

# THE ESSENTIAL WRITINGS OF FRITHJOF SCHUON

**Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Amity House, New York, 1986, pp.543**

This book is a treasure - house which will bring much joy to all those who, in the realms of religion, spirituality, art and life, seek to explore, dig deep, and understand the true nature of things. The author is Frithjof Schuon, the Swiss authority on comparative religion - particularly Islam and its relations with other traditions - whose works, during the last thirty years, have generated an appreciative following in Britain and America, and, during the last decade, have also won many admirers in Pakistan. The present volume, an anthology of his major writings, is undoubtedly the fullest presentation so far of the author's works to the general public, and it must be said that it is an impressive achievement.

Frithjof Schuon's chosen fields are four - fold: (1) a fundamental and implacable analysis of the nature - and deviancy - of the secular modern world; - (2) an explanation of the meaning of "tradition" (and of the traditional civilizations which, historically, have embodied pre-modern and sacred values); (3) an exposition of metaphysics and of the principal wisdom-systems of the world, such as tasawwuf (as represented by Ibn 'Arabi and Rumi), Christian mysticism (as represented by St. Gregory Palamas, Master Eckhart and Jakob Boehme), the Advaita-Vedanta of the Hindus (as represented by Shankara), Greek philosophy (as represented by Pythagoras and Plato), and Taoism; and, finally, (4) an exposition of the spiritual and intellectual content of sacred symbols, from whichever tradition of religion they may derive. The present volume is a generous presentation of lengthy extracts from Schuon's published writings in all of these fields.

The crowning glory of all Schuon's writing is its unvarying capacity to uncover the essential truth, illuminating and saving, that lies at the heart of every traditional form. His point of view is thus that of the "religion of the heart", of which the most poignant expression is perhaps to be found in the famous words of Ibn 'Arabi: "My heart has opened unto every form: it is a pasture for gazelles, a cloister for Christian monks, a temple for idols, the Ka'aba of the pilgrim, the tables of the Torah and the Book of the Qur'an. I

practice the religion of love; in whatsoever direction its caravans advance, the religion of love shall be my religion and my faith.”

Schuon calls the religion of the heart the *religio perennis*; and in this connection we must mention a particular and characteristic dimension which is unfailingly present in everything that he writes. This is that intellectual understanding entails spiritual responsibility, that percipience and insight, to be truly sincere, must be complemented by commitment and faith, and that “seeing” (in height) implies “believing” (in depth). In other words, the keener our perception and intuition of essential and saving truth, the greater our obligation to take the necessary steps towards inward or spiritual “realization”. Schuon’s work invariably possesses the uncanny capacity never to allow the reader to stop short at theory, but rather to impel him, at a deep and serious level, towards practice and commitment. In an age of complacent skepticism, nothing could be more precious.

The religion of the heart is sometimes also referred to as “esoterism”, and it is important to know what Schuon means by this. To some the term suggests a flight of fancy, an indulgence in unbridled subjectivity. Here is what Schuon says: “The prerogative of the human state is objectivity, the essential ‘content of which is the Absolute. There is no knowledge without objectivity of the intelligence, no freedom without objectivity of the will, and no nobility without objectivity of the soul. Esoterism seeks to realize pure and direct objectivity; this is the reason for its existence.” Moreover, true esoterism is not the enemy of religion, as those familiar only with the many contemporary pseudo-esoterisms have found reason to suppose. Schuon writes: “Just as rationalism can remove faith, so esoterism can restore it.” These quotations give something of the flavour, precision, and incisiveness of the writings presented in this anthology.

As Ibn ‘Arabi in his day made clear, the religion of the heart in no way challenges the providential nature or paramount importance of the revealed religion. Indeed, one of the most important facets of Schuon’s writings is the stress laid on the need for “orthodoxy” - not only in Islam, but in the other religions as well. Nowadays “orthodoxy” is frequently regarded as a form of intolerance: the arbitrary imposing on people of a certain set of views. The question is more subtle, however, and, given the wide field of world religions evoked in this book, we are at liberty to have recourse in this connection to

the “Noble Eightfold Path” of Buddhism. We discover that the first item on this is nothing other than “right thinking”. It is obvious why this should be given precedence over all else, since, both logically and in terms of commonsense, “right thinking” must come before “right doing”. And what is the English word (derived from the Greek) that signifies “right thinking”? Nothing other than “ortho-doxy”. It is in this sense that orthodoxy is expounded by Schuon.

To go further:  $2 + 2 = 4$  is orthodox;  $2 + 2 = 5$  is unorthodox. Rather simple - but it also works the same way at much loftier levels. Another way of looking at it is this: even in the circumstances of today, many people still preserve the notion of “moral purity”, and lay high value on it. Orthodoxy is “intellectual purity”, which is indispensable for the proper worship of God, and the receiving of His grace. Seen in this way - and far from “telling other people what to believe” - orthodoxy is no more than a reference to the primacy and indispensability of truth. This viewpoint lies at the heart of every spiritual way based on knowledge or gnosis (known as ma’rifa in Islam, and jnana in Hinduism). In Christianity, the same viewpoint finds expression in the words of Christ: “Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” All of Schuon’s writings are like a commentary on this “gnostic” or “jnanic” text. No greater service could be rendered in the present age of error.

Schuon’s best known works up to now have been *Understanding Islam* (1963), *Dimensions of Islam* (1969), *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy* (1976), and *Christianity/Islam* (1985). The present work includes long extracts from these, and also from his studies on other religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and the religion of the North American Indians. This is a book for those who want an authoritative and reliable insight into the inner meaning and spiritual practices of the principal world religions.

The sixty-page introduction by the editor Seyyed Hossein Nasr is a masterpiece in itself. In it he outlines and comments on the vast scope encompassed by the author’s work. Not only all the main religions are covered, but also the manifold aspects of religion, art, and life: metaphysics, epistemology, cosmology, esthetics, man, woman, sexuality, the spiritual life, the virtues, prayer. There is also an interesting section on the traditionalist criticisms of modern philosophy, modern science, and modern art. But

perhaps most remarkable of all in this remarkable book are four previously unpublished private letters on the spiritual life. Here before our very eyes is the naked truth, a total uncovering of the spirit; here it can truly be said that heart speaks to heart.

It is much to be hoped that this comprehensive presentation of the writings and teachings of Frithjof Schuon, contemporary sage, spiritual authority, and expositor of tassawwuf and Vedanta, will reach those many seekers after truth who are capable of receiving the profound blessing and enrichment that it offers.

William Stoddart