

Remarks on Esoterism in the works of Frithjof Schuon

by Patrick Laude

In esoterism there are two principles which may be actualized sporadically and at different levels, but always in a partial and contained manner: the first is that fundamentally, there is only one religion with various forms, for humanity is one and the spirit is one; the second principle is that man bears everything within himself, potentially at least, by reason of the immanence of the one Truth.

(Frithjof Schuon: *In the Face of the Absolute*, 1989)

Introduction

The definition and scope of esoterism remains a much-debated issue in traditional circles as is clearly apparent from a variety of reactions to Frithjof Schuon's presentation of *religio perennis*.¹ Our intention in writing this note is to highlight a few fundamental points that may have been in part obscured as a result of simplifying emphases or pious exaggerations prompted by the opportune or expedient demands of the particular contexts in which they were made. We will therefore limit ourselves to produce, in a manner as brief and simple as possible, a kind of summary of the main ideas presented by Schuon on the topic of esoterism,

1. Let us hasten to say that we do not share the view according to which Schuon's direct heritage has by now divided between two "camps," one labelled "traditionalist" and the other "primordialist." Such alarming simplifications may be prompted by praiseworthy intentions of intellectual clarity and zeal for the House of the Lord, but in actuality the layout is much more nuanced and less schizomorphic than it would appear to some. We much prefer to speak, as Schuon himself did in some of his correspondence, of two "poles" or rather two "emphases" that should not in principle be mutually exclusive. We do not know of any genuine "primordialist" eager to dispense with the essential traditional framework and we have not heard of any "traditionalist" intent on rejecting the idea of an esoteric and universal core common to all traditions.

both in his published works and in some of his unpublished texts. In this summary we do not claim to be exhaustive, our primary objective being merely to encourage our readers to refer directly to Schuon's own writings on the matter. It goes without saying that in such subtle matters one may emphasize, for a variety of reasons, some aspects of the message at the expense of others. In any event, a doctrinal exposition will be partly systematic and partly indeterminate, the latter allowing for a plurality of perspectives of its meaning.² As it appears upon reading some of his private writings, Schuon was perfectly aware of and quite agreeable to the spectrum of legitimate understandings and interpretations to which his essential message might give rise, while being no less explicit about the scope of what he personally considered to be his integral perspective.

Defining “Esoterism”: Doctrine and Method

A first important aspect of the issue at hand lies in the fact that esoterism may be defined either in its doctrinal aspect or in its methodical dimension, the former concerning Truth as it is perceived by intelligence, while the latter deals with the Way as it is lived by the soul and the will. In its most direct doctrinal expression, esoterism amounts to a fundamental discernment between the absolute and infinite Reality on the one hand, and relative realities on the other. Considered in its absoluteness, Reality is identified as Beyond-Being, as that which lies beyond all determinations and relations—and has therefore nothing to do with Creation as such. By contrast, when considered in its dimension of infinitude, Reality is the All-Possibility and as such the Principle that “makes possible” all further determinations and manifestations. There is only one Reality, which means that Reality alone “is,” and that consequently all realities “are” only in virtue of their “participation” in Reality: these are the two faces exclusive and inclusive of Truth. This is esoterism when it is reduced to its essential doctrine which is none other than the universal doctrine of Unity — “*at-tawhîdu wâhidun*”—and which all wisdoms and all religions express in a more or less direct way within the sacred means

2. “(...) Every traditional doctrine has an aspect of system and an aspect of indeterminacy; this latter appears in the variety of orthodox perspectives, hence also in the plurality of systems, such as may appear in the writings of one and the same author, above all in the esoteric field.” Frithjof Schuon, *Language of the Self*, World Wisdom Books, 1999, p.12.

and constraints of their formal languages.³

The notion of Beyond-Being (Sur-Etre) is closely connected, in the esoteric perspective, to that of Mâyâ. The latter can be defined as Universal Relativity, which means that it ranges from God as Creator at its summit—in so far as He is “relative” to His Creation and therefore only “relatively absolute”—to the least of corporeal manifestations. Moreover, these two key-concepts, unknown or rejected by exoterism, presuppose the at once epistemological and ontological reality of the Intellect, for only the supra-personal Intellect transcends the relationship between God and man since it is essentially identified with the Divine Subject itself, Atmâ.

Operatively or methodically, esoterism is defined by Schuon as the most inclusive or integral concentration on the most exclusive Reality: “the Unicity of the Object demands the totality of the subject.” The modes of this concentration, which are at once interiorizing and assimilating, may vary in their “sacramental” or “technical” components but they all amount to an awakening and a deepening of the consciousness or the “remembrance” of Reality—through meditation, contemplation, invocation, and orison.

Esoterism and Religion

Given the essentiality of esoterism, the question must be raised: “Is esoterism independent from the religion within which it manifests itself?” To this question, a totally logical and consistent reader of Schuon’s writings can only answer with a proximate “no” upon which an indisputable “yes” must however ultimately prevail.⁴

In the esoteric and gnostic perspective defined by Schuon, Revelation, Religion and Tradition must be considered as necessary compo-

3. “Thus esoterism as such is metaphysics, to which is necessarily joined an appropriate method of realization. But the esoterism of a particular religion—of a particular exoterism precisely—tends to adapt itself to this religion and thereby enter into theological, psychological and legalistic meanders foreign to its nature, while preserving in its secret center its authentic and plenary nature, but for which it would not be what it is.” Frithjof Schuon, *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*, Bloomington: 1986, p.115.

4. “(...) this nucleus (the esoteric nucleus), however, is not in any sense a part, even an inner part, of the exoterism, but represents, on the contrary, a quasi-independent “dimension” in relation to the latter.” Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, Wheaton-Madras-London: 1993, Pp.9-10.

nents of the spiritual path in at least two senses: first, as “objective supernatural” elements and as such occasional means of awakening of the “subjective supernatural” element, the Intellect; and second, as providing sacred symbols, rites and other God-given spiritual “guarantees” and protections, or means of salvation and deliverance. As far as the first aspect is concerned, the need for an upaya or the formal framework of a tradition is however “accidental” and not “essential,” which means that the Intellect, and the Sanātana Dharma or religio perennis as language of the Intellect, is independent from any “extrinsic objections”⁵ arising from the traditional world. It also means, with respect to the operative dimension, that the esoteric understanding of sacred symbols and the concomitant practice of rites may, in some cases, involve a reduction of the latter to their essential components—which are, as such, the most direct methodical vehicles of the *religio perennis*—and to their quintessential sacramental core, the definition of this quintessence depending upon specific circumstances and contexts. In other words, the Law is sacred and cannot simply and lightly be dispensed with in the name of esoterism, but the genuinely esoteric outlook necessarily implies an understanding and a practice of the exoteric system that may—and even must—reduce its formal complexity to a measure of essential simplicity. This principle prompted a traditionalist esoterist such as Titus Burckhardt to write that a true master “surely will (...) Reduce traditional form to its essential elements.”⁶ In doing so, esoterism does not start from the liter-

5. “The ‘subjective supernatural’ has need—‘accidentally’ and not ‘essentially’—of the ‘objective supernatural’, but once it is thus ‘awakened to itself’ by what corresponds to it outside of us, no extrinsic objection can concern it further.” Frithjof Schuon, *Gnosis, Divine Wisdom*, Bedfont: 1990, p.32.
6. “A master whose spiritual outlook is limited by a particular formal or traditional framework is not a complete master (although a true master may in practice be unfamiliar with traditions other than his own); and a master who rejects all forms is a false master (although *a true master may reduce traditional form to its essential elements, and be surely will.*)” Titus Burckhardt, “A Letter on Spiritual Method,” *Mirror of the Intellect*, Albany, p. 252.
7. “We could say, simplifying a little, that exoterism puts the form—the credo—above the essence—Universal Truth—and accepts the latter only as a function of the former; the form, through its divine origin, is here the criterion of the essence. Esoterism, on the contrary, puts the essence above the form and only accepts the latter as a function of the former; for esoterism, and in accordance with the real hierarchy of values, the essence is the criterion of the form; the one and universal Truth is the criterion of the various religious forms of the Truth.” Frithjof Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, Bedfont: 1990, p.37.

ality of the formal Law to adapt its outlook to it,⁷ but rather unfolds from an understanding of the nature of things and the essential finality of the Law in order to “live the Law” both as a protective framework and as a support for contemplation.

The possibility of misunderstanding and abuse of quintessential esoterism lies in its very nature, which is—according to Schuon—extrinsically precarious.⁸ This precariousness stems precisely from the subtlety of the esoteric outlook, particularly with respect to the relationship between form and essence: the form “is” and “is not” the essence. The form prolongs the essence but it may also veil it. The essence transcends the form but it also “manifests” itself through it. In any case, the possibility of abuses or misunderstandings does not invalidate the reality, legitimacy and necessity of esoterism, any more than the abuses of literal formalism and fanaticism invalidate religion as a sacred way. Subjective and expedient reactions to real or imaginary abuses have no bearing upon the objective reality of gnosis and its intrinsic independence from formal religion. To claim that quintessential esoterism is a dangerous perspective because it is not formally discernable within the human context of its manifestation is either a truism, in the absence of the required qualifications, or amounts to denying the very possibility of the manifestation of the Spirit since “the Light shineth in the darkness and the darkness comprehended it not.”⁹

With respect to the relationship between esoterism and exoterism, Schuon has repeatedly asserted that it can and must be viewed from two stand-points: that of continuity, following which esoterism appears as the inner core of a tradition; and that of discontinuity, according to which esoterism transcends exoterism and may even stand in opposition to it:

8. “The paradox of esoterism is that on the one hand ‘men do not light a candle and put it under a bushel’, while on the other hand ‘give not what is sacred to dogs’; between these two expressions lies the ‘light that shineth in the darkness, but the darkness comprehended it not’. There are fluctuations here which no one can prevent and which are the ransom of contingency.” Frithjof Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, Bedfont: 1990, p.19.
9. When speaking about esoterism, if one were to be wary of all possible misconstructions of one’s words, one should as well remain silent. Moreover, one all too easily forgets that esoterism does not address everybody. It has no intrinsic reason to adapt its views and language to the lowest common exoteric denominator, this being said with no elitist pretension whatsoever, for sanctity does not belong to any group or perspective.

“If you would have the kernel, you must break the husk,”¹⁰ according to Meister Eckhart’s formula often quoted by Schuon. Exoterism as a formal system is a practically necessary framework for the manifestation of esoterism which befalls upon the former as the mistletoe on an oak, or as the rain falling from the sky to the earth, and the wind which “bloweth where it listeth,”¹¹ but exoterism, to the extent that it emphasizes a voluntaristic and individualistic piety and its emotional—or worse political—identification with a given tradition, cannot be truly and fully compatible with esoterism as Schuon has defined it and as René Guénon has understood it.

Religio Perennis

Schuon has referred several times to the one and only “sub-jacent” religion that he sometimes designated as *religio perennis*. This must not be misinterpreted as meaning that *religio perennis* is a new religion with new rites and new means of salvation—for *religio perennis*, since it is essential and primordial by definition, has certainly nothing “new” about it, and it cannot exteriorize itself as a religion, that is, as an exclusive system of forms, without contradicting its very nature. It may however integrate forms which are directly inspired from above or borrowed from other spiritual climates and which may have no direct, formal relation with the traditional framework which is its abode, as has happened many times in the history of mysticism when new forms inspired by Heaven or by a given cultural ambience became new ceremonial or ritual vehicles of spiritual blessing. For example, what is more formally different from exoteric Islam than the dances of the *Mevlevis*? In any case, the profundity and essentiality of esoterism may give rise to spiritual and formal manifestations of an exceptional character that are the very evidence of

10. “The wind bloweth where it listeth,’ and because of its universality shatters forms, though it must needs clothe itself in a form while on the formal plane.” Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, Wheaton-Madras-London: 1993, p.32.

11. “Esoterism, in fact, is not an unpredictable doctrine that can only be discovered, should the occasion arise, by means of detailed researches; what is mysterious in esoterism is its dimension of depth, its particular developments and its practical consequences, but not its starting-points, which coincide with the fundamental symbols of the religion in question; moreover its continuity is not exclusively ‘horizontal’ as is that of exoterism; it is also ‘vertical,’ (...)” “The Supreme Commandment” in *The Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon*, edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Element, 1991, p.227.

its transcendent nature and that one should therefore welcome with awe and gratitude. This kind of spiritual and methodical *istithnâ* (an “exception” in the “traditional syntax” as it were) brings with it the “shock” of a transcendent gift which is, so to speak, offered by God in a direct manner and thus challenges our all too human biases and conventional comforts. Such a direct offering is also no doubt connected with the fact that the nature of a plenary esoteric master¹² is akin to that of prophecy, albeit obviously not in the sense of a law-giving mission.¹³

Esoterism and Hermeneutic Possibility

Against the notion of quintessential esoterism, it has been objected that the limitations of the human creature make it impossible for us to reach a direct perception of the essence and that all that can therefore be attained is an obscure perception of esoterism through “semantic presence.”¹⁴ In other words, this philosophical line of reasoning aims at establishing that pure esoterism is never more than the hermeneutic horizon of an intuition which is always dependent upon revealed forms, and particularly upon the tradition that is ours.

In response to this objection, it is first of all necessary to draw a distinction between the universal Intellect and the limitations of human nature, for one can only “know” God by God, which amounts to saying

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12. In this connection, it may be useful to recall that the first step of discernment entails awareness of the qualitative spiritual gap that lies between the master and the disciple. The disciple’s discernment manifests *a priori* in a surrender to the master in all that pertains to spiritual life for, as Ghazali put it: “The disciple must cling to his shaikh as a blind man on the edge of a river clings to his leader, confiding himself to him entirely, opposing him in no matter whatsoever, and binding himself to follow him absolutely. Let him know that the advantage he gains from the error of his shaikh, if he should err, is greater than the advantage he gains from his own rightness, if he should be right.” (quoted by H.A.R. Gibb in *Mohammedanism*, NY, 1955, p. 117). Moreover, one should also keep in mind that it is difficult, if not impossible, for the disciple to determine the inner significance of his master’s behavior given that “the ethical trace of a spiritual degree is all the more subtle as the degree is more lofty and the incommensurability between the Reality contemplated and the human receptacle more profound.” (Titus Burckhardt, *Introduction to Sufism*, San Francisco, 1995, p. 88).
 13. “(...) Esoteric mastery is related to prophecy, without for all that departing from the framework of the mother-religion.” Frithjof Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, Perennial Books, 1981, pp.152-3. 14. Jean Borella, *Esotérisme guénonien et mystère chrétien*, Paris: 1997, p.50.
 15. “(...) esoterism resides not only in the choice of ideas, but also in the manner of envisaging things.” Frithjof Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, Bedfont: 1990, p.9.

that God alone knows himself through man and through Creation. This is not to say however that “pure” esoterism should be ultimately identified with God, as some have suggested. Esoterism is a particular perspective¹⁵—neither an object nor a subject properly speaking, but the perspective of the Intellect in relation to the nature of things. Without this perspective, which is none other than the *religio perennis*, religion would be somewhat unintelligible, in the sense that there would be no way of understanding what any particular religion is all about without a “decisive intuition”¹⁶ of Religion as such. The religious literality of a given form would remain ineffective were it not for the “anamnesis” that pertains—most often partially or obscurely—to the Intellect. This does not mean however that *religio perennis* can be reduced to the status of a mere mental abstraction of an “intellectual” nature¹⁷—as some of its malcontents have argued—for it essentially implies a spiritual and existential conformity to Reality, or a moral and aesthetic assimilation of the “message” of the nature of things. As Schuon often reminded us: to know is to be. Esoterism is the perspective and language of wisdom in which being and knowing coincide. That is the reason why, on the plane of doctrinal exposition, pure esoterism cannot be limited by the conceptual expressions that accounts for its reality.

Conclusion

Esoterism has often been defined by Schuon as aiming at perfect objectivity;¹⁸ this objectivity has also been defined by him as a conformity to

16. “Of course, the object of the decisive intuition is not the extrinsic limitations of religions the overaccentuations, narrownesses and ostracisms but their intrinsic and therefore universal truths...” Frithjof Schuon, *In the Face of the Absolute*, Bloomington: 1989, p.15

17. “To return to what was said above about the understanding of ideas, a theoretical notion may be compared to the view of an object. Just as this view does not reveal all possible aspects, or in other words, the integral nature of the object, the perfect knowledge of which would be nothing less than identity with it, so a theoretical notion does not itself correspond to the integral truth, of which it necessarily suggests only one aspects, essential or otherwise. (...) As for a speculative and therefore intellectually unlimited conception, this may be compared to the sum of all possible views of the object in question, views that presuppose in the subject a power of displacement or an ability to alter his view-point, hence a certain mode of identity with the dimensions of space, which themselves effectually reveal the integral nature of the object, at least with respect to its form, which is all that is in question in the example given.” Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, Wheaton-Madras-London: 1993, p.5.

the nature of things. While remaining perfectly sensitive to the spiritual wealth of tradition as the repository of truth and beauty, to morality as the beauty of the soul (rather than juridically and voluntaristically inclined moralism) and to rules of social conduct (normatively speaking and without concessions to conventional narrowness) inasmuch as these constitute vehicles of formal approximation of the True, the Good and the Beautiful, esoterism is that which understands and treats phenomena by considering their intrinsic meaning or their archetypes. Esoterism may therefore be defined, in conclusion, as the science of the fundamental intuitions of the Real.

18. "Esoterism, by its interpretations, its revelations and its interiorizing and essentializing operations, tends to realize pure and direct objectivity; this is the reason for its existence." Frithjof Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, Bedford: 1990, p.15.