

Conforming to the Real: Frithjof Schuon on Morality (Part Two*)

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Religion and Secular Morality

Errors—which poison—must be recognized;
Otherwise one can no longer distinguish good from evil.

Songs without Names XII:XI

Having examined Frithjof Schuon's teachings on the traditional understanding of morality, we now turn to his views on secular morality and its implications, particularly as they have developed since the Enlightenment. Directly relevant here is his distinction between Tradition and modernity and critique of the latter, as well as his insistence that truth and morality are intimately related, that 'there is no moral greatness outside objectivity, thus outside Truth'.¹ In traditional societies the sources of spiritual and moral authority are easily identified, whether these are sacred scriptures and the principal commentaries on them, or the teachings and example of prophets as well as great sages and saints. By contrast, secular morality and its applications stand without reference to any immutable and transcendent Reality. They are therefore inevitably fragmentary or inconsistent, even representing in some cases distortions or perversions in relation to morality as traditionally understood. Given his traditional premises, Schuon sees secular thought, to the extent that

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¹ Frithjof Schuon, *Echoes of Perennial Wisdom*, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1992, p. 46; 'Morality must also be present in our thinking—/To think illogically is already wickedness.' *Songs without Names* IX:CXX (see also *Songs without Names* X:LXV); 'Let us labour, therefore, to think well. That is the principle of morality' (Pascal, *Pensees* VI:347).

it is associated with atheism, as necessarily problematic,² for ‘moral perfection coincides with faith, and thus could not be a social perfectionism devoid of spiritual content’.³ He thus naturally emphasises the connection between morality and religion,⁴ which in practice provides the necessary context for morality: ‘it is indeed religion that offers to the individual and to society the sacrificial or moral framework without which they cannot subsist in the long run.’⁵ Without the restraining influence of religion and piety, a moral decline is inevitable: ‘it is a fact of experience that, on the whole, the common man, who is not disciplined by social necessity and who, precisely, is only disciplined by religion and piety, degenerates in his behaviour when he no longer has religion containing and penetrating him’.⁶

² If to love God is the Supreme Commandment, ‘it follows that the contrary attitude is the supreme sin, in varying degrees since one has to distinguish between hatred of God and simple indifference’ (*The Play of Masks*, p.57); indifference to God is ‘the very hallmark of the fall’ (*Light on the Ancient Worlds*, p.48). In a secular context, Schuon tells us, the virtues are liable to be falsified in particular ways: ‘egalitarian and demagogic humility, humanistic and basically bitter charity, and cynical sincerity. There are false virtues whose motives are basically to demonstrate to oneself that one has no need of God’ (*The Play of Masks*, p.65).

³ *Roots of the Human Condition*, p. 8

⁴ With the reservation, however, that ‘To be above all reproach for inconsequence, hypocrisy and betrayal, it is not enough to belong to a religion, one must belong to it “in spirit and in truth”’ (*The Transfiguration of Man*, p.42). This point is essential given the ever-present possibility of abuse, as well as the ongoing subversion of religion that is one symptom of the descending progression of our times; “in truth” here implies the need for the ‘objective’ factor that is orthodoxy, whilst “in spirit” refers to ‘subjective’ sincerity or faithfulness to the essential intentions of the religion in question.

⁵ *The Transfiguration of Man*, p.6; ‘without it [religion] no moral and social life is possible, except for a brief period which, without admitting it, still lives off the residues of a disavowed heritage’ (*From the Divine to the Human*, p.146). That moral decline parallels religious decline is of course now a commonplace—see, for example, Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Notre Dame (IN): University of Notre Dame Press, 1981; Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996; Robert H. Bork, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline*, New York: Harper Collins, 1996; ‘There is good reason for declaring that modern man has become a moral idiot...we approach a condition in which we shall be amoral without the capacity to perceive it and degraded without means to measure our descent’ (Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948, pp.1,10); ‘The question is no longer as Dostoevski put it “can civilized man believe?” Rather: can unbelieving man be civilized?’ (Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987, p.4)

⁶ *From the Divine to the Human*, p.146; ‘It is religious belief that confers dignity and an aristocratic nature on believing peasants and aristocracy alike’ (*Ibid.*). See also *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, p. 107.

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