The Fullness of God:
Frithjof Schuon on Christianity

Selected and edited by
James S. Cutsinger

Foreword by
Antoine Faivre

World Wisdom
I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom the whole family in Heaven and on earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His great glory, to be strengthened with might by His Spirit in the inner man; that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fullness of God.

Ephesians 3:14-19
CONTENTS

Foreword
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Introduction
James S. Cutsinger

1. Outline of the Christic Message

2. The Particular Nature and Universality of the Christian Tradition

3. “Our Father Who Art in Heaven”

4. Some Observations

5. Delineations of Original Sin

6. The Dialogue between Hellenists and Christians

7. The Complexity of Dogmatism

8. Christian Divergences

9. Keys to the Bible

10. Evidence and Mystery

11. An Enigma of the Gospel

12. The Seat of Wisdom

13. The Mystery of the Two Natures

14. Christic and Virginal Mysteries

15. The Cross

Appendix: A Sampling of Letters and Other Unpublished Materials

Editor’s Notes

Glossary of Foreign Terms and Phrases

Sources

Index
INTRODUCTION

It is a curious fact in the history of religions that Christianity, which took the form of a spiritual “way” (Acts 24:22) from its very beginning, and which continues to offer its initiates the means of seeing “the glory of God” (John 11:40) and of becoming “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4), should have become so adept at concealing the significance of its deepest and most transformative truths, “kept secret since the world began” (Romans 16:25), that serious Christian seekers in our day often forsake their religion in favor of such traditions as Yoga and Zen, where the promises of realization can be more easily discerned and where methods of spiritual development are often more accessible. Writing in the seventh century, Saint Maximos the Confessor explained that “the followers and servants of Christ were initiated directly by him into the gnosis of existent things, they in turn imparting this knowledge to those who came after them”,¹ and a Greek Orthodox bishop has recently testified to meeting one of the latest links in this chain on the Holy Mountain of Athos, whom he describes as appearing to his wondering eyes “like lightning in the night” and as having “everything that God has”.² Most Christians, however, seem altogether unaware of the fact that such things are still possible and that the attainment of so exalted a station of knowledge and union is precisely the purpose of their tradition.

This is a matter, in part, of sheer familiarity—though no doubt aggravated by the fideism and sentimentalism that have come to dominate in certain sectors of this ancient religion. Centuries of repetition have meant that Christians can now recite the creeds of the Church and take part in its sacramental mysteries without the freshness and wonder of the first Christian catechumens, who had been taught in secrecy and with great solemnity, and then only after lengthy periods of spiritual examination and discipline, that God was born as a man, died on a cross, and rose from the dead, and that through a conscious assimilation of the body and blood of this God-Man—the “medicine of immortality”, in the words of Saint Ignatius of Antioch—men might be drawn into the inward life of Divinity, having acquired the “power to become sons of God” (John 1:12). No spiritual teaching is more esoteric than this, nor is there an initiatic or mystagogical path that offers any more lofty a goal or any greater promise of fulfillment,

¹ Ambigua, 91.
however neglectful many Christians may be of their tradition’s innermost treasures and however
difficult it may have therefore become for them to recover the awe and anticipation with which
the earliest Christians entered upon their new way.

This collection of writings, selected from the works of one of the greatest spiritual
teachers of our time, Frithjof Schuon, is intended to aid in this recovery; by removing the veils of
familiarity, indifference, and forgetfulness, our aim is to assist the reader in gaining a fresh
perception of Christianity and a keener sense of the underlying meaning and transformational
power of its doctrines, symbols, and spiritual methods. The author is uniquely suited to guide us
in this endeavor. Widely acknowledged as one of the twentieth century’s foremost authorities on
the world’s religions, and the leading spokesman for the traditionalist or perennialist school of
comparative religious philosophy,3 Schuon was the author of over twenty books, as well as
numerous articles, letters, texts of spiritual instruction, and other unpublished documents; the
depth of his insights and the masterful quality of his early writing had brought him international
recognition while he was still in his twenties, and by the time of his death in 1998 at the age of
ninety, his reputation among many scholars of mysticism, esoterism, and contemplative
traditions was unsurpassed.

Frithjof Schuon was much more than a scholar, however. An accomplished artist and
poet,4 he was above all a man of prayer, whose fundamental message, whatever its particular
thrust in any given article or chapter, was always linked to the importance of faith and spiritual
practice. “Even if our writings had on average no other result than the restitution for some of the
saving barque that is prayer,” he once wrote, “we would owe it to God to consider ourselves
profoundly satisfied.”5 In the years since his death, a number of his close associates have begun
to publish biographical memoirs, and as a result it is now widely known that Schuon’s own
practice was undertaken within the context of Sufi Islam and that he was himself a master of the

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3 René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy, and Titus Burckhardt were also important figures in this school.
4 A number of his paintings have been collected in Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty: Paintings by
Frithjof Schuon, ed. Michael Pollack (Bloomington, Indiana: Abodes, 1992). During the last three years of his life,
Schuon composed nearly thirty-five hundred lyric poems in German; four volumes of these poems have been
published to date: Glück, Leben, Sinn, and Liebe (Freiburg-im-Breisgau, Basel, Vienna: Herder, 1997). Bi-lingual
editions of the poetry—German with an English translation—include Songs for a Spiritual Traveler: Selected Poems
(Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2002) and Adastra and Stella Maris: Poems by Frithjof Schuon
traditional Shadhiliyyah-Darqawiyah lineage, who served for over sixty years as a guide to more than two thousand followers throughout the world.

Schuon did not himself speak of this role in his published writings, however, for he wished to distinguish very carefully between his function as a spiritual master, on the one hand, and his teaching as a metaphysician and philosopher, on the other—a teaching that is universalist in its scope and intention and worlds apart from any proselytizing or authoritarian aim. Born in Switzerland in 1907, where he was brought up as a Protestant before becoming a Roman Catholic, he knew that those who were aware of his background might falsely conclude that he had renounced Christianity and had “converted” to Islam. In fact, however, his Sufi affiliation was simply a matter of opportunity and vocation, the result of his quest, as a young man, for direction of a kind that he had been unable to find in the Western Church, and it did not conflict with his remaining, throughout his long life, an adamant defender of traditional Christological doctrine and other essential Christian truths, nor with his having a special fondness for the Christian East and the Hesychast method of prayer. “Being a priori a metaphysician,” he wrote, “I have had since my youth a particular interest in Advaita Vedânta, but also in the method of realization of which Advaita Vedânta approves. Since I could not find this method—in its strict and esoteric form—in Europe, and since it was impossible for me to turn to a Hindu guru because of the laws of the castes, I had to look elsewhere; and since Islam de facto contains this method, in Sufism, I finally decided to look for a Sufi master; the outer form did not matter to me.”

Although Schuon made a home for himself within this spiritual framework, he was in no sense an apologist for the Sufi tradition, but maintained close ties throughout his long life with authorities and wayfarers in a wide variety of orthodox religions, each of which, he insisted, is a saving expression of a single Truth, which he variously referred to as the sophia perennis or philosophia perennis, that is, the “perennial wisdom” or “perennial philosophy”. Until his later years he traveled widely, from India to North Africa to America, and his personal friendships ranged from Hindu swamis to Native American chiefs and shamans, while hundreds of correspondents and visitors, from nearly every religious background, looked to him for advice.

For obvious reasons, he was especially interested in Christianity, and as with every religion about which he wrote, his grasp of its inward and essential message was profound; steeped in the Scriptures and in the lives of the saints, and well acquainted with the works of

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6 From a letter dated January 1996.
Church Fathers and other Christian authorities, Schuon speaks with full knowledge of the Church’s artistic and liturgical traditions, as well as its historic controversies and denominational divergences, and he exhibits again and again in his writing an extraordinary ability to bring to light the underlying meaning and validity of what might otherwise seem conflicting and mutually exclusive theological claims. Nor did his knowledge come simply from books; his own brother was a Trappist monk, and his numerous other contacts included the Athonite starets Sophrony, who was a noted disciple of Saint Silouan of the Holy Mountain; Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, a popular and much published Russian Orthodox writer on prayer; and the well-known Roman Catholic monk and contemplative author Thomas Merton, who near the end of his life wrote to Schuon in hopes of establishing a private spiritual correspondence.

There is no need to describe the author’s perspective in any detail in this context; the following pages will provide a clear and ample picture of his views, and it makes better sense to let him speak for himself. On the other hand, it will perhaps be useful if we say just a word about how Schuon envisioned the relationship between the Christian religion and the sophia perennis. Christianity is well known, after all, for its widespread exclusivism—for the conviction that there can be no salvation apart from a conscious, explicit, and active faith in Jesus Christ and membership in his visible body, the Church—and some readers may therefore be hesitant, however extensive this author’s knowledge and however numerous his friendships with serious Christian believers, to trust his insights and to benefit fully from his observations, given his universalist doctrine. If Christ is truly God incarnate, they will say, then it is surely impossible for a Christian to condone those religions which ignore or dismiss his Divinity, and it is therefore unacceptable for a Christian to subscribe to the perennial philosophy.

It is beyond the scope of the present introduction to undertake a full response to this criticism; what can be said, however, is that a number of unimpeachably orthodox Christians, including canonized saints, have themselves been “perennialists”. According to Saint Augustine, for example, “That which today is called the Christian religion existed among the ancients and has never ceased to exist from the origin of the human race until the time when Christ himself came and men began to call ‘Christian’ the true religion which already existed beforehand.”

Saint Justin the Martyr fully concurs with this dictum: “We have been taught that Christ is the

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First-begotten of God and have testified that he is the *Logos* of which every race of man partakes. Those who lived in accordance with the *Logos* are Christians, even though they were called godless, such as, among the Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus and others like them. Those who lived by this *Logos*, and those who so live now, are Christians, fearless and unperturbed.”

These ancient testimonies have been echoed in our own day by Saint Nikolai Velimirovich, a Serbian Orthodox bishop and a survivor of Dachau, who teaches that the *Logos* or Word of God, manifest in every authentic religion, is the true and saving source of “precious gifts in the East”: “Glory to the memory of Lao Tzu,” he can therefore exclaim, “the teacher and prophet of his people! Glory to the memory of Krishna, the teacher and prophet of his people! Blessed be the memory of Buddha, the royal son and inexorable teacher of his people!”

As will be evident from the following pages, these articulations of the *sophia perennis* provide a useful synopsis of Schuon’s fundamental point of view. We do not mean to suggest that he thought deliberately or self-consciously in patristic, or other Christian, categories; the author of these pages was a metaphysician and esoterist, not a theologian or historian of religions, and it would therefore be a mistake to suppose that his aim was to provide a hermeneutic for interpreting religious texts or phenomena, or that his doctrine flowed from empirical considerations. On the contrary, his point of departure was always the underlying nature of things, as perceived by the Intellect, not the exoteric doctrines of any given religion or the pious opinions of its traditional authorities. Nevertheless, what we can say is that he was in full agreement, beginning from his own metaphysical starting-point, with the essential idea expressed by these saints; like them he taught that the incarnation of the Word as Jesus Christ (John 1:14) bestowed a particular form upon a pre-existing and eternal Truth, and that the substance of this form—the living heart of the Christic message—is thus perennial and universal in its inward or essential meaning. This is a key to Schuon’s entire approach to Christianity, and it helps to explain what he meant in writing that “all genuine religions are

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8 *First Apology*, 46.
10 See Chapter 1, “Outline of the Christic Message”.

Christian”,\(^\text{11}\) that “every truth is necessarily manifested in terms of Christ and on his model”;\(^\text{12}\) and that “there is no truth or wisdom that does not come from Christ”.\(^\text{13}\)

The following chapters have been chosen from Schuon’s published corpus of twenty-three books. Written originally in French, these selections are here presented in a fully revised English translation; bibliographical details, including information about previous English editions, may be found at the end of this volume. As it happens, most of Schuon’s books are themselves anthologies, which he periodically assembled from articles that had been initially published, beginning in 1933 and continuing through 1997, in a variety of European, Persian, and American journals, including *Le Voile d’Isis*, *Études traditionnelles*, *France-Asie*, *Sophia Perennis*, *Connaissance des religions*, and *Sophia: A Journal of Traditional Studies*. Many of these articles were “occasional” in nature, having been composed in response to a broad spectrum of questions and problems, often put to Schuon by those who sought his spiritual counsel. As a result, his writings are often more meditative and maieutic than discursive in character, with any given essay ranging across a number of fascinating topics and including illustrations drawn from an astonishing variety of sources. The selections included in this present volume are intended to highlight this variety and to convey something of both the scope and the depth of Schuon’s insights into the Christian tradition. We have certainly not meant to be exhaustive; a number of pertinent chapters, several of them focused on more “specialized” issues, such as the significance of the *epiclesis* in the Byzantine liturgy and the mysticism of Theresa of Avila and John of the Cross, have not been included. It has been said that Schuon’s editor is like an artist cutting figures from gold leaf: the shapes that one keeps are all gold, but so is what remains.

Because of the wide-ranging nature of Schuon’s work and its poetic—one might say “musical”—quality, a firm categorization of his writings is impossible; he himself spoke of the “discontinuous and sporadic manner” of his expositions, acknowledging that while “there is no great doctrine that is not a system”, there is equally none that “expresses itself in an exclusively systematic fashion”.\(^\text{14}\) Nevertheless, there is an order, if not a system, to the arrangement of this book; in broad strokes, the chapters have been organized in a way that will guide the reader from


\(^{13}\) See Chapter 4, “Some Observations”, p. __.

matters of metaphysical principle, through various theological and hermeneutical issues, to somewhat more “operative” questions of spiritual practice and method. Specific topics include the relationship between Christianity and non-Christian religions; the distinction or divergence within Christianity between its main branches, Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant; the place of reason and faith and their connection to spiritual knowledge or gnosis; the principles, and applications, of an anagogical or mystical exegesis of the Scriptures; the central dogmas of the Trinity and Incarnation, as well as Eucharistic and Marian doctrine; and Christian initiation, contemplative practice, and “prayer of the heart”, especially the Jesus Prayer. The book concludes with a short Appendix of previously unpublished writings, including samples from Schuon’s correspondence with Christian seekers.

The breadth of the author’s erudition can be somewhat daunting, especially for those not accustomed to reading philosophical and religious works; his pages frequently contain allusions to ideas, historical figures or events, and sacred texts that illumine or amplify his meaning, but a citation or other reference is not usually provided. With this fact in mind and as an aid to the interested reader, we have added a series of Editor’s Notes to this volume; in order to be as unobtrusive as possible, we have chosen not to interrupt Schuon’s prose with asterisks or other symbols, leaving it to the reader to consult the notes when in need. It should be understood that this editorial apparatus does not presume to offer an interpretation of Schuon’s own teaching; as remarked above, we prefer to allow his writings to speak for themselves. Organized by chapter and tagged to the relevant page numbers, the notes are designed simply to provide a few helpful supports for those who may be unacquainted with the details of Christian dogma and intellectual history or with other traditional teachings. Chapter and verse citations are given for quotations from the Bible and other sacred texts; dates and brief biographical summaries are provided for historical figures; explanations are offered concerning the fine points of theological controversies and the principal doctrines of various schools of thought.

One final point should be mentioned. It is customary for Schuon to use a number of “technical” terms in his writings, drawn from a multitude of traditions and involving several classical languages, including Sanskrit, Arabic, Latin, and Greek, and a Glossary has therefore been provided as well; here one will find, in transliteration, foreign words and phrases appearing both in Schuon’s text and in our editorial notes, together with brief translations and definitions.