly, it presents an excellent survey and exposition of Schuon’s writing on the Virgin. Secondly, Cutsinger’s identification of the divine Essence with the Virgin, leading to the criticism from Alvin Moore, Jr. and Martin Lings that Cutsinger introduces gender into the Godhead, opens the way to a deeper exploration of this difficult and problematic area.⁷⁵

In his article, Cutsinger writes:

...she [the Virgin] is also, in her most inward depths, this Infinitude itself. For Mary “is not one particular colour or one particular perfume,” writes Schuon; “she is colourless light and pure air,” and hence “in her essence she is identified with that merciful Infinitude which, preceding all forms, overflows upon them all, embraces them all, and reintegrates them all.”† As the perfect type of cosmic equilibrium and “the model of every holy soul,”† † “she equally personifies the *Haqîqah*, the naked and living Truth, which is hidden behind the veil of symbols.” Thus, when a man comes to

⁷³ Schuon, *Christianity/Islam*, 1985, p.95.

⁷⁴ Schuon, *Christianity/Islam*, 1985, p.147, n.29.

⁷⁵ See Cutsinger, “The Virgin”: *Sophia* 6, 2; responses by Martin Lings & Alvin Moore, Jr., *Sophia* 7, 1; reply by Cutsinger, *Sophia* 7, 2; reply by Moore, *Sophia* 8, 1.

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know the Blessed Virgin, she having condescended to let her veil fall, what he knows is precisely What is, surpassing every confusion between *Âtmâ* and *Mâyâ*, for “she expresses the *Dhât*, the Essence, which is beyond all form and all determination and which thereby liberates from limitations.” This, Schuon adds, “is the supreme aspect of the feminine Principle,” †††and it is this which the heart may discern, concretely but inexpressibly, in the Virgin Mother.

† *Christianity/Islam*, 147-48. Indeed, “all the qualities of Mary can be reduced to the perfumes of Divine Infinitude” (*Esoterism*, 38). According to St Gregory Palamas, “Those who know God recognize in her the habitation of the Infinite” (“Homily 14”).

†† In fact, Schuon adds, “she is as it were sanctity itself, without which there is neither Divine revelation nor return to God” (*Christianity/Islam*, 68-69). And again: “The Virgin personifies Equilibrium, since she is identifiable with the Substance of the Cosmos, which is both maternal and virginal—a Substance of Harmony and Beauty, and thereby opposed to all disequilibriums” (*Dimensions of Islam*, 89).

††† Unpublished Text 796.

In saying that “she expresses the *Dhât*, the Essence, which is beyond all form and all determination and which thereby liberates from limitations,” Schuon does not say that the Essence *is* feminine, as such, but rather that a certain aspect of the feminine principle—in fact the supreme aspect—expresses a certain aspect of the Essence, that aspect being that which is “beyond all form and all determination.” One might say that the unknowable depth of the Infinite and Its corresponding Mystery might be described as “feminine,” inasmuch as Darkness, which symbolises mystery, is a homologue of the symbol of the Feminine. Thus, when Cutsinger, in his response to this criticism of introducing gender into the Godhead, says: ‘the Essence is *not* in Itself either masculine or feminine, it is precisely for this reason that the Essence is “feminine” ...’⁷⁶ he is using this term somewhat paradoxically to refer to the mystery or unknowability of the Essence in terms of any distinction, such as between masculine and feminine; so “feminine” in

⁷⁶ Cutsinger, *Sophia* 7, 2, 2001, p.239.

this context does not mean passivity, potential, or any other qualification that might be polarized with a masculine idea. The use of femininity to express the Divine Mystery is found in the *Song of Songs*: “I am black but beautiful.” This, as Cutsinger observes, was one of Schuon’s favourite Scriptural passages. Patrick Laude remarks, ‘The passage from the “Song of Songs” often cited by Schuon, “*nigra sum sed formosa*,” refers quite particularly to this mystery, in emphasizing the coincidence of inwardness with beauty.’⁷⁷

According to Laude, ‘Feminine beauty plays a preponderant role in the spiritual alchemy that issues from the oeuvre and spiritual personality of Schuon.’⁷⁸ Schuon is far from alone in his emphasis on femininity. Ibn al-‘Arabī claims that, “The contemplation of God in women is the most intense and the most perfect”:

When man contemplates the Reality in woman he beholds [Him] in a passive aspect, while when he contemplates Him in himself, as being that from which woman is manifest, he beholds Him in an active aspect. When, however, he contemplates Him in himself, without any regard to what has come from him, he beholds Him as passive to Himself directly. However, his contemplation of the Reality in woman is the most complete and perfect, because in this way he contemplates the Reality in both active and passive mode, while by contemplating the Reality only in himself, he beholds Him in a passive mode particularly.⁷⁹

For Schuon, the female form assumes a “sacramental function”: ‘Woman synthesizing virgin nature, the sanctuary and spiritual company, is for man what is most lovable; in a certain respect she represents the projection of merciful Inwardness in barren outwardness, and in this regard she assumes a sacramental or quasi-Divine function.’⁸⁰ As Laude observes, ‘the contemplation of feminine beauty presupposes a theophanic conception of the created symbol, a conception according to which beauty is fundamentally that which it communicates.’⁸¹ This

⁷⁷ Aymard and Laude, *Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teachings*, 2004, p.123.

⁷⁸ Aymard and Laude, *Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teachings*, 2004, p.123.

⁷⁹ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Fusūs* chapter on Muhammad (tr. Austin, 1980, p.275).

⁸⁰ Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*, 1975, p.194.

⁸¹ Aymard and Laude, *Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teachings*, 2004, p.123.

theophanic beauty leads Schuon to speak of “salvation through femininity:

The key to the mystery of salvation through woman, or through femininity, if one prefers, lies in the very nature of *Maya*: If *Maya* can attract towards the outward, she can also attract towards the inward. Eve is life, and this is manifesting *Maya*; Mary is Grace, and this is reintegrating *Maya*. Eve personifies the demiurge under its aspect of femininity; Mary is the personification of the *Shekhinah*, of the Presence that is both virginal and maternal. Life, being amoral, can be immoral; Grace, being pure substance, is capable of absorbing all accidents.⁸²

When considering the sexual act it is easy to see how the female form is receptive and thus “passive” (obviously this term has nothing to do with the rights of women in this context). Likewise one might say that, with respect to the act of creation as it is expressed in the birth of a child, the female form is “passive” to the necessity of the act of birth. At the same time it is the feminine form that actively manifests the creative power of birth, which leads Schuon to declare the feminine body ‘an image of creative Power.’⁸³ For Schuon this biological “creative power,” which is, so to speak, descending into the flesh, is a mirror of the ascending spiritual “creative power.” All of this leads Schuon to declare that the female form is as if an argument for the divine. As he says, ‘the feminine body is far too perfect and spiritually too eloquent to be no more than a kind of transitory accident.’⁸⁴

‘As symbols,’ says Schuon, ‘the masculine body indicates a victory of the Spirit over chaos, and the feminine body, a deliverance of form by Essence; the first is like a magic sign which would subjugate the blind forces of the Universe, and the second like celestial music which would give back to fallen matter its paradisiac transparency, or which, to use the language of Taoism, would make trees flower beneath the snow.’⁸⁵ This symbolism is particularly evident in the form of the human breast. Schuon: ‘One of the most salient characteristics of the human body is

⁸² Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, 1981, p.143.

⁸³ Schuon, *Sufism, Veil and Quintessence*, 1981, p.69, n.19.

⁸⁴ Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, 1982, p.91.

⁸⁵ Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom*, 1995, p.80.

the breast, which is a solar symbol, with an accentuation differing according to sex: noble and glorious radiation in both cases, but manifesting power in the first case and generosity in the second; the power and generosity of pure Being. The heart is the centre of man, and the breast is so to speak the face of the heart: and since the heart-intellect comprises both Knowledge and Love, it is plausible that in the human body this polarization manifests itself by the complementarity of the masculine and feminine breasts.’⁸⁶ From another perspective the male breast is like the sun and the female breast the moon, where the moon is the vessel of *soma*, the life-giving drink. The moon’s light is the colour of milk, which again expresses the idea of the essential drink of life. In fact, a Gallo-Roman dedicatory inscription in Autun, France, identifies the ‘chalice from which flows grace’ with the ‘breast from which flows the milk which nourishes the city’.⁸⁷ For Schuon the mystical *lactatio* in depictions of the Virgin is an expression of the ‘self-giving and liberating Mercy’.⁸⁸

Nudity

The human form has two modes of presentation: naked or clothed; in turn, each of these modes may be realised in a manner that is either sacred or profane. Profane nudity is at best a matter of biological curiosity and at worst a matter of sexual perversion; profane clothing is a matter of either utility or an individual predilection which has nothing objective or seriously meaningful about it. Sacred nudity expresses a sense of our primordial state and in turn the celestial Norm. From another perspective nudity symbolises quintessential esoterism. Sacred clothing either accentuates man’s form or symbolises an aspect of the Divine, which in the end is the same thing. Examples of the former are the robes of a priest or monk and the type of traditional dress evidenced in the Arabic world which accentuate verticality and unity.⁸⁹ An example of the latter is the glorious headdress of the Plains Indians which identifies the qualified wearer with the solar orb and in turn with

⁸⁶ Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, 1982, p. 94-95.

⁸⁷ Devoucoux, cited in Chevalier & Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*, 1996, p.178.

⁸⁸ Schuon, private correspondence to Max Schray, Oct.11th 1981.

⁸⁹ The simplicity and practicality of the *dishdasha* almost belies the profundity of its message, a message which is reinforced by the adornment of the *jalabiyyah*.

the Divine Sun.⁹⁰ In recognising these four ways of considering nudity we must always keep in mind that, as Guénon says, ‘there is really no such thing as a “profane realm” opposable in some way to a “sacred realm”; there is simply a “profane point of view,” which is really nothing but the point of view of ignorance.’⁹¹ With this in mind the ideas of profane nudity and profane clothing take on a much more sinister character.

In his *Nasab al-Khirqah* (The Decent of the Mantle of Initiation) Ibn al-‘Arabī talks of God “putting on” the Heart of His Servant as His Vestment.⁹² Similarly, for Schuon the body is a sanctuary of the “Real Presence”. Far from being ‘the principle of evil and the source of all sin ... the human body, of which the perfect prototypes are the bodies of Adam and Eve, and the sublime manifestations the bodies of Christ and the Virgin, [is] a work of God in which he is reflected, and therefore a “tabernacle of the Holy Spirit” and a “House of God”—and here it is well to remember that the “Word was made flesh,” and not just “soul”.’⁹³ Therefore, as he continues,

nudity—serving thus as a support of contemplation—may also express love towards the Creator whose Presence man feels in his consecrated flesh, which implies as a consequence the abolition of the artificial and specifically human limits—represented by clothing—which separate man from the rest of creation. The naked body has not only an “innocent” or “child-like” aspect, due to the fact that it is the work and image of the Creator and in this respect “good” and “pure” like the primordial Creation itself, but it also possesses an aspect of “nobility”—one might almost say of “love”—because it reflects God’s beauty by its own, or in other words, because it manifests the Divine Beatitude and Goodness, which preside over the Divine Act of Creation.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ See Schuon, *To Have a Centre*, 1990, pp.162-164.

⁹¹ Guénon, *Crisis of the Modern World*, 1975, p.49.

⁹² Ibn al-‘Arabī, ‘Testament on the Mantle of Initiation (*Nasab al-Khirqah*)’ tr. Gerald Elmore, *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society* Vol.26, 1999.

⁹³ Schuon, ‘The Christ-Given Initiation.’ This essay appears as Ch.9 in the 1948 French translation of *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (Gallimard) and as Ch.12 of the 1953 English translation (Faber & Faber). The reference is from Endnote 1, pp. 189-192.

⁹⁴ Schuon, ‘The Christ-Given Initiation,’ 1953.

Schuon goes even further in recognising the transfigured reality of the body.

To say that the body symbolizes spiritual and even Divine Aspects—the former necessarily having a reference to the latter—amounts to saying that it really “is” these realities and Aspects on its own plane of existence, and in consequence that the positive aspects of the body are metaphysically more real than its aspects of impurity and “flesh”; and it is precisely this knowledge that sacred nudity affirms.⁹⁵

Schuon’s understanding of *nuditas sacra* is, however, not as simple as an immediate call to nakedness. The science of symbolism requires both direct and inverse analogy:

if between one level of reality and another there is a direct analogy in respect of positive content, there is on the other hand an inverse analogy in respect of relationship: thus according to Islamic tradition, earthly women are reflections of heavenly women (direct analogy); but heavenly women are naked, whereas earthly women express this mystery through the covering of their clothes (inverse analogy); what is “below” becoming “above,” and what is “inward” becoming “outward.”⁹⁶

‘Dress,’ remarks Schuon, ‘like language and vertical posture, is one of the prerogatives of man; although doubtless much less important than the two other prerogatives mentioned, it is no less characteristic of *homo faber*.’⁹⁷ Clothing either ‘veils the body or accentuates its symbolism or beauty’⁹⁸; ‘Clothing in itself may represent that which veils, thus exoterism, but it becomes interiorized and “esoterized” through its symbolic elements, its sacerdotal language, precisely.’⁹⁹ ‘To wear a traditional and sacred garment, to which one has a sufficient right,’ observes Schuon, ‘is to be invested with an archetype and virtuality of

⁹⁵ Schuon, ‘The Christ-Given Initiation,’ 1953.

⁹⁶ See Schuon, *Tracks 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.

⁹⁷ Schuon, *To Have a Centre*, 1990, p.159.

⁹⁸ Schuon, *To Have a Centre*, 1990, p.159.

⁹⁹ Schuon, *To Have a Centre*, 1990, p.160.

perfection’¹⁰⁰. In this sense the veil of clothing acts to *reveal*, as does the dual nature of the cosmic Veil (*Māyā*), which either re-veals or re-veils, according to the manner in which She is approached.

For peoples of a primordial nature nudity is, as it were, the norm. Schuon observes this when remarking of the American Plains Indians that ‘most often the Indian is more or less naked’¹⁰¹. Now, to talk of the norm is not to talk of the mundane but rather the ideal, the *fitrah* of the Islamic tradition: *the* primordial, supra-formal, intrinsic Norm. According to Schuon, this ‘sacred aspect of nudity is indeed met with, if only exceptionally, in every traditional form, whether in the symbolism itself or in the case of isolated spiritual personages: we need only recall the nudity of the crucified Christ, which is far from being without significance, or that attributed by Christian iconography to Saint Mary the Egyptian and sometimes to Saint Mary Magdalene.’¹⁰² The body, says Schuon, possesses ‘an aspect of “serenity” or “reality” since it affirms “That which really is,” that is to say, the naked “Truth,” unique and formless, unobscured by the veils of arbitrary human thought.’¹⁰³ Nudity expresses the Norm, the True; its meaning is that of esoterism, the Truth unveiled. Like the effect of nudity upon a “civilized” sentimentality, this Truth is shocking. For those who have lived in darkness it is as if the veil were removed and they are suddenly left staring into the Sun.

In the primordial state Adam and Eve were “naked”: ‘Now, both of them were naked, the man and his wife, but they felt no shame before each other’ (Gen.2:25). After eating of the fruit of the tree of Knowledge the man and woman “saw that they were naked” and were ashamed (Gen.3:7). This passage has led to a strong biblical and Qur’anic moral perspective that condemns nudity. However, as Schuon says, this moral perspective does not represent the whole truth. Schuon: ‘If in the biblical and Qur’anic symbolism the sexual parts evoke shame and humiliation, it is because they remind man of blind and God-fleeing passion that is unworthy of man because it ravishes his intelligence and his will ... [but] the Bible does not reproach Adam and Eve for their

¹⁰⁰ Schuon, *The Feathered Sun*, 1990, p.163.

¹⁰¹ Schuon, *The Feathered Sun*, 1990, p.163.

¹⁰² Schuon, ‘The Christ-Given Initiation,’ 1953.

¹⁰³ Schuon, ‘The Christ-Given Initiation,’ 1953.

nakedness; it records that they looked upon it with shame, but this refers to the fall and not to nudity as such,¹⁰⁴.

Moralistic reproaches of nudity have often gone hand in hand with the anti-spiritual—and thus immoral—“civilization” of man. Schuon:

The relativity of moral conceptions and of the association of ideas belonging to them appears in a striking way in the false generalizations of the moralism of dress which has decimated many tribes; people worry about “morals”—with or without ulterior commercial motives—and are incapable of seeing the immoral character of that kind of universal degradation spread with certain forms of clothing. This official and “civilized” moralism seems to prefer the clothed adulterer to virgin nudity; among peoples nude by tradition, it readily has a meaning of pedantry, greed, even maleficence. Let us add that sacred nudity, in Hinduism, is not unrelated to the purifying quality of the air which, being an element, is simple, and hence incorruptible, a fact that Jains express in prescribing the “wearing of the air as a garment.”¹⁰⁵

Schuon offers a more profound explanation of Adam and Eve’s “shame”:

their intelligence and their will, like their way of feeling, had become exteriorized, and their love had thereby become detached from the divine essence of things and transmuted into concupiscence; reflections of the Divine Sun on the water of Existence, they had taken themselves for the Sun itself, forgetting that they were but reflections, and they were ashamed of the humiliating consequences of this error.¹⁰⁶

From a perspective that is both cosmological and metaphysical the nakedness of Adam and Eve is the receptivity of *prima material* and of the Intellect itself. As Meister Eckhart remarks,

¹⁰⁴ Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and Way*, 1981, p.84.

¹⁰⁵ Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom*, 1995, 118, note 1.

¹⁰⁶ Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and Way*, 1981, p.84.

“Made in the Image”: Schuon’s theomorphic anthropology

Aristotle himself says that the intellect must be an empty or naked tablet.¹⁰⁷ The greater the nakedness, the greater the union. Therefore, prime matter, since among the passive and receptive powers it alone is utterly naked and pure, is worthy to receive the utterly first act, which is existence or form.¹⁰⁸

To be naked is to be free from the veil or clothing of the conditions of manifest existence.¹⁰⁹ Schuon:

Veils are divine or human, without speaking of the veilings that other creatures represent or constitute. The divine veils are, in our cosmos, the existential categories: space, time, form, number, matter; then the creatures with their truths and their limits. The human veils are, firstly, man himself, the ego in itself, then the passionate and darksome ego, and finally passions, vices, sins, without forgetting, on a normal and neutral plane, concepts and thoughts in so far as they clothe the truth.¹¹⁰

Prior—logically rather than temporally—to the “Fall” the ontological principles, Essence and Substance, exist in a state of biunity, not “veiled” by the distinction of Essence *qua* Essence and Substance *qua* Substance. To talk of the “Fall” is to talk of the diremption of the ontological principles and thus the first “downward” movement towards cosmological manifestation. “Downward”: firstly expressing the notions of rank and level, and secondly, according with the symbolism of solidification and heaviness whereby that which is more manifest is more solid and heavy and thus settles lower by virtue of gravity.¹¹¹ The

¹⁰⁷ Aristotle, *De anima* 430A. According to most modern interpretations Aristotle is here putting forward the idea of the mind as a “blank tablet” (*tabula rasa*) as opposed to Plato’s doctrine of innate Ideas or Forms. Meister Eckhart here applies this to the Intellect or *nous*, the spiritual or mystical faculty, as distinct from the *dianoia*, the analytical and discursive “mind”.

¹⁰⁸ Meister Eckhart, *Par. Gen.* 32 (Colledge & McGinn, 1981, p.105); see Aristotle, *On the Soul* 4.4 (429b31).

¹⁰⁹ ‘The Creation of the World was a Vail cast upon the Face of God, with a figure of the Godhead wrought upon this Vail, and God seen through it by a dim transparency’ (Peter Sterry, cited in Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.27).

¹¹⁰ Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and Way*, 1981, p.60.

¹¹¹ The law of gravity expresses both a metaphysical and a physical truth which coincide with respect to their symbolism. Metaphysically it expresses a movement towards the Centre, to the point of greatest stability. Terrestrially this results in the gravitational

diremption of Essence and Substance gives rise to all complementaries and thus the knowledge of distinction, principally the distinction between man and God, or ego-self and Other, and from another perspective, the distinction between Good and Evil. With distinction comes the recognition of otherness; the difference between man and God, the difference between male and female. With distinction comes the loss of primordial “nakedness,” and thus, ‘Yahweh God made tunics of skins for the man and his wife and clothed them’ (Gen.3:21). These “skins” are at once the psycho-physical “bodies” of the human condition and the spatio-temporal conditions of cosmic existence. These are again the “veils” of *Māyā* in Hindu tradition and the shimmering *paragod* (the “curtain” of onto-cosmological manifestation) of the Kabbalah. And with this loss of innocence comes the loss of primordial unity symbolised by the garden of Eden: ‘So Yahweh God expelled him from the garden of Eden, to till the soil from which he had been taken’ (Gen.3:23).

This cosmogonic symbolism of nakedness is again found in the account of the drunkenness of Noah:

And while he was drunk, he lay uncovered in his tent. Ham, father of Canaan, saw his father naked and told his two brothers outside. Shem and Japheth took a cloak and they put it over their shoulders, and walking backwards, covered their father’s nakedness; they kept their faces turned away, and they did not look at their father naked (Gen.9:22, 23).

We have spoken in detail of the cosmogonic symbolism of Noah’s sons elsewhere;¹¹² here it is enough to rehearse the basic argument. According to symbolism that is common to both Judaism and Islam, the “tent” is the meeting place of God and man.¹¹³ As Adrian Snodgrass observes, ‘The Tent symbolises the Supreme Intellect, the Nous, identified with

“pull” towards the centre of the earth; celestially this results in the “pull” towards the Sun, the manifest symbol of Divinity. Thus something like Christ’s ascension is not, as might be contested, a contradiction of the law of gravity but an example of its celestial or divine mode, whereby Christ’s movement—“upwards” from a terrestrial point of view—is a movement “inwards” to the Sun.

¹¹² See ‘On the Ark of Noah and the Ark of the Covenant’: *Sophia*, 12,2, 2006, pp.99-126.

¹¹³ Genesis 18.

the Muhammadian Light (*al-nûr al-Muhammadi*).¹¹⁴ In the *Zohar* the “Opening of the Tent” is equated with the *Shekhinah*.¹¹⁵ Within his “tent,” which is analogous to the “veil” of cosmic existence, Noah enters a state of naked unity with the Divine Essence; within the Divine Immanence (*Shekhinah*), which is the principle of diversity, rests the naked unity of the Divine Transcendence. The state of “drunkenness” expresses a state of non-distinction, a return to the primordial unity. St. Cyprian of Carthage says, ‘the chalice of the Lord inebriates us as Noah drinking wine in *Genesis* was also inebriated ... the inebriation of the chalice ... is not such as the inebriation coming from worldly wine ... actually, the chalice of the Lord so inebriates that it actually makes sober, that it raises minds to spiritual wisdom, that from this taste of the world each one comes to the knowledge of God’¹¹⁶. Again, St. Augustine: ‘The light of truth passes not by, but remaining fixed, inebriates the hearts of the beholders.’¹¹⁷ Shem and Japheth correspond to Essence and Substance; Ham’s transgression may be likened to the “sin” of the knowledge of good and evil. The cloak that covered Noah’s nakedness thus corresponds to the “tunics of skin” given to Adam and Eve, and the “cursing of Canaan” (Gen.9:25) to the expulsion from the garden. The coming together of Essence (Shem) and Substance (Japheth) brings forth the *paragod* (the cloak), which veils cosmic existence. The Hebrew word translated variously as cloak or garment is *simplâh* (“a dress,” especially “a mantle”); *Strong’s Dictionary* conjectures that this comes “through the idea of a *cover* assuming the shape of the object beneath,” with this deriving from the word *camel*, meaning “to resemble” or “a likeness.” ‘God created man in the image of Himself.’ To say man is to say creation; the veil of creation is the “image” or “likeness” of its Source. We might further remark on the fact that the word *simplâh* (שִׁמְלָה) “contains,” as it were, the root name Shem (שׁ; “name,” precisely the divine Name), which it might be said to veil.

¹¹⁴ Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity: Studies in the Stellar and Temporal Symbolism of Traditional Buildings Vol.2*, 1990, p.421.

¹¹⁵ Matt (tr.), *Zohar*, 1983, p.65-68.

¹¹⁶ St. Cyprian from Hamman (ed.), *The Mass: Ancient Liturgies and Patristic Texts*, 1967, cited in Urban, ‘Oblatio Rationabilis: Sacrifice in East and West,’ *Sophia* 8,1, 2002, p.183.

¹¹⁷ St. Augustine, *In Ps. XCIII*, cited in Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.638. For numerous other examples of this symbolism of wine and drunkenness see Perry, pp.637-640.

To speak of the Veil is to allude to That which is veiled, Nudity. The Outer and the Inner; exoterism and esoterism; Manifestation and Principle; Substance and Essence. As Schuon says, ‘the play of *Māyā* is a dance between Essence and Existence, Existence being the Veil, and Essence, Nudity.’¹¹⁸ Specifically with respect to the human form, Schuon remarks,

Since I have spoken of dress and its moral and spiritual exigencies, I must add certain reflections on nudity—by definition sacred—considered from the same standpoint. For here too, “nobles oblige”: the human body—like man as such—being “made in the image of God,” manifests the universal qualities and therefore all of the virtues; it is essentially vertical and total, which amounts to saying that it is essentially noble. What is most outward expresses what is most inward—that is what Lalla Yogishwari, having realized the Centre, danced naked—so that the body reminds man of the celestial Norm and of the early Law. “Extremes meet” ...¹¹⁹

The naked dance of Lalla Yogishwari recalls King David dancing and exposing himself before the Ark (2 *Samuel* 6:14, 16, 20), where the Ark is precisely the symbol of that which is most Inner, the Holy of Holies unveiled and naked. David “danced” filled with the joy of the Divine Glory, and this dance “exposed” him before God—removed the limitations of the manifest form—entering him naked into unity with That which is most Naked.

Man’s Mission

There is much more that might be said about the symbolism of man. Nevertheless, we will bring this survey to a close with a few of Schuon’s reflections upon man’s ultimate purpose. For Schuon man’s mission precisely is ‘to be at once witness to God as Principle and to God as Manifestation or Theophany ... Man has therefore a God-given right to these two perspectives; they constitute his sufficient cause and therefore serve to define him; in other words, man is essentially a pontifex, a link between Earth and Heaven, and between the Outward and the

¹¹⁸ Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and Way*, 1981, p.59.

¹¹⁹ Schuon, *The Feathered Sun*, 1990, pp.163-4.

Immanent.’¹²⁰ Man as pontifex is expressed by the verticality of his body. Yet man is not only vertical but also radial where the heart is the symbol *par excellence* of centrality, origin and source of life. The diastole and systole of the heart express the movement from uncreated to creation, and in turn, from creation back to the origin. ‘Man,’ says Schuon, ‘has been placed in the world so that there be in it someone who may return to God. This is what is suggested, among other signs, by that “supernaturally natural” theophany that is the human body: man being *imago Dei*, his body necessarily symbolizes a liberating return to the divine origin and in this sense it is “remembrance of God.”¹²¹ Man’s body is a remembrance of God, and this remembrance takes place in and through the direct and unifying vision of the eye of the heart. This idea is found in two of Schuon’s favourite spiritual sources: in the Upanishads we read: ‘The heart is the same as Prajâpati. It is Brahma. It is all’¹²²; and in the words of Al-Hallâj: ‘I saw my Lord with the eye of my heart, and I said: who art Thou? He said: Thou.’¹²³

‘The main question’ says Schuon ‘is to know what we are, or what man is; now our true identity is in our consciousness of the Real, of the Immutable, of the Sovereign Good. All psychological, moral, social and spiritual anthropology has to have its foundation in this axiom; it follows that to defend man is above all to defend man against himself.’¹²⁴ The truth of man is our divinity; that which may know this is our intellect; that which may obscure this is our ego. To be Man is to Know.

¹²⁰ Schuon, *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, 1976, p.182.

¹²¹ Schuon, *The Play of Masks*, 1992, p.21.

¹²² *Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad*, 5.3.

¹²³ Cited by Guénon, *Aperçus sur l’Initiation*, *Éditions Traditionnelles*, Paris, 1946, p.219.

¹²⁴ Schuon, *The Play of Masks*, 1992, p.69.