

Formal Diversity, Essential Unity: Frithjof Schuon on the Convergence of Religions

(A talk delivered at the Australasian Association for the Study of Religions Conference on the theme "The End of Religions? Religion in an Age of Globalization," Sydney University, September 1999)

by *Kenneth Oldmeadow*

Introduction

It is a commonplace that we are living in an unprecedented situation in which the different religious traditions are everywhere impinging on each other. There has, of course, always been some intercourse in ideas and influences between religions. Nevertheless, each civilization formerly exhibited a spiritual homogeneity untroubled, for the most part, by the problem of religious pluralism. For the vast majority of believers in a traditional civilization the question of the inter-relationship of the religions was one which was either of peripheral concern or one of which they remained unaware. The homogeneity of Christian civilization has long since been ruptured, and in the last few centuries European imperialism has itself been the agent for the disruption and extirpation of traditional cultures the world over. All manner of changes have made for a "smaller" world, for "the global village," and there is nowadays a good deal of talk about "globalization." I must confess I have only the haziest notion of what this might mean beyond the obvious point that more often than not what it seems actually to mean is Americanization: McDonalds in Mongolia, so to speak. However, it is clear that the question of the relationship of the religions one to another and the imperatives of mutual understanding take on a new urgency both for comparative religionist and theologian and, indeed, for all those concerned with fostering a harmonious world community. In an age of rampant secularism and scepticism the need for some kind of inter-religious solidarity makes itself ever more acutely felt. At least three other alternatives arise out of "globalization," each disastrous for humankind's spiritual welfare:

intensifying internecine theological and/or political warfare; the disappearance of the religions under the onslaughts of modernity; the dilution of the religions into some sentimental, “universal” pseudo-religion.

The philosophical question of the inter-relationship of the religions and the moral concern for greater mutual understanding are, in fact, all of a piece. We can distinguish but not separate questions about unity and harmony; too often both comparative religionists and those engaged in “dialogue” have failed to see that the achievement of the latter depends on a metaphysical resolution of the former question. Today I wish briefly to consider the implications of the convergence of religions from the traditionalist perspective exemplified in the works René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy and, particularly, Frithjof Schuon.

The traditionalists are committed to the explication of the *philosophia perennis* which lies at the heart of the diverse religions and behind their manifold forms. However, unlike some of those who sought to popularize the notion of the perennial philosophy—most notably perhaps, Aldous Huxley, various neo-Hindus and some “Aquarian” New Agers—the traditionalists are also dedicated to the preservation and illumination of the traditional forms which give each religious heritage its *raison d’être* and which guarantee its formal integrity and, by the same token, ensure its spiritual efficacy. I shall have time to do no more than drastically adumbrate some of the central themes of the traditionalists as they impinge on the questions with which we are presently concerned.

Religions and Revelations

The traditionalist understanding of the nature of religion, and thus of the inter-relationships of the religious traditions, depends on four key ideas or principles. These are (1) the necessary diversity of multiple Revelations and thus of the religious forms which derive from those Divine dispensations; (2) the principle of orthodoxy which ensures that each integral religious tradition furnishes its adherents with an adequate metaphysical doctrine and an effective spiritual method; (3) the distinction between the outer, exoteric and the inner, esoteric domains of religion; and, (4) the transcendent or metaphysical unity of religions which surpasses but in no way invalidates their formal diversity. Given the limited compass of this talk I can only here address the last two of these governing ideas, and even then only in severely abbreviated fashion.

There is a good deal of talk these days about the traditional religions being “played out,” “inadequate to the problems of the age,” “irrelevant to contemporary concerns” and so on. “New solutions are needed,” it is asserted, “appropriate to the times.” From the traditionalist viewpoint, and I quote from Schuon,

Nothing is more misleading than to pretend, as is so glibly done in our day, that the religions have compromised themselves hopelessly in the course of the centuries or that they are now played out. If one knows what a religion really consists of, one also knows that the religions cannot compromise themselves and they are independent of human doings... The fact that a man may exploit a religion in order to bolster up national or private interests in no wise affects religion as such... as for an exhausting of the religions, one might speak of this if all men had by now become saints or Buddhas. In that case only could it be admitted that the religions were exhausted, at least as regards their forms.¹

To the diverse human collectivities are addressed Revelations which are determined in their formal aspects by the needs and receptivities at hand. In a sense the Revelations are communicated in different divine languages. Just as we should balk at the idea of “true” and “false” languages, so we need to see the necessity and the validity of multiple Revelations.² This is not to suggest that all “religions” which claim to derive from a “Revelation” do so in fact, nor that there is no such thing as a pseudo-religion. The principle of multiple Revelations is not accessible to all mentalities and its implications must remain anathema to the majority of believers. This is in the nature of things. However, as each religion proceeds from a Revelation, it is, in Seyyed Hossein Nasr’s words, both

...the religion and a religion, the religion inasmuch as it contains within itself the Truth and the means of attaining the Truth, a religion since it emphasizes a particular aspect of Truth in conformity with the spiritual and psychological needs of the humanity for whom it is destined.³

In other words each religion is sufficient unto itself and contains all

1. Frithjof Schuon, “No Activity Without Truth,” in *The Sword of Gnosis*, ed. Jacob Needleman, Baltimore: Penguin, 1974, 29. See also Frithjof Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom*, London: John Murray, 1961, 11.
2. The comparison of religions and languages is a common one. For some examples see Max Muller: “Chips from a German Workshop,” in Jacques Waardenburg (ed) *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion*, The Hague: Mouton, 1973, 88-89; and R. Zwi Werblowsky, “Universal Religion and Universalist Religion,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 2:1, 1971, 10-11.
3. See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1966, 15.

that is necessary for man's sanctification and salvation. Nevertheless, it remains limited by definition. The recognition and reconciliation of these two apparently antagonistic principles is crucial to the traditionalist perspective: the key is to be found in relationship of the exoteric and esoteric aspects of religion.

The Exoteric and Esoteric Domains

We are accustomed to drawing sharp dividing lines between the religious traditions. The differences here are, of course, palpably real and Schuon has no wish to blur the distinctions. We shall not find in the work of the traditionalists any Procrustean attempt to find a unity on a plane where it does not exist nor an insipid universalism which posits a unity of no matter what elements as long as they lay some claim to being "religious" or "spiritual." However, this notwithstanding, Schuon draws another kind of dividing line which in some senses is much more fundamental: that between the exoteric and esoteric.

In discriminating between the exoteric and the esoteric we are, in a sense, speaking of "form" and "spirit." Exotericism rests on a necessary formalism:

Exotericism never goes beyond the "letter." It puts its accent on the Law, not on any realization, and so puts it on action and merit. It is essentially a "belief" in a "letter," or a dogma envisaged in its formal exclusiveness, and an obedience to a ritual and moral Law. And, further, exotericism never goes beyond the individual; it is centered on heaven rather than on God, and this amounts to saying that this difference has for it no meaning.⁴

It follows that exotericism must thereby embody certain inevitable and in a sense therapeutic limits or "errors" which from a fuller perspective can be seen in both their positive and negative aspects. Religion, in its formal aspect, is made up of what the Buddhists call *upaya*, "skillful means" which answer the necessities of the case, what Schuon calls "saving mirages" and "celestial stratagems."⁵ The limiting definitions of exoteric formalism are "comparable to descriptions of an object of which

4. Frithjof Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, London: Perennial Books, 1965, 76.

5. Frithjof Schuon, *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*, Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1986, 185 fn2. See also Frithjof Schuon, *The Transfiguration of Man*, Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1995, 8: "In religious esoterisms, efficacy at times takes the place of truth, and rightly so, given the nature of the men to whom they are addressed."

only the form and not the colors can be seen.”⁶ Partial truths which might be inadequate in a sapiential perspective may be altogether proper on the formal exoteric plane:

The formal homogeneity of a religion requires not only truth but also errors—though these are only in form—just as the world requires evil and as Diversity implies the mystery of creation by virtue of its infinity... The religions are “mythologies” which, as such, are founded on real aspects of the Divine and on sacred facts, and thus on realities but only on aspects. Now this limitation is at the same time inevitable and fully efficacious.⁷

The statements of a formal exotericism can thus be seen as intimations of Truth, as metaphors and symbols, as bridges to the formless Reality.⁸ In other words the forms of exotericism represent certain accommodations which are necessary to bring various truths within the purview of the average mentality. As such they are adequate to the collective needs in question. For the normal believer the exoteric domain is the only domain.

However, if “exotericism consists in identifying transcendent realities with dogmatic forms” then esotericism is concerned “in a more or less direct manner with these same realities.”⁹ Esotericism is concerned with the apprehension of Reality as such, not Reality as understood in such and such a perspective and “under the veil of different religious formulations.”¹⁰ While exotericism sees “essence” or “universal truth” as a function of particular forms, esotericism sees the forms as a function of “essence.” To put it another way, exotericism particularizes the universal, esotericism universalizes the particular:

What characterizes esoterism to the very extent that it is absolute, is that on contact with a dogmatic system, it universalizes the symbol or religious concept on the one hand, and interiorizes it on the other; the particular or the limited is recognized as the manifestation of the principal and the transcendent, and this in its turn reveals itself as immanent.¹¹

6. Frithjof Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1976, 80.

7. Frithjof Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, London: Perennial Books, 1969, 70.

8. Frithjof Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, 110.

9. Frithjof Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*, New York: Harper & Row, 1975, 144. See also Frithjof Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, London: Perennial Books, 1980, 37.

10. Frithjof Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, 19.

11. Frithjof Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, 19.

Esotericism is “situated” on the plane of mystical experience, of intellection and realization, of gnosis, a plane on which the question of orthodoxy cannot arise, operative as it is only on the formal plane:

If the purest esotericism includes the whole truth—and that is the very reason for its existence—the question of “orthodoxy” in the religious sense clearly cannot arise: direct knowledge of the mysteries could not be “Moslem” or “Christian” just as the sight of a mountain is the sight of a mountain and not something else.¹²

Nevertheless, the two realms, exoteric and esoteric, are continually meeting and interpenetrating, not only because there is such a thing as a “relative esotericism” but because “the underlying truth is one, and also because man is one.”¹³ Furthermore, even if esotericism transcends forms, it has need of doctrinal, ritual, moral and aesthetic supports on the path to realization.¹⁴ Herein lies the point of Schuon’s repeated affirmations of orthodoxy, such as this:

Orthodoxy includes and guarantees incalculable values which man could not possibly draw out of himself.¹⁵

It is not surprising that the exoteric elements in a religious tradition should be preserved and protected by custodians whose attitude to esotericism will be, at best, somewhat ambivalent, at worst openly hostile. In addressing itself to the defence of the credo and of the forms which appear as guarantors of truth the exoteric “resistance” to esotericism is entirely positive. But sometimes the exoteric defendants of orthodoxy overstep themselves and in so doing beget results that are both destructive and counter-productive, especially when a religious tradition is endangered by a preponderantly exoteric outlook:

The exoteric viewpoint is, in fact, doomed to end by negating itself once it is no longer vivified by the presence within it of the esotericism of which it is both the outward radiation and the veil. So it is that religion, according to the measure in which it denies metaphysical and initiatory realities and becomes crystallized in literalistic dogmatism, inevitably engenders unbelief; the atrophy that overtakes dogmas when they are deprived of their internal dimension recoils upon them from outside, in the form of heretical and atheistic negations.¹⁶

12. Frithjof Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, 139. See also Frithjof Schuon, *Sufism, Veil and Quintessence*, Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1981, 112.

13. Frithjof Schuon, *Esotericism as Principle and as Way*, 16.

14. Frithjof Schuon, *Esotericism as Principle and as Way*, 29.

15. Frithjof Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 113. See also Frithjof Schuon, *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, London: World of Islam, 1976, 5.

How much of post-medieval Christian history bears witness to this truth! Recall the theological and ecclesiastical ostracisms that have befallen some of the mystics and metaphysicians seeking to preserve the esoteric dimension within their respective religious traditions.

The supra-human origin of a religious tradition in a Revelation, an adequate doctrine concerning the Absolute and the relative, the saving power of the spiritual method, the esoteric convergence on the Unitive Truth: all these point to the inner unity of all integral traditions which are, in a sense, variations on one theme. However, there remain certain puzzling questions which might stand in the way of an understanding of the principal unity which the *religio perennis* discloses.

The Limits of Religious Exclusivism

One frequently comes across formulations such as the following: "It is sometimes asserted that all religions are equally true. But this would seem to be simply sloppy thinking, since the various religions hold views of reality which are sharply different if not contradictory."¹⁷ This kind of either/or thinking, characteristic of much that nowadays passes for philosophy, is in the same vein as a dogmatism which reveals itself not only by its inability to conceive the inward or implicit illimitability of a symbol, but also by its inability to recognize, when faced with two apparently contradictory truths, the inward connection that they apparently affirm, a connection that makes of them complementary aspects of one and the same truth.¹⁸

It is precisely this kind of incapacity which must be overcome if the transcendent unity of the religions is to be understood. As Schuon remarks,

A religion is not limited by what it includes but by what it excludes; this exclu-

-
16. Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, New York: Harper & Row, 1975, 9. A spiritually alert minority has recently given much thought to the implications of this principle. The intuition and affirmation of its lessons was perhaps the most important aspect of the work of the late Thomas Merton. Merton's work has too often been seen as an enterprise in dialogue, which indeed it was, without any thought as to what end this was to be directed. The end Merton had in view was, of course, precisely, the revivification of the contemplative and esoteric dimension within the Catholic tradition.
 17. O. Thomas: "Introduction" to *Attitudes to Other Religions*, London: SCM, 1969, quoted by Huston Smith, "Introduction to the Revised Edition" in Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, xiii fn.
 18. Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, 3. See also Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, New York: Crossroad, 1981, 281.

sion cannot impair the religion's deepest contents—every religion is intrinsically a totality—but it takes its revenge all the more surely on the intermediary plane... the arena of theological speculations and fervors... extrinsic contradictions can hide an intrinsic compatibility or identity, which amounts to saying that each of the contradictory theses contains a truth and thereby an aspect of the whole truth and a way of access to this totality.¹⁹

Examples of “contradictory” truths which effectively express complementary aspects of a single reality can be found not only across the traditions but within them. One might instance, by way of illustration, the Biblical or Koranic affirmations regarding predestination and free will.²⁰

From an esoteric viewpoint the exclusivist claims of one or another religion have no absolute validity. It is true that “the arguments of every intrinsically orthodox religion are absolutely convincing if one puts oneself in the intended setting.”²¹ It is also true that orthodox theological dogmatisms are entitled to a kind of “defensive reflex” which makes for claims to exclusivism. However, and this is crucial,

The exoteric claim to the exclusive possession of a unique truth, or of Truth without epithet, is... an error purely and simply; in reality, every expressed truth necessarily assumes a form, that of its expression, and it is metaphysically impossible that any form should possess a unique value to the exclusion of other forms; for a form, by definition, cannot be unique and exclusive, that is to say it cannot be the only possible expression of what it expresses.²²

The argument that the different religions cannot all be repositories of the truth because of their formal differences and antagonisms rests on a failure to understand this principle. The lesson to be drawn from the multiplicity of religious forms is quite different:

The diversity of religions, far from proving the falseness of all the doctrines concerning the supernatural, shows on the contrary the supra-formal character of revelation and the formal character of ordinary human understanding: the essence of revelation—or enlightenment—is one, but human nature requires diversity.²³

Schuon has deployed several images to clarify the relationship of the religions to each other. He likens them to geometric forms. Just as it would be absurd to imagine that spatial extensions and relationships

19. Frithjof Schuon, *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, 46.

20. Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, 4.

21. Frithjof Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 14.

22. Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, 17.

23. Frithjof Schuon: “No Activity Without Truth,” 4. See also Marco Pallis, *A Buddhist Spectrum*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1980, 157.

could only be expressed by one form so it is absurd to assert that there could be only one doctrine giving an account of the Absolute. However, just as each geometric form has some necessary and sufficient reason for its existence, so too with the religions.

Ecumenism and Dialogue

From a traditionalist viewpoint, the vexed issues of ecumenism, dialogue and the inter-relationship of the religions are all strands in the same web. It should be noted, firstly, that the recognition of the proper status of traditions other than one's own depends on various contingent circumstances and does not in itself constitute a spiritual necessity. In some respects a religious intolerance is preferable to the kind of tolerance which holds fast to nothing: "...the Christian saint who fights the Moslems is closer to Islamic sanctity than the philosopher who accepts everything and practices nothing."²⁴ Secondly, traditional orthodoxy is the prerequisite of any creative intercourse between the traditions themselves. To imagine that dialogue can usefully proceed without firm formal commitments is to throw the arena open to any and every kind of opinion and to let loose a kind of anarchy which can only exacerbate the problem. Thirdly, and crucially, the question of the relationship of the religions to each other can only decisively be resolved by resort to traditional esotericisms and by the application of trans-religious metaphysical principles. The "problem" of religious pluralism can only be resolved through a penetration of the exoteric barriers which each tradition has erected. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr has pointed out, "Ecumenism if correctly understood must be an esoteric activity if it is to avoid becoming the instrument for simple relativization and further secularization."²⁵

A proper understanding of the exoteric-esoteric relationship would put an end to all the artificial and quite implausible means by which attempts have been made to reconcile formal divergences. As Marco Pallis, starting from a Buddhist perspective, has suggested,

Dharma and the *dbarmas*, unitive suchness and the suchness of diversified existence: here is to be found the basis of an inter-religious exegesis which does

24. Frithjof Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*, 182. See also Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 291 & 307 fn28.

25. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 282.

not seek a remedy for historical conflicts by explaining away formal or doctrinal factors such as in reality translate differences of spiritual genius. Far from minimizing the importance of these differences in the name of a facile and eventually spurious ecumenical friendliness, they will be cherished for the positive message they severally carry and as necessities that have arisen out of the differentiation of mankind itself.²⁶

There have been several attempts to reconcile these formal antagonisms under an array of different philosophical and theological canopies—theosophy, “anonymous Christianity,” “natural religion,” “universal religion,” the perennial philosophy as espoused by the likes of Aldous Huxley and Vivekananda. As Coomaraswamy has remarked, these various attempts at a universal religion amount to a kind of religious Esperanto—with about as much chance of success!

The outlook implied in the passage from Pallis depends on a recognition of the exoteric-esoteric relationship and a subordination (not an annihilation) of exoteric dogmatism to the metaphysical principles preserved by traditional esotericisms. The main obstacle on this path is the tenacity with which many representatives of an exoteric viewpoint cling to a belief in the exclusive claims of their own tradition and to other “pious extravagances.”²⁷ Schuon goes to the heart of the matter:

...if exoterism, the religion of literalism and exclusive dogmatism, has difficulty in admitting the existence and legitimacy of the esoteric dimension...this is understandable on various grounds. However, in the cyclic period in which we live, the situation of the world is such that exclusive dogmatism... is hard put to hold its own, and whether it likes it or not, has need of certain esoteric elements... Unhappily the wrong choice is made; the way out of certain deadlocks is sought, not with the help of esoterism, but by resorting to the falsest and most pernicious of philosophical and scientific ideologies, and for the universality of the spirit, the reality of which is confusedly noted, there is substituted a so-called “ecumenism” which consists of nothing but platitudes and sentimentality and accepts everything without discrimination.²⁸

For many scholars the dilemma has been this: any “theoretical” solu-

26. Marco Pallis, *A Buddhist Spectrum*, pp109-110. The essay from which this excerpt is taken can also be found in Ranjit Fernando (ed), *The Unanimous Tradition*, Colombo: Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies, 1991. See also Victor Danner, “The Inner and Outer Man,” in Yusuf Ibish & Peter Lamborn Wilson (eds), *Traditional Modes of Contemplation and Action*, Tehran: Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, 1977, 407ff.

27. The phrase is from Schuon’s essay “Deficiencies in the World of Faith,” *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*, 125.

28. Frithjof Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*, 4.

tion to the problem of conflicting truth claims demands a conceptual platform which both encompasses and transcends any specific theological position; it must go beyond the premises of any particular theological outlook but at the same time not compromise the theological position to which one might adhere. Traditionalism shows the way out of this impasse. It neither insists on nor precludes any particular religious commitment. Once the necessity of orthodoxy is accepted, and the principles which govern the relationship of the exoteric and the esoteric are understood, then one can remain fully committed to a particular tradition while recognizing the limits of the outlook in question. Traditionalism requires neither a betrayal of one's own tradition nor a wishy-washy hospitality to anything and everything. The observation made by an early reviewer of Schuon's *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* might be applied to traditionalism as a whole. It presents "a very concrete and specific philosophy of religion for an ecumenical age...It opens... [the] way for discovering a basis for coexistence for the different creeds."²⁹

29. F.H. Heinemann in *The Journal of Theological Studies* 6, 1955, 340.