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## BOOK REVIEWS

*Christianity/Islam: Essays on Esoteric Ecumenism*, by Frithjof Schuon. Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1985. Pp. 270. \$12.

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Frithjof Schuon will be recognized by many readers of this journal as the leading representative of the Traditionalist school (of Guenon, Coomaraswamy, *et al.*) which holds that though Revelation must by definition be of and from the one and only God, it must articulate itself variously to conform to the human variety—the races and civilizations which, while comprising mankind collectively, differ importantly among themselves. A teacher must speak the language his students understand. He must also use it to impart what his students, often individually, most need to hear.

Those who have read my Introduction to Schuon's *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, recently reissued with a new chapter by the Theosophical Publishing House, will recognize that (as far as I can see) this is the only way we can approach the world's great religions with absolute respect without falling into an unworkable relativism. In his corpus as a whole Schuon plies this approach with breathtaking sweep, but this book focuses on the complementing revelations of Christianity and Islam. In Islam God or the Absolute is manifest primarily as Truth, whereas in Christianity it is manifest as Presence. The presence of the Truth in human form leads Muslims to charge Christians with compromising the divine unity, while Christians cannot understand how God could incarnate himself as completely in a book (the Holy Koran) as in a person who shares our very nature. Both objections have their points without obviating the need for their countervailing emphases.

The word "need" here points towards the presuppositions of Schuon's entire approach which can be summarized as follows: The premise that being, issuing as it does from God, is intrinsically good (*esse qua esse bonum est*) leads by way of Plato's "principle of plenitude" to the endorsement of variety; it is as if the Absolute—"that Fountain ever on," (Origen)—has an in-built compulsion to body forth into every nook and cranny that possibility affords. With respect to life, this not only accounts for the existence of multiple species; it requires that the possibilities *within* species be realized. In the human species it requires that there be a plurality of temperamental types, and history's multiple civilizations, invariably religiously inspired, serve as the molds or archetypes through which they emerge. Christianity and Islam are the templates this book centers on, but the pressure for variety doesn't stop with them as wholes. In India's terminology, Christianity is essentially a devotional or *bhaktic* religion and Islam an intellectual or *jnanic* one, but it stands to reason that there will be Muslim bhaktis (Rabi'a) and Christian jnanis (Dionysius and St. Thomas).

This brings us to an important secondary point in this book. Grounded to the extent that he is in tradition, Schuon is so wary of innovations that he has heretofore been reluctant to grant Protestantism the status of a fully orthodox *yana*, or vehicle. Here, in an important chapter that focuses on Lutheranism but alludes to Calvin and Anglicanism in passing, he acknowledges that it is such.

His reasons are in keeping with the ones he uses in simultaneously validating Christianity and Islam. Protestantism allows expression to spiritual propensities that Christianity had insufficiently provided for, ones which (to pursue the matter of ethnic types) the Germanic temperament probably houses disproportionately. Centering in an extreme consciousness of human limitations, one so acute that it totally despairs of man's power to meliorate them, Luther turned directly to God. Faith in God's power to effect a change is the human access *to* that change, so faith and faith alone—*solo fide*—is the key to the kingdom. The reformer in Luther should not be downplayed, but his destiny was to “gestalt” the components of a spiritual personality type that has its rights. In doing so, he accomplished for Christendom what his counterpart, the saint Shinran, effected for Japanese Buddhism.

Returning to the primary theme of the book, its comparison of Christianity and Islam, there is not room to go into specifics, but I can add another word about the general drift through calling attention to the book's subtitle. Ecumenism is much in the air these days, but Schuon has been so critical of the venture that it is initially surprising to find the word appearing in one of his own titles. The explanation is to be found in the prefix “esoteric” which Schuon uses to distinguish his version of the enterprize.

The mistake of ecumenism as it is typically practiced—exoteric ecumenism in Schuon's vocabulary—is that it tinkers with disparate theologies to try to make them compatible. This can only produce a theological mishmash that smacks more of committee compromises than of divine disclosure. It blurs identities, causing the life to go out of them.

Esoteric ecumenism leaves existing theologies untouched. Instead, it cultivates a non-creedal stance that honors alternatives while tempering their exclusivism. It is like adding a third dimension to spiritual space. No two-dimensional photograph [articulated theology] can do justice to a building's mass [the fullness of the divine Reality]. Yet even while circumambulating the building we can see that photographs faithfully represent it from their respective perspectives.

*Religious Experience*, by **Wayne Proudfoot**. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985. Pp. xix, 263. Cloth, n.p.

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Proudfoot's book offers a sustained examination of modern attempts to ground