

Advice to the Serious Seeker
Meditations on the Teaching of Frithjof Schuon

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Introduction:
Landmarks on the Road Ahead

You have asked for my advice about the spiritual life, and I can tell from how the question was posed that you are not going to settle for a glib response. Only the Truth, the whole Truth, and nothing but the Truth will do. While mere complexity of detail is no solution either, of course, a satisfactory answer will need to be large enough, rich enough, to speak at once and with power to both the skeptics and the serious aspirant: both to those around us who doubt whether there is a God at all, and to the one within us who understands in advance that there must be a God, and who longs for His wisdom and likeness.

An acceptable answer must do something else, too. It must provide perspective and be of help in sorting through the bewildering multitude of competing alternatives now available to the spiritual seeker. Which are true and which false? What is efficacious, what is useless, and what is actually dangerous? Wisely to judge of such matters requires an understanding of both theory and practice, both doctrine and method. At the very least, therefore, you are going to need not only a map of where you wish to go, but instructions on how to secure food and other provisions for the journey itself. In fact, the complexity and confusion of our day mean that even more is required. More than a map, you will need some lessons in cartography, and more than just food, you need the facts of nutrition. Only then can you know that what you are told is the Truth.

Other more specific needs and questions will come to mind as we proceed, but please notice that your order is a tall one already. In fact it is much too tall for the likes of me, and you should understand from the outset that I cannot myself fill it. This is no joke, no rhetorical strategy, no mere show of modesty. I mean what I say. The question you have asked can be properly and effectively answered only by a spiritual master. I do not mean to dismiss the encouragement and prayers of a fellow pilgrim, nor is the practical experience of life to be belittled. Nor again should we ignore the importance of destiny. God has placed you there and me here, and the fact that he has brought us together through your question cannot but mean something. But at the same time I want you to realize that while I shall gladly offer my support

as a spiritual friend, I can claim to have no wisdom of my own. All I can do is to pass along what I have received.

I propose to describe for you a teaching that has been of immeasurable help to me personally in coming to grips with the essentials of the spiritual life. This teaching can be described as metaphysical, esoteric, traditional, and perennial. As perhaps you know, each of these terms is laden with a variety of connotations and can be used in several, sometimes mutually exclusive, ways by different philosophical and religious schools of thought. It is most important, therefore, that we begin trying to understand precisely what are, and what are not, the meanings intended in the discussions that follow. By pausing here to offer some preliminary definitions of these important words, I hope to provide an initial sense of the territory that we are going to be exploring.

The word *metaphysical* pertains to God's transcendence. It means very simply that God in Himself cannot be limited. To be precise, metaphysics is the science of the real as such, no matter the dimension we might wish to consider. For the sake of simplicity, however, and in light of the word's etymology, the adjective is here being linked to the fact that God is beyond the domain of change and becoming. God exceeds or surpasses not only the tangible boundaries which circumscribe physical objects, and not only the temporal alterations to which they are subject, but the logical limits presupposed in everything susceptible to conceptual form and definition. All these are aspects of His transcendence. And yet paradoxically this very same God, precisely because He cannot be limited, cannot be excluded. To see why is to have grasped the key to all that follows. Nothing can bar God's entry into our world—neither space, time, or any of the other "conditions of existence" understood as containers, nor any of their particular, innumerable contents. God is therefore inevitably present within all things, and He can be discovered by an insight which pierces through the outward shells of those things to their hidden kernel. Here is where the word *esoteric* comes in. It refers to what is essential, inward, and intrinsic, whether in an object, a doctrine, or a sacred text, and it describes a method of investigation and a mode of interpretation which seek to find God at the center or heart of forms. Once again I am prescinding from a somewhat wider sense of the word, in which pure esoterism or "esoterism as such" may be equated with metaphysics. Understood for the moment, however,

simply in terms of its reference to whatever is inward, the esoteric pertains primarily to the immanence of God. The metaphysical and the esoteric can thus be seen as complementary opposites.

The other two terms have a similar relationship. First, *traditional*. I have said that nothing can resist God's entry. Being infinite, He cannot but enter space, and the force or impact of this entry results inevitably in a kind of radiation or reverberation through time. The former can be pictured as a vertical descent, like dropping a stone into a pool of water, while the latter corresponds to centrifugal ripples moving horizontally toward the shore. These ripples are an image of tradition. Tradition is the name we shall give to all that extends and recalls the revelatory entry of God into our world. The image is helpful for another reason, too. The concentric waves in the pool necessarily have a very particular center. They would not have taken their specific shape nor have begun to move along certain definite radii were it not for the center established by the stone's initial impact. Something of the center remains in the waves. It is the same with tradition and traditional teachings. They cannot be just anything. Not to be confused with mere custom or habit, they are strictly dependent upon the specificity and uniqueness of the initial revelation which they are designed to transmit. These teachings are therefore obliged to honor certain formal conditions and constraints on pain of losing contact with their Divine inception.

If you are beginning to think that the esoteric and the traditional are in a certain sense at odds with each other, you are right. Indeed there are some people who would call themselves esoterists—or esotericists—who reject the idea of tradition on the grounds that it accords too much authority to established forms: particular symbols, laws, precepts, and norms. Only by rejecting all such forms, they say, can God be found within. On the other hand, there are traditionalists—we might also call them exoterists—who reject the idea of the esoteric, and this on the grounds that the inward is at best a distraction, and at worst a dangerous deviation, from what God has unambiguously made known to all men. According to the perspective we shall be exploring here, each of these groups is right in one respect and wrong in another, for the esoteric and the traditional belong together, whatever the tension or uneasiness at times between them.

The reason is simply that there is no inside without an outside, and there is no outside without an inside. It will be necessary to return to this fundamental reciprocity many times.

Finally, let me say something about the word *perennial*. We shall not have occasion to examine this idea directly until the Epilogue, but it will be implicit throughout our discussions. I have already hinted that the perennial and the traditional, like the metaphysical and the esoteric, can be regarded as both opposites and complements. From another point of view, the perennial is a kind of bridge between the traditional and the esoteric. Or yet again, it can be understood as expressing the relationship between God and time, even as the esoteric expresses the relationship between God and space.

God, I have said, is beyond both space and time. His transcendence of space results paradoxically in His inward, esoteric presence in all things in space. On the other hand, His transcendence of time results by a corresponding paradox in His being present at all points of time. Like a perennial flower, which blooms every year, God repeatedly springs forth in our world, for no single moment can hold Him, just as no particular form can exhaust Him. This is not to say that the moments are interchangeable or that the forms are equivalent. Each form is unique just as each moment is unrepeatable, and in some of these forms and moments, God has revealed Himself more fully and powerfully than in others. On the other hand, our recognition that nothing can limit or enclose God obliges us to conclude that no single point or form can alone be the true one. His metaphysical being has given rise instead to a multiplicity of traditions on the plane of limitation and becoming, each beginning with a Divine descent.

Do remember that we have only just started to survey the field before actually setting out on our journey. It is to be expected that this brief and rather elliptical introduction should give rise to new questions, and not the least of these will concern this last point about the perennial repetition of Divine revelation. This is an idea which is bound to prove unacceptable both to esoterists who reject tradition and to traditionalists who are suspicious of esoterism. To suppose that inward Truth has nothing essential to do with outward form, as do the former, is to dismiss the importance of tradition as such, and therefore of all traditions. To suppose on the contrary that outward form and inward Truth are identical, as do the latter, is to insist on one's own form and reject all the others.

But both of these positions belie the nature of God. The middle ground alone is justified. It alone understands why God, though transcendent, cannot but be immanent, and why God in His immanence cannot but transcend—why the Truth must take form, but why no form can exhaust the Truth. Ringing the many changes on these fundamental axioms will occupy us for some time. Once we have learned to recognize the many tones they give rise to, and have begun to appreciate the resulting harmonies, we shall circle back in the Epilogue to consider more fully the perennial dimension of the perspective at hand.

The spiritual teaching I am planning to describe is marked by all four of the characteristics just outlined. It is metaphysical, esoteric, traditional, and perennial. It begins with the fact that God is beyond all restriction and form. It provokes our perception of His presence within things. It insists that our relationship with God depends upon His initiative and must be based on a foundation that He has established. And it assumes that several such traditional foundations have been willed by God, and that these are the world's great religions.

I have admitted that I am without any wisdom of my own and that I am going to need some assistance in adequately addressing your question. I am myself no master, but what I can do is to point you to the teaching of someone whom I believe to be one of the great spiritual authorities of our time. This teacher is at once a metaphysician, an esoterist, a traditionalist, and a perennialist, and he is the author of many books on the spiritual life. His name is Frithjof Schuon, and he has been called the greatest living exponent of the *philosophia perennis* or perennial philosophy, a perspective also frequently associated with the names of René Guénon and Ananda Coomaraswamy. (Suggested readings by these and other like-minded authors may be found at the end of this book.)

As you will see very shortly, Schuon is no mere scholar, though the breadth of his knowledge in such domains as philosophy, theology, and comparative religion rivals that of almost any academic I know. More important, however, is the depth of his work, which as others have noted unfailingly cuts straight to the heart of what should concern us all most: our relationship with God. At the same time, it is a very practical, realistic message, based—in a phrase he often uses—on "the nature of things." Though he calls us

to live "in the face of the Absolute," Schuon knows well that we are creatures and that we have certain rights to relativity on "the human margin."

You will find that there is a distinctive texture or tone to Schuon's writing which itself mirrors his focus on essentials. The style is unmistakable and seems connected somehow, as if organically, to the realities he describes. One knows at a glance that a certain passage cannot but have come from Frithjof Schuon. Nor is this fact without bearing on his teaching. He has pointed out that in our day "ideas no longer bite into the intelligence, which slides over concepts without taking time really to grasp them," and he means if possible to break through this triviality and indifference. He also knows that "Truth must be enunciated, not only with a sense of proportion, but also according to a certain rhythm," and it is accordingly with a poet's craftsmanship that he has designed his prose to attract our attention but without enclosing or restricting it. Schuon is known in many circles for two things primarily: on the one hand, for the perennialism that has been touched on already—for the idea, to use his own formulation, that there is a "transcendent unity of religions"—and, on the other hand, for his criticism of the modern world, for an uncompromising insistence that we are living at a time of unprecedented intellectual, spiritual, and moral decadence, corresponding to the *Kali Yuga* or Dark Age of Hindu doctrine. Neither of these more or less extrinsic assertions will be our focus here, however. Those who come looking to quarrel with these aspects of his teaching will undoubtedly go away unpersuaded. But one cannot do everything at once, and it seemed to me that the needs of a serious seeker could be met more directly if he were introduced first to Schuon's spiritual counsel. This is not to say that we should ignore the increasingly important questions posed by religious pluralism. Nor should we forget that the spiritual life includes an ability to discern the signs of the times. My plan in this case, however, is to concentrate on the essential ingredients or constitutive elements of what Schuon has called the "religion of the heart." These are the intrinsic dimensions of the spiritual life, found in some form in every integral religious tradition. They are the conditions without which no effective approach to God is possible. All of us can profit from a clearer understanding of these conditions, whatever our views of other religions.

There are four such dimensions, each presupposing man's formal or sacramental attachment to a living tradition, and I shall invite you to consider each of them with me in

turn. They are Truth, Virtue, Beauty, and Prayer. I pointed out earlier that spirituality comprises both theory and practice, or doctrine and method. Truth is the theoretical or doctrinal dimension of the spiritual path, while Virtue, Beauty, and Prayer pertain in various ways to practice or method. Truth consists in the comprehension of God. Virtue has to do with our conformation to God. Beauty may be called the configuration of God. And Prayer is a matter of concentration on God. We could make the point in yet another way by saying that the spiritual life depends upon doctrine, morality, aesthetics, and spiritual technique.

As we consider the perennial philosophy under each of these headings, you might wish to keep a picture in mind. God, who is Truth, is at one and the same time both our origin and our goal. The Truth must come at the start of the path, but it is also waiting at the end. The path itself passes through a space or field constituted on the one hand by Virtue and on the other by Beauty. And our motion or progress along the path is Prayer. "Metaphysical truth, a life of prayer, moral conformity, interiorizing beauty: this is the essential, and this is our message."

Finally, a word or two about my mode of presentation. I want to do everything I can to make my response to your request as direct, as concrete, and as practical as possible. This is no time to be concerned about footnotes and other scholarly regularities, and I see no point in having to attach a *Schuon says* to everything that comes from his pen. What you need most is to be brought into immediate contact with the treasures of traditional wisdom—without unnecessary detours and without my commentary taking center stage. It is also important that in helping you explore the four essentials, I avoid giving the impression that Schuon's message is expounded in the form of a system. Systematic qualities or aspects can be found within it, but never to the detriment of a certain musical character, and I would like to highlight this music as much as possible.

My solution takes the form of a series of meditations on aphorisms drawn from Schuon's writings. This procedure reflects the "discontinuous" and "quite evidently inexhaustible" quality of his expositions while allowing us to consider them in a more contemplative way, comparable to a meditative stroll in a garden. As we ponder together the meaning of these aphorisms, I shall be making additional use of other passages from Schuon's books, so that he is given the opportunity of commenting as it were on himself.

All such borrowings will be indicated by the appropriate marks. You may turn to the Sources of Quotations at the end of the book for directions on tracking down these passages, and the aphorisms, in Schuon himself.