

Colorless Light and Pure Air: The Virgin in the Thought of Frithjof Schuon

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*The cause of what preceded her, the protectress
of what came after her, and the patroness of things eternal.*

St Gregory Palamas

It is now widely known that Frithjof Schuon, recognized throughout the second half of the twentieth century as one of the world's most prolific and authoritative writers on religion and spirituality and as its most important expositor of the *Sophia Perennis*, was in his private life a Sufi master, the Shaykh 'Îsâ Nûr al-Dîn Ahmad al-Shâdhilî al-'Alawî al-Maryamî. It has also become public knowledge that the *tarîqah* or spiritual order which Schuon founded and guided, a branch of the *Shâdhilîyyah* lineage, is of a Marian provenance, a fact indicated by the last of his Islamic names. Known as the *Tarîqah Maryamîyyah*, this order has been blessed with the celestial patronage of the Virgin Mary, Sayyidatnâ Maryam in Islam—a patronage, Schuon has explained, which was bestowed freely by Heaven, and not by virtue of any initiative or intention of his own. "The coming of Sayyidatnâ Maryam did not depend upon my own will," he writes, "but upon the will of Heaven; it was a totally unexpected and unimaginable gift."¹

This information will come as no great surprise to careful readers of Schuon's books, especially those written after 1965 when he first experienced what he would refer to in later years as the Marian Grace. Those who are sensitive to such things will have noticed that there is something almost palpably feminine or shaktic about the substance of much of his work, a quality which can be sensed on occasion even in his very mode of expression. It is difficult to say in just what this consists. One commentator has suggested that his writing exhibits a "spherical quality" in the sense that the sphere contains the greatest volume for a given area, and I have elsewhere noted that Schuon's words seem "connected somehow, as if organically, to the realities he describes."² The distinctive shape and texture of his style are of course something

that must be discerned by each reader firsthand, and I hope in what follows to provide an opportunity for those who may still be unacquainted with Schuon to experience these qualities for themselves. But whatever one's impressions with respect to the form of his writings, and however it may be best described, one soon discovers with respect to their matter that they contain numerous explicit references to the Blessed Virgin, with additional allusions and indications often tucked away into notes. In a recent review of the entire *corpus*, I could not find a single book containing no mention of the Virgin at all, and most of them seem replete with her presence. As is often the case with Schuon's teaching on a given subject, however, these references are for the most part occasional in nature, and they are almost always rather brief; in fact, only two chapters in his published writings are specifically devoted to Marian topics.³ What this means is that one must read persistently and extensively in order to piece together the elements of a distinctively Schuonian Mariology.

This has been my aim precisely in preparing this article. From the very beginning of my acquaintance with Schuon's books, and later more profoundly when I had the privilege of meeting him and reading certain documents of a more personal kind, I have been deeply affected by the Virginal dimensions of his teaching, both doctrinal and methodic, and it has seemed to me for some time that I could perhaps perform a useful service for other like-minded readers and friends by endeavoring to follow the thread which connects a representative sampling of Marian quotations, gathered from a wide variety of his writings. It will be understood, I hope, that in no sense have I presumed to exhaust a topic so infinitely rich in implication and resonance, nor of course does space allow me to cite explicitly any but a small number of passages. What follow are hints, indirections, openings.

Another, rather different, caveat should be inserted before I begin, and that is to say that this article is not meant for just anyone. It is certainly not intended for skeptics or cynics—for those who may come looking to argue about the very legitimacy of the spiritual life, or who may have more particular quibbles concerning the role of the Virgin or the temperament of those who are drawn to her. Attending to their complaints is a task for quite another occasion; all I can do here is to register my agreement with Schuon that whether one knows it or not, the Marian mysteries have “absolutely nothing to do with fairy tales, let alone with ‘depth psychology.’”⁴ If a critic objects that the following meditations are merely so much “romanticism” or “aestheticism” or “folklore,” I gladly respond in Schuon's own words that

far from disclaiming any affinity with these things, we adopt them in the precise measure that they have a relationship either with tradition or with virgin nature, restoring to them in consequence their legitimate and, at the very least, innocent meanings. For “beauty is the splendor of the true”; and since it is possible to be capable of perceiving this without lacking “seriousness,” to say the least, we do not feel obliged to offer excuses for being particularly sensitive to this aspect of the Real.⁵

I must explain here at the outset as well that although I am myself a Christian, and by profession a Christian theologian, I am not in fact writing for Christians *per se*. Protestants in particular will be little helped by these comments; if this article were mainly for them, then yet another, though of course very different, set of explanations and defenses would be in order, defenses serving to justify, on scriptural grounds, the position and role of the Blessed Virgin in Schuon’s life and teaching, and the extraordinary degree of veneration which he exhibits towards her. As it happens there are several passages in the Bible which have proven to be especially important keys to his Mariology, and we shall examine them shortly. But he would be the first to admit that taken on their own, apart from the context provided by their use in the traditional liturgies and the expositions afforded in the orthodox commentaries, these texts provide no decisive support for his teaching.⁶

As for those Christians, on the other hand, who celebrate these liturgies and who rely on those commentaries—Christians in other words of the Apostolic communions, whether of the East or the West—they, too, are not really my primary audience, for such readers would also require, at least in most cases, something very different from what I intend to provide. It is certainly true that Roman Catholics and Orthodox understand much better than Protestants the decisive role of the Virgin in the Christian economy, and yet I know from experience that they are still often puzzled, if not scandalized, when they first learn about Schuon’s teachings on Mary. Even when they study his words with great care, many still come away unconvinced by the greater part of his doctrine, and I am under no illusions that my own merely supplemental remarks will be sufficient in addressing their fundamental objections. As we shall find, Schuon himself actually went to some lengths in helping Christians to understand the deeper significance of traditional Marian teachings, and in highlighting their consistency with his own expositions—whether one finds these teachings in the works of great saints, or in the liturgies and iconography

of the Church, or in such dogmatic titles of the Virgin as *Theotokos* or “Mother of God,” a title, promulgated by the third of the Ecumenical Councils, which my fellow Orthodox above all willingly acknowledge as essential to their faith.⁷ And yet he knew very well in so doing that the Church, in its efforts to formulate the truth in a way that will be intelligible to as many people as possible, “cannot recognize Mary’s Divine Reality without entering into insoluble contradictions—although it admits this Reality implicitly at least when, for example, it defines the Virgin as ‘Co-Redemptress,’ ‘Mother of God,’ ‘Spouse of the Holy Ghost.’”⁸

Here, as some of my readers will realize, we anticipate the very heart of my topic, and here of course, too, we can see very clearly, in just a single short phrase, one of the most important reasons that Schuon presents a problem for many traditional Christians. For in speaking so candidly of the Virgin’s Divinity, her “Divine Reality,” he has evidently, and very consciously, transgressed a certain traditional boundary. As my co-religionists know, it is a boundary long established by theologians, who, while insisting on the Divinity of Mary’s Son, “begotten by the Father before all ages” (Nicene Creed), have at the same time been loath, however exalted the words of the liturgical hymns that are sung in her praise, to think of His mother as sharing in this principal stature. Even though she is called “more honorable than the Cherubim and beyond compare more glorious than the Seraphim,”⁹ it has been the judgment of the Church that the Virgin even so is no more than a creature, and it is not surprising therefore if the Schuonian Mariology should be considered too “high”—too high in where it places Mary in relation to God—even as his Christology is often considered too “low” in what it says about the status of Jesus.¹⁰ It is not surprising, in other words, that even the most serious of Christian devotees of Our Lady should be offended by the claim that the Blessed Mother is herself of an avataric substance, a “Divine descent,” and thus like her Son an incarnation of God. And yet this is precisely Schuon’s fundamental perception of Mary, and the consistent teaching of all his books and unpublished writings.

In seeking to understand this perception, it is clear that we shall be entering what Schuon admits is “an extremely subtle domain, in which definitions are always hazardous.” And yet, as he himself adds at once, “the nature of the problem leaves us no choice; there are things one can only express imperfectly, but which nevertheless cannot be passed over in silence.”¹¹ The Virgin is clearly one of those things, one of those mysteries—perhaps indeed the most important of all—which the Church has for so long been so good at protecting that Christians seem

themselves nearly to have forgotten its deepest significance.¹² I do not pretend to have understood it fully myself, but to the extent that I have an inkling at least, some intuition of the Virgin's presence and message, I have Frithjof Schuon to thank, and it is in part as a way of expressing my gratitude that I have attempted to describe here the lineaments of his Mariology. As I have tried to emphasize, I do not intend to argue with those who have no use for these teachings, whether skeptical critics or Christian exoterists. But if with this small beginning I can somehow assist the esoterist, who is *a priori* open to the depth of this mystery, to see Mary more truly in her intrinsic reality, and to become in this way more fully conformed to her substance, then I shall consider myself profoundly satisfied.

Christianity and the Bible

The first level of the teaching which I propose to discuss takes the form of a spiritual or anagogical commentary on certain Marian passages in the Bible.¹³ Of course, as we have noted already, this is not to imply that the sacred texts offer proof of Schuon's doctrine, or not at least in its fullness, and certainly not at the level of their literal meanings; but then neither can they be said to "prove" the Mariology of the Church, which goes well beyond what the Bible explicitly records regarding Mary. Indeed, when one considers the extraordinary prerogatives accorded her by the exoteric tradition, one realizes that "scripture treats the Virgin with a somewhat surprising parsimony."¹⁴ And yet as Schuon points out, this can easily be explained by the fact that she "lived in effacement and refused to perform miracles; the almost complete silence of the Gospel in regard to her illustrates this effacement." But it illustrates as well, he continues—however indirectly and allusively—something of the Virgin's true greatness, for in their very reticence the scriptures provide us with a first and most important hint that "Maryam is identifiable with esoteric Truth (*Haqîqah*) inasmuch as she is a secret Revelation."¹⁵

This identification of Mary with pure esoterism is one of the most important dimensions of the Schuonian doctrine, and we shall have occasion to return to it near the end of these reflections. For the moment it is worth noting, however, that many Christian authorities have rendered a similar interpretation, seeing in the relative silence of scripture a sign of the Virgin's surpassing amplitude and dignity. Writing in the earliest years of the Church, St Ignatius of

Antioch, for example, describes Mary's virginity and her giving birth to the *Logos* as "secrets crying to be told, but wrought in God's silence,"¹⁶ and many centuries later St Louis Marie de Montfort could teach in a similar vein that "even though Mary was His faithful spouse, God the Holy Spirit willed that His apostles and evangelists should say very little about her, and then only as much as was necessary to make Jesus known." Otherwise, the saint explains, "men as yet insufficiently instructed and enlightened concerning the person of her Son might wander from the truth by becoming too strongly attached to her," an attachment owing to "the wondrous charms with which the Almighty had endowed even her outward appearance."¹⁷ The understatement in scripture is thus by no means a sign of the Virgin's unimportance or insignificance. One must admit that "the Gospel says nothing about the daily life of Mary," but at the same time, says Schuon, it is surely obvious that "the life of a co-redeeming *Mater Dei* could not in any event be 'ordinary' in the stupidly conventional sense of the word."¹⁸

Although references to a variety of Biblical texts can be found in his work when he is speaking of Mary, Schuon returns again and again to four sets of verses in particular, three in the Old Testament and one in the New. The first of the Old Testament passages is Genesis 3:15, called by the Church Fathers the *protoevangelium*, or primordial Gospel, insofar as it prophesies, in its Christian interpretation, the coming of Christ. Speaking to the serpent in the Garden, God says, *And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel*. In the immediate and literal context, the woman of course is Eve, who is tempted by the serpent, or Satan, and disobeys God. But at the same time it is obvious that the woman whose seed will eventually bruise, while being bruised by, the devil is Mary, and for this reason, beginning in the second Christian century, the Church has often taught that the wife of the first Adam and the mother of the Second Adam are spiritually linked to each other as antitypes. St Irenaeus of Lyons is representative in this respect:

As Eve was seduced by the word of an angel to flee from God, having rebelled against the Word, so Mary by the word of an angel received the glad tidings that she would bear God by obeying His Word. The former was seduced to disobey God, but the latter was persuaded to obey God, so that the Virgin Mary might become the advocate of the virgin Eve. As the human race was subjected to death through a virgin, so was it saved by a Virgin.¹⁹

Schuon calls attention to the profound theological implications of this pairing many times in his writings. Noting, for example, that the two women are complementary opposites in the order of their relation with the corresponding masculine figures, he writes that “if Eve, issued from Adam, symbolizes the fall, the Holy Virgin, from whom Christ issued, symbolizes victory over the serpent.”²⁰ Or again, highlighting yet another contrast, he stresses that Mary, “by her purity as also by her mercy, conquers the sin of the demiurgic Eve, the bringer forth of creatures and of passions; Eve, who brings forth, seduces, and attaches, is ‘eternally’ conquered by the Virgin, who purifies, pardons, and sets free.”²¹

At the level of these formulations, no exoterist should have cause for objection. But Schuon soon takes a further step, beyond the familiar typological coupling, when he undertakes to explain the metaphysical relationship between the two sides of *the woman* in terms of the Hindu conception of *Mâyâ*. In the Schuonian doctrine, as his readers know, *Mâyâ* is a dimension of the Divine Principle; rooted in God’s infinitude, it is what “causes” the Divinity to radiate outside of itself into Manifestation. *Mâyâ* is thus the principle of every theophany, and yet at the same time, since what is “outside” the Divinity is not really Divine, it is the principle of all obscurity and the cause of man’s forgetfulness. It is the reason that God is able to appear to man, but paradoxically it is also the reason that man does not see Him.²² Now according to Schuon, this ambivalent character of the Divine Relativity can be seen in two distinct aspects of the feminine, which are manifest in the persons of Eve and the Virgin:

As the universal archetype of femininity, *Mâyâ* is both Eve and Mary: “psychic” and seductive woman and “pneumatic” and liberating woman; descendent or ascendant, alienating or reintegrating genius. *Mâyâ* projects souls in order to be able to free them, and projects evil in order to be able to overcome it; or again: on the one hand, She projects her veil in order to be able to manifest the potentialities of the Supreme Good; and, on the other, She veils good in order to be able to unveil it, and thus to manifest a further good: that of the prodigal son’s return, or of Deliverance.²³

The last part of this passage is crucial, for it might otherwise be thought that the relationship between the two aspects of *the woman* is a merely reciprocal one. Schuon makes it very clear, however, that even though the sin of Eve—that is, the tendency of the cosmogonic projection to move in the direction of nothingness—“confers on *Mâyâ* an ambiguity,” this ambiguity “is quite

relative and, far from being symmetrical, cannot tarnish *Mâyâ*.” For “the glory of Mary totally effaces the sin of Eve, which is to say that with regard to the total extent of Existence and above all with regard to its Divine Summit, there is no longer any ambiguity, and evil is not.”²⁴ After all, everything but the Supreme Principle is only a seeming; only God truly is, and thus “Eve is infinitely forgiven and victorious in Mary.”²⁵

For centuries, Christians have turned to the Song of Songs, or Canticles, in celebrating the life of the Virgin, and like the fathers before him, Schuon refers to it, too. Two verses have been especially prominent in the traditional commentaries of such saints as Bernard of Clairvaux, and in the festal antiphons, *stichera*, and other propers for the Virgin’s Conception, her Nativity, her Entrance into the Temple, the Annunciation, and other Marian Feasts of the liturgical year: namely, Canticles 1:5, *I am black, but beautiful*; and Canticles 4:7, *Thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee*. The figure who is speaking in the first of these passages, and who is addressed in the second—in both cases a woman—is variously interpreted in the Christian tradition, depending on the level of meaning emphasized, as standing allegorically either for the people of Israel, or for the Church, or for the human soul in a state of grace. But whichever of these meanings is stressed, it is agreed that the Blessed Virgin—whose soul is understood to be spotless, who is the Mother of the Church, and in whom culminate the promises of God to His people—is the supreme type of the figure in question, and hence that this sacred text is fundamentally a dialogue between God and His Virginal Bride.

Again and again in his writings, Schuon returned to the first of these verses, *Nigra sum sed formosa*, helping to plumb the depths upon depths of its meaning. I would venture to say, in fact, that there may well have been no other passage in the Bible with which he was more endlessly fascinated, and this fascination can be seen in the evident delight with which he reveals its application to Mary.²⁶ Recalling, for example, her cosmic role in relation to *Mâyâ*, he explains that the Virgin “manifests the universal Veil in its function of transmission; she is Veil because she is a form, but she is Essence by her content and consequently her message. She is both closed and open, inviolable and generous,” and it follows therefore, he continues, that “she is ‘black but beautiful’ because the Veil is both closed and transparent, or because, after having closed by virtue of inviolability, it opens by virtue of mercy.”²⁷ Not only, however, is the Virgin “at first obscure and sacrificial, and then luminous and beatific”; she is also, and yet more profoundly, “luminous and beatific in the obscurity.” She is, Schuon adds in a typically powerful coda,

“divinely obscure—that is, unmanifest and infinite—in her very beauty.”²⁸ Stressing on the other hand her mode of action, rather than her state of being, he indicates in another place that the Blessed Mother is like her Son in bringing a message of inwardness. But hers is an inwardness—that is, a blackness—which is more “welcoming” than rigorous, and it is in this sense that “one can attribute to her, as does the Song of Songs, the quality of being ‘black but beautiful’; she does not tear us away from the outward world, but draws us gently towards the inward.”²⁹

Of course the fact that the Virgin is gentle does not take anything away from her majesty or transcendent dignity. Although we are grateful for her beauty and mercy, we must not forget that like Christ she is “not of this world” (St John 18:36).³⁰ She is black, Schuon writes, “because she transcends and thereby negates our all too human plane”; or again: “the black color of the beloved in the Song of Songs, and of many images of the Blessed Virgin, expresses not so much the very relative ambiguity of Existence as its ‘self-effacement.’”³¹ And yet this last symbolism is not exclusive either, for from still another point of view the Virgin’s color also serves to remind the esoterist of the end of his Path. Her darkness betokens the struggles of the spiritual battle, but also the cooling shade to be enjoyed by the victor. In this case, “black represents the secret and supra-formal character of *gnosis*.”³² Speaking, for example, of the “supreme spiritual state” which is the aim of the Christian hesychast, Schuon notes that the goal of “‘holy silence’ (*hesychia*)” is “symbolized by the black color given to certain Virgins,”³³ and in this respect there is clearly a beauty within the blackness—even as there is a *yang* in the *yin* in the familiar emblem of the Far Eastern tradition. For even though “knowledge is exclusive and separative at the exterior,” it is “inclusive and unitive at the interior.” The final goal of the spiritual journey is thus like Mary herself: it “is virginal because the ego cannot violate it, and it is maternal because it welcomes, adopts, and reintegrates; it is Beauty and Goodness; it is at once Night and Wine.”³⁴

In addition to the *protoevangelium* of Genesis and the Song of Songs, traditional Christians have always made considerable use of the Wisdom books of the Old Testament as inspired sources for their understanding of the Virgin. Two texts have been especially important, Proverbs 8:22-30 and the Wisdom of Solomon 7:22-30, both of which speak of a feminine being named *Sophia* or Wisdom, who is very clearly of a celestial, if not a principal, order. In Proverbs she says of herself that she was *set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was*. Even as God *prepared the heavens, I was there: when He set a compass upon the face of the depth. Then I was by Him, as one brought up with Him: and I was daily His delight,*

rejoicing always before Him. As for the book of Wisdom, it is said there of *Sophia* that *she is the breath of the power of God, and a pure influence flowing from the glory of the Almighty. She is the brightness of the everlasting light, the unspotted mirror of the power of God, and the image of His goodness. She can do all things: and remaining in herself, she maketh all things new. For she is more beautiful than the sun, and above all the order of stars: being compared with the light, she is found before it.* These and other similar passages have for centuries been read by the Church in celebration of its Marian feasts, and they can be found incorporated in many Christian hymns and litanies in honor of the Virgin. Thus in the western Mass for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, it is said of Mary, as it was said of *Sophia*, that she “was begotten before all the worlds, set up from of old before the earth.” And in the Akathist Hymn of the Eastern Church, among a dazzling array of other titles, the Virgin is described as the Space of the Spaceless God, an epithet which reflects the fact that *Wisdom alone compassed the circuit of Heaven* (Ecclesiasticus 24:5).³⁵

To my knowledge, Schuon never comments in detail on these particular sophianic prerogatives, nor does he single out any specific verse from these sacred texts, but he certainly affirms the essential connection between Wisdom and Mary, and in doing so it is evident that he is well aware of the long tradition of Christian meditation and devotion which is based on this relationship. He is also aware that the Church has often associated Divine Wisdom with the *Logos*, the Word which was incarnate in Christ, and for this reason he teaches, in many places, that this *Logos* must contain in some fashion a feminine dimension or aspect, which was personified or incarnate in Mary. Thus

the Blessed Virgin personifies the pre-existential and existentiating *Sophia*: the *Logos* inasmuch as it “conceives” creatures, then “engenders” them, and finally “forms” or “embellishes” them; if Mary thus represents the unmanifested and silent *Logos*—*nigra sum sed formosa*—Jesus is the manifested and law-giving *Logos*.³⁶

In 1 Kings, the Bible speaks of the great Throne of Solomon or Throne of Wisdom, and like many Christian authorities, it is common for Schuon to explain the Virgin’s relationship with the *Logos* by identifying her with this Throne. She herself, he insists—with St Bernard and others—is the *Sedes Sapientiae*, of which *there was not the like made in any kingdom* (1 Kings 10:20). “This is first of all because she is the Mother of Christ who, being the Word, is the ‘Wisdom of

God'; but it is also, quite obviously, because of her own nature, which results from her quality as 'Spouse of the Holy Spirit' and 'Co-Redemptress.'" And since she is such a Throne, he continues—a "'Throne quickened by the Almighty' according to a Byzantine hymn—Mary is *ipso facto* identified with the Divine *Sophia*, as is attested by the Marian interpretation of some of the eulogies of Wisdom in the Bible. Mary could not have been the locus of the Incarnation did she not bear in her very nature the Wisdom to be incarnated."³⁷

Now it is important to pause for a moment with this formulation, because it anticipates certain ideas that I shall be commenting on more carefully later. As this passage indicates, Schuon's teaching about the Divinity of Mary—based in this case on her identification with uncreated Wisdom—does not mean, despite what a superficial reading might lead one to assume, that he wished to deny her humanity, which was obviously essential in order that she might become a true *locus* for Christ's Incarnation. On the contrary, it is only by fully respecting the fact that the Virgin was a genuine woman that it is possible to understand in what way she can at the same time be *Sophia* or the *Logos* incarnate. "The human femininity of the Blessed Virgin, and thus her subordination," he writes, far from being opposed to Divinity, indicate "a real celestial superiority in a particular connection: femininity appears here—in view of the spiritual and cosmic supereminence of the personage—as the inverted reflection of pure essentiality," and it is in this way precisely that "she is thus identified with Divine Femininity, or with the Wisdom 'which was at the beginning.'"³⁸ Elsewhere, speaking more particularly concerning her virtues, Schuon calls attention to the fact that "the Virgin, despite her supreme sanctity, remains woman and aspires to no other role; the humble soul is conscious of its own rank and effaces itself before what surpasses it. It is thus that the *Materia Prima* of the Universe"—that is, the underlying Substance of things, which the Schuonian perspective identifies with the immanent Wisdom of God—"remains on its own level and never seeks to appropriate to itself the transcendence of the Principle."³⁹ And yet here is the wonder, of course: that it is precisely in not desiring to emulate God that Mary shows herself to be so organically a part of Him, so fully Divine. According to St Louis Marie de Montfort, the Blessed Virgin made a practice of "hiding herself in the depths of nothingness during her whole life," and as a result, says the saint, "Mary is entirely relative to God. Indeed I would say that she is relative only to God."⁴⁰

St Louis, of course, does not intend simply to provoke our awe; he would have us strive to become ourselves conformed to this Virginal model, and so too would Schuon. He knows that

so great a mystery cannot but have profound implications for understanding our own nature as we proceed in the Path, and he is quick to help us see what they are:

The Divine *Mâyâ*—Femininity *in divinis*—is not only that which projects and creates; it is also that which attracts and liberates. The Blessed Virgin as *Sedes Sapientiae* personifies this merciful Wisdom which descends towards us and which we too, whether we know it or not, bear in our very essence; and it is precisely by virtue of this potentiality or virtuality that Wisdom comes down upon us. The immanent seat of Wisdom is the heart of man.⁴¹

In turning to the New Testament, Christians have taken note of two important passages in the Apocalypse in their efforts to fathom the full significance of the Mother of God: Revelation 12:1, which speaks of *a great wonder in Heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars*; and Revelation 21:11, which describes *the bride of the Lamb, shining with the very glory of God: and her light was like unto a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone, clear as crystal*. But more often they have turned to St Luke, where even at the literal level of meaning the Christian is offered two extremely important insights into the Virginal nature—first, in the narrative of the Annunciation: *And the angel came in unto her and said, Hail, thou that art highly favored, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women* (Luke 1:28); and second, in the description of Mary's meeting with St Elizabeth: *And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost: and she spake out with a loud voice, and said, Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb* (Luke 1:41-42). It is of course upon the inspired combination of these verses that the *Ave Maria*, or Angelic Salutation, of the western Rosary is based, and it is not surprising that Schuon, who was so keenly interested in the practice of methodic prayer in all traditions, frequently spoke of the *Ave*, nor that his Mariology was expressed in part in numerous comments on these Gospel verses.

According to Schuon, two things are made clear in these sacred texts: on the one hand, that the Virgin is perfectly sinless, as the Old Testament had prophesied,⁴² and as the Catholic Church has dogmatically affirmed in its doctrine of the Immaculate Conception; and on the other hand, that she is in her own right a Divine incarnation. As to the first of these points, he notes that when Gabriel first addresses Mary, he says *Ave gratia plena*. “The angel did not say *Ave Maria*, because to him *gratia plena* is the name that he gives to the Virgin; this amounts to saying that *Maria* is synonymous with *gratia plena*.”⁴³ It follows for the Schuonian, as it does for

the Church, that “the Virgin is holiness”; since she is utterly filled with God’s grace, there is no room in her for the presence of sin. She therefore possesses in her very nature “the entirety and quintessence of all the spiritual qualities or attitudes and of all the virtues which accompany or condition them.”⁴⁴ Not surprisingly, Schuon links this personal, moral perfection of the Virgin’s human nature to the primordial harmony of pure Existence, and he does so in such a way as to encourage us to look to her as a model. “*Maria* is the purity, the beauty, the goodness, and the humility of the cosmic Substance,” and “the microcosmic reflection of this Substance is the soul in a state of grace.” The Virgin’s blessing, therefore, “is on him who purifies his soul for God.”⁴⁵

In underscoring these preliminary points, Schuon’s reflections on the Angelic Salutation are perfectly consistent with what is affirmed by the exoteric Christian tradition, at least in principle. But as I have already mentioned, he takes the additional step of insisting that the Virgin’s immaculate nature, as announced by the angel, is owing to her own Divinity. According to the Roman constitution *Ineffabilis Deus*, “The Blessed Virgin Mary, at the first instant of her conception, by a singular privilege and grace of the omnipotent God, was preserved free from all stain of original sin”—but only, it is added at once, “in consideration of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of mankind.”⁴⁶ In this way the Catholic Church, well aware of the direction in which popular piety might otherwise develop—and in which it has developed in any case—has attempted to forestall the deflection of worship away from Jesus. But in the esoteric perspective, “whatever the self-imposed limitations that exoteric theology may have to assume here for reasons of expediency,”⁴⁷ there is really no reason not to admit what this extraordinary prerogative of Mary in truth implies:

On the one hand, the Gospel says of the Holy Virgin that she is ‘full of grace’ and that ‘the Lord is with thee,’ and that ‘henceforth all generations shall call me blessed’; on the other hand, Christ inherited from the Virgin his entire human nature, from the psychic as well as physical point of view, so that his sacramental body and blood are fundamentally those of the Virgin. Now a person who possesses such prerogatives—to the point of being called ‘Mother of God’—necessarily has an ‘avataric’ quality, expressed theologically by the idea of ‘Immaculate Conception.’ Thus the cult of Mary is not merely a matter of tradition; it clearly results from Scripture.⁴⁸

When we recall that “Immaculate Conception” is the name which Mary gave herself in speaking with St Bernadette at Lourdes, it is understandable why, according to Schuon, the dogma must refer to “an intrinsic quality of the Virgin”: since it is a quality which by definition she possessed from the very start, from her conception, it obviously pertains to her nature, for it would be absurd to suppose that a “nature” might have existed in some other form before benefiting from an extrinsic addition. Therefore, he concludes, “Mary is ‘Divine’ not only through Jesus, but also, and *a priori*, by her receptivity proportionate to the Incarnation,” and this being so, we must admit that “the Logos ‘was incarnated’ in her already before the birth of Christ, which is indicated by the words *gratia plena* and *Dominus tecum*.”⁴⁹

I might briefly note before leaving this subject that Schuon was perfectly aware of the divergence between the eastern and western churches on the question of Mary’s conception. Like Roman Catholics, the Orthodox teach that the Virgin was sinless, readily confessing her to be the *Panagia* or “All-Holy One,” and believing her to have been so from the very beginning. But in their understanding, the guilt of man’s “original sin” is not inherited: every newborn is innocent, and the dogma of the Immaculate Conception is therefore at best superfluous; at worst it runs the risk of diluting our admiration for the Virgin’s perfection, for if she were by nature and necessarily virtuous, one could not attribute to her the excellence of spiritual victory. As is so often the case, Schuon’s perspective not only sheds new light on the dispute, but has the effect of resolving it on a higher level:

Was Mary *a priori* delivered from the capacity for sin, or was she sinless through the superabundance of her virtue? In other words, was she impeccable because of the absolute holiness of her nature, or was she holy as a result of the absolute impeccability of her intelligence and her will? Those who maintain the first thesis seek to avoid attributing to Mary an imperfection of substance; those of the second seek to avoid depriving her of the perfection of merit; but both sides seem to lose sight of the fact that at the degree of the Blessed Virgin the alternative loses all its meaning. The “immaculate conception”—attributed to Mary also by the Islamic tradition—admits of every meritorious attitude by its very nature, rather as a substance contains in synthesis all its possible accidents; and inversely, perfect impeccability—out of the question for the ordinary man—is *ipso facto* equivalent to the absence of “original sin.”⁵⁰

Islam and the Koran

Having been brought up as a Christian, and remaining his entire life an adamant defender of the Divinity of Christ and the other essential truths of this tradition, it was only natural for Schuon to formulate his understanding of the Blessed Virgin in terms of the Christian scriptures. But having decided as a young man to enter Islam—“without being converted,” of course, but “for reasons of esoteric and therefore spiritual expediency”⁵¹—and having fulfilled within this framework, for over sixty years, the function of a Sufi Shaykh, it was also very natural that his Mariology should rest in part on references to Sayyidatnâ Maryam which one finds in the Koran, as well as on certain traditions of the Prophet Muhammad.

Christians are often surprised to discover that the sacred Book of Islam is sometimes even more explicit than the Bible in its praise of Mary, and that it too—as Schuon notes—teaches a doctrine of the immaculate conception. It is said, for example, that when the Virgin was born, her mother, *the wife of ‘Imrân*—known to Christians as St Anne—prayed to God on behalf of the child, *I entrust her and her offspring to Thy protection from Satan the outcast* (Sûrah 3:35, 36), and the fact that this prayer was answered is proven by the saying of the Prophet: “Satan toucheth every son of Adam the day his mother beareth him, save only Mary and her son.” Elsewhere, in a passage reminiscent of the words of Gabriel and St Elizabeth in the Gospel of Luke, *blessed art thou among women*, the Koran affirms of Mary that *Allah hath chosen thee and made thee pure, and hath preferred thee above all the women of creation* (Sûrah 3:42), a teaching which was confirmed, according to another *hadîth*, when the Prophet told his daughter Fâtimah, “Thou art the highest of the women of the people of Paradise, excepting only the Virgin Mary, daughter of ‘Imrân.” Furthermore, one entire *sûrah* bears the Virgin’s name, in which it is revealed—in confirmation of a Christian tradition found in the Book of St James, where we learn of Mary’s early years in the Temple—that even as a child she *had withdrawn from her family to a place facing the East, and she placed a veil between her and her people* (Sûrah 19:16-17). In another passage, the Koran teaches that Allah *made the son of Mary and his mother a sign* (Sûrah 23:50),⁵² and elsewhere again that when God *citeth an example for those who believe*, mention is made of *Mary, the daughter of ‘Imrân, who kept chaste her womb, and We breathed*

therein of Our Spirit. And she testified to the truth of the words of her Lord and His scriptures, and was of those who are absorbed in prayer (Sûrah 66:12). So great was the Prophet's own respect for Mary that upon returning in conquest to Mecca, he ordered that all of the images in the Ka'bah be destroyed, excepting only two icons: one of an old man, said to be Abraham, and another of the Virgin and Child, which he protected with his own hands.

Schuon was deeply interested in the implications for Marian doctrine and method which can be discovered in two Koranic passages in particular. The first, the Verse of the *Mihrâb* or "Prayer-niche," speaks of the Virgin's presence in the Temple, where she had been brought as a child of three, and where she lived until her betrothal to Joseph—Zachariah, the husband of her cousin Elizabeth, being high priest in those years. *Her Lord accepted her with full acceptance and vouchsafed to her a goodly growth; and made Zachariah her guardian. Whenever Zachariah went into the sanctuary [Mihrâb] where she was, he found that she had food. He said: O Mary! Whence cometh unto thee this food? She answered: It is from Allah. Verily Allah provideth sustenance beyond all reckoning for those whom He will* (Sûrah 3:37).⁵³ It is the belief of Islam, as it is of Christianity, that the Blessed Virgin was miraculously sustained during these years by celestial food which was regularly brought to her by the angels. According to the Orthodox Patriarch Photius, Mary "gave an example of an immaterial life on earth, having been nourished, so to speak, from the very swaddling clothes, on the virtues alone,"⁵⁴ and the Schuonian Mariology is in perfect accord with this teaching: not only does her life in the Temple help to instruct us as to the Virgin's own stature in the Divine economy; it provides the spiritual pilgrim with a powerfully attractive model of what his own state of life should be like.

On the one hand, writes Schuon, since "the *Mihrâb* is equivalent to the Holy of Holies of the Temple," it follows that "at the time of the presence of the Virgin in the Temple, she was the high priest," and since esoterically "the *Mihrâb* is the heart," she herself was "the Holy of Holies."⁵⁵ Recalling *the East* which she faced (Sûrah 19:16) as she performed her priestly function, Schuon adds, "It is noteworthy that the Virgin is *Stella Matutina*, an allusion to the East, which in our symbolism denotes fervor. Aside from this particular meaning, the East expresses the coming of light, and it is thus that the Christian tradition interprets the Marian title 'Morning Star'; now fervor derives from light just as in principle light and heat go together."⁵⁶ On the other hand, Mary's seclusion and piety become in turn an example for others; indeed "Maryam is the inner soul which invokes and which, by that fact, is withdrawn from the

world.”⁵⁷ According to certain Koranic commentators on the phrase *she placed a veil between her and her people* (19:17), the sanctuary of the Temple was separated from the outer court by a series of veils, seven in number, which “become seven doors,” Schuon writes, “which Zachariah had to open with a key each time he visited Mary in the Temple.”⁵⁸ What this veiling signifies for the spiritual traveler is that “the Holy Virgin represents the *khalwah* or spiritual retreat.” Combining this symbolic meaning of the Koranic passage with the text which we discussed from Canticles, Schuon continues, “‘I am black, but beautiful’: this verse likewise expresses the mystery of the *khalwah*; and it follows that if the *khalwah* is *a priori* obscure, it subsequently transforms itself into a golden light.”⁵⁹ Thus, together with the Song of Songs, the Verse of the *Mihrâb* serves to show that

what Sayyidatnâ Maryam asks of us is that we always remain in *khalwah*, in the midst of the world and of life; not so much in the *khalwah* which is obscure as in the one which is golden, which accompanies us everywhere like a protecting and blessed aura, as soon as we surrender ourselves to the Celestial Ray. In this state, man no longer feels any curiosity for the dissipating things of this world; he is no longer interested in things that are useless for him, and he is only concerned about remaining in the little golden garden of spiritual poverty. For Sayyidatnâ Maryam is like crystal, into which nothing senseless or impure penetrates; that is why the Koran says that she kept her virginity intact, meaning her heart.⁶⁰

As for the food with which Mary was nourished during her time of retreat, Schuon teaches that what it refers to finally is God Himself, whose Names she invoked without ceasing. “Sayyidatnâ Maryam was nourished in the Temple (the *Mihrâb*) by celestial foods. Now for man to live, he has need of food and drink.” It therefore makes perfect sense, says Schuon, that the Christian and Muslim traditions should concur in believing that the Virgin was given fruit by the angels, for “fruits combine the two, the solid and the liquid; they nourish by their flesh and give drink by their juice.” The Christian will naturally think of the Bread and Wine of the Eucharist, themselves the very substance of God, but in this case Schuon chooses to emphasize the link with the sacrament of the Name and the method of *Dhikr* or Invocation. “One can say that the supreme Name is at once Food and Drink; it is the Divine Fruit which combines all the gifts which make us live. To say that the Holy Virgin received diverse fruits means that she lived by Divine Names, according to the double relationship of Ambrosia and Nectar.”⁶¹

Another important Koranic text which Schuon often comes back to is a passage in which Christians are reproached for their belief in a Divine trinity—not, however, the Trinity dogmatically proclaimed by the Church, but a trinity composed of Allah, Jesus, and Mary: *They surely disbelieve who say: Lo! Allah is the third of three, when there is no God save the One God. The Messiah, son of Mary, was no other than a messenger, the like of whom had passed away before him, and his mother was a saintly woman* (Sûrah 5:73, 75). The burden of these verses is of course to stress, in a way characteristic of the Muslim economy, that nothing may be associated with Allah, and that Jesus and His mother must therefore be regarded as no more than creatures. According to Schuon, what is being censored in this passage is thus a trinity resulting from “the deification of Jesus and Mary,” a trinity which is “indirectly attributed to the Christians by the Koran,” but which at the same time, contrary to what many exoterists of both traditions have assumed, “this Book nowhere identifies with the Trinity of Christian doctrine.”⁶² As Schuon sees it, however, there is nonetheless an important, underlying connection between these two trinities, which the revealed text helps the esoterist to discern, even while stressing “the exoteric incompatibility of Christian Trinitarianism with Islamic Unitarianism.”⁶³

“The trinity which the Koran attributes to Christianity—the Father, the Son, and the Virgin—is altogether logical in its way,”⁶⁴ writes Schuon, and he explains this logic on three distinct levels. First of all, by putting Mary in the “place” of the Holy Spirit in its formulation of the Trinity, the Islamic revelation was intended to take into account certain “heretical worshipers of the Virgin” who lived at the time of the Prophet, whose “very existence” serves to show “what the Christian dogmas would have become through an inevitable fault of adaptation had they come to be adopted by the Arabs, for whom they were not intended.”⁶⁵ Second, the Koranic trinity “expresses a psychological situation *de facto*”⁶⁶ by seeking to address “the Marianism which existed in practice” among orthodox Christians at the birth of Islam, and which, while being perfectly consistent with the Christian spiritual economy, “from the Islamic point of view constituted a partial usurpation of the worship due to God.”⁶⁷ Finally, on yet a third level, which is the most important for our purposes here, Schuon joins ranks with the Sufi ‘Abd al-Karîm al-Jîlî in explaining the text esoterically, and this he does by insisting, in numerous places, that it makes perfect sense for the Blessed Virgin to be identified with the Holy Spirit, even as Jesus is with the *Logos* or Son, for “Mary incarnates either the Spirit considered in its feminine aspect or the feminine complement of the Spirit.”⁶⁸ The Koranic text is completely “justified,” he writes,

“in the sense that the Holy Virgin is by her nature, and not by adoption, the human receptacle of the Holy Spirit (whence *gratia plena* and *Dominus tecum*); as ‘Immaculate Conception,’ she is *a priori* the vehicle of the Spirit and thereby personifies it.”⁶⁹ By “bringing the Virgin Mary into the Christian Trinity,” the Islamic revelation thus provokes “an interpretation which is not theological in fact but is so by right and finds its support in the Scriptures”—an esoteric interpretation which is closely “linked to the feminization, in certain ancient texts, of the Divine *Pneuma*.”⁷⁰

As surprising as this may be to some, a connection between Mary and the Holy Spirit is well established in a number of Christian sources. We do not, of course, find it at the level of dogma, and yet there are sufficient formulations to this effect, both in ancient texts and in the devotional and speculative writings of modern saints and theologians, to suggest that it can be entertained as a *theologoumenon* or pious opinion even in exoteric circles. A fragment from an early Coptic life of the Virgin is exemplary in this respect. Jesus said, “I will not leave you desolate; but if I go, I will send the Spirit, the Comforter, unto you in My place, after not many days, but when Pentecost cometh.” Up to this point, the ancient source is simply recapitulating the words of Christ in the Gospel (John 14:16-18). But the text then continues, showing those who are listening to Jesus precisely where they might discover that promised Spirit: “And behold, she who was My dwelling place, and I was her Son in the flesh and in the Godhead, even she the expression of whose image is like Mine according to flesh, behold she is with you now.”⁷¹ Depending on the language in which they were writing, it was more or less likely for ancient writers to emphasize this relationship. Schuon calls attention to the fact that “the Hebrew word *Rûah*, ‘Spirit,’ is feminine,”⁷² and so also, we may note, is the term for Spirit in Syriac, which explains why among certain Syrian fathers—the “Persian sage” Aphraates, for example—the Third Person of the Trinity is often described in distinctly feminine terms.

As for more recent Christian writers, Schuon notes that “according to the blessed Fr Kolbe”—now canonized by the Catholic Church as St Maximilian Kolbe—“‘Immaculate Conception’ is one of the Names of the Holy Spirit.” It can be said, the saint adds, that “in espousing Mary, the Spirit was as if incarnated in her,” that she is “united with the Holy Spirit to the point of being able to present herself in his Name,” and that “the Immaculate One personifies the Mercy of God.”⁷³ One must admit, of course, that Schuon often expressed himself on this point in words which such a Christian would never have chosen, and yet his teaching is

essentially the same. Making use of the Hindu term for the underlying cosmic potency which is informed by the Spirit, he explains that the Virgin “personifies the receptive or passive perfections of universal Substance; but she likewise incarnates—by virtue of the formless and occult nature of the Divine *Prakriti*—the ineffable essence of wisdom or spirituality, the both virginal and maternal *materia prima* of all formal coagulations of the Spirit.”⁷⁴

As this last passage helps to show, the Schuonian doctrine often associates the Holy Spirit with the uncreated Wisdom of the Old Testament texts which were examined earlier, seeing in both an expression of the Divine femininity manifested in Mary on the human plane. In this respect the teaching is not unlike that of Vladimir Solovyov, Sergei Bulgakov, Paul Evdokimov, and other Eastern Orthodox writers who are associated with the Russian school of sophiology. Like the Catholic saint Fr Kolbe, these theologians also draw a close connection between the Holy Spirit and the Blessed Virgin, but they insist as well on an additional link with *Sophia*. On the one hand, according to Bulgakov, Wisdom is a name for what all three Persons of the Trinity share: she is “the silence and mystery of the Godhead.”⁷⁵ But at the same time, in her very mystery and elusiveness, *Sophia* maintains a special intimacy with the Holy Spirit, which “bloweth where it listeth” (John 3:8), and it is through this same Spirit that the Divine Wisdom becomes embodied in Mary, who was herself—as we noted earlier—elusively hidden from the public gaze.⁷⁶ The Spirit, says Bulgakov, “abides in the ever-virgin Mary as in a holy temple, while her personality seems to become transparent to Him and to provide Him with a human countenance.” Indeed Mary—who made herself as it were “entirely transparent”—“is, in personal form, the human likeness of the Holy Ghost.”⁷⁷ Speaking in much the same way about the “Primordial Femininity” which “was there when God prepared the Heavens” (Proverbs 8:27), and bringing us back in so doing to the Book of Islam, Schuon points out that “the qualities of this *Materia prima* or this *Prakriti* are purity and transparence, and receptivity with regard to Heaven and intimate union with it,” and that Sayyidatnâ Maryam—who is the emptiness precisely in which the Spirit may move—is for this reason described in the Koran as “‘chosen and purified,’ ‘submissive,’ and ‘believing the Words of her Lord.’” The reader is then offered this image:

The manifested Divine Spirit is in certain respects comparable to the reflected image of the sun on a lake. In this image there is a feminine or “horizontal” element, and this is the potential luminosity which is inherent in water, and the

perfect calm of a surface unruffled by any wind; and since these qualities permit the perfect reverberation of the “solar” body, they are already something of it. So it is that the Primordial Recipient is a providential projection . . . of the Divine Content.⁷⁸

Now of course, none of this is in any way to suggest that the Blessed Virgin as a human woman is somehow herself to be equated with the Divine Spirit. I paused once before at a similar point in this exposition, and I should do so again lest we make a very serious mistake in our reading of Schuon. As I have elsewhere explained, not even Jesus *is* God in the much too simplistic sense with which this pious ellipsis is often interpreted by traditional Christians, for the Divine and human natures of Christ are not the same, and the Ecumenical Councils of the Church explicitly forbid their confusion.⁷⁹ Precisely the same distinction is in order here. When Schuon tells us that Mary “is the personification of the Holy Spirit”⁸⁰ or that “the Spirit ‘as creation’ is none other than the Virgin,”⁸¹ or again—speaking in terms of *Sophia*—that “the Virgin Mother personifies supraformal Wisdom,”⁸² he does not wish to imply that there is no difference between her human reality and the Divinity which she contains and makes present. Commenting on a verse which we have already cited from the *sûrah* “The Prohibition” (*Sûrah* 66:12), he takes note of the words *We breathed into her of Our Spirit*—words with which the Koran describes the Annunciation—and he observes that “the image of breath evokes both the intimacy and subtlety of the gift, its depth or infinitude, if one will,” in this way underscoring the avatic relation between the Virgin and God. At the same time, however, the preposition in the phrase *of Our Spirit* reminds us that “no Divine manifestation can involve the Divine Spirit in itself and in its intrinsic totality; otherwise the Spirit would henceforth be in the manifestation in question, and no longer in God.”⁸³

In any case, to sum up these last observations: according to Schuon, the trinity which we find mentioned in the Koran, although it is not the same as the Trinity of the Christian creeds, nevertheless is not lacking in truth—*quod absit*—even from an exoteric Christian point of view, while for the esoterist, by calling attention to the Blessed Virgin’s “incarnational” relationship with the Holy Spirit, it has the effect of opening a door as it were onto her avatic substance and stature. From the point of view of exoteric Islam, of course, such an opening is altogether beside the point, to say the least, for it is in the nature of the Muslim spiritual economy to emphasize the Divine transcendence to the exclusion of every human theophany. And yet even here, Schuon

notes—even in terms of what the traditional Muslim may be prepared to allow for in his considerations of Mary—it is possible to follow the lead suggested by this same Koranic text in such a way as to glimpse something of the exceptional nature of the Virgin. It is true of course that the Muslim exoterist will never be persuaded to accept the idea of a Divine incarnation, but he will readily admit even so that the Spirit of God makes itself present in the messages which it brings and thus through the person of its messengers.⁸⁴ Thus, where the Christian speaks in terms of a God-man, the Muslim will describe the greatest of men by saying that such a one is a prophet, and according to Schuon, this is precisely what can and must be said in Islamic terms about Mary.

He directs our attention, on the one hand, to the similar positions which the Blessed Virgin and the Prophet of Islam occupy in the formal economies of the two traditions. “The function of the Prophet,” he writes, is “analogous and symbolically even identical to that of the Virgin Mary, who was likewise the ‘ground’ for the reception of the Word.” Mary, “fecundated by the Holy Ghost, is ‘Co-Redemptress’ and ‘Queen of Heaven,’” while the Prophet Muhammad, “inspired by the same Paracletic Spirit, is ‘Messenger of Mercy’ (*Rasûl ar-Rahmah*) and ‘Lord of the Two Existences’ (*Sayyid al-Kawnayn*), this world and the next.” In a memorable observation often borrowed by other traditionalist writers, Schuon points out that “the Virgin is ‘immaculate’ and, from the merely physical standpoint, ‘virgin,’ while the Prophet, like the Apostles, is ‘illiterate’ (*ummi*), that is to say, pure from the taint of human knowledge or knowledge humanly acquired.”⁸⁵

These very suggestive correspondences might alone entitle us to describe the Blessed Mother as having the stature of Prophetess, but other reasons can be brought forward as well. For example, “Maryam is mentioned, together with other Messengers, in the *sûrah* ‘The Prophets’; furthermore,” Schuon adds—still speaking of the Koran—“her story is related with care and praise, which would be inconceivable for an ordinary saint (*waliyah*),”⁸⁶ but which accords perfectly with what the Prophet himself said in describing her as the “Queen of the women saints in the Muslim paradise.”⁸⁷ Surely “all this would prove,” says Schuon, “if proof were necessary, the supereminent rank of Maryam, that is to say her quality of Prophetess (*Nabiyah*).”⁸⁸ We are not to forget, he admits—considering the matter with his usual thoroughness—that “according to a *hadîth*, no woman was ever a prophet.” But in this case, he asserts, “it is a question exclusively of law-giving prophecy.”⁸⁹ In other words, the saying “refers, not to intrinsic dignity, but to

extrinsic function,”⁹⁰ and hence “there is no reason for thinking, Islamically speaking, that the term ‘prophetess’ (*nabiyah*) could not fit the Virgin Maryam.”⁹¹

Gnosis and the Primordial Norm

It is only natural, I have said, that Schuon sought to express his Marian doctrine in terms borrowed from the scriptures of the Abrahamic traditions and in light of their orthodox commentaries. He was after all a traditionalist, who always insisted that an operative spirituality must be grounded in one of the great revelations bestowed by Heaven, and as one who had lived in the two worlds of Christianity and Islam, his continual fascination with what the Bible and the Koran have to say about Mary is not unexpected. But he was at the same time a metaphysician and master of *gnosis*, whose message was that of pure esoterism, and it also makes perfect sense that his perception of the Virgin’s presence and meaning would not have been confined to those worlds.⁹² Unlike the exoteric authorities of a given religion, whose perspectives are determined by certain confessional loyalties—and in fact unlike even the masters of what he sometimes called “average Sufism”⁹³—Schuon was utterly free in his fidelity to the “nature of things,” to the *fitrah* or primordial norm, and within the inward space of that freedom he realized that the Virgin’s intrinsic reality transcends the doctrinal boundaries of the traditions which honor her, manifesting something that is truly universal and Divine. It was for this reason that he called himself *Maryamî*, and it is in this light that one may understand the Marian character of the spiritual order he founded. It is indeed “our insistence upon the nature of things,” he writes, “that explains and justifies our connection with Sayyidatnâ Maryam; it is because our perspective is *a priori* metaphysical, esoteric, primordial, and universal that our *Tarîqah* has the right to be named *Tarîqah Maryamîyah*, in perfect accordance with the teachings of Sufic tradition.”⁹⁴

It is possible to glimpse at least something of the universal scope and plenitude of the Blessed Virgin by considering first the implications of a title accorded her in Islamic mysticism. As we have just noted, there is good reason—even on exoteric grounds—for calling Mary a Prophetess, but among certain Sufis a further “paracletic” step is sometimes taken in which she is referred to as the “Mother of Prophecy and of all the Prophets,” a phrase to which Schuon returns a number of times in his writings. What this formulation helps to make clear, he explains, is a

dimension of the Marian reality which might not otherwise have been discerned at the level of scriptural exegesis—namely, that “the message of the Blessed Virgin,” understood in its essence, “contains all the prophetic forms possible in their universal and primordial indifferenciation.”⁹⁵ On the one hand, of course, her message has to do with her Son; theologians have pointed out that the only time she speaks publicly in the Gospel is on the occasion of the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee, when, referring to Jesus, she tells the servants, *Whatsoever He saith unto you, do it* (John 2:5).⁹⁶ But in the Schuonian perspective, *He*—the Son—must be understood as applying not simply to “Jesus as founder of a religion,” but to the Divine *Logos* or Word, which was incarnate in Him, and hence not to “such and such a *Rasûl*, but the *Rasûl* as such.”⁹⁷ As the Mother of that supra-temporal Word, Mary is thus the “matrix of all the sacred forms,” a truth expressed, “according to a symbolism common to Christianity and Islam,” when it is said that she “has suckled her children—the Prophets and sages—from the beginning and outside of time.” This implies, continues Schuon, that “the domain of Mary” pertains to “a level where these systems as such lose much of their importance, and where by way of compensation the essential elements they have in common are affirmed,” elements which, he adds—“whether they like it or not”—“give the systems all their value.”⁹⁸

On an initial and most obvious level, this “Marian universality”⁹⁹ can be seen in the fact that the Virgin serves as a providential link between the western or Semitic traditions. “Precisely because, in the world of the Semitic monotheists, Maryam is the only feminization of the Divine,” Schuon writes—“the only avataric *Shakti* of Vishnu, in Hindu terms”—“she had to appear in all three monotheistic religions at once.”¹⁰⁰ For she was indeed “unique and incomparable both in Judaism, by her concrete personality as Prophetess—whether understood or not—and in Christianity, by her function as Co-Redemptress,” and she was therefore “*ipso facto* unique and incomparable in Islam and was ‘at home’ in it, like all the Semitic prophets up to and including Christ.”¹⁰¹ If one objects that a being of so great a stature, so important to the religious worlds in question, would surely have appeared at an earlier and more foundational moment and in a more incontrovertible form, manifesting herself among the ancient Jews even before the coming of their promised Messiah, Schuon replies that in taking a feminine form, the Divinity “is necessarily the *Shakti* of an *Avatâra* and thus necessarily appears along with Him,” and as it were in His shadow. Mary “could thus appear neither in isolation nor, needless to say, in a spiritual climate” like that of Judaism or Islam, “whose perspective providentially excludes

the notion of ‘Divine Descents.’” Instead, “in view of her incomparability, she had to be linked with a masculine manifestation of ‘human Divinity,’” and this “manifestation, in the Semitic world, is precisely Christ.”¹⁰²

But this is just the beginning. According to Schuon, if one wishes to enter into the Virgin’s deepest reality, it is necessary to look beyond the role which she plays in the Abrahamic sector of humanity, and therefore beyond the providential relationship which she was destined to have with the incarnate Word of the Christian tradition. It is true, of course, that as the *woman* of the Apocalypse who is *clothed with the sun* (Revelation 12:1), Mary must not be confused with that Sun; she is veiled instead like the moon in its light, and from this point of view her role, a receptive and passive one, is to be the feminine complement of the redeeming *Logos*, hidden—as we have seen more than once—for the sake of His operative eminence. But this fact in no way excludes another, and yet higher, truth—a truth which is hinted at even in the letter of scripture. For it is said of this very same *woman* that the *moon* is *under her feet*, and *upon her head*, we are told, there is *a crown of twelve stars* (Revelation 12:1). From this point of view it is clear that the Virgin is more than the *Shakti* of a masculine *Avatâra*: she is also *Laylâ*, the supremely silent and indeterminate Night, *black but beautiful*, and embracing the suns of all the worlds.¹⁰³ “In addition to her celestial personality,” which is already evident in the exoteric perspective, and beyond even “her Divine Prototype” in the Holy Spirit and Wisdom, the Blessed Virgin is finally “the underlying Divine Substance,” the “attracting, dilating, and gentling transmuting infinitude of inward and transcendent Reality.”¹⁰⁴

In order to understand what is meant by this teaching, it is important to realize that in the Schuonian doctrine the Supreme Principle is at once the Absolute and the Infinite. By virtue of its absoluteness, it is so far beyond everything else that it alone is to be regarded as truly real, and yet by virtue of its infinitude it is so intimately present within everything that whatever truly exists is itself. According to the first relationship, “the reality of the Substance annihilates that of the accident; according to the second, the qualities of the accident—starting with their reality—cannot but be those of the Substance.”¹⁰⁵ As his readers know, Schuon returns to this fundamental polarity numerous times, and in doing so he often connects the first of the two poles with the masculine, and the second with the feminine. “In the first case, the accent is put on the symbolism of virility” or masculinity, for absoluteness means rigor, strength, and sovereignty, while in the second case, it is put on intimacy, fecundity, and nourishing mercy, for infinitude

means the radiation of goodness, and thus one may say that “the Infinite is Divine Femininity.”¹⁰⁶ Depending on which aspect of Reality one intends to emphasize, “the Supreme Divinity is either Father or Mother.”¹⁰⁷ It is of course primarily with a masculine “face” that God has willed to look upon the worlds of the Abrahamic traditions,¹⁰⁸ where He is understood to be the Father and the Sovereign Lord of all things, but even there it is evident that the Divinity is equally feminine in its intrinsic or inward reality, for *God created man in His own image, male and female created He them* (Genesis 1:27).

In Schuon’s perspective, however, there is something more than just equality or symmetry here; there is also hierarchy. The symmetry is not surprising, for the principal aspects of Reality are like two sides of one coin, the Divine being no more absolute than it is infinite, and no more infinite than it is absolute: “Beyond-Being is the Absolute or Unconditioned, which by definition is infinite and thus unlimited; but one can also say that Beyond-Being is the Infinite, which by definition is absolute.”¹⁰⁹ As for the existence of hierarchy, or at least a certain kind of hierarchy, those whose theology has been informed by the Semitic traditions will have been led to expect such a teaching, and they will readily understand what Schuon means in writing that “virility refers to the Principle, and femininity to Manifestation,” and they will see why he places the masculine at the higher level when considering the cosmogonic relationship between God and creation. But unless they are already careful students of his books, what they may well be surprised to discover is that there is a second hierarchy in the Schuonian doctrine, a metaphysical and esoteric hierarchy intrinsic to the Principle itself, and that within this other and more inward order, it is the Divine Femininity which is the superior pole. Thus he continues:

Even though *a priori* femininity is subordinate to virility, it also comprises an aspect which makes it superior to a given aspect of the masculine pole; for the Divine Principle has an aspect of unlimitedness, virginal mystery, and maternal mercy, which takes precedence over a certain more relative aspect of determination, logical precision, and implacable justice.¹¹⁰

Indeed, as one reads more closely, it becomes apparent that the feminine “aspect” of the Principle is rather more than an aspect—more, in other words, than a particular quality or attribute with a value that is strictly *pro nobis*—for what Schuon is talking about in this and other similar passages is nothing less than the very Essence of God. He points out that “a Sufi, probably Ibn ‘Arabî, has written that the Divine Name ‘She’ (*Hiya*), not in use but nevertheless

possible, is greater than the Name 'He' (*Huwa*), and this refers," he explains, "to the Indetermination or Infinitude, both virginal and maternal, of the Self or 'Essence' (*Dhât*),"¹¹¹ an Essence which inwardly transcends the relative fixity and "masculinity" of the Divine Person, even as that Person transcends in turn the "femininity" of His creation. It is thus no accident that the Arabic word *Dhât* should be feminine, for it refers esoterically to "the superior aspect of femininity," which "surpasses the formal, the finite, the outward; it is synonymous with indetermination, illimitation, mystery, and thus evokes the 'Spirit which giveth life' in relation to the 'letter which killeth.'" For "femininity in the superior sense comprises a liquefying, interiorizing, liberating power: it liberates from sterile hardnesses, from the dispersing outwardness of limiting and compressing forms,"¹¹² and thus it gives access to a transcendent and supra-formal domain where, in the words of St Dionysius the Areopagite, "the dazzling obscurity of the secret Silence outshines all brilliance with the intensity of its darkness."¹¹³

As I have pointed out several times before, this is precisely for Schuon the Virgin Mary's "domain," the primordial and universal domain of pure esoterism.¹¹⁴ *Nigra sed formosa*, she is in fact, he says, both the domain itself and the key to its entrance. On the one hand, she is a "feminine *Avatâra* of supreme degree,"¹¹⁵ who like every incarnation of God is "at once created and uncreated,"¹¹⁶ and who as her special vocation "personifies 'original Sanctity,'"¹¹⁷ manifesting "the universal soul in her purity, her receptivity towards God, her fecundity, and her beauty."¹¹⁸ At an operative or methodical level, she is thus the paragon of contemplative prayer and the *khalwah*, and a human embodiment of "the Divine Music that melts hearts and renders infinite."¹¹⁹ But at the same time she is also, in her most inward depths, this Infinitude itself. For Mary "is not one particular color or one particular perfume," writes Schuon; "she is colorless light and pure air," and hence "in her essence she is identified with that merciful Infinitude which, preceding all forms, overflows upon them all, embraces them all, and reintegrates them all."¹²⁰ As the perfect type of cosmic equilibrium and "the model of every holy soul,"¹²¹ "she equally personifies the *Haqîqah*, the naked and living Truth, which is hidden behind the veil of symbols." Thus, when a man comes to know the Blessed Virgin, she having condescended to let her veil fall, what he knows is precisely What is, surpassing every confusion between *Âtmâ* and *Mâyâ*, for "she expresses the *Dhât*, the Essence, which is beyond all form and all determination and which thereby liberates from limitations." This, Schuon adds, "is the supreme aspect of the

feminine Principle,”¹²² and it is this which the heart may discern, concretely but inexpressibly, in the Virgin Mother.

I have stressed more than once, beginning at the very outset of this article, that there can be no question of proving the validity of this highest and most inward of Schuon’s Marian teachings from the starting point of the Semitic exoterisms—or not at least on the basis of their scriptures and dogmas.¹²³ In the case of Christianity, specifically theological thought, the aim of which is “to concentrate solely on the Christ-Savior”¹²⁴ in a way which suits the needs of the exoteric majority, is clearly ill-suited for grasping the avataric complementarity between the Son and His mother,¹²⁵ to say nothing of the existence of a hierarchy within the Principle or the idea of a supreme Femininity *in divinis*, and for this reason, says Schuon, “it is scarcely possible for theology to accept this mystery of Mary.”¹²⁶ It is true, of course, that if one is willing to look “along” certain theological doctrines, the spiritual and symbolic elaboration of their meaning can provide a kind of trajectory, suggesting a direction in which intellection might move, and this is precisely what I have endeavored to show in earlier parts of this article. And yet, for Schuon, it is only by attending to the very nature of things that one can hope to find any final and lasting proof of this greatest of the Virginal mysteries. Even when the most suggestive scriptures are read anagogically and in the light cast by the most exalted of traditional Marian titles, they still can only take us so far.

This is the case in fact even when we consider the most important of all the Virgin’s dogmatic titles, namely, *Theotokos* or “Mother of God.”¹²⁷ Such a reservation will perhaps surprise the Christian reader, who may have supposed, in view of all I have said, that the Schuonian would be quick to make use of so crucial and so suggestive a title; for here, if nowhere else, there appears to be an “opening” to Mary’s ultimate stature, and hence to the principal and esoteric priority of the Divine Femininity. Moreover, the term *Theotokos* comes with the full weight of dogmatic tradition; unlike such epithets of liturgical hymnody as “Ark of the Covenant” and “Gate of Heaven,” or “Celestial Ladder” and “Cause of the Deification of Men,”¹²⁸ which have the support merely of pious convention and traditional usage, this is a name which was formally bestowed on the Virgin by an Ecumenical Council of the Church, and as such its acceptance is obligatory for all the faithful. Historically, the title is *a priori* Christological, of course, having been promulgated in order to underscore the unity of the two natures in the single Person of Christ, and yet its implications for an esoteric Mariology are

obvious. When Gregory the Theologian insisted that “if anyone does not accept the Holy Mary as *Theotokos*, he is without the Godhead,”¹²⁹ there is no reason to think that the saint meant to identify the Virgin with this Godhead, or that he himself would have accepted the doctrine that the Principle of the Principle is a feminine Substance; but the very fact that his words may be so interpreted is not without significance. Surely, one imagines, Schuon must have placed considerable emphasis on this dogmatic definition of Mary’s role. As it happens, however, he expressed serious reservations concerning Christian use of this title, and as we near the end of this article it is important to underscore what they were, for they provide a valuable key to the fundamentally esoteric nature of his Marian perspective, and an essential corrective to certain one-sided interpretations which might otherwise seem to follow from my exposition.

When I say that Schuon had reservations concerning this doctrinal formulation, I do not of course mean that he disagreed with the teaching as such, nor *a fortiori* that he disapproved of the idea of Divine Motherhood. Here as always he was a traditionalist, who would never have challenged the intrinsic orthodoxy of so important a religious dogma. Indeed, God being “not only ‘the Father,’ but also ‘the Mother,’” Schuon himself explicitly says that “it is Mary who embodies her on the human plane,” and that she may therefore be regarded as “the ‘Mother’ of the Divine Perfection or of the Supreme Good.”¹³⁰ In this sense, if no other, the Virgin is certainly the Mother of God. Schuon’s concerns were based instead, not on the legitimacy or value of the expression as such, but on the potential danger involved in mixing two very different categories or levels of spiritual doctrine, and he had in mind specifically the disequilibrating effects which may result when one attempts to give dogmatic form to ideas which are of an essentially closed or initiatic character, ideas normally reserved for an oral and symbolic transmission. The term *Theotokos*, he writes, is a “purely esoteric expression,” and for this reason it is “by no means accessible to everyone.”¹³¹ In becoming a *de fide* dogma, however, the idea was necessarily inserted into a domain where all and sundry would be required to accept it, whether esoterists or not. Hence, while agreeing that the meaning contained in the title is “metaphysically plausible,”¹³² Schuon knew even so that it remained a “rather problematical epithet”¹³³ in its present dogmatic and ecclesiastical context, for “on the exoteric level and in the absence of subtle commentaries which would compensate for its audacity or imprudence,” it can easily result for some in “an overshadowing of the metaphysics of the Absolute.”¹³⁴

Given the extraordinary depth to which his Mariology reaches, it is most instructive to see how thorough and balanced Schuon's observations are on this point. Although he himself had a profound affinity for the primordial mysteries of inwardness and immanence, willingly acknowledging a spiritual kinship with Abhinavagupta as well as with Shankara, they did not blind him to the importance of a preparatory and counterbalancing stress on transcendence, and one can see clear evidence of that fact in this case, precisely at a point where those whose love of the Eternal Feminine is less discerning might be tempted to exaggeration. Again and again one finds that the Schuonian message is one of pure objectivity. "It is useless," he cautions, "to seek to realize that 'I am *Brahma*' before understanding that 'I am not *Brahma*'; it is useless to seek to realize that '*Brahma* is my true Self' before understanding that '*Brahma* is outside me'; it is useless to seek to realize that '*Brahma* is pure consciousness' before understanding that '*Brahma* is the Almighty Creator.'"¹³⁵ By analogy, we could say in the present context that it is useless to seek to realize that the Virgin Mary is the Mother of God, and hence that she corresponds esoterically to the Divine Essence, before understanding outwardly, on the plane of exoteric doctrine, that from another and logically prior point of view she is at the same time a human woman and creature.

Twice before we have paused in order to stress this crucial paradox, and if we do so again it is because the matter seems to have been such an important one for Schuon—so important in fact that he felt obliged to distance himself, in spite of all we have seen, from the most exalted of all Christian names for the Virgin. As a metaphysician he knew very well that since the infinitude of the Divine Essence transcends the Divine Person, "Mary" is indeed God's Mother; but he also knew that they alone have a right to speak of such mysteries who have first distinguished not just between *Âtmâ* and *Mâyâ*, but between the Principle and its Manifestation, and who thus have enough discernment to realize that "either a phenomenon is God—which is a contradiction—in which case it has no mother, or it has a mother, and then it is not God, at least in respect of its having a mother, and setting aside the initial contradiction of the hypothesis."¹³⁶ Whatever else she might be, and however great the Reality which she manifests, whether on earth or in Heaven, the *Theotokos* remains, at the level of that manifestation, ontologically less than the One whom she bears. Only those who know at least this can hope to know that it is precisely in this way that she is also much more.

Experiencing the Marian Mystery

So it is that Schuon taught; but how, it might be asked, did he know? For many readers, the doctrine discussed in this article will doubtless seem merely speculative, and it is understandable, as we draw to a close, if some are wondering precisely where lies the authority for these varied and provocative insights. As I explained near the start, it has not been my aim to respond to the skeptical cavils of cynics, nor at this point is that surely necessary, for such critics will have dropped away many pages ago. On the other hand, I fully expect that even among those readers who remain, and who may find themselves attracted to Schuon's Marian teaching, the question I have raised will persist. How could he have known these things? From one point of view, a perfectly sufficient answer has been provided already, for in describing the esoteric character of his message, and its essential difference from a strictly theological standpoint, I have several times emphasized its foundation in the very "nature of things." In order to verify what Schuon has said, we must therefore exercise our powers of discernment, for the truth of these matters is to be apprehended by the heart, and by virtue of the "metaphysical transparency" of phenomena.¹³⁷ But there is a second answer that can be given as well, one to which I alluded in beginning this article—an answer that concerns certain very particular experiences granted to Schuon by Mary herself.

Schuon has written that his spiritual relationship with the Virgin actually began in his childhood. As a lad of thirteen, he had composed a short poem in honor of the Divine Femininity, which he would later describe as a "presentiment" of certain graces to come: "Doth thy velvet arm bear me aloft to thee? Doth thy mantle silently descend upon me? Devoutly do I contemplate thy holy all; I dissolve in the fragrance of thy soul. To my heart dost thou softly ope a door; a quiet faith doth ripple gently down."¹³⁸ Having been a Protestant as a very young boy, he soon thereafter became a Roman Catholic, and he recalls in his memoirs that he "met Mary in two ways" in this new ambience: first through a "large and beautiful image of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, the famous Byzantine icon on a gold background," which hung in the monastery chapel where he attended Mass; and second through reciting the Rosary, in which he "spoke to Mary, which I had never done before."¹³⁹ When in his twenties he later entered Islam, this practice was of course abandoned, and his spiritual attention became otherwise occupied for

many years—though even then there were hints as to the continuing benediction of Sayyidatnâ Maryam. He recalls a time, for example, when he was invoking the Koranic Names of Mercy, “the Divine Names *Rahmân* and *Rahîm*”:

I invoked the two Names quite independently of any doctrinal perspective and thinking only of God. Then all at once I felt a powerful Presence: in it there was golden warmth, beauty, love, mercy, and I—who had not in the least been thinking of the Holy Virgin—suddenly knew that it was she. For a long while this state of grace continued, and I was as if inebriated from it.¹⁴⁰

This experience seems to have been only a foreshadowing of something greater to come, however, for in March of 1965, at a time when he was faced with particular difficulties and sufferings, Mary came to him, he writes, in a yet more profound and decisive way. He was on his way to Morocco, and the ship had called at Port-Vendres along the French coast. Alone in his cabin, gazing into a bouquet of flowers, “I sought to explain to myself certain difficulties,” and “to imagine, with regard to Paradise, what is imaginable; it was as if I were in a waking dream; in my consciousness nothing remained save images of Paradise. Then all at once,” he continues, “the Divine Mercy overwhelmed me in a special manner; it approached me inwardly in a feminine form which I cannot describe, but which I knew to be the Holy Virgin; I could not think otherwise.”¹⁴¹ Later during the same trip, when he was staying in the Moroccan city of Tetuán, “the undreamt-of grace came to me anew, the heavenly consolation, streaming forth from the primordial femininity”, and as with all truly celestial experiences, it left him feeling “a new man,” forever changed for the better. “I was as if marked by Heaven. It was as though I lived in a special protective aura belonging already to Heaven, which at the same time carried with it an obligation.”¹⁴² He would later describe these moments as having afforded him “a mystical contact” with Mary and as signs of his “heavenly adoption” by her¹⁴³—an adoption and protection, he affirmed, through which the Virgin had become the patroness of his disciples as well. Hence the name of his Sufi order, which we noted earlier: the *Tarîqah Maryamîyyah*.¹⁴⁴

I mention this decisive occasion in Schuon’s life for two reasons. First, as already indicated, knowing at least something about his experiences can be of assistance when questions are posed by otherwise sympathetic interlocutors concerning his authority. If someone asks in good faith how he could have come to know what he taught, the answer in part is that he was instructed by the Blessed Virgin herself, for there can be little doubt that had it not been for these

miraculous encounters, his understanding of the Divine Femininity would have been less intimate and his Mariology correspondingly less profound. On the other hand, it is very important that a note of caution be sounded; Schuon was a metaphysician, after all, and not a mystic, and it is therefore characteristic of him to insist that “instead of being governed by phenomena and following inspirations,” one should “submit to principles and accomplish actions.” For this reason, he would have been quick to discourage us from supposing that the truth of his Marian doctrine, or indeed any doctrine, depends exclusively upon certain spiritual states or gifts. For “what counts in the eyes of God,” he goes on to warn, “is not what we experience, but what we do. Doubtless we may feel graces, but we may not base ourselves upon them. God will not ask us what we have experienced, but He will ask us what we have done.”¹⁴⁵

This being so, one hesitates to talk at all about Schuon’s own experiences. Indeed it might have been preferable to pass them over in silence—at least in the present article, where the interest is not primarily of a biographical kind—were it not for the fact that he soon found a way to transpose what he had been given into an objective form, a form which could in turn become for others a support for intellection, and thereby an opportunity for their own discernment of principles. I spoke at the outset about a certain shaktic quality which can be detected in those of Schuon’s books published after 1965, and it is noteworthy, too, that he began at this time to compose Arabic *qasîdahs* or poems in honor of the Virgin.¹⁴⁶ But there is something else as well—something of an even greater significance—which must also be mentioned. It seems that his contact with Mary had provided him with the inspiration for a level or modality of concrete expression quite different from what one finds in his writing, whether prose or verse, for shortly after these initial experiences, Schuon, who had been a gifted artist since childhood, began to express his perception of the Marian mysteries through paintings of the Virgin and Child, and this he continued to do until the early 1980s, producing numerous very beautiful icons.¹⁴⁷

As those who have had the privilege of seeing them know, these paintings reflect very clearly something of the extraordinary insight which the manifestation of the Virgin Mother had brought him. At the same time, however—and more importantly—they have made it possible for others to share in the grace she bestowed, and in this way an experience which might have otherwise remained a strictly personal or individual *hâl* has become instead the vehicle for transmitting and evoking a like discernment. This in fact, says Schuon, was his very object in producing the icons. “If I were asked why I paint images of the Holy Virgin,” he writes, “I

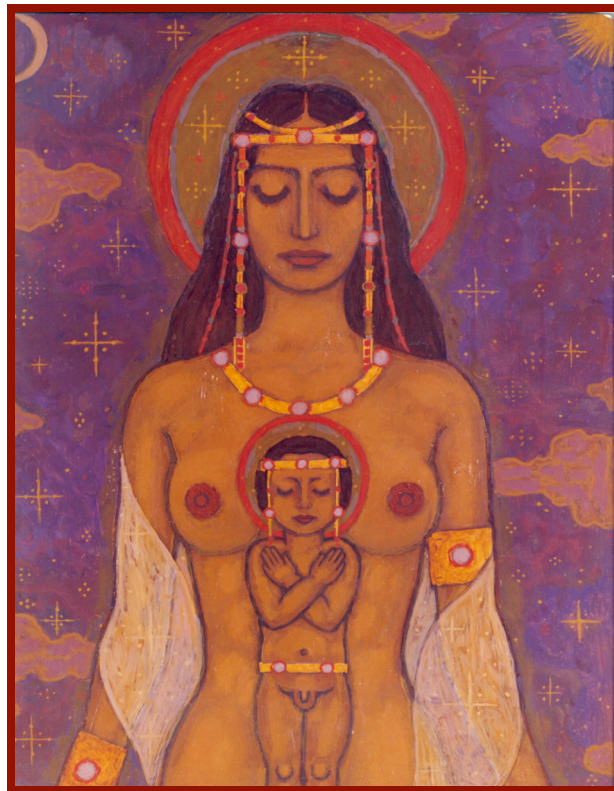
should answer: to transmit, thus to make accessible to others, an inward vision,” and thus “to make possible a participation in this vision.”¹⁴⁸ It is therefore not necessary to depend exclusively on what he has said about Mary in his writings, for in this altogether unexpected fashion, he had provided the means of verifying the truth of his doctrine in the depths of one’s own inward perception.

It has seemed to me obvious that any adequate account of the Schuonian teaching must at least acknowledge the existence of this aesthetic dimension, and yet having done so it is very difficult to know quite what to say, how to convey the many subtle particulars, especially when addressing readers who may have never seen his paintings before. The discursive formulation of any beauty is of course finally impossible, and this is all the more true when we are presented with beauty of a sacred and maieutic order—one which operates, says Schuon, by means of an “initiatric dis-illusion.”¹⁴⁹ A Catholic writer, having admitted that “it is difficult to express in words the gratitude I feel for Schuon’s beautiful pictures,” nonetheless struggled to call attention to certain of their distinguishing features, seeing in the images “the timelessness and immobility of traditional American Indian art; the luminosity and hieratic attitude of the figures of Byzantine art; and the color, sensuality, and majesty—even sumptuousness—of Persian and Indian Islamic art.”¹⁵⁰ Such observations do little more than touch the surface, however, and in some ways they may even mislead, for Schuon certainly did not set out to imitate any existing convention or to blend various styles, but simply to communicate what he saw when the Virgin came to him. “I painted her, not as she is portrayed in Christian religious art,” he writes—nor for that matter in any other art—“but as I had inwardly experienced her, as virginal Mother or as motherly Virgin, and beyond all theological forms; as the embodiment of the Divine Mercy and at the same time of the *Religio Perennis*.”¹⁵¹

As I have already confessed, I am at a loss to know even how to begin describing this dimension of the Schuonian message, how to convey in words even a small portion of its transformative power, and it therefore seems best in conclusion if the icons are left to “speak” for themselves, offering as they do a kind of wordless summation, in color and contour, of the entire range of Schuon’s Marian doctrine. For there indeed is the Blessed Virgin herself, “black but beautiful”: on the one hand a very particular woman, often dark-skinned and in many cases bejeweled, clothed like primordial man with the air—the hidden model of the *khalwah* and of contemplative prayer, in herself strictly nothing; but at the same time a feminine *Avatâra* of

supreme degree and the very Mother of God, the Priest in the Temple and that Temple itself, a Prophetess and the Mother of Prophets, merciful *Mâyâ* and *Sophia* incarnate, the *Shakti* of her Son and the elusive Spouse of the Spirit—and ultimately the ineffable *Dhât*, the inward bliss of the transpersonal Essence, through whose radiance we are invited to return to the Self.

How can we know that what Schuon tells us is true? How can we ever hope to fathom these mysteries? We need not, it seems, only listen to him; with his help we may gaze in wonder upon Mary herself.



¹ From a letter of September 1981. “There are Sufis who claim a mystical connection with a particular Prophet: they are *Ibrāhīmī*, *Mūsāwī*, *Īsāwī*”—that is, of Abraham, of Moses, of Jesus—“as may be seen from the *Fusūs al Hikam* of Ibn ‘Arabi. It is thus,” Schuon continues, that “our *Tariqah* is *Maryamī*—the Shaykh Al-‘Alawī having been unquestionably *Īsāwī*” (unpublished Text 275). The Shaykh Al-‘Alawī is the celebrated Algerian master of whom Schuon was first the disciple and later the *muqaddam* or representative in Europe.

² Seyyed Hossein Nasr, ed., *The Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon* (Rockport, Mass.: Element Books, 1991), 54; James S. Cutsinger, *Advice to the Serious Seeker: Meditations on the Teaching of Frithjof Schuon* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 6. None of this is to suggest, of course, that there is not a more rigorous and masculine side to his work as well; I have also written of Schuon that while “the message he brings is a good one, it is a goodness that produces a shock, as if one were swallowing light” (James S. Cutsinger, “A Knowledge that Wounds Our Nature: The Message of Frithjof Schuon,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, LX/3, 465).

³ “The Wisdom of Sayyidatnā Maryam,” *Dimensions of Islam*, trans. P. N. Townsend (London: Allen and Unwin, 1969), and “*Sedes Sapientiae*,” *In the Face of the Absolute* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1989). Even in these chapters, however, the topic announced by the title does not prevent Schuon from expounding a variety of other subjects as well. While there are certainly systematic elements in his teaching, it is not itself a system—or not at least in the usual sense of the word—and this fact can be seen in part in his mode of presentation.

⁴ *Face of the Absolute*, 89. Schuon has pointed out that “one of the most odious effects of the adoption of the psychoanalytical approach by believers is the disfavoring of the cult of the Holy Virgin; only a barbarous mentality that wants to be ‘adult’ at all costs and no longer believes in anything but the trivial could be embarrassed by this cult” (*Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*, trans. Gustavo Polit [Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1986], 199).

⁵ *Logic and Transcendence*, trans. Peter N. Townsend (London: Perennial Books, 1984), 6.

⁶ I should perhaps add here in passing that Schuon regarded the traditional Protestant perspective, firmly based on the Bible, as a perfectly legitimate and saving *upāya* or spiritual means, and he knew that Protestant suspicions concerning Catholic and Orthodox veneration of the Virgin are, from one point of view, a natural and understandable part of a “general reaction against the dispersion of religious sentiment and thus in favor of worship concentrated on Christ alone” (*Christianity/Islam: Essays on Esoteric Ecumenicism*, trans. Gustavo Polit [Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1985], 29). This may also be the place to point out that I shall make no attempt to respond to the arguments of the Muslim exoterist, who is of course *a fortiori* suspicious of anything bordering on the divinization or worship of a human being, including Christ Himself. The Koran speaks with great respect concerning the Virgin and includes a *sūrah* with her name; indeed hers is the only feminine name to occur in the Book, and as we shall see later, the exposition of Schuon’s Mariology rests in part on Koranic texts. But it is no part of his aim, or mine, to convince every Muslim that his Marian teachings are valid.

⁷ In response to the Nestorian heresy, the Third Council (Ephesus) proclaimed that the Virgin is to be called, not simply *Christotokos* or “Mother of Christ,” but *Theotokos* or “Mother of God.” Schuon’s standpoint with respect to this title will be considered more fully below.

⁸ *Treasures of Buddhism* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1993), 92. The term “Co-Redemptress”—in Latin *Co-Redemptrix*—is used only in the western Church, and then explicitly only since the fourteenth century. But the idea thus expressed, that the Blessed Virgin participates in the redeeming work of her Son, is quite ancient and is common to the eastern Church as well. According to St Anselm, “God is the Father of all created things, and Mary is the Mother of all re-created things. God is the Father of the constitution of all things, and Mary is the Mother of the restitution of all things” (*Oratio VII*). Among the Orthodox, the holy hierarch St Theophanes of Nicaea says, “It cannot happen that anyone, of angels or of men, can come otherwise, in any way whatsoever, to participation in the Divine gifts flowing from what has been divinely assumed, from the Son of God, save through His Mother” (*The*

Life of the Virgin Mary, the Theotokos [Buena Vista, Colorado: Holy Apostles Convent and Dormition Skete, 1989], 516). The term has never been defined as dogma, but it has been used by many popes.

⁹ According to St Dionysius the Areopagite, the Seraphim and Cherubim are the two highest ranks of the Celestial Hierarchies, above whom there is only God. The phrase comes from the *Megalynarion*, a well-known hymn of the Orthodox Church, sung in every Divine Liturgy of St John Chrysostom: “It is truly meet to bless thee, O *Theotokos*, who art ever blessed and all-blameless, and the Mother of our God. More honorable than the Cherubim and more glorious beyond compare than the Seraphim, thou who without stain barest God the Word, and art truly *Theotokos*: we magnify thee.”

¹⁰ I have endeavored to respond to this common, but ill-conceived, objection to Schuon’s teaching on Christ in a recent article, “The Mystery of the Two Natures,” *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies*, 4/2 (Winter 1998), also published in French as “Le Mystère des Deux Natures,” *Connaissance des Religions*, Numero Hors Serie (Juillet-Octobre 1999).

¹¹ *Christianity/Islam*, 243.

¹² The Eastern Church has always drawn a line, more or less solid, between its *kerygmata*, teachings codified as dogmas and proclaimed to all and sundry, and its *mysteria*, the inner mysteries of the faith, reserved in their fullness for initiates illumined by Baptism and Chrismation; Christology has traditionally been placed on the first, Mariology on the second, side of that line.

¹³ First, that is, in the order in which it shall be treated here. I do not mean to imply that this is Schuon’s own priority, nor that his Mariology is dependent on these scriptures, or on their interpretation in the traditional commentaries. One cannot stress too often that Schuon was not a theologian, but a metaphysician and esoterist, whose doctrine was based simply on the nature of things.

¹⁴ *Christianity/Islam*, 30.

¹⁵ *Dimensions of Islam*, 84.

¹⁶ *Letter to the Ephesians*, 19.

¹⁷ *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin* (Bay Shore, New York: Montfort Publications, 1980), 1, 20. This is apparently what nearly happened to St Dionysius the Areopagite, who, having visited Jerusalem where he met the Blessed Virgin in person, writes to St Paul his teacher, “I bear witness before God, who dwelt in that most honorable virginal womb, that I would have taken her for the true God, and would have honored her with the adoration due to God alone, if my newly-enlightened soul had not retained thy Divine instructions and laws” (*The Life of the Virgin Mary, the Theotokos*, 441).

¹⁸ *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence*, trans. William Stoddart (Bloomington, Ind.: Word Wisdom Books, 1981), 77. Schuon writes elsewhere of “the strange case of Fâtimah. Embodying, according to unanimous tradition, the purest sanctity, she was put aside, frustrated, and forgotten. On occasion she was treated in a hard way even by the Prophet her father. Herein is the whole drama of a celestial soul predestined to be the martyr of terrestrial life. Her abasement is, as it were, the shadow cast by her spiritual elevation, human individuals appearing in her destiny as the cosmic instruments of her painful alchemy. There is something of this likewise in the case of the Blessed Virgin, treated not without a certain coldness by the Gospels and passed over largely in silence by most of the New Testament, to reappear afterwards in all the greater splendor” (*Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, trans. J. Peter Hobson [London: World of Islam Festival Publishing Company, 1976], 92-93). I have noted that on this point Schuon has the support of saints; it should be added, however, that when occasion demanded he was not averse to disagreeing with them. On this very question, for example, he criticized St Thérèse de Lisieux—“despite her angelic nature,” which he was among the first to honor—for “diminishing the Blessed Virgin in order to bring her ‘nearer.’” For Thérèse, he continues, “the Blessed Virgin is ‘mother’ more than ‘queen,’ as if Mary were not great and mysterious before making herself little and intimate; and it is for the queen, not her subjects, to decide when and

how she intends to be mother, the worth and the charm of the maternal intimacy residing here precisely in its combination with majesty” (*Sufism: Veil and Quintessence*, 77).

¹⁹ *Against Heresies*, V, 19; see also III, 22. A similar symbolic pairing can be found in St Justin the Philosopher, *A Dialogue with Trypho*, 100, and in Tertullian, *On the Flesh of Christ*, 17. The western tradition observes that *Ave*, the first word of the Angelic Salutation in Latin, being the palindrome of the Latin for Eve, *Eva*, indicates that the reversal of the Fall was effected in Mary. Thus, in the *Ave Maris Stella*, used since the ninth century as the Vesper hymn for the Common of Feasts of the Blessed Virgin, the Church addresses her with these words: *Sumens illius Ave/Gabrielis ore/Funda nos in pace/Mutans Evae nomen*—“Receiving that Ave from the mouth of Gabriel, establish us in peace, changing the name of Eve.”

²⁰ *The Eye of the Heart* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1997), 95.

²¹ *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, trans. G. E. H. Palmer (London: Perennial Books, 1990), 75.

²² See “The Doctrine of Illusion” in my *Advice to the Serious Seeker*.

²³ *Survey of Metaphysics*, 73-74.

²⁴ *Face of the Absolute*, 59.

²⁵ *Face of the Absolute*, 61. “The key to the mystery of salvation through woman, or through femininity, if one prefers, lies in the very nature of *Mâyâ*. If *Mâyâ* can attract towards the outward, she can also attract towards the inward. Eve is life, and this is manifesting *Mâyâ*; Mary is Grace, and this is reintegrating *Mâyâ*. Eve personifies the demiurge under its aspect of femininity; Mary is the personification of the *Shekhînah*, of the Presence that is both virginal and maternal. Life, being amoral, can be immoral; Grace, being pure substance, is capable of absorbing all accidents” (*Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, trans. William Stoddart [London: Perennial Books, 1981], 143). Elsewhere Schuon calls our attention to yet another, in this case methodic, correlation between the two women within *the woman*: “The discriminative and contemplative abstraction from the world could not exclude our natural contacts with our ambience, which is not merely Eve, but also Mary. There is parallelism, not incompatibility, between the ‘remembrance of God’ and contingent life” (*The Play of Masks* [Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1992], 52).

²⁶ Another verse in the Song of Songs which he often cites, and which is intimately linked not only to the doctrine of the Virgin, but to the method of quintessential prayer, is Canticles 5:2: *I sleep, but my heart waketh*.

²⁷ *Esoterism*, 62. “The Russian Church,” he adds, “celebrates a ‘feast of the Veil’ in remembrance of an apparition of Mary at Constantinople, in the course of which the Virgin lifted her luminous veil and held it, in a miraculous fashion, above those present. The Russian word *pokrov* means both ‘veil’ and ‘intercession’: the *Mâyâ* which dissimulates Essence is at the same time the *Mâyâ* which communicates graces.”

²⁸ Unpublished Text 511.

²⁹ *Christianity/Islam*, 145-46. It is characteristic of Schuon to contrast the predominantly “inward” and spiritual function of Christ, called in Islam the “Seal of Sanctity,” with the more outward and social function of the Prophet Muhammad.

³⁰ Schuon observes that the *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55) “is impregnated with elements of Mercy and Rigor, and it thus reflects an aspect of the nature of the Virgin herself: the mildness of the Virgin is accompanied by an adamantine purity, also by a strength of soul which evokes such Biblical figures as Miriam and Deborah, and which represents a dimension inseparable from the greatness of her who was called *O Clemens*, *O Pia*, *O Dulcis Virgo Maria*”—words, Schuon notes, which were “added spontaneously by St Bernard to the *Salve Regina* on the occasion of a solemn gathering at Speyer Cathedral” (*Dimensions of Islam*, 89).

³¹ *Face of the Absolute*, 220, 60.

³² *Dimensions of Islam*, 15.

³³ *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, trans. Peter Townsend (London: Faber and Faber, 1953), 180-81.

³⁴ Unpublished Text 448. “Spiritual truth, a Moroccan shaikh has said, is more beautiful when it is veiled like a fiancée. This opinion suggests—apart from a solicitude for dialectic breadth—an almost liturgical attitude of respectful distance, or even reverential awe, with regard to the truth” (*Dimensions of Islam*, 13). Schuon points out that these two aspects of the Virginal substance are given a concrete and very powerful expression in the iconography of the Eastern Church. “In many icons the Holy Virgin expresses mercy by the inclined and spiral-like movement of her posture, while the severity of her facial expression indicates purity in its aspect of inviolability; other icons express solely this purity, emphasizing the severity of the features by a very upright position; others again express mercy alone, combining the inclination of the body with sweetness of expression” (*Stations of Wisdom* [Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1995], 135).

³⁵ The phrase points as well, of course, to the doctrine of the Incarnation, for it was in the space of the Virginal matrix or womb that God the Infinite dwelt. In the apse of an Orthodox church, one often sees an icon called Our Lady of the Sign, or the *Platytera*. Seated in majesty, with the Child enthroned on her lap, the Virgin holds her hands outstretched, as if embracing the universe, and there is often an inscription which reads *Platytera Tôn Ouranôn*: “She who is more spacious than the Heavens.” As for the Akathist and other traditional “litanies of the Virgin,” including that of Loreto, Schuon writes that they “are in a certain respect concerned with Existence insofar as it is the first manifestation of the Self and the substance of all existential perfections” (*Dimensions of Islam*, 134). This observation should help to cast a new light for many readers on the relationship between God and the Wisdom of Mary.

³⁶ *Esoterism*, 62.

³⁷ *Face of the Absolute*, 137-38.

³⁸ *Logic and Transcendence*, 119. Readers familiar with Schuon’s work will notice that this is yet another application of the Law of Inverse Analogy. See my *Advice to the Serious Seeker*, 114.

³⁹ *Gnosis*, 121. Although it is true for Schuon that “a being such as the Virgin appears only once every one or two millennia” (unpublished “Summary of an Audience with the Shaykh” [Spring 1985]), her greatness is in no way inconsistent with her humble submission to the role for which she was destined as a human woman within the spiritual economy instituted by her Son. Thus, while “no man can be more holy than the Blessed Virgin,” nonetheless “any priest can celebrate the Mass and preach in public, which she could not do . . . in the framework of a traditional Christian world” (*Castes and Races*, trans. Marco Pallis and Macleod Matheson [Pates Manor, Bedford, Middlesex: Perennial Books, 1982], 34).

⁴⁰ *True Devotion*, 9, 116. It is clear why Schuon was so fond of this work and why he recommended it so heartily to Christian seekers. In precisely the same spirit, he himself writes: “The soul of the Blessed Virgin, prototype of every sanctified soul, is made of inborn worship, and this actualizes the Real Presence as a mirror reflects the sun; the virginal soul is consubstantial with this Presence just as space coincides with the ether that it contains” (*Esoterism*, 114).

⁴¹ *Face of the Absolute*, 144. I am reminded of G. K. Chesterton’s words: “Men are men, but Man is a woman.” One also notes the following words of Schuon: “If Mary is seated upon the Throne of Solomon and is even identified with that Throne—with the authority it represents—this is not only by Divine right but by human right as well, in the sense that, being descended from David, she is heiress and queen in the same way that Christ, in like respect, is heir and king. One cannot but think of this when one sees the crowned Romanesque Virgins seated with the Child on a royal Throne” (*Face of the Absolute*, 139-40).

⁴² We have noted already a verse from the Song of Songs, *Thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee* (4:7). Among a host of other Old Testament texts which have been adduced by the tradition in proof of the Virgin's perfection, the following provides an especially eloquent testimony: *Thou art fairer than the children of men: grace is poured into thy lips: therefore God hath blessed thee forever* (Psalm 45:2).

⁴³ *Esoterism*, 143.

⁴⁴ Unpublished Text 251. Schuon adds in the same place that "the snow placed by the angels in the breast of the Prophet-child is Virginity."

⁴⁵ *Gnosis*, 119. Schuon continues, "This purity—the Marial state—is the essential condition, not only for the reception of the sacraments, but also for the spiritual actualization of the Real Presence of the Word. By the word *Ave*, the soul expresses the idea that, in conforming to the perfection of Substance, it puts itself at the same time in harmony with it, whilst imploring the help of the Virgin Mary, who personifies this perfection."

⁴⁶ It was with these words that Pope Pius IX proclaimed the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception (8 December 1854).

⁴⁷ *Treasures of Buddhism*, 92. As Schuon writes elsewhere, "Christianity in practice deifies the Mother of Christ, despite exoteric reservations, namely the distinction between *latria* and *hyperdulia*"—that is, between worship, properly speaking, and the highest form of veneration (*Face of the Absolute*, 227).

⁴⁸ *To Have a Center* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1990), 122-23. "As Jesus had no human father, His body and blood came to Him from Mary, which is also true for the eucharistic species and reveals a new aspect of the quality of 'Co-Redemptress'" (*Esoterism*, 38).

⁴⁹ *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (London: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1984), 154. It will be understood, I trust, that this is one of those cases where the Schuonian logic will inevitably seem less than conclusive to "a dogmatism that is too intent upon dotting every 'i'"; as Schuon sees it, however, we are here faced with "a context in which holy indetermination would do no harm and in any case would be more appropriate" (*Christianity/Islam*, 122). Commenting elsewhere on the implications of Mary's immaculate nature, he says that the Virginal "Substance is not only filled with the Divine Presence in an ontological or existential manner, in the sense that it is impregnated with it by definition, that is to say by its very nature"—as is signified by the words *gratia plena*—"but it is also constantly communicating with the Word as such. So, if *gratia plena* means that the Divine Mystery is immanent in the Substance as such, *Dominus tecum* signifies that God, in his metacosmic transcendence, is revealed to the Substance, just as the eye, which is filled with light, sees in addition the sun itself." He concludes, as so often, with a concrete application: "The soul filled with grace will see God" (*Gnosis*, 119).

⁵⁰ *Face of the Absolute*, 65-66. "Greek theology," he writes, "in conformity with its prudence in matters of dogmatic definition and its fidelity to scriptural symbolism, sought to avoid crystallizing, on the plane of outward doctrine, a truth closely relating to the highly delicate question of 'human divinity,' if we may call it that. Whatever the case, if the Catholic dogma of the Immaculate Conception means that the Virgin is 'the perfect creature,' the absence of this dogma with the Greeks means in the last analysis that 'there is none good but God,' according to the Gospel words themselves" (*The Eye of the Heart*, 100). It is evident, for Schuon, that both perspectives are true.

⁵¹ *Transcendent Unity* (1984), 83. See in this regard a recent article by Martin Lings, "Frithjof Schuon and René Guénon," *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies*, 5/2 (Winter 1999), 13.

⁵² "It will be noted," writes Schuon, "that the 'sign' is not Jesus alone, but He and His Mother" (*Sufism*, 155).

⁵³ Orthodox Christians and traditional Catholics agree in teaching that the Blessed Virgin spent her youth in the Temple as one of the Temple virgins. Orthodoxy remembers this fact in its Feast of the Entrance, recalling how her parents, St Joachim and St Anne, had brought her there in fulfillment of a vow to God. The Church sings in one of its hymns, "Thy wise parents, O undefiled one, brought thee, who art the 'Holy of Holies,' as an offering to the

House of the Lord, there to be reared in holiness and made ready to become His Mother” (Matins Canon for the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin, Ode Six, Plagal of the Fourth Tone). St John of Damascus writes of her, “Transplanted into the Temple of God, and enriched by the Spirit like a fruitful olive tree, Mary became the dwelling of every virtue, and a holy and admirable temple, worthy of the Most High God” (*On the Orthodox Faith*, IV, 14).

⁵⁴ “Homily II on the Annunciation.” The Metropolitan George of Nicomedia adds, “The heavenly food which the Immaculate Virgin received enriched her with Divine grace. But it did not bring about a cleansing from sins in her, because she who partook of it had no sin; she was pure and free from any stain” (“Homily on the Entrance of the Blessed Virgin into the Temple”).

⁵⁵ Unpublished Text 328. Calling attention to the Virgin’s Koranic epithet “daughter of ‘Imrân,” and specifically to the name ‘Imrân itself, Schuon writes that “the trilateral root of this name comprises amongst others the meanings ‘prosperity’ and ‘flowering,’ which are most appropriate for her whom God ‘caused to grow with a goodly growth’ and to whom He gave ‘His sustenance beyond measure.’” He adds that “the words ‘daughter of ‘Imran’ link Mary not only to her direct father but also to her ancestor, the father of Moses and Aaron, whence the description ‘sister of Aaron’ which the Koran likewise employs, wishing thus to stress that the priestly and esoteric super-eminence of the brother of Moses is remanifested in Mary” (*Dimensions of Islam*, 93-94). It should be understood, of course, that the Schuonian teaching on this point goes well beyond what exoteric Islam is willing to accept; indeed, “when the Koran declares that ‘God hath chosen thee (O Mary) and hath purified thee, and hath raised thee above all women,’ there are commentators who find a way of having it say merely that Mary was ‘the most pious woman of her time,’ no more, no less; an absurd minimalizing,” Schuon continues, “which is explainable by the fear of mariolatry; it is always a case of *ad maiorem Dei gloriam* which, in the climate of a sensitive monotheism, is theologically and psychologically decisive” (*Survey of Metaphysics*, 98). It goes without saying that exoteric Christianity, in its own way, is no less sensitive on this score.

⁵⁶ *Face of the Absolute*, 218.

⁵⁷ Unpublished Text 328.

⁵⁸ *Esoterism*, 61.

⁵⁹ Unpublished Text 838. Schuon adds in the same text, “One speaks also of the protecting mantle of the Holy Virgin, which springs from the same symbolism; and one may say the same of her long hair, which is her natural mantle.”

⁶⁰ Unpublished Text 838. Commenting in another place on the Virgin’s response to Zachariah, Schuon observes that “by this saying—or this teaching—Maryam invites us to do what she does, to be what she is; to enter into her, so to speak, to be carried by her; for it is the function of the Divine man to be the intermediary between us and Heaven” (Unpublished Text 344). The Muslim exoterist will object to this language, pointing out that in the Koran the Virgin is addressed with the words, *O Maryam, be in prayer before thy Lord and prostrate thyself and bow with those who bow* (Sûrah 3:43). Schuon explains this verse, however, by saying that “the order given to the avatic creature does no more than express the nature of this creature, cosmic perfections always deriving from a Divine order; in pronouncing His order in eternity, God created the nature of the Virgin. The angels only repeat this order to the glory of Mary. It is worthy of note,” he concludes, that the Virgin serves as a model even here, at the level of external practice, for “this verse in effect indicates that the movements of the Moslem prayer pertain to the Marian nature” (*Dimensions of Islam*, 85).

⁶¹ Unpublished Text 640.

⁶² *Transcendent Unity* (1984), 24.

⁶³ *Logic and Transcendence*, 106.

⁶⁴ *Survey of Metaphysics*, 21.

⁶⁵ *Transcendent Unity* (1984), 24. Writing in the late fourth century A.D. in the *Refutation of All Heresies*, St Epiphanius describes two opposite sects: on the one hand the “opponents of Mary,” who denied her perpetual virginity, and on the other hand the “Collyridians,” who practiced a kind of Marian eucharist, offering her cakes (*kollyrides*) as a goddess (see Jeremiah 7:18, 44:15-28). There is evidence that the latter group persisted and had spread to Arabia by the sixth century, and Islam, says Schuon, was “bound to react” against this form of “Mariolatry” insofar as “it bore a close resemblance to Arab paganism” (*Transcendent Unity* [1984], 24).

⁶⁶ *Logic and Transcendence*, 106.

⁶⁷ *Transcendent Unity* (1984), 24.

⁶⁸ *Christianity/Islam*, 147.

⁶⁹ *Sufism*, 161. “It follows,” he continues, “that an invocation of Mary, such as the *Ave*, is practically, implicitly, and quintessentially an invocation of the Holy Spirit, which in Islam pertains to the hypostatic mystery of *Rahmānīyah*, Divine ‘Generosity,’ which is Life, Radiation, Light; the Virgin, like the Spirit, is the ‘womb’ (*rahim*), both inviolable and generous, of all graces” (*Sufism*, 161). Elsewhere we learn from Schuon that “a Maghribi shaykh, who had no knowledge of Christianity except through the Koran, told us that Maryam personifies Clemency-Mercy (*Rahmah*) and that our age is especially dedicated to her for that very reason; the essence of Mary—her ‘crown’—are the Names *Rahmān* and *Rahīm*, and she is the human manifestation of the *Basmalah* (‘in the Name of God the Clement, the Merciful’)” (*Dimensions of Islam*, 93). It is noteworthy that in the *Trisagion* prayer of the Orthodox Church, the Spirit is described in words which suggest these two aspects of the Koranic formula: “O Heavenly King, the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, who art everywhere present and fillest all things: Treasury of Blessings and Giver of Life, come and abide in us, and cleanse us from all impurity, and save our souls, O Good One.” As Treasury the Holy Spirit is *Rahmān*, while as Giver it is clearly *Rahīm*.

⁷⁰ *Christianity/Islam*, 95.

⁷¹ *Sahidic Fragments of the Life of the Virgin*, IV, 45-50.

⁷² *Christianity/Islam*, 95. He adds in the same place, “Let us likewise note that one finds in the Gospel of the Hebrews the expression ‘My Mother the Holy Ghost’ (*Matēr mou to hagion pneuma*).”

⁷³ *Esoterism*, 38.

⁷⁴ *Dimensions of Islam*, 92-93. The following is instructive in this context: “In the Catholic sign of the cross a ternary is superimposed on a quaternary; the content of the sign is in fact the Trinity, but the gesture itself consists of four stations; the fourth coincides with the word *Amen*.” According to Schuon, “This fourth station belongs to the Blessed Virgin as Spouse of the Holy Spirit and Co-Redemptrix, that is, ultimately, as *Mâyâ* at once human and Divine. This is moreover what is betokened by the *Amen* itself, for it expresses the *Fiat Voluntas Tua* of Mary” (*Face of the Absolute*, 60).

⁷⁵ Sergei Bulgakov, *Sophia, the Wisdom of God: An Outline of Sophiology* (Hudson, New York: Lindisfarne Press, 1993), 51.

⁷⁶ According to the Orthodox theologian Paul Evdokimov, “There is a mysterious coincidence in the theological silence that surrounds both the Holy Spirit and the Virgin during the first three centuries, but their double *kenôsis* ends with a radiant and simultaneous proclamation, during the fourth and fifth centuries. The *Theotokos* appears as the pre-established center of the world, the thrice-holy place of the Divine Advent. . . . As the New Eve, she contains in herself all of humanity, as Adam did; and her flesh, which she gives to her Son, is that of the ‘mother of all the living’ (Gen 3: 20)” (*Woman and the Salvation of the World*, trans. Anthony P. Gythiel [Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1994], 195).

⁷⁷ Bulgakov, 116-117, 122.

⁷⁸ *Dimensions of Islam*, 85-86.

⁷⁹ See my article “The Mystery of the Two Natures” (note 10 above). “God and man have been united in Jesus Christ, but unless we choose to be heretics, the Christian tradition forbids us to think that the manhood in question was merely that of a historical individual, or that the Divinity was that of the pure Absolute” (132).

⁸⁰ Schuon teaches that Mary is “*la personnification de l’Esprit Saint, comme l’indiquent clairement les expressions gratia plena et Mater Dei*” (*Du Divin à L’Humain* [Paris: Le Courrier du Livre, 1981], 47)

⁸¹ *Gnosis*, 106.

⁸² *Christianity/Islam*, 124.

⁸³ *Dimensions of Islam*, 94. What Schuon says here is true of every “Divine descent.” For “in the *Avatâra* there is quite obviously a separation between the human and the Divine—or between accident and Substance; then there is a mixing, not of human accident and Divine Substance, but of the human and the direct reflection of the Substance in the cosmic accident; relatively to the human this reflection may be called Divine, on condition that the Cause is not in any way reduced to the effect” (*Esoterism*, 63). Any adequate exposition of the Schuonian doctrine of the *Avatâra* would obviously take us too far afield, but one should point out at the very least that like that of the Hindus, it differentiates between a number of avataric modalities. “One may distinguish broadly speaking four categories of incarnation,” Schuon writes, “two of them ‘major’ and two ‘minor,’ each of the two groups comprising a ‘plenary’ and a ‘partial’ incarnation. The major *Avatâras* are the founders of religions or, in circumstances where the question of a renewal of form could not arise, the supreme dispensers of a grace, such as Rama and Krishna; among these founders or dispensers, some are ‘solar’ and others ‘lunar’ manifestations of the Divinity, depending on the form of the Message, and so also on the nature of the collectivity receiving it. The minor *Avatâras* are also subdivided into plenary or solar and partial or lunar; they are the great sages or saints who, within the framework of a given tradition and consequently on a lesser scale, repeat the function of the major *Avatâras* in a manner either solar or lunar; there are also feminine incarnations, but their role—that of *shakti*—is always relatively secondary, whatever the level of their manifestation” (*Stations of Wisdom*, 86). Insofar as she is the feminine complement of Christ, Mary may be described as a major “descent” of the lunar type, though as we shall see below the avataric reciprocity which she shares with her Son does not fully exhaust her reality. In any case, the point to underscore at the moment is that every *Avatâra*, whatever the level or scope, “is ‘man as such,’ while being at the same time ‘such and such a man’” (Unpublished Text 919).

⁸⁴ It is said in Islam that when Jesus told his disciples of “another Comforter” whom He would send, “even the Spirit of truth” (John 14:16, 17), He was speaking of the Prophet Muhammad.

⁸⁵ *Transcendent Unity* (1984), 120-121.

⁸⁶ Unpublished Text 430.

⁸⁷ *Dimensions of Islam*, 81. This teaching comes from a tradition of the Prophet mentioned earlier.

⁸⁸ Unpublished Text 430.

⁸⁹ *Face of the Absolute*, 104. Schuon is referring to the distinction in Islam between the *Nabi* (feminine: *Nabiyah*) or prophet as such and the “law-giving prophet” or *Rasûl*. The latter is an apostle or messenger, sent by God as the founder of a given tradition, in accordance with the Koranic verse *And for every nation there is a messenger* (Surâh 10:48). Every *Rasûl* is a *Nabi*, but not every *Nabi* is a *Rasûl*.

⁹⁰ Unpublished Text 430.

⁹¹ *Face of the Absolute*, 105. Speaking directly to his disciples, Schuon adds, “Maryam is the *Nabiyah* of the *khalwah*” (Unpublished Text 337).

⁹² While “it is in the nature of esoterism,” Schuon writes, “to base itself externally” on certain elements in a given exoterism, those elements are “precarious and often almost imperceptible” from the point of view of the corresponding exoteric mentality (*Gnosis*, 36).

⁹³ In a chapter entitled “The Quintessential Esoterism of Islam,” Schuon anticipates the obvious question: “Is not esoterism quintessential by definition?” He answers, “It is so ‘by right,’ but not necessarily ‘in fact,’ as is amply proved by the unequal and often disconcerting phenomena of average Sufism,” in which “metaphysics is treated according to the categories of an anthropomorphist and voluntaristic theology and of an individualistic piety above all obediential in character” (*Sufism*, 131).

⁹⁴ Unpublished Text 745. See note 1 above.

⁹⁵ *Sufism*, 155. “Thus it is that the Virgin is considered, by certain Sufis as well as by Christian authors, as Wisdom-Mother, or as Mother of Prophecy and of all the Prophets.”

⁹⁶ In the Koran, what amounts to the same message is delivered even more laconically, in fact in utter silence. When the Virgin returns to her family holding the one she has borne, and they, incredulous, say, *O Mary! Thou hast come with an amazing thing*, her response is to give place to the child: *Then she pointed to him*, and it is he who speaks: *Lo! I am the slave of Allah. He hath given me the Scripture and hath appointed me a Prophet* (Surâh 19:27, 29, 30).

⁹⁷ *Sufism*, 155. “The Prophets bring Laws; the Holy Virgin brings that which is at the root of all Laws; it is thus that she is the Mother of all the Prophets” (Unpublished Text 344). Schuon observes in this same source that Mary also bears the epithet “‘Mother of the Book’ [*Umm al-Kitâb*],” indicating that she is “the supra-formal essence of all Books, or the *Logos* as first Substance, pure Mercy.” This is why “she personifies and teaches the quintessential orison, the Invocation: the spiritual nourishment, which is infinite. On earth she was the hidden and unknown mother of a Prophet; in Heaven she is the radiant Mother of all the Prophets; it is for this reason that she was, on earth, the wife of the Holy Spirit, not of a man.” In another place, Schuon adds that “each Messenger—Sayyidatnâ Maryam included—is identified with the *Logos*, and at the same time, inasmuch as he is a human individual, he is a door to the *Logos*. Every Messenger has a Message, and the Message of Maryam is on the one hand her Son, and on the other hand the unexpressed Substance of all Messages” (Unpublished Text 400). I said above that the Son is fundamentally the *Logos* “in the Schuonian perspective,” but it should be added that the Church teaches precisely the same—that the *hypostasis* or personal subject of Christ is the eternal Word. According to traditional patristic Christology, what Jesus was, “was both Divine and human, but who He was, was the *Logos*—His Person in fact being none other than the eternal second Person of the Trinity, who had existed from before the foundation of the world” (“The Mystery of the Two Natures,” 117).

⁹⁸ *Christianity/Islam*, 147. Schuon quotes—“according to the revelations of Sister Mechtilde of Magedeburg (13th century)” —the words of the Virgin Mother herself: “‘There I was the single betrothed of the Holy Trinity and mother of the Sages, and I took them before the eyes of God lest they fall, as so many others did. And as I was thus mother to many noble children, my breasts were filled with the pure and unmixed milk of true, sweet Mercy, in such wise that I nurtured the Prophets, and they prophesied before God (Christ) was born’ (*Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit*, 1, 22)” (*Face of the Absolute*, 60). In another connection he notes that St Bernard of Clairvaux was among the saints who knew that “Mary is the ‘milk’ which flows from the Holy Ghost” (*Christianity/Islam*, 146) and who himself had experienced “the Marian mystery of *lactatio*” (*Face of the Absolute*, 225).

⁹⁹ *Dimensions of Islam*, 95. Schuon calls attention in this same place to other examples of Mary’s universality. He notes that “at the time of the persecution of Christianity in Japan, the Christians did not hesitate to make their devotions in front of the statues of Kwannon, the Buddhist goddess of Mercy”; that “the basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, near Mexico City—a famous place of pilgrimage—is built on a hill which in ancient times was consecrated to the mother-goddess Tonantzin, a divinity of the Earth and the Moon,” who “appeared herself, in the form of an Aztec princess of great beauty, to a poor Indian, telling him that she was the ‘Mother of God’ and that

she wished to have a church on this spot”; that “above the principal gate of Córdoba, now no longer extant,” there was an “image of a Roman goddess identified by the Christians as Mary” and respected as well by the Muslims, who “in their turn venerated the statue of the Virgin-Mother as the patroness of Córdoba”; and finally that “the town of Ephesus, where Mary was assumed into Heaven, was dedicated to Artemis, goddess of light,” who as “the protectress of virginity and the beneficent guardian of the sea,” is “thus both *virgo* and *stella maris*.”

¹⁰⁰ *Dimensions of Islam*, 96. To turn the formulation around—for the sake of those who might be assisted by dialectic—the very fact that the Blessed Virgin did radiate across the boundaries of three distinct major traditions can be taken as an indication or sign that she is nothing less than an *Avatâra*.

¹⁰¹ *Dimensions of Islam*, 96. Schuon refers to a *hadîth* at this point which “places Mary alongside Adam and above Eve, because of the privilege of having been breathed into by the Divine Spirit.” As for the Virgin’s prophetic stature in Judaism, this is above all evident in the *Magnificat*, whose words are an inspired synthesis of such Biblical texts as Genesis 17:7, 1 Samuel 2:1-10, 2 Samuel 22:28, Job 5:11-12, Isaiah 40:3-5 and 41:8-10, and Habakkuk 3:18, not to mention several Psalms, including 89:10, 98:3, 103:13, 17-18, 107:9, 111:9-10, 113:5-7, 126:3, 5, and 147:6. Schuon adds, “That the Blessed Virgin, speaking spontaneously, should express herself in Biblical terms is a matter of course for anyone with an inkling of what must be the relationship between infused knowledge and formal Revelation in the soul of such a being as Mary” (*Dimensions of Islam*, 98). The Venerable Mary of Agreda writes of the Virgin that “even in the years of her tender infancy it was noticeable that she understood the Scriptures, and she spent much time in reading them. As she was full of wisdom, she conferred in her heart what she knew from the Divine revelations made to her own self with what is revealed to all men in the Holy Scriptures” (*The Mystical City of God: The Divine History and Life of the Virgin Mother of God*, trans. Fiscar Marison [Rockford, Ill.: Tan Books and Publishers, 1978], 163).

¹⁰² *Dimensions of Islam*, 97. Schuon writes extensively about “the complementarity of the holy personages” (*Christianity/Islam*, 146), that is the relationship between the Virgin and her Son, and he does so in a way which stresses its universal, and not only Christian, significance. We have already discussed the relationship between Mary and Wisdom, the supraformal *Sophia*, a relationship closely linking her to the Spirit as well, and from this point of view, notes Schuon, it is clear that the Mother must be regarded as “greater than the Child, who here represents formal wisdom, hence the particular revelation” of Christianity. But if we consider instead “the adult Jesus”—who said of Himself that *he that hath seen me hath seen the Father* (John 14:9)—then “on the contrary, Mary is not the formless and primordial essence, but his feminine prolongation, the *shakti*: she is then, not the *Logos* under its feminine and maternal aspect, but the virginal and passive complement of the masculine and active *Logos*, its mirror, made of purity and mercy” (*Christianity/Islam*, 124). Understood from this point of view, the Virgin is the dimension of *yin* in all things, even as Christ, by whom *all things were made* (John 1:3), is the *yang*, for “she personifies,” says Schuon, “the passive and receptive qualities of the Divine Substance” (*Logic and Transcendence*, 110). Continuing in the same place, he writes that “if Christ is the ‘spirit,’ she is the ‘soul,’ and this means that man cannot be integrated in Christ without first being integrated in the Virgin, for there is no ‘vertical’ illumination without the corresponding ‘horizontal’ perfection.” Elsewhere he adds that “if Christ is ‘the Way, the Truth, and the Life,’ the Blessed Virgin, who is made of the same substance, enfolds graces which facilitate access to these mysteries, and it is to her that this saying of Christ applies in the first place: ‘My yoke is easy, and My burden is light’” (*Roots of the Human Condition* [Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1991], 78). Schuon goes on to link the same complementarity with the account of creation in Genesis 1 and with Canticles, providing as he does so an important methodic insight. “Water represents Perfection according to Maryam, whereas Spirit is Perfection according to ‘Îsâ, their cosmogonic prototype being ‘the Spirit of God moving on the Waters’; in the Song of Solomon there is an analogous reference in the words of the Beloved: ‘I sleep, but my heart wakes.’ Holy sleep, or *apatheia*, refers to the first of these two mysteries, and holy wakefulness to the second; their combination gives rise to a spiritual alchemy which is found in a variety of forms in all initiatory methods” (*Dimensions of Islam*, 86-87). One final point should be made in this context: insofar as she functions “economically” as the shaktic counterpart of her Son, Mary prepares for His “descent” according to her own, inverse avataric modality. Returning once again, as so often, to the language of Advaita Vedanta, Schuon observes—in one of his frequent paraphrases of the well-known Patristic formula—that in Christ “*Âtmâ* became *Mâyâ* so that *Mâyâ* might become *Âtmâ*.” In the case of His mother, however, “*Mâyâ* (Mary) became *Âtmâ* (through the Immaculate Conception) so that *Âtmâ* (the Word) might become *Mâyâ* (through Christ’s human nature).” In other words—putting the matter “in Tibetan terms”—“Mary the

Immaculate is *Padme*, and Jesus the Incarnate is *Mani*; ‘the Jewel in the Lotus’” (Unpublished Text entitled “Intrinsic Esoterism in Christianity”).

¹⁰³ A woman’s name in Arabic, *Laylâ* (or *Lailâ*) means “night,” and in view of her mystery and darkness, she is often celebrated among the Sufis as representing the Divine Essence. The following, from a poem by the Shaykh Al-‘Alawî, is exemplary in this respect: “Full near I came unto where dwelleth/Lailâ, when I heard her call./That voice, would I might ever hear it!/She favoured me, and drew me to her,/took me in, into her precinct,/With discourse intimate addressed me./She sat me by her, then came closer./Raised the cloak that hid her from me,/Made me marvel to distraction, Bewildered me with all her beauty./She took me and amazed me,/And hid me in her inmost self, Until I thought that she was I,/And my life she took as ransome” (Martin Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century: Shaikh Ahmad Al-‘Alawî: His Spiritual Heritage and Legacy* [Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 1973], 225). Commenting on this poem Schuon writes, “The ‘Divine dimension’ is called *Laylâ*, ‘Night,’ for its *a priori* non-manifested quality; this makes one think of the dark color of Parvati and of the black Virgins in Christian art and also, in a certain sense, of the nocturnal encounter between Christ and Nicodemus” (*Roots of the Human Condition*, 42).

¹⁰⁴ Unpublished Text 251. “No perfection,” he adds, “is situated outside of her.” Elsewhere he writes, “The Substance contains all that we love, and She is what we are” (Unpublished Text 683).

¹⁰⁵ *Esoterism*, 44.

¹⁰⁶ *Esoterism*, 49, 178.

¹⁰⁷ *Esoterism*, 49-50. We must not forget, of course, that the Divine is finally beyond all categories, and that in Himself “God could be neither masculine nor feminine, for it would be an error of language to reduce God to one of two reciprocally complementary poles.” Insofar as each requires the other to be what it is, Reality is obviously neither alone, nor even both as a synthesis, for its perfect simplicity is prior to all such pairs or syzygies. On the other hand, if “each sex represents perfection,” and if we attend to that perfection as such, “God cannot but assume the characteristics of both” (*Dimensions of Islam*, 129).

¹⁰⁸ “There is not only a personal God—who is so to speak the ‘human’ or ‘humanized Face’ of the suprapersonal Divinity—but there is also, ‘below’ and resulting from this first hypostatic degree, what we may term the ‘confessional Face’ of God: it is the Face that God turns towards a particular religion, the Gaze He casts upon it, and without which it could not even exist” (*Survey of Metaphysics*, 91).

¹⁰⁹ *Esoterism*, 49.

¹¹⁰ *From the Divine to the Human*, trans. Gustavo Polit and Deborah Lambert (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1982), 95.

¹¹¹ *Logic and Transcendence*, 119.

¹¹² *Roots of the Human Condition*, 40-41. As I have written elsewhere, “The impassibility, integrity, and sovereignty of the exoteric western Deity are seen here to be the veils or projections of something other and higher, which, utterly unlike all manifested qualities and insusceptible to every category, remains in its very fluidity and indeterminacy rather more like the feminine than like anything else.” Hence “the femininity of Non-Being or Beyond-Being can thus be considered, at least in this context, as the Principle of the Principle, as constituting and deploying the very Divinity of God Himself” (“Femininity, Hierarchy, and God,” *Religion of the Heart: Essays Presented to Frithjof Schuon on His Eightieth Birthday*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr and William Stoddart [Washington, D.C.: The Foundation for Traditional Studies, 1991], 126).

¹¹³ *The Mystical Theology*, Chapter 1.

¹¹⁴ Orthodox writer Philip Sherrard draws an explicit connection between the apophatic silence of the supra-formal domain and the Divine Femininity: “The Feminine is the pure potentiality that transcends even Being. . . . she is ‘beyond Being,’ ‘that which is not,’ the *Nihil* or totally occluded state that is a precondition of God being able to be at all, or to know and affirm Himself at all. As such she is the principle of the masculine principle itself” (*Human Image, World Image: The Death and Resurrection of Sacred Cosmology* [Ipswich, England: Golgonooza Press, 1992], 178-79).

¹¹⁵ *To Have a Center*, 119. “Whoever has seen me has seen God”: these words, or their equivalent—Schuon is here paraphrasing Christ’s teaching in the Gospel that *He that hath seen me hath seen the Father* (John 14:9)—“are found in the most diverse traditional worlds, and they apply especially also to the ‘Divine Mary,’ ‘clothed in the sun’ because reabsorbed in it and as it were contained therein” (*Esoterism*, 62).

¹¹⁶ *Treasures of Buddhism*, 92. According to the Palamite doctrine, “The Virgin Mother dwells on the frontier between created and uncreated natures” (St Gregory Palamas, “Homily 14”).

¹¹⁷ “A Sufi has said that Sayyidatnâ Maryam personifies ‘original Sanctity,’ hence ‘naturally supernatural’ Sanctity, which implies no effort with a view to realization, no method, no constraint; there are certainly, with the Virgin, efforts which result from her Sanctity, but the latter is not the fruit of any effort; it is substantial and existential. Now Sanctity is essentially Contemplativity: it is the intuition of the spiritual nature of things; profound intuition, which determines the entire soul, hence the entire being of man. . . . Sanctity in itself coincides with the Plenitude of Grace (*gratia plena*) which calls forth the Presence of God (*Dominus tecum*)” (Unpublished Text, 894). According to St Andrew of Crete, “When the Mother of Him who is Beauty itself is born, [our] nature recovers in her person its ancient privileges, and is fashioned according to a perfect model, truly worthy of God. And this fashioning is a perfect restoration; this restoration is a divinization; and this divinization is an assimilation to the primordial state” (“Homily I on the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin”).

¹¹⁸ *Christianity/Islam*, 67. Schuon continues by pointing out that these several attributes “are at the origin of all the angelic and human virtues, and even of every possible positive quality, as for example the purity of snow or the incorruptibility and luminosity of crystal.” Speaking in another place about the Virgin’s beauty, he writes, “Just as Sayyidnâ ‘Îsâ took upon himself all the sorrow of the world, so Sayyidatnâ Maryam encompasses all the beauty of the world. With her beauty she places herself before the world so that it can no longer seduce us; it is thus that she delivers us through her beauty. It is through her beauty that she causes us to love God and to forget the world; she is a ray of the Beauty and of the Love of God” (Unpublished Text 312).

¹¹⁹ Unpublished Text 448.

¹²⁰ *Christianity/Islam*, 147-48. Indeed, “all the qualities of Mary can be reduced to the perfumes of Divine Infinitude” (*Esoterism*, 38). According to St Gregory Palamas, “Those who know God recognize in her the habitation of the Infinite” (“Homily 14”).

¹²¹ In fact, Schuon adds, “she is as it were sanctity itself, without which there is neither Divine revelation nor return to God” (*Christianity/Islam*, 68-69). And again: “The Virgin personifies Equilibrium, since she is identifiable with the Substance of the Cosmos, which is both maternal and virginal—a Substance of Harmony and Beauty, and thereby opposed to all disequilibriums” (*Dimensions of Islam*, 89).

¹²² Unpublished Text 796.

¹²³ One feels obliged to add this last phrase, for “in spite of every theological precaution,” and “whether one likes it or not,” it is nonetheless true that “in Christianity the Blessed Virgin assumes the function of the feminine aspect of the Divinity” (*Dimensions of Islam*, 129) at the level of pious practice—a case, one is tempted to say, where extremes meet and *vox populi, vox Dei*. Schuon continues, not surprisingly: “This observation, far from being a cause for reproach in the eyes of the writer, has on the contrary for him the most positive of meanings.” Elsewhere he points out that in the Semitic religions, “the Divinity is conceived in a masculine aspect,” though “with a certain exception in the case of Christianity, which, without granting the Blessed Virgin the worship of ‘latría,’ does grant

her, and to her alone, the worship of ‘hyperdulia,’ which practically, in spite of everything, amounts to a kind of divinization, if not by ‘right,’ at least ‘in fact’” (*To Have a Center*, 119). In the piety of the Eastern Church, one is expressly asked to acknowledge Mary’s share in the salvific work of God, as in the Akathist Hymn, where the invocations of the Virgin by her many names are punctuated by the refrain “O Most Holy Mother of God, save us.” Indeed, the oldest known prayer to the Virgin, recited in the West as the *Sub tuum praesidium* and first found in a Greek papyrus fragment dating from the late third century A.D., is altogether explicit in this connection: “We turn to thee for protection, O Holy Mother of God: Despise not our petitions, but help us in our necessities. Save us from every danger, O Glorious and Blessed Virgin.”

¹²⁴ *To Have a Center*, 123. Schuon is speaking specifically here about “Evangelicalism” and Protestant theology, but what he says applies just as much to every form of Christian exoterism.

¹²⁵ There are very occasional exceptions in certain speculative works. Bulgakov, for example, is able to write that the “Divine-humanity is to be found . . . in a double, not only a single, form: not only that of the God-human Christ, but that of His Mother, too. Jesus-Mary—there is the fulness of Divine-humanity.” The Virgin, he adds, is her Son’s “feminine counterpart” (*Sophia, the Wisdom of God*, 123). But such exceptions serve only to confirm the rule.

¹²⁶ *Face of the Absolute*, 60. Theological reflection, Schuon continues, “can function only with simple notions, precisely defined and concretely useful; its philosophical dimension can refine this structure, but it cannot transcend it.”

¹²⁷ See above note 7.

¹²⁸ The first two of these titles are from the Litany of Loreto, and the second two from the Akathist Hymn. Other notable descriptions include “Mystical Rose,” “Mirror of Justice,” “Shrine of the Spirit,” “Burning and Unconsumed Bush,” “Hidden Sense of the Ineffable Plan,” and “Restoration of the Fallen Adam.”

¹²⁹ *Epistle* 101. Not only is Mary “the protectress of what came after her,” being “the glory of the earthborn” and “the adornment of all creation”; she is also, says St Gregory Palamas, “the cause of what preceded her,” and thus “the head and consummation of all that is holy.” She is, in fact, “the beginning and the foundation and the root of all these ineffable good things” (“Homily on the Dormition”).

¹³⁰ *Survey of Metaphysics*, 33-34.

¹³¹ *Transcendent Unity* (1984), 132. See above note 12.

¹³² *Christianity/Islam*, 79.

¹³³ *To Have a Center*, 119. The phrase “Mother of God,” says Schuon, is “actually highly elliptical” (*Roots of the Human Condition*, 38); indeed it is an ellipsis of “the most daring kind” (*Logic and Transcendence*, 117).

¹³⁴ *Christianity/Islam*, 79. Schuon goes so far as to say that the Nestorian “protest against the expression *Mater Dei*,” which originally precipitated the declaration of the dogma, “can be defended seriously and honestly,” for the expression “unquestionably entails a certain ‘neutralization’ of the perspective of transcendence to which Nestorius had a sacred right to be deeply attached” (*Survey of Metaphysics*, 128). Elsewhere Schuon explains that “the esoteric nature of the Christian dogmas and sacraments is the underlying cause of the Islamic reaction against Christianity. Because the latter had mixed together the *Haqiqah* (the esoteric Truth) and the *Shari’ah* (the exoteric Law), it carried with it certain dangers of disequilibrium that have in fact manifested themselves during the course of the centuries,” dangers which Christ Himself indicates with the words *Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you* (Matthew 7:6). If one asks, however, “whether things might have been otherwise,” Schuon answers at once, “assuredly not,” for “the inward and esoteric truth must of necessity sometimes manifest itself in broad daylight, this being by virtue of a definite possibility of spiritual manifestation and without regard to the shortcomings of a particular human environment” (*Transcendent Unity* [1984], 133-34).

¹³⁵ *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, trans. P. N. Townsend (Bedfont, England: Perennial Books, 1987), 115-16.

¹³⁶ *Christianity/Islam*, 79.

¹³⁷ As his readers know, this is a frequently recurring phrase in the Schuonian writings. The following is representative: “There has been much speculation on the question of knowing how the sage—the ‘gnostic’ or the *jnâni*—‘sees’ the world of phenomena, and occultists of all sorts have not refrained from putting forward the most fantastic theories on ‘clairvoyance’ and the ‘third eye’; but in reality the difference between ordinary vision and that enjoyed by the sage or the gnostic is quite clearly not of the sensorial order. The sage sees things in their total context, therefore in their relativity, and at the same time in their metaphysical transparency” (*Light on the Ancient Worlds*, trans. Lord Northbourne [Bloomington, Ind: World Wisdom Books, 1984], 116).

¹³⁸ From his unpublished memoirs, “Memories and Meditations” (1982), 10.

¹³⁹ “Memories and Meditations,” 264. Although his parents were both of Roman Catholic background, they did not practice their religion, and Schuon was sent instead to a Lutheran school. Shortly before dying in 1920, however, his father had encouraged him to enter the Catholic Church.

¹⁴⁰ “Memories and Meditations,” 265.

¹⁴¹ “Memories and Meditations,” 266.

¹⁴² “Memories and Meditations,” 267, 268. “In retrospect,” says Schuon, “I can describe the event on the ship and in Tetuán in these words: The heavenly Beauty is both remedy and sacrament. For its sweetness heals; it dissolves all melancholy and all bitterness. And its holiness transforms; it overcomes all consuming thoughts and all seductive curiosity. It bestows the motionless light of recollection and the inebriating draught of fervor; it is luminous gold and singing wine. May I be the mirror, wherein its saving image resounds” (270).

¹⁴³ Unpublished text entitled “On the Subject of a Pneumatic Personality.” Although further details would be out of place in this context, it should be added, and emphasized, that these experiences were not the last. Indeed Schuon was to benefit from Mary’s presence and graces throughout the rest of his life, though he remained circumspect in speaking about them, even in his unpublished writings. Describing a certain state in his memoirs, he writes very typically, “All at once she was there—a tall apparition, like snow and sun. But to say more would not become me” (“Memories and Meditations,” 269). We do know, however, that he was granted additional visual experiences, that the Virgin would speak to him in his native German, and that he sometimes received presentiments of a tactile order when Mary clasped his hand.

¹⁴⁴ Martin Lings recently recounted his experience of being led to the *Tarîqah*, in the late 1930s, in response to his prayers to the Virgin, though it was only years later that he came to realize what the connection had been all along. He and other disciples in Europe had asked Schuon to add a further name to that of his own shaykh, the Shaykh Al-‘Alawî, in order to distinguish their spiritual community from ‘Alawiyyah Sufis in North Africa. “To our surprise [Schuon] said, ‘Our *Tarîqah* is *Maryamiyyah*,’ that is, of Mary; and he told us that more than once she had made it clear to him that she had chosen us for herself, and that she was our protective patroness. He went so far as to say: ‘It is not we who have chosen her; it is she who has chosen us.’ And so, after all, my *Ave Maria*, repeated such a multitude of times, had not been out of line with my final orientation” (“Frithjof Schuon: An Autobiographical Approach,” *Sophia*, 4/2 [Winter 1998], 19).

¹⁴⁵ Unpublished Text 982.

¹⁴⁶ These verses vary from one or two quatrains to somewhat lengthier litanies, and in them the Virgin is addressed by such titles as “Full Moon of Full Moons,” “Well-spring in the Garden of the All-Bountiful,” “Flood of Graces,” “Laylâ, Abode of the Ever-Merciful,” “Nectar of Paradise,” “Light-filled Crystal,” “Repose of the Spiritual

Travelers,” “Gate of the Infinitely Good,” and “Bride unto the Gnostics.” In later years Schuon came to write a series of poems in English, the first of which, “*Regina Coeli*,” was also addressed to Mary: “Thou art more than a symbol; Thou art near/To me as blood and heart; Thou art the air/That makes me live, that makes me pure and wise;/A sweet and tender air from Paradise./Thou art more than the words describing Thee/And more than all the sacred songs that we/Sing in Thy praise; my ecstasy was Thine/Before God’s very making of the vine” (*Road to the Heart: Poems* [Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1995], 8). Later still, during the last three years of his life, Schuon wrote over three thousand lyric poems in German, and once again he had occasion to celebrate the great Marian Grace. “Port-Vendres, where the ship lay at anchor—/I will never forget that golden day./I was alone in my room; the others/Wanted to walk a little on the shore./They had brought me a bunch of flowers—/I gazed into their bright splendor/And thought of Paradise like a child;/Then came—a waking dream—the Virgin sweet,/And remained, hidden deep within me/With her grace, which never left me—/Holy presence, luminous remembrance./A picture come from Heaven; I gladly call it/The *Stella Maris*—my morning star.”

¹⁴⁷ I use the term “icons” to underscore the hieratic and translucent quality of the images, their function as “windows to Heaven,” but it should be understood that Schuon’s paintings are not in a Byzantine style, nor are they meant to serve the same didactic purpose as Eastern Christian works of sacred art. It should also be stressed that Schuon was above all a metaphysician and a spiritual master, not an artist, and that it was for his books, not his art, that he wished to be known.

¹⁴⁸ From a letter of December 1982.

¹⁴⁹ Schuon is actually describing the Egyptian Isis, “a well-known example of Divine Femininity,” but his words apply equally to the Blessed Virgin as she appears in his paintings. “By drawing back the veils, which are accidents and darkness, she reveals her Nudity, which is Substance and Light; being inviolable, she can blind or kill, but being generous, she regenerates and delivers” (*Esoterism*, 50).

¹⁵⁰ The author is Ramon Mujica, a Peruvian scholar, and the words are taken from a copy of an undated letter. Referring to Schuon’s own words above, Mujica writes that “for someone like myself who has been brought up in a Catholic background, Mr Schuon’s representations of the Holy Virgin are . . . a source of ‘initiatc dis-illusion.’ The Virgin’s Nudity—her naked immaculate earth, her transparent body of glory, her flower of virginity—scorches the lids of our hearts. An epiphany of light, a garden of resurrected suns, is food for the inner eye.” On the subject of nudity in sacred art, Schuon notes that “according to the Catholic criteriology, total nudity is excluded so far as the messengers of Heaven are concerned”—“even partial nudity probably,” he adds, “so far as women are concerned, except in the case of *lactatio*, as indicated by St Bernard’s vision and also by certain icons”—“whereas in Hinduism it has either a neutral or a positive character. The reason for the Catholic attitude is that Heaven can neither wish to excite concupiscence nor to offend against modesty.” And yet, he concludes, “even in the climate of Christianity there exists here a certain margin” (*Esoterism*, 217; see above note 98). In a private audience, Schuon once told me, “One loves Christ for His words, but one loves the Virgin for her body” (July 1996). In view of everything we have discussed in this article, I trust that the profoundly sober meaning of this remark will be evident.

¹⁵¹ “Memories and Meditations,” 268. It is true that when writing privately to friends he would himself sometimes speak about the stylistic content of the images, explaining for example that “in my paintings of the Virgin, a tendency towards Hinduism, towards Shaktism if you will, manifests itself, and towards the *Krita-Yuga*, and finally towards the proto-Semitic world, which is echoed in the Song of Songs.” But he was quick to add in such contexts that “this was not my prior intention; it lies simply in the nature of things and likewise in the very kernel of my being”; for it was precisely there, it seems—in his heart—that he had been blessed with “a particular manifestation of the *Rahmah*, the *Sakinah*, the *Barakah*, the mystical *Laylā*, determined by the end of time; and, from a metaphysical point of view, the self-determining of the *Haqiqah*” (from a letter of September 1981).