

# Book Review

*Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy*

by

Michael Oren Fitzgerald

(Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2010).

Review by Harry Oldmeadow

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An issue of *Studies in Comparative Religion* dedicated to the theme “Crossing Religious Frontiers” could hardly find a more apposite subject than the life and work of Frithjof Schuon. Indeed, two of Schuon’s essays feature in this very issue. His work first appeared in the Anglophone world with the publication in 1953 of *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, a book which articulated the metaphysical basis of the inner or essential unity of the world’s great religious traditions. This remarkable work was followed, over the next half-century, by more than thirty books in which Schuon provided a peerless exegesis of immutable metaphysical and cosmological principles, and an explication of their applications and ramifications in the boundless world of Tradition. These works, written in crystalline prose, stand as a beacon for those lost in the spiritual wastelands of modernity. Many years ago, in introducing one of Schuon’s books, Seyyed Hossein Nasr wrote: “His authoritative tone, clarity of expression, and an ‘alchemy’ which transmutes human language to enable it to present the profoundest truths, make of it a unique expression of the *sophia perennis*”.<sup>1</sup> Quite so. Now we have to hand a biography of this frontier-crosser *extraordinaire*.

For many readers of this journal, Schuon—metaphysician, poet, artist, spiritual master—requires no introduction. Amidst the clamour and confusion of modernity those few still willing to heed the lessons of Tradition have long since recognized Schuon as the most commanding exponent of that timeless wisdom which lies at the heart of all integral mythological, sapiential, and religious traditions. But both the life and work of Frithjof Schuon have remained more or less unknown to the public at large. There are many reasons for this. Schuon’s writings are, in

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<sup>1</sup> Preface to *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy* (London: World of Islam Publishing Festival, 1976), p. viii.

the main, addressed to that small minority of jñânic disposition, capable of discerning the inner convergence of apparently divergent and manifold religious forms. Schuon's primary task has been to expound the *philosophia perennis*—"the totality of the primordial and universal truths—and the metaphysical axioms—whose formulation does not belong to any particular system"<sup>2</sup>. Likewise, he has been the foremost exponent of the *religio perennis*—that is, "the essence of every form of worship, every form of prayer, and every system of morality"<sup>3</sup>.

His *oeuvre* is necessarily somewhat difficult of access, not only because metaphysics demands intellectual rigor and contemplative intelligence, but because modernity is characterized by a pervasive ignorance of metaphysical principles. Then, too, there is the fact that Schuon deliberately shrouded his own life from public view, living a somewhat reclusive existence and abjuring public acclaim. Nonetheless, over the last three decades a number of studies have appeared, some dealing with the more recondite aspects of Schuon's metaphysical expositions, as well as many essays and articles addressing other facets of his work. Mention might be made of several landmarks: Nasr's percipient Introduction to *The Essential Frithjof Schuon* (1986), a substantial compilation of many of Schuon's essays, organized around various themes; James Cutsinger's *Advice to the Serious Seeker* (1996), subtitled *Meditations on the Teaching of Frithjof Schuon*, a manual for wayfarers treading the spiritual path signposted by Schuon's writings; the memorial issue of *Sophia* which appeared soon after Schuon's passing in 1998; and the French anthology of articles, *Frithjof Schuon: Les Dossiers H* (2002). These were followed in 2004 by Jean-Baptiste Aymard and Patrick Laude's excellent study, *Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teachings*, which includes both metaphysical and biographical material. Now, more than a decade after Schuon's death, Michael Fitzgerald has furnished us with the first intimate, full-scale biography of the sage.

Fitzgerald is particularly well-equipped for the task at hand. He was a disciple, adviser, friend, and executor of Schuon's estate, and is thus able to draw not only on his own long personal association with the metaphysician but on a wealth of unpublished material—letters, diaries, notes, manuscripts, poems, drawings—which has hitherto only come within the purview of a very small circle. He has also enjoyed direct access to some of Schuon's closest friends, associates, and disciples whose recollections texture his account.

We cannot here recount Schuon's biography except in its most general contours: his childhood in Basle in an ambience redolent of the medieval, the Romantic, and the Oriental; the early apprenticeship in Paris in textile design; the immersion in the Scriptures and commentaries of the East, especially the *Advaita Vedanta* which provided the foundations for Schuon's

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<sup>2</sup> Frithjof Schuon, "The Perennial Philosophy", in *The Unanimous Tradition*, ed. Ranjit Fernando (Colombo: The Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies, 1991), p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

metaphysical works; the travels to North Africa, where he entered Islam and was initiated into Sufism by Shaykh Ahmad al-'Alawi; his vocation as Sufi master; the association with René Guénon; military service and incarceration during World War 2; marriage to Catherine Feer and the long residence in Lausanne where Schuon produced many of his books; visionary experiences of the Virgin and the Marial graces which subsequently flowed through his life; the therapeutic sojourns with the American Plains Indians who had a special place in his heart from childhood years; the eventual move to America in the early 1980s and the growth of the *Maryamiyyah tariqah* over which he presided. All this, and much more, is seamlessly recounted in Fitzgerald's narrative, frequently embellished with Schuon's own words. In the process we come to sense something of those qualities which moved another luminary of our time, Swami Ramdas, to recall: "[Schuon's] face was bright with inner illumination. He possessed a regal bearing...but he was at heart so humble, simple, and loving. The love in his heart was manifest on his face.... [He was] a very prince among saints" (p. 79).

Throughout Schuon's life and work we can discern several themes which run like brightly colored threads through a variegated tapestry. To mention a few: the prodigious intellectual gifts and astonishing spiritual plasticity, evident from an early age in the youthful attraction to Plato, the *Vedanta*, and the *Gita*; the spontaneous and intuitive understanding of the symbols and messages of sacred art; the uncanny, more or less miraculous ability to penetrate religious forms of all kinds—texts, myths, doctrines, rituals, symbols—to uncover their deepest and most universal significance; the love of Virgin Nature and the singular role of the American Plains Indians in Schuon's personal life, writings, and paintings; the privileged position of the Virgin, of Celestial Femininity and of Beauty throughout the *oeuvre*; the implacable defense of Tradition and the unflinching arraignment of modernity in many of its ugliest and most sinister guises (particularly the aberrations of modern philosophy and the Promethean claims of a totalitarian scientism); the centrality of prayer, particularly Invocation, in the spiritual economy extolled in Schuon's works and exemplified by his life. Without intruding with superfluous commentary, and often allowing Schuon to speak in his own words, Fitzgerald deftly draws our attention to these leitmotifs. The book also includes Schuon's essay, "*Sophia Perennis*", the text of an interview first published in 1996, excerpts from previously unpublished writings about the spiritual life, a glossary of foreign terms, and a highly useful Bibliography and Index. The biography is quite free of pretentious academic jargon and the repellent "theorizing" which infects much so-called "scholarship" nowadays, but the material is scrupulously documented in detailed but unobtrusively placed endnotes.

Unlike many modern biographers Fitzgerald does not swamp us with tediously accumulating details—he does not belong to what has been called the "laundry list school" of biography wherein the reader is numbed into submission by ever-proliferating minutiae of the most mundane kind. Nor, to change the image, does Fitzgerald imagine that the mere aggregation of stones produces a building. What is on offer here is a carefully crafted and nuanced portrait which gives us the essentials of a life in both its outer and inner dimensions without ever

descending into the impudent psychologizing which, so often, is the very calling card of the modern biographer. Fitzgerald skillfully renders the salient features of Schuon's life, his family background and upbringing, his personality and character, his daily habits and disciplines, his travels and friendships, his relations with an extraordinary range of spiritual masters and representatives of the world's religious traditions. Much of this is quite fascinating. For my own part I was particularly moved by the account of Schuon's childhood and youth, and by Fitzgerald's evocative treatment of Schuon's relations with the Plains Indians, especially his friendship with Chief Thomas Yellowtail and his little known but quite pivotal role in the preservation of the Lakota heritage. The biography recounts Schuon's indirect but potent relationship with the Lakota visionary Black Elk, mediated by Joseph Epes Brown whom Schuon had sent to seek out the aging holy man—and so it was that Brown was able to compile that treasury of ancestral wisdom and traditional Lakota rituals, *The Sacred Pipe*. In *The Feathered Sun*, a luminous collection of Schuon's writings and paintings on Indian themes, he observed that “a stoical and combative heroism with a priestly bearing conferred on the Indian of the Plains and Forest a sort of majesty at once aquiline and solar”;<sup>4</sup> how apt these words are in relation to Schuon himself!

It is not surprising that Fitzgerald should handle the place of the Indians in Schuon's life and work with such sensitivity and surety, not only because of his own long association with Yellowtail and other Indian figures, but because he is himself one of the most authoritative and penetrating of contemporary writers on their spiritual legacy. (Fitzgerald's first major work was *Yellowtail: Crow Medicine Man and Sun Dance Chief*, published in 1991; a stream of books has followed in its wake, including *Indian Spirit* and *The Spirit of Indian Women*, both co-authored with Judith Fitzgerald.)

*Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy* is studded with many captivating anecdotes and flashing insights into its subject. Not the least interesting aspect of the book concerns Schuon's encounters with some of the most impressive spiritual figures of our time—Shaykh Ahmad al-'Alawi, Staretz Sophrony, Shojun Bando, Swami Ramdas, and the Jagadguru of Kanchipuram, to mention a representative sample. Then, too, there are accounts of Schuon's relations with his brother Erich, who as a Trappist monk became Father Gall, with his schooldays friend Titus Burckhardt who became an immensely erudite writer on metaphysics and cosmology, and with others who played various roles in the recovery of the Wisdom of the Ages in these latter days—René Guénon, Marco Pallis, Leo Schaya, Whitall Perry, Martin Lings and others. Schuon's wife Catherine provides engaging glimpses of his disposition, daily routines, work habits, and spiritual practice. However, anecdotal and illustrative material is never allowed to derail the book's governing purpose which is to throw into sharp relief Schuon's

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<sup>4</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *The Feathered Sun: Plains Indians in Art and Philosophy* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books, 1990), pp. 39-40.

peculiar vocation as “messenger of the perennial philosophy”, to accent the astounding gifts and the unwavering commitment he brought to this life-long task, to acclaim the majestic corpus of work (not only the metaphysical explications but also the paintings and poems), and to show how Schuon actualized in his own person the spirituality which he extolled in his work. In Schuon’s own words, “The *Sophia perennis* is to know total Truth and, in consequence, to will the Good and to love Beauty”.<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere: “Knowledge saves only on condition that it engages all that we are; only when it constitutes a path which works and transforms and wounds our nature as the plough wounds the soil”.<sup>6</sup> For Schuon the *sophia perennis* could never be a matter of mere abstractions, abstruse speculations, and what Shankara called “subtle argument”—though to be sure Schuon, like the Indian sage, was a master dialectician; it was, rather, a matter of *living* and *lived* verities, of spiritual realities both understood and realized. To put it another way, in both the life and work of Schuon we find a fusion of the intellectual and spiritual, of doctrine and method, of principle and way. As he himself so pithily put it, “If we want truth to live in us we must live in it”.<sup>7</sup>

The book is generously illustrated with photographs and with Schuon’s own drawings and paintings; along with the biographer’s commentary these provide vital insights into Schuon’s spiritual personality, if one may so put it. Many of the photographs, not previously exposed to public view, allow us to savor something of the ambience of the various milieux in which Schuon lived. We find, for instance, arresting photos of Schuon as a child and youth, as a young man in Paris and North Africa, in the precinct of the pyramids of Egypt, in his military uniform in 1939, with Plains Indians in the American West, as well as some charming images which reveal the more gentle side of his temperament. The book is also a veritable treasure-house of rare photos of Schuon’s family, friends, and associates—parents, siblings, and wife Catherine, Guénon, Burckhardt, Marco Pallis, Leo Schaya, Thomas and Suzie Yellowtail, Hans Küry, and Lucy von Dechend among them.

Also interspersed throughout the biographical narrative are excerpts from the immense and glittering collection of poems which flowed from Schuon’s pen in his later years, offering an immediate, concrete, lyrical, and succinct expression of the metaphysical and spiritual insights which had inspired his formal expositions over half a century and more. This kaleidoscope of visual and poetic material, as well as the abundant quotations from Schuon’s metaphysical and autobiographical writings, enrich the biography and make the book a thing of beauty. It is produced with the meticulous attention to detail and commitment to quality which characterizes

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<sup>5</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Roots of the Human Condition* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books, 1990), p. 93.

<sup>6</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2007), p. 146.

<sup>7</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Echoes of Perennial Wisdom* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books, 1992), p. 31.

the productions of World Wisdom. Readers will also be pleased to learn that Fitzgerald's biography will soon be complemented by a film which has been in preparation for some time, and which includes interviews with Schuon himself.

Much of the contemporary mania for biographies is really thinly-disguised voyeurism, fuelled by an insatiable appetite for gossip, for trivia, for the sensational, and the salacious. Here is a book of a different kind, one drawing out the exemplary significance of a heroic and saintly life—a life dedicated to the pursuit of Truth, to the preservation of the revealed and traditional forms in which that Truth has been enshrined, and to the spiritual life which is the very realization and living-out of that Truth. And so it is that this biography necessarily calls us back to a sense of the sacred and the way of prayer which is a constant refrain in Schuon's life. Like Gandhi, Schuon might well have said, "My life is my message"—though in the latter case we have an imposing body of writings and paintings which will endure quite independently.

As Fitzgerald remarks in his Preface, the lives of the great sages lend themselves to diverse interpretations and inflections; no single account can ever be exhaustive or finally definitive. True, but one must say that Fitzgerald's biography, the fruit of many years of research and reflection, is unlikely to be surpassed. It is a precious document which will, assuredly, prove to be of abiding interest and significance to all those who seek that Light which is of neither East nor West, a Light dazzlingly refracted through the life and work of Frithjof Schuon