

Frithjof Schuon, Life and Teachings

Jean Baptiste Aymard and Patrick Laude
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Reviewed by Renaud Fabbri

Suny Press has just published a book on Frithjof Schuon, which undoubtedly will constitute a landmark in Perennialist studies. Based on unpublished documents, this book unveils some aspects of the works and life of Schuon not accounted for in previous publications.

This book, co-authored by Jean Baptiste Aymard and Patrick Laude (Georgetown University) includes some essays already published in France and Canada. The first two chapters and most original part of the work, offer a biography and a spiritual portrait of Frithjof Schuon. As we read them, a hieratic portrait of Schuon is unraveled: a born-Gnostic, a *fideli d'amor* and a true spiritual master whose influence is not limited by a specific religion but whose teachings are better defined as an expression of the *Religio Perennis* itself. His spiritual stature is truly located at the intersection of three major influences, according to J.B. Aymard:

Concerning the Vedantic ternary [*Cat-Cit-Ananda*], three paternities or spiritual « god parentages » can be recognized as being linked to one of the dimensions of Schuon's personality. The *Cit* aspect, which we briefly described earlier, can be related to the authority of René Guenon who is, unquestionably, the one who introduced him to metaphysics and who, he stressed, had the « noteworthy merit of presenting and making explicit crucial concepts of pure metaphysical science, of integral tradition and traditional orthodoxy, of symbolism, and of esoterism. (...)

In turning to the *Sat* aspect of Schuon's nature, which we previously discussed, it resonates with that of the strong personality of Shaykh Al-Alawi, from whom, it should be pointed out, he claimed part of the « spiritual heritage ». By conferring initiation upon him the old Shaykh in fact became his veritable spiritual father toward whom he was to feel indebted throughout his life. (...)

Finally, in connection with *Ananda* aspect of his nature, it seemed that it was Schuon's link with Al-Khidr, the « Master of the masterless », that could shed light on certain facets of his personality and thereby show the exemplary coherence of his spiritual life. » (p.67)

Al-Khidr also being the master of the *Afrad* or Solitaries, J.B. Aymard adds:

« In our opinion, many of Schuon's attitudes which were not understood by some people, such as his sovereign independence with regard to formalism, his genius for the essential, and his all-inclusive taste for all manifestations of Beauty, take on a different meaning in the light of the *Afrad*. » (p.45)

J.B. Aymard makes also a definite mention of the specific link Schuon had with the Virgin Mary (Seyyidtna Maryam). Through her luminous presence and visitations, she inspired Schuon from early childhood on. The term « adoption » is appropriate and one can even witness a true heritage (*wiratha*) of a virginal nature which gives the full measure of the elevation of a master whose name of initiation was Shaykh Isa Nur el-Din Ahmad al-Shadhili al-Alawi al-Maryami.¹

The next chapter by Patrick Laude is more directly centered on the metaphysical aspect of his teaching. In a few pages of a surprising quality and density, P. Laude offers a most lucid synthesis of the quintessential aspects of Schuon's teachings. He makes a point to situate his teaching with respect to that of other Perennialists and Traditionalists and to dispel a few misunderstandings. Schuon's multi-layered work is, according to P. Laude, centered primarily on the notion of quintessential esoterism and on *Religio Perennis*. *Religio Perennis* is not a super-religion (as it has been wrongly supposed) but the one and only "subjacent" religion, the transcendent norm establishing the intrinsic orthodoxy of any given traditional form. In its essence, Schuon's perspective is Shivaite rather than Vishnuvite. It is not meant to arbitrarily justify all cultural manifestations of a given tradition but to break with dogmatic limitations in order to reach the essence, identified to pure metaphysics and to the Language of the Self. According to Meister Eckhart: « If you would have the kernel, you must break the husk. » P. Laude also refers in the same chapter, to some methodological aspects of his teachings such as the alchemy of virtues and some meditative practices which have been described in « The Stations of Wisdom ». P. Laude also stresses the difference between Schuon's metaphysical

¹ With respect to this heritage of a virginal nature and to the doctrinal aspects of Schuon's mariology, let us mention James Cutsinger's article entitled « The Virgin », published in *Sophia* and available on-line at: <http://www.religioperennis.org>

perspective and that of Akbarian Sufism. The later, according to Schuon, has a tendency to create a confusion between the metaphysical point of view and theological opinions. As Schuon said elsewhere, his point of departure is not Sufism but *Advaita Vedanta*. P. Laude thus explains:

« In a sense, much of Sufi Metaphysics is pulled apart between its sublime non-dualism and its legalistic straps. Schuon's esoteric formulation allows us to bridge the gap between these two incommensurable dimensions by insisting upon the « multileveled structure » of the Divine Will. (...) In spiritual matters alike, esoterism reaches to the essential through the veil of surimpositions and accretions, while elucidating the partial legitimacy of mystical emphases, excesses, and subjective or collective detours. As such esoterism is nothing less than the most direct and comprehensive language of the Self. »
(p. 105-106)

The last chapter, also written by P. Laude exposes Schuon's aesthetics, his poetical writings and paintings, representing as many expressions of his teaching in a synthetic mode. P. Laude is thus able to detect the intimate connection of the aesthetic dimension of his work with his Virginal inspiration. He even recognizes here a tantric and shaktic dimension in the person of Schuon, thus linking him another time to the Shaykh Al-Akbar but also to the Iranian Sufi Ruzbihan al-Baqli. In Schuon's eyes, women are invested with a theophanic function. Woman manifests an essential aspect of the Principle in the immanence of the cosmic spheres: God in his infinite dimension. Eternal Man and Woman thus appear in Schuon's teachings as the two complimentary aspects of what Coomaraswamy called « the Tantric Biunity »: *Atman* and *Maya*, *Brahman* and *Shakti*, Absolute and Infinite.

Frithjof Schuon, Life and Teaching will become a primary source for all those who are not only interested in the metaphysical teachings of Schuon but who also try to understand the spiritual dimension of this great sage who died in the U.S. in 1998. We very strongly recommend this book to all readers and spiritual seekers.