



Frithjof Schuon, life and Teachings

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While the spiritually inclined appreciated his glib talk on religion, they could also detect in it the stench of bitterness.

His discourses were a mixture of the good, and the bad. He mixed poison in rose jam.

Rumi, *Mathnawi*

We have in our hands a recently published Biography or rather Hagiography of Frithjof Schuon, who is considered by S.H. Nasr to be “one of the major intellectual and spiritual figures of the twentieth century” and at another occasion, “the most important transmitter of the traditional doctrines.” The title of the work is **Frithjof Schuon, life and Teachings**.

The work disappointed us a lot. The authors, J. B. Aymard and P. Laude seem to be quite clever and skillful in defending their master. They vainly try “to explicate some aspects of his works that may have been neglected or possibly misunderstood.” One wonders as to what the authors actually want to convey when just before a paragraph they claimed, “Schuon’s works defend themselves on their own ground, and they certainly do not need to be completed nor perfected by any commentators or epigones.” If the above claim is true, then what is the need “to explicate (off course for defending him!) some aspects of his works”?

In his *Foreword*, S. H. Nasr wrote, “Schuon’s writings were like the seal of this corpus of works (the works of René Guénon and Ananda Coomaraswamy). He both complemented and completed the message of those masters who had gone before him.” These statements imply that the message of Ananda Coomaraswamy and especially of René Guénon was ‘one-sided’ and ‘incomplete,’ which was to be ‘complemented,’ ‘completed’ and ‘sealed’ by the ‘last prophet,’ Frithjof Schuon! Moreover, there is a possibility of a traditional message being presented incompletely and inadequately even by the providential expositor, René Guénon; and at the same time complementarily and completely by yet another ‘providential expositor,’ Frithjof Schuon!

If René Guénon was a providential expositor, as has been admitted by Schuon, Nasr and others, of a traditional message, then he was certainly endowed with a ‘function’ by the Heaven. Now, is it possible that he could fulfill his function incompletely and inadequately despite the providential character of his function?

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It is indeed ironical to claim that ‘Schuon’s works defend themselves on their own ground,’ while those of René Guénon needs a Schuon for ‘protecting Guénon against himself.’ Again, Schuon’s works ‘certainly do not need to be completed nor perfected by any commentators or epigones,’ while the works of René Guénon need to be ‘both complemented and completed’!

Let us recall here the words of Scotus Erigena with respect to the question of traditional authority:

‘True authority cannot contradict true reason, nor conversely, since their common source is the divine wisdom.’

True reason, indeed, cannot contradict true authority, but false reason (being mixed with pride) can, as one sees in the case of Schuon and his disciples.

When at the realm of metaphysics no differences remain. There was in reality no ‘metaphysical’ reason for Schuon to express his differences regarding the authority of René Guénon whether they are related to Christian initiation or reincarnation or East-West polarity. One hardly finds differences with respect to ‘content’ or ‘substance’ among the followers of Ibn Arabî. There might indeed be differences of ‘form’ or ‘expression’ as can be found in the case of Abd al-Karim Jili, an ardent follower of Ibn Arabî. Nor does one encounters such a thing among the followers of Shankaracharya. All his four disciples are in perfect agreement with their master.

This shows that the representatives of the most metaphysical traditions tend to disagree with one another in the least. The example can be extended to other traditions as well. As a matter of fact the differences emerge among the philosophers or theologians or profane thinkers at the ‘philosophical’ or ‘non-metaphysical’ level as we see in the case of Ibn Sina, Ghazali (at least in his polemical writings), Mulla Sadra, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther etc.

While a metaphysician as formidable as René Guénon untiringly emphasizes every now and then the absolute necessity of attaching oneself to a religion, the epigones of Schuon takes pleasure in revealing that ‘Schuon cannot be identified as belonging to any given religion since his perspective is fundamentally supra-confessional, esoteric and universalist.’ How come a man who ‘emphasized the operative and practical aspects of the realization of the truth’ and whose ‘message brought out more than the writings of Guenon ... the central significance of religion that esoterism can only be realized within the framework of revealed religions’ be also a man who ‘cannot be identified as “belonging” to any given religion since his perspective is fundamentally supra confessional, esoteric and universalist’?

Schuon had had to emphasize ‘more than the writings of Guénon ... the central significance of religion’ because he did not find Guénon more than a ‘theoretician’ as if knowledge is/can be divided into theory and practice! This reminds us of an assessment of the group of Schuon by René Guénon in a letter to a friend:

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In Lausanne, the ritual observances have been reduced to the strict minimum, and that most even don't fast any more during Ramadan; I did not think that it had reached this point, and I see now that I was only too right when I said that soon it would not be a *tarîqah* at all anymore, but a vaguely 'universalist' organization, more or less like that of the disciples of Vivekananda.

How true was the assessment of Rene Guenon!

From a practical point of view, one cannot but attach oneself to one religion only at a time, while Schuon in spite of his emphasis on operative and practical aspects of religion tries to belong to all religions, as can be seen in his adoption by the Lakota tribe of Red Indians and his active participation in their rituals.

In the *Foreword*, S. H. Nasr in his usually polite and confident manner wrote: 'Of course such writers (the Biographers) would not be objective by standards but would represent what we might call "the view from within." Such works, however, are not to be seen as lacking objectivity and being just subjective appraisals.'

But contrary to the claims of S. H. Nasr, we can cite an example:

In a chapter entitled, **A Biographical Approach**, we are told, 'He (René Guénon) went so far as to suspect Lings - a man of integrity if ever there was one, but who had in Guenon's eyes the fault of not sharing his views on Christianity.' This statement clearly shows that the writers hold a bias against René Guénon and therefore their appraisals can 'be seen as lacking objectivity and being just subjective appraisals.'

Regarding René Guénon's suspicion regarding Martin Lings having opened a letter to him before his knowledge, the writers explained: 'The reality, however, was quite different, and Guénon's suspicions were unjustified. In this troubled period, Egyptian censorship was zealous.'

Let us see whether René Guénon's suspicions were really illegitimate or not. He wrote to a friend:

I have received new letters from Frithjof Schuon and Burckhardt; Martin Lings has again brought them himself, and, as always in such cases, he seemed very eager to learn about their contents, but in fact, I do believe he had acquainted himself with them before me! Indeed, when I had passed on the beginning of Burckhardt's letter to him before reading its last page, he saw that I was holding only 3 pages, and said in a mechanical way, "I thought there were 4 pages..." ; then he stopped abruptly, probably realizing his "gaffe," and embarked on a completely different subject... After he left, we examined closely the envelopes, and we noticed that they had been opened and re-closed carefully, but yet not sufficiently well for it not to be visible, and that the same was true of the preceding letter from Burckhardt.

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Can the Martin Lings' slip of tongue, 'I thought there were four pages...' be explained away by referring to the political circumstances of Egypt at that time?

One suspects that as subtle a character as Schuon can be so easily deceived by the individuality of René Guénon when he noticed in him, 'psychic lassitude,' 'sort of mental exhaustion,' 'The banality of his subjects' and 'his almost permanent restlessness.' Rather, Schuon seemed to have made such observations as a part of his tactics in order to usurp the function of René Guénon. To suggest, as his disciples do, that the works of Schuon are more relevant and urgent for the modern world is nothing but a part of the same strategy.

Admittedly, there is no point in focusing on the personal lives of traditional expositors because only their works deserve exclusive attention.

In the case of Schuon the above remarks do not strictly apply, partly because the contents of his work are not strictly metaphysical and partly for the reason that he claimed himself to be a spiritual master.

In evaluating the contents of Schuon's work, his personal life can be of immense help as we have alluded to earlier. It would not be out of place here to note that Schuon was born and died during the summer solstice while René Guénon, on the other hand, entered and left the world during the winter Solstice, which proves the 'Polar' and 'Brahmanic' character of his function.

It is quite strange to know that when Schuon was deputed, as has been alleged, with the function of Shaykh, there began for him an affair with a woman which lasted for ten years after his initiation.

Isn't contradictory that a spiritual master whose only job is to help his disciples cut the knot of worldly attachments would pray that, 'Heaven would accord him the happiness of being loved by the woman.' or 'God would help him in the conquest of his much beloved lady.' A totally profane prayer! Moreover, Schuon's alleged involvement in a case related to the so-called 'Sacred nudity' at the age of around 80 is indeed shameful from a moral point of view so dear to him. To say that Schuon was 'amorally moral' is to attempt to take advantage of such a possibility, if not to play with words. There is here enough reason for us to suspect his initiatory status.

It is not uncommon to see that if one fails to attain to a higher perspective, one tends to reduce it to his own profane point of view. And if some seem to be in possession of the truths of higher order, as in the case of Schuon and others, they tend to mask their worldly attachments with the ambiguous and open-to-be-misused words- immanence, sacred-nudity, aesthetics, beauty etc.

The application or rather mis-application of traditional symbols on Schuon's spiritual journey, as has been done by his hagiographers, is a naïveté pure and simple. To say that his spiritual life moved on from *sat* to *chit*, then at last to *Ananda* is to create the impression that *Ananda* is the final goal, which is obviously ridiculous, because the ternary is inseparable.

Elsewhere, we are informed that in the light of Islamic symbols, Schuon's spiritual journey can be said to have begun from 'transcendence' (*tanzih*), while the last part of his

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life was imbued with ‘immanence’ (*Tashbih*) in that his increasing attention towards poetry, painting, dance and nudity.

According to a traditional Sufi scheme the station of immanence acquires an intermediate position preceded and followed by the stations of transcendence. It is obvious that the station of immanence being intermediate is consequently ambiguous. Keeping the traditional map in view, Schuon’s journey seemed to have stopped short at the station (*maqam*) of immanence, whence the ‘ambiguous’ and ‘confusing’ character of his work. They are marked by his strong individuality which surfaces in his autobiography more openly. Even his ‘doctrinal’ works stop short at philosophical and literary output minus the influence of the work of René Guénon. Through out his writings he seems to be much concerned with the psychological, moral, aesthetic and poetic considerations, which means that he does not go beyond the domain of individuality. That is why S. H. Nasr in all his naivety could say

Schuon is much more than a simple “metaphysician,” he is a traditional theologian and logical philosopher, a teacher in the discipline... of the traditional art and the civilization, an authority in the knowledge of the man and the society, a spiritual guide and a critic of the modern world not only in its practical aspect but also in its philosophical and scientific aspects.

There still remains much to be said but we would like to bring our study to a close by noting one or two instances. The authors of the work show much severity towards the authentic commentators of René Guénon, Michel Vâlsan and Charles André Gilis. They are accused of being ‘Guénonians of strict observance,’ ‘ultra Guénonians,’ ‘passionately attached to the Islamic form,’ and the like. All such accusations do not really make any sense, rather they reflect the malafide intentions of the authors, because either you agree totally with the metaphysical principles or you don’t. Michel Vâlsan, the authors say, had ‘a very strong personality, he had suffered harmful psychic influences, which had profoundly disturbed him.’ But how did they come to know all this?

What is more, Michel Valsan despite his ‘very strong personality’ and ‘voluntaristic nature’ met Schuon in 1958 ‘in a gesture of superb humility’ and ‘apologized for every thing that had happened.’