

This book contributes to a recent and positive trend in the field to make a sharper distinction between aesthetics and philosophy of art. However, despite emphasizing this distinction, this book still seems to lean too heavily on examples taken from art. The main ideas might have been demonstrated in a stronger way had there been more examples—there were a few—of attending aesthetically in other specifically non-art contexts. But a major strength of this volume is the blending of philosophical insights with research in the science of perception and with non-Western aesthetic ideas. Bence Nanay's *Aesthetics: A Very Short Introduction* is a good and insightful read for scholars and non-specialists alike.

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KEYS TO THE BEYOND: FRITHJOF SCHUON'S CROSS-TRADITIONAL LANGUAGE OF TRANSCENDENCE. By Patrick Laude. New York: State University of New York (SUNY) Press, 2020, 404 pp.

"[W]hat is needed in our time...is to provide some people with keys fashioned afresh—keys no better than the old ones but merely more elaborated and reflective—in order to help them rediscover the truths written in an eternal script in the very substance of the spirit."¹

– Frithjof Schuon

A remarkable facet of today's world is the proximity in which diverse human beings and collectivities find themselves. Diversity appears everywhere and is a hallmark of our times. Yet how are we to understand this pluralism? Never have all the world's religions and their mystical dimensions been available as they are today, virtually at the touch of a human finger. Now anyone can access the most esoteric teachings of the East and West that were once made available to only those sufficiently prepared and qualified.

It is through a cross-cultural analysis that this book studies the *corpus* of the philosopher Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998), a leading exponent of the perennial philosophy. This work explores Schuon's original vocabulary and his contribution to the field of comparative religion through a cross-religious and trans-religious hermeneutics and understanding.

Patrick Laude has authored numerous books on esoterism, mysticism and comparative religion. This work consists of ten very lucid and no less illuminating chapters: 1) *Ātman, Māyā* and the Relatively Absolute; 2) The Avatāric Mystery; 3) *Upāya*: Religion as Relatively Absolute; 4) The Nature of Things and the Human Margin; 5) Trinitarian Metaphysics; 6) Necessary Sufism and the Archetype of Islam; 7) The Divine Feminine; 8) The *Yin-Yang* Perspective and Visual Metaphysics; 9) The "Tantric" Spiritualization of Sexuality; and 10) Esoteric Ecumenism.

The outlook of modernism and postmodernism essentially repudiates objectivity due to its subjectivist relativism, which signifies an end to the alleged grand narratives of the present day. This, however, flies in the face of logic as there is an obvious self-contradiction here, because to reject objectivity is to undermine the premise of relativism itself. The idea that there is no universal truth or that all knowledge is social construction that

everything is an interpretation is self-contradicting. This itself is an absolutization of the relative, which is none other than relativism. According to Schuon, a relativistic “assertion nullifies itself if it is true and by nullifying itself logically proves thereby that it is false; its initial absurdity lies in the implicit claim to be unique in escaping, as if by enchantment, from a relativity that is declared to be the only possibility.” (p. 13) Laude notes that the Divine Essence, like the Absolute, evades all attempts to be measured and cannot be reduced: “The Absolute is that which is totally itself without any qualification and is, at the same time, necessary and independent from anything else.” (p. 161)

Because of the reductionistic trend of *historicism* that pervades contemporary academia, attempts to discern a common ground or essential doctrinal convergences across the religious and spiritual traditions are regarded with a deeply entrenched skepticism. Metaphysics in such a context is inextricably determined by socioeconomic and political factors. Yet this current study demonstrates that it is through a cross-cultural analysis and esoteric ecumenicism of the religions rooted in metaphysics that common insights and their diverse modulations can be distilled. From the outset of the book, Laude refers to the important work of Toshihiko Izutsu (1914–1993), Professor Emeritus at Keio University in Japan, who called for a “meta-historical” metaphysical dialogue that would “be crystallized into a *philosophia perennis* in the fullest sense of the term.”²

Laude informs us that “The doctrinal core of Schuon’s metaphysical exposition lies in envisaging non-dual Reality under an indefinite number of aspects and vantage points.” (p. 16) He adds elsewhere, “it is only by envisaging reality from a metaphysical point of view — one rooted in ultimate non-duality underlying all phenomena — that one can fully recognize a transcendent unity of religions.” (p. 120)

Religions can be understood in their exoteric or outward dimension and in their esoteric or inner dimension: however, both are needed for the integral understanding of religion. Schuon affirms “exoterism must always start from the relative while esoterism starts from the Absolute to which it gives a more strict, and even the strictest possible meaning.” (p. 153) This esoteric perspective is not for everyone as Schuon cautions “truths that are too elevated may...actually become errors in the consciousness of a man who is too earthly or too passionate.” (p. 121) An example of this is provided with the Buddhist *upāya* “saving means,” which can be misunderstood as being a mere dispensable instrument while it is actually a necessary sacred mediation.

Laude writes the following, which is consistent with Schuon’s approach: “immanence cannot be apprehended independently from transcendence.” (p. 47) This discernment is missing within New Age spirituality as it asserts immanence to the exclusion of transcendence. Through metaphysics, we can say that transcendence is immanence and immanence is transcendence. Yet, transcendence always precedes immanence and not the other way around. This is why religions tend to emphasize *a priori* transcendence in their dogmatic and traditional teachings.

Schuon speaks to the necessity of spiritual forms in the integral practice of religion, yet he simultaneously articulates that it is only through esoterism that the spiritual forms can be fully understood:

Every Tradition is necessarily an adaptation, and adaptation implies limitation.... These limitations must needs be found in some manner or other in the origins of the traditional forms and it is inevitable that they should be manifested in the course of the development of these forms, becoming most marked at the end of this development, to which they themselves contribute. If these limitations are necessary for the vitality of a Tradition, they

remain none the less limitations with the consequences which that implies... It could not indeed be otherwise, even in the case of the sacred symbols, because only the infinite, eternal, and formless Essence is absolutely pure and unassailable, and because its transcendence must be made manifest by the dissolution of forms as well as by its radiation through them. (p. 138)

For Schuon the relationship between essence and form is described here: "Form proceeds from essence, but the latter remains eminently free in regard to form." (p. 208) From this point of view, we can make sense of Schuon's remark that "explicitly to practice one religion is implicitly to practice them all." (p. 192) This is because the doctrine of the perennial philosophy or the transcendent unity of religions upholds that all religions converge in the Absolute as they originate and return to the Divine Essence. The term Tradition in this context needs clarifying, and Laude defines it as "a divinely inspired and instituted reality whose core principle, the transcendent wisdom of the ages, is manifested through a diversity of revelations and symbols in response to the various conditions of time and place." (p. 188)

Transcendence does not in any way repudiate the human realm or diversity; on the contrary, "the Unity or Non-Duality that metaphysics recognizes is not an absolute negation of multiplicity but an essential integration of the later into the former." (p. 54) Laude makes a very important point regarding the application of metaphysics to the human realm: "the recognition of transcendent essences cannot readily translate into a rigid categorization of human phenomena." (p. 260) It becomes clear that through comparative metaphysics, as Laude makes powerfully clear, "a term borrowed from one tradition may serve to enlighten some aspects of another." (p. 352)

Keys to the Beyond provides an unmatched academic analysis of the work of Frithjof Schuon, who in large part remains misunderstood. This is an important work for those who seek a deeper understanding of this complex thinker. This penetrating analysis articulates how religions are necessary forms that correspond to the diverse human beings and collectivities the world over. Although the religions are each a manifestation of the relative Absolute, each religion utilizes words to point to a transcendent reality. The religions use language as the Zen adage of the finger pointing at the moon, directing consciousness from the tool as the finger to the moon as reality itself. If the finger is mistaken for the moon, akin to language being taken as an end unto itself rather than the reality it is alluding to, it remains obscuring and veiling as opposed to clarifying and revealing. It remains a trapping, rather than a doorway into the universal and timeless wisdom to realize the formless and transpersonal essence found at the heart of all the religions, what is—unborn and therefore undying—always here and now.

Notes

¹ Frithjof Schuon, "Preface," to *Understanding Islam: A New Translation with Selected Letters*, trans. Mark Perry and Jean-Pierre Lafouge, ed. Patrick Laude (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2011), p. xvii.

² See Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984).

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