



Scientism and Human Nature in the Works of Frithjof Schuon

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Motto

"Wanting to believe only what they see, scientists condemn themselves to seeing only what they believe; logic for them is their desire not to see what they do not want to believe. Scientism in fact is less interested in the real as such- which necessarily goes beyond our limitations- than in what is non-contradictory, therefore in what is logical, or more precisely, in what is empirically logical; thus in what is logical de facto according to a given experience, and not in what is logical de jure in accordance with the nature of things" [Frithjof Schuon-From the Divine to the Human].

The commentary that follows is a brief collection of random and not necessarily coherent observations conceived as a reaction (without any expositive aspirations) to one of the multiple and complex trends that characterize the involution of the Westernized mentality; it is a reaction entirely based on Schuon's thinking insofar as such a mimetical adoption can be claimed without impunity¹. Schuon dedicated parts of his works to brief impersonal polemics debating some of the modern tendencies—intellectual moral and spiritual—and one should not be surprised that he abandoned the typical ivory tower detachment to address these effects (nonetheless, in a very rhetorical fashion) partly because they reflected the immediate reality of his lifetime (which is also ours) and partly because they all had an obvious spiritual charge like everything else that surrounds us, because *"there is no extraterritoriality to God"*.

The trigger of this commentary was Schuon's short but brilliantly articulate paragraph quoted in the introduction. We discovered, not without surprise that its message encountered more hopeless misunderstanding than fierce opposition in laypersons addicted to the scientific worldview but otherwise normally educated and relatively open-minded. The very beginning of the first sentence posed the first obstacle because it was interpreted as an imprecation questioning the honesty of the scientific discourse at its own level. But whether scientific enunciations are true or false in regard to reality is completely irrelevant in this case. The phrase: *"Wanting to believe only what they see..."*, is actually completely neutral if one

¹ Wherever possible, we marked the references to Schuon's texts using a different font and quotation marks but the informed reader may discover in the text paraphrases without such explicit marks.

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eliminates all prejudices. There were indeed conjectural scientific theories that suffered debacles, others that were furiously denied or embraced and eventually accepted or rejected but this has nothing to do with what Schuon had in mind, although incidentally, the scientific turmoil is not inconsequential with respect to the fundamental idea of his comments. At the same time, the occasional lack of professional deontology² manifested in the scientific circles throughout history caused by stubbornness, pretentiousness, prejudice, cupidity and deliberate falsification is of little consequence—it only shows that humans are humans in all circumstances although there are voices who deplore such fatalities as if scientists were supposed to be angelical creatures above all contingencies. The confusion—not uncommon—is to blame moral decadence for all the evils of this world. Clearly, the critic who laments the depravity of the scholarly community uses an “inside” perspective incapable to transcend the fundamental limitations of the scientific mindset. With respect to truth, scientific knowledge is an unintentional imposture. There are two types of imposture, although the quality as such may always contain a certain measure of each: conscious imposture which is dishonest, deliberate and immoral and unconscious imposture which is “instinctual”, ignorant and sincere. In its ignorance, unconscious imposture is always convinced of the paramount worth of its mission and so is science—*“error creates the stage setting it requires to feel comfortable”*.

The verb “they see” deserves some extra clarifications. In this context, it refers to the axiom which establishes the empirical method as the fundamental principle of science. Based on this principle, virtually all the developments of modern civilization, including the theses found in those relatively theoretical branches of human investigation such as physics, are derived from observation and experiment followed by a more or less pertinent and astute discursive process³. Now, that observation and experiment are called for to confirm and support certain assumptions has nothing intrinsically perverse: the lifespan of Golden Gate Bridge is indeed an evidence that the engineering principles behind its construction were sound and its erection is an invitation (although insidiously traitorous) to the performance of similar feats. The reliance on observation and experiment demonstrates two things however: firstly, when taken as the source of new “discoveries” it reveals the incapacity of our discursive intelligence to extract its nutrients from other source but sheer contingency—secondly, when used to prove or strengthen certain theoretical hypotheses it shows the inherent absence from our dialectic of any absolute and irrefutable truth foundation. Fortunately the “cold mechanism” of our minds is always complemented by the warmth of our hearts and by the associated “intuition” (or “intellectual intuition” as Guénon and then Schuon calls it), which is the transpersonal but *sine qua non* element of our God given intellect—being the indiscernible ferment of any elaboration, the combination of intuition and reason is naturally and unconsciously present in all our mental processes.

A corollary to what Schuon expressed in the opening paragraph is that scientific mentality is confined to the level of syllogistic dexterity, which is equivalent to the reduction of man’s “intelligence” to ratiocination pure and simple. The error of science consists of the reliance of its entire scaffolding on the axiomatic denial of any supra-sensible reality, both immanent and transcendent. Clearly, “knowledge” entails infinitely much more than what our senses and discursive capacity are capable to reveal, if one may be permitted to use the word “infinitely”

² When we say “professional deontology” we refer to the mundane ethical principles and nothing more.

³ There are purely mathematical theories in physics which will never be sanctioned by an experimental counterpart—the limit of the speculative mind is the sky but action will always hit the wall of solidified matter.

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in a strictly provisional sense just to express the enormity of such a comparison. But the so called “epistemic scientism” denies that there is another kind of knowledge, qualitatively different from what sensory perception and the conscious actualization of the sensible order can produce and “ontological scientism” refutes the existence of any supra-sensible reality that would require such knowledge—with a single agnostic stroke, scientism wiped out the entire wisdom of humanity: we don’t need to know more and cannot know simply because there is nothing to be known. As Schuon noticed, *“this is the ultimate betrayal of our most profound and intrinsically human...”* potential and an eloquent expression of the downturn trajectory of our earthly existence that the past millennium and especially the last two centuries greatly accelerated. If Renaissance humanism endeavored to “inflate” man’s image and dethrone God (man as “the measure of all things”), more recent philosophy—starting with Cartesianism—managed to “deflate” it in an attempt to express human nature (and reality) in purely material and quantitative terms, establishing a “reign of quantity” so dubbed by Guénon almost eighty years ago. Finally, nowadays it is the machine which is called upon to provide “models” for man’s intelligence (as the development of cognitive science demonstrates), in other words, machine tends to become “the measure of man”—to quote the words of Schuon again *“...it is difficult for man to fall lower, to realize a greater mental perversion, a more complete abandonment of himself, a more perfect betrayal of his intelligent and free personality: in the name of “science” and of “human genius” man consents to become the creation of what he has created and to forget what he is... Swept away by a torrent, he glories in his incapacity to resist it.” [Stations of Wisdom]*. The word “scientism” used previously deserves a definition and a brief elaboration because the cult of this phenomenon has become a distinctive mark of the twentieth century. In essence and to various degrees, scientism represents the final stage of materialism and the deadly usurper of all spiritual wisdom (and of wisdom as such). Scientism is the ideological excrescence of science and considers this one as the only justifiable access to truth—an affirmation which leads to the presumptuous confidence in the derivatives of science: technology and industry. Science has virtually become the norm and the only alethiological criterion and there is no surprise that it is called upon to sanction and interpret spiritual realities, whereas ironically, it should be the role of religion to question and qualify the meaning and value of scientific discoveries. Scientism is by no means confined to the theoretical and academic level (where it already engendered frightening concepts)—unknowingly it evolved into a totalitarian ideology which permeates our lives all the more pervasively since—voluntarily or involuntarily—it disguises its viciousness under the apparently reasonable mask of a convincing rationality. Because science, reduced to its practical consequences seems to resolve in an impeccable fashion our material problems, the inference is made that it can and should resolve all the problems of our lives—as Schuon noticed, this confusion is even more deplorable when it occurs in men who represent traditional values and who thus compromise *“what they should otherwise defend”*. But religious or non-religious, we are all under the spell of a collective psychosis, prone to an unconscious ambivalence—unknowingly and unavoidably we have become victims of the scientific regime and perpetrators of its actions or at least innocent proselytizers of its mentality.

One can compare the scope of empirical and discursive knowledge to the segment of a straight line which contains an infinity of points, although, by definition, none of them is situated beyond the extremities of the segment. This implies that man could reach virtually any stretches of this “horizontal” dimension by rational means but will never exceed its boundaries—certainly, this doesn’t come as a surprise to the scientific mindset which postulated that there is nothing in the world which is not within reach of our discursive

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intelligence—ergo, the boundaries simply do not exist. The scientific unrest, metaphorically called “critical thinking” can plastically be described as the struggle of the fish in an overpopulated fish tank and this phenomenon becomes even more obvious when the powerful support of empirical evidence cannot play a role as it is the case with abstract thinking in general and with philosophy in particular⁴—in these latter cases, ingenious but shallow rationalistic fabrications serve as the foundation of any intellectual buildup. It is not surprising that once the existence of the absolute truth or even the possibility of such truth came to be questioned, surrogates emerged: in this climate, myriads of ideas, ranging from simple opinions to sophisticated philosophical theories can compete with equal rights for the quality of truthfulness (the sacrosanct “freedom of expression” is just another metaphor for this diversity); in the absence of a normative intellectual dimension, the world succumbed to intellectual chaos, euphemistically called “freethinking” and in this climate almost anything could be proven or disproved without too much pain if the premises (otherwise perfectly arbitrary) were carefully chosen.

Much easier for the modern man however, is to perceive the moral facet of this destructive process: the denial of an ultimate absolute truth creates philosophical skepticism which in turn leads to moral relativism and from that to amorality pure and simple (the vulgar and cynical “and so what?” is representative of such an attitude)—on the other hand, if degeneracy reaches a critical mass, men will predictably fall into their own trap and destroy themselves one way or the other, not because God wills our demise but because even God may not be able to save us from ourselves. In other words, although arguably human beings (and all the more societies) have the ability to sanction their ideas and straighten out their own actions because *est Deus in nobis*—“the kingdom of Heaven is within us” and the Godly seed is imperishable—men also have perfect freedom which includes the freedom to deny their own divine attributes and produce the most grotesque concepts or commit the most foolish and barbaric acts one could ever imagine as history demonstrated over and over again.

We live in a world dominated by a mélange of vaishya and shūdra mentalities—their expression is the inability of this new syncretic humanity⁵ to transcend the level of mere facts (in the words of René Guénon, “*the raise of vaishyas spelled intellectual night*”)⁶. The democratic leveling of society and the preoccupation with science in the nineteenth and twentieth century are the most prominent expressions of this reality. The destruction of nobility as a social class attracted as a consequence the disappearance of nobleness as a moral trait that once identified a homogenous social group⁷—when the grass dies, weeds take its place. A world impregnated with the mindset of the lower intellectual classes cannot but scorn, mock and belittle all things that do not correspond to the inner nature of those who populate it—atheism is the unavoidable result of this inclination and the result of the promethean pretensions that ungodliness and individualism aroused in the mind of modern

⁴ Although the methods of science and modern philosophy are different, their fundamental principles with regard to the ultimate reality are the same: a deep mistrust, aberrant distortions or complete denial.

⁵ Again, we refer not only to geographically Western but also to psychologically “westernized” human milieus.

⁶ The reference to the Hindu castes here is allusive and purely symbolic. The traits that identify the Hindu castes are generally human and define distinctive moral and intellectual categories independent of ethnicity—in particular they also characterized the European society of the Middle Ages until eighteenth and nineteenth century revolutionary movements—aimed against an oppressive social system—destroyed the normal intellectual order that that system had upheld.

⁷ Noble and virtuous men undoubtedly continued to be born and to exist but very rarely were and are they able to exert their natural function in society.

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man. But atheism in itself is a recognizable evil and a conspicuous enemy is evidently easier to avoid than a traitorous ally. Devil is indeed “the adversary” but it would be much easier to dodge its blows so to speak than to reject its delusory attraction. And this brings the discussion to the main point of this paragraph which is the impious incorporation of the sacred into the curriculum of profane academic study. Like everything else in this world, religion did not escape the scrutiny of science, an idea which is outrageous in itself because—as we remarked earlier—it is religion which should have the upper hand by all accounts. Historically speaking, the scholarly study of religion has its origins in the gradual shift of the *academia* from an overwhelmingly spiritual institution to a secular organization; theology, which once was recognized as the “philosophy” of the supra-sensible was reduced to the profane rationalistic study of its terrestrial manifestations—confiscated from the pulpits, it ended up relegated to the desk of the erudite scholar⁸. Following the introduction of the methodical study of religion in secular establishments (one is compelled to note the oxymoron), a multitude of ancillary utilities sprouted in the footsteps: anthropology, archeology, comparative religion, religious history, ethnography to mention just a few. With them, starting from the nineteenth century, hordes of religious scholars emerged whose mental attitude towards the divine has been indulgent at the best if not indifferent, derogatory or completely hostile. Their method of investigation is that of the researcher who studies a microorganism under the ocular of a microscope: he could count its cells, describe its feeding and reproductive abilities but will never be able to explain what gives life to that creature, why it exists and why it was shaped in that particular form, ideas which go beyond the morphological and functional description of visible phenomena, directly into the essentiality of being. To give just an example of the mentality that the “objective” examination of religion brings about, we could mention the irritating insistence on the “historical Jesus” which is either an unconscious (if one wants to warrant the religious historians the benefit of the doubt) or otherwise, a deliberately impious attempt to debase the sacred scriptures and reduce them to a collection of profane anecdotes. It is also an expression of the condescending attitude of scientism towards religion: “myths” needed the scrutiny of the objective, scholarly and reputable “intellectuals” in order to unveil their secrets to the twentieth century mature and rational individual: “*The question of the spiritual sense underlying the myths is one of those which people gladly relegate to the realm of feeling and imagination and which “exact science” refuses to treat otherwise than through the medium of psychological and historical conjectures*”. Because he lost the sense of the holy, modern man cannot but trivialize it and reduce it to his demeaning mentality. To the extent that they are honest and sincere, religious scholars should realize that the sense of the sacred cannot be understood rationally although it could be perceived intuitively, received by supernatural intervention and “lived” mystically⁹. The rendering of mythology in profane terms transforms it in what it is not: a collection of fictitious fables and obscure superstitions—a pattern of representation which nevertheless concurs with the preconceived idea of the immaturity, naivety and primitivism of the “uncivilized” man. These observations are all the more disappointing when the scientific outlook imprints on the disposition of the erudite with an open mind but still incapable to avoid the methodological and essentially profane avenues of science. Imperceptibly, the hammering of the consciousness of the believers with a multitude of inconsequential historic and encyclopedic observations left its permanent mark and the soul

⁸ The church evidently preserved the right to teach its canons but could not prevent the apparition of these spurious parallel institutions which debase the essence of the sacred and trivialize its exoteric manifestations.

⁹ Koans are the most representative expression of this idea, purposely meant to tax the understanding of the novice and ridicule reason.

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has become oblivious to any sacred dimensions—the noesis was cut short and for many, the Bible has become a place of earthly passions, saintly quarrels and dogmatic superstitions. Ironically, the skeptical, denigratory or flagrantly atheistic mindset of the religious scholars makes their endeavor derisory and frivolous not only *de jure*—from the perspective of the truth—but also *de facto*, that is, from their own mundane perspective. Whoever seriously studies what he otherwise trivializes cannot help becoming the object of his own contempt: *“since it is impossible to abuse directly a God in whom one does not believe, one abuses Him indirectly..., and one goes so far as to disparage the very form of man and his intelligence, the very intelligence one thinks with and abuses with. There is however no escape from the immanent Truth: ‘The more he blasphemes’, says Meister Elkhart, ‘the more he praises God’”*.

The misused and misunderstood derogatory syntagm, “Great Satan” that the Muslims apply to the West is at the same time fundamentally wrong and fundamentally adequate. It is false from a moral standpoint: Westerners are not evil or at least, not **more evil** than any other nations—in many respects quite the contrary—it is true from an intellectual standpoint: Western culture is a fountain of inexhaustible foolishness (the materialistic enslavement is another related and unsurprising effect which would clearly deserve more than a footnote). On the other hand, there is an irresistible lure in the luster of matter, a magic of cupidity and an attraction of turpitude in every soul, in the West and in the East—man is sinful by nature everywhere and Muslim clerics recognize that. What they instinctively fear is both the evil expressed by the *“totalitarian and autonomous domination”* of matter brought about by the encroachment of the Western culture, but to the same extent, the intrinsic incapacity of human nature to resist it—we are never pushed through the gates of Hell against our will in which case we would be martyrs, but we hanker to cross their threshold.

One could not end these comments without noticing that scientism like all the other evils of modern world appeared in the vacuum left by the moral decay of religion and the subsequent erosion of religious belief. The Holy Spirit could never fill the souls and altars of base and corrupt clergy often reduced to the roles of uninspired colporteurs and Protestantism added to the problem that it had endeavored to solve: *“indignation against abuses brings with it the rejection of the positive principles that those abuses falsify”*. Nowadays, when the influence of scientism on human realm takes such proportions, religion is powerless and often feels hypnotized by the persuasive domination of the rationalistic world-view, to which science seems to bring an irrefutable empirical validation. In the words of Frithjof Schuon: *“One of the effects of modern science has been to give religion a mortal wound, by posing in concrete terms problems which only esoterism can resolve; but these problems remain unresolved, because esoterism is not listened to, and is listened to less now than ever. Faced by these new problems, religion is disarmed, and it borrows clumsily and gropingly the arguments of the enemy; it is thus compelled to falsify by imperceptible degrees its own perspective, and more and more to disavow itself. Its doctrine, it is true, is not affected, but the false opinion borrowed from its repudiators corrode it cunningly ‘from within’; witness, for example, modernist exegesis, the demagogic leveling down of the liturgy, the Darwinism of Teilhard de Chardin, the ‘worker-priests’, and a ‘sacred art’ obedient to surrealist and ‘abstract’ influences. Scientific discoveries prove nothing to contradict the traditional positions of religion, of course, but there is no one at hand to point this out; too many ‘believers’ consider, on the contrary, that it is time that religion ‘shook off the dust of the centuries’, which amounts to saying, that it should ‘liberate’*

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itself from its very essence and from everything which manifests that essence.” [Light on the Ancient Worlds].

Post Scriptum

Reality can sometimes exceed the worst nightmares and the Devil’s shrewdness can never be overestimated. An internet website, focused on a certain topic, professed the following creeds (one should mind the capitalization):

1. Scientific Knowledge is a new type of knowledge, superior to common sense and all other types of non-scientific beliefs.
2. Scientific Knowledge can only be discovered by highly trained professional scientists.
3. Scientists obtain Scientific Knowledge by following The Scientific Method, a uniquely powerful tool for understanding Reality.

Clearly, there cannot be anything **inferior** to the common sense of the individual who wrote these lines but trying to determine the general context to which these outrageously inept statements belonged, we came across a bewildering discovery: it was a website dedicated to Eastern spirituality, with the Oriental Wheel of Truth visibly displayed on the first page.