

A Knowledge That Wounds Our Nature: The Message of Frithjof Schuon

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Knowledge saves us only on condition that it engages all that we are: only when it constitutes a way which works and transforms, and which wounds our nature as the plough wounds the soil. (Schuon 1987:144-45)

There can be no denying that the message of Frithjof Schuon, even when compelling, cannot be called attractive — unless the attraction be that of the lodestone for iron or of sunlight for the plant. For his is a teaching that courts no acclaim, provides no excuses, neglects to justify itself by any of the usual academic authorities, and denounces without concession virtually all that we “scholars” hold most dear. There is in his books an appeal, to be sure — to revelation, intellection, and God — but nothing appealing, as we are accustomed to using that word. Quite the contrary, many have found him repellent; and even those who have not, who have found themselves drawn, will still agree that the healing words of this teacher have often first wounded them. If there is a beauty here, it is a beauty that burns. If the message he brings is a good one, it is a goodness that produces a shock, as if one were swallowing light.

My aim in this article is to explain why these things should be — why it is proper that this work should offend, and how that offense can be taken as a sign that the method is working and that the doctrine is true. Schuon has said that his position is at once “universalist,” “dogmatist,” and “traditionalist” (1982:1). Each of these features presents both an obstacle and an invitation. How they obstruct will be more or less clear; my plan is to show how they may also invite, or better provoke, those who can see their necessity. In offering this explanation, I do not mean to provide concessions, however, those concessions precisely that Schuon has refused to allow, but to help us instead to concede their legitimate absence. My hope is to account for a style and approach that have seemed to some strident and arrogant, unforgiving and pompous — to account for them, not to explain them away. Nor do I mean to suggest by treating this topic that Schuon is in need of an apologist or hierophant, and that I shall somehow make up for deficiencies in his own exposition. This, too, would be inconsistent with the authority presupposed by his message, as with our efforts to understand that authority by taking it seriously. My purpose is simply to

bring together in one place, and into interpretive union with each other, certain ideas and arguments whose full significance might otherwise escape the less persistent reader of Schuon's prose.

Though by common agreement the premier traditionalist of our time, Schuon has repeatedly said that he does "not necessarily subscribe to every assessment, conclusion, or theory formulated in the name of metaphysical, esoteric, or broadly traditional principles." "We wish," he continues, "to be held responsible solely for what we write ourselves" (1975:6). This seems a fair request, and yet it is one that has often been ignored by critics, who have come to equate Schuon's writings with "perennialism," variously defined, and to identify his teachings, not only with those of René Guénon and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, who though close allies in many respects have not been exempt from Schuon's objections, but even with those of an Aldous Huxley or Hegel, whose perspectives are worlds apart from his own. This is not to suggest, of course, that there can be no discussion of the various meanings of the "esoteric" or the "perennial," or that attempts to compare Schuon with other writers are without value. The point of this essay, however, is to enter so far as we can into Schuon's own perspective, to understand him on his own terms, and to see how he envisions certain crucial ideas.

I

The sum and substance of Schuon's message is conveyed to the reader of many of his books even before the covers are opened. The first thing one sees is a mandala, often the feathered sun of the Plains Indians. This fact is most instructive. He seems to be saying — this author and painter — that vision is essential: what one will find within his books is the successive deployment in a series of words of something which must be grasped all at once, through symbol and form, with the immediacy of perception:

Intelligence has only one nature, namely luminosity; but it has diverse functions and different modes of working.... Intelligence with a "logical," "mathematical," or one might say "abstract" quality is not enough for reaching all aspects of the real; it would be impossible to insist too often on the importance of the "visual" or "aesthetic" function of the intellective faculty. (1987:140)

As for the image itself, the mandala, what one is to see is that “things are in God and God is in things, with a kind of discontinuous continuity” (1975:61). This elliptical and paradoxical phrase cuts straight to the heart of Schuon’s metaphysical teaching.

God, he has said, is at once Absolute and Infinite. In Its absoluteness, the Divine cannot but surpass Its creatures, whose reality It completely eclipses, and yet by virtue of Its infinity, It cannot but be within them as well, sustaining them by Its presence and making them shine with the divine glory itself. This basic truth is conveyed by myriad expressions, compressions, and reformulations throughout Schuon’s work — the *Sophia perennis* being “quite evidently inexhaustible” (1986:1) — and it provides a framework for his esoteric reconciliation of such exoteric opposites as justice and mercy, the masculine and the feminine, necessity and freedom, and Buddhist *anātmā* and Vedantic *Ātmā* — not to forget the crucial methodic distinction between discernment and concentration. For in fact, “esoterically speaking,”

[t]here are only two relationships to take into consideration, that of transcendence and that of immanence: according to the first, the reality of Substance annihilates that of the accident; according to the second, the qualities of the accident — starting with their reality — cannot but be those of Substance. (1981:44)

Nothing exists except God, Substance, the Principle, the metaphysical One — that is, Unicity; but this is to say that God, Substance, the Principle is all that exists, and hence that all that exists is God — that is, Totality. “The world is false, *Brahma* is true”; but “That art thou.” Of course, Schuon knows very well that the reason, the “mathematical” intelligence, will resist this formulation, which admittedly forces the limits of analysis. Thus the importance precisely of a concentric yet radial image, like the mandala or the spider’s web, with its analogical oppositions and parallel antinomies.¹ For by this means alone can one grasp the Truth:

¹ Schuon speaks of there being an indirect relationship between the reason and the Intellect (of which more below), which is like that between the world and God: “There is at the same time analogy and opposition: the mind is analogous to the Intellect in so far as it is a kind of intelligence, but is opposed to it by its limited, indirect, and discursive character” (1961:21). And again: “The world is paradoxical by definition, which is a way of saying it is not God; every image is at the same time true and false, and it is enough if the different relationships are distinguished. Christ is ‘true God and true man,’ which is the very formula of the antinomy and parallelism governing the cosmos: antinomy because the creature is not the Creator, and parallelism because nothing can be ‘outside God,’ Reality being one” (1961:23).

To understand what Substance is and what the relationship is between Substance and accident, and to grasp at the same time that every single thing participates in both while being always an accident in relation to the ultimate Substance, is in principle to understand the meaning of all religion and all metaphysics. (1975:76)

When one proceeds from the covers to open his books, one quickly finds that Schuon has designed his prose, too, that it might mirror these essential principles. His words in many cases work against the grain of the discursive reason so as to produce the intellectual equivalent of symbolic perception, that is, a direct apprehension of Self, not in but through the language, and because of its deliquescence. It is difficult to provide an example of this quality. To single out some particular phrase or striking analogy would be to remove precisely the context that serves by contrast to illumine and deepen the passage in question; it is in large part the effort of movement through the forest that makes the clearing and the brightness of sunlight so welcome. This experience is well known to Schuon's readers.

But there is much more to the picture. The reader must also recognize the important role of timing and balance. According to Schuon, "Truth must be enunciated, not only with a sense of proportion, but also according to a certain rhythm. One cannot speak of sacred things 'just anyhow,' nor can one speak of them without limitations" (1987:141). This last phrase is crucial. To speak of the Truth without limitations, that is, without the protection of certain qualifications, warnings, and safeguards, is to speak of a truth *with* limitations, as if the true could be captured in words — hence not of the Truth at all. "We are faced in reality, on the one hand," says Schuon, "with what is determined in advance — starting from principles — and on the other hand with what is incalculable and in some way unforeseeable, which we have to obtain knowledge of by concrete 'assimilation' and not by abstract 'discernment'" (1987:140). Nor, he insists, could things be otherwise, for the world is at once both real and not real, because both within and without its Source — an illusory veil that communicates the Truth only by unravelling itself, in keeping with the "dimensions" of God.

Assimilation alone can make sense of this paradox, and it is this — the ontological adequation of the knower and known — that Schuon has always in view, and not simply certain speculative indications. Furthermore, it is because of this view and for the sake of this final purpose that his

prose allows for certain “imponderables,” which are the prolongations of the Infinite and All-possible. An author can permit the passage of these “rays” through his work only by “music” and the insertions of silence, and not by “geometry” alone.² For we are told that “the cosmic play of possibilities, which are innumerable, tends toward the exception that proves the rule” (1961:114). Hence the value of a style like Schuon’s, which is deliberately designed to admit exceptions, to sustain and promote that “interplay of compensations and surprises” (1987:167) which is the cosmos, and which is always returning to the implicit coda: “But God is more wise.”

Perhaps, in this light, we can understand better this author’s insistence that “pure metaphysics is essentially symbolist and descriptive, not literal and conjectural” (1961:152-53n), and that “a valid doctrine is a ‘description’ which is based on direct, supramental knowledge,” quite unlike “a philosophy which claims to be a research” (1975:202n). As a metaphysician and dogmatist both, Schuon is not out to argue, let alone to persuade — not, that is, in the usual sense or as an end in itself. No doubt the horizontal deduction of conclusion from premise can be a means of provoking a vertical insight, and he certainly on occasion does use words this way. The point of his “reasonings,” however, is to lead not to new truths or novel conclusions, not to some data before quite unknown, but to a remembrance or recollection of God. To read him otherwise is to misconstrue virtually every sentence and to misplace or misappropriate the rigor and authority with which he speaks as if they were tied to some particular linguistic construction or dogmatic interpretation, whose incompleteness or fragility one had finally exposed. “Every doctrine,” he says — including his own — “is only error when confronted with the Divine Reality in Itself” (1987:169). Thus “the quite ‘indicatory’ and ‘provisional’ role of ‘thinking’ in metaphysics” (1961:43n):

One can spend a whole lifetime speculating on the supra-sensorial and the transcendent, but all that matters is ... the “leap into the void” which is the fixation of spirit and soul in an unthinkable dimension of the Real; this leap, which cuts short and completes in itself the endless chain of formulations, depends on a direct understanding and on a grace, not on having reached a certain phase in the

² Schuon employs this distinction, of geometry or mathematics from music, in various ways, but especially in view of the differences between the masculine and feminine as expressions of the absoluteness and infinity of God. See, for example, Schuon 1982:100, and Cutsinger.

unfolding of the doctrine, for this unfolding, we repeat, has logically no end.
(1975:202)³

Other interpreters have noted before how absurd it would be to treat Schuon's work as if it were a scheme for the interpretation of religious phenomena, as if he were developing and defending a theory, or as if his vocabulary and categories might be borrowed by persons searching for a fresh hermeneutical paradigm. Whether he is "right" or not — whatever that would mean in this context — Schuon's message completely resists any and all forms of *Religionsgeschichte*. He is not "doing" history. But neither is he "doing" theology or philosophy, and this has been less readily seen, even by those with an interest in perennialism and esotericism. Schuon neither exposit doctrine as accepted on faith nor formulates a system as devised by reason. As a consequence, his defense of religious dogmas and his examination of philosophical theories are always as means to an end, that the first be transcended and the second exploded. True ideas he envisions always as "intellectual keys":

This is something that metaphysical thought alone is capable of grasping. So far as philosophical or ordinary theological thought is concerned, there is, on the contrary, an ignorance affecting not only the nature of the ideas that are believed to be completely understood, but also and above all the scope of theory as such; theoretical understanding is in fact transitory and limited by definition. (1984b:2)

And yet in spite of this fact, and despite a message expressly designed to abrogate the importance of schools and worldviews, and to project the mind into the "void," Schuon continues to be suspected in many quarters of a kind of perennialist fundamentalism or traditionalist sectarianism. It is in part for this reason that we should examine not only the essential content, but the characteristic form of his teaching — a form which belies the suggestion that Schuon is interested in converting us to "his" view, or to any view as an end in itself. Theories are transitory.

³ "We are here at the limit of the expressible; it is no one's fault if within every enunciation of this kind there remain unanswerable questions ... for the science of the heart requires no discussion. In any case, it is all too evident that wisdom cannot start from the intention of expressing the ineffable; rather it intends to furnish points of reference which permit us to open ourselves to the ineffable to the extent possible, and according to what is foreseen by the Will of God" (1982:42).

This is not to suppose that all theories are equally good but to affirm what their goodness consists in. Whatever its symbols or language, the purpose of a view of the world is to make the cosmic into a support for our awareness of the metacosmic, whence the world proceeds and upon which it is permanently and perpetually dependent. A vision that is not conducive to this intellection is, for that reason, invalid. The point of having a spiritual teaching is not that it might correspond in some more or less mathematical way to the world as it is in itself, which is in any case as far beyond perfect comprehension as it is below perfect being. The point is to provide various “landmarks” and “keys”⁴ for the sake of intellection, that uncreated power of knowing what is and being what knows which alone can enable us to transcend the world altogether — though only by seeing that this very same world, when rightly perceived, is already the manifestation of God:

Intellectual dialectic, like a sensible symbol, is a transparent veil which, on contact with the miracle of remembrance, is torn asunder and uncovers a truth which, being universal, springs forth from our own being, which would not be so were it not That which is. (1981:11)

II

These last words themselves should be enough to point us toward a correct interpretation of his “universalism,” “dogmatism,” and “traditionalism.” We shall find it necessary to return to this critical matter of intellection. To add some precision to the preceding remarks, it will be useful first, however, to be more specific as to who it is exactly that Schuon seems most to “offend,” to return to the issue with which I began. How are we to account for Schuon’s unbending, implacable rigor and for the extremely hard, even caustic, denunciations and rejections that sometimes fill his pages? Why the seeming arrogance? What is so wrong with the views he opposes, and why should he oppose them anyway — he whose aim is to transcend all such views, and all views as such?

⁴ Schuon writes, “Sufficiently adequate thought, however tentative, can actualize a sudden awareness pertaining to a completely different dimension from the chain of mental operations, for when associated with Intellection, it provides a symbolism and a landmark” (1981:10-11). And elsewhere: “Dogmatist thought is so to speak static and exclusive.... it is unaware of the play of *Māyā*; in other words, it admits of no movement, no diversity of points of view and aspects, no degrees of Reality. It offers keys, but also veils; appeasing and protective veils assuredly, but veils which it itself will not lift” (1982:40–41).

The answer I believe is quite simple. Any careful study of the positions and ideas that Schuon rejects will show them to be, one and all, either contrary to or contradictory of our detachment from ourselves — either indifferent or obstructive to a person’s “fixation” in God as “a star immortalized in the halo of Divinity” (1984a:113). To offend those who subscribe to such theories is not authoritarianism; it is not presumption; it is not even nostalgia for a past when such beliefs were unknown, or at least less obtrusive.⁵ It is simply proof, Schuon would say, that “charity or ‘compassion’ is not flabbiness” (1986:205).

There are three positions in particular that Schuon cannot but offend. Two of them are philosophical, and the third I shall simply refer to as “spiritual.” By describing these viewpoints, we may gain by contrast a clearer understanding of Schuon’s perennial message, which is intended in part to challenge the adequacy, the intelligence, and the safety of them all. Our greatest attention will be devoted to the third, for it is there, on the spiritual plane, where he confronts and rejects the teachings of other, more “modern” esoteric and metaphysical schools, that he has seemed the most puzzling and unacceptable to otherwise interested readers. By examining first Schuon’s response to the philosophical positions, we should be better prepared to comprehend his reasons for denouncing these spiritual “competitors.”

The first of the philosophical theories is empiricism — though it might with equal justice be called rationalism, materialism, or scientism; Schuon uses all of these terms more or less interchangeably. Here are to be found the familiar claims that matter is all that exists, or matter-energy if a greater subtlety is required; that what one can know is strictly confined to the data mediated to consciousness by the senses; and that it is irrational or meaningless even to consider the possibility of domains of reality transcending the physical world. *De non apparentibus et non existentibus eadem est ratio*. It is important to emphasize that Schuon has no quarrel with the legitimacy or adequacy of the scientific method when operating on its own level and in full awareness of its own limits and flaws, though he is quick to point out certain dangers attending the accumulation of such knowledge for its own sake and apart from the protection of a traditional

⁵ “To confine oneself to admiring the traditional worlds is still to stop short at a fragmentary point of view, for every civilization is a two-edged sword.’ . . . in certain respects, every human society is bad” (1984a:42-43). “A civilization is a world, i.e. a totality made up of compensations. No complex organism is without certain evils; nature is there to prove it” (1987:21).

framework.⁶ His criticism is of that ubiquitous scientific mentality that supposes itself able to account for everything in strictly mathematical or quantitative terms. “If it is childish to believe, because one sees it that way, that the earth is flat and that the sky and the stars revolve around it, it is no less childish to take the world of the senses to be the only world or the whole world... Errors of that kind,” says Schuon, “are indeed incomparably greater than that of the geocentric system” (1984a:106). They are greater because they neglect to remember that what can be seen is not only much less than the whole, but less real than the “parts” of the whole that it is not, even as the images of a dream are less real than the objects of waking perception:

In vain does modern science explore the infinitely distant and the infinitely small; it can reach in its own way the world of the galaxies and that of molecules, but it is unaware ... of all the immaterial and supra-sensorial worlds that as it were envelop our sensorial dimensions, and in relation to which these dimensions are no more than a sort of fragile coagulation, destined to disappear when its time comes before the blinding power of the Divine Reality. (1984a:130-31)

To suppose otherwise, to act as if the sensible universe were all that exists, is “incomparably” more dangerous than the “naivety” of geocentrism because it cuts a person off from the Source and obstructs our recollection in God. But apart from its danger — and apart from whether or not a given empiricist would accept Schuon’s theological language — the position, says Schuon, is simply stupid, euphemisms aside, and this an empiricist should be able to discern. For it is absurd to contend that “all that one can know is empirical” since that proposition itself is non-empirical, that is, not a claim subject to sensible corroboration. And so Schuon can write, with undeniable justice, that “the rationalism of a frog living at the bottom of a well is to deny the existence of mountains: this is logic of a kind, perhaps, but it has nothing to do with reality” (1975:42). Perhaps one would still like to ask, however, why this author has to be so sarcastic and mocking. Might it not be to wake the mind up that has gone to sleep, to brighten like lightning the darkness of its

⁶ “A meaningless knowledge, a knowledge to which we have no right either by virtue of its nature, or of our capacities, and therefore by virtue of our vocation, is not a knowledge that enriches, but one that impoverishes... We must distrust the fascination which an abyss can exert over us... The current of forms does not want us to escape from its hold. Forms can be snares just as they can be symbols and keys” (1984a:44). Hence, “a science of the finite has need of a wisdom which goes beyond it and controls it, just as the body needs a soul to animate it, and the reason an Intellect to illumine it” (1961:37).

own contradictions?

The second of the philosophical theories I shall refer to as relativism, though here as well a number of other terms could be used: historicism, nihilism, and perhaps deconstructionism; the existentialist position is to be included here, too. Whether one looks to a Darwin or Marx, to a Nietzsche or Freud, or to a Wittgenstein or Heidegger, the essential point of this philosophical perspective is that thinking is a product of non-rational and irrational factors — biological, economic, emotional, linguistic, and other unconscious forces — to which the mind is related as an effect to a cause, and by which all ideas and systems are, if not determined, then irrevocably conditioned. As Schuon sees it, this philosophy, in which “everything is conceived through the haze of ... contingencies, relationships, prejudices” (1984a:41), is the inevitable result and successor of the rationalism and scientism already discussed:

The very precision of modern science ... has become seriously threatened, and from a wholly unforeseen direction, by the intrusion of psychoanalysis, not to mention that of “surrealism” and other such systematizations of the irrational.... A rationality that claims self-sufficiency cannot fail to provoke such interferences. (1984a:36)

Schuon can be especially biting when he speaks of the existentialist version of this general viewpoint: “The existentialists are human as it were by chance,” he says. “What distinguishes them from animals is not human intelligence but the human style of an infra-human intelligence” (1961:35). Or again:

Existentialism has achieved the *tour de force* or the monstrous contortion of representing the commonest stupidity as intelligence and disguising it as philosophy, and of holding intelligence up to ridicule, that of all intelligent men of all times. (1975:26)

Now to put the matter in this fashion is not, admittedly, a good way to make friends or to placate one's opponents. Undoubtedly it is such passages as these that the critics think of first when they fault this author for his “style.” What it appears they too often forget, however, is the argument, the dialectic, that leads up to such denunciations. They fail to see the ineluctable logic of his

observation that “if our intelligence is by definition ineffectual, if we are irresponsible beings or lumps of earth, there is no sense in philosophizing” (1984a:131); they ignore, in other words, the unassailable fact that “the idea of the absurdity both of the world and of man, supposing this to be true, would remain inaccessible to us” (1975:66). For truly to remark the absurd is to prove oneself rational — and whence, then, one’s reason?

In our days there is no fear of the contradiction inherent in questioning the subject, the knower, in its intrinsic and irreplaceable aspect; intelligence as such is called in question, it is even “examined,” without wondering “who” examines it ... and without seeing that philosophic doubt is itself included in that same devaluation, that it falls if intelligence falls, and that at the same stroke all science and all philosophy collapse. (1984a:131)⁷

“There is,” says Schuon, “no fear of contradiction.” It is this fact more than anything else that should serve to justify the absence of diplomacy in Schuon’s work — his efforts to stab and to “wound,” to bring into movement, if simply from anger, a mind that is indifferent to everything that might make it a mind. Let us be clear about his argument. If certain “thinkers” of our day are correct to claim that all of our thoughts are the result of the operation of subordinate forces, then precisely *because* of their claim they are *not* correct, nor could they be “correct” whatever they said. For from this point of view, no idea, including such conjectures as evolution or the collective unconscious, is true, that is, conformed or adequate to the actual nature of things in a way that its competitors are not. If the relativist is right, all ideas, including his own, and thus all possible theories, are already equally conformed to the real, because equally formed and determined to be what they are by their respective biochemical or cultural histories. Truth, like the mind that thinks it, requires a freedom from all conditioning, hence a freedom from all “horizontality,” all physical and historical process, and thus from the whole of nature, which is by definition a concatenation of effected causes and caused effects. Nothing is true — including the statement that “nothing is true” — unless the power of knowing within us “came down from Heaven,” having proceeded

⁷ “All relativism applied to the intelligence as such — or to the truth — is radically false, and this falsity is in fact the result of the inner contradiction which all ‘intellectual’ relativism implies; for on what grounds is it possible to base judgement, when one denies, implicitly or explicitly, the possibility of objective judgement, in short of judgement as such?” (1961:27).

from a completely unconditioned Source. In short, “real knowledge has no history” (1987:16). This point is absolutely essential to any comprehension of Schuon’s message. And yet it is a point that the “historical” mentality of our time, to say nothing of our scholarship, seems intent upon blithely ignoring. What *does* one do with those who have no fear of contradiction? Perhaps one can only mock them: “All down the ages to philosophize was to think; it has been reserved to the twentieth century not to think and to make a philosophy of it” (1975:26).⁸

Yet a third point of view that Schuon rejects is one I call the spiritual, though it would perhaps be better to call it the “psychical.” In turning to this particular theory or collection of theories, we are in effect turning from what René Guénon called the “anti-tradition” to the “counter-tradition” (1953) — that is, from a simple rejection or denial of metaphysical principles (whether the denial be of the empiricist or historicist kind) to their caricature, counterfeit, and parody. We are turning as well to a kind of esotericism or spirituality that was much discussed for several years in an American Academy of Religion Group on Esotericism and Perennialism, and hence to those issues and arguments where Schuon is often “offensive” even to those with an interest in challenging the philosophical positions that have just been described. For as many of these scholars know very well, Schuon’s “devolutionary” orientation is nothing if not completely at odds with any and all forms of “evolutionary” esotericism or so-called new age spirituality.⁹ He utterly rejects the notion that persons in search of a spiritual method can no longer depend on the teachings of the traditional orthodoxies, which — some have said — were intended for minds of a pre-scientific and less self-conscious kind, and which therefore must be either supplemented or supplanted by new insights especially adapted to the needs and capacities of modern men and women.

It has been claimed that it is up to religion to prove itself in the face of the utmost ill-will, that “religion is made for man,” that it must therefore adapt itself to his needs, and that through its failure to do so it has become bankrupt. One might as well say that the alphabet has become bankrupt in a class where the pupils are

⁸ Or again: “Thought in its most specifically modern form destroys intelligence itself” (1961:39). There are, of course, certain “soft” or “qualified” kinds of relativism, which may escape this general censure. It is to be noted, however, that they are inevitably qualified in favor of their proponents, who would otherwise be guilty of the same contradiction. Whether exempting oneself or one’s party from a relativism to which others are allegedly subject is any less “presumptuous” than Schuon’s absolutism is surely doubtful.

⁹ This distinction was proposed at a 1984 American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting session on “Esoteric Anthropology” by Sheldon R. Isenberg and Gene R. Thursby; see Isenberg and Thursby.

determined not to learn it; with this kind of “infralagic” one might declare that the law is made for honest people who are pleased to conform to it and that a new law is required for the others, a law “adapted” to the needs of their maliciousness and “rejuvenated” in conformity with their propensity for crime. (1975:58-59)

What Schuon calls for instead is a return to tradition, by which is meant the continuing echo or reverberation of our original state, in union with God, as transmitted by the major religions, whose symbols and forms are alone adequate to the soul’s perennial needs, and which alone can re-awaken one’s inward awareness of Self. “No spirituality is possible without the implacable and immutable bulwark of a Divine expression of saving Truth” (1975:204). To find such an expression, one is obliged to turn to one of the “great” religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity, or Islam; for “one does not enter the presence of a king by the back door” (1975:206n), and “an apprehension of the truth is possible only on the foundations, and within the framework, willed by God” (1961:45).

III

It is very important that we be as clear as possible as to what Schuon does *not* mean to suggest by his defense of tradition. First, he is not implying that the religions are exempt from corruption. Like all things in time and thus subject to change, their structures and forms cannot help but decay. “In every religious cycle there are four periods to be distinguished: the ‘apostolic’ period, then the period of full development, after which comes the period of decadence, and lastly the final period of corruption” (1985:12). It is therefore inevitable that the religions should become less and less adequate vehicles of their celestial content, which nonetheless remains accessible, in spite of decay, “even unto the end of the world,” for God never gives less than promised. Nor in the second place does Schuon intend to suggest that the religions *qua* forms, that is, in their strictly exoteric aspects, can answer all questions or fulfill on their “surface” the aspirations of everyone without exception. He admits the presence of “deficiencies” in the traditional worlds and of “pitfalls in the language of faith” (1986:123, 173). These result from the fact that the religions are intended to meet the exigencies of human collectivities and therefore of the more or less average human being, whose basically “passional” nature demands a certain “anthropomorphic” simplicity if their

message is to be heard. “Religion,” says Schuon, “the goal of which is to save the largest possible number of souls and not to satisfy the need for causal explanations of an intellectual elite, has no reason for directly addressing the intelligence as such” (1986:123). Though they are not by their nature explicit, Schuon insists that the traditions contain implicitly all the essential keys and supports for the spiritual life, and that they are for that reason far more than sufficient for even the greatest of sages.

Thus the importance of Schuon’s “esoteric ecumenism” (see 1985). This phrase is meant to distinguish his message from two alternative formulations: *exoteric* ecumenism and *exoteric exclusivism*. The former is defined by the notion that dogmas are at best human constructions and that they can therefore be refashioned, synthesized, or simply jettisoned as the case may be — all with a view to their ultimate equation and sublimation. According to Schuon, however, such an approach ignores the fact that the traditional forms are a matter of divine appointment, and that they are meant to speak to the differing demands of the various spiritual, racial, and ethnic human types. To neglect or dismantle doctrines is “to confuse inspiration with invention, the sacred with the profane, saintly souls with bureaus and committees” (1985:6). Schuon finds this kind of “blind and dissolvent ecumenism” (1975:5)¹⁰ to be nothing more than an attempt to avoid the necessary rigor of religious authority by the “downward” path:

When a man seeks to escape from “dogmatic narrowness” it is essential that it should be “upwards” and not “downwards”: dogmatic form is transcended by fathoming its depths and contemplating its universal content, and not by denying it in the name of a pretentious and iconoclastic “ideal” of “pure truth.” (1961:16)

— or worse, in the name of a tolerance whose chief objective is of a strictly social or political sort. There is after all a “false ecumenism, as sentimental and vague as you please, which to all intents and purposes abolishes doctrine; to reconcile two adversaries, one strangles them both, which is certainly the best way to make peace” (1975:182).¹¹

¹⁰ “We are as far as can be from approving a gratuitous and sentimentalist ‘ecumenism,’ which does not distinguish between truth and error and which results in religious indifference and the cult of man” (1982:137).

¹¹ Schuon comments further on this false ecumenism: “Objectivity with regard to the perspectives and spiritual ways of other peoples is only too often the result of philosophic indifferentism or sentimental universalism and in such a case there is no reason to pay it homage; indeed one may well ask whether objectivity, in the full sense of the word,

Schuon is not about to abolish doctrine. He is the first to insist that the simple piety of those who accept their religions on faith alone is completely sufficient for salvation. One need not be a metaphysician to enter Heaven. But he also believes that the simplicity of this saving faith cannot be protected simply by the repetition of doctrine, and that the “narrowly literal belief” of the western religions in particular has become intellectually “untenable and dangerous” in our time (1975:4). For “only esoteric theses can satisfy the imperious logical needs created by the philosophic and scientific positions of the modern world” (1981:7). Only metaphysical insight, which is able to read each of the traditional worlds in the light of the principles that they are meant to express, can guard these worlds against the denials, falsifications, and compromises provoked by empiricism, relativism, and other such typically modern errors. Thus Schuon’s additional criticism of exoteric exclusivism and of those who would claim that their religion only is true. In earlier times, this exclusivist claim, though no less mistaken than now — and no less absurd than the assumption that one’s own ego is the only legitimate “I” — was comparatively harmless and not likely to be contradicted. But now

The situation of the world is such that exclusive dogmatism (though not dogmatism in itself, since dogmas are necessary as immutable foundations and have inward and inclusive dimensions) is hard put to hold its own, and whether it likes it or not, has need of certain esoteric elements without which it runs the risk of exposing itself to errors of a much more questionable kind than gnosis. (1975:4)

Here then, to repeat, is the role envisioned for an authentic, “ecumenical” esotericism: to “explain the particular ‘cut’ or adaptation [of a given religion or a specific dogma] and restore the lost truth by referring to the total truth; this alone,” Schuon adds, “can provide answers that are neither fragmentary nor compromised in advance by a denominational bias” (1981:8); and this alone can show that “scientific discoveries prove nothing to contradict the traditional positions of religion” (1984a:37-38). “Just as rationalism can remove faith, so esoterism can restore it” (1981:8).

Modern men and women have allowed themselves to be “hypnotized” by the “inevitable defects” of anthropomorphic symbolism (1961:9), the symbolism so often traduced by those who

is in question here; the Christian saint who fights the Moslems is closer to Islamic sanctity than the philosopher who accepts everything and practices nothing” (1975:182n).

are embarrassed at the childishness of their ancestors, and who wish instead for a spirituality “of their own.” Their intelligence confined to the surface, they can no longer penetrate through such symbols into their inward meaning; they fail to see the importance of worship, obedience, and effacement, and do not understand that

[i]t is useless to seek to realize that “I am *Brahma*” before understanding that “I am not *Brahma*”; it is useless to seek to realize that “*Brahma* is my true Self” before understanding that “*Brahma*” is outside me; it is useless to seek to realize that “*Brahma* is pure consciousness” before understanding that “*Brahma* is the Almighty Creator.” (1987:115-16)¹²

Nor have these modern and “autonomous” people the faith and piety of earlier ages, which might have compensated for their lack of intellectual discernment. Here precisely is the irony of the complaint that Schuon is too authoritarian. For though chiding them sharply and offending them deeply, it is just for the sake of his “enlightened” contemporaries, were they only to listen, that Schuon brings his message. It is for precisely such people, if it be their vocation, that esoteric ecumenism is propounded, and not for their more “naive” ancestors:¹³

One must give modern man certain additional explanations, since new errors — and new experiences — require new arguments, but to explain religion is one thing, and to dismantle religion under the pretext of explaining it, is another. Here is where essential esoterism could and should intervene.

Here, certainly, is where Schuon does intervene, but often to no avail. For

in accordance with the law of gravitation and the line of least resistance what are preferred are new solutions that lead downwards; to crown it all, what is adopted are certain more or less extrinsic esoteric positions, plainly rendered inoperative in the absence of their fundamental context. (1986:130-31)

¹² Schuon notes: “‘No man cometh unto the Father but by me.’ The following *hadīth* bears the same meaning: ‘He who desires to meet Allah must first meet His Prophet’” (1987:116n).

¹³ Schuon observes of “modern languages” that they “are overgiven to dotting the *i*’s, as the present author also is compelled to do — but then he is not writing for medieval readers” (Needleman:347n).

Schuon calls out, but his voice is not heeded. He is read, to be sure — certainly much more now than ever before. But he is read too often with a view toward adaptation, inclusion, and adjustment, and in such contexts as AAR meetings where “his” views can be compared with those he opposes, perhaps in the hopes of a *rapprochement*. If only he were not so acerbic, the task of syncretism would be so much easier! Perhaps this is no accident. Perhaps, in other words, we are seeing again that offense may be serving his purpose: to prevent, in this case, the synthesis that might otherwise be so attractive — to insure a fundamental disjunction between a truly perennial philosophy, on the one hand, and “certain more or less extrinsic esoteric positions,” on the other. Of course, the question remains: Why the disjunction at all? What exactly is so mistaken, so anomalous, and so dangerous, in Schuon’s eyes, about a modern or contemporary spirituality? Why is this teacher so adamant and so severe on just that point which might otherwise have gained him allies?

Whatever answer one gives to these questions, it is obviously impossible in a context like this even to begin describing Schuon’s assessments and interpretations of the various traditional worlds, let alone to defend his particular judgments — even supposing I were able to do so. In the final analysis, however, it is only in view of his full exposition of tradition that one begins to discern the depths of the difference at issue. Nor by contrast can one hope to consider in any detail the distinguishing features of specific types of “evolutionary” esotericism, “contemporary” spirituality, or other such “extrinsic” points of view. This is not really a failing, of course, and need not be a cause for concern. For however much we might prefer to have the supplementary data provided by concrete cases or to inspect certain “fruits” by which we might judge the adequacy of particular systems, principles are the only essentials. For if a position is *de jure* absurd, its status *de facto* is quite irrelevant — a matter of curiosity, perhaps, but not of fundamental importance. If one knows — as one must — “without having to pass through psychology or biology, or so-called sociology” (1986:2), that two and two make four, then there is no need to bother with the differences between those who might say they make five and those who would argue for six, nor is it of any essential significance that five is “more nearly” correct. Both are wrong *a priori*, and that is the only thing worth knowing. The crux of the matter is simply this: What are the principles of the spiritual life, and what does it mean to ignore them?

The answer in one sense is easy. According to Schuon, the essential principles are those of

metaphysics or “esoterism as such” (1986:115), as conveyed by the perspectives of transcendence and immanence — on the one hand, by both symbols and rhythms, which we discussed at the outset of this article; and on the other, by the twin formulations that God alone is, and that what is, is God. This, I have said, is the sum and substance of Schuon’s message, that we might know That which is and be That which knows. And this is precisely, he says, what affords the indispensable basis for the evaluation of all authentic spirituality:

The two-fold definition of the *religio perennis*, discernment between the Real and the illusory, and a unifying and permanent concentration on the Real — implies ... the criteria of intrinsic orthodoxy for every religion and all spirituality.... A religion is orthodox on condition that it offers a sufficient, if not always exhaustive, idea of the absolute and the relative ... and also a spiritual activity that is contemplative in its nature and effectual as concerns our ultimate destiny. (1984a:137-38)

Or again: “For a religion to be considered as intrinsically orthodox it must be founded upon a fully adequate doctrine of the Absolute ... it must also advocate and realize a spirituality that is adequate to this doctrine” (1985:87).¹⁴ As for ignoring these principal truths and their corresponding criteria, one can imagine no clearer examples of metaphysical negligence — speaking, I repeat, *a priori* — than empiricism and relativism, or rationalism and historicism: the first in its nescience of That which is Real, and in its preference for illusion; the second in its denial of our power to know it, and in its embrace of contradiction. Hence the fundamental importance of Schuon’s rejection of these positions. Nor is it possible to imagine any more disastrous or more dangerous error than the one which results from the conflation of these philosophical theories in a supposedly “spiritual” vision. And yet — here is the key to all his evaluations in this domain — it is just this combination that one repeatedly finds, and cannot fail to find, in an esotericism that purports to be evolutionary, scientific, or simply “modern.” Thus Schuon’s severity toward all “non-traditional” spiritualities, which in the name of the “spirit” or even of “God,” result in the subversion of Truth.

¹⁴ “The religion must therefore be of Divine, and not philosophical, origin,” Schuon continues, “and in virtue of this origin, it must be the vehicle of a sacramental or theurgic presence which manifests itself especially in miracles and also ... in sacred art” (1985:87).

IV

In order to understand these criticisms, to say nothing of the harsh words that convey them, one must understand above all the nature of intellection, which exists — we have said — when what really is so becomes aware of itself. This is for Schuon the indispensable key to true esotericism and thus to any legitimate evaluation of orthodoxy and spirituality. I had said that we would return to this critical matter, and the time to do so is now.

What must be understood is the nature of the Platonic *noēsis*, as distinct from *dianoia*; of *intellectus* — *incretus et increabilis*, in the teaching of Eckhart — as distinct from *ratio*: that is, a power of both knowing and being that is not so much a faculty of the individual soul as the soul is an aspect or a dimension of it. This is the power, as was observed earlier, through which one grasps the Self, not as the result of conceptual analysis or discursive argumentation (or not at least directly so), but with the immediacy of perception — or combustion, perhaps, to recall Plato’s “leaping spark.” It is a direct apprehension of being as object by virtue of being as subject — an apprehension that “comes into being” when the soul is enabled to attend to itself and to what makes it attend: when it enters by introsusception into an other that is essentially inward, there to know God. But not just any God, or God in any mode. Truly to see God is to see that there is in God something “else” that “is” God nonetheless, which is one’s seeing. This is intellection, and this the reason for Schuon’s stress on the “assimilation” of being in metaphysical knowledge, and not its mere inspection.

This, too, is the justification for his teaching that “human intelligence coincides in its essence with certainty of the Absolute” (1975:57), and that “in principle the Intellect knows everything, because all possible knowledge is inscribed in its very substance” (1975:71). This doctrine would clearly be false if knowledge were of a composite, cumulative, or synthetic sort — the cybernetic ingestion of empirical facts, or the storage and retrieval of information. But such is not the gnosis in question:

Knowledge, as St. Augustine maintained, with Plato and many others, is not something that is added from outside; teaching is only the occasional cause of a grasping of a truth already latent within us. Teaching is a recalling, understanding

a recollection. In the intellect, the subject is the object, “being,” and the object is the subject, “knowing,” whence comes absolute certitude. (1961:26)

This is not to suppose, of course, that all human beings have “equal access” to intellectual adequation — and certainly not on their own or by means of individual initiatives. Quite the contrary, most do not. Or better, virtually none do. Thus the sufficient reason for symbols and ideas that might restore their “memory” and assist in their grasp of Self. And thus, too, the necessity of the traditional orthodoxies, as divinely revealed, which alone can make explicit the discernment and union, the transcendence and immanence, by virtue of which a soul might then see for itself in its Self as the Knower. “It is Revelation that confers spiritual knowledge at its different levels, transmitting to men truths of which they were unaware and awakening in some an Intellection that had hitherto remained latent” (1975:71-72). To grasp Schuon’s message is, in short, to know what it means to be a knower; it is to see in one glance that if one knows That which is, one must be That which knows. But this is not all. To grasp the message is to appreciate his insistence that an adequate spiritual teaching must be provided by Heaven, and that it must be orthodox, in accordance with the criteria already adduced. For only the Real can know Itself, and so only it can know “how,” if such an expression be permitted. Moreover, only the knowledge that the Real is the Knower is evidently sufficient to the intellection in question — thus only a teaching that is “about” what it “is,” and which is its own “Subject”: all this in strict accordance with the metaphysics of absoluteness and infinitude. Schuon can therefore say that

The essence of every orthodoxy is the truth, and not mere fidelity to a system that eventually turns out to be false. To be orthodox means to participate ... in the immutability of the principles which govern the Universe and fashion our intelligence. (1961:13)

The implication is that by living the life and understanding the doctrine of any one of the major traditions, we are enabled — if God should so will — to know *a priori* the essence of all orthodoxies, because of orthodoxy as such. We are then in a position to engage in “esoteric ecumenism.” For in knowing oneself as the Knower, one knows in advance and by that very fact the difference between truth and error, orthodoxy and heresy. “If we can grasp the transcendent nature ... of the human being, we thereby grasp the nature of revelation, of religion, of tradition;

we understand their possibility, their necessity, their truth” (1984a:142). There is one might say a “two-way street” here, and a distinction between a *ratio essendi* and a *ratio cognoscendi*. On the one hand, only an orthodox religion can provide both the teaching and the constellation of symbols and sacramental supports that are necessary for intellection:

Total truth is inscribed, in an immortal script, in the very substance of our spirit; what the different Revelations do is to “crystallize” and “actualize” ... a nucleus of certitudes which not only abides forever in the divine Omniscience, but also sleeps by refraction in the “naturally supernatural” kernel of the individual. (1984a:136)

That kernel, of course, is the Intellect. But on the other hand, only intellection can distinguish what is orthodox from what is not; only it can discern between the sacred and the profane, the beautiful and the ugly, the genuine and the spurious. Therefore, only the one in whom intellection is fully operative can speak with final authority on the question of orthodoxy. Though the reader looks in vain in Schuon’s work for any personal claims as to his own “attainments,” it is undeniable that his message presupposes precisely this authority — whether one is willing to accept it or not.

It is, however, essential that we be exceedingly cautious at precisely this juncture. For acceptance is hardly the issue. Though he would certainly have us put our faith in God and in divine revelation, Schuon is most definitely not in the business of soliciting our faith in himself. The fact that acceptance has seemed important to some of his readers, and that his message has sometimes been construed as if this were the crucial issue, may help us in part to account for the charge, already mentioned, that Schuon is simply another in a long list of “fundamentalists,” with his own somewhat more sophisticated set of *ipse dixits*. These readers need to look again, however, for at no point in this work is one ever invited to a *fides implicita* in the rectitude or accuracy of the author, nor is one ever presented with facts as it were for consumption. As I have indicated before several times, what one finds instead are leadings, supports, keys — a teaching maieutic in both substance and form, in which everything points toward the Intellect that the Intellect might be set into motion. Even the severities and insensitivities, in their very hardness toward the world and toward error, are intended to make us “soft” — that is to say supple and open: toward God and the Truth. Not open toward some alternative data, which Schuon would seek to export, but toward that “liquid” center within ourselves where the awareness of Substance remains “unfrozen” by our

attachment to fragments and surface. This I believe is a clue to understanding the whole of Schuon's work: to see that the strengthening of the reason against the infra-rational, against the "infralogic" of false philosophy, is but a prelude to the effacing of reason before the supra-rational, in the blaze of an intellectual vision. The mind must be made vigilant, alert, in its relation to the world lest it fail to be humble and yielding in its relation to God. There must exist first an apophatic remotion of Truth from all its pretenders before there can be a cataphatic unification with Truth in all its implications — in accordance, as always, with transcendence and immanence.¹⁵

And so it is that Schuon cannot but refute the empiricists and the relativists, who would limit the mind to what it takes in, to what is "added from outside"; and who would persuade us to "think," without fear of contradiction, that this limited mind is the product of its contents — the conditioned effect of the purely contingent. "In this state," he observes, "the soul is at the same time hard as stone and pulverised as sand, it lives in the dead rinds of things and not in the Essence which is Life and Love; it is at once both hardness and dissolution" (1961:151). But so it is, too, and for the very same reason, that Schuon cannot fail to oppose all modern, evolutionary, and scientific forms of "spirituality," for they are but a kind of "dissolutive hardness." They are, he believes, no more than confections of all that is worst in the two philosophical errors.

No doubt one needs considerably more discernment than the present writer to assess what is "right" about the traditional orthodoxies, to say precisely in what their sacredness consists. And

¹⁵ Schuon repeatedly insists that there is nothing illogical about the spiritual life. We are not to suppose that our grasp of the Truth is against the reason, only beyond its exhaustive formulation. To speak of the "effacement" of thought is therefore not to imply its denial. Just the reverse, a rigorously logical attitude toward conceptual systems and philosophical theories is the *sine qua non* for intellectual adequation. Hence the "initiatic" importance of Schuon's criticisms of false points of view: "The Divine Essence eludes logic to the extent that it is undefinable: but as we are conscious of it, seeing that we can speak of it, it constitutes a premise which allows us to draw at least indirect and extrinsic conclusions. Everything that presents itself to our mind is therefore a premise in some respect, and as soon as there is a premise, whether it be direct or indirect, precise or approximate, there is the possibility of a conclusion and so of logic. To speak of concepts which impose themselves on us while concealing themselves from our logic is a pure and simple contradiction, and in fact no doctrine has ever rejected the logical explanation of any notion.... No religion has ever imposed on the human mind, or ever could have imposed, an idea which logic was incapable of approaching in any way; religion addresses itself to man, and man is thought" (1975:91-92). Schuon admits, of course, that "there are in God aspects that are independent of all limitative logic, and it is from them that the cosmic play and the musical aspects of things arise; but there is nothing in God that opposes the principles of noncontradiction and of sufficient reason, which are rooted in the Divine Intellect" (1975:112).

no doubt one would need to be much more precise and detailed, as I admitted above, to assess what is specifically “wrong” in the case of the esoteric heresies, to indicate their peculiar misjudgments and flaws. But it requires only the simplest logic, and but a few observations, to see what is mistaken *in principle* with all non-traditional spiritualities. Consider what they say. It is said that certain teachings, and certain symbolic and liturgical forms, which were effective in the past, are now outmoded; it is said that human consciousness has been transformed over time, and that how we now know differs in structure or quality from how our ancestors knew in previous ages; and it is said that spiritual teachers can and should benefit from the insights provided by the modern sciences — be they the latest and most provocative theories of the quantum physicist or the “mappings” of consciousness supplied by a transpersonal psychology. One finds, in other words, a spirituality that is by turns “modern,” “evolutionary,” and “scientific,” and one that is guilty, therefore, of both the empiricist and historicist errors.

This is not to imply, of course, that the errors are recognized or admitted. On the contrary, those who subscribe to such a spirituality often do so in order to escape or avoid the limitations in question. “Spiritual scientists” — like the anthroposophists, for example — do not suppose themselves confined to the physical data of the strictly material world, as do their much commoner cousins, the naturalists. They readily transcend such a limited plane in their researches, endeavoring instead to record the facts and explore the geography of the super-sensible domains, the etheric and subtle worlds. Nevertheless, their approach is in essence identical to that of their earth-bound colleagues. For like them, they have confused sapiential knowledge with experience — a stranger and more compelling experience, to be sure, but an experience nonetheless: that is, an encounter *ab extra ad intra* between the knower and the known. The data received are now “internal” and invisible insofar as they are no longer directly concerned with the physical world. But they must remain even so outside the “I” itself, celestial statistics attached to its cognitive surface. Hence these esotericists’ easy alliance with certain forms of empirical psychology and their fascination with phenomena — their failure to see that phenomena are always false, because always the reflections of parts and not wholes, of aspects not substance. As Schuon observes.

There has been much speculation on the question of knowing how the sage — the “gnostic” or the *jnānī* — “sees” the world of phenomena, and occultists of all sorts have not refrained from putting forward the most fantastic theories on

“clairvoyance” and the “third eye”; but in reality the difference between ordinary vision and that enjoyed by the sage or the gnostic is quite clearly not of the sensorial order. The sage sees things in their total context, therefore in their relativity and at the same time in their metaphysical transparency; he does not see them as if they were physically diaphanous or endowed with a mystical sonority or a visible aura.... A spiritual vision of things is distinguished by a concrete perception of universal relationships and not by some special sensorial characteristic. (1984a:116)

Like all empiricists, the “scientific” esotericist appears to have forgotten that the truth of experience presupposes a standard that must by its nature elude experience, that is, a Reality that not only does not but cannot appear, and a Knower that can never be “given.” Whatever the range of our experience, and however numerous the results of our explorations, this standard cannot by these means be discovered; it cannot be the result of “research.” To understand intellection is to see why this is so. And to see why this is so is to admit the impotence of this kind of science in the spiritual life, which exists that we might know God neither in nor because of the facts, but rather “above” and “behind” them: “To see God everywhere and in everything is to see infinity in things, whereas human animality sees only their surface and their relativity” (1959:119).

Nor do modern esotericists limit their understanding of evolution to the specifically biological level, or even only to history. Unlike their Darwinist and historicist allies, the transformations that they envision reflect the operation of forces and powers exceeding the gene, the culture, or the language one speaks — to say nothing of the planet one lives on. Cosmic panoramas cannot be too large if they mean to embrace all the astrological and angelic laws, and all the higher worlds, that have fashioned the mind to be what it is, and that hold in their grasp its spiritual destiny. And yet again one finds, inevitably, at the very root of such views, exactly the same error that distinguishes all relativism, even if its reach be trans-historical. It is the absurdity of thinking that the Knower can change, that It has “come to be” able to know as It does out of a previous incapacity, and hence that Its knowledge is caught in a web of conditions. As Schuon points out, “Thinking which is harnessed to temporal contingencies ... thereby loses all its validity; for validity lies in the quality of objectivity or of absoluteness, without which thought is only a monologue or an agitation in the void” (1961:42). No matter that the contingencies are complex and subtle or that time is conceived

as vaster or deeper. Time is time, and evolution is evolution. To observe that either exists is to show oneself free from their limits, possessed of a freedom that no amount of time and no degree of evolution could possibly attain: that freedom, in fact, upon which all authentic spirituality is necessarily based. Why is it so hard to see, Schuon wonders, that the very phrase “evolution of consciousness,” so favored by so many contemporary spiritual teachers, could be intelligible only to a consciousness that does *not* evolve, and for which the phrase is therefore untrue? To see the implicit contradiction here, and to fear it, is to be open to intellection; it is to realize that knowledge is qualitative, instantaneous, and total, and not the product of progressive gropings or temporary investigations, not a goal to be reached by “a finite series of discoveries, as if it were possible to exhaust the inexhaustible” (1961:37). It is to see why “real knowledge has no history” and why gnosis cannot be a matter of facts. It is to know, in short, according to Schuon, that in the domain of the spirit “[t]here is no common measure between efforts and results” (1961:28-29), for “intelligence is prior to its objects and God prior to man” (1961:37).

V

One need not listen long in our day to hear a chorus of voices urging the adoption of more “relevant” forms of spiritual discipline, and intent upon forging a more meaningful teaching and congenial method, one that is more closely attuned to the expectations of contemporary seekers and that is sensitive to their specific problems and peculiar capacities — everything, it is felt, that the message of Schuon is not. If Schuon is correct, however, the meaning, the relevance, and the sensitivity so much in demand from the spiritual consumer have nothing whatsoever to do with what is really needed; and those systems and viewpoints, those methods and doctrines, that would attempt to fulfill certain contemporary demands cannot but be useless, if not in fact dangerous, when it comes to releasing the soul into God.

This does not mean that there is nothing for the seeker to do, that the teachings of the major traditions are simply to be accepted unthinkingly, or that method and spiritual practice cannot be effective. It does mean, however, that religion is more than *technique*. Here in one clause is perhaps the simplest of tests for a “traditional” spiritual perspective, and the most succinct of synopses for the message of Schuon. For to make a religious tradition into a “tool” is quite clearly to cut oneself

off from a Spirit that “bloweth where it listeth,” and from a God at once Absolute and Infinite, since “that is absolute which allows of no augmentation and no diminution, or of no repetition or division.... And that is infinite which is not determined by any limiting factor and therefore does not end at any boundary” (1986:15). Some have complained that Schuon is too restrictive, that he would limit God’s grace by confining it to the ancient traditions. Schuon asks, however, what such critics intend to put in the place of tradition. If, as it seems to him, their principal wish has been to conform their ideas to the patterns set by “scientific progress” and “evolutionary thinking,” then this criticism must redound upon them. It is they who would limit God, in strict and unthinking compliance with the modern philosophical errors. For it is these above all — the twin views of empiricism and relativism — that have been at the root of so much delusion and that have deceived so many into believing that a religion is something that they might create for their use: as if to carry them elsewhere, as if to achieve something new, as if to produce an effect, as if to gain an experience — and all of this in search of a truth “up ahead” and “out there.”¹⁶

Here, we were told, is where essential esotericism can and should intervene. Here precisely is where Schuon hopes that his message will be heard — a message which would call his readers back to principles: which demands that the seeker acknowledge, on pain of contradiction, that where we must “go” is not toward the future, but into the Knower, our spiritual substance, and thus “back” into that which is “old” because prior to time itself; which provokes and “offends” us to see what our seeing and think what our thinking, even in their most skeptical forms, have involved all along, though we “knew Him not”; and which would help us to know, accordingly, that the effectiveness of a spiritual means is not with a view to an end that is not, but the result of the End being in it. Blessed is whosoever is not offended at that.

All great spiritual experiences agree in this: there is no common measure between the means put into operation and the result. “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible,” says the Gospel. In fact, what separates man from divine Reality is the slightest of barriers: God is infinitely close to man, but man is

¹⁶ According to Schuon, the proposition that “religion is made for man” is false “if one does not immediately add that man exists for religion; the falsity is in the isolation of the proposition. Religion is made for man insofar as it must be accessible to him according to the measure of his goodwill, and not regardless of it, since man is free; and man is made for religion in so far as it represents the sufficient reason for human existence” (1975:58-59n).

infinitely far from God. This barrier, for man, is a mountain; man stands in front of a mountain which he must remove with his hands. He digs away the earth, but in vain, the mountain remains; man, however, goes on digging, in the name of God. And the mountain vanishes. It was never there. (1961:157)

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