

Traditionalism



**Some selected articles and biographies about
Traditionalism School and Famous Traditionalists**

May 2006
Iran

Traditionalist School

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

The **Traditionalist School** of [philosophy](#) was founded in its current form by the French [metaphysician René Guénon](#), although its precepts are considered to be timeless and to be found in all authentic traditions. It is also known as Perennialism, the [Perennial Philosophy](#), or *Sophia Perennis*. The term *Philosophia Perennis* goes back to the Renaissance, while the Hindu expression [Sanatana Dharma](#) - Eternal Doctrine - has precisely the same signification.

The other founding figures of the Traditionalist School were the German philosopher [Frithjof Schuon](#) and the Ceylonese scholar [Ananda Coomaraswamy](#). To these were added over time such imposing figures as [Titus Burckhardt](#), [Huston Smith](#), [Martin Lings](#), [Marco Pallis](#), [Whitall N. Perry](#), [Michel Vâlsân](#), [William Stoddart](#), [Charles le Gai Eaton](#), [Tage Lindbom](#) and Professor [Seyyed Hossein Nasr](#). Other major figures of the twentieth century have been profoundly influenced by the school, including [T.S. Eliot](#), the Romanian historian of religions [Mircea Eliade](#) and the Italian esotericist and political thinker [Julius Evola](#).

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Fundamental tenets

The fundamental tenets of this school or philosophy may be stated as follows:

1. All authentic religious traditions are true, deriving from the Primordial Tradition. Guénon's work draws extensively on [Hindu](#), [Taoist](#), [Muslim](#), [Judaic](#) and [Christian](#) sources. At first, following certain Hindu schools, he rejected [Buddhism](#) as heretical, but Dr. [Coomaraswamy](#), at the instigation of Marco Pallis (a Traditionalist convert to Tibetan Buddhism) demonstrated the essential orthodoxy of Buddhism and its consistency with Vedanta. Guénon, accordingly, authorised amendments to references to Buddhism in his earlier works.
2. Contrary to the modern idea of "progress", and in accordance with all traditions, the world is in a state of intellectual and spiritual decline, inevitable from the very start of an historical cycle. We are at present in what the Classical West called the [Iron Age](#), and the Hindus [Kali Yuga](#).

In addition to this, the Western world, unlike other cultures, has lost its connection to the Primordial Tradition. This took place first in the Classical era, was rectified by

Christianity, which re-introduced a modified form of the Primordial Tradition, but the severance began again at the time of the renaissance (this is a somewhat truncated account. The reader is referred to Guénon's *Crisis of the Modern World* for a fuller one).

Values

Traditionalists accord a high value to the intellectual activities of the pre-modern world and non-Western societies and a good deal of their work lies in the sciences of [metaphysics](#) and [symbolism](#), as well as the discussion and elucidation of the various spiritual traditions. Where they venture into such realms as social criticism it is clearly from a Traditionalist perspective which turns the [Progressivist/Evolutionist](#) assumptions of [modernist](#) theorists (both "[left](#)" and "[right](#)") and of [post-modernists](#) alike on their heads.

A good exposition of the views of this movement can be found in Seyyed Hossein Nasr's *Knowledge and the Sacred* and Harry Oldmeadow's *Traditionalism*.

References

- [Seyyed Hossein Nasr](#), *Knowledge and the Sacred* (September 1, 1989) [ISBN 0791401774](#)
- [Harry Oldmeadow](#), [Kenneth Oldmeadow](#), *Traditionalism: Religion in the Light of the Perennial Philosophy* (April 1, 2000) [ISBN 9559028049](#)

Books and Resources

- [Books related to Traditionalism](#)
- [World Wisdom Books](#)
- [Fons Vitae Books](#)

A critique of Mark Sedgwick's book about this spiritual current

- [A critique of Against the Modern World by Mark Sedgwick](#)

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René Guénon

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

René Guénon (also **Sheikh 'Abd al-Wahid Yahya**, name taken upon his embracement of Islam) ([Blois](#), France [November 15, 1886](#) - [Cairo](#), Egypt [January 7, 1951](#)) was a [French](#)-born [author](#). The most appropriate label of his 'specialisation', if ever one could exist, is that of metaphysics, particularly applied to the study of Traditions. Labels such as [philosopher](#), [thinker](#) etc. were flatly disowned by Guénon himself, who humbly described himself as a mere "exposer of Traditional data". Thus the aspects of his work dealing with history of religions, social criticism, etc. should be interpreted as a by-products of the real traditional function with which he was invested: to provide the modern man with the means to understand traditional societies.

Born in [Blois](#), [France](#) into a [Catholic](#) household, Guénon excelled as a youth in [mathematics](#) and [philosophy](#). Dissatisfied with the [status quo](#) of modern society, he moved to [Paris](#) in [1907](#) and became deeply involved in a series of [underground](#) cultural movements, including [occultism](#), [Gnosticism](#), and a [Shivaite](#) branch of [Hinduism](#). At the same time, he exposed himself to [Islam](#), [Christianity](#), and [Buddhism](#). He was at this time critical of Buddhism as a "Hindu heresy", but later accepted its validity when evidence of its essential orthodoxy was presented to him by [Ananda Coomaraswamy](#) and Marco Pallis.

Guénon began writing in the [1920s](#), after [World War I](#), supposed to be the "last war". Western civilisation was overwhelmed with a sense of relief and euphoria. Guénon, seeing this as delusion, criticised the [society](#) of his day as being disorganized and reckless. "It is as if an organism with its head cut off were to go on living," he wrote in [1924](#). Guénon's main criticism of despiritualized Western culture was its self-proud lack of recognition of a greater power which maintained a higher order than that of man.

Shortly after beginning his writing career, Guénon studied [Sufism](#), a mystic branch of Islam, despite the dominant [positivism](#) ideology. Guénon believed in a universal objective spiritual truth, which could be expressed in the terms of valid religions such as Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam. Guénon also believed that if this truth was presented properly, even secular [intellectuals](#) of his day would accept it. He wrote *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines* in [1921](#) in an attempt to begin expressing this truth.

Guénon left Paris in [1930](#) and moved to [Cairo, Egypt](#), where he would remain for the rest of his life, living as a Sufi. Having offended the Paris intellectuals whom he considered his peers, especially with two books denouncing [occultism](#), he feared being attacked by his enemies through magic or spiritual energy, and lived primarily incognito.

Guénon had been a Sufi Muslim since [1912](#), when he was initiated in Paris by a wandering Swedish Sufi named [Abd al-Hadi Aqhili](#). Guénon championed the validity

of other [religions](#) as vehicles of the one same [Truth](#), though designed for the acceptance of different [cultures](#). [Hinduism](#), [Christianity](#), and [Islam](#) were among those with which he concerned himself most, in terms of rectifying their values as distortions of (but ultimately soundly based upon) the Universal Truth.

Guénon wrote a compendium of universal spiritual symbols, *Fundamental Symbols: The Universal Language of Sacred Science*, which was published in [1962](#). It attempted to illustrate common meanings and interpretations of images, concepts, and [symbolisms](#) among major religions, again tying them all back into the truth explained by Hinduism.

He had a great influence on [Julius Evola](#).

Guénon did not believe in purely personal exposition and did not write or contribute to a [biography](#).

Bibliography

Books written by René Guénon (ordered chronologically according to their first publication date):

- *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines (Introduction générale à l'étude des doctrines hindoues, [1921](#))*
- *Theosophy: History of a Pseudo-Religion (Le Théosophisme - Histoire d'une pseudo-religion, [1921](#))*
- *The Spiritist Fallacy (L'erreur spirite, [1923](#))*
- *East and West (Orient et Occident, [1924](#))*
- *Man and His Becoming according to the Vedânta (L'homme et son devenir selon le Védânta, [1925](#))*
- *The Esoterism of Dante (L'ésotérisme de Dante, [1925](#))*
- *The King of the World (Le Roi du Monde, [1927](#))*
- *The Crisis of the Modern World (La crise du monde moderne, [1927](#))*
- *Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power (Autorité Spirituelle et Pouvoir Temporel, [1929](#))*
- *St. Bernard (Saint-Bernard, [1929](#))*
- *Symbolism of the Cross (Le symbolisme de la croix, [1931](#))*
- *The Multiple States of the Being (Les états multiples de l'Être, [1932](#))*
- *Oriental Metaphysics (La métaphysique orientale, [1939](#))*
- *The Reign of Quantity & the Signs of the Times (Le règne de la quantité et les signes des temps, [1945](#))*
- *Perspectives on Initiation (Aperçus sur l'initiation, [1946](#))*
- *The Metaphysical Principles of the Infinitesimal Calculus (Les principes du calcul infinitésimal, [1946](#))*
- *The Great Triad (La Grande Triade, [1946](#))*

Posthumous collections

- *Initiation and Spiritual Realization (Initiation et réalisation spirituelle, [1952](#))*
- *Insights into Christian Esoterism (Aperçus sur l'ésotérisme chrétien, [1954](#))*
- *Symbols of Sacred Science (Symboles de la Science Sacrée, [1962](#))*

- *Studies in Freemasonry and Compagnonnage* (*Études sur la Franc-Maçonnerie et le Compagnonnage*, [1964](#))
- *Studies in Hinduism* (*Études sur l'Hindouisme*, [1966](#))
- *Traditional Forms & Cosmic Cycles* (*Formes traditionnelles et cycles cosmiques*, [1970](#))
- *Insights into Islamic Esoterism & Taoism* (*Aperçus sur l'ésotérisme islamique et le Taoïsme*, [1973](#))
- *Reviews* (*Comptes rendus*, [1973](#))
- *Miscellanea* (*Mélanges*, [1976](#))

The Collected Works of René Guénon, New English Translation,

23 Volumes (Sophia Perennis)

- East and West [paper, 2001; cloth, 2004]
- The Crisis of the Modern World [paper, 2001; cloth, 2004]
- The Esoterism of Dante [paper, 2003; cloth, 2005]
- The Great Triad [paper, 2001; cloth, 2004]
- Initiation and Spiritual Realization [paper, 2001; cloth, 2004]
- Insights into Christian Esoterism [paper, 2001; cloth, 2005]
- Insights into Islamic Esoterism and Taoism [paper, 2003; cloth, 2004]
- Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines [paper, 2001; cloth, 2004]
- The King of the World [paper, 2001; cloth, 2004]
- Man and His Becoming According to the Vedanta [paper, 2001; cloth, 2004]
- Metaphysical Principles of the Infinitesimal Calculus [paper, 2003; cloth, 2004]
- Miscellanea [paper, 2003; cloth, 2004]
- The Multiple States of the Being [paper, 2001; cloth, 2004]
- Perspectives on Initiation [paper, 2001; cloth, 2004]
- The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times [paper, 2001; cloth, 2004]
- The Spiritist Fallacy [paper, 2003; cloth, 2004]
- Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power [paper, 2001; cloth, 2004]
- Studies in Freemasonry and the Compagnonnage [paper, 2005; cloth, 2005]
- Studies in Hinduism [paper, 2001; cloth, 2004]
- The Symbolism of the Cross [paper, 2001; cloth, 2004]
- Symbols of Sacred Science [paper, 2004; cloth, 2004]
- Theosophy, the History of a Pseudo-Religion [paper, 2003; cloth, 2004]
- Traditional Forms and Cosmic Cycles [paper, 2003; cloth, 2004]

Books About René Guénon (Sophia Perennis)

- René Guénon: Some Observations, by Frithjof Schuon [paper, 2004]
- The Simple Life of René Guénon, by Paul Chacornac [paper, 2005; cloth, 2005]
- René Guénon and the Future of the West, by Robin Waterfield [paper, 2002; cloth, 2005]
- Guénonian Esoterism and Christian Mystery, by Jean Borella [cloth, 2005]

Ananda Coomaraswamy

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy ([22 August 1877 Colombo](#) - [9 September 1947 Needham, Massachusetts](#)) was the son of the famous [Sri Lankan](#) legislator and philosopher Sir Mutu Coomaraswamy and his English wife Elizabeth Beeby. He became a pioneering historian and philosopher of Indian art, and a great interpreter of Indian culture to the West. He was also a tireless campaigner for the regeneration of [Hinduism](#). In [1917](#), he became the first Keeper of Indian art in the [Museum of Fine Arts](#) in [Boston](#). He stressed the [spiritual](#) element in [Indian art](#).

Amongst his books are *The Dance of Siva* (1918), *History of Indian and Indonesian Art* (1927), and *The Transformation of Nature in Art* (1934).

Along with [René Guénon](#) and [Frithjof Schuon](#), Coomaraswamy is regarded as one of the three founders of the [Traditionalist School](#).

External links

- [A Bibliography](#)
- [Books by Ananda Coomaraswamy - Fons Vitae Series](#)
- [An essay on his philosophy of art](#)
- [The 1999 Coomaraswamy lecture by Sandrasagra](#)
- [Ananda Coomaraswamy in One Hundred Tamils of 20th Century](#)
- [Works of Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy in Hungarian](#)

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Frithjof Schuon

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Frithjof Schuon ([June 18, 1907](#) - [May 5, 1998](#)) was a [metaphysician](#), [poet](#), [painter](#) and a leading figure of [traditional metaphysics](#).

Along with [René Guénon](#) and [Ananda Coomaraswamy](#), Schuon is regarded as one of the three founders of the [Traditionalist School](#).

Frithjof Schuon is best known as the foremost spokesman of the *religio perennis* and as a [philosopher](#) in the metaphysical current of [Shankara](#) and [Plato](#). Over the past 50 years, he has written more than 20 books on metaphysical, [spiritual](#) and [ethnic](#) themes as well as having been a regular contributor to journals on [comparative religion](#) in both [Europe](#) and [America](#). Schuon's writings have been consistently featured and reviewed in a wide range of scholarly and philosophical publications around the world, respected by both scholars and spiritual authorities.

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Biography

Schuon was born in [1907](#) in [Basle, Switzerland](#), of [German](#) parents. As a youth, he went to [Paris](#), where he studied for a few years before undertaking a number of trips to [North Africa](#), the [Near East](#) and [India](#) in order to contact spiritual authorities and witness [traditional cultures](#). Following [World War II](#), he accepted an invitation to travel to the [American West](#), where he lived for several months among the [Plains Indians](#), in whom he had always had a deep interest. Having received his education in France, Schuon has written all his major works in [French](#), which began to appear in English translation in [1953](#). Of his first book, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (London, Faber & Faber) [T.S. Eliot](#) wrote: "I have met with no more impressive work in the comparative study of Oriental and Occidental religion."

God is in the center, all paths lead to Him

The traditionalist or "perennialist" perspective began to be enunciated in the 1920s by the French philosopher [Rene Guenon](#) and, in the 1930s, by the German philosopher **Frithjof Schuon**. The Harvard orientalist [Ananda Coomaraswamy](#) and the Swiss art historian [Titus Burckhardt](#) also became prominent advocates of this point of view. Fundamentally, this doctrine is the [Sanatana Dharma](#)--the "eternal religion"--of Hindu [Vedantists](#). It was formulated in ancient Greece, in particular, by [Plato](#) and later

Neoplatonists, and in Christendom by [Meister Eckhart](#) (in the West) and Gregory Palamas (in the East), and is also to be found in [Islam](#) in the form of [Sufism](#). Every religion has, besides its literal meaning, an esoteric dimension, which is essential, primordial and universal. This intellectual universality is one of the hallmarks of Schuon's works, and it gives rise to many fascinating insights into not only the various spiritual traditions, but also history, science and art.

The dominant theme or principle of Schuon's writings was foreshadowed in his early encounter with a Black [marabout](#) who had accompanied some members of his [Senegalese](#) village to [Switzerland](#) in order to demonstrate their culture. When the young Schuon talked with him, the venerable old man drew a circle with radii on the ground and explained: "God is in the center, all paths lead to Him."

Published works

Some of Schuon's major publications are *The Transcendent Unity of Religions, Esoterism as Principle and as Way, In the Tracks of Buddhism, Stations of Wisdom, Logic and Transcendence, Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts, Light on the Ancient Worlds, Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism* (1986), *The Feathered Sun: Plains Indians in Art and Philosophy* (1990) and *Understanding Islam* (1994). For a very well informed overview of Frithjof Schuon's life and teachings, see "Frithjof Schuon, Life and Teachings", Jean-Baptiste Aymard and Patrick Laude, SUNY Press, Albany, 2004, and also the website <http://www.frithjof-schuon.com/>. For other books related to his perspective see: <http://www.worldwisdom.com/> and <http://www.fonsvitae.com/>.

English translations of writings by Frithjof Schuon

Castes and Races

Christianity/Islam: Essays on Esoteric Ecumenicism

Echoes of Perennial Wisdom

Esoterism as Principle and as Way

The Eye of the Heart

From the Divine to the Human

The Garland: (Poems)

Gnosis: Divine Wisdom

In the face of the Absolute

Language of the Self

Light on the Ancient Worlds

Logic and Transcendence

The Play of Masks

Road to the Heart: Poems

Roots of the Human Condition

Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts

Stations of Wisdom

Sufism: Veil and Quintessence

Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism

To Have a Center

The Transfiguration of Man

Treasures of Buddhism

Understanding Islam

Martin Lings

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia



Martin Lings

Martin Lings (Abu Bakr Siraj Ad-Din) ([January 24, 1909](#) – [May 12, 2005](#)) was a lifelong student and follower of [Frithjof Schuon](#) and a [British](#) scholar of [Sufism](#).

Lings was born in [Burnage, Lancashire](#) in 1909 to a [Protestant](#) family. The young Lings would gain an introduction to travelling at a young age, spending significant time in the [United States](#) due to his father's employment. Lings completed his studies at [Clifton College](#), and then studied at [Oxford University](#), [Magdalen College](#). At Oxford, he was a student of [C. S. Lewis](#), who would become a close friend of his. After studying at Oxford, Lings went to [Lithuania](#) where he taught in [Kaunas](#).

For Lings himself, however, the most important event that occurred while he was at Oxford was his discovery of the writings of the French Muslim writer and traditionalist philosopher [René Guénon](#) and the German spiritual authority and metaphysician [Frithjof Schuon](#). In 1938 Lings went to Basle to make Schuon's acquaintance, and he remained [Frithjof Schuon](#)'s disciple and expositor for the rest of his life. Having found an authentic and orthodox spiritual path was for him the most important event of his life and he devoted the rest of his life to the spiritual path and serving God.(see also: [Sufi studies](#))

In [1939](#) Lings went to [Cairo, Egypt](#) in order to visit a friend of his, who was an assistant of [René Guénon](#). Not long after arriving in Cairo, his friend would die, and Lings began studying and learned the [Arabic language](#). It was in Cairo that Lings studied [Sufism](#), and converted to Islam.

Cairo would become his home for over a decade, he would become an [English](#) teacher at the [University of Cairo](#) and would produce [Shakespearean](#) plays annually. Lings married Lesley Smalley in [1944](#), and lived with his wife in a village near the [pyramids](#). Despite having settled comfortably in Egypt, Lings was forced to leave in [1952](#) after anti-British disturbances.

Upon returning to the United Kingdom, he continued his education, earning a [PhD](#) from [SOAS](#). His thesis at SOAS would become a well-received book on Algerian Sufi [Ahmad al-Alawi](#).(see also:[Sufi studies](#)) After earning his PhD, Lings would work at

the [British Museum](#) and later [British Library](#), overseeing eastern manuscripts and other textual works.

A writer throughout this period, Lings output would increase in the last quarter of his life. While his thesis work on Ahmad al-Alawi had been well-regarded, his most famous work was a biography about the [Prophet Muhammad](#), written in [1983](#), that earned him acclaim in the Muslim world, and prizes from the governments of [Pakistan](#) and [Egypt](#). He also continued travelling extensively, although he made his home in [Kent](#).

Books

- *Splendors of Qur'an Calligraphy And Illumination* (2005), Thesaurus Islamicus Foundation, Thames & Hudson, [ISBN 0500976481](#)
- *A Return to the Spirit : Questions and Answers* (2005), Fons Vitae, [ISBN 1887752749](#)
- *Sufi Poems : A Mediaeval Anthology* (2005), Islamic Texts Society, [ISBN 1903682185](#)
- *Mecca: From Before Genesis Until Now* (2004), Archetype, [ISBN 1901383075](#)
- *The Eleventh Hour : the Spiritual Crisis of the Modern World in the Light of Tradition and Prophecy* (2002), Archetype, [ISBN 1901383016](#)
- *Collected Poems, revised and expanded* (2002), Archetype, [ISBN 1901383032](#)
- *Ancient Beliefs and Modern Superstitions* (2001), Archetype, [ISBN 1901383024](#)
- *The Secret of Shakespeare : His Greatest Plays seen in the Light of Sacred Art* (1998), Quinta Essentia, distributed by Archetype, (pb), [ISBN 1870196147](#)
- *The Secret of Shakespeare : His Greatest Plays seen in the Light of Sacred Art* (1998), Quinta Essentia, distributed by Archetype, (hb), [ISBN 1870196155](#)
- *Sacred Art of Shakespeare : To Take Upon Us the Mystery of Things* (1998), Inner Tradition, 0892817178
- *A Sufi saint of the twentieth century: Shaikh Ahmad al-°Alawi, his spiritual heritage and legacy* (1993), Islamic Texts Society, [ISBN 0946621500](#)
- *Symbol & Archetype : A Study of the Meaning of Existence* (1991, 2006), Fons Vitae Quinta Essentia series, [ISBN 1870196058](#)
- *Muhammad : His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (1983), Islamic Texts Society, [ISBN 0042970423](#)
- *The Quranic Art of Calligraphy and Illumination* (1976), World of Islam Festival Trust, [ISBN 0905035011](#)
- *What is Sufism?* (1975), University of California Press, [ISBN 0520027949](#)
- *The Heralds, and other Poems* 1970
- *The Elements, and Other Poems* (1967), Perennial Books
- *The Book of Certainty: The Sufi Doctrine of Faith, Wisdom and Gnosis* Abu Bakr Siraj al Din 1952, 1970, 1992,

Nasr is a well-known and highly respected intellectual figure both in the West and the Islamic world. An eloquent speaker with a charismatic presence, Nasr is a much sought-after speaker at academic conferences and seminars, university and public lectures, and also radio and television programs in his areas of expertise. Possessing an impressive academic and intellectual record, his career as a teacher and scholar spans over four decades.

Born in 1933, Professor Nasr began his teaching career in 1955 when he was still a young doctoral student at [Harvard University](#). Over the years, he has taught and trained an innumerable number of students who have come from the different parts of the world, and many of whom have become important and prominent scholars in their fields of study.

He has trained different generations of students over the years since 1958 when he was a professor at [Tehran University](#), [Arya Mehr University](#) (where he was appointed president in 1972), and then in America at [Temple University](#) and at [The George Washington University](#) since 1984 to the present day. The range of subjects and areas of study in which Professor Nasr has engaged himself over the course of his academic career and intellectual life are immense. As demonstrated by his numerous writings, lectures and speeches, Professor Nasr speaks and writes based on the doctrine and the viewpoints of the [Perennial Philosophy](#) and with great authority on a wide variety of subjects, ranging from philosophy to religion to spirituality, to music and art and architecture, to science and literature, to civilizational dialogues and the natural environment.

For Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the quest for knowledge, specifically knowledge which enables man to understand the true nature of things and which furthermore "liberates and delivers him from the fetters and limitations of earthly existence," has been and continues to be the central concern and determinant of his intellectual life.

Professor Nasr was also a student of [Allameh Tabatabaei](#), a spiritual scholar whose commentary on the [Qur'an Tafsir al-Mizan](#) is widely known as one of the best commentaries. In the 1970s, [Empress Farah Pahlavi](#) of Iran appointed professor Nasr as head of the [Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy](#), the first academic institution to be conducted in accordance with the intellectual principles of the [Traditionalist School](#). During that time, Nasr, [Tabatabaei](#), [William Chittick](#), [Kenneth Morgan](#), [Sachiko Murata](#), [Toshihiko Izutsu](#), and [Henry Corbin](#) would meet and hold various philosophical discourses. The famous book [Shi'ite Islam](#) was one product of this period.

This experiment ended with the arrival of the Islamic [revolution](#), which forced Professor Nasr to emigrate to the United States.

Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr is currently University Professor of Islamic Studies at [The George Washington University](#).

Awards and honors

- [Templeton Religion and Science Course Award](#) (1999)

- First Muslim to deliver the prestigious [Gifford Lectures](#)

Works

Nasr is the author of over fifty books and five hundred articles on [Islamic science](#), religion, and the environment, in 4 languages, including:

- The Essential Frithjof Schuon *Selected and Edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr* [ISBN 0-941532-92-5](#)
- Three Muslim Sages (His first major book which is dedicated to [Frithjof Schuon](#))
- An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines [ISBN 0791415163](#)
- Science and Civilization in Islam [ISBN 1930637152](#)
- Islamic Science: An Illustrated Study [ISBN 1567443125](#)
- Man and Nature [ISBN 1871031656](#)
- Religion and the Order of Nature [ISBN 0195102746](#)
- The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity [ISBN 0060099240](#)
- Ideals and Realities of Islam
- Beacon of Knowledge - Essays in Honor of Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Fons Vitae books) 2003 [ISBN 188775260](#)
- [Shi'a Islam \(Book\)](#)
- [Expectation of the Millennium: Shi'ism in History](#)

René Guénon

by Martin Lings

The following is a transcript of a lecture given in the autumn of 1994 at the Prince of Wales Institute in London and sponsored by the Temenos Academy.

As regards the early part of the life of René Guénon our knowledge is very limited because of his extreme reticence. His objectivity, which is one aspect of his greatness, made him realize the evils of subjectivism and individualism in the modern world, and impelled him perhaps too far in the opposite direction; he shrank at any rate from speaking about himself. Since his death book after book has been written about him and the authors have no doubt felt often extremely frustrated at being unable to find out various things and as a result, book after book contains factual errors.

What we do know is that he was born at Blois in France in 1886, that he was the son of an architect; he had a traditional Catholic upbringing and at school he excelled in philosophy and mathematics. But at the age of 21 he was already in Paris, in the world of occultism, which was in full ferment at that time, about 1906-08. And the dangers of that world were perhaps counteracted for him by the fact that it was more open to wider perspectives. It seems to be about this time, in Paris, that he came in contact with some Hindus of the Advaita Vedanta school, one of whom initiated him into their own Shivaite line of spirituality. We have no details of time or place and he seems never to have spoken about these Hindus nor does he seem to have had further contact with them after one or two years. But what he learned from them is in his books and his meeting with them was clearly providential. His contact with them must have been extremely intense while it lasted. His books are just what was and is needed as antidote to the crisis of the modern world.

By the time he was nearly 30, his phenomenal intelligence had enabled him to see exactly what was wrong with the modern West, and that same intelligence had dug him out of it altogether. I myself remember that world in which and for which Guénon wrote his earliest books, in the first decade after the First World War, a monstrous world made impenetrable by euphoria: the First World War had been the war to end war. Now there would never be another war; and science had proved that man was descended from the ape, that is, he had progressed from apehood, and now this progress would continue with nothing to impede it; everything would get better and better and better. I was at school at that time and I remember being taught these things with just one hour a week being taught the opposite in religious lessons. But religion in the modern world had long before then been pushed into a corner. From its corner it protested against this euphoria, but to no avail.

Today the situation is considerably worse and considerably better. It is worse because human beings have degenerated still further. One sees far more bad faces than one did in the 20s, if I may say so, at least, that is my impression. It is better because there is no euphoria at all. The edifice of the modern world is falling into ruin. Great cracks are appearing everywhere through which it can be penetrated as it

could not be before. But it is again worse because the Church, anxious not to be behind the times, has become the accomplice of modernity.

But to return to the world of the 20s, I remember a politician proclaiming, as who would dare to do today, "We are now in the glorious morning of the world." And at this same time, Guénon wrote of this wonderful world, "It is as if an organism with its head cut off were to go on living a life which was both intense and disordered." (from *East and West* first published in 1924).

Guénon seems to have had no further contact with the Hindus and no doubt they had returned to India. Meantime, he had been initiated into a Sufi order which was to be his spiritual home for the rest of his life. Among the ills which he saw all around him he was very much preoccupied with the general anti-religious prejudice which was particularly rife among the French so-called intelligentsia. He was sure that some of these people were nonetheless virtually intelligent and would be capable of responding to the truth if it were clearly set before them. This anti-religious prejudice arose because the representatives of religion had gradually become less and less intelligent and more and more centered on sentimental considerations. In the Catholic Church especially, where the division of the community into clergy and laity was always stressed, a lay figure had to rely on the Church, it was not his business to think about spiritual things. Intelligent laymen would ask questions of priests who would not be able to answer these questions and who would take refuge in the idea that intelligence and pride were very closely connected. And so it is not difficult to see how this very anti-religious prejudice came into being especially in France.

Now Guénon put himself the question: Since these people have rejected Christianity would they be able to accept the truth when expressed in the Islamic terms of Sufism, which are closely related to Christian terms in many respects? He decided that they would not, that they would say that this is another religion; we have had enough of religion. However Hinduism, the oldest living religion, is on the surface very different from both Christianity and Islam, and so he decided to confront the Western world with the truth on the basis of Hinduism. It was to this end that he wrote his general *Introduction to the Study of Hindu Doctrines*. The French was published in 1921 to be followed in 1925 by what is perhaps the greatest of all of Guénon's books, *Man and His Becoming according to the Vedanta*.

He could not have chosen a better setting for his message of truth to the West because Hinduism has a directness which results from its having been revealed to man in a remote age when there was not yet a need to make a distinction between esoterism and exoterism, and that directness means that the truth did not have to be veiled. Already in Classical Antiquity the Mysteries, that is esoterism, were for the few. In Hinduism however they were the norm and the highest truths could be spoken of directly. There was no question of 'Cast not your pearls before swine' and 'Give not holy things to dogs'. The sister religions of Hinduism, for example, the religions of Greece and Rome, have long since perished. But thanks to the caste system with the Brahmins as safeguarders of religion we have today a Hinduism which is still living and which down to this century has produced flowers of sanctity.

One of the points to be mentioned first is the question of the distinction which has to be made at the divine level and which is made in all esoterisms but cannot be made

exoterically, that is, in religions as given to the masses today -- the distinction between the Absolute and the beginnings therein of relativity. The Absolute which is One, Infinite, Eternal, Immutable, Undetermined, Unconditioned, is represented in Hinduism by the sacred monosyllable *Aum*, and it is termed *Atmâ*, which means Self, and *Brahma* which is a neuter word that serves to emphasize that it is beyond all duality such as male and female. And it is also termed *Tat* (That), just as in Sufism, the Absolute is sometimes termed *Huwa* (He). Then we have what corresponds in other religions to the personal God, Ishvara, which is the beginning already of relativity, because it is concerned with manifestation, the term that Hindus use for creation, and creation is clearly the beginning of a duality -- Creator and created. Ishvara is at the divine level, yet it is the beginning of relativity.

In all esoterism one finds the same doctrine. Meister Eckhart came into difficulties with the Church because he insisted on making a distinction between God and *Godhead* -- *Gott und Gottheit*. He used the second term for the Absolute, that is for the Absolute Absolute, and he used God for the relative Absolute. It could have been the other way around, it was just that he needed to make some difference. In Sufism one speaks of the Divine Essence and the Essential Names of God such as The One, The Truth, the All-Holy, The Living, and the Infinitely Good, *al-Rahmân*, which contains the roots of all goodness and which is also a name of the Divine Essence. Below that there are the Names of Qualities, like Creator, the Merciful, in the sense of one who has Mercy on others, and that is clearly the beginning of a duality. In every esoterism this distinction is made even at the level of the Divinity. It cannot exist below esoterism because it would result in the idea of two Gods; a division in the Divinity would be exceedingly dangerous in the hands of the mass of believers. The Divine Unity has to be maintained at all costs.

Now Guénon, in this book, traces with all clarity the hierarchy of the universe from the Absolute, from the personal God, down to the created logos, that is *buddhi*, which is the word which means intellect and which has three aspects -- *Brahmâ* (this time the word is masculine), Vishnu and Shiva. Strictly speaking in the hierarchy of the universes these *devas* (this is the same word linguistically as the Latin *deus*), have the rank of what we would call archangels. Hinduism is so subtle however that though they are created they can be invoked as Names of the Absolute because they descend from the Absolute and they return to the Absolute. They can be invoked in the sense of the Absolute *Brahmâ*, in the sense of *Atmâ*, in the sense of *Aum*.

The Hindu doctrine, like Genesis, speaks of the two waters. The Quran speaks of the two seas, the upper waters and the lower waters. The upper waters represent the higher aspect of the created world, that is, of the manifested world, corresponding to the different heavens in which are the different paradises. It is all part of the next world from the point of view of this world. The lower waters represent the world of body and soul, and all is a manifestation of the Absolute.

In *Man and His Becoming according to the Vedanta*, Guénon, having traced the manifestation of man and having shown what is the nature of man in all its details, then proceeds to show how, according to Hindu doctrine, man can return to his absolute source. It ends with the supreme spiritual possibility of oneness with the Absolute, a oneness which is already there. A Brahmin boy at the age of eight is initiated by his father and the words are spoken into his ear, "Thou art That," meaning

thou art the Absolute, *tat vam asi*. This shows how far we are from religion as understood in the modern world. But that truth which is called in Sufism the secret, *al-sirr*, is necessary in all esoterism in the present day, otherwise it would not deserve the name esoterism.

Another aspect of Hinduism which made it the perfect vehicle for Guénon's message is the breadth of its structure. In the later religions it is as if Providence had shepherded mankind into a narrower and narrower valley: the opening is still the same to heaven but the horizontal outlook is narrower and narrower because man is no longer capable of taking in more than a certain amount. The Hindu doctrine of the *samsâra*, that is, of the endless chain of innumerable worlds which have been manifested, and of which the universe consists, would lead to all sorts of distractions. Nonetheless, when one is speaking of an Absolute, Eternal Divinity, the idea that that Infinitude produced only one single world in manifesting itself does not satisfy the intelligence. The doctrine of the *samsâra* does, on the other hand, satisfy, but the worlds are innumerable that have been manifested.

Another point in this respect is that Hinduism has an amazing versatility. It depends first of all on Divine Revelation. The Vedas and the Upanishads are revealed; the Bhagavad Gita is generally considered as revealed but not the *Mahâbhârata* as a whole, this "inspired" epic to which the Gita belongs. In Hinduism this distinction between revelation, *sruti*, and inspiration, *smriti*, is very clearly made, as it also is in Judaism and in Islam: The Pentateuch, that is, the first five books of the Old Testament, were revealed to Moses, the Psalms to David, the Qur'ân to Muhammad. That is something which Christians as a rule do not understand. They have difficulty in realizing, in the Old Testament for example, the difference between the Pentateuch and the Books of Kings and Chronicles which are simply sacred history, inspired no doubt, but in no sense revealed. For Christians the revelation is Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh; the concept of "the Word made book", which is a parallel revelation, does not enter into their perspective.

Hinduism also has the *avatâras*, and that a Christian can well understand, that is, the manifestations, the descents, of the Divinity. Of course a Christian would not recognize the descents of the Hindu *avatâras* because for the average Christian there has only ever been one descent and that is Christ Himself, but Hinduism recognizes the descent as an inexhaustible possibility and it names ten *avatâras* who have helped maintain the vitality of the religion down to the present day. The ninth *avatâra* which is called the foreign *avatâra* is the Buddha himself because, although he appeared in India, he was not for Hindus but clearly for the Eastern world. The breadth of Hinduism is seen also in its prefiguration of exoterism which is the recognition of the Three Ways. These are still Ways back to God -- the three *margas* -- the way of knowledge, the way of love, and the way of action -- three ways which correspond to the inclinations and affinities of different human beings.

Another point which makes the terms of Hinduism so right for giving Europeans the message is that they have as Aryans an affinity with Hinduism because they are rooted in the religions of Classical Antiquity which are sister religions to Hinduism; their structure was clearly the same as the structure of Hinduism. Of course they degenerated into complete decadence and have now disappeared. Nonetheless our heritage lies in them and Guénon gives us, one might say, the possibility of a

mysterious renaissance in a purely positive sense by his message of the truth in Hindu terms. This affinity must not be exaggerated however, and Guénon never advised anybody who was not a Hindu, as far as I know, to become a Hindu.

His message was always one of strict orthodoxy in one esoterism, but at the same time of equal recognition of all other orthodoxies, but his purpose was in no sense academic. His motto was *Vincit omnia veritas*, Truth conquers all, but implicitly his motto was 'Seek and ye shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you'. Implicit in his writings is the certainty that they will come providentially to those who are qualified to receive his message and they will impel them to seek and therefore to find a way.

Guénon was conscious of having a function and he knew what belonged to this function and what did not belong to it. He knew that it was not his function to have disciples; he never had any. It was his function to teach in preparation for a way that people would find for themselves, and this preparation meant filling in gaps which are left by modern education. The first of these gaps is the failure to understand the meaning of the transcendent and the meaning of the word intellect in consequence, a word which always continues to be used, but the intellect in the traditional sense of the word, corresponding to the Sanskrit *buddhi*, had simply been forgotten in the Western world. Guénon insisted in his writings on giving this word its true meaning which is perception of transcendent realities, the faculty which can perceive the things of the next world, and its prolongations in the soul are what might be called intellectual intuitions which are the preliminary glimmerings before intellection in the full sense takes place.

One has the impression that Guénon must have himself had an intellectual illumination at quite an early age. He must have perceived directly spiritual truths with the intellect in the true sense. He fills in gaps by explaining the meaning of rites, the meaning of symbols, the hierarchy of the worlds. In modern education the next world is left out altogether whereas in the Middle Ages students were taught about the hierarchy of the faculties and correspondingly the hierarchy of the universe.

Now I must for the moment speak on a rather personal level, but perhaps it may not be without interest. When I read the books of Guénon in the early thirties it was as if I had been struck by lightning and realized that this was the truth. I had never seen the truth before set down as in this message of Guénon's that there were many religions and that they must all be treated with reverence; they were different because they were for different people. It made sense and it also was at the same time to the glory of God because a person with even a reasonable intelligence when taught what we were taught at school would inevitably ask, well what about the rest of the world? Why were things managed in this way? Why was the truth given first of all to only the Jews, one people only? And then Christianity was ordered to spread over the world, but why so late? What about previous ages? These questions were never answered, but when I read Guénon I knew that what he said was the truth and I knew that I must do something about it.

I wrote to Guénon. I translated one of his first books, *East and West*, into English and I was in correspondence with him in connection with that. In 1930 Guénon left Paris, after the death of his first wife, and went to Cairo where he lived for twenty

years until his death in 1951. One of my first ideas upon reading Guénon's books was to send copies to my greatest friend who had been a student with me at Oxford, because I knew he would have just the same reaction as I had. He came back to the West and took the same way that I had already found, a way of the kind that Guénon speaks of in his books. Then being in need of work he was given a lectureship at Cairo University, and I sent him Guénon's *poste restante* number. Guénon was extremely secretive and would not give his actual address to anybody; he wanted to disappear. He had enemies in France and he suspected that they wished to attack him by magic. I do not know this for certain but I know that Guénon was very much afraid of being attacked by certain people and he wished to remain unknown, to sink himself into the Egyptian world where he was, the world of Islam. And so my friend had to wait a long time before Guénon agreed to see him. But when the meeting finally took place Guénon became immediately attached to him, and told him that he could always come to his house whenever he liked.

In the summer of 1939 I went to visit my friend in Cairo and when I was there the war broke out. I had a lectureship in Lithuania at that time and, being unable to return there, I was forced to stay in Egypt. My friend, who had become like a member of Guénon's household, collecting his mail from *poste restante* and doing many other things for him, took me to see Guénon. A year later I was out riding in the desert with my friend when his horse ran away with him and he was killed as the result of an accident. I shall never forget having to go to tell Guénon of his death. When I did he just wept for an hour. I had no option but to take my friend's place. I had already been given the freedom of the household and very quickly I became like one of the family. It was a tremendous privilege of course. Guénon's wife could not read and she spoke only Arabic. I quickly learned Arabic so I was able to talk to her. It was a very happy marriage. They had been married for seven years without children and Guénon, who was getting fairly old -- he was much older than she was -- had had no children with his first wife, so it was unexpected when they began to have children. They had four children altogether. I went to see Guénon nearly every day. I was the first person to read *The Reign of Quantity*, the only book he wrote while I knew him since the other books had all been written earlier. He gave it to me chapter by chapter. And I was able also to give him my own first book when I wrote it, *The Book of Certainty*, which I gave him also chapter by chapter. It was a very great privilege to have known such a person.

During this time a rather important question was resolved. The Hindus with whom Guénon had made contact in Paris had given him a wrong idea, not a strictly Hindu idea, about Buddhism. Hinduism recognizes the Buddha as the ninth *avatâra* of Vishnu but some Hindus maintain that he was not an *avatâra*, that he was just a revolted *kshatriya*, that is a member of the royal caste, against the Brahmins and it was this latter view which Guénon had accepted. Consequently he wrote about Buddhism as though it was not one of the great religions of the world. Now Ananda Coomaraswamy, Frithjof Schuon and Marco Pallis altogether decided that they would remonstrate with Guénon about this point. Guénon was very open to being persuaded and in 1946 I took Marco Pallis to see him with the result that he agreed that he had been mistaken and that the mistakes must be rectified in his books. Marco Pallis started sending him lists of many pages that needed correction.

Guénon almost never went out except when he came to visit us. I would send a car to fetch him and he would come with his family to our house about twice a year. We lived at that time just near the pyramids outside of Cairo. I went out with him only once and we went to visit the mosque of Sayyidnâ Husayn near al-Azhar. He had a remarkable presence; it was striking to see the respect with which he was treated. As he entered the mosque you could hear people on all sides saying, '*Allâhumma salli 'alâ Sayyidnâ Muhammad,*' that is, 'May God rain blessings on the Prophet Muhammad', which is a way of expressing great reverence for someone. He had a luminous presence and his very beautiful eyes, one of his most striking features, retained their lustre into early old age.

With his book on the Vedanta ranks his book on symbols, entitled *Fundamental Symbols: The Universal Language of Sacred Science*, which was published after his death from all the articles which were written about symbols in his journal, *Études Traditionnelles*. It was marvelous to read these articles when they came out month after month, but this book takes us back almost to prehistoric times as does *Man and His Becoming according to the Vedanta* but in a wider sense. Everything is a symbol of course, it could not exist if it were not a symbol, but the fundamental symbols are those which express eloquently aspects of the Supreme Truth and the Supreme Way. For example, one of these aspects of both the Way and the Truth is what is called the 'axis of the world', the axis which runs through all the higher states from the center of this state. That is the meaning of what is called the Tree of Life. The Tree of Life is symbolized by many particular trees: the oak, the ash, the fig and others throughout the world. The axis is the Way itself, the way of return to the Absolute. It is also symbolized by man-made things: the ladder, the mast, weapons like the lance, and the central pillar of edifices. As architects know, many buildings are built round a central axis which is not in fact there, which is not materialized. Very often in traditional houses the hearth is the center of the house and the chimney through which the smoke rises is another figure of the axis. And things which are normally horizontal are symbols of the axis: a bridge is also a symbol of the world axis. Witness the title Pontifex, the maker of the bridge, which is given to the highest spiritual authority of the Church -- the bridge, which is the bridge between Heaven and earth.

Another fundamental symbol is the river. There are three aspects to the river: the crossing of the river symbolizes the passage from this world to a higher world, always, but then there is the river itself. There is the difficulty of moving upstream which symbolizes the difficulties of the spiritual path, of returning to one's source against the current. There is also the symbolism of moving in the other direction to the ocean, of returning finally to the ocean; that is another symbol of the Way. In this book amongst many other symbols, Guénon also treats of the symbolism of the mountain, the cave, the temporal cycle. In the temporal cycle the solstices of summer and winter are the gates of the gods according to Hinduism. The gate of the gods is the winter solstice, in the sign of Capricorn; the gate of the ancestors is the summer solstice, in the sign of Cancer.

As I have said, Guénon did not like to talk about himself and I respected his reticence, I did not ask him questions and I think he was pleased with that. To sum up what his function was, one might say that it was his function, in a world increasingly rife with heresy and pseudo religion, to remind twentieth century man of the need for orthodoxy which itself presupposes firstly a divine intervention, and secondly a

tradition which hands down with fidelity from generation to generation what Heaven has revealed. In this connection we are deeply indebted to him for having restored to the world the word orthodoxy in the full rigor of its original meaning, that is, rectitude of opinion, a rectitude which compels the intelligent man not merely to reject heresy, but also to recognize the validity of all those faiths which conform to those criteria on which his own faith depends for its orthodoxy.

On the basis of this universality, which is often known as *religio perennis*, it was also Guénon's function to remind us that the great religions of the world are not only the means of man's salvation, but that they offer him beyond that, even in this life, two esoteric possibilities which correspond to what were known in Graeco-Roman Antiquity as *mysteria pava* and *mysteria magna*, the 'Greater Mysteries' and the 'Lesser Mysteries'. The first of these is the way of return to the primordial perfection which was lost in the fall. The second, which presupposes the first, is the way to gnosis, the fulfillment of the precept, 'know thyself'. This one ultimate end is termed in Christianity *deificatio*, in Hinduism, *yoga*, union, and *moksha*, deliverance, in Buddhism, *nirvana*, that is, extinction of all that is illusory. And in Islamic mysticism, that is Sufism, *tahaqquq*, which means realization and which was glossed by a Sufi sheikh as self-realization in God. The Mysteries and especially the Greater Mysteries are explicitly or implicitly the main theme of Guénon's writing, even in *The Crisis of the Modern World* and *The Reign of Quantity*. The troubles in question are shown to have sprung ultimately from loss of the mysterical dimension, that is, the dimension of the mysteries of esoterism. He traces all the troubles in the modern world to the forgetting of the higher aspects of religion. He was conscious of being a pioneer, and I will end simply by quoting something he wrote of himself, "All that we shall do or say will amount to giving those who come afterwards facilities which we ourselves were not given. Here as everywhere else it is the beginning of the work that is hardest."

Dr. Martin Lings taught for many years at the University of Cairo before becoming Keeper of Oriental Manuscripts at the British Library. The author of numerous books including The Eleventh Hour, Symbol and Archetype, and Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources, he is an authority on tradition and on Sufism in particular.

A Biography of Seyyed Hossein Nasr

Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr, one of the world's leading experts on Islamic science and spirituality, is University Professor of Islamic Studies at George Washington University. Professor Nasr is the author of numerous books including **Man and Nature: the Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man** (Kazi Publications, 1998), **Religion and the Order of Nature** (Oxford, 1996) and **Knowledge and the Sacred** (SUNY, 1989).

Introduction

Seyyed Hossein Nasr, currently University Professor of Islamic Studies at the George Washington University, Washington D.C. is one of the most important and foremost scholars of Islamic, Religious and Comparative Studies in the world today. Author of over fifty books and five hundred articles which have been translated into several major Islamic, European and Asian languages, Professor Nasr is a well known and highly respected intellectual figure both in the West and the Islamic world. An eloquent speaker with a charismatic presence, Nasr is a much sought after speaker at academic conferences and seminars, university and public lectures and also radio and television programs in his area of expertise. Possessor of an impressive academic and intellectual record, his career as a teacher and scholar spans over four decades.

Born in 1933, Professor Nasr began his illustrious teaching career in 1955 when he was still a young and promising, doctoral student at Harvard University. Over the years, he has taught and trained an innumerable number of students who have come from the different parts of the world, and many of whom have become important and prominent scholars in their fields of study.

He has trained different generations of students over the years since 1958 when he was a professor at Tehran University and then, in America since the Iranian revolution in 1979, specifically at Temple University in Philadelphia from 1979 to 1984 and at the George Washington University since 1984 to the present day. The range of subjects and areas of study which Professor Nasr has involved and engaged himself with in his academic career and intellectual life are immense. As demonstrated by his numerous writings, lectures and speeches, Professor Nasr speaks and writes with great authority on a wide variety of subjects, ranging from philosophy to religion to spirituality, to music and art and architecture, to science and literature, to civilizational dialogues and the natural environment.

For Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the quest for knowledge, specifically knowledge which enables man to understand the true nature of things and which furthermore, "liberates and delivers him from the fetters and limitations of earthly existence," has been and continues to be the central concern and determinant of his intellectual life.

Brief Biography

Seyyed Hossein Nasr was born on April 7, 1933 (19 Farvadin 1312 A.H. solar) in Tehran into a family of distinguished scholars and physicians. His father, Seyyed Valiallah, a man of great learning and piety, was a physician to the Iranian royal family, as was his father before him. The name "Nasr" which means "victory" was conferred on Professor Nasr's grandfather by the King of Persia. Nasr also comes from a family of Sufis. One of his ancestors was Mulla Seyyed Muhammad Taqi Poshtmashhad, who was a famous saint of Kashan, and his mausoleum which is located next to the tomb of the Safavid king Shah Abbas, is still visited by pilgrims to this day.

As a young boy, Nasr attended one of the schools near his home. His early formal education included the usual Persian curriculum at school with an extra concentration in Islamic and Persian subjects at home, as well as tutorial in French. However for Nasr, it was the long hours of discussion with his father, mostly on philosophical and theological issues, complemented by both reading and reaction to the discourses carried on by those who came to his father's house, that constituted an essential aspect of his early education and which in many ways set the pattern and tone of his intellectual development. This was the situation for the first twelve years of Nasr's life.

Nasr's arrival in America at the young age of twelve marked the beginning of a new period in his life which was totally different and therefore, discontinuous from his early life in Iran. He attended The Peddie School in Highstown, New Jersey and in 1950 graduated as the valedictorian of his class and also winner of the Wycliffe Award which was the school's highest honor given to the most outstanding all-round student. It was during the four years at Peddie that Nasr acquired his knowledge of the English language, as well as studying the sciences, American history, Western culture and Christianity.

Nasr chose to go to M.I.T. for college. He was offered a scholarship and was the first Iranian student to be admitted as an undergraduate at M.I.T. He began his studies at M.I.T in the Physics Department with some of the most gifted students in the country and outstanding professors of physics. His decision to study physics was motivated by the desire to gain knowledge of the nature of things, at least at the level of physical reality. However, at the end of his freshman year, although he was the top student in his class, he began to feel oppressed by the overbearingly scientific atmosphere with its implicit positivism. Furthermore, he discovered that many of the metaphysical questions which he had been concerned with were not being asked, much less answered. Thus, he began to have serious doubts as to whether physics would lead him to an understanding of the nature of physical reality. His doubt was confirmed when the leading British philosopher, Bertrand Russell, in a small group discussion with the students following a lecture he had given at M.I.T, stated that physics does not concern itself with the nature of physical reality per se but with mathematical structures related to pointer readings.

The shock of discovering the real nature of the subject he had chosen to study, together with the overbearingly scientific atmosphere at his Department, led Nasr to experience a major intellectual and spiritual crisis during his second year. Although

the crisis did not destroy his belief in God, it shook certain fundamental elements in his worldview, such as his understanding of the meaning of life, the significance of knowledge and the means to find the Truth. He was prepared to leave the field of physics and M.I.T. and depart from America in quest of the Truth. However, the strong discipline in him, inculcated by his father, prevented him from abandoning his studies altogether. He remained at M.I.T. and graduated with honors, but his heart was no longer with physics.

Having realized in his second year that a study of the physical sciences would neither lead him to an understanding of the nature of physical reality nor deal with some of the metaphysical questions he was concerned with, Nasr decided to look at other fields of study for his answers. He started to read extensively and to take many courses in the humanities, especially those taught by Professor Giorgio Di Santillana, the famous Italian philosopher and historian of science. Under Professor Di Santillana's instruction, Nasr began his serious study of not only the ancient Greek wisdom as contained in the philosophies of Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus but also European, Medieval philosophy, Dante's highly mystical and symbolic *Divine Comedy*, Hinduism and a critique of modern Western thought. It was also Di Santillana who first introduced him to the writings of one of the most important traditionalist writers of this century, Rene Guenon. Guenon's writings played a decisive role in laying the intellectual foundation of Nasr's traditionalist perspective. Nasr also had the great fortune of having access to the library of the late Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, the outstanding Singhalese metaphysician and historian of art. The library had an incredible collection of works on traditional philosophy and art from all over the world. It was in this library that Nasr first discovered the works of the other traditionalist writers such as Frithjof Schuon, Titus Burckhardt, Marco Pallis and Martin Lings and who were to have tremendous and enduring intellectual and spiritual influence on Nasr.

According to Nasr, it was the discovery of traditional metaphysics and the *philosophia perennis* through the works of these figures which settled the crisis he had experienced and gained an intellectual certitude which has never left him since. From then on, he was certain that there was such a thing as the Truth and that it could be attained through knowledge by means of the intellect which is guided and illuminated by divine revelation. His childhood love for the attainment of knowledge returned to him but on a higher and deeper plane. The traditional writings of Schuon with their singular emphasis on the need for the practice of a spiritual discipline as well as theoretical knowledge, were especially instrumental in determining the course of Nasr's intellectual and spiritual life from that time onward.

Upon his graduation from M.I.T., Nasr enrolled himself in a graduate program in geology and geophysics at Harvard University. After obtaining his Master's degree in geology and geophysics in 1956, he went on to pursue his Ph.D. degree in the history of science and learning at Harvard. Nasr wanted to study other types of sciences of nature apart from the modern Western and also to understand why modern science had developed as it had. He planned to write his dissertation under the supervision of George Sarton, a great authority on Islamic science. However, Sarton passed away before he could begin his dissertation work and since there was not another specialist in Islamic science at Harvard then, he wrote his dissertation under the direction of three professors. They were I. Bernard Cohen, Hamilton Gibb and Harry Wolfson.

It was also at Harvard that Nasr resumed his study of classical Arabic which he had left since coming to America. He struggled with philosophical Arabic while getting some assistance from Wolfson and Gibb. However, the mastery of philosophical Arabic was only attained after he studied Islamic philosophy from the traditional masters of Iran after his return to his homeland in 1958.

During his Harvard years, Nasr also traveled to Europe, especially to France, Switzerland, Britain, Italy and Spain, widening his intellectual horizon and establishing important and fruitful contacts. It was during these travels to Europe that Nasr met with the foremost traditionalist writers and exponents of the *philosophia perennis*, Frithjof Schuon and Titus Burckhardt, who made a tremendous impact and decisive contribution to his intellectual and spiritual life. He also traveled to Morocco in North Africa, which had great spiritual significance for Nasr who embraced Sufism in the form taught and practiced by the great Sufi saint of the Maghrib, Shaykh Ahmad al-Alawi. Thus, the years at Harvard witnessed the crystallization of the major intellectual and spiritual elements of Nasr's mature worldview, elements which have since dominated and determined the course and pattern of his scholarship and academic career.

At twenty-five, Nasr graduated with a Ph.D. degree from Harvard and on the way to completing his first book, *Science and Civilization in Islam*. His doctoral dissertation entitled "Conceptions of Nature in Islamic Thought" was published in 1964 by Harvard University Press as *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*. Although he was offered a position as assistant professor at M.I.T., Nasr decided to return permanently to Iran.

Back in Iran, Nasr was offered a position as an Associate Professor of philosophy and the history of science at the Faculty of Letters in Tehran University. A few months after his return, Nasr married a young woman from a respected family whose members were close friends of his family. Five years later at the age of thirty, Nasr became the youngest person to become a full professor at the University. He used his position and influence to bring major changes to strengthen and expand the philosophy program at Tehran University which like many of its other programs, was very much dominated by and limited to French intellectual influence. Nasr initiated the important move of teaching Islamic philosophy on the basis of its own history and from its own perspective and to encourage his Iranian students to study other philosophies and intellectual traditions from the point of view of their own tradition. He maintains that one cannot hope to understand and appreciate one's own intellectual tradition from the viewpoint of another, just as one cannot see oneself through the eyes of another person. He also created greater awareness and interest in the study of Oriental philosophies among the students and faculty members. Since Tehran University was the only university in Iran to offer a doctorate in philosophy, these changes introduced by Nasr had far reaching influence. Many universities in Iran integrated these changes into their philosophical studies and until today Nasr's perspective that Iranian students should study other philosophical traditions from the view of their own tradition instead of studying their tradition from the perspective of Western thought and philosophy remains widely influential. The students he has trained and who have become scholars and university professors of philosophy have enabled this perspective to have enduring influence in Iran.

Apart from the philosophy program, Nasr was also involved in the university's doctoral program in Persian language and literature for those whose mother tongue was not Persian. He strengthened the philosophical component of this program and had many outstanding students from outside of Iran to receive training, not only in Persian language, but also the rich treasury of philosophical and Sufi literature written in Persian. Many of the students trained in this program have since become important scholars in this field such as the American scholar, William Chittick and the Japanese woman scholar, Sachiko Murata.

Furthermore, from 1968 to 1972, Nasr was made Dean of the Faculty and for a while, Academic Vice-Chancellor of Tehran University. Through these positions, he introduced many important changes which all aimed at strengthening the university programs in the humanities generally and in philosophy, specifically. In 1972, he was appointed President of Aryamehr University by the Shah of Iran. Aryamehr University was then the leading scientific and technical university in Iran and the Shah, as the patron, wanted Professor Nasr to develop the university on the model of M.I.T. but with firm roots in Iranian culture. Consequently, a strong humanities program in Islamic thought and culture, with a particular emphasis upon an Islamic philosophy of science, was established at Aryamehr University by Nasr. Nasr's pioneering effort has led Aryamehr to create one of the first graduate programs in the Islamic world in the philosophy of science based upon the Islamic philosophy of science, some ten years ago. In 1973, the Queen of Iran appointed Professor Nasr to establish a center for the study and propagation of philosophy under her patronage. Hence, the Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy was established and very soon became one of the most important and vital centers of philosophical activities in the Islamic world, housing the best library of philosophy in Iran and attracting some of the most distinguished scholars in the field, both from the East and the West, such as Henry Corbin and Toshihiko Izutsu. The Academy also organized important seminars and lecture series given by philosophers, offered fellowships for short and long term research work in Islamic philosophy, and comparative philosophy and undertook a major publication program of works in this field in Persian, Arabic, English and French.

Another very important dimension to Nasr's intellectual activities after his return to Iran in 1958, was his program in re-educating himself in Islamic philosophy by learning it at the feet of the masters through the traditional method of oral transmission. He studied hikmah for twenty years under some of the greatest teachers in Iran at the time, reading traditional texts of Islamic philosophy and gnosis, three days a week at the Sepahsalar madrasah in Tehran and also in private homes in Tehran, Qom and Qazwin. Among his venerable teachers were Sayyid Muhammad Kazim Assar, an alim who was an authority on Islamic law, as well as philosophy, and a very close friend of Professor Nasr's father; the great luminary and master of gnosis, Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabatabai and Sayyid Abul-Hasan Qazwini, a great authority on Islamic law and the intellectual sciences who knew mathematics, astronomy and philosophy extremely well. Nasr read and studied several of the major texts of Islamic philosophy under these masters such as the al-Asfar al-arbaah of Mulla Sadra and the Sharh-i manumah of Sabziwari and benefited greatly from the invaluable insights and commentaries provided by them orally. In this way, Nasr had the best educational training both from the modern West and the traditional East, a rare combination which put him in a very special position to speak

and write with authority on the numerous issues involved in the encounter between East and West, and tradition and modernity, as demonstrated very clearly by his writings and lectures.

During the years Professor Nasr was in Iran, he wrote extensively in Persian and English and occasionally in French and Arabic. His doctoral dissertation was rewritten by him in Persian and it won the royal book award. Nasr also brought out the critical editions of several important philosophical texts such as the complete Persian works of Suhrawardi and of Mulla Sadra and the Arabic texts of Ibn Sina and al-Biruni. Nasr's great interest in the philosophy of one of the greatest later Islamic philosophers, Mulla Sadra resulted in the publication of the Mulla Sadra written by the traditional masters of Islamic philosophy. Nasr was also the first person to introduce the figure of Mulla Sadra to the English speaking world.

With the assistance of William Chittick, Nasr prepared An Annotated Bibliography of Islamic Science in three volumes, with Persian and English annotations. He also wrote Three Muslim Sages and completed and published Science and Civilization in Islam which he had written while still a student at Harvard. Both of these books were translated into several languages very quickly and were reprinted in Iran many times and have been used for the past three decades as textbooks for courses in Islamic philosophy and science in Iranian universities. Three Muslim Sages, which presents the whole of the Islamic intellectual tradition from within, grew out of three lectures which Nasr gave in 1962 as the first visiting professor at the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard University. Ideals and Realities of Islam, which is one of Nasr's most widely read book on the Islamic religion and which opens up the world of Islam, revealing some of its most universal and profound dimensions, was based on the text of the first six of fifteen lectures which he delivered at the American University in Beirut as the first Aga Khan Professor of Islamic studies in 1964-65.

In 1966 Nasr was invited to deliver the Rockefeller Lectures at the University of Chicago and to speak on some aspects of the relation between religion, philosophy and the environmental crisis. Consequently, Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man, which deals with the philosophical and spiritual roots of the question and the first work to predict the coming of the environmental crisis was written for the occasion. Nasr also brought out Islam and the Plight of Modern Man, Sufi Essays and The Transcendent Theosophy of Sadr al-Din Shirazi. Both Islam and the Plight of Modern Man and Sufi Essays have proved to be very popular and have been translated into many European and Islamic languages and reprinted several times since their first appearance.

In 1964-65, Nasr spent an academic year at the American University of Beirut as the first Aga Khan professor of Islamic Studies. Besides Ideals and Realities of Islam, Nasr also brought out Islamic Studies, which is a collection of articles discussing several fundamental aspects of the Islamic tradition. This work was later expanded and published under the title, Islamic Life and Thought. During this period in Lebanon, Nasr also met with and had intellectual discourses with several important Catholic and Shi'ite thinkers and scholars. He also had the opportunity to meet with the woman Sufi saint Sayyidah Fatimah Yashrutiyah, daughter of the founder of the Yashrutiyah order, a branch of the Shadhiliyah Sufi order.

Although Nasr lived in Iran, he maintained strong contacts with America and many of the major universities in the country. He taught at Harvard in 1962 and 65 and conducted short seminars at Princeton University and the University of Utah. He also had close associations with several important American scholars such as Huston Smith, professor of philosophy and comparative religion, Jacob Needleman, editor of the well-known work, *Sword of Gnosis* which includes Nasr's essays, and a number of Catholic and Protestant philosophers and theologians. Nasr also helped with the planning and expansion of Islamic and Iranian studies in several universities such as Princeton, the University of Utah and the University of Southern California. In 1977, he delivered the Kevorkian Lectures on Islamic art at New York University on the meaning and philosophy of Islamic art.

In 1979 at the time of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Nasr moved with his family to the United States where he would rebuild his life again and secure a university position to support himself and his family. By 1980, Nasr began to write again. He started to work intensively on the research and text of the prestigious Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh to which he received an invitation shortly before the Iranian Revolution took place. Nasr had the honor of being the first non-Westerner to be invited to deliver the most famous lecture series in the fields of natural theology and philosophy of religion in the West. Thus, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, one of Nasr's most important philosophical works, one which had a great impact on scholars and students of religious studies, came to be prepared amidst the strain of trying times and the strenuous commute between Boston and Philadelphia. However, Nasr discloses that the actual writing of the text of *Knowledge and the Sacred* came as a gift from heaven. He was able to write the texts of the lectures with great facility and speed and within a period of less than three months, they were completed. Nasr says that it was as though, he was writing from a text he had previously memorized.

In 1982, Nasr was invited to collaborate on a major project to bring out the *Encyclopedia of World Spirituality* together with Ewert Cousins, chief editor and professor of Medieval philosophy at Fordham University, and many other leading philosophers and scholars of religion. Nasr accepted to edit the two volumes on Islamic Spirituality, which came out in 1989 and 1991. Both volumes have since become invaluable reference material in English for those interested in this subject. In 1983, Nasr delivered the Wiegand Lecture on the philosophy of religion at the University of Toronto in Canada. He also helped in the establishment of the section on Hermeticism and perennial philosophy at the American Academy of Religion.

Nasr was soon recognized in American academic circles as a traditionalist and a major expositor and advocate of the perennialist perspective. Much of his intellectual activities and writing since being in exile in America, are related to this function and also in the fields of comparative religion, philosophy and religious dialogue. He has participated in many debates and discussions with eminent Christian and Jewish theologians and philosophers such as Hans Kung, John Hick and Rabbi Izmar Schorch. In 1986, Nasr edited *The Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon* and in 1990, he was selected as a patron of the Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations of the Sally Oaks College in Birmingham. In addition, he has played an active role in the creation and activities of the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University in Washington D.C. He has also attended

many conferences on this subject including the famous 1993 Parliament of World Religions.

He continues to travel to Europe often, giving lectures and being involved with intellectual activities. He gives lectures at Oxford, University of London and a few other British universities and is a member of the Temenos Academy. In 1994, he was invited to deliver the Cadbury Lectures at the University of Birmingham and a major work entitled Religion and the Order of Nature was produced by Nasr for this occasion.

Nasr also continues to travel to Spain, especially southern Spain which still has an Islamic presence and which reminds him very much of his home country, Iran. It was also during some of his journeys to Spain, that Nasr was inspired to compose several poems related to Spanish themes. Nasr has brought out recently a collection of forty English poems on spiritual themes, which were written within the past fifteen years, under the title Poems of the Way.

Although Professor Nasr continues to have a very busy teaching and lecturing schedule, he still manages to allocate much of his time and energy to writing. 1987 saw the publication of two of his books: Islamic Art and Spirituality and Traditional Islam in the Modern World. Islamic Art and Spirituality which deals with the metaphysical and symbolic significance of Islamic art, poetry and music is Nasr's first book on this subject. Traditional Islam in the Modern World discusses several important dimensions of the Islamic tradition and its relation to the West. Nasr also wrote a book specifically for young Muslims entitled, A Young Muslim's Guide to the Modern World which addresses some of the major problems and challenges which the modern world presents to them.

Recently, Nasr together with the British scholar of Islamic and Jewish philosophy, Oliver Leaman, edited a two volume work, History of Islamic Philosophy which consists of articles written by important scholars in this field, discussing the different aspects and schools of Islamic philosophy and its development in the different parts of the Islamic world. Nasr's continued interest in science is made evident by his latest book on this subject, The Need for a Sacred Science. Also, together with one of his former students, Mehdi Amin Razavi, Nasr is now bringing out a major four volume work, An Anthology of Philosophy in Persia which will be published by Oxford University Press. Razavi also edited earlier, The Islamic Intellectual Tradition in Persia, which is a collection of Nasr's articles on Islamic philosophy in Persia written during the last forty years.

Another important aspect to Nasr's intellectual activities in Washington D.C. is his active involvement in the activities of the Foundation for Traditional Studies. The Foundation which is devoted to the dissemination of traditional thought was established in 1984 under the direction of a board presided by Nasr. The Foundation has published several books including the festschrift of Frithjof Schuon entitled, Religion of the Heart, edited by Nasr and William Stoddart and In Quest of the Sacred: The Modern World in the Light of Tradition which Nasr co-edited with the executive director of the Foundation, Katherine O'Brien. In Quest of the Sacred is a collection of essays presented by some of the major traditionalist writers in an important conference held in Peru, organized by the Foundation and the Peruvian

Instituto de Estudios Tradicionales. The Foundation also publishes the journal, "Sophia," which carries essays on traditional thought written by the leading authorities in this field. Together with the Foundation, Nasr is also involved in the production of a major documentary television series on "Islam and the West," which deals with some of the more important and profound aspects of the encounter between the Islamic and Western civilizations.

At sixty-six, Seyyed Hossein Nasr leads an extremely active intellectual life with a very busy schedule of teaching at the university and lecturing at many institutions in America and around the world, writing scholarly works, being involved in several intellectual projects simultaneously and meeting individuals who are interested in traditional thought. At the same time, he leads a very intense spiritual life spent in prayer, meditation and contemplation and also providing spiritual counsel for those who seek his advice and guidance. Exiled from his homeland, Seyyed Hossein Nasr has found his home in the inviolable and sacred Center which is neither in the East nor the West.

SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR IN THE CONTEXT OF THE PERENNIALIST SCHOOL

As it has been often mentioned, the so-called Perennial School traces its intellectual and spiritual heritage back to three fundamental figures who may be considered as its main inspirers and interpreters in the XXth century. These are René Guénon (1886-1951), Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) and Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998).¹ Aside from his keen and implacable critique of the modern world, René Guénon's seminal contribution was focused on three major domains of exposition: metaphysics, initiation and symbolism. In each of these fundamental domains, Guénon provides his reader with a rigorous definition of what he understood by the term tradition. This understanding was mostly informed by the Hindu, Islamic and Taoist worlds.² The clarity and rigor of his mode of expression sharply contrasts with the diffuse and confused intellectual ambience of the spiritualist trends of the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century. Guénon's work dispels confusions and pseudospiritual fantasies with an impersonal mastery that is more geometric than musical, more rational (and not rationalist) than intuitive.

From Ananda Coomaraswamy the expression of the *philosophia perennis* gained a new dimension both in its mode and in its content. As for the mode,

¹ For an excellent introduction to the “traditionalist” or “perennialist” school see Kenneth Oldmeadow, *Traditionalism: Religion in the light of the Perennial Philosophy*, Sri Lanka, 2000.

² It could be said schematically that Guénon's metaphysical idiom was Hindu, his view of initiation and its relationship to exoterism Islamic, and his symbolist vision Taoist or Far-Eastern.

one has often noted the painstakingly academic way of proceeding that informs Coomaraswamy's works. A veritable arsenal of quotations is placed at the disposal at the reader, contrasting with the often allusive and sometimes mysterious references that are to be found in Guénon's works. From the standpoint of content, Coomaraswamy's contribution seems to lie primarily in his ability to reveal the spiritual connection that unites symbolism, aesthetics, contemplation and artistic work. Symbolism is not only a museum of references and correspondences, it is a living workshop of spiritual transformation.³ We may also mention Coomaraswamy's important pages devoted to Buddhism, Neo-Platonism and Christian mysticism --including the Christian East, all three domains that Guénon had either ignored or underestimated. If Guénon and Coomaraswamy can be considered as pioneers of *Sophia perennis* and *philosophia perennis* in the twentieth-century, it could be argued that Frithjof Schuon was, in a sense, more interested in *religio perennis* than in *Sophia perennis* or in tradition.⁴ An important note from his *magnum opus Esoterism As Principle And As Way* bears much light in this respect:

³ “Traditional art, in Coomaraswamy's view, was always directed towards a twin purpose: a daily utility, towards what he was fond of calling ‘the

satisfaction of present needs', and towards the preservation and transmission of moral values and spiritual teachings derived from the tradition in which it appeared." Oldmeadow, p.33.

4 In keeping with its Islamic orientation, Seyyed Hossein Nasr's reading of Schuon emphasizes the traditional dimension of Schuon's perspective: "Perhaps no other concept is so crucial for the understanding of his writings (Schuon's). Schuon is first and foremost an We say "primordial Religion", and not "Tradition", because the first of these terms has the advantage of expressing an intrinsic reality (religere='to bind' the earthly with the heavenly), and not simply an extrinsic reality like the second (tradere= 'to hand down' scriptural ritual and legal elements.)

5 This emphasis has sometimes been reproached to Schuon inasmuch as it has been perceived, erroneously, as an attempt at fostering a universal and syncretistic religion disconnected from any specific traditional grounding. In fact however, what Schuon has in mind through this emphasis is rather the "intrinsic" dimension suggested by the term religion --as an inner link to God, together with the implications of totality that it involves with respect to the human spiritual engagement that religion entails. In this sense, *Religio* connotes the universal realities of prayer, morality and aesthetics, and not only a theoretical or metaphysical core.

6 expositor of traditional teachings and wants to be known as such." (*The Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon, Element*, 1986, p.8) Although there is no doubt about the traditional aspect of Schuon's, it is interesting to note that the word "tradition" is not included in any title of his books by contrast with the more frequently used terms "esoterism" and "gnosis." Let us add that the word "esoterism" is by and large conspicuously absent from Nasr's introduction to the *Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon*..

5*Esoterism As Principle And As Way*, Bedfont, Middlesex, 1981, Note 164, p.157

6 "Esoterism, with its three dimensions of metaphysical discernment, mystical concentration and moral conformity, includes in the final analysis the only things that Heaven demands in an absolute fashion, all other demands being relative and therefore more or less conditional." "Ambiguité de l'exotérisme", *Approches du phénomène religieux*, Paris, 1984, p.41.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr has repeatedly acknowledged a more direct intellectual and spiritual debt toward Schuon 7 than toward Guénon or Coomaraswamy. In many respects, his opus could be read as a brilliant and richly referenced development of Schuon's work. However he seems to have been less interested in emphasizing the centrality of the very concept of *religio perennis*, and it would not be an exaggeration to add that he has favored the terms *sophia perennis* or *philosophia perennis* over the latter; a fact that is perhaps symbolically indicated that the title of the two academic journals that he created and directed in Iran and the US, *Sophia Perennis* and *Sophia*. Among all of the foremost perennialist writers, Seyyed Hossein Nasr's background is

remarkable in at least three ways: first, he is a public figure who has been widely recognized in the media --in both the US and Europe-- as a spokesman for perennialist ideas. His exceptional gifts as a scholar, a pedagogue and a public speaker could not but lead him to become one of the most highly recognized and most acclaimed representatives of the perennial philosophy in the twentieth century. His appearance on broadcast programs such as Bill Moyers' *Genesis* and his participation in highly visible interfaith events at the UN and other forums testify to this public notoriety. Other

7 As testified by Seyyed Hossein Nasr's own assertion of being "the person who knows Frithjof Schuon's writings best in the world." (Conference in Honor of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Washington DC, November 2, 2001)

figures, particularly Schuon, have been much more withdrawn from the public eye. Second, he is the only perennialist writer who is closely identified with a given religious tradition, both as being born in it and as being a world expert on many of its dimensions. It must be added that Seyyed Hossein Nasr inherited his Islamic spiritual identity from a long and prestigious line of scholars and educators. He is by no means simply a Muslim born expert on Islam, 8 he is the spiritual and intellectual offspring of a lineage of remarkable men whose life and works bear the deep imprint of a whole traditional civilization.9 This is not the case for most other major perennialists who have adopted a religious form different from that in which they were born. For example, Guénon and Schuon chose Islam, while Marco Pallis entered Buddhism. Let us mention though, that

8 "I was born into a family of well-known scholars and physicians in Tehran in 1933. (...) My paternal grandfather hailed from a family of *seyyeds* (*sâdât*) (descendants of the Prophet of Islam. (...)" *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, Carbondale, 2001, p.3. Nasr's ancestry includes many important figures of Persian science, literature and spirituality. Let us mention that his paternal grandfather was a celebrated physician, while his maternal great grandfather, Shaykh Fadlallâh Nûrî, was a most prominent figure of religion and politics in modern Persian history. Mohammad Faghfoory has also shown interestingly how Seyyed Hossein Nasr's intellectual destiny is in a sense a continuation of his father's, Seyyed Valiallah Khan Nasr: "Those who have known Seyyed Valiallah Khan have in fact found Seyyed Hossein Nasr to be a mirror image of his father. (...) Lessons which Seyyed Hossein Nasr learned from his father during the first twelve years of his life have been his guide during the last fifty-four years and will continue to be his source of inspiration for the years to come." "The Forgotten Educator: The Life of Seyyed Vali Allah Khan Nasr", in *Knowledge is Light. Essays in Honor of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, edited by Zailan Moris, Chicago, 1999, p.230.

9 This is something important to bear in mind when one wishes to do full justice to his understanding of and attachment to tradition. Seyyed Hossein Nasr is in a sense himself a remarkable product of tradition.

none of these authors can be considered as "converts."10 This is best illustrated by the following lines from Guénon's correspondence:

I cannot let it said that I "converted to Islam" for this way of presenting things is completely false; whoever is aware of the essential unity of traditions is therefore "unconvertible" to whatsoever, and he is even the only one to be so; but one may "settle", if one may say so, in such or such a tradition depending upon circumstances, and above all for reasons of an initiatory order.

11 Thirdly, Nasr is the only foremost perennialist writer to have received an intensive and advanced academic training in modern sciences. Although Guénon was a mathematician of background, he was not directly involved in the study of modern sciences nor did he manifest much interest in going beyond a general critique of modern scientific reductionism. Titus Burckhardt, and to a lesser extent Frithjof Schuon, has left us with remarkably perceptive arguments and analyses against such scientific axioms as macro-evolutionism and the superstition of materialism.

12 It belonged to Seyyed Hossein Nasr

13 to delve in a much more comprehensive and systematic fashion into the fallacies 10 For his part, Seyyed Hossein Nasr writes about Schuon's "conversion" to Islam, a term that Schuon has never used to refer to his own spiritual journey: "From the time of his conversion to Islam, [Schuon] lived as a Muslim although hidden from the public..."

"Frithjof Schuon and the Islamic Tradition," *Sophia*, Volume 5, Number 1, Summer 1999, p.30-31.

11 "René Guénon et la tradition hindoue", Alain Daniélou, *Dossier H René Guénon*, ed. Pierre-Marie Sigaud, L'Age d'Homme: Lausanne-Paris, 1984, p.138.

12 See *Mirror of the Intellect*, Quinta Essentia, 1986.

13 One must also mention, in the same vein, the works of Fernand Brunner, Whitall Perry, Wolfgang Smith, and Giovanni Monastra; the latter two being established scientists in their own right.

of a science disconnected from metaphysical principles. 14 He did so, in works such *The Encounter of Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1968), *Islamic Science: An Illustrated Study* (London: World of Islam Festival Trust, 1976), *Western Science and Asian Cultures* (New Delhi: Indian Council for Cultural Relations, 1976), *The Need for a Sacred Science* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993) and *Religion and the Order of Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), against the double background of his being conversant in traditional Islamic sciences and having been trained in physics at M.I.T. This dimension of his work –in addition to his natural sensibility to the beauty and majesty of nature and his metaphysical acumen-- also provided him with the most effective

intellectual tools to tackle the contemporary predicament of the environmental crisis with a unique cogency. The three aforementioned characteristics have allowed him, in a sense, to be the ideal spokesman of the perennialist perspective in the public forum, both in academia and beyond. His familiarity and identification with Islam, his

14 “With his unyielding stance, Nasr also opens up a new avenue for facing up the challenge of modern science without sacrificing the traditional ideas and values, and for rejecting the totalizing claims of the modern secular worldview which continue ever increasingly to dominate every facet of human life. Considering the current positions taken on science, which have been either total submission in the case of modernism or an inchoate rejection in the case of postmodernism and its associates, Nasr’s critical approach offers a veritable alternative to both extremes, inviting us to a serious deliberation over the very terms of the problem. In this sense, the reassertion of the religious view of the universe and its meaning for natural sciences is indubitably of prime importance, not only for the followers of any particular religion but for the whole of humanity.” Ibrahim Kalin, *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, edited by L.E. Hahn, Randall E. Auxier and Lucian W. Stone, Jr., Chicago, 2001, p.458.

validation as a recognized scholar and respected member of the scholarly community, and his conceptual proficiency in modern scientific languages have all contributed to make him a particularly apt interpreter of perennialist ideas in the contemporary public arena. If we now look at Nasr's contribution, one may consider that there are four main dimensions of Seyyed Hossein Nasr's contribution to the world of the spirit, and it could be said, therefore, that there are --so to speak--four Seyyed Hossein Nasr. These four identities and functions could be defined as follow: --the gnostic, the esoterist whose work is situated in the wake of Frithjof Schuon's intellectual opus and spiritual path, -- the revivificator of the Islamic intelligentsia who has devoted many efforts to fostering a greater understanding of the intellectual roots of the Islamic tradition, -- the intellectual and spiritual pedagogue whose teachings have aimed at and contributed to providing a cohesive religious framework for young Muslims and for some others, --and finally the interpreter of Islam for Western audiences, one would almost be tempted to say one of the quasi-official spokesman of Islam in the West. From a most fundamental standpoint, these four dimensions of Nasr's personality and work are essentially connected. As the tradition that he defines, describes and embraces, Nasr's *opus* is an organic whole that ranges over multiple levels of reality. From another standpoint, this plurality of dimensions may tend to obscure the less "visible" esoteric and gnostic kernel that animates the whole of Nasr's contribution. To put it another way, it could be argued that the wide and manifold array of concerns that encompasses Nasr's work cannot but contribute to veiling the informal and transcendent core that he inherited from other major perennialists and particularly from Frithjof Schuon. In what follows, we would like to support this thesis by reference to two aspects of Nasr's symbolic language, as

well as --briefly and *in fine*-- by alluding to what appears to be his vision of the role of formal religions --and particularly Islam-- in the modern world and the ways in which it may be deemed to differ from Schuon's emphasis in this respect. In doing so, we will tend to emphasize --for quasi-pedagogical reasons-- Nasr's specific interpretation of the perennialist perspective, which will lead us to focus on some of his differences from Schuon. One may question the usefulness of such an exercise in distinction since, after all, what matters most is essential commonality and convergence.

Our answer to this is that distinction is not a mere intellectual exercise, it is also an opportunity for sharpening one's discernment, thereby reaching a better understanding, such discerning understanding being a key to a more effective concentration on the essential. The first symbolic image that can be considered as representative of Nasr's vision is that of the flow of a river. This image is conjured by Nasr's understanding and description of tradition. Such a symbolic representation places the emphasis on *continuity* on two levels: that of the transmission that ranges from the source of a given revelation to the present, and that of the organic integrality of the whole set of disciplines and institutions that encompasses a whole given traditional civilization. Adventitious images that are suggested by Nasr's vision are those of a mighty fortress and a merciful abode, Nasr's concept of tradition being moreover akin to that of a mother keeping her children out of trouble. In his works, Nasr envisages tradition as an instrumental and ideal *sine qua non*, as a guarantee of spiritual authenticity and a virtually infinite source of grace. This is certainly an aspect of his work which is in consonance with Guénon and Schuon. However, much of Schuon's work has to do with situating, explaining and criticizing or rejecting a variety of formal characteristics and phenomena that encumbers the traditional scene and may be stumbling blocks for well-intentioned and sincere seekers who do not necessarily participate in a kind of "nationalist" enthusiasm toward a given tradition. Schuon does not hesitate to criticize some aspects of the Islamic or Christian traditions that may veil the essentiality and universality of these religious messages; not only from the standpoint of human abuses, but even from the standpoint of providential opportuneness. For Schuon, tradition is not only a safe, merciful and organic milieu as it is for Nasr, it is also a set of phenomena, some of which problematic, that may be objectified by the Intellect, the divine intelligence in us. In this connection, Schuon went so far as to suggest that, in a sense, religions are like "heresies" in relation to *Religio Perennis*. In Schuon's symbolic language, the nurturing function of water is not primarily identified to the flow of a river but rather to the fertilizing and direct descent of rain. This image suggests vertical descent in "space" and discontinuity in "time." This is the principle of esoterism, which is referred to in Islam as the purview of *al-Khidr*, the universal initiator whose injunction transcends the Law.¹⁵ It must be granted that tradition also stems from "vertical" revelation as it could not be understood independently from this vertical axis. As Reza Shah-Kazemi has rightfully emphasized following Henry Corbin, "a tradition transmits itself as something alive, since it is a ceaselessly renewed inspiration, and not a funeral cortège or a register of conformist opinion."

(*Sacred Web 7*, p.44, *En Islam Iranien*, I). Nasr would be the first to recognize that tradition is an ever renewed miracle. But at the same time, he seems more interested in emphasizing the organic and integral unfolding of tradition, which is both the principle of its effectiveness and that of its necessary limitations and "scandals", which Nasr is less readily disposed to point.

15 "We can compare this particular mode of inspiration and orthodoxy that is esoterism to the rain falling vertically from the sky, whereas the river — the common tradition — flows horizontally in a continuous flow; that is to say that the tradition springs from a source, it declares itself connected with a given founder of a religion, whereas esoterism refers in addition, and above all a priori, to an invisible filiation, one which in the Bible is represented by Melchizedek, Solomon and Elijah, and which Sufism links to al-Khidr, the mysterious immortal." "Le mystère de la substance prophétique", *Approches du phénomène religieux*, Paris, 1984, p.185.

Another fundamental symbol that may help us to delineate more clearly the subtle but very real differences that distinguishes Nasr's perspective from Schuon's is that of the shell or husk and the kernel. It is very revealing to observe that this very same symbolic representation of the relationship between essence and form, or inner spirituality and outer religion, --which is a recurrent signifier in many mystical discourses East and West-- is envisaged from a very distinct point of view in Nasr's and Schuon's writings. As a German gnostic in the lineage of Meister Eckhart and the Medieval Northern European mystics, Schuon repeatedly refers to Eckhart's formula: "If you want the kernel, you need to break the husk."¹⁶ The kernel is the esoteric wisdom, the Religion of the Heart that is in principle independent from any religious language, the husk is the formal language of a given religion. Schuon's esoteric approach starts with this "breaking of the shell" that amounts to an intuitive or intellective grasp of Reality that allows to read each confessional language from within or starting from the essence. "Breaking the husk" also means that Schuon's metaphysical language and spiritual focus cannot be located in a particular traditional world since they are intrinsically universal.¹⁷ Much of Schuon's work is actually a "breaking of the husk" in the sense that it highlights the limitations,

16 "Man has attachments, his instinct of preservation may lead him into error, and that is why, in many cases, to be objective is to die a little. (...) "If thou wouldst reach the kernel," said Eckhart, "thou must break the shell." *Le Soufisme voile et quintessence*, Paris, 1980, p.8. biases, and sometimes inconsistencies of the external manifestation of religious traditions. It could be said, at least symbolically, that Schuon's spiritual personality is "Shivaite" whereas Nasr's is by and large "Visnuite." Schuon is a "destroyer of illusory peace" (as suggested by his first name Frithjof) who reduces forms to the naked essence and reintegrates them into the supraformal Truth, whereas Nasr's enterprise has to do with conserving, protecting, stabilizing and transmitting.

In a sense, Seyyed Hossein Nasr's intellectual and spiritual path is different from Schuon's, since the latter starts from esoterism to go toward Islam while

the former has its starting point is Islam while its ultimate destination is esoterism or gnosis.¹⁸ In this connection, an examination of the relationship between esoterism and Islam in Schuon's writings will provide us with a particularly relevant avenue of understanding Schuon's notion of "quintessential esoterism" and the extent to which it must be distinguished from Nasr's understanding of esoterism.¹⁹ It could be said that, through his

17 "Esoterism is without a country and it establishes itself wherever it can." *Le Soufisme voile et quintessence*, p.45.

18 This "direction" is moreover related to Nasr's tendency to bring the entire religion into esoterism, so to speak; and this is no doubt in keeping with major trends of Islamic esoterism. "Islam has the tendency — in Sufism — either to reduce or to bring the entire religion to esoterism; a tendency particularly marked in the Shiites, who go so far as to make gnosis a confessional article of faith." Frithjof Schuon, "Concerning Delimitations in Moslem Spirituality", *In the Face of the Absolute*.

19 Nasr tends to equate Schuon's universalist perspective with that of famous Sufi like Ibn 'Arabî or Rûmî. Such an identification is only partially valid however, as Schuon has explained himself in *Sufism, veil and quintessence*. The traditional Sufi leaning toward universality must be situated in the context of love's abolition of boundaries and limitations, most important distinction between "esoteric Islam" and "Islamic esoterism", Schuon refers to the distinction between a spiritual perspective that envisages esoterism from the point of view of Islam and one that envisages Islam from the point of view of esoterism. This is far from being a mere academic subtlety or hair splitting. In fact, it could be argued that most of the hermeneutic divergences to which Schuon's work has given rise stem from this very distinction. In other words, one may be interested in esoterism because of Islam, as one may be interested in Islam because of esoterism. Denying that such a difference in outlook must have some important consequences on the doctrinal level as well as on the spiritual plane amounts to missing one of the main points of Schuon's "quintessential esoterism." For instance, it is clear that this distinction runs parallel to a difference of perspective in terms of and not necessarily interpreted literally as a full recognition of the transcendent unity of religions, a recognition that would have been anyway highly problematic in a homogeneous traditional context. The case of Ibn Arabî is no doubt different from Rûmî's in this respect.

Still, this universalism reveals very clear boundaries as Schuon illustrated in the following passage: "In his *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq*, Ibn 'Arabi sings: "My heart has become receptive to every form . . . a temple for idols, a kaaba for a Moslem pilgrim, the tablets of the Torah and the book of the Koran. I adhere to the religion of love . . . "All religious forms, Ibn 'Arabi comments, unite in the love of God, and yet: "No religion is more excellent than the one founded on the love — and the need — of God . . . This religion of love is the prerogative

of the Moslems; for the station of the most perfect love has been imparted to the Prophet Mohammed exclusively, and not to the other prophets; for God accepted him as his wellbeloved friend.” The extenuating circumstance for this abrupt and unintelligible denominationalism is the fact that for each religion, the Prophet who founded it is the sole personification of the total, and not the partial, Logos; however, one might expect an esoterist not to enclose himself in this concept-symbol, but to make mention, since he has opted for the essence, of the relativity of forms—even those that are dear to him — and to do so in an objective and concrete, and not merely metaphorical manner; or else to remain silent, out of pity.” Cf. *Le Soufisme*, p.49, note 29.

understanding the function and priority of esoterism. An interest in esoterism from the standpoint of Islam, and for the sake of Islam --or a kind of "confirmation" or validation of Islam by esoterism if one wishes-- will almost unavoidably entail an emphasis on the revivification and expansion of Islam by means of esoteric truths. The outward-leaning, public and “apostolic” tendencies of this perspective 20 are not just coincidences: they stem from the very understanding of "esoterism" and its "mission." On the other hand, the perspective of quintessential esoterism will be characterized by an understanding of Islam as an extrinsic "support" for esoterism, and its overall priority will be more conservative than expansive. This is so to speak the distinction that may drawn between the Hindu emphasis on the integral "conservation" of the *Sanâtana Dharma* and the Christian and Islamic "preaching to all nations."

Another major consequence of this divergence lies in the extent to which esoterism may be allowed to manifest itself in the full range of its possibilities. In the perspective of esoterism as a "confirmation" of Islam, the former will remain always more or less "hidden", "partial" and implicit. It will be the responsibility of the individual seeker, if he is able to break the husk and

20 Seyyed Hossein Nasr is obviously quite aware –as testified by his essays on the topic—that esoterism cannot be “preached.” However, his Islamic emphasis makes it sometimes difficult to distinguish between his esoteric identity and his Islamic function, whence the ambiguities of some of his positions. if he is allowed to do so by an ambience that is not likely to be conducive to such a "breaking", to look for the *haqîqah* hidden in the form. On the contrary, the perspective of quintessential esoterism will allow, in principle, for the fullest or maximal manifestation of the "nature of things" in doctrinal and methodical matters. Its reference point will be "things as they are" rather than things as they are providentially envisaged by Islam. This difference stems from the fact that integral esoterism will tend to consider Islam as a "validation" of the truth, rather than considering itself as a "validation" of Islam. When esoterism is primarily envisaged as a validation of Islam, some of its aspects are cast aside or looked upon with suspicion or unease, precisely because they do not necessarily fit the mold of the Islamic *upâya* or other traditional "frames of mind." By contrast, quintessential esoterism will not consider the entire formal complex of Islam as compatible with its perspective,

which is why it will focus on the central and essential elements of its spiritual perspective, those which may provide a direct entrance into the *haqîqah*. On the one hand, esoterism will keep the confessional and ethnic limitations of Islam at bay, on the other it will understand its central tenets and practices from the point of view of universal gnosis. As Schuon has illustrated this point in an unpublished text: performing

21 A case in point is the network of juridical injunctions upon which the exoterist mentality particularly flourishes and thrives. Another example would be what Schuon calls a pedantic or “meticulous karma-yoga” in ritual matters, which must not be confused with an impeccable attention to the performance of daily rites. the *çalât* will not be conceived and lived as the fulfillment of an Islamic duty, it will rather be envisaged as a direct expression of the relationship between man and God. This amounts to saying that quintessential esoterism will never consider Islam independently from the nature of things and from the integral structure of reality. By contrast, it could be said that “esoteric Islam” will never allow itself to consider esoterism independently from Islam.

22 Finally, a major concomitance of the contrast of what has just been sketched lies in the fact that, whereas integral esoterism is always “comfortable” with recognizing the legitimacy of more exoteric and formalistic perspectives, partial esoterism experiences a tension between its call to universality and its sentimental solidarity with Islam. This tension will more than often result in anathemas against all intellectual and existential manifestations of esoterism that appear to lie outside the strict and conventional cadre of the Islamic tradition, or at least outside its recorded and accepted historical manifestations. Another relevant aspect of this distinction is related to the gradual process of assimilation of the truth, or to the logical and chronological sequence in which a spiritual seeker will proceed:

This appears for example in the way in which Nasr reads Schuon’s entire metaphysics, including his writings on religions other than Islam, as a commentary on the *shahâdah*, an assertion that is literally impeccable but which has the obvious inconvenience of appearing to “annex” traditional metaphysics to the Islamic territory. By contrast, Schuon has tirelessly written and asserted that his doctrinal point of departure is the *Advaita Vedânta*. His conceptual language is Advaitin, much more so than it is Sufi. A Westerner desirous of following an esoteric way would find it logical first of all to inform himself of the doctrine, then to enquire about the method and finally about its general conditions; but the Moslem of esoteric inclination — and the attitude of the Kabbalist is doubtless analogous — has definitely the opposite tendency: if one speaks to him of metaphysics, he will find it natural to reply that one must begin at the beginning, namely with pious exercises and all sorts of religious observances; metaphysics will be for later. He does not seem to realize that in the eyes of the Westerner, as also of the Hindu, this is to deprive the pious practices of their sufficient reason— not in themselves of course but with a

view to knowledge — and to make the way almost unintelligible; and above all, the Semitic zealot does not see that understanding of doctrine cannot result from a moral and individualistic zeal, but that on the contrary it is there to inaugurate a new dimension and to elucidate its nature and purpose.

By contrast with the eso-exoteric anteriority of pious practice over metaphysical understanding, Schuon's spiritual pedagogy stresses the primacy of *jnana-yoga* over *karma-yoga* and he never interprets the former as an complexifying intensification of the latter. His teachings emphasize the essential dimension of forms and does not subordinate this essence to any kind of psychological or moral opportuneness or expediency. In other words, his main motto is that "there is no right superior to that of truth." Truth needs to be expressed in its "nakedness" for those who "have ears to hear." Those who are not ready, for one legitimate reason or another,²⁴ to acknowledge this uncolored truth may find more suitable paths in the context of more "colored"

23 It is important to add the *caveat* that Schuon specifies that this limitation, as any other, is only reprehensible to the extent that it denies the other possibility for "the moralistic attitude is only blameworthy through its ignorance of the opposite point of view or through its exaggeration, for in fact, the doctrine deserves on our part an element of reverential fear. " perspectives. By contrast with esoterism that does not compromise on the totality of truth, eso-exoteric perspectives will willingly veil and sacrifice some elements of truth to adapt to the limitations and conditioning of some or most of their faithful.

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As we have suggested above, the formal characteristics of Seyyed Hossein Nasr's Islamic point of departure determine the very scope and style of his outlook and the way in which he proceeds toward the *religio perennis*. In his work, the symbol of the "husk and the kernel" takes a very different meaning from the one that is assigned to it by Schuon. In this connection, the emphasis is on the protective and nurturing function of the shell. The main concern seems to be on transmission and protection, rather than on unveiling and liberating:

Religion is like a walnut, with both a shell and the core or fruit which can grow and possess existence only within the shell.

This understanding of the relationship between shell and core is also in full consonance with Nasr's interpretation of Schuon's concept of esoterism: Schuon's aim is to substantiate the reality of esoterism not as a vaguely defined reality by itself, but within each orthodox religion, thereby

24 And needless to say that these limitations have nothing to do with the level of sanctification.

25 *The Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon*, edit. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Elements, New York, 1986, p.12.

strengthening religion as such and even exoterism as considered in itself and independent of the esoteric.

26 Although this statement is literally accurate in what it includes, it is not necessarily so in what it implicitly excludes. Schuon certainly does not define esoterism in vaguely universal terms, but he does not restrict the meaning of this notion to its relative manifestations in specific traditions, as clearly shown by several passages of his work, like the following one in which he distinguishes between "esoterism as such" and the "esoterism of a particular tradition" :

Thus esoterism as such is metaphysics, to which is necessarily joined an appropriate method of realization. But the esoterism of a particular religion—of a particular exoterism precisely—tends to adapt itself to this religion and thereby enter into theological, psychological and legalistic meanders foreign to its nature, while preserving in its secret center its authentic and plenary nature, but for which it would not be what it is.

This passage, that is echoed by many others in Schuon's writings, clearly establishes that esoterism cannot be reduced to doctrinal metaphysics since it includes "an appropriate method of realization." The fact that this esoterism is distinguished from the "esoterism of a particular tradition" clearly indicates that the "method of realization" that is part of esoterism, even though necessarily derived from a particular tradition in its forms, is not to be identified with the
26 Ibid., p.13.

27 The fact that Schuon approved and saluted Nasr's introduction to the *Essential Writings* does not imply that he would have himself emphasized the same elements of his own teachings. It simply indicates that Nasr's presentation does not contradict nor betray the substance of Schuon's work. Moreover, it should be noted that a spiritual Master tends to "speak the language" of his interlocutor, which often explains why various "perceptions" and understandings of the same message may greatly differ. "theological, psychological and legalistic meanders foreign to its nature" that form the external and collective characters of a given tradition. The objection that is often raised against this consistent understanding of esoterism lies in Schuon's assertion that —outside of an infinitesimally small quantity of exceptions-- esoterism cannot be practiced independently from an exoteric framework. The fact is that this has never been in doubt for any serious readers of Schuon, all the more so for any of those who situate themselves in his spiritual wake. The real questions that this truism tends to veil are the following: --to what extent and in what ways does the independence of principle that the esoteric outlook enjoys vis-à-vis traditional forms affect the intellectual outlook and spiritual practices of the esoterist, --and what are the consequences of this esoteric outlook upon the relationship between the esoterist and the collective psychic

climate of any given tradition, including that in which he has “established himself”, to use Guénon’s term? Schuon’s answers to these questions are crystal-clear. With respect to the intellectual perspective of gnosis, it is unambiguously stated that it is independent from objections from the traditional framework:

The ‘subjective supernatural’ has need –‘accidentally’ and not ‘essentially’—of the ‘objective supernatural’, but once it is thus ‘awakened to itself’ by what corresponds to it outside of us, no extrinsic objection can concern it further.

28 Frithjof Schuon, *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*, Bloomington: 1986, p.115.

29 Frithjof Schuon, *Gnosis, Divine Wisdom*, Bedford: 1990, p.32 As for the spiritual practices, it is no less clear that they are essentially contained in the inner core of the tradition, that is quintessential prayer: The *Dhikr* contains the whole Law (*Shari’ah*) and it is the reason for the existence of the whole Law;

this is declared by the Koranic verse: “Verily prayer (the exoteric practice) prevents man from committing what is shameful (sully) and blameworthy; and verily the remembrance (invocation) of God (the esoteric practice) is greater. (*Sura of the Spider*, 45).

The formula “the remembrance of God is greater” or “the greatest thing” (*Wa la-dhikru ‘Llahi akbar*) evokes and paraphrases the following words from the Canonical Prayer: “God is greater” or “the greatest” (*Allahu akbar*) and this indicates a mysterious connection between God and His Name; it also indicates a certain relativity — from the point of view of gnosis — of the outward rites, which are nevertheless indispensable in principle and in the majority of cases.

In this connection we could also quote the following *hadith*: one of the Companions said to the Prophet: “O Messenger of God, the prescriptions of Islam are too numerous for me; tell me something that I can hold fast to.” The Prophet replied: “Let thy tongue always be supple (in movement) with the mention (the remembrance) of God.” This *hadith*, like the verse we have just quoted, expresses by allusion (*isharah*) the principle of the inherence of the whole *Shari’ah* in the *Dhikr* alone.

The concentration on quintessential prayer is both the ultimate limit of the interiorizing and “deepening of the symbols of exoterism” –in so far as the Divine Name is the essence of the whole tradition-- and the supreme

30 “ This is the point of view of all invocatory disciplines, such as the Hindu *japa-yoga* or the Amidist *nembutsu (buddhanusmriti)*. This *yoga* is found in *jnana* as well as in *bhakti*: “Repeat the Sacred Name of the Divinity,” said Shankaracharya in one of his hymns.” Ibid.

31 “God and His Name are identical,” as Ramakrishna said; and he certainly was not the first to say so.

32 This reservation (“indispensable in principle and in the majority of cases”) does not contradict the principle of “the inherence of the whole *Shari’ah* in the *Dhikr* alone.” First, it applies to the central rites of the religion and not necessarily to the whole host of traditional practices and juridical edicts that the tradition carries in its wake. Second, the expression “in principle” suggests the possibility of legitimate “facts” that would not conform to it. Thirdly, the reference to the “majority of cases” leaves room for exceptions and points to a collective norm and equilibrium rather than to an absolute spiritual necessity.

33 Cf. *Le Soufisme voile et quintessence*, Paris, 1980, p.126.

“affirmation of the independence of the essence vis-à-vis form“ ---inasmuch as it may absorb the whole traditional form.

As for the non-identification of the gnostic with the limitative aspects of the collective ambience of a given tradition, Schuon has extensively delved into this issue, especially in *Sufism, veil and quintessence*. This question is essentially connected to Schuon’s discussion of the spiritual function of the caste system. The advantage of the Hindu system is that it greatly favors the purity of esoteric spirituality; in the absence of such a system, esoterism becomes too closely linked with the average collective mentality which cannot be proportionate to the demands of a disinterested perspective or, in other words, cannot be entirely free from denominational narcissism.

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Let us conclude with a few further reflections on Schuon and Nasr’s perspectives on religion in the modern world. Schuon’s explicit objective is minimally expressed as a wish to restore the sense of prayer in the life of a few of his readers: “if our writings had on average no other result than that of

34 “We have here the two essential aspects of plenary esoterism: on the one hand the penetration of the symbols of exoterism and on the other hand, on the contrary, the affirmation of the independence — and pre-excellence — of essence with regard to forms, or of substance with regard to accidents, that is, precisely, the formulations of the common religion. As regards this “non-conformist” aspect of esoterism, we would say, by way of illustration, that the abrogations of Koranic verses on the one hand and the matrimonial exceptions in the life of the Prophet on the other hand, are there to indicate respectively the relativity of the formal Revelation and of social morality; which amounts to saying that these abrogations and exceptions pertain to the esoteric perspective, leaving aside their immediate and practical significance.”

Cf. *Le Soufisme*, p.33.

35 *Le Soufisme*, p.83.

restituting for some this saving boat that is prayer we would owe to God to be profoundly satisfied." 36 This objective concerns individuals, not traditions as such, and it has no confessional priority nor agenda. Note also that Schuon has no illusions concerning the present state of formal religions; he writes, in this connection, "in the past the prince of darkness fought against religions mostly from outside, (...) in our times, he has added to this fight a new stratagem (...) that consists in taking over religions from within, and he has widely succeeded in this, in the world of Islam as well as in Judaism and Christianity."37 Nasr is certainly aware of the deviations and corruption of traditional religions in the modern world. His book on *Traditional Islam in the Modern World* is the best evidence for this. However, he seems to place a greater emphasis on the spiritual function of traditional heritages in the eschatological destiny of the world. His conclusive remarks in the series "Searching for God in America" particularly emphasizes the role of Islam in this respect, a role that he defines as "upholding the promise of the sacred until the end of times." 38And Godknows best.

36 Cf. *Le Jeu des masques*, Paris-Lausanne, 1992, p.7.

37 *Christianisme/Islam: Visions d'oecuménisme ésotérique*, Milano, 1981, p.78.

38 This eschatological vision can moreover be related to Nasr's statement that "Jesus will return as a Muslim in the sense that he will unite all believers in total submission to the one God." (*Newsweek*, March 27, 2000, p.57)

Christianity and the Perennial Philosophy

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Forthcoming in *Christianity: A Complete Guide*, edited by John Bowden (Continuum Press)

Theologians and philosophers of religion have understood the perennial philosophy in two distinct ways. Among Roman Catholic writers, those influenced in particular by the teachings of St Thomas Aquinas, it is often associated with the classical heritage of ancient Greece and Rome and refers to beliefs about God, human nature, virtue, and knowledge that church fathers and medieval scholastics share with pre-Christian philosophers, notably Plato and Aristotle. The Latin expression *philosophia perennis*, 'perennial philosophy', was probably first employed in this sense by Agostino Steuco (1496-1549), a Vatican librarian, and was given currency in the early eighteenth century by the philosopher Leibniz. More recently, the phrase has been used in a broader way to refer to the idea that all of the world's great religious traditions are expressions of a single, saving truth. Comparing this truth to a perennial flower, a perennialist asserts that there is one divine Source of all wisdom, which has repeatedly blossomed forth throughout history.

The major religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, are different forms of that wisdom and are sometimes referred to as paths leading to the same summit or dialects of a common language.

Understood in this second sense, the perennial philosophy was popularized in the twentieth century by Aldous Huxley in a book by that title (1946). Its best known and most authoritative exponents, however, are Ananda Coomaraswamy, René Guénon, and especially Frithjof Schuon, whose *Transcendent Unity of Religions* (1948) has been of signal importance in defining the contemporary perennialist viewpoint. According to Schuon and those of his school, a distinction must be made between the exoteric or outer and the esoteric or inner dimensions of religion. Outwardly the doctrines of the world's religions are clearly different, even contradictory, as can be seen in their theologies. The Hindu tradition, for example, includes many Gods, Judaism insists there is only one God, and Buddhism declares the question of God to be moot. Or again, Christianity believes that God is a Trinity and that the divine Son was incarnate as Jesus Christ, beliefs explicitly rejected by Islam. According to the perennial philosophy, however, such outwardly divergent teachings, providentially adapted to the spiritual, psychological, and cultural needs of different peoples at different stages of history, can be inwardly reconciled by those who are sensitive to their metaphysical and symbolic meanings and prepared to follow the golden thread of the dogmatic letter to its deeper spiritual meaning. It is for this reason that one finds such a remarkable consensus among the greatest mystics and sages, such as Shankara in Hinduism, Ibn Arabi in Islam, and Meister Eckhart in Christianity.

The perennial philosophy may be classified as a kind of pluralism, though with two important qualifications. First, unlike many pluralists, perennial philosophers do not believe that every religious tradition is valid, but distinguish between true religions

and their human or demonic counterfeits and, within authentic traditions, between orthodox and heretical forms. Some paths go all the way to the summit, but others circle aimlessly around the base of the mountain or lead away toward the desert. Second, where pluralism sees religion as resulting from human efforts to reach out to a divine Reality that can never be known as it is in itself, perennialism teaches that the world's true or orthodox religions are directly revealed by that Reality, each of them corresponding to an archetype within the divine mind. Revealed traditions do not communicate merely partial or complementary truths, which must then be combined by the syncretist to achieve a complete understanding. Rather, each is fully true in the sense that it provides its adherents with everything they need for reaching the highest or most complete human state, a state in which they will be able to confirm the truth experientially through their participation in the very nature of God.

It must be admitted that traditional Christianity is largely hostile to the perennial philosophy. In considering the claims of other religions, most Christians have been either exclusivists, denying the possibility of salvation to anyone outside the church, or inclusivists, extending the possibility of salvation only to those non-Christians who are invincibly ignorant of the Gospel but who belong to the church by their desire for salvation and benefit thereby from the redeeming work of the incarnate Son. But to say with perennialism that Christianity is but one among several revealed religions and that non-Christians can be saved independently of the events of the Gospel has seemed to most Christians a contradiction to their faith. Since Vatican II the Roman Catholic Church, for example, has adopted a primarily inclusivist stance, acknowledging the presence of certain partial truths in other religions, and yet in its declaration *Dominus Iesus* (2000) it explicitly repudiates the idea that there could be ways of salvation apart from Jesus Christ, whose historical passion, death, and resurrection are said to be the essential means of redemption for all.

According to Schuon and other perennialists, this dominant attitude among Christians is not surprising, nor should its usefulness for the vast majority of believers be called into question. The entire point of any religion is to ensure the salvation of as many people as possible, and most people, whether Christian or otherwise, are able to take their tradition seriously only if they are persuaded that it is the best, if not the only, way to reach God. Critics have argued that the New Testament, taken as a whole, is opposed to the perennial philosophy, and this is by and large true. Muslims could offer a parallel criticism, and they too would be correct in saying that the Qur'an, however positively it may sometimes speak about other People of the Book, nonetheless gives priority to those who follow the example of Muhammad. But for the perennialist this simply shows that the primary aim of the world's religions, beginning with their scriptures and apostolic authorities, is to assist their adherents in remaining focused on a single form of saving truth, not to lay the foundations for interfaith dialogue. On the other hand, given the common origin of the religions in a transcendent Source which, as the traditions themselves all attest, infinitely exceeds even its own self-expressions, it is in the nature of things that the scriptural and dogmatic formulations of each religion should include certain openings or clues to the underlying validity of the perennial philosophy. These clues may be found not simply on the periphery of religious traditions, but in their most central and essential doctrines.

This is certainly the case with Christianity, where one of the most important openings can be found in the traditional understanding of the Person of Christ. Christians who believe that their religion is either uniquely or decisively true often support their position by quoting Christ's words, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one

comes to the Father but by me' (John 14:6). According to perennialist theologians, however, an exclusivist, or even inclusivist, interpretation of this and other such passages is by no means necessary and may in fact betray a heretical Christology. For in the developed doctrine of the ecumenical councils, the true person of Christ, that is, the subject who thinks his thoughts, speaks his words, and is the agent of all his actions, is the eternal Word or Son of God, the second Person of the Trinity. Jesus Christ is not a man who was adopted by God, nor a man in whom God was the indwelling presence, nor an intermediate being created by God as the highest of creatures, nor again a composite being who was partly divine and partly human. Who Jesus is, is the divine Son, 'of one essence with the Father', 'by whom all things were made' (Nicene Creed).

Of all the gospels, John is the most emphatic in this regard, for the same Person who says of himself that he is the only way to the Father also says that 'before Abraham was, I am' (John 8:58), a passage whose very tenses undercut the identification of Christ with a strictly temporal set of saving facts. Christian perennialists conclude that it is a mistake to confuse the uniqueness of the only-begotten and eternal Son of God with the alleged singularity of his historical manifestation in first-century Palestine. Without denying that there is only one Son of God, or that he alone is the author of salvation, or that Jesus Christ is that Son, they contend that there are no Biblical or dogmatic grounds for supposing that this one Son has limited his saving work to his incarnate presence as Jesus. On the contrary, as St Athanasius and other early fathers insisted, though the Word "became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14), he was not confined by his body even during his earthly ministry.

It is sometimes objected that this line of reasoning drives a wedge between the two natures of Christ, diminishing the integrity and importance of the historical Jesus in favor of the Word or cosmic Christ. But this is to forget that a separate Jesus of history, understood as a particular man with a temporally conditioned psychology, is largely the invention of modern scholars, who are themselves often at odds with the very teachings that traditionalist Christians intend to safeguard. According to the fathers, especially those who interpreted the Council of Chalcedon (451) along the lines established by St Cyril of Alexandria, the Jesus of history *is* the cosmic Christ, for there is no historical person to be conceived alongside or in addition to the eternal Person of the only Son. Of course, the humanity of Jesus cannot be denied. 'Like us in all things except for sin' (Definition of Chalcedon), he was truly born, truly crucified, and truly raised from the dead. But in encountering this humanity what one encounters is not an individual human being—not some 'man of Nazareth'—but human nature as such, assumed into God and thus divinized.

Once this subtle point has been grasped, a number of other scriptural teachings begin to take on a more encompassing meaning. One reads in a new and fresh way that Christ is 'the true light who enlightens every man that comes into the world' (John 1:9), that he has 'other sheep who are not of this fold' (John 10:16), and that 'God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him' (Acts 10:34-35); and one notices that the events of Christ's passion on Golgotha are the working out at a particular time and place of a strictly timeless salvation, for the Lamb of God, whose 'act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men' (Rom. 5:18), is 'slain from the foundation of the world' (Rev. 13:8). Following the thread of such clues, one begins to sense that the Son or Word, far from being limited to a single religion, is the divine principle behind all revelation and the eternal source of salvation in every authentic tradition. Though truly incarnate as Jesus Christ in Christianity, he is salvifically operative in and through non-

Christian religions as well. In some he is present in an equally personal way, as in Krishna and the other Hindu avatars, in whom he was also 'made man' (Nicene Creed), while in others he appears in an impersonal way, as in the Qur'an of Islam, where he made himself book.

The concern is often expressed that a perennialist interpretation of Christianity has the effect of demoting Christ, making him only one among a variety of competing saviors. But if 'by their fruits' (Matt. 7:20) one may discern whether religions are valid and if the good fruit of sanctity is often found growing along non-Christian paths, it will perhaps seem instead that the power and scope of the Son of God are actually much greater than Christians had been led to believe, and the perennial philosophy will itself appear as a kind of inclusivism, but with an inclusivity no longer centered on Christianity or the church or its sacraments, but on Jesus Christ, the saving Source of all wisdom.

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Introduction of:

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

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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 Maximus 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.

² Hierotheos Vlachos, *A Night in the Desert of the Holy Mountain*, trans. Effie Mavromichali (Levadia, Greece: Birth of the Theotokos Monastery, 1991), p. 31.

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

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* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2003).

⁵ *The Play of Masks* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 1992), p. vii.

traditional Shadhiliyyah-Darqawiyyah 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.”⁶ 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

⁶From 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.”⁷

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

⁷ *Reconsiderations*, I.13.3; see Chapter 2, “The Particular Nature and Universality of the Christian Tradition”, note 4.

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.”⁸

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!”⁹

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 message¹⁰—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

⁸ *First Apology*, 46.

⁹ *Prayers by the Lake* (Grayslake, Illinois: Free Serbian Orthodox Diocese of the United States, n.d.), Chapter 48.

¹⁰ See Chapter 1, “Outline of the Christic Message”.

Christian”,¹¹ that “every truth is necessarily manifested in terms of Christ and on his model”,¹² and that “there is no truth or wisdom that does not come from Christ”.¹³

The following chapters have been chosen from Schuon’s published corpus of twentythree 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”.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

¹¹ *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, trans. G. E. H. Palmer (London: Perennial Books, 1959), p. 67.

¹² *Stations of Wisdom* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 1995), p. 49.

¹³ See Chapter 4, “Some Observations”, p. ___.

¹⁴ *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*, trans. Gustavo Polit (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 1986), p. 1.

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 analogical 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.

RENÉ GUÉNON

Mircea A. Tamas

Our modern world, and mainly the Western world, is now the abode of emotional and rational human beings, more emotional than rational, with no place for intellectual people.

The same way the true Rosy-Cross disappeared and found retreat in Asia, in the Seventeenth-Century, so the intellectual individuals disappeared from our Western public life. One of the last intellectuals, born in the Western world, took refuge in Egypt, where he died fifty years ago; his name: René Guénon. For a long time, Guénon's work was under suspicion, and the official pundits and scholars tried hard to suppress it. A heavy silence reigned over his "subversive" books, maybe one day they would be forgotten. Yet René Guénon was not forgotten. His influence remained so powerful that "the law of silence," which proved to be fruitless, was changed with "the law of logorrhea." Everybody started to use frequently Guénon's name and his writings, including on the Internet, his work being misinterpreted, his intellectual stature being downplayed; the purpose was to reduce Guénon to a common writer or philosopher, and so, to annihilate his spiritual function. For example, the street in Blois, France, where his native house was, is called today "René Guénon, French Orientalist," an insulting definition.

Many are more interested today in Guénon's individuality than in his intellectual works. Others, wearing the mask of appreciation and understanding, have labeled Guénon as an "outsider," suggesting that he knew only superficially the Christian esotericism, the Taoism, Hebrew Kabbalah, the Hindu tradition and even the Islamic doctrines. We may ask ourselves: is or not Guénon an orthodox exponent of the One-and-only Tradition? The answer, for the honest and qualified people, is an easy one: René Guénon was the providential interpreter of the everlasting Tradition. He is the one who, in Occident, brought the metaphysics to its real and deserved brightness, who clearly stated the universal principles of the traditional doctrines, who presented the true face of the initiation, and described the cosmic cycles¹. The Hebrew Kabbalah identifies three main and symbolic elements that constitute the sacred significance of traditional rites and writings: the Cosmos, the Year and the Man (Sepher Ietsirah III.2). Guénon's work was built on studies about cosmogony (the Cosmos), about the theory of the cosmic cycles (the Year) and about the spiritual realization and initiation

¹ "Generally speaking, Guénon's doctrinal work regards the highest universal truths, and also the symbolical rules and the cyclic laws that regulate their traditional adaptation" (Michel Vâlsan, *L'Islam et la fonction de René Guénon*, Les Editions de l'Oeuvre, Paris, 1984, p. 14). Michel Vâlsan, a native Romanian, became after Guénon's corporeal death, the director of Guénon's journal, *Études Traditionnelles*.

(the Man), yet always as applications of the metaphysics, which is the domain of the supreme Principle.

Guénon spent an immense effort to modify the Western mentality, to open the modern mind and thinking towards the metaphysical and initiatory truths, to recover the spiritual and primeval meanings of the traditional symbols, to facilitate the sacred writings to be not only read but also comprehended.¹

That was only a part of his mission. More important is that Guénon succeeded to unify the various particular traditions, to pacify the apparent oppositions, to restore the “ideal model” of what would have been the primordial Tradition; in a conciliatory way, and not at all bias or narrow minded, Guénon assimilated synthetically the fundamental data of the diverse traditional forms, and tried to recompose the primeval form.² Taking into account that the present moment of our cosmic cycle is favorable to the sentimental and emotional elements, especially in the Western world, and that the domain of metaphysics goes far beyond the individuality, René Guénon raised the traditional data at the level of the pure intellect; only there, at the highest level – the order of pure metaphysics, the particular traditions are united in the Unique.³

Voluntarily, he left aside the *bhakti* and *karma* aspects of the doctrine, and even more, he rejected all the heterodox branches of the Tradition, careful not to permit any confusion or pseudo-knowledge to develop. The rigorousness of his writings had as main purpose to modify the superficiality of the Western thinking; even now some sentimental scholars are profoundly unhappy with Guénon’s tough discipline imposed to the style and the form of his work. Guénon’s “superintellectual” approach is, though, the only valid way when a theoretical transmission is involved.⁴ Using mathematical symbols and language, even if disagreeable to some scholars and literate individuals, facilitated a precise and exact style, very different from all the inflated and tortuous phrases of the modern rationalists.

Nicholas of Cusa, who reminds us of René Guénon, writes: “the mathematics represent the scientific domain that offers the most numerous similarities with metaphysics”, and adds: *Nihil certi habemus in nostra scientia, nisi nostram*

¹ “The universal and comprehensive character of Guénon’s teachings explains why these offer the key that permits to the Western people to penetrate within any metaphysical doctrine, by understanding and assimilating its fundamental aspects” (Charles-André Gilis, Introduction à l’enseignement et au mystère de René Guénon, Les Editions de l’Oeuvre, Paris, 1985, p. 11).

² “Exposing truths that were unthinkable for the contemporarily people, Guénon’s metaphysical modes of expression had necessarily an independent character in comparison to the known, or used, doctrinal modes of expression in Occident. On the other hand, because Guénon didn’t attach himself exclusively to a single Oriental tradition, but he found support from everything that was opportune and could serve to express universal ideas, which he gave the synthesis, this characteristic of formal independence exists, for some extent, even in comparison to the doctrinal modes of expression of Orient; this thing was inevitable because René Guénon wrote in a language totally different from the usually languages of the regular doctrines” (Vâlsan, Islam, p. 14).

³ “Such an identity and universality [of the Tradition] is real only for the highest aspect of the metaphysics: regarding this, the Islamic masters said: ‘the doctrine of Unity is unique’ (*at-Tawhîdu wâhidun*)” (Vâlsan, Islam, p. 13).

⁴ “That is why if one would try to translate Guénon’s work in any Oriental language, the translation should be followed by commentaries. Guénon expressed and thought in modes belonging to what we can call a ‘sapiental spirituality,’ modes different from the regular ones that are the support of ‘religions based on revelation’” (Vâlsan, Islam, p. 15).

mathematicam, stressing that from Pythagoras and Plato to Saint Augustine and Boethius, the philosophers stated that nobody can reach the knowledge of the divine order without learning mathematics. “On this path,” concluded Cusa, “we will follow them, and, because there is no other way to lead to the divine order but that of the symbols, we affirm that we may select the mathematical signs, which contain an incorruptible certitude.”¹

There are some people who are upset that Guénon did not develop some specific doctrinal subjects, or, that he did not insist on the Greek-Orthodox tradition, for example, proving that he did not study the Fathers of the Church. Sure, we can be sorry forever that some authors did not write about this or that. Yet in Guénon’s case, we have to stress that he transmitted everything what really counts, offering to the qualified ones an infallible guide in the spiritual domain. His work, even without quoting all the Fathers of the Church, is the best guide to decipher the Christian mystery. And we have to keep in mind that Guénon was not an ordinary scholar or a philosopher or a thinker, or even a spiritual master.

René Guénon, as an individual, did not count, as he himself insisted many times. It is difficult for the modern mentality, totally attached to the order of the *ego* and of the individuality, to accept such a statement. Guénon was invested by, let’s say without elaborating, by the *Superiores Incognitni*² with the function of restoring the primordial Tradition, a function comprising as main objective the modification and regeneration of the Western mentality. His writings do not have other purpose. As a transmitter of the absolute Truth, Guénon’s only “errors” could appear because of the difficulty to dress in human words a Knowledge that surpasses the human and individual domain. Those who call themselves “guénonists,” referring to Guénon as individual, make a terrible mistake. Those who call themselves “guénonists,” referring to Guénon’s work, they are not less mistaking. Guénon’s work is just the porch of the Temple; his work allows a theoretical knowledge of metaphysical order, indispensable (as Guénon himself stated), yet the theoretical learning is just a preparation for the actual spiritual realization. Moreover, his work is “Guénon’s work” only because he wrote it in a book format; his work has universal origins, that is, superhuman. It is totally useless – Gilis stresses – to try to find out the exact circumstances regarding the beginning of Guénon’s initiatory career (Gilis 27). We can assume that between 1908 and 1912 “something” happened to Guénon and he acquired a “universal initiation” that came directly from the spiritual invisible center, let’s call it Agarthā. After that, Guénon followed a more “human” path and was introduced to all the important particular traditions (Islamism, Taoism, Hinduism, Masonry), which seems normal considering his overall initiation. “The spiritual influences, which converge towards him, coming from particular initiatory centers, and having as intermediaries individuals representing the major metaphysical traditions of the East, appear as a consequence of a major event caused by Guénon’s investiture” (Gilis 30).

Guénon “has confirmed himself to André Préau that he received from oral Oriental teaching his knowledge of Hindu doctrines, Islamic esotericism and of Taoism.

¹Nicolas de Cusa, *De la docte Ignorance*, Guy Trédaniel, 1979, p. 58.

² “The mysterious character of René Guénon privileged status is connected to the intervention of a spiritual influence operating ‘outside the regular and common ways of initiation,’ that is, independently of the existent initiatory organizations, which were apt to confer a regular initiatory attachment” (Gilis 26).

Michel Vâlsan, on his part, considering Hinduism, Taoism and Islamism in an analog perspective, regarded ‘the three main forms of the present traditional world, representing the Middle-East, the Far-East, and the Near-East, as reflections of the three aspects of the Lord of the World.’¹ The mention of the mysterious Lord of the World here is a confirmation of Guénon’s ‘mission’ that came from the Supreme Center, which was acting this time using external forms and traditional institutions” (Gilis 31).

As we already said, the period 1908-1912 is very enigmatical. That is the period when *Superiores Incogniti* empowered Guénon with the function of messenger, transmitter and translator of absolute truths, primarily to the Western world. This function Guénon will fulfill consistently until his corporeal disappearance; he was not allowed to be a spiritual master, and that is why he didn’t accept to have disciples.

In 1908, René Guénon is already involved with the Occultist “schools” of that epoch, trying to find an opportunity to start the renovation of the Occidental mentality. He soon realizes that, unfortunately for the Western world, there is not much hope. In the same year, Guénon tries to provoke a breach in the profane mental wall. Members of the Martinist Order received an “astral message” to bring René Guénon at *Hotel des Cannettes*, and, after more meetings, the Renovated Order of the Temple was founded having Guénon as leader; yet the activity of the Order had no effects upon Western mentality and Guénon is forced to dismantle the organization. This experience proved to Guénon “the necessity, because the impossibility to follow his mission inside the Order of the Temple, to turn to ‘ordinary’ traditional organizations” (Gilis 48), like Masonry and Islam.²

Guénon’s attachment to Islam is not a “conversion,” but an application of his “universal initiation” in order to fulfill his function, after the attempt to generate an “extraordinary” organization failed. “Guénon declared more than one time that he was never ‘converted’ to anything, and, in 1938, in a letter to Pierre Collard, that he even did not ‘embrace the Muslim religion,’ more or less recently, as some ones try to make people believe for some obscure reasons. And he added: ‘the fact of the matter is that I am attached to the Islamic initiatic organizations for thirty years, which, of course, is completely different’” (Gilis 57).

As we said, Guénon’s function was not that of being a spiritual master for a specific path. There are some people who are upset that Guénon presented so little about specific methods of the spiritual realization and Liberation, which means that they completely misunderstood Guénon and his function. Guénon’s writings constitute the theoretical fundament, Guénon intentionally exposing the elements of different traditions in a general form, and we can notice his endeavor to stay away from specifics and details, to be at the general, or better universal level. We have to keep in mind that his writings aim the Western people in the first place; that is why Guénon presented an ideal type of Oriental being (that has real existence, but not as a

¹ Études Traditionnelles, nos. 293-294-295, 1951. See Michel Vâlsan, *La fonction de René Guénon et le sort de l’Occident*, p. 218. Vâlsan specifies that Guénon was the first one who gave a proper definition for the Lord of the World.

² Gilis stresses “the remarkable coincidence between the end of the Order of the Temple and Guénon’s attachment to Islam” (Gilis 47). Also, in 1911, Guénon is initiated in Masonry (Gilis 48).

quantitative majority, in Orient, the genuine spiritual masters, the initiation and the traditional doctrines being a reality, even if today a process of profanation and of “occidentalization” takes place). To obtain a “break” inside the modern mentality, Guénon used different strategies, all criticized today and considered errors.

Today, the modern people are hypnotized by “information” and “to be informed”; many of them consider Guénon’s work just another source of information, and regard the traditional lore transmitted by him as a common “bibliography” that now is obsolete. These people look for new facts, new information, they fight to obtain Guénon’s letters, hoping to discover some spicy detail of his individual life; today, texts assigned to Guénon are published (see *Psychologie*).

Some scholars consider Guénon and his writings out-of-date. Of course, if they have in mind the sacred kernel of his work, their ignorance needs no comments. We remember, to give an example, the opinion of a French “Orientalist” who wrote us many years ago that

Guénon is completely obsolete, that his knowledge about Hindu tradition was very poor, which is normal for his times, and now, it is out-of-date; that he mixed three elements: a incomplete information, a so-called “esoterically tradition” of Western origins, and his imagination. At that time, we expressed our comments, but now we just wanted to illustrate the ignorance we were talking about.

Others complained that, visiting Guénon at Cairo, he did not say anything different from his writings; he talked about the same ideas and used the same words that could be found in his work. Probably these visitors expected to hear sensational phrases or to see some strange phenomena. If we read Ramana Maharshi’s teachings, it is easy to notice that he, over and over again, stated the same question: *Who am I?*, an essential and fundamental idea helping the spiritual realization. Who wants more?

However, Guénon did not accept “disciples.” Even though so many tried to call themselves “guénonists” or Guénon’s “pupils,” no one has the right for this appellative. René Guénon stated clearly, and many times, that his mission is not to be a “teacher” and he does not have disciples; that, what it counts, is the traditional lore he transmitted through his writings, and anything else connected to his individuality, intimate deeds or words, is his personal business. Yet any honest student of Guénon’s work cannot avoid the question: how valid are Guénon’s followers, from Schuon to Gilis? And many years ago, we asked the late Giovanni Ponte, from *Rivista di Studi Tradizionali* of Turin, the same question.

Here it is what he answered: In my opinion, nobody by far has the authority Guénon has. Each one has exposed valid things, especially Coomaraswamy, yet each one was marked by his individuality, a mark more or less decisive, and which became very damaging when the individuals believed to be spiritual masters (like Schuon). Regarding Burckhardt, even if he is more balanced than Schuon, the fact that he was Schuon’s disciple marked him; on the other hand, I don’t see how Evola can be called an “exponent of the Tradition.” I don’t know very well Eliade; I know that he used copiously traditional notions from Guénon’s work, but I don’t think he went beyond the profane order. And Matgioi, despite his profoundness in some of his works and his remarkable role related to Taoism and Guénon, he is not an incontestable authority, far from that, considering the last part of his life... That is why I think that is important not to know a lot of authors or to judge them, but to study deeply the traditional teachings in order to apply them. It is not the place and not our task to emit judgments regarding the individuality order, but we have to mention that, after Guénon’s death, some of his “collaborators” were very active to reduce Guénon’s

work at the profane level. Marco Pallis, for example, who was encouraged and helped by Guénon in his traditional studies, wrote a curious article against Guénon's *Le Roi du Monde*; Pallis tried to prove that Agarttha and the Lord of the World were just results of Guénon's imagination, that nobody heard in India or Tibet about Agarttha and the Lord of the World. There is an extraordinary incomprehension about the symbolism of the Lord of the World, about what really Guénon transmitted in his fundamental book *Le Roi du Monde*.¹ Marco Pallis is one of the examples of this incomprehension.

We have to keep in mind that Guénon transmitted through his writings a unitary doctrine, unaffected by contingencies, a synthesis of all particular traditions that can be found in it, but which, at the same time, inevitable, are different from it, because the unification of the particular doctrines implies to preserve the "spirit," not the "letter." René Guénon had as objective to establish the doctrinal essence of the universal metaphysics, opening the eyes and smoothing the way towards spiritual knowledge; he left on purpose aside the specific elements that would more confuse than clarify the modern mentality.

We can ask ourselves: is René Guénon the creator of a new doctrine? No, absolutely not! In the *Foreword* of his book *Le Symbolisme de la Croix*, Guénon confesses that he wants "soit exposer directement certains aspects des doctrines métaphysiques de l'Orient, soit adapter ces mêmes doctrines de la façon qui nous paraîtrait la plus intelligible et la plus profitable, mais en reste toujours strictement fidèle à leur esprit."²

Guénon dressed in essential clothes the traditional data, presenting a unitive doctrine about Unity, and here appears brightly his providential function.³ Guénon writes: "nous n'avons jamais entendu nous renfermer exclusivement dans une forme déterminée, ce qui serait d'ailleurs bien difficile dès lors qu'on a pris conscience de l'unité essentielle qui se dissimule sous la diversité des formes plus ou moins extérieures, celle-ci n'étant en somme que comme autant de vêtements d'une seule et même vérité."⁴

Many don't want and cannot recognize the unitary doctrine renovated by René Guénon, and we are not surprised. Gandhi fought his entire life for the independence of India and could not conciliate the Hindu and the Muslims, and today this divergence is stronger than ever. In comparison to the acute and increasing

¹ "The explicit reference to the Supreme Center of the World and its Leader marks, more than any other aspect of Guénon's work, the incomparable and privileged character of his function in the Western world" (Gilis 16).

² René Guénon, *Le symbolisme de la croix*, Guy Trédaniel, 1989, p. 9. Guénon writes that he wants either to expose directly some aspects of the Oriental metaphysical doctrines, or to adapt these doctrines to our mentality, preserving their spirit.

³ "The Islamic spirituality as a whole is specially sensitive to recognizing the divine Unicity, which, for it, is the fundament and the first criteria of validity for any religious form. Or, René Guénon teaches and affirms the fundamental unity of the existent traditions because he notices that the essence of all doctrines is that of Unity or Non-Duality of the Principle of the Truth" (Vâlsan, *Islam*, p. 27).

⁴ Guénon explains that he doesn't want to be limited by the frame of a specific doctrine, especially when someone is aware of the essential unity of all these doctrines, the various forms being just garments of the same truth.

oppositions reigning in this world, the unitary doctrine transmitted by Guénon appears as a redeeming one. René Guénon is not the exponent of a new doctrine; he is the “servant” who presented and transmitted, primary in the Western world, the fundamental unity of all traditional forms, offering a metaphysical synthesis of various orthodox doctrines, having the Truth as sacred kernel, a Truth that can be found in all the particular traditions. René Guénon was and is the “servant of the Unique.” His Islamic name, *Abdel Wahed Yahia*, stands witness for this.