

INTRODUCTION

Few religious writers of recent times have had as polarizing an effect on those acquainted with their work as Frithjof Schuon.

A first group of readers have competed to see who can praise him in the grandest terms. One of them tells us that Schuon's books offer "completely new perspectives in every aspect of religious thought,"¹ while another asserts that "*à propos* religion, equally in depth and breadth," he was "the paragon of our time."² Yet a third prolific and highly respected scholar has elevated his own superlatives to the level of the superhuman, comparing Schuon to "the cosmic Intellect itself."³ It is important to note that these are not the words of marginal thinkers or cultish sycophants. On the contrary they represent the considered judgment of several of the academy's most prestigious and influential names. Schuon—who was at once a philosopher, an authority on the world's religions, a spiritual guide, and a gifted poet and painter—seemed to many of his most learned readers not just a man but a providential phenomenon, a many-sided genius with a God-given spiritual role for our age.

At the same time, however, his work has been severely criticized—when not simply ignored—by a second and admittedly much larger group, and this includes academics who might have otherwise been expected to benefit most from his insights: philosophers of religion, authorities on mysticism and spirituality, and comparative religionists. In fact scholarly dismissals began many years ago when a prominent reviewer of one of this author's first books complained that "Schuon glories in his contempt for human reason" and that his writings are little more than "a disconnected series of

1. Jacob Needleman, *The Sword of Gnosis: Metaphysics, Cosmology, Tradition, Symbolism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 14–15.

2. Huston Smith, commenting on Schuon's book *Logic and Transcendence* (London: Perennial Books, 1975).

3. "Schuon seems like the cosmic Intellect itself. . . surveying the whole of the reality surrounding man and elucidating all the concerns of human existence in the light of sacred knowledge" (Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred: The 1981 Gifford Lectures* [Albany, New York: State University of New York, 1989], 107).

private thoughts”;⁴ another critic has charged Schuon with a “subtle arrogance which is hardly becoming in those who desire religious unity,”⁵ while a third objects that “the very manner in which Schuon’s thesis is developed suggests that the theoretical is the basis for what is. . . . The course of philosophy (and theology, too) over the past two centuries is precisely one of questioning such an approach.”⁶ For a number of reasons, the opinions of those in this second group have tended to carry the day. As a result Schuon’s books are seldom read in college or university classrooms, and his name therefore remains comparatively unknown among students of religion and philosophy, as well as among those in the wider public whose choice of reading is influenced by what the pundits say.⁷

My aim in compiling this anthology has been to redress this imbalance by offering its readers a glimpse of the full scope of Schuon’s philosophy in order that they might be able to judge for themselves what to make of this provocative, and obviously controversial, writer. It should be understood from the outset that I am by no means an indifferent observer. Having studied and written about Schuon for the past quarter century, I have long been convinced that he is an author whose work deserves a much larger audience and much fairer hearing, and this book has been quite deliberately designed to persuade others to think the same. Colleagues in the field who are accustomed to maintaining neutrality may fault me for adopting the role of an advocate, and if so they are kindly invited to bring their preferred methodology to the table and to be as critical as they wish. For my part, I cannot but agree with Schuon that “knowledge saves only on condition that it engages all that we are,”⁸ and since—as I see it—the only good reason for seeking knowledge in the domain of religion is that

4. R. C. Zaehner in a review of Schuon’s *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* in *The Journal of Theological Studies*, Vol. 6 (1955), 341.

5. Richard Bush, “Frithjof Schuon’s *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*: Con,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (1976), 717.

6. Shunji Nishi in a review of Schuon’s *Transcendent Unity of Religions* and *Logic and Transcendence* in *The Anglican Theological Review*, Vol. 60 (1978), 120.

7. Or if not unknown at least unnamed. “One rarely encounters academic specialists in the spiritual dimensions of religious studies who have not in fact read several of the works of Schuon, but this wide-ranging influence is rarely mentioned in public because of the peculiar processes of academic ‘canonization’” (James W. Morris, “Ibn ‘Arabī in the ‘Far West’: Visible and Invisible Influences,” *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabī Society*, No. 29 [2001], 106). Noting the “profound effect of the abundant writings of Frithjof Schuon” on “several generations of philosophers and theologians seeking to develop a comprehensive, non-reductive ‘philosophy of religions,’” Morris attributes scholarly unwillingness to acknowledge this influence to the “vagaries of academic opinion and respectability” (105–106).

8. *Prayer Fashions Man: Frithjof Schuon on the Spiritual Life*, ed. James S. Cutsinger (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2005), 24.

it might in fact save us, I have chosen to remain as fully engaged with the Schuonian message as possible.

My task as editor has not been an easy one. The complete corpus of Schuon's writings is extensive and imposing: more than two dozen books, some four thousand poems, and nearly two thousand letters, as well as approximately twelve hundred short spiritual texts, which were privately circulated among his friends and close associates.⁹ My goal here is simply to present a small cross-section of the evidence that has led Schuon's defenders to draw what must otherwise seem excessively flattering conclusions concerning his stature and significance, while at the same time challenging his critics—and the religious studies community as a whole—to give his work a much fuller and more sustained examination than it has so far received.

But words of both praise and blame aside, who exactly was Frithjof Schuon,¹⁰ and why, if his perspective has seemed to some so immensely important, has he been so disparaged when not neglected by others?

PERENNIALIST

A first response is to say that Schuon was the leading spokesman for a contemporary school of religious thought known as perennialism,¹¹ the

9. Compiled in his later years as “The Book of Keys” (*Le Livre des clefs*), these texts were initially composed as *mudhākarat* or “sermons” for Schuon's Sufi disciples (see below for a discussion of his role as a *shaykh*). With the exception of a first volume in German—*Leitgedanken zur Urbesinnung* [Guiding Thoughts for Primordial Meditation] (Zürich: Orell Füssli Verlag, 1935); revised edition: *Urbesinnung: Das Denken des Eigentlichen* [Primordial Meditation: Contemplating the Real] (Freiburg im Breisgau: Auum Verlag, 1989)—the author's books were compiled from articles originally written in French and published in such journals as *Le Voile d'Isis*, *Études traditionnelles*, and *Connaissance des religions*. Schuon wrote poetry in Arabic, English, and German; a sampling of his English poems can be found in *Road to the Heart* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1995), and the German poems appear in a number of collections, including *Songs for a Spiritual Traveler: Selected Poems* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2002), *Adasra & Stella Maris: Poems by Frithjof Schuon* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2003), and *Autumn Leaves & The Ring: Poems by Frithjof Schuon* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2010). For further information, see the Bibliography of Works by Frithjof Schuon, pp. 277–86.

10. A much more complete picture of Schuon than this brief introduction intends to supply can be found in Jean-Baptiste Aymard and Patrick Laude, *Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teachings* (Albany, New York: State University of New York, 2004) and Michael Fitzgerald, *Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2010).

11. The label “traditionalism” is also sometimes used; see for example Kenneth Oldmeadow, *Traditionalism: Religion in the Light of the Perennial Philosophy* (Colombo, Sri Lanka: Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies, 2000). The term “traditionalism” underscores the importance of fidelity to the revealed doctrines and rites of the major religions, whereas “perennialism” points to the metaphysical unanimity of these religions.

distinctive teaching of which is that the world's great religious traditions are all expressions or crystallizations of a single, saving Truth.

Born in Basle, Switzerland in 1907, Schuon writes that even as a young boy

I saw with my eyes and my heart the beauty, grandeur, and spirituality of other civilizations . . . and I could never believe that one religion alone in the whole world was the true one and that all other religions were false. . . . How could God, wishing to save every human soul, have given the saving truth to only one people and thus condemned so many others, who are no worse than these, to remain forever in deadly darkness?¹²

Comparing this Truth to a perennial flower, a perennialist teaches that there is one divine Source of all wisdom—itself timeless and universal—which has repeatedly blossomed forth at different moments of history. The major religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, are different blooms on that wisdom—or, to change the metaphor, different paths leading to the same summit or different dialects of a common language.

Schuon's early signature work, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, first published in 1948, was a key to defining the perennialist standpoint, a standpoint often associated with two other especially noteworthy spokesmen, René Guénon and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy.¹³ As the word “transcendent” implies, the unity or unanimity of the world's wisdom traditions is not to be found in the “human atmosphere” but in the “divine stratosphere”—to borrow one of Schuon's more memorable metaphors—and for the perennialist this means that a careful distinction must be drawn between two levels of religious meaning and interpretation. Outwardly or exoterically the doctrines of the major traditions are clearly different, even contradictory, a fact not surprisingly stressed by scholars whose approach to religion is strictly historical and empirical. The Hindu tradition, for example, includes

12. Letter to Benjamin Black Elk (7 October 1947); see the Appendix, pp. 202–203 (Selection 2).

13. The French metaphysician René Guénon (1886–1951), with whom Schuon corresponded and collaborated for nearly twenty years, may be regarded as the founder of the perennialist school; Guénon articulated the first principles of this perspective in such books as *An Introduction to the Study of Hindu Doctrines* (1921) and *Man and His Becoming according to the Vedānta* (1925). Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877–1947), for many years curator of Indian art at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, was the author of numerous books and articles on metaphysics, art, religion, and traditional civilizations; see especially his *Selected Papers on Metaphysics and Traditional Art and Symbolism*, ed. Roger Lipsey (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

many Gods, Judaism insists there is only one God, and Buddhism declares the question of God to be moot. Or again, Christians believe that God is a Trinity and that the divine Son of God was incarnate as Jesus Christ, beliefs explicitly rejected by Islam.

According to Schuon, however, such outwardly divergent teachings, providentially adapted to the spiritual, psychological, and cultural needs of different peoples at different periods of history, can be inwardly or esoterically reconciled by those who are sensitive to the metaphysical and symbolic meanings of revealed doctrines and rites and who are prepared to follow the golden thread of the dogmatic letter to the deepest—or highest—level of Spirit. From the perennialist point of view, this is why one finds such a remarkable “stratospheric” consensus among the greatest mystics and sages, such as Shankara in Hinduism, Ibn Arabi in Islam, and Meister Eckhart in Christianity.¹⁴

Schuon’s perennialism embraces three distinct dimensions, which are reflected in his use of three Latin phrases: *Sophia Perennis* (perennial wisdom), *Philosophia Perennis* (perennial philosophy), and *Religio Perennis* (perennial religion). When speaking of the *Sophia Perennis*,¹⁵ what he has in mind above all is metaphysical Truth as such—eternal, immutable, and supra-formal Wisdom—which he would occasionally sum up by citing the advaitic teaching of Shankara: “God is real; the world is unreal; the soul is not different from God.” *Philosophia Perennis* on the other hand refers in the Schuonian lexicon to the conceptual approximations and elaborations of this Wisdom that are to be found in the West among such figures as Plato, Plotinus, the Church Fathers, and the medieval Scholastics,¹⁶ although Schuon also uses this phrase to refer more generally to “the connecting link between different religious languages.”¹⁷ Finally, *Religio Perennis* is an expression he employs in order to accentuate the “quintessence of all spirituality,” the “underlying universality in every great spiritual patrimony,” or simply the “underlying religion” (*la religion sous-jacente* in his original

14. See Reza Shah-Kazemi, *Paths to Transcendence: According to Shankara, Ibn Arabi, and Meister Eckhart* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2006).

15. For example, in “Axioms of the *Sophia Perennis*,” *The Transfiguration of Man* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1995).

16. *Stations of Wisdom* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1995), 33; see also Schuon’s article “The Perennial Philosophy” in *The Unanimous Tradition: Essays on the Essential Unity of All Religions*, ed. Ranjit Fernando (Colombo, Sri Lanka: Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies, 1991). The phrase *philosophia perennis* appears to have been used for the first time by Agostino Steuco (1496–1549), a Vatican librarian, and it was given currency in the early eighteenth century by the philosopher Leibniz.

17. See below Ch. 1, “The Sense of the Absolute in Religions,” p. 14.

French).¹⁸ Reduced to its perennial essentials, every genuine religion is doctrinally based on a salvific descent of the Real into the illusory and, at the operative level of practice, on a metaphysical discernment between the Real and illusory and a contemplative concentration on the Real.

The perennialist perspective is sometimes classified as a kind of pluralism, but in fact it is fundamentally different, and this difference places Schuon worlds apart from many contemporary comparativists and philosophers of religion. Most pluralists, working inductively from the data presented by ethnographers and historians of religion, envision the diversity of religious traditions as the *natural* effect of a corresponding variety among human beings and cultures: Different people at different times and in different places have endeavored to reach out to the divine Reality—a Reality, many pluralists would insist, that can never be known as it is in itself¹⁹—and the religions, which are the results of their collective efforts, are therefore as varied as they are.

Schuon teaches by contrast that the great traditions are this Reality's own self-disclosures, each a *supernatural* effect resulting from direct revelation. The differences between them, together with certain fundamental divergences between the types of people to whom the revelations were given, correspond in the first instance to distinct archetypes in the divine Mind and distinct intentions in the divine Will, with each religion reflecting—as Schuon puts it—one of the “confessional Faces” of God.²⁰ In other words

18. See below “*Religio Perennis*,” p. 192, where the author presents this “quintessence” or “underlying universality” in light of the Patristic maxim: “God became man that man might become God.” See also the Appendix, pp. 226–27 (Selection 32).

19. Pluralist thinking is often undergirded by the Kantian assumption that knowledge is inevitably mediated by conceptual categories, which means that we can never experience Reality *an sich*, as it is in itself. I shall return to the question of cognitive limits below.

20. “There is not only a personal God—who is so to speak the ‘human Face,’ or the ‘humanized Face,’ of the supra-personal Divinity—but there is also, beneath this first hypostatic degree and resulting from it, what we may term the ‘confessional Face’ of God: It is the Face God turns toward a particular religion, the Gaze He casts upon it, *without which it would not even exist*” (see Ch. 4, “The Mystery of the Hypostatic Face,” p. 33 [italics added]). I say “in the first instance” because Schuon was not so blind as to think that the religions as we actually find them in history are immune to a variety of adaptive, and sometimes distorting, forces. “In every religious cycle four periods are to be distinguished: first the ‘apostolic’ period, then the period of full development, after which comes the period of decadence, and last the final period of corruption” (Schuon, *Christianity/Islam: Perspectives on Esoteric Ecumenism*, ed. James S. Cutsinger [Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2008], 10). The divine origin of the orthodox traditions notwithstanding, each of them nonetheless includes what he calls a “human margin”; see the chapter by that title in his book *In the Face of the Absolute* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1989).

religions are not human creations, and they should not be understood to comprise merely partial or complementary truths, which then need combining with those of other traditions in order to achieve a more complete—but still always imperfect—picture of the Real. On the contrary, each tradition is integrally true in that it provides its adherents with everything they need for reaching the highest or most complete human state, a state in which they may come to know and participate in the Supreme Reality itself.

Three consequences follow from Schuon's position, each of which is bound to be problematic for pluralists of a more typically historicist, empiricist, and "democratic" mindset. First, a merely abstract respect for the great wisdom traditions or a purely theoretical acknowledgment of their "transcendent unity" is not enough. Those intent on penetrating, and not merely appreciating, the religions must be concretely engaged in the practice of one of them, a practice prescribed in that religion's sacred scriptures and followed by its own saintly authorities. "A spirituality deprived of these bases," Schuon warned, "can only end up as a psychological game without any relation to the unfolding of our higher states."²¹ The syllogism is perennialist through and through: Whoever knows one religion knows implicitly all the others as well, for each of the orthodox faiths of the world is the manifestation of a single, underlying Essence. But the only way truly to know a given religious tradition—deeply and experientially and in such a way as to understand its very reason for being—is by believing in it and doing what it requires. Therefore, only those who are fully living the life required by their own religion, opening themselves to its doctrinal vision and submitting themselves to its moral and sacramental precepts, are qualified to speak with authority about any religion.²²

Second, the validity or spiritual legitimacy of a religion is not to be measured by something as subjective as the personal testimony of any given believer, however learned or faithful, but rather by objective criteria. "In order for a religion to be considered intrinsically orthodox," Schuon writes,

it must be founded upon a doctrine which, taken as a whole, is adequate to the Absolute . . . and it must promote and bring to fulfillment a spirituality proportioned to this doctrine, which

21. See below Ch. 19, "The Nature and Function of the Spiritual Master," p. 172. Schuon clearly parts company with a growing number of people who prefer to call themselves "spiritual" outside the context of a traditional religion.

22. One is reminded of the saying of Evagrius the Solitary: "The theologian is one who prays, and the one who prays is truly a theologian."

means that it must include both the idea and the fact of sanctity. The religion must therefore be of divine and not philosophical origin, and as a result it must convey a sacramental or theurgic presence, manifest above all in miracles and—though this may be surprising to some—in sacred art.²³

As for a given branch or spiritual community within a larger tradition, it too must be evaluated on the basis of objective factors, above all the scriptures and other revealed sources of the religion in question as these are interpreted by that tradition's "apostolic" and "patristic" authorities.²⁴ Readers who are accustomed to stressing the importance of tolerance and open-mindedness will doubtless wince, but Schuon did not hesitate to bring these criteria to bear in denouncing what he regarded as pseudo-religions and "intrinsic heresies," and he was prepared to name names.²⁵

Finally, a third result of his perennialism—and this may take the reader by surprise—is that Schuon was deeply skeptical of interfaith dialogue, at least in its most common forms. I do not mean to suggest that he was some sort of religious "isolationist"; on the contrary his personal friendships with believers and spiritual authorities in many different traditions were varied and extensive and included Hindu *gurus* and pundits, Pure Land Buddhist priests and Zen masters, Christian monks and abbots, and Native American chiefs and shamans.²⁶ But he knew very well that contemporary ecumenical discussions are too often dominated by interlocutors who fail to take seriously their own tradition's theology and who therefore end up reducing whole religions to an ethical least common denominator in the interest of promoting peace and harmony. Laudable as such a goal might seem, for

23. Schuon, *Forme et substance dans les religions* [Form and Substance in Religions] (Paris: Dervy-Livres, 1975), 19. I should point out that when Schuon speaks here of doctrinal "adequacy" he is not referring to a teaching that is merely "acceptable"; he is alluding instead to the Scholastic definition of truth as the "adequation of reality and mind" (*adaequatio rei et intellectus*).

24. Certain pluralists on the other hand prefer to "demythologize" the scriptures and dismantle traditional doctrines on the pretext that they can no longer be understood, let alone believed and practiced, by modern people; see for example John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic Age* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox, 1993).

25. For example, the Transcendental Meditation movement of Mahesh Yogi (see the Appendix, Selection 12). In Schuon's terminology an "intrinsic heresy" is incompatible with metaphysical Truth as such; an "extrinsic heresy" on the other hand is a valid dogmatic perspective, which only appears to be false from the point of view of another such perspective. See the important chapter "Orthodoxy and Intellectuality" in Schuon's *Stations of Wisdom*.

26. Schuon took a special interest in the religious traditions of the Plains Indians, twice visiting the American West, in 1959 and 1963. He also enjoyed longstanding friendships with Benjamin Black Elk, son of the Oglala Sioux elder Black Elk, and Thomas Yellowtail, a Crow Sun Dance chief.

Schuon this deliberate blurring of dogmatic differences involved—at least potentially—a kind of “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit,” for if differences between the religions are indeed willed by God and if they manifest the various facets or “faces” of the Supreme Reality, these differences must be salvifically necessary.²⁷ And this being so, one is obliged to respect the integrity of each orthodox tradition as an irreplaceable repository of the sacred, honoring the formal structure of its distinctive dogmas, rites, and symbols so as to ensure that these unique “dialects” not be confused or collapsed into a kind of “religious Esperanto.”²⁸

“If all men were metaphysicians and contemplatives,” Schuon notes,

a single Revelation might be enough; but since this is not how things are, the Absolute must reveal itself in different ways, and the metaphysical viewpoints from which these Revelations are derived—according to different logical needs and different spiritual temperaments—cannot but contradict one another on the plane of forms. . . . The great evil is not that men of different religions do not understand one other, but that too many men—due to the influence of the modern spirit—are no longer believers.

Given this situation, his advice was that people should “return to faith, whatever their religion may be, provided that it is intrinsically orthodox and in spite of dogmatic ostracisms.”²⁹ Better in other words to worship God in a religiously exclusivistic but orthodox environment than to run the risk of diminishing or disparaging, however unintentionally, one of Heaven’s gifts.

27. Schuon occasionally cited the Koran in this regard: “For each We have appointed a divine law and a traced-out way. Had God willed He could have made you one community. But that He may try you by that which He hath given you (He hath made you as ye are). So vie one with another in good works. Unto God ye will all return, and He will then inform you of that wherein ye differ” (*Sūrah* “The Table Spread” [5]:48).

28. The phrase is Coomaraswamy’s; see “Sri Ramakrishna and Religious Tolerance,” *Coomaraswamy, 2: Selected Papers: Metaphysics*, ed. Roger Lipsey, 40. In a recent book, *God is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World—and Why Their Differences Matter* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), Stephen Prothero alleges that perennialist writers treat all the religions as if they were the same, but this is a complete misrepresentation of Schuon’s position, whom Prothero never bothers to cite or even mention.

29. Letter of 29 May 1964. For the complete letter, see *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom: A New Translation with Selected Letters*, ed. James S. Cutsinger (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2006), 133–34. Schuon’s observation concerning “how things are” will perhaps be taken as an example of the “subtle arrogance” mentioned by one critic above. If so, surely the only response can be that Schuon was right, whether we like the way he puts things or not. The majority of religious believers need a formal, and relatively simple, expression of Truth in which they can put their entire trust without being troubled by metaphysical subtleties.

SHAYKH

This insistence on a serious, sacramental commitment to an orthodox tradition is one of the hallmarks of Schuon's teaching. There are of course many writers on the subject of religion who believe in God and say their prayers and who encourage others to do the same—though their numbers have been sharply reduced over the last several decades among academic religionists, as we shall be discussing shortly. What one finds in Schuon's case, however, is a writer who takes the further step of insisting that only those who do believe and pray,³⁰ and who do so moreover on the canonical basis supplied by an authentic revelation, can speak on the subject of religion, any religion, with true authority.

Schuon did not exempt himself from this rule, a fact that brings us to a second answer to the question of who he was, why he has provoked such divergent responses among his readers, and why so many remain unaware of his work. Since his death in 1998, it has become a matter of public record that his own spiritual practice was undertaken within the framework of Islam, specifically within the mystical tradition of Sufism. Some of his closest associates have published biographical reminiscences in recent years,³¹ and we now know that this perennial philosopher served for more than sixty years as the *shaykh*, or spiritual master, of a traditional Sufi brotherhood in the *Shādhilīyyah-Darqāwīyyah* lineage.³²

Growing up in Western Europe in the early years of the twentieth century, Schuon had been raised first as a Protestant and later received confirmation as a Roman Catholic. Nowhere in these Christian contexts, however—as he explains in several letters as well as in his unpublished memoirs³³—did he encounter spiritual teaching and guidance of the same kind and caliber as he had discovered, during his early teens, in the scriptures and sacred art of the East.³⁴ “Being *a priori* a metaphysician,” he recalls,

30. “Even if our writings had on average no other result than the restitution for some of the saving barque that is prayer, we would owe it to God to consider ourselves profoundly satisfied” (Schuon, *The Play of Masks* [Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1992], vii).

31. For example, Martin Lings, *A Return to the Spirit: Questions and Answers* (Louisville, Kentucky: Fons Vitae, 2005), 1–19.

32. This is an unbroken line of initiatic transmission tracing its origin to the thirteenth-century master Abu al-Hasan al-Shadhili (1196–1258) and including among its subsequent branches an order founded in the early nineteenth century by Mawlay al-Arabi al-Darqawi (1760–1823).

33. *Erinnerungen und Betrachtungen* (Lausanne: privately circulated, 1974); English translation: “Memories and Meditations” (Bloomington, Indiana: privately circulated, 1982).

34. “In my childhood I was first a Protestant and later a Catholic; to the simple and sincere piety of my first teacher, who lived wholly on the Bible, I owe much. In Catholicism I loved the

I had since my youth a particular interest in *Advaita Vedānta*, but also in the method of realization of which *Advaita* 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 rules 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.³⁵

This search took him eventually, in 1932, to Mostaganem, Algeria, where he met and was soon initiated by one of the most celebrated of twentieth-century Sufi masters, the *shaykh* Ahmad al-Alawi.³⁶ This aspect of Schuon's personal background, together with his own subsequent role as a *shaykh* in his own right—the Shaykh Isa Nur al-Din Ahmad al-Shadhili al-Darqawi al-Alawi al-Maryami—was kept in the strictest confidence until his death, and those who had the privilege of approaching him for spiritual direction, including perhaps as many as a thousand disciples throughout the world, were asked to do their part in protecting his privacy.³⁷

There were at least two reasons for the veil of anonymity surrounding Schuon's person and for the relative secrecy of his Sufi brotherhood. First, like any other such authority—whether Hindu *guru*, Buddhist *roshi*, or Christian *geronda*—he was obliged by his office to take into careful consideration the moral and other qualifications of those who sought to become his disciples. “In former times,” he writes,

when an aspirant presented himself at the door of a *zāwiyah* [a Sufi center for prayer] he was at first left to knock in vain; one was wary of opening the door to him right away, and it

liturgical manifestation of the holy, the beauty of the divine service in the Gothic-style churches, the cult of Mary and the Rosary. But I could not stop with this, for at an early age I had read the *Bhagavad Gītā* and profoundly experienced the sacred art of the Far East” (Letter of 21 December 1980; see footnote 76 below).

35. Letter of January 1996.

36. See Martin Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century: Shaikh Ahmad al-Alawi: His Spiritual Heritage and Legacy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1973). “To meet such a one,” Schuon later wrote, “is like coming face to face in mid-twentieth century with a medieval Saint or a Semitic Patriarch, and this was the impression made on me by the Shaikh Al-Hajj Ahmad Bin-Aliwāh, one of the greatest Masters of Sufism, who died a few months ago at Mostaganem” (“*Rāhimabu ’Llah*,” *Cahiers du Sud*, August–September, 1935).

37. In addition to his Sufi disciples, Schuon also gave counsel to a number of seekers from other religions, including Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, and Christians; regarding this unusual role, see Ch. 19, “The Nature and Function of the Spiritual Master,” pp. 175–77.

sometimes happened that he was left to wait many days. . . . One wanted to be sure of his sincerity, humility, capacities, and good character. I do not say that things were always like this or that we must do things this way; I simply indicate a traditional point of view, which is as obvious as it is indispensable. Needing no one, we are not interested in strangers who simply wish to make our acquaintance.³⁸

Although Schuon devoted considerable time and attention to those who were in earnest about their spiritual lives and who exhibited the persistence necessary to seek him out, he had no interest at all in proselytizing or attracting newcomers. His personal guidance was destined for a relatively small number of people, and he took very seriously his responsibilities for protecting their privacy and providing them with a congenial environment for their spiritual work—"a little garden of the Holy Virgin," as he liked to call it, hidden from the public gaze.³⁹

But a second, and for our purposes more important, reason for his circumspection was an abiding concern that the message he sought to convey in his books—a perennial, hence universal, message precisely—not be confused or identified with a single religion. He knew that those who were aware of his Christian background might falsely conclude from his Sufi affiliation and function that he had renounced the religion of his youth and "converted" to Islam, whereas in fact his initiatic link with the Muslim tradition in no way conflicted with his remaining throughout his long life an adamant defender of traditional Christianity against its own modernist critics nor with his having a special affinity for the Christian East and the Hesychast method of prayer.⁴⁰ He

38. Letter of 8 June 1984.

39. "One must live in a little garden of the Holy Virgin, without unhealthy curiosity and without ever losing sight of the essential content and goal of life" ("Message to a Disciple," undated document). It is useful to note in this regard that Schuon's branch of the *Shādhiliyyah* Sufi line came to be known as the *Tariqah Maryamiyyah*, having been blessed, he informed his disciples, with the celestial patronage of the Virgin Mary. "The coming of Sayyidatna Maryam [as the Virgin is called in Islam] did not depend on my own will but upon the will of Heaven; it was a totally unexpected and unimaginable gift" (Letter of September 1981). For further insight into the distinctively Marian aspects of his teaching, see my article "Colorless Light and Pure Air: The Virgin in the Thought of Frithjof Schuon," *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies*, 6:2 (Winter 2000); reprinted in *Maria: A Journal of Marian Studies*, 3:1 (August 2002) and in *Ye Shall Know the Truth: Christianity and the Perennial Philosophy*, ed. Mateus Soares de Azevedo (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2005).

40. Schuon's brother was a Trappist monk, and his numerous other Christian contacts included the Russian Orthodox archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov (1896–1993), who was a noted disciple of Saint Silouan of the Holy Mountain of Athos, and the widely influential Roman Catholic

therefore felt it was necessary to avoid not only “the curiosity of Westerners,” who might well have flocked to his door in hopes of finding something strange and exotic, but even more the misunderstandings of “Muslim Easterners, for whom a *shaykh* embodies not only what is most lofty and mysterious in Islam but also what is narrow and sentimental—when in reality I wished to represent above all the *Religio Perennis*.”⁴¹ Moreover Schuon was perfectly aware of the political implications of being a Muslim in the West, to say nothing of a *shaykh*, and he was quick to recognize—even in a “pre-9/11” context—the importance of distancing himself and his philosophy from the misleading associations such terms and categories could easily lead to:

If we present ourselves in the Western world as “Muslims,” people will think quite logically that we are converts, apostates, and traitors, given that Islam rejects Christianity. . . . Muslims on the other hand will welcome us as “brothers” and will congratulate us on having rejected the false religion that is Christianity, whereas in reality we are Vedantists who have sought an initiation and a spiritual method. What this means is that we shall appear in a false light in regard to both the East and the West. It is therefore important to keep silent to the extent we can.⁴²

These facts go some further way in helping answer the question of why Schuon’s name is not better known among scholars of religion nor cited as often as one might have expected in the pertinent bibliographies. Despite

writer Thomas Merton (1915–1968), who near the end of his life was in regular correspondence with several of Schuon’s disciples about the possibility of meeting with “the Shaykh” and asking him for spiritual guidance; see *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Harcourt, 1993), 476–77.

41. Letter of 21 August 1971. “Our starting point is *Advaita Vedānta* and not the voluntarist, individualist, and moralist anthropology with which Sufism is unquestionably identified” (Letter of 29 April 1989).

42. Letter of January 1992. Schuon adds, “In the Muslim world religion is becoming more and more politicized, which makes our position all the more precarious in the Western world—although we would have nothing to fear if people knew what we are in reality, not ‘believers’ of this or that faith but esotericists, who are by definition universalists, open to every orthodox credo.” It should be emphasized that Schuon had nothing but the highest respect for the revealed forms of Islam and for traditional Islamic law as such: “Admittedly, one has the right to criticize those who, by an excessive and possibly absurd legalistic zeal, refuse to benefit from the simplifications that the Law itself offers, but one does not have the right to scorn in the least a given prescription of the Law or to take advantage of simplifications with a feeling of superiority or triumph. The Law is sacred” (“The Book of Keys,” No. 887, “On the Subject of the Notion of Exotericism”).

being a much-published author, his role as a *shaykh* led him to maintain a deliberate public anonymity, far from the halls of academia and the lecture and conference circuits where he might otherwise have gained a wider hearing.

Silence, circumspection, and relative anonymity notwithstanding, it was only natural for an author who was so deeply immersed in an intense contemplative practice and in the day-to-day life of a spiritual community to bring at least something of that side of himself to his written expositions, and this was certainly true for Schuon. From first to last—from *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* in 1948 to *The Transfiguration of Man* in 1995—his books testify to a continuing interest in the scriptures, doctrines, symbols, rites, and sacred arts of the Muslim tradition. *Understanding Islam*—first published in 1961 and translated into Arabic, Persian, and Urdu, as well as many European languages—remains his most often reprinted and most widely read title, though *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence* and *Christianity/Islam: Perspectives on Esoteric Ecumenism* should also be mentioned.⁴³ These books continue to attract a small but highly receptive audience in the Islamic world as well as in the West. At the same time, it is not surprising that a significant number of his Muslim readers, including at least a few other Sufi authorities, have found much to object to in Schuon's work. His uncompromising defense of a pure or integral esotericism “uncolored” by the viewpoint of any specific religion or formal spiritual framework,⁴⁴ his perennialist insistence on the validity and salvific efficacy of all the world's major traditions, and his trenchant criticisms of what he called the “moralizing metaphysics” of “average Sufism”⁴⁵ made him an unusual *shaykh*, to say the least, and it has

43. *Understanding Islam*, ed. Patrick Laude (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2011), foreword by Annemarie Schimmel; *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence*, ed. James S. Cutsinger (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2006), foreword by Seyyed Hossein Nasr; *Christianity/Islam: Perspectives on Esoteric Ecumenism*, ed. James S. Cutsinger (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2008); two anthologies of Schuon's writings on Islam should also be noted: *Dimensions of Islam*, trans. P. N. Townsend (London: Allen and Unwin, 1969) and *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, trans. J. Peter Hobson (London: World of Islam Festival, 1976).

44. “The word ‘esotericism’ designates not only the total truth insofar as it is ‘colored’ by entering a system of partial truth but also the total truth as such, which is colorless” (see Ch. 2, “Two Esotericisms,” p. 17). Schuon described his perspective as that of “Islamic esotericism,” where “the esotericism comes first and Islam afterward,” and not that of “esoteric Islam,” where “Islam comes first and esotericism afterward” (“The Book of Keys,” No. 1008, “Islamic Esotericism and Esoteric Islam”).

45. “The Quintessential Esotericism of Islam,” *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence*, 102. Critical though he could be of confessional or “contingent” expressions of Islamic spirituality, Schuon was adamant in his defense of a “quintessential Sufism” consisting of three key elements: discernment between the Real and illusory—between *al-Haqq*, the True, and *al-hijāb*, the veil—as expressed by the *Shahādah*; permanent concentration on the Real by means of *Dhikru ʿLlāh*, the Remembrance or Invocation of God; and conformity to the Real through *Ihsān*, beauty of soul or virtue.

sometimes been difficult for those of other Sufi lineages, let alone the exoteric Muslim majority, to understand and accept his full perspective, however impressed they might otherwise be with particular aspects of his teaching.

Some of his critics have gone so far as to suggest that Schuon was not really serious about his Islamic affiliation and practice and that he gradually drifted away from an initially firm footing in traditional *Tasawwuf*, but this claim appears to be belied by the facts. In this respect, as in others, he seems on the contrary to have undergone virtually no intellectual or spiritual change or development. Having as a young man made the decision to enter Islam, he continued to practice within that framework for the rest of his life, and yet he remained simultaneously a “pure esotericist” from start to finish. In a letter written when he was just twenty-five—several months before meeting the *shaykh* al-Alawi—he said to a friend,

If there were any essential difference between a path that passes through Benares and one that passes through Mecca, how could you think that I would wish to come to God “through Mecca” and thereby betray Christ and the *Vedānta*? Is the Nirvana of Mecca different from the Nirvana of Benares simply because it is called *fanā*⁷ and not *nirvāna*? Either we are esotericists and metaphysicians who transcend forms . . . and do not distinguish between *Allāh* and *Brahman*, or else we are exotericists, “theologians,” or at best mystics, who consequently live in forms like fish in water and who do make a distinction between Mecca and Benares.⁴⁶

Precisely the same metaphysical accentuation remains evident nearly fifty years later in another letter, written to one of his disciples when Schuon was seventy-four:

Our *Tariqah* is not a *Tariqah* like the others. . . . Our point of departure is the quest after esotericism and not after a particular religion—after the total Truth, not a sentimental mythology. To renounce and forget the religion of our [Christian] forefathers simply to immerse ourselves in another religion . . . could never be our perspective.⁴⁷

Here we begin to see yet another reason, or rather set of reasons, why Schuon’s writings may have failed to gain a wider readership and why they

46. Letter of 15 May 1932.

47. Letter of 18 May 1981.

will doubtless never be popular even among those who in other ways are prepared to appreciate many of the key elements in his philosophy, including his defense of revelation and tradition, his movingly poetic descriptions and explanations of religious symbols and art, his penetrating criticisms of the modern world, and his insistence on the practice of virtue and prayer. As attractive as Schuon's work might be for the serious person of faith, whether Muslim or otherwise, his message refuses to be domesticated in the interest of any sectarian aim and cannot be limited by any formal enclosure—even the “mystical enclosure” of traditional Sufism.⁴⁸

GNOSTIC

The difficulties certain of the faithful may have in appreciating Schuon's teaching are nothing, however, compared to the problems modern scholars must face in coming to terms with his work. For if he has seemed insufficiently partisan from the point of view of some fellow Sufis, he is undoubtedly much too partisan for the taste of most contemporary religionists, who are trained to be wary of mixing personal commitment with scholarly discourse.⁴⁹ His frequent references to God and not merely to what people *say* about “God,” his confident asseverations as to the esoteric significance of sundry doctrines and symbols, and his continual talk about “pure” metaphysics and Truth—with a capital “T” after all!—are bound to leave many of the professoriate feeling nonplussed if not irritated, or else embarrassed to have been caught reading such an author. What will one's colleagues think?

Asked in a 1991 interview why his books had not received more attention in university circles, Schuon quickly cut to the chase with a reply that was at once abrupt and revealing: “The reason is that I am not a relativist. Today all the scholars are relativists, and I am an absolutist. I believe in Truth, and the official scholars do not believe in Truth.”⁵⁰ Anyone who

48. Schuon discusses the uniqueness of his perspective, and the differences between his teaching and that of other Sufis, at several points in the Appendix, notably in selections 6, 19, and 29.

49. Jan G. Platvoet gives voice to what is for many academics the default methodology: “Scholars of religion . . . can only take an agnostic position in respect of the truth or falsehood of the beliefs of the faithful. They must, therefore, confine themselves to investigating what is empirical about these beliefs and rituals i.e. to those elements and aspects of them that belong squarely to our own world and are parts of its empirical, cultural, and historical realities” (“Rattray's Request: Spirit Possession among the Bono of West Africa,” *Indigenous Religions: A Companion*, ed. Graham Harvey [London and New York: Cassell, 2000], 81). Mircea Eliade's complaint that contemporary religionists often “take refuge in a materialism or behaviorism impervious to every spiritual shock” (*The Quest* [Chicago: University of Chicago, 1969], 62) still rings true.

50. “Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy” (biographical video featuring interviews with Schuon in 1991 and 1992; Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2012).

has had a religion course in a secular university setting—or for that matter in any number of “church-related” institutions of higher learning—is well aware of what Schuon is talking about and knows that he is largely right, not perhaps about any given scholar as an individual person of faith but about virtually all the scholars *qua* scholars. For with few exceptions most academic religionists decided long ago to adopt the public posture of agnostics, obediently doing their part to uphold the opinion that opinions—more or less well informed by historical and other empirical data—are all we can hope for when it comes to God and other ultimate issues.

Into such a climate of assumptions and professional protocols the words of this “absolutist” inevitably descend like a thunderbolt, shattering preconceptions, flouting conventions, and often offending the sensibilities of those who might otherwise have been sympathetic to his ecumenical outlook. Even readers who admit to finding themselves powerfully attracted by Schuon often report having experienced a certain shock on first contact with his work. For here one is confronted by an approach to religion and spirituality that eschews, indeed strongly denounces, the pervasive “contextualism” of today’s university, refusing to justify itself by any of the usual standards of academic research while at the same time conveying a clear and unmistakable note of authority and total certainty.⁵¹

But where does this authority come from? And what are the foundations, if any, for Schuon’s certainty?

In order to begin addressing these questions, one must dig deeper than we have thus far—deeper certainly than a discussion of perennialism as a school of thought and deeper too than an acknowledgment of this author’s connection with Sufism. Something of the depth in question was suggested many years ago in a review of Schuon’s third book, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* (1953). Noting that this volume possessed “the intrinsic authority of a contemplative intelligence,” the reviewer went on to suggest that its author “speaks of grace as one in whom it is operative and as it

51. “We grew up at a time when one could still say—without blushing on account of its naiveté—that two and two make four, when words still had a meaning and said what they meant to say, when one could conform to the laws of elementary logic or of common sense without having to pass through psychology or biology or so-called sociology and so forth, in short when there were still points of reference in the intellectual arsenal of men. By this we wish to point out that our way of thinking and our dialectic are deliberately out of date; and we know in advance, for it is only too evident, that the reader to whom we address ourselves will thank us for it” (Schuon, *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism* [Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1986], 2). As one scholar has noted, “If the premise of the Perennial Philosophy is conceded, then much of the apparatus of modern scholarship . . . stands condemned” (Carl Ernst, “Traditionalism, the Perennial Philosophy, and Islamic Studies,” *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin*, Vol. 28, No. 2 [December 1994], 181). For Schuon’s further thoughts on authority, certainty, and infallibility, see Ch. 7, “Tracing the Notion of Philosophy,” pp. 67–68.

were in virtue of that operation.”⁵² If this observation is to be regarded as anything more than hyperbole—and similar comments on the part of other learned readers oblige us, if we are honest, at least to consider that option—a radical shift in assumptions is going to have to take place. We must entertain the possibility, if only as an experiment in thought, that Schuon was someone who actually *knew* what he was talking about, someone who had apprehended the Truth—with that capital “T” once again—in a way that cannot be accounted for in terms of sheerly natural causes or purely human phenomena.

I realize how inflated such language will sound to many readers. It is, therefore, of the greatest importance that in approaching Schuon’s work from this angle we be exceedingly cautious, for the last thing I want to do is to give the impression that his faithful defenders are nothing more than mere fideists, whose appreciative response to his books is based on a prior conviction concerning his spiritual station. By all accounts Schuon was indeed an exceptional human being, and his “presence” was such that many who knew him were inclined to describe him in quite extraordinary terms; such testimonials in fact abound, and not only on the part of injudicious disciples.⁵³ But it would be a mistake to suppose that the validity of his philosophy somehow rested on his charisma or other personal qualities. In fact one of the characteristic and most frequently noted features of his books is how rigorously impersonal they are; autobiographical allusions are extremely rare, and one finds no references at all to his own spiritual attainments, whatever those may have been. This is no accident, for though Schuon certainly wished for his readers to put their trust in God, he was not in the business of soliciting their trust in himself or in promulgating his insights as it were *ex cathedra*. On the contrary, his explicit and often stated aim was to teach his readers “how to think”⁵⁴ so that they might

52. Bernard Kelly, “Notes on the Light of the Eastern Religions: With Special Reference to the Writings of Ananda Coomaraswamy, René Guénon, and Frithjof Schuon,” *Dominican Studies*, Vol. 7 [1954]), 265.

53. To give but one instance, we may quote the distinguished author of the foreword to this anthology: “With the possible exception of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Frithjof Schuon is the only person I have known who invariably made me feel, on leaving him, that I had been in the presence of a different order of human being” (Huston Smith, *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2 [Winter 1998], 31).

54. “I have the impression of living in a world where almost no one knows how to think anymore; this does not encourage me to share my thoughts. One of the reasons I write articles is that I hope to influence not only the intelligence but also the soul or sensibility of readers and to teach them how to think” (Letter of 9 September 1970).

come to know God for themselves. As a *shaykh*, Schuon was unquestionably a master to those in his charge, but as an author, he was always careful to maintain the stance of a logician and diagnostician.

Of course, even after the bugbear of authoritarianism has been put to rest, there will remain for many an even greater obstacle: the claim that it is possible for anyone—Schuon or otherwise—truly to know things of a spiritual or supernatural order. The question of whether he himself might have been a “gnostic” or *jnānin* pales to insignificance before the more radical question of whether there really is such a thing as genuine *gnosis* in the first place—whether “spiritual knowledge” or a “science of the Real” is anything more than an idle dream and hence unworthy of the attention of the serious reader.⁵⁵ When Schuon tells us that “human intelligence coincides in its essence with certainty of the Absolute,”⁵⁶ that “the real and the knowable coincide,”⁵⁷ that “everything that exists is inscribed *a priori* in the theomorphic substance of our intelligence,”⁵⁸ or that “real knowledge has no history”⁵⁹ because it is dependent instead on the sudden and supersensible “grasping of a truth already latent within us,”⁶⁰ the testy response of many scholars will no doubt be to say: Did this latter-day Platonist know nothing about the philosophy of the last two or three hundred years? Was he really so naive as to be unaware of what any undergraduate knows, that human knowledge is strictly dependent on sensory experience and irrevocably conditioned by cultural categories? Had he never heard of Kant, to say nothing of the numerous postmodern reminders that we are all in epistemological

55. Schuon often uses the term *gnosis* as a synonym for metaphysical knowledge, as in his book *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*; see below, pp. 14–15, 66. “We say *gnosis* and not ‘Gnosticism,’” he clarifies, “for the latter is most often a heterodox mythological dogmatism, whereas intrinsic *gnosis* is not other than what the Hindus mean by *jnāna* and *Advaita Vedānta*. To claim that all *gnosis* is false because of Gnosticism amounts to saying, by analogy, that all prophets are false because there are false prophets” (Schuon, *Roots of the Human Condition* [Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 2002], 10–11). Christian readers of Schuon sometimes balk at this word, but Saint Irenaeus of Lyons, the greatest of the early cataloguers of heresy, made a point of denouncing all “*gnosis* falsely so called” (1 Tim. 6:20), which obviously implies the existence of a *gnosis* “rightly so called.”

56. *Logic and Transcendence*, ed. James S. Cutsinger (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2009), 49.

57. *In the Face of the Absolute*, 37.

58. See Ch. 6, “Consequences Flowing from the Mystery of Subjectivity,” p. 52.

59. *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, ed. James S. Cutsinger (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2007), 10.

60. Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom*, 15.

bondage—however subtle and unconscious—to our gender, race, social class, period, and climate of opinion?⁶¹

As a matter of fact Schuon was well aware of such Kantian and post-Kantian “critiques,” and much of his work was devoted to exposing the radical inconsistency involved in every such claim to *know* the limits of knowledge. “In times past it was the object that was sometimes doubted,” he writes,

but in our day no one fears the contradiction of doubting the knowing subject in its intrinsic and irreplaceable aspect; intelligence as such is called into question, even “examined,” without wondering “who” examines it . . . and without taking account of the fact that philosophic doubt is included in this same devaluation, that it falls with the fall of intelligence, and that at the same stroke all science and philosophy collapse.⁶²

It is not my aim in this short introduction to attempt to justify Schuon’s position; whatever else one might say about him, this is clearly an author who is able and ready to speak in his own defense, and these opening words of mine are no more than a prelude to letting him do just that in the pages that follow. But perhaps I could venture just a hint as to what this defense will consist in by underscoring the phrase “knowing subject” in the passage above. For Schuon, learning “how to think” means above all learning how to come to grips with the “who” of the subject or self—not just *ab extra* but in its “intrinsic and irreplaceable aspect”; and what this in turn involves is the sudden realization—however demanding and protracted the preparation may prove—that in knowing That which is we must be That which knows. This is what it means to be a gnostic, no more but at the same time no less.

Gnosis thus understood is the prerogative of a faculty that Schuon calls the Intellect and that he describes, following the medieval Christian mystic

61. Schuon anticipates these criticisms: “There are few things that . . . ‘a man of our times’ endures less readily than the risk of appearing naive; everything else can be sacrificed as long as the feeling of not being duped by anything is safeguarded. . . . Those who reproach our ancestors with having been stupidly credulous forget first of all that one can also be stupidly incredulous and second that the self-styled destroyers of illusion live on illusions that exemplify a credulity second to none; for a simple credulity can be replaced by a complicated one, adorned with the arabesques of a reflexive doubt forming part of the style, but it is still credulity. Complication does not make error less false or stupidity less stupid” (See Ch. 3, “Naiveté,” p. 23).

62. Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, ed. Deborah Casey (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2006), 111. See also “The Contradiction of Relativism” in Schuon’s *Logic and Transcendence*.