

SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR IN THE CONTEXT OF THE PERENNIALIST SCHOOL

As it has been often mentioned, the so-called Perennial School traces its intellectual and spiritual heritage back to three fundamental figures who may be considered as its main inspirers and interpreters in the XXth century. These are René Guénon (1886-1951), Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) and Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998).¹ Aside from his keen and implacable critique of the modern world, René Guénon's seminal contribution was focused on three major domains of exposition: metaphysics, initiation and symbolism. In each of these fundamental domains, Guénon provides his reader with a rigorous definition of what he understood by the term tradition. This understanding was mostly informed by the Hindu, Islamic and Taoist worlds.² The clarity and rigor of his mode of expression sharply contrasts with the diffuse and confused intellectual ambience of the spiritualist trends of the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century. Guénon's work dispels confusions and pseudo-spiritual fantasies with an impersonal mastery that is more geometric than musical, more rational (and not rationalist) than intuitive.

From Ananda Coomaraswamy the expression of the *philosophia perennis* gained a new dimension both in its mode and in its content. As for the mode,

¹ For an excellent introduction to the “traditionalist” or “perennialist” school see Kenneth Oldmeadow, *Traditionalism: Religion in the light of the Perennial Philosophy*, Sri Lanka, 2000.

² It could be said schematically that Guénon’s metaphysical idiom was Hindu, his view of initiation and its relationship to exoterism Islamic, and his symbolist vision Taoist or Far-Eastern.

one has often noted the painstakingly academic way of proceeding that informs Coomaraswamy's works. A veritable arsenal of quotations is placed at the disposal at the reader, contrasting with the often allusive and sometimes mysterious references that are to be found in Guénon's works. From the standpoint of content, Coomaraswamy's contribution seems to lie primarily in his ability to reveal the spiritual connection that unites symbolism, aesthetics, contemplation and artistic work. Symbolism is not only a museum of references and correspondences, it is a living workshop of spiritual transformation.³ We may also mention Coomaraswamy's important pages devoted to Buddhism, Neo-Platonism and Christian mysticism --including the Christian East, all three domains that Guénon had either ignored or underestimated.

If Guénon and Coomaraswamy can be considered as pioneers of *sophia perennis* and *philosophia perennis* in the twentieth-century, it could be argued that Frithjof Schuon was, in a sense, more interested in *religio perennis* than in *sophia perennis* or in tradition.⁴ An important note from his *magnum opus Esoterism As Principle And As Way* bears much light in this respect:

³ “Traditional art, in Coomaraswamy’s view, was always directed towards a twin purpose: a daily utility, towards what he was fond of calling ‘the satisfaction of present needs’, and towards the preservation and transmission of moral values and spiritual teachings derived from the tradition in which it appeared.” Oldmeadow, p.33.

⁴ In keeping with its Islamic orientation, Seyyed Hossein Nasr’s reading of Schuon emphasizes the traditional dimension of Schuon’s perspective: “Perhaps no other concept is so crucial for the understanding of his writings (Schuon’s). Schuon is first and foremost an

We say "primordial Religion", and not "Tradition", because the first of these terms has the advantage of expressing an intrinsic reality (religere='to bind' the earthly with the heavenly), and not simply an extrinsic reality like the second (tradere= 'to hand down' scriptural ritual and legal elements.)⁵

This emphasis has sometimes been reproached to Schuon inasmuch as it has been perceived, erroneously, as an attempt at fostering a universal and syncretistic religion disconnected from any specific traditional grounding. In fact however, what Schuon has in mind through this emphasis is rather the "intrinsic" dimension suggested by the term religion --as an inner link to God, together with the implications of totality that it involves with respect to the human spiritual engagement that religion entails. In this sense, *Religio* connotes the universal realities of prayer, morality and aesthetics, and not only a theoretical or metaphysical core.⁶

expositor of traditional teachings and wants to be known as such." (*The Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon, Element*, 1986, p.8) Although there is no doubt about the traditional aspect of Schuon's, it is interesting to note that the word "tradition" is not included in any title of his books by contrast with the more frequently used terms "esoterism" and "gnosis." Let us add that the word "esoterism" is by and large conspicuously absent from Nasr's introduction to the *Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon*.

⁵ *Esoterism As Principle And As Way*, Bedfont, Middlesex, 1981, Note 164, p.157

⁶ "Esoterism, with its three dimensions of metaphysical discernment, mystical concentration and moral conformity, includes in the final analysis the only things that Heaven demands in an absolute fashion, all other demands being relative and therefore more or less conditional." "Ambigüité de l'exotérisme", *Approches du phénomène religieux*, Paris, 1984, p.41.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr has repeatedly acknowledged a more direct intellectual and spiritual debt toward Schuon⁷ than toward Guénon or Coomaraswamy. In many respects, his opus could be read as a brilliant and richly referenced development of Schuon's work. However he seems to have been less interested in emphasizing the centrality of the very concept of *religio perennis*, and it would not be an exaggeration to add that he has favored the terms *sophia perennis* or *philosophia perennis* over the latter; a fact that is perhaps symbolically indicated that the title of the two academic journals that he created and directed in Iran and the US, *Sophia Perennis* and *Sophia*.

Among all of the foremost perennialist writers, Seyyed Hossein Nasr's background is remarkable in at least three ways: first, he is a public figure who has been widely recognized in the media --in both the US and Europe-- as a spokesman for perennialist ideas. His exceptional gifts as a scholar, a pedagogue and a public speaker could not but lead him to become one of the most highly recognized and most acclaimed representatives of the perennial philosophy in the twentieth century. His appearance on broadcast programs such as Bill Moyers' *Genesis* and his participation in highly visible interfaith events at the UN and other forums testify to this public notoriety. Other

⁷ As testified by Seyyed Hossein Nasr's own assertion of being "the person who knows Frithjof Schuon's writings best in the world." (Conference in Honor of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Washington DC, November 2, 2001)

figures, particularly Schuon, have been much more withdrawn from the public eye.

Second, he is the only perennialist writer who is closely identified with a given religious tradition, both as being born in it and as being a world expert on many of its dimensions. It must be added that Seyyed Hossein Nasr inherited his Islamic spiritual identity from a long and prestigious line of scholars and educators. He is by no means simply a Muslim born expert on Islam,⁸ he is the spiritual and intellectual offspring of a lineage of remarkable men whose life and works bear the deep imprint of a whole traditional civilization.⁹ This is not the case for most other major perennialists who have adopted a religious form different from that in which they were born. For example, Guénon and Schuon chose Islam, while Marco Pallis entered Buddhism. Let us mention though, that

⁸ “I was born into a family of well-known scholars and physicians in Tehran in 1933. (...) My paternal grandfather hailed from a family of *seyyeds* (*sâdât*) (descendants of the Prophet of Islam. (...))” *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, Carbondale, 2001, p.3. Nasr’s ancestry includes many important figures of Persian science, literature and spirituality. Let us mention that his paternal grandfather was a celebrated physician, while his maternal great grandfather, Shaykh Fadlallâh Nûrî, was a most prominent figure of religion and politics in modern Persian history. Mohammad Faghfoory has also shown interestingly how Seyyed Hossein Nasr’s intellectual destiny is in a sense a continuation of his father’s, Seyyed Valiallah Khan Nasr: “Those who have known Seyyed Valiallah Khan have in fact found Seyyed Hossein Nasr to be a mirror image of his father. (...) Lessons which Seyyed Hossein Nasr learned from his father during the first twelve years of his life have been his guide during the last fifty-four years and will continue to be his source of inspiration for the years to come.” “The Forgotten Educator: The Life of Seyyed Vali Allah Khan Nasr”, in *Knowledge is Light. Essays in Honor of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, edited by Zailan Moris, Chicago, 1999, p.230.

⁹ This is something important to bear in mind when one wishes to do full justice to his understanding of and attachment to tradition. Seyyed Hossein Nasr is in a sense himself a remarkable product of tradition.

none of these authors can be considered as "converts."¹⁰ This is best illustrated by the following lines from Guénon's correspondence:

I cannot let it said that I "converted to Islam" for this way of presenting things is completely false; whoever is aware of the essential unity of traditions is therefore "unconvertible" to whatsoever, and he is even the only one to be so; but one may "settle", if one may say so, in such or such a tradition depending upon circumstances, and above all for reasons of an initiatory order.¹¹

Thirdly, Nasr is the only foremost perennialist writer to have received an intensive and advanced academic training in modern sciences. Although Guénon was a mathematician of background, he was not directly involved in the study of modern sciences nor did he manifest much interest in going beyond a general critique of modern scientific reductionism. Titus Burckhardt, and to a lesser extent Frithjof Schuon, has left us with remarkably perceptive arguments and analyses against such scientific axioms as macro-evolutionism and the superstition of materialism.¹² It belonged to Seyyed Hossein Nasr¹³ to delve in a much more comprehensive and systematic fashion into the fallacies

¹⁰ For his part, Seyyed Hossein Nasr writes about Schuon's "conversion" to Islam, a term that Schuon has never used to refer to his own spiritual journey: "From the time of his conversion to Islam, [Schuon] lived as a Muslim although hidden from the public..." "Frithjof Schuon and the Islamic Tradition," *Sophia*, Volume 5, Number 1, Summer 1999, p.30-31.

¹¹ "René Guénon et la tradition hindoue", Alain Daniélou, *Dossier H René Guénon*, ed. Pierre-Marie Sigaud, L'Age d'Homme: Lausanne-Paris, 1984, p.138.

¹² See *Mirror of the Intellect*, Quinta Essentia, 1986.

¹³ One must also mention, in the same vein, the works of Fernand Brunner, Whitall Perry, Wolfgang Smith, and Giovanni Monastra; the latter two being established scientists in their own right.

of a science disconnected from metaphysical principles.¹⁴ He did so, in works such *The Encounter of Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1968), *Islamic Science: An Illustrated Study* (London: World of Islam Festival Trust, 1976), *Western Science and Asian Cultures* (New Delhi: Indian Council for Cultural Relations, 1976), *The Need for a Sacred Science* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993) and *Religion and the Order of Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), against the double background of his being conversant in traditional Islamic sciences and having been trained in physics at M.I.T. This dimension of his work—in addition to his natural sensibility to the beauty and majesty of nature and his metaphysical acumen—also provided him with the most effective intellectual tools to tackle the contemporary predicament of the environmental crisis with a unique cogency. The three aforementioned characteristics have allowed him, in a sense, to be the ideal spokesman of the perennialist perspective in the public forum, both in academia and beyond. His familiarity and identification with Islam, his

¹⁴ “With his unyielding stance, Nasr also opens up a new avenue for facing up the challenge of modern science without sacrificing the traditional ideas and values, and for rejecting the totalizing claims of the modern secular worldview which continue ever increasingly to dominate every facet of human life. Considering the current positions taken on science, which have been either total submission in the case of modernism or an inchoate rejection in the case of postmodernism and its associates, Nasr’s critical approach offers a veritable alternative to both extremes, inviting us to a serious deliberation over the very terms of the problem. In this sense, the reassertion of the religious view of the universe and its meaning for natural sciences is indubitably of prime importance, not only for the followers of any particular religion but for the whole of humanity.” Ibrahim Kalin, *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, edited by L.E. Hahn, Randall E. Auxier and Lucian W. Stone, Jr., Chicago, 2001, p.458.

validation as a recognized scholar and respected member of the scholarly community, and his conceptual proficiency in modern scientific languages have all contributed to make him a particularly apt interpreter of perennialist ideas in the contemporary public arena.

If we now look at Nasr's contribution, one may consider that there are four main dimensions of Seyyed Hossein Nasr's contribution to the world of the spirit, and it could be said, therefore, that there are --so to speak-- four Seyyed Hossein Nasr. These four identities and functions could be defined as follow: --the gnostic, the esoterist whose work is situated in the wake of Frithjof Schuon's intellectual opus and spiritual path, --the revivificator of the Islamic intelligentsia who has devoted many efforts to fostering a greater understanding of the intellectual roots of the Islamic tradition, -- the intellectual and spiritual pedagogue whose teachings have aimed at and contributed to providing a cohesive religious framework for young Muslims and for some others, --and finally the interpreter of Islam for Western audiences, one would almost be tempted to say one of the quasi-official spokesman of Islam in the West. From a most fundamental standpoint, these four dimensions of Nasr's personality and work are essentially connected. As the tradition that he defines, describes and embraces, Nasr's *opus* is an organic whole that ranges over multiple levels of reality. From another standpoint, this plurality of dimensions may tend to obscure the less "visible" esoteric and gnostic kernel that animates

the whole of Nasr's contribution. To put it another way, it could be argued that the wide and manifold array of concerns that encompasses Nasr's work cannot but contribute to veiling the informal and transcendent core that he inherited from other major perennialists and particularly from Frithjof Schuon. In what follows, we would like to support this thesis by reference to two aspects of Nasr's symbolic language, as well as --briefly and *in fine*-- by alluding to what appears to be his vision of the role of formal religions --and particularly Islam-- in the modern world and the ways in which it may be deemed to differ from Schuon's emphasis in this respect. In doing so, we will tend to emphasize --for quasi-pedagogical reasons-- Nasr's specific interpretation of the perennialist perspective, which will lead us to focus on some of his differences from Schuon. One may question the usefulness of such an exercise in distinction since, after all, what matters most is essential commonality and convergence. Our answer to this is that distinction is not a mere intellectual exercise, it is also an opportunity for sharpening one's discernment, thereby reaching a better understanding, such discerning understanding being a key to a more effective concentration on the essential.

The first symbolic image that can be considered as representative of Nasr's vision is that of the flow of a river. This image is conjured by Nasr's understanding and description of tradition. Such a symbolic representation places the emphasis on *continuity* on two levels: that of the transmission that

ranges from the source of a given revelation to the present, and that of the organic integrality of the whole set of disciplines and institutions that encompasses a whole given traditional civilization. Adventitious images that are suggested by Nasr's vision are those of a mighty fortress and a merciful abode, Nasr's concept of tradition being moreover akin to that of a mother keeping her children out of trouble. In his works, Nasr envisages tradition as an instrumental and ideal *sine qua non*, as a guarantee of spiritual authenticity and a virtually infinite source of grace. This is certainly an aspect of his work which is in consonance with Guénon and Schuon. However, much of Schuon's work has to do with situating, explaining and criticizing or rejecting a variety of formal characteristics and phenomena that encumbers the traditional scene and may be stumbling blocks for well-intentioned and sincere seekers who do not necessarily participate in a kind of "nationalist" enthusiasm toward a given tradition. Schuon does not hesitate to criticize some aspects of the Islamic or Christian traditions that may veil the essentiality and universality of these religious messages; not only from the standpoint of human abuses, but even from the standpoint of providential opportuneness. For Schuon, tradition is not only a safe, merciful and organic milieu as it is for Nasr, it is also a set of phenomena, some of which problematic, that may be objectified by the Intellect, the divine intelligence in us. In this connection, Schuon went so far as to suggest that, in a sense, religions are like "heresies" in relation to *Religio*

Perennis. In Schuon's symbolic language, the nurturing function of water is not primarily identified to the flow of a river but rather to the fertilizing and direct descent of rain. This image suggests vertical descent in "space" and discontinuity in "time." This is the principle of esoterism, which is referred to in Islam as the purview of *al-Khidr*, the universal initiator whose injunction transcends the Law.¹⁵ It must be granted that tradition also stems from "vertical" revelation as it could not be understood independently from this vertical axis. As Reza Shah-Kazemi has rightfully emphasized following Henry Corbin, "a tradition transmits itself as something alive, since it is a ceaselessly renewed inspiration, and not a funeral cortège or a register of conformist opinion." (*Sacred Web* 7, p.44, *En Islam Iranien*, I). Nasr would be the first to recognize that tradition is an ever renewed miracle. But at the same time, he seems more interested in emphasizing the organic and integral unfolding of tradition, which is both the principle of its effectiveness and that of its necessary limitations and "scandals", which Nasr is less readily disposed to point.

¹⁵ "We can compare this particular mode of inspiration and orthodoxy that is esoterism to the rain falling vertically from the sky, whereas the river — the common tradition — flows horizontally in a continuous flow; that is to say that the tradition springs from a source, it declares itself connected with a given founder of a religion, whereas esoterism refers in addition, and above all a priori, to an invisible filiation, one which in the Bible is represented by Melchizedek, Solomon and Elijah, and which Sufism links to al-Khidr, the mysterious immortal." "Le mystère de la substance prophétique", *Approches du phénomène religieux*, Paris, 1984, p.185.

Another fundamental symbol that may help us to delineate more clearly the subtle but very real differences that distinguishes Nasr's perspective from Schuon's is that of the shell or husk and the kernel. It is very revealing to observe that this very same symbolic representation of the relationship between essence and form, or inner spirituality and outer religion, --which is a recurrent signifier in many mystical discourses East and West-- is envisaged from a very distinct point of view in Nasr's and Schuon's writings. As a German gnostic in the lineage of Meister Eckhart and the Medieval Northern European mystics, Schuon repeatedly refers to Eckhart's formula: "If you want the kernel, you need to break the husk."¹⁶ The kernel is the esoteric wisdom, the Religion of the Heart that is in principle independent from any religious language, the husk is the formal language of a given religion. Schuon's esoteric approach starts with this "breaking of the shell" that amounts to an intuitive or intellectual grasp of Reality that allows to read each confessional language from within or starting from the essence. "Breaking the husk" also means that Schuon's metaphysical language and spiritual focus cannot be located in a particular traditional world since they are intrinsically universal.¹⁷ Much of Schuon's work is actually a "breaking of the husk" in the sense that it highlights the limitations,

¹⁶ "Man has attachments, his instinct of preservation may lead him into error, and that is why, in many cases, to be objective is to die a little. (...) "If thou wouldst reach the kernel," said Eckhart, "thou must break the shell." *Le Soufisme voile et quintessence*, Paris, 1980, p.8.

biases, and sometimes inconsistencies of the external manifestation of religious traditions. It could be said, at least symbolically, that Schuon's spiritual personality is "Shivaite" whereas Nasr's is by and large "Visnuite:" Schuon is a "destroyer of illusory peace" (as suggested by his first name Frithjof) who reduces forms to the naked essence and reintegrates them into the supraformal Truth, whereas Nasr's enterprise has to do with conserving, protecting, stabilizing and transmitting.

In a sense, Seyyed Hossein Nasr's intellectual and spiritual path is different from Schuon's, since the latter starts from esoterism to go toward Islam while the former has its starting point is Islam while its ultimate destination is esoterism or gnosis.¹⁸ In this connection, an examination of the relationship between esoterism and Islam in Schuon's writings will provide us with a particularly relevant avenue of understanding Schuon's notion of "quintessential esoterism" and the extent to which it must be distinguished from Nasr's understanding of esoterism.¹⁹ It could be said that, through his

¹⁷ "Esoterism is without a country and it establishes itself wherever it can." *Le Soufisme voilé et quintessence*, p.45.

¹⁸ This "direction" is moreover related to Nasr's tendency to bring the entire religion into esoterism, so to speak; and this is no doubt in keeping with major trends of Islamic esoterism. "Islam has the tendency — in Sufism — either to reduce or to bring the entire religion to esoterism; a tendency particularly marked in the Shiites, who go so far as to make gnosis a confessional article of faith." Frithjof Schuon, "Concerning Delimitations in Moslem Spirituality", *In the Face of the Absolute*.

¹⁹ Nasr tends to equate Schuon's universalist perspective with that of famous Sufi like Ibn 'Arabî or Rûmî. Such an identification is only partially valid however, as Schuon has explained himself in *Sufism, veil and quintessence*. The traditional Sufi leaning toward universality must be situated in the context of love's abolition of boundaries and limitations,

most important distinction between "esoteric Islam" and "Islamic esoterism", Schuon refers to the distinction between a spiritual perspective that envisages esoterism from the point of view of Islam and one that envisages Islam from the point of view of esoterism. This is far from being a mere academic subtlety or hair splitting. In fact, it could be argued that most of the hermeneutic divergences to which Schuon's work has given rise stem from this very distinction. In other words, one may be interested in esoterism because of Islam, as one may be interested in Islam because of esoterism. Denying that such a difference in outlook must have some important consequences on the doctrinal level as well as on the spiritual plane amounts to missing one of the main points of Schuon's "quintessential esoterism." For instance, it is clear that this distinction runs parallel to a difference of perspective in terms of

and not necessarily interpreted literally as a full recognition of the transcendent unity of religions, a recognition that would have been anyway highly problematic in a homogeneous traditional context. The case of Ibn Arabî is no doubt different from Rûmî's in this respect. Still, this universalism reveals very clear boundaries as Schuon illustrated in the following passage: "In his *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq*, Ibn 'Arabi sings: "My heart has become receptive to every form . . . a temple for idols, a kaaba for a Moslem pilgrim, the tablets of the Torah and the book of the Koran. I adhere to the religion of love . . . "All religious forms, Ibn 'Arabi comments, unite in the love of God, and yet: "No religion is more excellent than the one founded on the love — and the need — of God . . . This religion of love is the prerogative of the Moslems; for the station of the most perfect love has been imparted to the Prophet Mohammed exclusively, and not to the other prophets; for God accepted him as his well-beloved friend." The extenuating circumstance for this abrupt and unintelligible denominationalism is the fact that for each religion, the Prophet who founded it is the sole personification of the total, and not the partial, Logos; however, one might expect an esoterist not to enclose himself in this concept-symbol, but to make mention, since he has opted for the essence, of the relativity of forms—even those that are dear to him — and to do so in an objective and concrete, and not merely metaphorical manner; or else to remain silent, out of pity." Cf. *Le Soufisme*, p.49, note 29.

understanding the function and priority of esoterism. An interest in esoterism from the standpoint of Islam, and for the sake of Islam --or a kind of "confirmation" or validation of Islam by esoterism if one wishes-- will almost unavoidably entail an emphasis on the revivification and expansion of Islam by means of esoteric truths. The outward-leaning, public and "apostolic" tendencies of this perspective²⁰ are not just coincidences: they stem from the very understanding of "esoterism" and its "mission." On the other hand, the perspective of quintessential esoterism will be characterized by an understanding of Islam as an extrinsic "support" for esoterism, and its overall priority will be more conservative than expansive. This is so to speak the distinction that may be drawn between the Hindu emphasis on the integral "conservation" of the *Sanâtana Dharma* and the Christian and Islamic "preaching to all nations."

Another major consequence of this divergence lies in the extent to which esoterism may be allowed to manifest itself in the full range of its possibilities. In the perspective of esoterism as a "confirmation" of Islam, the former will remain always more or less "hidden", "partial" and implicit. It will be the responsibility of the individual seeker, if he is able to break the husk and

²⁰ Seyyed Hossein Nasr is obviously quite aware --as testified by his essays on the topic-- that esoterism cannot be "preached." However, his Islamic emphasis makes it sometimes difficult to distinguish between his esoteric identity and his Islamic function, whence the ambiguities of some of his positions.

if he is allowed to do so by an ambience that is not likely to be conducive to such a "breaking", to look for the *haqîqah* hidden in the form. On the contrary, the perspective of quintessential esoterism will allow, in principle, for the fullest or maximal manifestation of the "nature of things" in doctrinal and methodical matters. Its reference point will be "things as they are" rather than things as they are providentially envisaged by Islam. This difference stems from the fact that integral esoterism will tend to consider Islam as a "validation" of the truth, rather than considering itself as a "validation" of Islam. When esoterism is primarily envisaged as a validation of Islam, some of its aspects are cast aside or looked upon with suspicion or unease, precisely because they do not necessarily fit the mold of the Islamic *upâya* or other traditional "frames of mind." By contrast, quintessential esoterism will not consider the entire formal complex of Islam as compatible with its perspective,²¹ which is why it will focus on the central and essential elements of its spiritual perspective, those which may provide a direct entrance into the *haqîqah*. On the one hand, esoterism will keep the confessional and ethnic limitations of Islam at bay, on the other it will understand its central tenets and practices from the point of view of universal gnosis. As Schuon has illustrated this point in an unpublished text: performing

²¹ A case in point is the network of juridical injunctions upon which the exoterist mentality particularly flourishes and thrives. Another example would be what Schuon calls a pedantic or "meticulous karma-yoga" in ritual matters, which must not be confused with an impeccable attention to the performance of daily rites.

the *ḡalât* will not be conceived and lived as the fulfillment of an Islamic duty, it will rather be envisaged as a direct expression of the relationship between man and God. This amounts to saying that quintessential esoterism will never consider Islam independently from the nature of things and from the integral structure of reality. By contrast, it could be said that "esoteric Islam" will never allow itself to consider esoterism independently from Islam.²² Finally, a major concomitance of the contrast of what has just been sketched lies in the fact that, whereas integral esoterism is always "comfortable" with recognizing the legitimacy of more exoteric and formalistic perspectives, partial esoterism experiences a tension between its call to universality and its sentimental solidarity with Islam. This tension will more than often result in anathemas against all intellectual and existential manifestations of esoterism that appear to lie outside the strict and conventional cadre of the Islamic tradition, or at least outside its recorded and accepted historical manifestations.

Another relevant aspect of this distinction is related to the gradual process of assimilation of the truth, or to the logical and chronological sequence in which a spiritual seeker will proceed:

²² This appears for example in the way in which Nasr reads Schuon's entire metaphysics, including his writings on religions other than Islam, as a commentary on the *shabâdah*, an assertion that is literally impeccable but which has the obvious inconvenience of appearing to "annex" traditional metaphysics to the Islamic territory. By contrast, Schuon has tirelessly written and asserted that his doctrinal point of departure is the *Advaita Vedânta*. His conceptual language is Advaitin, much more so than it is Sufi.

A Westerner desirous of following an esoteric way would find it logical first of all to inform himself of the doctrine, then to enquire about the method and finally about its general conditions; but the Moslem of esoteric inclination — and the attitude of the Kabbalist is doubtless analogous — has definitely the opposite tendency: if one speaks to him of metaphysics, he will find it natural to reply that one must begin at the beginning, namely with pious exercises and all sorts of religious observances; metaphysics will be for later. He does not seem to realize that in the eyes of the Westerner, as also of the Hindu, this is to deprive the pious practices of their sufficient reason— not in themselves of course but with a view to knowledge — and to make the way almost unintelligible; and above all, the Semitic zealot does not see that understanding of doctrine cannot result from a moral and individualistic zeal, but that on the contrary it is there to inaugurate a new dimension and to elucidate its nature and purpose.²³

By contrast with the eso-exoteric anteriority of pious practice over metaphysical understanding, Schuon's spiritual pedagogy stresses the primacy of *jnana-yoga* over *karma-yoga* and he never interprets the former as an complexifying intensification of the latter. His teachings emphasize the essential dimension of forms and does not subordinate this essence to any kind of psychological or moral opportuneness or expediency. In other words, his main motto is that “there is no right superior to that of truth.” Truth needs to be expressed in its “nakedness” for those who “have ears to hear.” Those who are not ready, for one legitimate reason or another,²⁴ to acknowledge this uncolored truth may find more suitable paths in the context of more “colored”

²³ It is important to add the *caveat* that Schuon specifies that this limitation, as any other, is only reprehensible to the extent that it denies the other possibility for “the moralistic attitude is only blameworthy through its ignorance of the opposite point of view or through its exaggeration, for in fact, the doctrine deserves on our part an element of reverential fear. “

perspectives. By contrast with esoterism that does not compromise on the totality of truth, eso-exoteric perspectives will willingly veil and sacrifice some elements of truth to adapt to the limitations and conditioning of some or most of their faithful.

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As we have suggested above, the formal characteristics of Seyyed Hossein Nasr's Islamic point of departure determine the very scope and style of his outlook and the way in which he proceeds toward the *religio perennis*. In his work, the symbol of the "husk and the kernel" takes a very different meaning from the one that is assigned to it by Schuon. In this connection, the emphasis is on the protective and nurturing function of the shell. The main concern seems to be on transmission and protection, rather than on unveiling and liberating:

Religion is like a walnut, with both a shell and the core or fruit which can grow and possess existence only within the shell.²⁵

This understanding of the relationship between shell and core is also in full consonance with Nasr's interpretation of Schuon's concept of esoterism:

Schuon's aim is to substantiate the reality of esoterism not as a vaguely defined reality by itself, but within each orthodox religion, thereby

²⁴ And needless to say that these limitations have nothing to do with the level of sanctification.

²⁵ *The Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon*, edit. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Elements, New York, 1986, p.12.

strengthening religion as such and even exoterism as considered in itself and independent of the esoteric.²⁶

Although this statement is literally accurate in what it includes,²⁷ it is not necessarily so in what it implicitly excludes. Schuon certainly does not define esoterism in vaguely universal terms, but he does not restrict the meaning of this notion to its relative manifestations in specific traditions, as clearly shown by several passages of his work, like the following one in which he distinguishes between "esoterism as such" and the "esoterism of a particular tradition" :

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.²⁸

This passage, that is echoed by many others in Schuon's writings, clearly establishes that esoterism cannot be reduced to doctrinal metaphysics since it includes "an appropriate method of realization." The fact that this esoterism is distinguished from the "esoterism of a particular tradition" clearly indicates that the "method of realization" that is part of esoterism, even though necessarily derived from a particular tradition in its forms, is not to be identified with the

²⁶ Ibid., p.13.

²⁷ The fact that Schuon approved and saluted Nasr's introduction to the *Essential Writings* does not imply that he would have himself emphasized the same elements of his own teachings. It simply indicates that Nasr's presentation does not contradict nor betray the substance of Schuon's work. Moreover, it should be noted that a spiritual Master tends to "speak the language" of his interlocutor, which often explains why various "perceptions" and understandings of the same message may greatly differ.

“theological, psychological and legalistic meanders foreign to its nature” that form the external and collective characters of a given tradition. The objection that is often raised against this consistent understanding of esoterism lies in Schuon’s assertion that –outside of an infinitesimally small quantity of exceptions-- esoterism cannot be practiced independently from an exoteric framework. The fact is that this has never been in doubt for any serious readers of Schuon, all the more so for any of those who situate themselves in his spiritual wake. The real questions that this truism tends to veil are the following: --to what extent and in what ways does the independence of principle that the esoteric outlook enjoys vis-à-vis traditional forms affect the intellectual outlook and spiritual practices of the esoterist, --and what are the consequences of this esoteric outlook upon the relationship between the esoterist and the collective psychic climate of any given tradition, including that in which he has “established itself”, to use Guénon’s term? Schuon’s answers to these questions are crystal-clear. With respect to the intellectual perspective of gnosis, it is unambiguously stated that it is independent from objections from the traditional framework:

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.²⁹

²⁸ Frithjof Schuon, *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*, Bloomington: 1986, p.115.

²⁹ Frithjof Schuon, *Gnosis, Divine Wisdom*, Bedford: 1990, p.32

As for the spiritual practices, it is no less clear that they are essentially contained in the inner core of the tradition, that is quintessential prayer:

The *Dhikr* contains the whole Law (*Shari'ah*) and it is the reason for the existence of the whole Law;³⁰ this is declared by the Koranic verse: “Verily prayer (the exoteric practice) prevents man from committing what is shameful (sullyng) and blameworthy; and verily the remembrance (invocation) of God (the esoteric practice) is greater. (*Sura of the Spider*, 45).³¹ The formula “the remembrance of God is greater” or “the greatest thing” (*Wa la-dhikru Llahi akbar*) evokes and paraphrases the following words from the Canonical Prayer: “God is greater” or “the greatest” (*Allahu akbar*) and this indicates a mysterious connection between God and His Name; it also indicates a certain relativity — from the point of view of gnosis — of the outward rites, which are nevertheless indispensable in principle and in the majority of cases.³² In this connection we could also quote the following *hadith*: one of the Companions said to the Prophet: “O Messenger of God, the prescriptions of Islam are too numerous for me; tell me something that I can hold fast to.” The Prophet replied: “Let thy tongue always be supple (in movement) with the mention (the remembrance) of God.” This *hadith*, like the verse we have just quoted, expresses by allusion (*isharah*) the principle of the inherence of the whole *Shari'ah* in the *Dhikr* alone.³³

The concentration on quintessential prayer is both the ultimate limit of the interiorizing and “deepening of the symbols of exoterism” —in so far as the Divine Name is the essence of the whole tradition-- and the supreme

³⁰ “ This is the point of view of all invocatory disciplines, such as the Hindu *japa-yoga* or the Amidist *nembutsu (buddhanusmriti)*. This *yoga* is found in *jnana* as well as in *bhakti*: “Repeat the Sacred Name of the Divinity,” said Shankaracharya in one of his hymns.” Ibid.

³¹ “God and His Name are identical,” as Ramakrishna said; and he certainly was not the first to say so.

³² This reservation (“indispensable in principle and in the majority of cases”) does not contradict the principle of “the inherence of the whole *Shari'ah* in the *Dhikr* alone.” First, it applies to the central rites of the religion and not necessarily to the whole host of traditional practices and juridical edicts that the tradition carries in its wake. Second, the expression “in principle” suggests the possibility of legitimate “facts” that would not conform to it. Thirdly, the reference to the “majority of cases” leaves room for exceptions and points to a collective norm and equilibrium rather than to an absolute spiritual necessity.

³³ Cf. *Le Soufisme voile et quintessence*, Paris, 1980, p.126.

“affirmation of the independence of the essence vis-à-vis form“ ---inasmuch as it may absorb the whole traditional form.³⁴

As for the non-identification of the gnostic with the limitative aspects of the collective ambience of a given tradition, Schuon has extensively delved into this issue, especially in *Sufism, veil and quintessence*. This question is essentially connected to Schuon’s discussion of the spiritual function of the caste system.

The advantage of the Hindu system is that it greatly favors the purity of esoteric spirituality; in the absence of such a system, esoterism becomes too closely linked with the average collective mentality which cannot be proportionate to the demands of a disinterested perspective or, in other words, cannot be entirely free from denominational narcissism.³⁵

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Let us conclude with a few further reflections on Schuon and Nasr's perspectives on religion in the modern world. Schuon's explicit objective is minimally expressed as a wish to restore the sense of prayer in the life of a few of his readers: "if our writings had on average no other result than that of

³⁴ “We have here the two essential aspects of plenary esoterism: on the one hand the penetration of the symbols of exoterism and on the other hand, on the contrary, the affirmation of the independence — and pre-excellence — of essence with regard to forms, or of substance with regard to accidents, that is, precisely, the formulations of the common religion. As regards this “non-conformist” aspect of esoterism, we would say, by way of illustration, that the abrogations of Koranic verses on the one hand and the matrimonial exceptions in the life of the Prophet on the other hand, are there to indicate respectively the relativity of the formal Revelation and of social morality; which amounts to saying that these abrogations and exceptions pertain to the esoteric perspective, leaving aside their immediate and practical significance.” Cf. *Le Soufisme*, p.33.

³⁵ *Le Soufisme*, p.83.

restituting for some this saving boat that is prayer we would owe to God to be profoundly satisfied." ³⁶ This objective concerns individuals, not traditions as such, and it has no confessional priority nor agenda. Note also that Schuon has no illusions concerning the present state of formal religions; he writes, in this connection, "in the past the prince of darkness fought against religions mostly from outside, (...) in our times, he has added to this fight a new stratagem (...) that consists in taking over religions from within, and he has widely succeeded in this, in the world of Islam as well as in Judaism and Christianity."³⁷ Nasr is certainly aware of the deviations and corruption of traditional religions in the modern world. His book on *Traditional Islam in the Modern World* is the best evidence for this. However, he seems to place a greater emphasis on the spiritual function of traditional heritages in the eschatological destiny of the world. His conclusive remarks in the series "Searching for God in America" particularly emphasizes the role of Islam in this respect, a role that he defines as "upholding the promise of the sacred until the end of times." ³⁸ And God knows best.

³⁶ Cf. *Le Jeu des masques*, Paris-Lausanne, 1992, p.7.

³⁷ *Christianisme/ Islam: Visions d'œcuménisme ésotérique*, Milano, 1981, p.78.

³⁸ This eschatological vision can moreover be related to Nasr's statement that "Jesus will return as a Muslim in the sense that he will unite all believers in total submission to the one God." (*Newsweek*, March 27, 2000, p.57)