A CONSIDERATION OF ASPECTS OF
SEVERAL WORKS OF FRITIJOF SCHUON

by

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ABSTRACT

According to Schuon there is a kind of knowledge, metaphysical knowledge, which is an absolutely certain knowledge, effectively realized, of what is beyond the manifest—of the Absolute, the Real.

In any age, an elite is capable of attaining this knowledge, but they require support from the symbols, doctrines, rites, art, etc. of traditional civilizations. The great religious orthodoxies express formally aspects of the supraformal metaphysical reality and provide the supports for the elite in their pursuit of realization. Their diversity is a result of the diversity of the collectivities for which they are designed.

This thesis considers several of Schuon's works describing the key concepts contained therein, and examines his views concerning the essential characteristics of several of the great religious traditions.
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Introduction

An excellent introduction to and background for the writings of Frithjof Schuon is a short article by Rene Guénon entitled *Oriental Metaphysics*. In it can be found a succinct and clear description, albeit a brief one, of the notion of metaphysical knowledge. As an understanding of the meaning of this concept is crucial for an understanding of Schuon's writings, I have chosen to briefly summarize Guénon's article as a prelude to dealing with Schuon's work.

There is, according to Guénon (and Schuon), a kind of knowledge which has been forgotten in the West but remains an effective kind of knowledge in the East (hence the title, *Oriental Metaphysics*). This has traditionally been called metaphysical knowledge. Etymologically, the word means "beyond physics"; for the ancients this would translate to a "study of what lies beyond nature", beyond the manifested world. In this sense it is a "supernatural" knowledge. In a traditional civilization, like India's, knowledge would be synonymous with metaphysics.

While metaphysics, being unlimited, cannot be defined or confined to any formula or system, it can be described in a rough way as "knowledge of universal principles". This knowledge, though not strictly expressible, is not an "abstraction" nor a scientific or philosophical conception, but an immediate, intuitive, and supra-rational knowledge. What makes possible this comprehension of universal principles is the presence in man of the transcendent intellect which is itself of the universal order. This divine element in man and consequently the truth perceived by it is supra-individual. Thus Guénon says: "It is the
attainment of effective consciousness of supra-individual states which is the real object of metaphysics..." It is a recognition of individuality as a transitory and contingent manifestation of the real being which is absolutely independent of all its manifestations.

To one who asks whether such knowledge is possible, Guénon replies that it is not only possible, it is a fact. To those who demand proof, Guénon poses an empirical criterion—"It is truly strange that proof is demanded concerning the possibility of a kind of knowledge instead of searching for it and verifying it for one's self by undertaking the work necessary for its acquisition."

To those who demand a theory of knowledge, Guénon replies that there remains something incommunicable in all certitude. The attainment of knowledge requires a personal effort and while the way can be pointed out, "the best argument in the world could not in this respect replace direct and effective knowledge." To seek a theory of knowledge rather than to follow a way of attainment of knowledge itself is an admission of impotence.

A fundamental characteristic of metaphysical knowledge is that it must not remain purely theoretical. True metaphysics is not speculation, not a "mental sport". Theoretical knowledge, which is indirect and symbolic, is merely an indispensable preparation for true knowledge which involves realization of the doctrine. Speaking of one pursuing metaphysical knowledge Guénon says:

"What he is concerned with is to know what is, and to know it in such a fashion as to be oneself, truly and effectively, what one knows."

The most important element in achieving realization is concentration. All other means serve to promote concentration. The goal is "to harmon-
ize the diverse elements of human individuality in order to facilitate effective communication between this individuality and the higher states of being." The means to attain this end must be within man's reach and since he exists, they must be formal and of the manifest world. Words, symbolism, signs, rites, and preparatory methods all serve as supports to place a man in a position requisite for attainment. They must be of the world and yet act like a fulcrum to raise man beyond this world.

These supports may not be absolutely necessary—it may be possible to achieve the requisite without them—but this would be very difficult and unusual. In Hindu metaphysics, these means are compared to a horse which makes it easier for the rider to make it to his destination. He might be able to get there eventually anyway, but the horse makes it so much easier. Indeed, even with the supports only an elite will be capable of metaphysical realization.

Thus, metaphysical knowledge, which is eternal and without origin, is in principle always possible to realize. But since it takes its support, particularly in the beginning, from contingencies, external aid from the environment and culture are extremely important. The role of traditional civilizations and their religions is to provide an elite with the means of support necessary for metaphysical realization. There will be a diversity of these exterior forms in accordance with the diversity of racial, geographical, and historical conditions, but underlying this diversity there is a basis of unity—for Truth is one. What is abnormal is for a civilization not to possess a traditional basis. But this is precisely what the West has done—it has left and forgotten the tradition in pursuit of material superiority. Although it is true that at times it
has made tremendous advances, it has paid for them with the death of metaphysical realization.

In summary, what has been described is a kind of knowledge which represents an inexpressible certitude of what is beyond the manifest and ephemeral, of what is universal and unlimited. It is a supra-individual knowledge though attained by personal effort. It is an intuitive, immediate, and supra-rational knowledge. Very importantly, it is an effective and realized knowledge, not merely theoretical. The supports needed for this realization are themselves formal and of this world and it is the function of traditional civilizations and religions to supply these supports for the élite capable of metaphysical realization. Behind the diversity of these formal methods, there is a unity of doctrine—the Truth.

What I will attempt in this thesis is an exposition of Schuon's working out of this outlook in several of his books. I will deal with his description of metaphysics, the ways of realization and the factors involved in it, and his descriptions of several traditional perspectives.
Metaphysics

Metaphysical knowledge has a sacred character. By this Schuon means it has the following properties: 1) it is of a transcendent order, 2) it has the character of absolute certainty, 3) it eludes the investigation and understanding of the ordinary human mind, and, 4) it demands all that a man is. The sacred introduces a quality of the absolute into our relative existence and confers on perishable things a texture of eternity.

Firstly, then, metaphysics is knowledge about things beyond nature, beyond the manifest. It is knowledge of the Absolute; as a matter of fact, the quintessence of truth is the discernment between the contingent and the Absolute. The essence of metaphysical doctrine is found in the mystery (expressed well in Islam) that the separation from God is absolute and that He alone is real and no continuity is possible between nothingness and Reality— but, that, nevertheless, the separation is relative, or rather "not absolute", because nothing is outside God. "Gnosis" which seems to be used synonymously with metaphysical knowledge and which refers to the supra-rational, purely intellective knowledge of metacosmic realities is summed up in these statements: (here, in their Hindu formulation, though the same meaning is found in the Shahādah of Islam or in the mysteries of Christ) "Brahma is not in the world" but "all things are Atma" or "Brahma is true, the world is false" and "He (the mukta, the delivered one) is Brahma".

The metaphysical doctrine concerning cosmology is most directly represented in Hindu cosmology. The Divine Essence, the Beyond—Being, the Divine Impersonality (Brahma) includes in its indistinction and
as a potentiality comprised within its very Infinity a principle of relativity. Being, which generates the world and all manifestation, is the first of the relativities, that from which all others flow (The Brahma/Brahman distinction). God, then, created by reason of his Infinity. The Infinite requires its own affirmation, which is Being. Being requires creation and with it limitaion and diversity which implies negation and contradiction, or evil. Thus, on the level of metaphysics there is no "problem of evil".

As metaphysical knowledge is of a transcendent order, of things beyond the manifest, so too it is supra-individual. The ego is a barrier to its realization:

"Metaphysically speaking the obstacle which keeps man from the Infinite is the ego, that is to say, the principle of individuation, or the 'passion' engendered by 'ignorance' as the Hindus would say." (Spiritual Perspectives and Human Fact, SPHF, p. 203)

Secondly, metaphysical knowledge has the character of absolute certainty. This is because of the identity of the knower and the known in the Intellect. Schuon describes this certainty as "ontological clarity" by which he means that to believe it is as obvious as to believe in one's own existence. (SPHF, p.126) The doctrine is believed not because it is logically clear but because it is ontologically clear.

Thirdly, metaphysics eludes the investigation and understanding of the ordinary human mind. The source of metaphysics is the intellect. Intellect is the divine element in man, what Eckhart called the uncreated element of the human soul. Intellectual knowledge is direct and non-discursive; it is supra-individual and universal. Intellect is not to be confused with reason. The latter is formalistic and, while
indispensable for verbal formulation, it does not involve immediate knowledge as does the intellect. Reason is like air without which fire-intellection—could not be manifested discursively but which can put out that same fire. The symbolic organ of the intellect is the heart. Metaphysical knowledge would not be possible and man would not be man "were there not included in his nature a field of flowering for the Absolute...if his nature did not allow him to become conscious, despite his 'petrification'...of all that 'is' and so also of all that is in his ultimate interest." (Understanding Islam, UI, p.153)

The source of metaphysics, then, is different from the sources of other kinds of human knowing. It proceeds from the intellect; Philosophy proceeds from reason; Religion proceeds from revelation. Each of these is different from metaphysics.

Philosophy is a rational mode of knowledge and as such cannot reach any transcendent truth. A metaphysical proposition is symbolical and descriptive; it makes use of rational modes as symbols to describe knowledge possessing a greater degree of certainty than any knowledge of a sensible order. A philosophical proposition, on the other hand, is never anything more than it expresses. Whereas the starting point of metaphysics is something certain, the starting point of philosophy is a doubt it strives to overcome. Philosophy classifies but never realizes; no philosophy engenders sanctity. The philosopher sees concepts, not things. He proceeds with an axiomatic blindness from hypotheses, through calculations, to his conclusions. The dialectic of metaphysics is founded on analogy and symbolism. Rationalism rejects the possibility of a knowledge which is accessible but lies beyond mental formulations;
metaphysical doctrine realizes a mental form which communicates a ray of infinite Truth. This type of knowledge is hard for the modern westerner to accept for he has deified both reason and the ephemeral:

"We say; let all else perish, but the reality of the Cosmos must remain. The Vedantist says; let the rest perish, but the Supreme must remain what It is: the absolute of being, implying eternity, independence and ascity! " (G. Dandoy, The Ontology of the Vedanta)

"No better definition could be given of the differences between true metaphysic, proceeding directly from intellect, and philosophy, proceeding from reason." (SPHF, p.123)

Neither is religion pure metaphysic, though perhaps closer to it than philosophy. Religion transmits the purely intellectual knowledge beneath the veil of its dogmatic and ritual symbols. All symbols, all religions, all dogmas by their negation of error and affirmation of Truth make it possible to follow the ray of revelation, which is none other than the ray of the intellect, back as far as its divine source. Continuing this analogy with light will make clear the distinction between metaphysics and religion. Metaphysical knowledge is conscious of the colorless essence of light, of the character of pure luminosity, while a religious point of view will assert that it is a particular color. This is because the religious point of view of necessity confuses the symbol or form with the supra-formal Truth. Metaphysics can make use of the same symbol while being aware of its relative character. The distinction between metaphysics and religion will be made clearer in the discussion of esotericism and exotericism to follow.

Applying the three modes of knowledge to the concept of God will serve as an illustration of these differences. Philosophy attempts a
proof or denial of his existence by means of logic; religion bases itself on a belief in a particular revelation; metaphysics bases itself on direct evidence and the identity of the knower and the known in the intellect.

Fourthly, metaphysics demands that all that a man is be enlisted in its realization. As the quintessence of truth was the discernment between the contingent and the Absolute, the quintessence of the way is an effective and permanent consciousness of this Absolute Reality. More will be said of this aspect of metaphysics in the section on the ways of realization.
Exotericism vs. Esotericism

There are two aspects to any orthodox religious tradition: one is extrinsic and formal and relates to dogma and thus to form; the other is intrinsic and beyond form and relates to universal truth and thus essence. The former may be called the exoteric aspect of the tradition and the latter the esoteric aspect. The esoteric aspect is the spirit which enlivens the exoteric form, it is the life giving sap of esotericism and the exoteric viewpoint must not destroy it or what is left is empty and dead; a shell without a kernel, a form without a life giving spirit.

The exoteric dogma is likewise necessary. As discussed in the introduction, the forms of the tradition are necessary as supports for the élite capable of the esoteric viewpoint. But to have a tradition at all, it must be assimilable by a large number of men. But to be attainable by masses of men, dogma must pay the price of becoming narrow and exclusive. A dogmatic, or exoteric, affirmation or understanding may be characterized as being inseparable from the forms of its expression, of limited perspective, and with a paralysis of the potentialities of the form. An integral or esoteric affirmation or understanding may be characterized as being supra-formal, a kind of sum of all possible views, with the ability to see the conceptual dimensions present in the form.

The exoteric point of view is primarily the point of view of individual interest, the highest of which is salvation. In a sense, it conceives of the Absolute in function of the relative. It is centered on heaven rather than God. It never gets beyond the letter of the
revelation to the underlying spirit. The statements of esotericism are the symbols of esotericism. Esotericism transmits fragments or aspects of metaphysical truth—whether about God, the world, or man. In man, it envisages chiefly the passional and social individual; in the universe it discerns only what affects the individual; in God it hardly sees anything more than what has to do with the world—creation, man, and his salvation.

Esotericism has clear limitations. There are many truths, accessible to a metaphysical viewpoint which it must ignore. Among them are: a) the doctrine of the gradations of Reality (the Brahma/Brahman/Atma/manifestation distinctions); b) the doctrine of cosmic illusion (Maya); c) an impersonal divinity, the Beyond-Being, or "Non-Being" of which Being or "Personal God" is the first determination; d) the existence of intellect and metaphysical realization—the essential identity with the Divine Principle (this is usually phrased in a way like "there is no supernatural knowledge without revelation"); e) esotericism must maintain a dualism of Lord and Servant, Creator and Creature; f) esotericism lacks the certainty of metaphysics since it is limited to a relative, interested point of view (salvation) which influences the conception of divinity in a restrictive sense. The criterion for judging an esotericism is whether it confers grace or spiritual power. Clearly no one form can be shown to be correct because this just is not so. None is unique and each derives its value from its efficacy in its particular setting and situation. Metaphysically, it is impossible that truth be exclusively possessed by any doctrinal form or means of grace.
In contrast, there is an esoteric aspect to any tradition which may be defined as metaphysical knowledge manifested through religious symbolism. Every exotericism is "transcended" and in a sense "denied" by esotericism which nevertheless recognizes the legitimacy of each. The goal of esotericism is different—renunciation is not to accumulate merit in order to enjoy individual bliss but serves to put the soul into the most favorable disposition for realizing its own true and infinite essence.

The esoteric viewpoint is, however, reserved for an élite. In any civilization, this will be a small number, though a fairly large number of men may benefit by being in an "outer circle" around such an élite which necessarily radiates grace. Gnosis or esotericism is for the very few whose intelligence is naturally turned towards universal essences and for whom the world of forms can be transparent. It must be said that it is the way that chooses the man and not vice versa. It is purity of intelligence, its contemplative nature and freedom from passions which determines the capability of a person to realize an esoteric perspective.

The passionate man will approach God through action supported by a moral code. The contemplative man seeks to become united with the Divine Essence through concentration supported by symbolism. These terms may almost be taken to be definitive of the two perspectives—

Exotericism: morality, action, merit, grace
Esotericism: symbolism, concentration, knowledge, identity

Morality is a principle of action and therefore of merit which has for its goal the grace of God. Symbolism is a support for contemplation and a means of intellection, the goal of which is unity or identity
with our existential and intellectual Essence.

The diversity of traditions and exoteric forms is based on the diversity of receptacles for the revelation. Each suits a particular historical, racial, and geographical set of conditions and is made for a particular human collectivity. It is necessary that each tradition will misinterpret others and judge itself superior for in a certain respect (and this is the sufficient reason for the existence of the tradition) it is superior, though only from the given point of view. This leads to the concept of a "relative absolute" an example of which is our calling of our sun, the sun. This is not meant to deny the existence of other suns but merely indicates its rightful position from our point of view. The unity of the forms is of course not realizable externally though it may be in an inward and spiritual way.
Doctrine and Method

There are two dimensions to metaphysics represented by the following pairs: (symbolized well in Tantra)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>purely metaphysical</th>
<th>and initiatic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>discernment</td>
<td>and ontological transformation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>doctrine</td>
<td>and method of realization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>seeing or knowing</td>
<td>and being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>truth</td>
<td>and way</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This two-fold aspect is in accordance with the nature of the receptaculum man— who is intelligence and will. While one can have metaphysical certainty without possessing faith, doctrine without realization and while this may be sufficient on the doctrinal ground, it is far from sufficient on the spiritual level. It must be completed and enlivened by faith where "Faith is nothing other than our whole being clinging to Truth..." (SPHF, p.127) The goal is a certainty residing in one's soul as an ever active presence. One who has faith acts as though he were always in the presence of what he believes— or knows— to be true. This sincere and integral faith always implies renunciation, poverty, and privation since the world—or ego—is not God. As we have said, metaphysical realization has this all-demanding character because it is sacred and it is the right of sacred things to require of a man all that he is. Unlike philosophy, metaphysics is not a play of the mind and one cannot speak of it without the moral concomitances it requires.

If this effort is not made, the knowledge is not effective. Knowledge saves only when it enlists all that we are. Intelligence and metaphysical certainty alone do not save (this is the reason for the precautions which surround doctrine in every tradition). One must bring the intelligence and the will into harmony (it is the disharmony
of these two elements which constitutes fallen man). To be spiritual is defined as having being and knowing in harmony, not denying at any point with one's being what one affirms with one's knowledge, what one accepts with one's intelligence. Knowledge does not do away with faith—he who knows may enjoy metaphysical certainty but it does not yet penetrate his whole being. So long as man exists there is always something of faith in his knowledge.

Spiritual realization is at once the hardest and the easiest thing there is:

"Spiritual realization is theoretically the easiest thing and practically the most difficult thing there is. It is the easiest because it is enough to think of God. It is the most difficult because human nature is forgetfulness of God." (SPHF, p.209)

To illustrate the divergence possible between being and knowing, one can cite a certainty which most men recognize on the level of ideas but which, on the level of life seldom pierces through illusion, namely:

"Everything is ephemeral and every man must die. No man is ignorant of this and no one knows it." (SPHF, p.140)

At this point, it must be pointed out that Schuon distinguishes between mysticism and a metaphysical or initiatory way. The former is passive while the latter is active. Mysticism, furthermore, is purely religious, i.e. limited to individuality with regard to ends and means. It is marked by an absence of intellectuality, the inability to recognize falsity of inspiration. Schuon suggests a criterion for distinguishing between a true and a false experience. The criterion is not in the objective nature of the states in question but always in the disequilibrium of the subject, in his lack of spiritual virtue, and his incapacity
to integrate these states into his ordinary consciousness and his active life. "...the strict distinction between the saint and the illuminated psychopath is always maintained." (SPHF, p. 89) Only the false mystic is wholly passive. The true mystic could not be so on the level of his will, since sanctity requires equilibrium and so force.
The Ways of Realization

According to Schuon, anything that has an aspect of nobility or unlimitedness can by definition be the vehicle for spiritual development. Buddhism, for example, is founded on the experience of affliction. Other perspectives might be founded on the experience of earthly beauty (an important element of what has been called the hyperborean outlook) or on the experience of earthly love and even sexual love (which is an extensively used symbol in Tantra). In general though, the overall character or approach of a way of realization will depend on the preliminary definition of man assumed by those for whom the way is designed. For example: if man is passion, the way is through suffering (as in the Christian approach); if man is desire, the way is renunciation; if will, effort; if intelligence, discernment, concentration, and contemplation. In general, all of the ways of realization can be classified as either a way of action (Karma yoga), of love (bhakti yoga), or of knowledge (jnani yoga). Schuon speaks of the way of action primarily in connection with the special case of the craft initiations. This is the use of their work by artisans such as icon painters, stone cutters, masons, alchemists, etc. as a vehicle for cosmological knowledge. Far more general are the other two ways and he devotes a considerable effort to their description.

There is something in man which is contrary to God and something in man which is conformable to Him. The former is the impassioned will; the latter is the pure intellect. For those ways founded on the former aspect, the turning back of the will (ascesis) is all and doctrine is a background. For those ways founded on the latter element, intellect is all and ascesis an accessory. These two basic perspectives give rise
to infinitely varied combinations in accordance with the diversity of human possibilities. The perspective of will is also an affective perspective, for asceticism has a negative character and requires compensation in a positive factor—this positive factor is love. Hence, the way of love (or affective way or way of the will—bhakti) and the way of knowledge (or cognitive way or way of the intellect—jnani) are both possible.

The adept of the affective way would say that love is more than knowledge, that it engages the whole being, not just the mind. The adept of the cognitive way would respond that on the contrary knowledge proceeds from the heart and to know is to be, while to love is to want or feel. This is difficult for the spiritual man of emotional temperament to grasp—for him to love is to be, while to know is only to think.

Actually, polemics against knowledge in the name of love are like trying to put out the light of one fire with the heat of another. They are but aspects of the same reality, knowledge being analogous to the light and love to the heat of the fire.

Though starting from different points, the effect in the end, in realization, is the same whichever path is chosen. The path depends on the temperament of the individual or collectivity. The affective way proceeds in a dualistic and objective way. Love has man for its subject while God is objective and external. Love starts from man and converges toward God becoming 'illuminated' to the degree it conforms to its divine object. In the intellectual way, God is conceived of as subjective and inward—He is the Self. Knowledge (intellective identification of subject with object) has Self, God, for its subject and man for its object.

(These two ways of conceiving of God are called by Schuon, not surprising—
ly, the objective and subjective perspective respectively.) But what is love at the start appears as knowledge in result and what is knowledge at the start appears as love in result. For the affective man, knowledge is the outcome of love and for the intellectual man, the gnostic, love is the outcome of knowledge. Perfect love is 'luminous' and perfect knowledge is 'hot'.

'The spiritual man of an affective temperament knows God because he loves Him.
The spiritual man of an intellectual temperament loves God because he knows Him and in knowing Him.
The love of the affective man is that he loves God.
The love of the intellectual man is that God loves him; that is to say he realizes intellectually—but not simply in a theoretical way—that God is love.' (SPHF p. 149)

Fallen man, man without spiritual realization, is hardness and dissipation. Dissipation is manifested as curiosity, preoccupation, and disquiet in relation to the world. Hardness is manifested as indifference in relation to God. Love is the absence of hardness. The peace of intellectual contemplation is the absence of dissipation.

There are dangers in both ways of realization. In the bhaktic way, there is a less clear distinction between its esoteric and exoteric aspects. Its esotericism Schuon calls a 'lesser esotericism'—external rites, symbols, and an objective, personal God being of obvious importance to this mode of realization. What distinguishes the bhaktic from the purely religious is that the goal in the former is divine, supra-individual whereas in the latter, as has been stressed, the goal is an individual one. But bhakti can slip very easily into the purely exoteric. When this happens, intellection is replaced by moral individualism. Spirituality and concentration are replaced by sentimentality.
Symbolism is replaced by literalism and anthropomorphism.

In the way of knowledge, there is a nearly opposite danger. A cult of intelligence and mental passion can take man further from the truth. Mental passion pursuing intellectual intuition is like the wind which blows out the light of a candle. A monomania of the spirit, marked by haste, pretension, and insatiability, is incompatible with sanctity which always introduces an element of humility and charity and so of calm and generosity.
The Essential Virtues

Before the fall, Adam distinguished the true from the false; after the fall he distinguished good from evil. Originally, man's will was inseparable from intelligence. Fallen human nature among other things may be regarded as the split between his intelligence and his will, his 'knowing' and his 'being'. As pointed out in the section on doctrine and method, sanctity is the personal realization of doctrine. The two go hand in hand: to reject doctrine in the name of sanctity or vice versa would be illogical.

Corresponding to metaphysical truths are the essential virtues. To a principal truth there corresponds an attitude of the will as a consequence of the principle that 'to know is to be'. Spirituality requires both the metaphysical truth and virtue (knowing and being). Truth makes us understand virtues and gives them fullness and efficacy. Virtues lead us to truths and transform them for us into realities that are concrete, seen, and lived. For fallen man truth is dead and the will is blind. In spiritual realization truth illuminates the will and the illuminated will vivifies the truth. To be fully is to know fully. The virtues when realized fully coincide with metaphysical truth. To be humble, charitable, and truthful in an 'absolute' manner is to 'know'. Truth is needed for the perfection of virtue just as virtue is needed for the perfection of truth.

'Intellection and Virtue: everything lies in this....The way of intellection and the way of virtue: one does not go without the other, but, according to human dispositions, one or the other predominates.' (SPHF p. 187)

Man's whole being must participate in the realization of the truth:
'The intellectual center of a being is not reached without involving his volitive circumference. He who wants the center must realize the whole; in other words he who wants to know with the heart-intellect must 'know' with the whole soul, and this implies purification of the soul, and so also the virtues. When the mind is purified by doctrinal truth and the whole being is purified by virtue, truth can reveal itself in the heart with the help of God.' (SPHF p. 183)

The enormity of the task demands the virtues:

'To know God with all that we are. The very infinity of the object of knowledge requires totality of the act of knowing, and this totality requires the essential virtues.' (SPHF p. 184)

Moralities can vary; the essential virtues do not. The former are founded on social exigencies; the latter are enshrined in the very nature of man. The virtues correspond to cosmic perfections, divine qualities. The law comes from without; the human norm is inward and unchanging.

The fundamental or essential virtues are these: veracity, charity, and humility. These must penetrate all levels of activity.

Veracity or sincerity is truth appearing on the level of our will. It is to look toward the truth and submit and attach oneself to it becoming penetrated by its light.

Humility is to look on oneself in the limiting state of individuation—to gaze on the ego, on limitation, on nothingness.

Charity is to look around oneself—seeing God in one's neighbor and also seeing oneself there, this time not as pure limitation, but as a creature of God made in his image.

These fundamental virtues permeate each other, each being found again in the others. Charitable humility will avoid causing scandal and thus injuring one's neighbor. Veridical humility will avoid overestimation. Humble charity will avoid showing itself when it is not useful.
Man must not grow proud of his generosity. The gift of oneself should be inward. Veridical charity is conscious of the nature of things—that I am not less than my neighbor and that sometimes a higher interest must take precedence over some particular interest of the neighbor. Spiritual interest comes before temporal interest, whether it is a question of my neighbor or myself. Humble veracity will not hide our ignorance. Charitable veracity will neglect nothing in order to make the truth understood. Truth is a good and should be a gift.

Our nature lives in forgetting Reality. To efface oneself, to bless one's neighbor, to contemplate the Truth—these are three ways of remembering in accord with the triad: God, manifested world, ego.

"Effacing the ego; the giving of oneself; the realization of truth. It might be said that these attitudes respectively correspond to the stages—-or--states—of purification, expansion, and union. These are the three 'dimensions' of perfect gnosis." (SPHF, p.173)

Two points of contrast must be remembered about the role of virtues in metaphysical realization. The first is the contrast between virtues and "purely natural virtues" and the second is the contrast between moralism and virtue.

By a "purely natural virtue", Schuon means a virtue which is independent of any movement toward God or acceptance of Truth. To be virtuous because one's habitual surroundings impose certain styles of action is not enough. Schuon compares such "virtue" to a crystal, which cannot be used to light a dark place without the light of truth.

The vulgarization of spirituality, which is inevitable within certain limits leads to moralism. In this point of view, the "duty of
doing" is insisted on and "being" is forgotten. Well-doing is not itself a virtue—it can go perfectly well with the self-sufficiency which annuls its spiritual quality. What matters is not the action but the virtue—actions may be accidental; virtues are essential. In not recognizing this the moralist is in a sense making the relative Absolute:

"The exclusive moralist, instead of seeking the Absolute above himself, projects a kind of absolute into his own relativity by concerning himself indefinitely with the perfection ...of what is only an instrument or support, that is, of the individual, of the human. It is as if, instead of accomplishing a work with a usable instrument, a man devoted his whole life to making that instrument better." (SPHF, p.190)

Some final remarks about one of the virtues—humility—are in order. First, it must be made clear that humility does not rule out self-respect—a genuine knowledge of one's worth as well as one's limitations. The opposite of humility is pride—taking oneself for what one is not and disparaging others. Second, the importance of humility cannot be over-emphasized. It is, in a way, the fundamental of the fundamental virtues. It is a kind of sine qua non of spirituality for the following reason. Man's existential drama has three movements: adoration of God, adoration of the world, adoration of the self. The first is the goal; the last is pride; all other vices belong to the second category. Humility is so important because as man tears himself from the world, he must pass through the temptation of pride in order to approach God. The "I" wants to appropriate this movement to the glory of itself, to the attainment of what is the sufficient reason for the movement.

"Pride; that 'something' which prevents man from 'losing his life' for God.
To be humble is then to 'lose' oneself on the way, to forget oneself with a holy heedlessness with God in view,
to squander oneself in a gesture of final superiority." (SPHF, p.197)

Gnosis and humility go together. One is knowledge of the divine; the other is knowledge of the human. Pride is treating the human as Divine and vice versa.
The Role of Sacred Art, Symbols, Nature

"Man cannot know or meet God if he has not known or met him in the world." (SPHF, p.168)

The soul might be compared to a tree. The roots of this tree go deep down into the "world"-into the diversity of things which in our selves and around us can be felt, tasted, and lived. "The one thing necessary" is the transferring of our roots into what appears as nothing, as void, as unity. The soul cannot plant its roots in the void, so the void is "incarnated" in the symbol, in everything that brings us nearer to God.

"Love is in the deeps of man even as water is in the deeps of the earth, and man suffers from not being able to enjoy this infinity which he bears in himself and for which he is made.

It is necessary to dig deep into the soil of the soul through layers of aridity and bitterness in order to find love and to live from it.

The depths of love are inaccessible to man in his state of hardness but reveal themselves externally through the language of art and also through that of nature. In sacred art and in virgin nature the soul can taste by analogical anticipation something of the love which sleeps in itself and for which it has a nostalgia though it has not experience of it." (SPHF, p.210)

Sacred art, nature, the symbol are, then, extremely important in spiritual realization. Sacred art which takes the materials of nature and makes of them a symbol of the divine through a human intermediary is of particular value. "Sacred art helps man to find his own center, that kernel the nature of which is to love God." (SPHF, p.29) The language of sacred art is both lofty and easy: lofty because of the spiritual symbolism of its forms and nobility of its style; easy because it is the aesthetic mode of assimilation. This "combination of profundity and naivety" in sacred art (Transcendent Unity of Religions—TUR, p.93) gives it a two-
fold function: first, it acts as a support and aid for the élite by virtue of its profound nature and second, it provides a means for influencing the vast majority of men of average intelligence by virtue of the accessibility of its language.

While for the passional man beauty in nature and art can represent seduction of the ego and the world, for a contemplative man beauty can exteriorize Truth and Bliss. Something of God is perceived in the beautiful.

"In beauty man realizes, passively in his perception and externally in his production of it, that which he should himself "be" after an active or inward fashion." (SPHF, p. 27)

The other important function of art is that it enables esotericism to act on exotericism through sensible forms. The production of art for this purpose is the prerogative of the craft initiations. Through a language which is both immediate and universal, the élite is thus able to affect the majority of men of average intelligence. The importance of this is obvious from what has been said concerning esotericism being the life sap of exotericism. Sacred art is necessary for the survival of a traditional civilization.

What may be said of the aesthetics of sacred art? Most importantly, that the reflection of the supra-formal in the formal is not formless— but is, in fact, strict form. The forms of sacred art and the symbols are divinely inspired. In the perfect form, truth is incarnate in the rigor of the symbolical formulation and in the purity and intelligence of the style. The work of the sacred artist is not a training in spontaneity, but a humble and instructed search for perfection of form
and expression according to sacred prototypes which are both heavenly and collective in their inspiration. Art which is deliberately individualistic and founded on the prejudice of genius does not exteriorize either transcendent ideas or profound virtues—it objectivizes only individual fact. Orthodox genius is greater than the individual genius of any particular artist. An example of the production of orthodox art is the work of sacred iconographers (Schuon does not mention them, but I am reminded of the workmanship of Tibetan artists). For them, their art is a form of meditation, a means of realization. They draw creative joy, not from inventing pretentious novelties, says Schuon, but from a loving re-creation of the revealed prototypes. Hence comes a spiritual and artistic perfection such as no individual genius would ever attain. In sacred art, individual talent must be strictly disciplined.

Virtually anything may become a symbol, i.e. something which brings one closer to the divine by expressing some aspect of metaphysical truth. There are two aspects to any symbol—one adequately reflects the divine. This is the sufficient reason for the symbol. The other is the reflection as such and so is contingent. The former is the content of the symbol; the latter is the mode of its manifestation. For example, consider the sun as a symbol. Its content would be its luminosity, emanation of heat, central position, immutability in relation to the planets, etc. Its mode of manifestation would be its matter, density, spatial limitations, etc. In chapter II of Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts, Schuon gives many examples of symbols and I recommend that one wishing a deeper understanding of the usage of symbolism look there at these concrete examples: color symbolism; symbolism of sacred places
(e.g., mountains); the character of a sanctuary which untouched nature possesses (reminiscent of the hyperborean outlook); animal symbolism where the animal reflects cosmic qualities like sattva (swan), rajas (eagle), tamas (snake).
The Importance of Traditional Civilizations

As suggested by the introduction, the importance of traditional civilizations stems from their ability to provide support for the élite, capable of metaphysical realization. Normally, the means of realizing the Absolute must come "objectively" from the Absolute. Knowledge does not usually spring up "subjectively" except within the framework of an "objective" divine formulation of knowledge—a tradition, an orthodox revelation. The tradition requires a complement which is essentially personal and free, namely virtue, or the orthodoxy becomes pharisaical. But, this does not lessen the importance of the traditional element. It may be possible that a man could have direct intellection without any link at all with a revealed wisdom, but this would certainly be the exception rather than the rule. Normally, three elements must be present for a realization of metaphysical truth: contemplative intelligence, divine inspiration or grace, and a traditional orthodoxy.

Given the importance of tradition for the spiritual development of the members of a collectivity, the criterion proposed by Schuon for judging the value of a civilization is not a surprising one. He feels that the value of a civilization is based on its capacity to feel the Absolute and, in the case of an élite, to reach the Absolute. Only people who have a sense of the sacred and draw life from it are truly civilized. The sacred is that which is "immutable, inviolable, infinitely majestic" and worthy of all that we are. Reforming man means binding him again to heaven, plucking him from passions, from the cult of matter and quantity, and reintegrating him into the world of spirit and serenity.
With this criterion Schuon makes a strong judgment against the modern West. If the worth of a culture is measured by its attitude toward the Absolute, the West is clearly inferior to the traditional civilizations. These civilizations may include evils resulting from the fact that they are not concerned with transitory things but with the beyond. However, it must be remembered that the "advantages" of the modern west are mentally conditioned by a denial of the beyond and a cult of the ephemeral things of this world. This deification of the ephemeral leads to a situation in which a contemplative attitude is labeled escapism. Schuon sees even the humanitarianism on which the West prides itself as a symptom of mechanization and materialism. This philosophical humanitarianism starts from the erroneous notion that man and his earthly well being represent absolute values and that there are no values that are incompatible with earthly well being. True charity, on the other hand, cleanses from the egoistic illusion. It is a recognition that my neighbor is no other than myself, neither more nor less "I" than I am myself.

"...the only legitimate humanitarianism is that which takes account, to the extent that this is possible,...of human interest in its entirety, and thus also first of all of man's spiritual well-being. When the latter is neglected or even rejected all the treasures of the earth cease to have any value." (SPHF, p.60)
Traditional Religions

One of the most valuable aspects of Schuon's writings is his description of the world's religious traditions. Only a fragmentary sense of the scope of his understanding and depth of insight will be possible here. This is unfortunate, for the extent to which he makes religions intelligible is in many ways the most convincing evidence for the validity and soundness of his approach.

Briefly, his approach is that the religions represent fragmentary views of metaphysical truths. Each religion has a perspective on Reality which it presents through its symbols and this perspective depends on the conditions of the collectivity for which it is designed. As discussed, previously each tradition has an exoteric and esoteric aspect. It is an explicit formulation of some limited view of metaphysical Reality accessible to large numbers of men; but it also provides the needed symbols and supports in terms of doctrinal language, sacred art, rites, and techniques for realization for that élite which is capable of a metaphysical understanding and realization. Thus each religion is formal but allows some of its adherents to reach the supra-formal. Each is fragmentary but each contains everything necessary to reconstitute the whole.

A. VEDANTA

The Hindu tradition is the most direct formulation of metaphysics, of that which makes up the essence of our spiritual reality. It is a "truly metaphysical" perspective as opposed to an "initiatic" perspective (like Buddhism or Christianity)—it seeks deliverance by knowledge,
the knowledge of what is Real. (Of course, this just means that it is predominantly "truly metaphysical"; it also must contain an "initiatic element, its yogas.)

Unlike most of the other traditions to be discussed here, its starting point is not man but Reality. Cosmology is very important in the Hindu outlook (though not at all in, for example, Christianity). For to know the cosmos is to know the Absolute and to realize the illusion of existence, and hence, be delivered.

Essentially and very briefly, the teaching is that Atma (a determination of Brahma, the Beyond-Being) is the one Reality. The appearance of Atma in the world, in diversity and multiparity is due to Maya, an objectivizing principle or manifesting tendency. Maya is a necessary consequence of Atma's Infinity; it is the "divine art" which expresses Atma according to indefinitely varied modes. Avidya or ignorance conceals Atma and keeps us in the illusion that the manifest is real when Atma is the one Reality.

"Atma is pure Light and Bliss, pure 'consciousness', pure 'Subject'. There is nothing unrelated to this Reality; even the 'object' which is least in conformity with It is still It, but It 'objectivized' by Maya, the power of illusion consequent on the infinity of the Self." (SPHF, p.97)

The goal is deliverance from the illusion; to see Atma in everything, most especially in oneself. According to Vedanta the contemplative must become absolutely "Himself". What he really is is Atma, Pure Subject.

In achieving this end, the virtues are extremely important for the Hindu retains the alchemical sense of the virtues—a sense of their power to transform. Those virtues considered most valuable are, of course,
the virtues of the mind—those which converge towards perfect and permanent concentration.

But the most valuable technique is one used in all traditions. It is a way of "fighting fire with fire". Schuon calls it "Subjectivizing objectivation" (SPHF p. 101). Through a symbol, a sacred formula, an avatar, a doctrine, a guru, etc. AtmA is 'incarnated' in MayA so that MayA more directly expresses AtmA, making AtmA more accessible for one not yet delivered. The Symbol is a direct objectivation which replaces the pure 'Subject' on the objectivized plane. A synthetic and direct image of AtmA is superimposed on the world in order to eliminate the superimposition in relation to AtmA which the world itself represents. The revelation of Sinai, the messianic redemption, the descent of the Quran are all examples of this 'Subjectivizing objectivation' effected by the symbol. In the Hindu tradition the sacred formula, or mantra is an example of this technique of symbolizing and incarnating the Subject by objectivizing it and then substituting this for objective world, thus leading the spirit lost in objectivation back to pure Subject.

"That is why in the most diverse traditions the mantra and its practice, japa, are referred to as 'recollection' (the dhikr of Sufism): with the aid of the symbol, of the divine name, the spirit which has gone astray and become separated 'recollects' that it is pure 'Consciousness', pure 'Subject', pure 'Self'. (SPHF p. 98)

Because the Vedanta represents the most direct formulation of metaphysical truths, I will use its language later in describing several of the other religions. For now, this brief description must suffice.

Schuon himself has summed up the essence of the Hindu goal and method in one sentence:
"'Union' (yoga): the Subject (Atma) becomes object (the Veda, the Dharma) in order that the object (the objectivized subject, man) may be able to become the (absolute) Subject."
(SPHF p. 103)

This formulation, in addition to being succinct and full will make it easy to compare with the Christian and Islamic traditions, as will be seen later.

B. THE TERNARY ASPECT OF MONOTHEISM

Monotheism essentially is based on a dogmatic conception of the Divine Unity. A dogmatic affirmation is one which is accompanied by an exclusion of every other point of view. Every religious point of view must be dogmatic to preserve its vitality. The exclusiveness is justified for the conditions in which the religion arose, but nevertheless it is a limitation—the fundamental limitation of the religious view as such.

Monotheism contained in Judaism and Christianity two great antagonistic expressions. Islam in its turn, although itself antagonistic in relation to these two forms, since its point of view is likewise religious, recapitulated them in a certain manner by harmonizing the Judaeo-Christian antagonism in a synthesis which marked the limit of the development and integral realization of monotheism.

The antagonism between Judaism and Christianity is essentially the antagonism between esotericism and exotericism, spirit and letter. Judaism, in the Mosaic law, reduced the pure monotheistic tradition of Abraham to what was in form essentially an exotericism. Christ in turn broke the shell of the Mosaic law to reach its kernel and left a monotheistic tradition which is essentially esoteric.
Islam can be called the Abrahamic reaction against the annexation of monotheism by Israel (Moses) on the one hand and the Messiah (Christ) on the other. Islam reestablished as sacred law for this world, preserving the Judaic element, while at the same time reaffirming the universality Christ affirmed in breaking the shell of the Mosaic law:

"The monotheism revealed to Abraham possessed esotericism and exotericism in perfect equilibrium...with Moses, exotericism so to speak became the tradition, in the sense that it determined the form of the latter without, however, affecting its essence; with Christ the reverse happened, and it was esotericism which in a certain manner became the tradition in its turn; finally with Mohammed, the initial equilibrium is reestablished and the cycle of the monotheistic tradition is closed." (TUR p. 123)

or again:

"...the tradition of Abraham manifested the undifferentiated equilibrium of 'letter' and 'spirit', the tradition of Moses the 'letter', Christianity the 'spirit', and Islam the differentiated equilibrium of these two aspects of Revelation." (TUR p. 124)

With respect to Way, it can be said that the three monotheistic traditions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam represent respectively the ways of action (karma), love (bhakti), and knowledge (jnani).

1. Judaism

In the works of Schuon with which I am familiar, he says little about Judaism except when he is comparing aspects of it to other traditions. The following is what can be gleaned from these writings, but since it is so fragmentary it may be unfair to the Judaic tradition.

As noted above, Judaism is in form primarily an exotericism. A divine law has been revealed and the goal is to conform to the 'letter' of the law. Thus it is a way of action. It sees the moral consequence of the fall as being that man is in revolt against the law. It seeks to
eliminate this consequence.

2. Christianity.

Judaic and Islamic traditions were founded with an esoteric aspect from the beginning in the sense that an esotericism formed part of the Revelation and was clearly distinguishable from the esoteric aspect. But Christian esotericism hardly figured as such in the Christian Revelation, for Schuon feels that it is primarily and fundamentally esoteric in its primitive manifestation. He sees the contradiction or depreciation of the Mosaic Law found in the words of Christ and the teachings of the Apostles as an expression of the superiority of esotericism over exotericism. Christ spoke, not from the standpoint of the Law, but from that of inward, suprasocial, and spiritual realities. Christ represents the living kernel of the Mosaic Law and the breaking of the shell was justified in the historical conditions. Exotericism must be manifested openly from time to time (the 'Light Shining in the Darkness') and in the time of Christ the laying bare of the 'spirit' hidden in the 'letter' was the only way of bringing about the reorientation which the world needed.

As evidence of the primarily esoteric character of Christianity, Schuon cites the words of Christ which most often have no exoteric application, the rites of the early Latin Church, and the 'law of the secret'—the rule enjoining that the dogmas should only be revealed to Initiates, those deemed ready, who 'had the ears to hear' (see note p. 164 TUR). Particularly important in his arguments are quotations from the older Christian authors, a fundamental part of the tradition. To give some examples:
"St. Basil in his work on the Holy Ghost speaks of a 'tacit and mystical tradition maintained down to our times, and of a secret instruction that our fathers observed without discussion and which we follow by dwelling in the simplicity of their silence. For they understood how necessary was silence in order to maintain the respect and veneration due to our Holy Mysteries. And in fact it was not expedient to make known in writing a doctrine containing things that catechumens are not permitted to contemplate.'" (TUR p. 155)

"And again, according to St Denys the Areopagite, 'Salvation is possible only for deified souls, and deification is nothing else but the union and resemblance we strive to have with God. The things that are bestowed uniformly and all at once, so to speak, on the Blessed Essences dwelling in Heaven, are transmitted to us as it were in fragments and through the multiplicity of the varied symbols of the Divine oracles. For it is on these Divine oracles that our hierarchy is founded. And by these words we mean not only what our inspired Masters have left us in the Holy Epistles and in their theological works, but also what they transmitted to their disciplines by a kind of spiritual and almost heavenly teaching, initiating them from person to person in a bodily way no doubt, since they spoke, but, I venture to say, in an immaterial way also, since they did not write. But since these truths had to be translated into the usages of the Church, the Apostles expressed them under the veil of symbols and not in their sublime nakedness, for not everybody is holy, and, as the Scriptures say, knowledge is not for all.'" (TUR p. 156)

Because of its fundamentally esoteric character, Christianity is by no means accessible to all, evidence of which are its many 'mysteries'. The Trinity, for example, is a 'mystery' accessible only to those who are capable of conceiving of the Divinity under more or less relative aspects, that is by those who are able to 'move' in the metaphysical dimension unhindered by contradictory forms.

The exclusiveness of the doctrine is balanced to some extent, though, by the way, which is a way of grace or love (bhakti marga) and is the most accessible of the methods of realization. In this mode, knowledge is infused indirectly into the soul; the immediate object is not the truth as such but a symbol of the truth. The symbol is effective or yields up its secrets in proportion to the greatness of Faith, which is
determined by an attitude of confidence or 'emotional certainty', i.e. by an element of bhakti or love. Of course perfect love results in knowledge for they go together as heat and light.

The fact that Christianity seems like a morality and appears to be based on action is an 'optical illusion' based on the fact that it is a Way of love. Because it is this mode of realization, its exotericism is in reality a 'lesser esotericism' in a much more immediate sense than, for example, in Jewish exotericism. What distinguished the bhaktic way from a purely religious attitude is the goal in view, which is not individual but Divine. Christian charity, for example, has no interest in 'well being' for its own sake but is accomplished through love of God, through a consciousness of the illusory ego and the indifferentiation of all that is created before the Creator—the knowledge that 'I' and 'my neighbor' are one.

If today it seems that modern Christianity is suffering from a decline of the intellectual element, this is precisely because its original spirituality was of a bhaktic nature and an exteriorization of bhakti inevitably leads to a decline of intellectuality in favor of sentimentality. It is Schuon's thesis that the Hesychast sect represents the most unaltered form of primitive Christian spirituality. The esoteric nature of Hesychasm is affirmed by numerous criteria. On the level of doctrine, the chief evidence is the apophatic and antinomian concept of divinity: God as 'Non-Being', attributeless, beyond what can be named or thought without contradiction. On the level of method, the Hesychast methods of realization are clearly distinguished from the method of ordinary religious piety: there are purely contemplative
techniques linked to those used in Sufism and Yoga; there are techniques for transmutation of passions analogous to those in the Tantric tradition; there is the 'prayer of Jesus' reserved for an élite which is a 'mantric' repetition of the sacred name of 'Jesu' and sacred formulas to bring about union with the Divine, the 'Holy Silence' (analogous to nirvana); there is the Eucharistic rite which is a kind of passive complement to the active incantatory methods in accord with the two-fold symbolism of the mouth as an organ of speech (the 'prayer of Jesus') and an organ of nutrition (Eucharist).

The key idea of Christianity is expressed in this statement by St. Irenaeus: "God became what we are, in order that we might become what he is." It is a doctrine of union—the Principle is united to manifestation so that the latter can be united to the Principle, hence the symbolism of love and the predominance of the bhaktic way. The Vedantic terminology for this idea would be: 'Atmā became Mayā in order that Mayā might become Atmā'. Christ's sapiential message is to love God with all your faculties and in function of this love, love your neighbor as yourself—i.e. become united with the Heart-intellect and in function of this union abandon all pride and all passion and discern the spirit in every creature.

A succinct formulation of the Christian perspective is the following (compare with similar expression of Vedanta and of Islam at the end of the next section):

"'Deification': God became man in order that man might be able to become God. 'Man' pre-exists in God—this is the 'Son'—and 'God' pre-exists in man—this is the intellect. The point of contact between God and man is, objectively, Christ, and, subjectively, it is the purified heart, 'intelligence-love'." (SPHF p. 103)
3. Islam.

The esoteric nature of Christian dogmas and sacraments was the cause of the Islamic reaction. Islam is a perfect equilibrium of exoteric and esoteric aspects containing as it does a sacred legislation for this world and a metaphysical truth—the Divine Unity. Thus, there are two dimensions of Islam: a horizontal one of the will and a vertical one of the intelligence. Islam seeks to abolish sin and error replacing them with equilibrium with the Divine Will and certitude of the Divine Unity. On the spiritual plane, Islam lays stress on knowledge—unitive knowledge which goes beyond subject and object. On the earthly plane, it seeks equilibrium—putting each thing in its own place in accordance with the Divine Law.

The certitude of Islam, the Divine Unity, is expressed succinctly in the two Shahāda (testimonies) of the faith. The doctrine of Islam hangs on these two statements: first 'There is no divinity (or reality, or absolute) outside the only Divinity (or Reality, or Absolute); and second, 'Muhammad (the 'Glorified', the Perfect) is the Envoy (the mouthpiece, the intermediary, the manifestation, the symbol) of the Divinity.' Briefly, these may be stated as 'There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet.' The first of these certainties is that 'God alone is' and the second that 'all things are attached to God.' In Vedantic terminology, "'There is no Atmā if it be not the one Atmā' and 'Māyā is the manifestation of Atmā.'"

The Quran is the great theophany of Islam. It represents the 'discernment' between truth and error and is something of a multiple paraphrase of the fundamental discernment expressed by the Shahāda. It is
the central element of Islamic faith comparable to Christ for the Christians, being the manifestation of the Principle, the Word. The great themes of the Quran are the themes of Islam: disequilibrium and equilibrium; lack of rhythm and rhythm; separation and union; division and unity.

The Prophet is a "normative" spiritual leader, analogous to Abraham and Moses. This Schuon contrasts with the "sublimative" spiritual leaders like Christ or the Buddha. The latter are characterized by the Biblical statement, 'My Kingdom is not of this world'; the former, by the statement, 'Thy Kingdom come'. Muhammad is at once divinely contemplative and humanly combative and constructive. The prophet represents a prototype of a man in equilibrium with the Divine.

"The prophet is the human norm in respect both of his individual and of his collective functions, or again in respect of his spiritual and earthly functions." (UI, p. 91)

For this reason imitation of the Prophet is an integral part of spiritual realization in Islam.

The prophet incarnates serenity, generosity, and strength. Strength is the affirmation of Divine Truth both in the soul and in the world. Generosity compensates for the aggressive aspect of strength—it is charity and pardon. These two virtues culminate in a third virtue, serenity, which is detachment from the world and the ego, extinction in the face of God, knowledge of the divine and union with it. Each of these three has a complementary virtue. Strength (active) has a complement of sobriety (passive) which is a love of poverty, fasting, incorruptibility. Generosity (active) which 'gives' has its counterpart
in nobility (passive) which 'is'; nobility is a sort of contemplative generosity—it is love of beauty in the widest sense. Serenity (passive) has a complement in truthfulness (active) which is its active or discriminative aspect—a love of intelligence, impartiality, and justice. Nobility compensates for the aspect of narrowness in sobriety and these two complementary virtues find their culmination in truthfulness.

"The virtues of the Prophet form, so to speak, a triangle: serenity with truthfulness is the apex of the triangle and the two other pairs of virtues—generosity with nobility and strength with sobriety—form the base; the two angles of the base are in equilibrium and at the apex are reduced to unity. As was said above the soul of the Prophet is in its essence equilibrium and extinction." (UI, p. 93)

This may be schematized as follows:

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truthfulness/serenity
      /
     /
strength/sobriety ——— genorousity/nobility
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PROPHET'S VIRTUES (Active/Passive)

Imitation of the Prophet would imply: 1) strength as regards oneself, 2) generosity as regards others, and 3) truthfulness in and through God. Thus, imitation of the prophet means actualizing a balance between our complementary virtues and following from this, it is extinction in the Divine Unity on the basis of this harmony. The role of the Prophet in Islam is summed up well in the following paragraph:

"Love of the Prophet constitutes a fundamental element in Islamic spirituality, although this love must not be understood in the sense of a personalistic bhakti which would presuppose divinizing the Prophet in an exclusive way. It arises because
Moslems see in the Prophet the prototype and model of the virtues which make the theomorphism of man and the beauty and equilibrium of the universe and are so many keys or ways towards the Unity which delivers, so that they love him and imitate him even in the smallest details of daily life. The Prophet like Islam as a whole, is as it were a heavenly mould ready to receive the influx of the intelligence and will of the believer and one wherein every effort becomes a kind of supernatural repose." (UI, p. 95)

Muhammad incarnates the theomorphic and harmonious totality of which we are fragments and also the origin or primordial state in relation to which we are but states of decay. This differs from the Buddhist or Christian cults—Muhammad is either man among men or a Platonic idea, a cosmic and spiritual symbol; never is he God incarnate. This would contradict the religious perspective of Islam which is a dogmatic conception of Divine Unity.

The Way, in Islam, represents a polarity between 'doctrine' and 'method'. It is metaphysical truth accompanied by contemplative concentration. Everything in the Way is reducible to these two elements—intellection and concentration; discernment and union. The goal is 'sincerity in unitary faith' and there are three elements: 1) el-imān (faith)—acceptance of unity by the intelligence; 2) el-islām (law)—submission of the will to the idea of unity; and 3) el-ishān (the Way)—deepens the two previous elements o the point of their ultimate consequences. Under the influence of el-ishān, el-imān becomes a lived certitude—knowing becomes being; el-islām, instead of being limited to a certain number of prescribed attitudes, comes to include every level in man's nature. The most important elements of the Way are: the Quran as sacrament—the prototype of the gift of speech, the Word, analogous to the Eucharist, the symbol of the Divine Presence; imitation of the
Prophet, the prototype of man in equilibrium; the dhikr—'mentioning' or 'remembrance'—the sacred formulas, repeating of the sacred name (Allah), analogous to the 'prayer of Jesus'. This latter method, the dhikr, is especially important to the Moslem in support of contemplative concentration.

"The soul of the Moslem is, as it were, woven of sacred formulae; in these he works, in these he rests, in these he lives, in these he dies." (UI, p. 60)

The importance of the sacred formulas may seem ridiculous from the Christian viewpoint, a kind of spiritual mediocrity—not so for the Moslem:

"To pronounce on every occasion certain formulas may amount to nothing, and will seem a mere nothing to one who conceives only of moral heroism, but from another point of view—that of virtual union with God through the constant 'remembrance' of things divine—this verbal way of introducing into life spiritual 'points of reference' is on the contrary a means of purification and of grace as to which no doubt can be entertained." (UI, p. 68)

Islam, particularly its esoteric aspect—Sufism, is fundamentally a way of jnana. Schuon calls it "the religious crystallization of gnosis." It is an idea, the knowledge of Divine unity, which, when grasped by the whole being, leads to deliverance. When the intelligence grasps the fundamental meaning of the Shahadah, it distinguishes the Real from the non-Real. When the will in its turn grasps this same meaning, it becomes attached to the Real; it becomes concentrated and lends its concentration to the mind.

The succinct formulation of Islam—corresponding to the ones above for Vedante and Christianity—is:

"'Unification' (tawhid): the One (illa-Llah) has become 'nought' (la ila=), in order that 'nought' might be able to become the One; the One has become separate and
multiple (the Quran) in order that the separate and multiple
(the soul) might be able to become the One. The 'multiple'
pre-exists in the One—this is the uncreated Quran, the
eternal Word—and the 'One' pre-exists in the multiple: this
is the heart-intellect, and in the microcosm it is the
universal Spirit." (SPHF, p.103)

4. Christianity and Islam

Christianity and Islam it has been seen, though both montheistic
traditions, are very different religious perspectives. The basis of
Islam is an idea—Unity; the basis of Christianity is a Fact, an Event—
the Mystery of Christ, the Incarnation, the Redemption. Islam is a
religion of certitude and equilibrium; Christianity is a religion of
love and sacrifice. The Islamic approach is based on the intellect; the
Christian, on the will. The equilibrium sought in Islam appears to the
Christian as a calculating mediocrity, incapable of reaching the super-
natural. The sacrificial idealism of Christianity is liable to be mis-
interpreted by the Moslem as heroic individualism which is dangerous
and contemptuous of the divine. From the Islamic point of view
Christianity has never had a social application in the full sense of
the word whereas Islam consists in a ritual and legislative conformity
of man and society to the Quranic Law and therefore to Unity.

The difference between the approaches of the two traditions is again
the result of a different preliminary definition of man. If man is
will, God is love; if man is intelligence, God is truth. If man is will
fallen and powerless, then God is Redeeming Love; if man is intelligence
darkened and gone astray, then God is the illuminating truth which
delivers. Divine Love saves by making Itself what we are; it 'descends'
in order to 'raise up'. Divine Truth delivers by giving back to the
Intellect its "supernaturally natural" object, i.e. by "recalling" that the Absolute alone "is", that contingency "is not" or that on the contrary "it is not other than the Absolute".

C. Unity in Diversity

The diversity of the world's religions arises because of their perspectival character. Each tradition has a certain starting point and views a different aspect of metaphysical reality, which is itself one. It may be compared to visualization of a physical object. A physical object can be seen from many different perspectives (or "felt" as in the parable of the blind men and the elephant). A different description might result from each view point and indeed they may even be contradictory. Nevertheless, it is true that there is the integral object which transcends all of the descriptions and which in a sense may be said to be the sum of all of them. The same holds true in the metaphysical realm. The traditions each describe Reality from a particular point of view and they are diverse in their descriptions and often contradictory—nevertheless, Truth is one and metaphysically, the diversity and contradiction are resolved in unity and harmony.

"The 'mythologies' cross one another without inner contradiction and the mutual misinterpretations arise from ignorance of their respective points of departure and from the mistake of attributing to others one's own postulates." (SPHF, p.54)

Christianity is founded on the primordial fall of a single man, Islam on the nature of mankind, or rather man as such, Buddhism on the suffering of man, Hinduism on the illusion of existence, Judaism on the revolt of man against the Law.
"The various starting points of the traditional mythologies—the creation of the world, the fall of Adam, the revelation to Abraham, the suffering of ignorance—are, so to speak, so many points of reference in metaphysical space." (SPMF, p. 57)

The diversity of the religions is due to the diversity of the receptacle—each individual has his own particular Lord and the same is true of psychological collectivities. And each has a reason, its own sufficient reason for existence, to consider itself superior to the others. Schuon's thesis about religions is summed up, I think, in the following:

"...if there are different religions—each of them by definition speaking an absolute and so an exclusive language—this is because the difference between the religions exactly corresponds by analogy to the differences between human individuals. In other words, if the religions are true it is because each time it is God who has spoken, and, if they are different it is because God has spoken in different 'languages' in conformity with the diversity of the receptacles. Finally, if they are absolute and exclusive, it is because in each of them God has said 'I'. We know all too well, and it is moreover in the natural order of things, that this thesis in not acceptable on the level of exoteric orthodoxies, but it is so on the level of universal orthodoxy..." (UI, p. 41-42)

The unity of the religious forms can never be realized externally, but Schuon suggests in the Transcendent Unity of Religions that such a realization is indeed possible in an inward and spiritual fashion.

Mohyiddin ibn Arabi, the great enunciator of gnosis in Islam, bore witness to such a realization in these terms:

"My heart is open to every form: it is a pasture for gazelles (i.e. spiritual states), and a cloister for Christian monks, a temple for idols, the kaaba of the pilgrim, the tables of the Torah, and the book of the Quran. I practice the religion of Love: in whatsoever direction His caravans advance, the religion of Love shall be my religion and my faith." (UI, p. 42)
Concluding Remarks

Schuon's approach has many aspects which are indeed difficult to accept. The rejection of the humanism of the modern era as mechanistic and a deification of the ephemeral is a hard condemnation for the Westerner to accept. The teaching that there is a spiritual élite is a hard lesson for the egalitarian. The fatalistic and cyclic cosmology in which the current epoch is the end of an Iron Age is hard for one who has placed his faith in science and progress and who has replaced the hope of immortality with the dream of evolution. Schuon's aesthetics, with its emphasis on strict form in sacred art and its playing down of the role of the artist, is hard to accept for one who celebrates individuality and creativity. The necessity of the exoteric aspects of a tradition is particularly difficult for modern man. What Tillich has called "radical doubt" has made it nearly impossible for the man of today to accept any forms or to invest his energies in any orthodoxy.

Nevertheless, there seems to be tremendous promise in his approach. It is true that it is not easy for the Western mind but Schuon recognized this throughout his writings and sees in it evidence of how far we have become removed from the tradition. But, even now there will be individuals capable of attaining what he offers—an absolute certainty concerning a Reality which is eternal and beyond the manifest. The empirical criterion should certainly meet acceptance from the Western man. What is asked is that one undertake what is necessary to have this knowledge, namely a way of realization, and then judge for oneself whether or not the experience is a true one. The problem, of course, is that one is required to invest a tremendous amount of energy, literally to bet
one's life, on something the outcome of which is denied or at least thrown into doubt by all the elements of our present culture. The fact that Schuon can give the insight that he does into the diverse religious traditions is perhaps the most convincing evidence that it might be well worth while to give serious consideration to his point of view. Perhaps, having got one's roots more firmly implanted in the traditions one would then be capable of investing oneself in what Tillich calls a courageous "in-spite-of", of overcoming the "radical doubt" and achieving and seeking metaphysical knowledge.
Bibliography


Other Books by Schuon


*All of Schuon's books, as far as I know, were written originally in French.