

Trials Must Be: Thoughts on a Pandemic

By Michael Fitzgerald

A new, dangerous human virus has spread to nearly every corner of the earth with lightning-like speed. As we consider the meaning of this pandemic, there are three questions that merit reflection: Is the virus a sign of the end of days? What are the proper attitudes in the face of such a trial? Will this world-wide shock turn humanity to prayer?

Is the virus a sign of the end of days?

Martin Lings provides a context for considering this question in his book *The Eleventh Hour*:

It is not given to man to foresee the future with any clarity—otherwise prophecies would be neither veiled nor ambiguous. But man has the right to speculate about the future in humble awareness of his limitations in that respect—otherwise prophecies would not be forthcoming at all. Moreover in some cases a settled conviction is legitimate and even, we may say, willed by Heaven, in virtue of the weight and universality of the prediction; and so it is with regard to imminent world-wide devastation, not total, but none the less of cataclysmic proportions, and not final, because it is to be “before the end”, though there are grounds for conviction that “the end” itself cannot be far off.¹

Many readers may conclude that Lings would have considered this pandemic a precursor of events to come surrounding the Last Judgement. Let us keep in mind, however, Frithjof Schuon’s caution that “no one can know the ‘moment’ of the end of the world, and that no calculation, even one established on serious bases, can lead to anything close to a precise result.”² Moreover, from a spiritual point of view, whether the end is far or is close does not matter, a point Schuon makes in two of his poems:

¹ Martin Lings, *The Eleventh Hour: The Spiritual Crisis of the Modern World in the Light of Tradition and Prophecy* (Cambridge: Archetype, 1987), chap. “The Restorer”, 84. Anyone wanting a clearer opinion on whether the virus is a sign foretold by prophecies would do well to consult this book.

² Frithjof Schuon, *Treasures of Buddhism: A New Translation with Selected Letters* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2018), chap. “Cosmological and Eschatological Viewpoints”, 42n.

If someone tells you that tomorrow
Will be the last day in the history of the world —
You must nonetheless act as if the time
Until the Last Judgment were still a thousand years —

Thus spake the Prophet. And it was not a jest;
So take his wise saying to heart.³



One could also say: if the last day
Will be tomorrow — or, on the contrary,
If thou still hast a hundred years to live:
This should be the same for thee — for thou standest before God;
Thou hast chosen the best, the eternal part in existence.⁴

What are the proper attitudes in the face of such a trial?

To answer this question, I turn to another two of Schuon's poems:

Trials must be upon this earth;
We are made of a stuff that easily
Corrupts when nothing calls to order, when a sign
From the Lord does not reach us soon enough.

Do not complain that destiny has rent your soul;
For God knows best what will help us.⁵



Be not astonished because of a trial,
For without trials man cannot grow;
Such is human nature, that
God can entirely forgive only the one who has accepted trials.⁶

³ Frithjof Schuon, *World Wheel: Volumes I-III* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2010), Third Collection, LXIV, 121.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Third Collection, LXV, 121.

⁵ Frithjof Schuon, *Autumn Leaves & The Ring: Poems by Frithjof Schuon*, (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2010), "Trials", 227.

⁶ Frithjof Schuon, *Songs without Names: Volumes VII-XII* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2010), Eighth Collection, XX, 62.

Will this world-wide shock turn humanity to prayer?

Here Frithjof Schuon's letters to the author Jacob Needleman, although written in a different context, help us to answer this question.

In your Preface to *The Sword of Gnosis*,⁷ you say that what is needed is not only truth, but also a shock which makes it acceptable to modern man. Now this presupposes that modern man is open, not to any shock, but to an *interiorizing* one, which precisely is not the case. The French Revolution, then communism, fascism and nazism, were shocks, but these shocks were *exteriorizing*. What does it mean that Judaism, Christianity and Islam operated with shocks? It means that the human collectivities for whom they were intended possessed a natural qualification for such a therapy; that it was possible to interiorize them through a shock, precisely. The very definition of the modern man is that a shock will reach him only under the condition that the shock will be exteriorizing, not interiorizing; that it must have something demagogic about it, for instance. All this amounts to saying that in our century only individuals can be saved from modernism, not collectivities; in a way, modern man is the creature which stubbornly doesn't want to be saved. All this means that we have information to give, but nothing to preach.⁸

A subsequent letter to Needleman reminds us that the answers are there for those individuals with eyes to see: "You ask," writes Schuon, "And which people are needed? The people needed exist,—people saying the truth and saintly people,—but the majority of 'modern man' does not listen to them. This is, I repeat it, the main problem. Et pax hominibus bonae voluntatis [and peace to men of goodwill]!"⁹

Final thoughts.

We can do no better than to end our reflections on this world-wide trial with some of Schuon's wisdom and advice:

We are surrounded by a world of tumult and incertitude; and there are sudden encounters with things surprising, incomprehensible, absurd or disappointing. But these things have no right to be problems for us, and this if only because every phenomenon has its causes, whether we know them or not.

⁷ Jacob Needleman (ed.), *The Sword of Gnosis: Metaphysics, Cosmology, Tradition, Symbolism* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1974).

⁸ Schuon's letter from Bloomington to Jacob Needleman, dated October 26, 1989. Needleman visited Schuon three times, first in Lausanne and twice in Bloomington.

⁹ Schuon's letter from Bloomington to Jacob Needleman, dated March 1, 1990.

Whatever may be the phenomena and whatever their causes, there is always That which is; and That which is is beyond the world of tumult, contradictions and disappointments. That which is can be troubled and diminished by nothing; it is Truth, Peace and Beauty. Nothing can tarnish it, and no one can take it away from us. Truth, Peace and Beauty of the Sacred — this Sacred which is the supreme Name.¹⁰

¹⁰ Frithjof Schuon, unpublished Text 514, "Truth, Peace, Beauty." Martin Lings has explained that Schuon's texts form "a series of messages or instructions concerning the spiritual path . . . set down on behalf of his disciples" (*The Underlying Religion: An Introduction to the Perennial Philosophy* [Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2007], "Preface", ix-x); Schuon referred to them collectively as "The Book of Keys."