

**Provocations in Place of Answers:**  
*Sollemnitas in Conceptione Immaculata Beatae Mariae Virginis*

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Why the poetry of the sage Frithjof Schuon? Why the musical echoes from other religions? Why the traditional Latin Mass? Why the feast of the Immaculate Conception? Why Femininity?

Why this constellation of beautiful but seemingly disparate elements?

Try as we might, there can be no answering these questions by means of mere prose, which is fallen poetry, or perhaps even poetry, which is fallen music. The answers must come, if at all, in the total experience of the *Sollemnitas* itself, an experience at once sensory and spiritual, physical and metaphysical. For like all sacred rites, the Mass is a fusion of liturgy—a temporal act of the people—with theurgy—the eternal act of God. “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for God is at work within you.”

But perhaps in place of answers we might risk a few provocations. As long as one looks along and not at them, they may serve as a “finger pointing toward the moon”—to speak in Zen idiom—showing the way toward a Way that is at once a descent and an ascent: a descent through the heart into the immanent interiority of one religion and an ascent with the mind toward the transcendent unity of all religions.

### **Why Frithjof Schuon?**

Metaphysician, Sufi *shaykh*, painter, and poet, Frithjof Schuon (1907-98) was one of the twentieth century’s foremost authorities on the world’s religions and the pre-eminent spokesman of the perennialist school of comparative religious philosophy.

Distilling this philosophy to its very quintessence, Schuon once summed it up with three adjectives: universalist, dogmatist, traditionalist. Universally free from all religious exclusivism and dogmatically opposed to all subjectivist relativism, the perennial philosophy is best known for its teaching that “there are many paths to the Summit” and thus for honoring the saving truth and symbolic integrity of each of the world’s revealed traditions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

During the last few years of his life, Schuon performed what many regard as a miracle of transposition, recasting the major themes of his often difficult and demanding philosophical writings into the simple melodies of lyric poetry—some in English, many more in his native German. Here one finds him reasserting, and celebrating, the unparalleled importance of invocatory prayer, the liberating beauties of virgin nature, the iconic significance of sacred art and symbolism, and the initiatic imperative of undertaking spiritual work within the protective framework of a divinely given tradition.

But what one hears most in these poems—on a few occasions explicitly, though more often as a deeply resounding *ison* or shimmering overtone—is the vivifying voice of the Feminine, unmistakably beckoning us to penetrate more deeply into the heart of our own faith in order to see at its center the center of every faith.

### **Why Musical Echoes?**

Sir John Tavener has acknowledged several times in recent years that Schuon's work, especially the poetry, is now a key influence on his music, and in composing this setting of the Mass he has endeavored to express in sound something of what the perennialist sage expressed in words.

Since music is to essence what the visual arts are to form, it is in the very nature of things that the esoteric or inward significance of sacred doctrines and rites should lend itself to an orchestral and choral exploration.

Equilibrium is vital in this domain, however, for it is easy to lose one's balance.

A *traditionalist* can fall to the side of believing that his religion alone has the Truth; thus historically many Christians have insisted that there is no salvation outside the Church. On the other hand a *universalist* can readily fall to the opposite side of supposing that any sincerely held opinion, however human, is as good as another and that the kaleidoscopic or syncretistic mixing of as many opinions as possible is a desirable goal.

Hence the importance of finding the fulcrum supplied by the Schuonian *dogmatist*, who knows that Truth is an objective Reality, soaring above our small minds, but who has come to acknowledge, and delight in, its multiple self-expressions. Participating in the sacramental life of our own religion as fully as possible, we gladly accept it as a gift of Divine Revelation, while at the same time realizing that others have received other gifts: gifts divinely bestowed in spite of—indeed, paradoxically, because of—their exoteric irreconcilability with our own.

The composer has taken full account of this paradox—among other ways in positioning a solo soprano in a place apart, high in a gallery overlooking the nave. The sacred formulas and divine Names she invokes, drawn as they are from other traditions, are thus *in* but not *of* the Mass—interpolations, not constituent parts. Eschewing glib and superficial correlations, Mr Tavener is helping us to see with our ears that if we force too close an inter-religious conjunction between sacred forms appearing alike on their surface, we may fail to fathom a deeper, truer unity running along quite different lines.

A voice is echoed when its sound strikes the sheer face of a cliff, even as a tree is reflected when its light meets the surface of a sparkling clear lake—a mirror in which top becomes bottom and bottom top. We hear the echoing presences of the Hindu goddesses and are moved to feel their truly Marian mercy, but at the same time a little reflection of our own will remind us that there must also be difference and inversion.

Unlike Lakshmi, Sarasvati, Parvati, Tara, and the others, the Blessed Virgin—to quote the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins—is “merely a woman”, hence the difference. And yet—and now comes the inversion—Her “presence, power is great as no goddess’s was deemèd, dreamèd”.

### **Why the Traditional Latin Mass?**

This inevitable question is actually two questions, requiring two responses: one horizontal and the other vertical.

A form of worship as apparently hidebound as the traditional Catholic Mass will no doubt seem to many a surprising setting for the jewels of perennialist insight. Some will surely object that the Mass—the Latin Mass in particular—has become the favorite retreat of the most obstinately narrow-minded and exclusivistic of Christians. But if so this merely proves once again, if proof were needed, that the corruption of the best is the worst. The use of Latin, traditionally, was precisely for the sake of universality, comprehensiveness; the language was meant not to close but to open doors.

Antiquity, dignity, sobriety: these undoubted virtues were, and are, part of the power of the Latin; but also a certain fluidity naturally flowing from a synthetic and impersonal idiom, unobstructed by the individualist eddies to which modern vernacular tongues are prone.

*Tam antiqua, tam nova*, said Saint Augustine: so old, so new; and we may add in this context, still in reference to the language: so solid, so liquid; so rigorous, so supple; so formal, so fresh—so *Yang*, so *Yin*.

Thus the horizontal amplitude of this Mass.

But the more important question is vertical, a matter of altitude.

The Real is eternal, therefore beyond all temporal sequence. The least inadequate way of expressing this fact, in Christian discourse, is to say that God is “always” doing whatever He does. It is true that He *made* the world, but no less true that He *is making* and *will continue to make* it; for He does what He does all at once *in principio*, “in the beginning” He is. The same is true of the events of His incarnate life: He is “still” being born in Bethlehem, “still” in the midst of His earthly ministry, “still” dying on the Cross and rising from the dead—but “already” returned in His glorious Second Coming.

Sacred liturgy is a disentangling from temporal flux and the demands of contingency, and it can therefore serve as a portal into this world of timeless happening. It is a movement of return to a starting point we never left: a point before line, plane, and solid, and therefore before the crystallization of competing forms—a point whence we are enabled to glimpse, if only “through a glass darkly”, the eternal Fountain from which all the religions have come flowing down.

But how does one *say* this?

Hieratic posture, symbolic gesture, balanced movement, rhythmic repetition, the resplendent sound of incantation and the resounding light of candle flame and icon; and then—at the moment of consummation—texture, taste. The sacred drama of the Mass is a picture—to say nothing of a song, a banquet, and a wedding night—“worth a thousand words”: an exhibition, for those with more than “eyes to see and ears to hear”, of what “eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man”.

### **Why the Immaculate Conception?**

Of all the possibilities of the liturgical year, how is it that this particular feast was selected as the occasion for a perennialist deepening and expansion?

Exoterically, Mariology is rooted in Christology: what the Church proclaims about the Mother is always a function of what it teaches its faithful concerning Her Son.

The Immaculate Conception—solemnly defined as dogma by Pope Pius IX (*Ineffabilis Deus*, 8 December 1854)—is a way of accounting for Christ’s freedom from sin, hence for the unblemished perfection of His world-remaking sacrifice. In the doctrine of the Catholic Church original sin is transmitted from parent to child, and this being so it is reasoned that Christ’s only human parent must have been sinless as well, which means that “the Blessed Virgin Mary, at the first instant of her conception, by a singular privilege and grace of the omnipotent God, was preserved free from all stain of original sin”.

In order to dissuade the faithful from supposing that this family resemblance amounts to equality or similarity in other respects—and thus to forestall any deflection of worship from the Son to His Mother—the Church at once adds, however, that the Virgin’s “singular privilege” was strictly “in consideration of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of mankind”.

Perfection of purity, simplicity, beauty, generosity: this and much more can be safely attributed to Her—She who is “more honorable than the Cherubim and more glorious beyond compare than the Seraphim” in the liturgical language of the Christian East—but only with the understanding that She is nonetheless human, not Divine, and therefore entirely subordinate in the order of grace to Her Son, the uncreated Word.

This is hardly the last word, however.

For esoterically, Marian devotion has always transgressed the limits of Marian dogma, and paradoxically—almost in spite of itself—the Church often seems to have encouraged this transgression.

Why else among the propers for this feast does it prescribe a reading from Proverbs 8, where the feminine figure of *Sophia* proclaims, “I was from everlasting, and of old, before the earth was made.... When God prepared the heavens, I was there.... I was by Him, as one brought up with Him, and was daily His delight”? Are these words, which are obviously intended to inform our devotion to the Blessed Virgin, the words of a mortal? Do they not rather betoken— allusively, of course, and in a way no dogma could, or should, try to imprison in words— Someone, or Something, more adequately described as Divine?

Or again: why else did the Church canonize Bernadette of Lourdes and deem her visions of the Beautiful Lady to be miraculous apparitions of the Virgin, and therefore “worthy of belief”, unless it expected the faithful to take very seriously what she said, under oath, concerning Mary’s self-appellation? When asked Her Name, the Lady did not tell the young

saint, “I am the one immaculately conceived”—which, though startling enough, would have done no more than confirm the dogma—but rather, “I am the Immaculate Conception.”

Is it not clear from this predicate nominative that the Conception of which She speaks is more than the miraculous means whereby She Herself came to be? Must it not be what She *is*?

Not just “My beginning was flawless”, but “I am the flawless Beginning”; not just “I am pure”, but “I am principal Purity”.

Not merely not subject to original sin.

Original Sinlessness. Primordial Perfection.

### **Why Femininity?**

But Immaculate Conception is not the Virgin’s only Name. She is also Handmaiden of the Lord, Co-Redemptress, and Mother of God.

Each of these traditional Christian epithets illumines a different face of Mary, a different facet of Her immaculate stature; each highlights a particular relationship between Femininity and Masculinity; and each in turn testifies to the liquefying, liberating power of the Feminine.

In the perennial philosophy, as in many of the world’s great religions, Feminine and Masculine are not merely labels for biological properties, or even psychological qualities. On the contrary, these world-creating and world-bridging Powers are operative on planes of Reality where sex, and even gender, as such would be meaningless. We see them in the relationship between liquid and solid, silver and gold, expansion and contraction, moon and sun, soft and hard, music and geometry, silence and sound, dark and light—each of these syzygies an instance of the opposition-in-union between *Yin* and *Yang*.

As for the specifically Marian manifestations of *Yin*, three distinctive relationships are worthy of our prayerful reflection: in the first the Feminine is subordinate to the Masculine; in the second the Feminine and the Masculine intermingle as equals; in the third the Feminine supersedes the Masculine.

And in each of these three we may distinguish three meanings: exoteric, esoteric, and methodic—as with the Celestial Hierarchies, a trinal triplicity.

As Handmaiden of the Lord, the Virgin is *exoterically* the type of self-effacing humility, supplication, adoration, obedience: the perfect model of what the created Feminine should be, whichever its gender, in relation to the Creative Masculine. “Be it unto me according to Thy

Word.” *Esoterically*—and etymologically—the Virgin’s humility is the humus beneath our feet, the Native American Earth in its relation to Sky: the perfect equilibrium and pure potentiality of Prime Matter, Cosmic Substance. *Methodically*—that is, with regard to our own spiritual work—the Handmaiden is peaceful repose at the center, non-acting-act. “Consider the lilies of the field.”

As Co-Redemptrix, the Virgin is *exoterically* the protecting, encouraging, sustaining counterpart to Her Son. Present at the conception, birth, death, and resurrection of the Masculine, the Feminine participates in every stage of His redemptive life. *Esoterically*, She is *Shakti*, the radiant power of the Divine, the Hindu Goddess in relation to Her masculine consort. “And there appeared a great wonder in Heaven: a woman clothed with the sun.” *Methodically*, the Co-Redemptrix is every member of the Body, the Church, each of whom is called into synergy—active cooperation with God—in order to “complete in the flesh what was lacking in the suffering of Christ”.

As Mother of God, the Virgin serves *exoterically* to guarantee the integrity of the single Person of Christ: Femininity is prior to Masculinity strictly in reference to the human nature of the Son. *Esoterically*, however, She is the mothering *Tao*, which is “older than God” (Lao Tzu), and thus She is the very Principle of the Masculine Principle: “Cause of What preceded Her” (Saint Gregory Palamas) and “Origin of the Beginning” (Saint Peter Damian). *Methodically*, the Mother of God is the indeterminate infinitude of the Self, the I-AM-THAT-I-AM, prior to its self-determination as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. She is each of us “filled with all the fullness of God”.

Human dimensions, cosmic dimensions, Divine dimensions: in each the same soft quality of early spring, the flowering of trees beneath the snow.

### **Why This Constellation of Elements?**

The way of descent and the way of ascent are one and the same, we have said: the opening of our hearts to the particular truths most deeply embedded in our own religion is coincident with an opening of our minds to the universal Truth embracing and transcending all religions.

The Feast of the Immaculate Conception—not merely *of* but *as* the Blessed Virgin Mary—is an opportunity to ponder one such truth in Christianity, perhaps the deepest and most inward of all. More than a dogma apropos of God incarnate, it bears indirect witness to the human modesty, cosmic reciprocity, and metaphysical priority of the Feminine, and thus in

turn—if we are careful to listen to the silences between the notes—to a Space beyond place, in which the mutual exclusions and antagonisms of the religions cannot but fall away, fluttering useless wings.

The witness is indeed indirect—no more than a glance, a hint, a gesture—as behooves so implicit and subtle a Mystery. If anyone should object that there is nothing in the Gospel to prove the possibilities here suggested, that the esoterist is going further than the *Immaculata* requires, whether in its meaning or by Her words, the Schuonian dogmatist cannot but agree.

But this is just as it should be, there being no demonstrations in this domain. Original Sinlessness or Primordial Perfection is not the Name of a discrete and supremely powerful Deity, whose sovereignty could be expressed in propositions or defended by argument. The title points us instead to a Priority beneath and behind such a Being—the Primacy of a hiddenness, emptiness, openness too soft, too small, too simple, too secret for dogmatic words of Her own.

But then comes the echo, the initiatic inversion, and the surprise of an ineffable Splendor. The humility of a given, mortal woman, “like us in all things sin only excepted”, is seen in its relative nothingness as nothing less than the liquid reflection of a Femininity antecedent to God Himself. “The dazzling obscurity of the secret Silence outshines all brilliance with the intensity of its darkness” (Saint Dionysius the Areopagite).

*Nigra sum, sed Formosa*: “I am black but beautiful.”

Can we begin to glimpse what this means? Are we able to grasp, however lightly—and the more lightly the better—that the immanent Emptiness of the Immaculate Conception is the transcendent Matrix of all sacred forms?

If not, then it is time to turn from our broken prose to poetry—and thence to the *Sollemnitas* itself.

### *Stella Matutina*

Der Morgenstern erhebt sich aus der Nacht  
So wie die Göttin Venus aus dem Bade  
Des Meeres—eine Perle, dann ein Weib;  
Urweiblich ist des Himmels Wundergnade.

Sie ist Geheimnis; sie ist nicht Gesetz,  
Sie ist das freie göttliche Vergeben  
Tief aus den Wassern der Unendlichkeit—  
Und niemand kann der Isis Schleier heben.

*Frithjof Schuon*