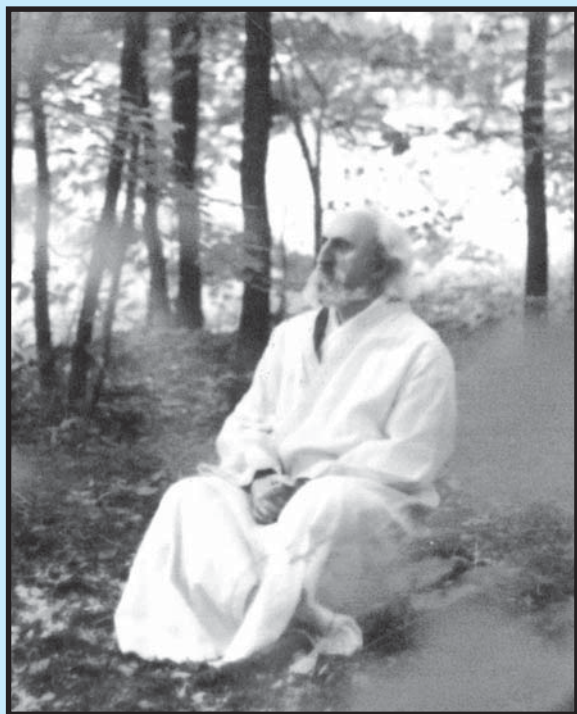


FRITHJOF SCHUON

Life and Teachings



Jean-Baptiste Aymard and Patrick Laude
Foreword by Seyyed Hossein Nasr

FRITHJOF SCHUON

SUNY series in Western Esoteric Traditions
David Appelbaum, editor

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JEAN-BAPTISTE AYMARD
AND
PATRICK LAUDE

*Foreword by
Seyyed Hossein Nasr*

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FRITHJOF SCHUON ROCK AND LIGHTNING

The “Thunder-Bird” (Wakinyan-Tanka) whose abode is in the West, and who protects earth and its vegetation against drought and death, is said to flash lightning from its eyes and to thunder with its wings; the analogy with the Revelation on Mount Sinai, which was accompanied by “thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud” (Exodus, XIX 16), is all the more striking in that this Revelation took place on a rock, while in the Indian mythology it is precisely the “Rock” which is connected with the “Thunder-Bird” It might . . . seem surprising that the Indian tradition should establish a symbolical link between the “West Wind,” bearer of thunder and rain, and the “Rock” which is an “angelic” or “semi-divine” personification of a cosmic aspect of Wakan-Tanka; but this connection is admissible, for in the rock are united the same complementary aspects as in the storms: the terrible aspect by reason of its destructive hardness . . . , and the aspect of Grace through its giving birth to springs which, like rain, quench the thirst of the land.

—Frithjof Schuon, *Language of the Self*

. . . the Absolute—or consciousness of the Absolute—thus [in Islam] engenders in the soul the qualities of rock and lightning, the former being represented by the Kaaba, which is the center, and the latter by the sword of the holy war, which marks the periphery.

—Frithjof Schuon, *Understanding Islam*

Rock-like, the Indian of former times rested in his own being, his own personality, ready to translate it into action with the impetuosity of lightning.

—Frithjof Schuon, *Lights on the Ancient Worlds*

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Contents

Foreword by Seyyed Hossein Nasr	ix
Acknowledgments	xiii
Introduction	1
1. A Biographical Approach	5
2. A Spiritual Portrait	55
3. Esoterism and Tradition	79
4. Metaphysical and Spiritual Aesthetics	107
Conclusion	127
Appendix 1: Frithjof Schuon: General Considerations on Spiritual Functions	129
Appendix 2: Frithjof Schuon: Christian Gnosis	133
Notes	137
Bibliography of Works by Frithjof Schuon	185
Index	191

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Foreword

Frithjof Schuon is without doubt one of the major intellectual and spiritual figures of the twentieth century and yet little is known about his life in the English-speaking world. During his lifetime, despite the wide dissemination of his writings in many languages throughout the world, he remained intentionally completely outside of the public limelight and was not easily accessible except to those in quest of spiritual guidance. Furthermore, those who knew him well respected his desire for privacy and did not write publicly about him. Now that he has left this world, however, it is time to make known the life and thought of this colossal figure who has exercised much influence in East and West already and whose works attract an ever greater number of seekers of the perennial wisdom or the *philosophia perennis* of which he was the foremost expositor in his day.

To understand the importance of Schuon one must turn one's attention to the innate significance of his timeless message as well as to the timeliness of his oeuvre, which comes at a particularly significant moment in both the process of intellectual and spiritual awakening among a number of people in the West and the revival of traditional metaphysics and authentic esoterism in Europe after a long period of having been eclipsed. To comprehend the timeless quality of the Schuonian message, it is sufficient to turn with an open mind and heart to his writings. In this foreword, therefore, we shall leave that question aside and turn to the aspect of the timeliness of his message and his historical role in the revival of perennial wisdom.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a time which saw the greatest spiritual eclipse in the West from the point of view of traditional wisdom, those drawn to the study of the inner meaning of things, to authentic metaphysics and esoterism, found themselves in a mental landscape wherein the choices in mainstream culture were between a completely externalized form of religion, a rationalistic and positivist philosophy, or a secularized science. Where were such seekers to find the *scientia sacra* of the days of old? Such people often turned to occultist and pseudoesoteric movements. This was the era of

Eliphas Lévi and Papus, of Mme Blavatsky and Annie Besant. A phenomenon had appeared that was unique to the modern West, namely the rise of occultism, which was then mistaken for authentic esoterism. Occultism in the West, which starts with the modern period, produced figures, influences, and forces which ranged from the quaint and the eccentric to the outright spiritually subversive and dangerous, and yet it drew to its fold many seekers who had nowhere else to go.

In the second and third decades of the twentieth century a major transformation occurred with the appearance in France of René Guénon, who had himself been associated with many of these occultist circles in his youth. Through direct contact with spiritual authorities from the East as well as through his own God-given metaphysical intelligence, Guénon was able to clear the ground of the errors of the day and build the edifice of authentic metaphysics and esoterism on the soil of the Occident. Although he spent the last twenty years of his life in Cairo, where he had lived openly as a Muslim and where he is buried, he continued to write in French for a Western audience until his death in 1951.

In the 1920s the prodigious scholar of Indian art and culture, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, came to know of Guénon, embraced the traditional perspective, and corresponded with him until his own death in 1947. Coomaraswamy had an in-depth knowledge of a dozen languages and was an unparalleled authority on Oriental art and a master expositor of the Hindu and Buddhist religions in all their dimensions and diverse manifestations. He was also deeply versed in the intellectual and artistic traditions of the West. Like Guénon, he sought to revive authentic metaphysics and esoterism by having recourse to the still existing and viable centers of wisdom in the Orient. Also like Guénon, he defended tradition against the onslaught of modernism and championed the cause of the *philosophia perennis* whose various formulations in the East and West he knew so well and about which he wrote eloquently in his numerous writings.

When Schuon began to write in the early 1930s, these two intellectual giants, Guénon and Coomaraswamy, had already composed many works, the former in French and the latter primarily in English, wherein the primacy of tradition, the critique of modernism, the exposition of metaphysics and authentic esoterism, the meaning of sacred symbols, and the sacred arts and sciences of various traditional civilizations had been expressed with great clarity and authority. Schuon's writings were like the seal of this corpus of works. He both complemented and completed the message of those masters who had gone before him. Moreover, Schuon emphasized the operative and practical aspects of the realization of the truth along with theoretical metaphysics and cosmology. He spoke not only of the *philosophia perennis*, or *sophia perennis*, but also of *religio perennis*. His message brought out more than the writings of Guénon and Coomaraswamy the central significance of religion and the truth that esoterism and traditional metaphysics can only be realized within the framework of

revealed religions. Like his predecessors, he also wrote about the universality and unity of the truth and coined the term “transcendent unity of religions,” which is the title of his first work in French and which has now become famous in the study of religion even in academic settings. Well-known scholars of religion ranging from R. C. Zaehner, who opposed his views, to Huston Smith, who embraced them completely, made him known in academic circles concerned with the study of religion.

Schuon’s works, as well as the way he lived his life, put an end once and for all to the confusion between the occult and the authentically esoteric and brought out the real significance of esoterism, as one sees in one of his masterpieces, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*. Schuon also lived the life of religion and walked the esoteric path until he attained the Truth. He was himself a spiritual master, the head of a Sufi order, and spoke with the authority of one who had experienced the Truth directly. That is why works on his life, if authentic, can be so valuable not only in making better known the biography of a major spiritual and intellectual figure with global influence, but also in making more understandable many aspects of his message, especially his insistence upon spiritual practice and his attraction to certain types of spiritual forms.

One could of course embark upon the task of writing such a biography by studying various public documents, sifting their relative value, and constructing an ordinary scholarly portrait of the man. Surely such works will appear in the future. But for now, when we are still close to the time of Schuon’s death and when there are a number of people who knew him personally and have access to direct sources concerning his life and thought, it is important to encourage biographies written from the perspective of such figures. Of course such writers would not be objective bystanders but would represent what we might call the “view from within.” Such works, however, are not to be seen as lacking objectivity and being just subjective appraisals, but can in fact become themselves primary sources for those who will undertake ordinary historical and scholarly biographical studies in the future.

The two authors of this work are not only among those who knew Schuon personally and view him with great respect and reverence, but they are also scholars well versed in dealing with scholarly material. They are already responsible as either authors or editors for several important biographical and intellectual studies of Schuon in French. Their personal positions and contacts have enabled them to gain access to many documents not available publicly and to be able to interview a number of key figures who knew Schuon intimately over many years, including his widow Catherine Schuon. Their study combines personal devotion to their subject with extensive knowledge drawn from both oral and written sources not generally available, not to speak of intimate knowledge of his works. Of course being the colossal intellectual and spiritual figure that he was, Schuon was a person about whom there cannot be just one interpretation

concerning his teachings and even about certain seminal events of his life. As we also see in the diverse interpretations of the life and teachings of many sages of old, certain interpretations of the authors of this work may in fact be debated and contested. Nevertheless, the present study remains a valuable document in that it is based on firsthand knowledge of Schuon's life and thought transmitted both orally and in writing.

The authors of this work are to be congratulated for having produced this important introduction to the life, works, and thought of the premier authority on perennial and primordial wisdom during the second half of the twentieth century. This work is bound to guide many readers to the writings of the master, writings which he considered as his main heritage to the general public, to be studied without concern about the life of the man who had authored them. But this book is also an important depiction of Schuon as a person and contains a sketch of the life which made such a remarkable body of works possible. Today this book may be taken as a major secondary source for the study of Schuon. In the future years it will most likely become among the primary sources, based as it is to such a large extent on firsthand oral and written witnesses to the life and works of one of the most remarkable intellectual and spiritual luminaries of the past century.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr

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Introduction

As a rich corpus of metaphysics and spiritual teachings, Frithjof Schuon's writings provide reflective and circumstantiated answers to the questions of modern man, who today finds himself disarmed in the face of the all-conquering certitudes of science, and the prevailing relativism. However, Schuon was not a bookish metaphysician but first and foremost a man of inspired meditation and prayer, and, to borrow the expression he used with regard to René Guénon, a "born gnostic" who tended to actualize all the wealth of his inner being in his philosophical and artistic output. As such, Schuon cannot be identified as "belonging" to any given religion since his perspective is fundamentally supra-confessional, esoteric, and universalist.

As much in his everyday comportment as in his reflexes, Schuon seemed from more than one point of view like a man of another time. Born into an ambience still linked to the nineteenth century, and dying at the dawn of the twenty-first, he remained, all his life, true to his principles, indifferent to the fashions of the age, and thereby often misunderstood and isolated.

Fundamentally, Schuon's works constitute a synthesis that not only reconciles the various creeds and wisdoms of the world from the standpoint of "colorless" wisdom, but also points to a way of realizing this wisdom here and now through an intellectual, volitive, and animic conformity to the Real and to the nature of things. Let us add that the "colorless" wisdom Schuon has had in view is of a much more essential nature than the applications to which it may give rise on the level of comparative religion; Schuon was certainly a brilliant comparatist, but those who had the privilege of his contact considered him above all a genuine gnostic. Be that as it may, just as the Divine Mercy must sometimes appear in the form of Rigor, within the realm of relativity—insofar as the latter is nothing but an illusory negation of the Absolute—in the same way, through his books, Schuon's generous gift of understanding finds a complement in the

rigor of a form that protects its substance, guarding it against distorting or debasing simplifications while testing the sincerity and resolve of the reader, and the intensity of his thirst for truth.

In his introduction to *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, Huston Smith noted, “[T]here appears to be something about Schuon’s entire approach to the relation between religions that, being foreign to the contemporary theological scene . . . renders it peculiarly difficult of access.” Whether it be a matter of approach or one of conceptual language, it is a fact that Frithjof Schuon’s works have the reputation of being difficult. It could be asserted, however, that this difficulty is less inherent in the substance of Schuon’s books and in their dialectics—notwithstanding the mystery of the Divine, the complexities of the human predicament, and the ransom of the inexpressible—than it is a perception resulting from a lack of metaphysical and philosophical training on the part of many modern readers, when it is not a manifestation of intellectual passivity. More subtly, this reputation of difficulty might even be a facile pretext to discard Schuon’s works or to minimize their impact—or at least that of their most esoteric dimension—by burying them under the heap of other perennialist works which, albeit valuable and insightful in their own right, are in fact of a lesser scope or a lesser depth of spiritual vision than Schuon’s opus, if not much indebted to it. To the objection that his works are too difficult, Schuon has himself retorted that his works are “no more difficult of approach than the average works of profane philosophy.”¹ In this connection, it should be added that the relative level of difficulty of Schuon’s works is a function of the complexity of Reality and not in the least the effect of a conceptual virtuosity nor a form of intellectual “art for art’s sake.”

The esoteric approach—in the sense of an inner reading of sacred forms that, far from casting them aside, illuminates them in light of their essence—allows Schuon to provide the reader with an enlightening phenomenology of religions which takes him to the metaphysical core of the various creeds.

Let us specify that the pages that follow should not to be construed as an attempt at providing an exclusive interpretation of Schuon’s writings, nor should they be considered as an apologetic defense of his metaphysical and spiritual opus. Schuon’s works defend themselves on their own ground, and they certainly do not need to be completed nor perfected by any commentators or epigones.

Our approach is twofold: biographical and doctrinal. These two elements should be understood in light of the Chinese yin/yang symbol of interrelatedness rather than in an exclusive manner. Schuon’s life cannot be severed from his metaphysical doctrine, and his doctrine was as if confirmed and illustrated by his life. Although chapter 1 and 2 of this book tend to emphasize a historical approach, they do so while connecting the major traits of Schuon’s personality and the main events of his life to the core of his teachings. Conversely, while chapters 3 and 4 delve into some fundamentals of Schuon’s doctrine, they also

touch upon the spiritual and aesthetic concomitances of Schuon's destiny and personality.

In writing these pages, our fundamental objective was simply to reformulate a certain number of ideas established by Schuon, to explicate some aspects of his works that may have been neglected or possibly misunderstood. Repetition and explication are after all quite valid and traditional modes of assimilation, quite independently from any ambition to convince or convert our reader. As Schuon himself has stated, "we do not seek to convert anyone who is at peace with God." It may simply be a matter of reawakening in some, presumably those increasingly rare seekers who "have eyes to see and ears to hear," a perception of reality according to the nature of things that may be the starting point of an aspiration toward spiritual centering.

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CHAPTER ONE

A Biographical Approach

*He is one who speaks from the experience of what he has seen,
And this makes all the difference.
The celestial rider has passed by;
The dust has risen into the air,
He has hastened on, but the dust he has raised
Is still there, in suspense—
Look straight in front of thee;
Let thy gaze deviate neither to the right nor to the left;
The dust is here, and he
Is in the Infinite.*

—Rûmî, *Rubâ'iyat*

At the beginning of the twentieth century the Schuon family, of Germanic origin but of Valaisan stock, had been living in Basel for some years. Paul Schuon, whose parents were Swabian, first emigrated to Alsace, after it had become German in 1870, following the Franco-Prussian war. There he married Margarete Boehler, who was Alsatian on her mother's side, but whose father was originally from the Rhineland. They had two sons. The first, Erich, born on April 26, 1906, was to become many years later a Trappist monk under the name Father Gall. The second, Frithjof, was born on June 18, 1907.¹

A violinist and a professor at the Basel Conservatory, Paul Schuon had formed a friendship during a concert he gave in Oslo with a ship's captain named Frithjof Thorsen; it was to the remembrance of this friendship that his second son owed his unusual name from the land of fjords.²

The Schuon brothers spent the best part of their childhood in Basel, a "fairy-tale city," as Frithjof later said in deep appreciation of the romanticism of this city on the edge of German Switzerland. As a child he liked to walk in the



Frithjof Schuon as a child in Basel, 1916. Personal collection, Catherine Schuon.

old, melancholic streets, stroll along the Rhine, and dream, alone or with friends, on the *Pfalz* which overlooked it.

Germanic to the core, and speaking at this time only German, Schuon was impregnated from childhood by that poetic and mystical culture whose particular expression in fairy tales and traditional melodies he never forgot. It was also because his father liked to play the violin like a gypsy that this music always had a nostalgic attraction for Schuon. His sensibility led him quite naturally in the direction of German romanticism, "nurtured by the Middle Ages, at once chivalrous, enchanted and mystical." "Doubtless," he wrote in a letter to his friend Hans Küry, "many children of that era—it was, as it were, the end of the nineteenth century—breathed that same air." Very early he read Goethe and Schiller, then later Heine and many others; but his father's library contained treasures of another kind. A gifted musician and an occasional poet, Paul Schuon was an amiable and distinguished man, a dreamer, naturally aristocratic and mystical in his fashion, sensitive to the atmosphere of Islam and India of old. And this is how the young Frithjof was able to find, among his father's books, the *Bhagavad Gîtâ*, which enchanted this twelve-year-old, the *Quran*, the *Vedas*, and also the *Arabian Nights*, which his father read to the family in the evenings.

Even though his parents, who were of Catholic origin, were not expressly practicing, Schuon was brought up in a profoundly religious atmosphere, and as a young child he was sent to Evangelical catechism,³ where the "simple and intense piety of this first teacher" made a singular impression on him. This pious Lutheran was indeed able to inculcate in him biblical principles, and to introduce him to the world of Abraham and the *Psalms*. He said much later of the predominant Lutheranism of his childhood, "It cannot be pure heresy. . . . Its priorities are simplicity, inwardness and trust in God; nothing else touched me in my early childhood" (letter to Hans Küry, November 17, 1982).

Schuon sought from his youth onwards to find consolation in sacred art and prayer. An introvert, he felt like a stranger, misunderstood by those around him. His profoundly artistic nature⁴ and his taste for the authentic led him to look in museums for the traces of past wisdom which seemed to him like windows opening onto a lost world. "I could spend hours visually assimilating the messages of the traditional worlds. For me visual assimilation came before conceptual assimilation" (Letter to Marco Pallis, June 8, 1982).

Thus it was that in 1919, when he was barely twelve, he discovered with wonder, in the Museum of Ethnography in Basel, three Buddhist statues whose closed eyes and sacred gestures filled him with emotion. Much later, he wrote, "Our first encounter, intense and unforgettable, with Buddhism and the Far East, took place in our childhood in the presence of a large Japanese Buddha of gilded wood, flanked by two statues of Kwannon. Suddenly confronted with this vision of majesty and mystery, we might well have paraphrased Caesar, and exclaimed: *Veni, vidi, victus sum*" (I came, I saw, I was conquered).⁵