

From the online Library at: <http://www.frithjofschuon.info>

Frithjof Schuon: A Face of Eternal Wisdom

An interview with Frithjof Schuon by Jean Biès
translated by Patrick Laude

Source: *Sophia*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 1998

Life is a dream, and thinking of God is the awakening.

Saying of the Prophet

The following is a revised English translation of a series of interviews carried out by Jean Biès with Frithjof Schuon in Pully, Switzerland, in July 1967, September 1968 and August 1971. They were published in La Voies des sages: douze maîtres spirituels témoignent de leur vérité, Paris: Philippe Lebeaud, 1997. Schuon, the foremost authority on the perennial philosophy and traditional wisdom, revised and shortened the text presented here shortly before his death. This revision was in fact the last scholarly activity which he carried out.

Jean Biès is a well known French philosopher and scholar with great interest in the traditions of the East as well as the West. He is the author of a number of important works dealing with religion and spirituality.

The idea that there exists, beneath the diversity of traditional symbols and metaphysical formulations, a single and immutable truth, is certainly not a new idea but it constantly needs to be expressed anew in forms adapted to various historical periods. Such is the vocation of the representatives of the *Philosophia perennis*; and that is, in the contemporary world, that of Frithjof Schuon, in the wake of René Guénon.

Ananda Coomaraswamy wrote in 1943 in the last footnote to *Hinduism and Buddhism*: “In truth, the time is coming in which a compendium of the *Philosophia perennis* must be written, impartially based on all of the orthodox sources, whatever they may be.”

One may consider that, in the wake of Guénon’s work, Frithjof Schuon has made a decisive contribution to the reconstitution of the elements of this *summa*.

He has contributed to the preparation for the final state of mankind by revealing the essence which is common to all traditions in their inward orthodoxy. He built stone by stone, book by book, so to speak, the eschatological future; and he did so in spite of the ruses of the adversary, the greatest of which consisted of building a wall of silence around his work. This work still makes its ways within the intelligence of some. The 'Eliatic function' intensifies proportionally to the darkening of the world. This is what we may observe with the work of Frithjof Schuon; it is unique of its kind, but it is also one in its content, universal in its nature.

Frithjof Schuon is the author of a considerable philosophical oeuvre; it was elaborated far from any ostentatious publicity and its importance and influence have only grown with time. Adding to the breadth of its vision an absolute doctrinal rigor, this work refers without compromise and beyond all syncretism to Sufism, Vedanta, Mahayana Buddhism, Christian esoterism, and even Shinto and the tradition of North American Indians.

The happy few who have had the privilege of meeting Frithjof Schuon all say that they recognize in him the archetypal image of the 'traditional man'. The three meetings I had with him only reinforced my personal agreement with this opinion.

He was then living in the hills of Lausanne, in Pully, in a small house hidden under the trees. I can still see clearly the kind of cell in which he received me: matting on the floor, simple furniture in Moroccan style. A window over which a curtain was filtering the light overlooked Lake Lemman and the Alps. Each of us was sitting on a high cushion, our backs against the wall, a low table separating us, with its round brass tray covered with papers; we viewed each other from the side. (It reminded me that, in India, no disciple can sit face to face with the guru. This is to prevent the action of the *prana*, linked to breath and the voice, from producing a 'shock' on the psychic level.) I was not the disciple of Schuon, but I think that his attitude is telling; another significant fact was the difficulty that I had with opening the gate to the garden for the latch was not working well; that was a kind of symbolic test to pass upon entering the threshold, at least for me, since it took me a long time to open it.

Schuon had the face of a man whom, although one has never seen him before, one still recognizes right away. But what more can one suggest from it than physical characteristics when the very essence which emanates from a human being cannot be delimited by any stylistic formula? A wide forehead, a short gray beard, abundant white hair pulled back, a strongly arched nose, the fine fingers of a pianist. One notices less his eyes than his gaze. His gestures are vivacious, ritualized, even in the smallest details—there is a proper way to invite a guest to sit down, to grasp a pen...

His faculty of welcome and attention to the other is total; he always seems deeply interested by what is asked of him though it be the most banal question. Being of German origin, he speaks with a slight German accent; he articulates sentences clearly, showing an ardent conviction, a peremptory authority, an emphatic majesty. Throughout his sentences, he pronounces Latin, Greek, Arabic or Sanskrit words in their original pronunciation.

He dominates, from all the height of his thought, over all the pseudo-philosophers of the time, those whose works are publicized with as great a fanfare as they are desperately empty. He lives here, between prayer and the slow elaboration of his books, with patience and discretion, as did the former ‘recluses’, the *sequestrati*, without whom the world would have long ago ceased to exist. Looking at this companion of ‘cellular retreat’, I think of the verses of the Shaykh al-Akbar in his *Futuhāt*: “I retired with Him whom I passionately love.” Enclosed in his room, it is here that he remembers God in order to be remembered by Him, it is here that he grows in knowledge “by sealing the apertures” as Ibn Arabi puts it, “so that no draft may affect the balance” and that his reflective thought may only receive the “divine effusion” of the knowers.

Interview—July 26, 1967

My first interview with Frithjof Schuon primarily dealt with theoretical matters. As for the two which succeed it, I will only relate what I was able to transcribe of them immediately following our conversation, at a time when memory does not yet betray the words one has heard. Being aware of living important moments, I made an effort to pay the greatest attention to what was said.

I was then quite preoccupied with the question of cosmic cycles and with their collective and personal consequences for the more or less long term. Were we in the ultimate phase of the *Kali-yuga*?

“We are,” Schuon answered, “in the last phase of the *Kali-yuga*, not in the very last, which is properly speaking the reign of the anti-Christ, which will immediately precede the final dissolution, the *pralaya* of the Hindus.’

J.B. What credibility should we give to the dates which have been proposed for the end of the ‘dark age’?

F. S. None. These dates are approximate, or they refer to symbolic numbers. We can only estimate that it will occur around fifty years from now.

J. B. If the end of the *Kali-yuga* is near, what did Sri Ramakrishna mean when he predicted that he would come back within two hundred years?

F. S. Two hundred years is symbolic. He probably meant that there would soon be a phenomenon analogous to his, that is, one that would emphasize the unity of religions, which is the essence of his message.

J. B. Is this end of the *Kali-yuga* a vertical fall?

F. S. It would be more accurate to speak of it as a downward undulatory motion. There are more and more obvious degradations which jeopardize the future. But there are also compensations. Half a century ago, in the academic world, it was the intellectual night. It is still the same night but one can speak of yoga, of Vedānta. Official errors were then taught against which one could not say anything. Today, one

is less naive; there exists an immense curiosity toward the East. One cannot deny the merits of some Orientalists.

J. B. How do you see the future of the academic world in the coming thirty years?

F. S. It will drag on until the end... Academia has always been able to find a *modus vivendi*. There is a decadence; there will be partial and momentary elements of redress. The correct attitude will be to say what it is possible to say. It is a question of discernment and opportuneness.

J. B. Have you noticed that among the youth some do not accept the culture which is imposed upon them; they have a feeling that there exists something else and manifest an intense intellectual curiosity?

F. S. It is to be encouraged. But the youth tends to like arguing and engaging in dialectal games. With them, one must go straight to the essential.

J. B. You mention in *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* that the present-day reappearance of the *Sophia perennis* manifests itself in conformity with the law of compensation in response to the current materialism. Do you think that, putting aside the works that are too highly specialized, the time has come for an unveiling of esoterism, at least for those who have ears to hear?

F. S. It is here again a matter of discernment. One must consider the degree of maturity of one's interlocutors; and when one has done so, one may speak of esoterism in some cases.

J. B. I noticed that you seem much more critical of artists in the field of plastic arts than you do of poets and musicians. You even wrote, in 'Principles and Criteria of Universal Art', that during the Renaissance and the following periods the decadence of music and poetry was infinitely less than that of other arts. Why?

F. S. The decadence of the plastic arts is much more serious than that of musical arts. The cause of this phenomenon is not clear... Michelangelo's sonnets are far superior to his sculptures, which are less spiritual as are all the humanistic arts. Dante and the troubadours were true poets; but they were part of a spiritually normal society. One still finds beautiful works in the 18th and 19th centuries, in some of Beethoven's compositions, for example.

J. B. Do you think that a 'recovery' has already begun on the side, and that this 'recovery' may have its origin in the West, as Julius Evola, for example, has suggested?

F. S. One does not see any sign of an actual 'recovery'; Evola places the *kshatriya* above the *brahmana*, he confuses the role of the East for that of the West and chooses Mussolini! There are only isolated individuals who are rediscovering traditional wisdoms.

J. B. What is the meaning then of the *hadith* according to which, at the end of the cycle, the sun and stars will rise in the West?

F. S. First of all it means that, from a certain period on, the great saints of Islam will be mostly Maghrebi; and that is in fact what has happened. Then it means that the Mandi will come from the West. And finally it means that what the East needs today is not the lessons of the modern West, certainly, but a

certain help from the Western genius as actualized by metaphysical and traditional intelligence. Westerners who have been healed from the deviations of modernism may transmit to ideologically poisoned and indolent Easterners, who are deprived of method, the positive side of their critical sense together with some of their moral qualities.

J. B. You have met with René Guénon twice in Cairo; I know that you are far from sharing all his ideas. How can it be possible to constitute a ‘virtual elite’ as Guénon calls it, whereas the same author writes that the passage from one cycle to the next is instantaneous, that is to say, outside of time?

F. S. It is a contradiction. All that one can consider for the time being is an individual ‘salvation’. An elite must subsist in order to conserve the Truth. It is not the future cycle which needs an elite, it is us!

J. B. How can we reconcile non-engagement in politics with the idea that “others”, as you write, “take responsibility for thinking and acting for those who do not want to?”

F. S. True *apolitéia* consists not only in not expecting anything good from fashionable politicians, it also means working at home in order to become a traditional man, making oneself *able* to follow a path before actually attempting to follow one. One must acquire the mind of a metaphysician while keeping the soul of a child, remaining in contact with nature, loving flowers, reading simple old books like *The Golden Legend*... As for the rest, one must choose the lesser evil . . .

J. B. How do you envisage an agreement between religions which would be founded on a common basic interest in the face of common dangers?

F. S. One cannot ask for the impossible from believers, but one should have them understand that a first urgent and easy agreement is necessary and that in the face of materialism, scientism, atheism, they have similar ideas and tendencies. I know that ‘religious narcissism’ prevents one from seeing the Truth in the other; when a Christian thinks of Islam, he thinks only of polygamy! But there are many chaste Muslims. Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists alike pray, fast, and stay awake at night to worship.

J. B. What will be the modalities of this agreement?

F. S. One would need a conference assembling various emissaries, who would all agree on fighting atheism. At least one should agree on principles. An agreement is possible only on the basis of esoterism. One Catholic in particular understood Islam: Massignon; he even saw in it an authentic Revelation.

Interview—September 9, 1968

My second interview with Frithjof Schuon dealt primarily with the unity of religions. I first wished to be enlightened as to the way in which they envisaged temporal succession according to a generally cyclical concept.

Schuon answered that it was less a ‘vision’ properly speaking than a metaphysical ‘point of view’, a *darshana*. All the Fathers of the Church have not refuted the cyclical doctrines. Christianity eventually

opted for a linear concept of time only because it had to take a point of view opposite to that of contemporary philosophies in order to impose itself within a hostile world. By focusing all of its attention on the phenomenon of Christ, it ended up dividing time in two phases, one anterior to Christ, the second posterior to him... This question is all the more complex given that each religion constitutes in itself a major cycle which includes secondary cycles.

My second question was of a more dogmatic order. How can we reconcile the Christian dogma according to which Christ, the only 'son' of god, incarnated 'once and for all', with the doctrine of the successive *avatara* in which Christ is no more than one among others?

Schuon gave me the following answer: "A Semitic religion is always limited to a form. They sentimentally attach themselves to a fact, to an idea Christ actualizes a divine manifestation, but so does the Veda. Metaphysics stands beyond phenomena as such. 'I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life': for a Christian, refers to Jesus Christ; but from a metaphysical standpoint, corresponds to the Logos which may manifest itself anywhere."

My third question had to do with transmigration: is there a possible contact between the doctrine of transmigration (even if it is interpreted symbolically) and the doctrine of a single terrestrial life and the unicity of the 'human person' as it is envisaged by Christian theology?

"Here again," said Schuon, "the Judeo-Christian doctrine remains partial. It does not speak about what does not pertain to the human state as such or if it does, it does so in a vague and embarrassed way. Or else it declares that hell is eternal, whereas nothing can be eternal save the Absolute! Now if Christ does not speak about trans-migration, he does not condemn it either. India speaks of both an eternal paradise, the *Brahma-loka*, from which there is no rebirth and a transmigration which one may relate to the 'limbo', extrinsically at least."

J. B. You like to quote the sentence of Saint Ireneus: "God became man so that man may become God." Is it still possible in the current circumstances of the world to work toward this inner alchemy which allows one to pass from *samsara* to *nirvana*?

F. S. It is still possible on condition that one insert meditative pauses amidst one's occupations, on a regular and daily basis. One must remember that the very foundations of all inner life are, first: to discern the Real from the illusory, Atma from *maya*: second: to concentrate on the Real. And that must be done on the basis of some intrinsic conditions which are, on the one hand, 'formal orthodoxy', on the other hand, 'virtues'. 'Formal orthodoxy', that is to say, a sacral conformity of the forms which surround us, and the prototypes among which are virgin nature, sacred art, and traditional civility. Static 'virtues' such as resignation, patience, poverty, self-effacement, humility, consciousness of one's ontological nothingness; and dynamic virtues such as fervor, trust, vigilance, and generosity ... Nothing must be left outside of the spiritual life for it must involve our entire being, therefore every-thing human, in so far as we have a choice.

J. B. Do you not think that sacraments have degenerated?

F. S. They cannot.

J. B. What do you understand as being the “tenth part of the Law” which is mentioned in a *hadith* and which is demanded of men at the end of the cycle? Is it enough to recite one ‘Our Father’ a day as the Blessed Virgin recommended to the shepherds at

La Sayette, or does this tenth part demand a quasi-hermitic life?

F. S. At the beginning of the cycle, one had to accomplish nine-tenths of the Law as indicated in the *Shastra*. At the end of the cycle the tenth part obviously refers to the minimum: in Islam, it is the five daily prayers and almsgiving; for Christians, it is to go to confession once a year and to participate in the Eucharist at Easter...

J. B. You are hostile to psychology as an apprenticeship in the process of gaining knowledge of oneself, to psychoanalysis in general, and to Freudianism in general. The only psychology that you recognize as legitimate is the ‘science of humors’ which studies the causes of our attitudes and our actions or reactions, the kernels of error which remain unarticulated in our subconscious. You wrote: “We must unveil these kernels and exhaust them; that is a function of the spiritual life.” But do we not reach fairly quickly a state of walking in place?

F. S. It is unavoidable... The goldsmith must strike the metal over and over again in vain, until with the hundredth strike, he breaks it. The same holds true for the soul. It is made out of ice, out of obscure and slithering passions, but also out of a luminous element which must be liberated from its shell. One must destroy the hardening [of the heart], not the passional energy. This energy is not bad in itself; it is neutral. One must turn it inward. The immortal element in ourselves, the *intellectus increatus et increabilis* of Eckhart, wants to be liberated from the layer of obscurity. We already are here below what we will be hereafter... A spiritual exercise always requires a certain violence; it is a ‘conversion’, a liberation of our being so that it may become what it actually is. That is the effort of a whole lifetime; the result may not come until the time of death; but it happens and the soul then melts as wax.

J. B. Isn’t there a risk that this internal transformation may create a dangerous distortion in relation to our ambiance?

F. S. One can sincerely play one’s part...

Interview—August 25, 1971

Several circumstances prevented me from visiting Frithjof Schuon during the past three years. The feeling of having received much from his words and his presence as well as a concern for discretion kept me from wanting more before I had assimilated what I had been given. To that were added the regular publication of his books and the receipt of several letters from him. However, the increased interest which was leading me toward the prayer of the heart as a form of “Christian yoga” led me to ask for a new appointment with him.

J. B. I particularly appreciated the pages which you de-voted to hesychasm. What can you tell me about this 'prayer of the heart' which has always appeared to me as the heart of prayer?

F. S. You often read that for the man of the *Kali-yuga* what matters above all is the 'remembrance of God'. That is the quintessence of religion. The important thing is to remember. One invokes God because He is the only Reality, without attachment to, nor expectation of, a reward. There is then the intention of love. Man looks for happiness; he has the right to look for it because he is made for happiness. Now, where can I find this happiness if not in the love of Love? I invoke God because I want to be happy and must be happy. "I love because I love," Saint Bernard said; this is an admirable metaphysical ellipsis. Finally there is the incentive of fear. Man is a sinner, he runs the risk of suffering in purgatory and he knows it. He knows that he must be saved. Nothing appeases God's wrath as much as the invocation of His name with faith, humility and perseverance.

J. B. Some have mentioned the existence of a hesychastic initiation. Do you think it is necessary to obtain this 'benediction'?

F. S. The Christian initiation consists in baptism, communion, and confirmation. That is Christian esoterism. One must add to it, first, the doctrine: *Atma*, the Real, becomes *maya*, the illusory, so that *maya* may become *Atma*; second, the method: Saint Paul's prayer, 'pray without ceasing'; the parable of the iniquitous judge... There are also particular benedictions: when one pronounces monastic vows; but their quintessence is perpetual orison. Poverty, chastity, obedience are supports without value in the absence of prayer.

J. B. How is it possible to repeat the Name of God throughout the hyper-mental work which is imposed upon modern man?

F. S. One does not work as a machine. There are always pauses But when it is a matter of prayer, one thinks that one has no time.

J. B. Is there not also a risk of automatism?

F. S. Well—it does not matter. What counts is the intention.

J. B. Are the psycho-physiological methods such as the descent of the *Nous* in the heart relevant for the layman of today?

F. S. These things have not been written for the sake of twentieth century man. The only method is the repetition of the Name with faith and humility, aided and supported by breathing.

J. B. How can one dissipate memories, associations, wandering ideas? Prayer is often like a butterfly at the surface of the Name.

F. S. One must make use of arguments. For example, a first argument consists in disassociating the Real from the unreal in order to concentrate on the former. Then there is the argument of happiness; the only happiness resides in the divine Name. Thirdly there is the argument of trust; the world is burning, everything is suffering, one must therefore flee toward God with trust.

J. B. Is not the prayer of the heart a kind of vocal Eucharist?

F. S. By the enunciation of the Name man assimilates the divine Presence of which the Name is the con-substantial support. The simple enunciation is analogous to the primordial enunciation of Being. The Name was revealed by God, it implies His Presence which becomes operative in as much as the Name takes possession of the mind of the invoker.

J. B. In our climate of apocalypse, what should one do to please God and fully realize what we are?

F. S. If I accomplish the essential, these questions are no longer relevant; if I know the essential, I therefore know the secondary. God asks for everything from every man. God wants our soul... If we give it to Him, in that case, we will certainly learn what is demanded as well. One must proceed from the evident to the conjectural, from the necessary to the possible, from the obligatory to the supererogatory. In order to be truly useful, one must forget oneself; God cannot do anything with the ambitious. The sure vocation of every man is to give himself up unconditionally to God, to forget himself in Him, and therefore act as a spiritual presence in the world.