

CHAPTER ONE

A Biographical Approach

*He is one who speaks from the experience of what he has seen,
And this makes all the difference.
The celestial rider has passed by;
The dust has risen into the air,
He has hastened on, but the dust he has raised
Is still there, in suspense—
Look straight in front of thee;
Let thy gaze deviate neither to the right nor to the left;
The dust is here, and he
Is in the Infinite.*

—Rûmî, *Rubâ'iyat*

At the beginning of the twentieth century the Schuon family, of Germanic origin but of Valaisan stock, had been living in Basel for some years. Paul Schuon, whose parents were Swabian, first emigrated to Alsace, after it had become German in 1870, following the Franco-Prussian war. There he married Margarete Boehler, who was Alsatian on her mother's side, but whose father was originally from the Rhineland. They had two sons. The first, Erich, born on April 26, 1906, was to become many years later a Trappist monk under the name Father Gall. The second, Frithjof, was born on June 18, 1907.¹

A violinist and a professor at the Basel Conservatory, Paul Schuon had formed a friendship during a concert he gave in Oslo with a ship's captain named Frithjof Thorsen; it was to the remembrance of this friendship that his second son owed his unusual name from the land of fjords.²

The Schuon brothers spent the best part of their childhood in Basel, a "fairy-tale city," as Frithjof later said in deep appreciation of the romanticism of this city on the edge of German Switzerland. As a child he liked to walk in the



Frithjof Schuon as a child in Basel, 1916. Personal collection, Catherine Schuon.

old, melancholic streets, stroll along the Rhine, and dream, alone or with friends, on the *Pfalz* which overlooked it.

Germanic to the core, and speaking at this time only German, Schuon was impregnated from childhood by that poetic and mystical culture whose particular expression in fairy tales and traditional melodies he never forgot. It was also because his father liked to play the violin like a gypsy that this music always had a nostalgic attraction for Schuon. His sensibility led him quite naturally in the direction of German romanticism, “nurtured by the Middle Ages, at once chivalrous, enchanted and mystical.” “Doubtless,” he wrote in a letter to his friend Hans K ry, “many children of that era—it was, as it were, the end of the nineteenth century—breathed that same air.” Very early he read Goethe and Schiller, then later Heine and many others; but his father’s library contained treasures of another kind. A gifted musician and an occasional poet, Paul Schuon was an amiable and distinguished man, a dreamer, naturally aristocratic and mystical in his fashion, sensitive to the atmosphere of Islam and India of old. And this is how the young Frithjof was able to find, among his father’s books, the *Bhagavad G ta*, which enchanted this twelve-year-old, the *Quran*, the *Vedas*, and also the *Arabian Nights*, which his father read to the family in the evenings.

Even though his parents, who were of Catholic origin, were not expressly practicing, Schuon was brought up in a profoundly religious atmosphere, and as a young child he was sent to Evangelical catechism,³ where the “simple and intense piety of this first teacher” made a singular impression on him. This pious Lutheran was indeed able to inculcate in him biblical principles, and to introduce him to the world of Abraham and the *Psalms*. He said much later of the predominant Lutheranism of his childhood, “It cannot be pure heresy. . . . Its priorities are simplicity, inwardness and trust in God; nothing else touched me in my early childhood” (letter to Hans K ry, November 17, 1982).

Schuon sought from his youth onwards to find consolation in sacred art and prayer. An introvert, he felt like a stranger, misunderstood by those around him. His profoundly artistic nature⁴ and his taste for the authentic led him to look in museums for the traces of past wisdom which seemed to him like windows opening onto a lost world. “I could spend hours visually assimilating the messages of the traditional worlds. For me visual assimilation came before conceptual assimilation” (Letter to Marco Pallis, June 8, 1982).

Thus it was that in 1919, when he was barely twelve, he discovered with wonder, in the Museum of Ethnography in Basel, three Buddhist statues whose closed eyes and sacred gestures filled him with emotion. Much later, he wrote, “Our first encounter, intense and unforgettable, with Buddhism and the Far East, took place in our childhood in the presence of a large Japanese Buddha of gilded wood, flanked by two statues of Kwannon. Suddenly confronted with this vision of majesty and mystery, we might well have paraphrased Caesar, and exclaimed: *Veni, vidi, victus sum*” (I came, I saw, I was conquered).⁵

An adolescent out of the ordinary, confronted with the profanity and absurdity of the world and the ugliness of evil—the war of 1914 began when he was only seven—and with growing incomprehension on the part of most of his entourage, he became absorbed in his dreams and aspired, as he then wrote, to “the Essential, the Sacred, the Beautiful, and the Great.”

Everything in his tastes and in his comportment distinguished him from his schoolmates with whom, however, he was happy to associate. Moreover, his loyalty as a friend was a characteristic of his sensibility. His early friends always remembered his dignity as a child, which was calm and without ostentation. “Dignity is the ontological consciousness that the individual has of his supra-individual reality,” he wrote later in *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, and he added, “[D]ignity is the ontological awareness an individual has of his supra-individual reality.”⁶ In fact, Schuon always kept this aristocratic bearing, this natural and unaffected dignity specific to many great spiritual beings.

He grasped at a very young age the principles that were to constitute the essence of his future metaphysical standpoint. It may be that the notion of the “transcendent unity of religions” was evoked in him one day when, walking in the Zoological Gardens in Basel with Lucy von Dechend,⁷ he met an elderly Senegalese marabout, with whom he conversed for a moment. The marabout, in order to make himself better understood, drew in the sand a circle with radii and added, pointing at the center, “God is the Center, all paths lead to Him.”

It was also at this time that he met at school someone who was to become his best friend and also one of the greatest writers of the traditionalist school of this century: Titus Burckhardt. Both excellent draftsmen, they sometimes tried to rival each other in skill and imagination, illustrating the Greek heroic legends or other traditional subjects. One year younger than Schuon, Burckhardt—born in Florence, but whose family was from Basel—was the son of the sculptor Carl Burckhardt and the great-nephew of the famous art historian, Jakob Burckhardt. Schuon described his first meeting with his future friend in these terms:

It was in the music room at school: the teacher asked each of us to sing a song we had learned at primary school. Up stood little Burckhardt and, in his boyish, piercing voice, sang the song of Winkelried. I saw him in profile: he had long blonde hair, and he sang so loudly that the teacher was astonished. This scene for me is unforgettable. I too was a singer when I was a child, as I had to sing in the St. Matthew Passion in the Basel Cathedral. The brahmanical side of Titus Burckhardt emerged later, when he was an adult. As a child he was half fighter, half dreamer; this dreaming was the prelude to his subsequent contemplativity. (letter to Hans Küry, March 14, 1984)

However, their real friendship began only many years later, in 1932, when they met again in Riehen (a district in Basel) in the house of Lucy von Dechend, after each had separately undertaken spiritual initiatives which brought them together once again. Their friendship lasted until Titus Burckhardt's death in 1984.

What was precious about Titus Burckhardt's personality was the combination of an extraordinarily penetrating and profound intelligence with a great artistic talent; since he could not be a creative artist—and it was his good fortune that he was prevented from being one—his talent was put entirely into the service of the spiritual life; even more so in that he was at the same time very gifted for mystical contemplation. . . . He had in him an eternal youthfulness, something as it were liberating; one never felt constricted in his presence. He certainly did not lack a sense of humor and he also had a sense of adventure; he was enterprising and knew how to adapt to circumstances. From another point of view he had a good heart and a childlike candor and transparency. I can add that he was an excellent writer: we all know that. (letter to Hans Küry, January 21, 1984)



Schuon was thirteen when he lost his father in 1920. This death left Erich and Frithjof desolate. In Paul Schuon, they lost the person who understood them best, and with whom they had had most affinity. What is more, their mother chose to return to her family in Mulhouse, her hometown in Alsace, which had reverted to France. The two brothers had great difficulty accepting this change of country, atmosphere, and language. Entering clumsily into a period of conflict with her children, Margarete Schuon—whose financial situation was precarious, to say the least—wanted henceforth to make them “good little Frenchmen” and dreamed of their acquiring social success and of becoming respectable bourgeois. In fact, Frithjof got along well only with his mother's half-sister, Hélène. His mother and grandmother tried to make him wear hats and ties, which he detested, so little did he feel in himself the soul of a little bourgeois. Unhappy and nostalgic, he found refuge in poetry and wrote many poems which already provided a glimpse of his unquenchable thirst for the Absolute.

Shortly before his death, Paul Schuon had encouraged his sons to embrace the Catholic faith, but while Erich decided quickly, Frithjof did not decide until a year later. In reality, he was very happy to find in Catholicism the practice of the rosary and the veneration of the Holy Virgin who was, so to speak, the answer to an aspiration expressed in one of his childhood poems written in 1920:

Trägt mich Dein sanfter Arm zu Dir empor?
 Senkt sich Dein Mantel stumm zu mir herab?
 Ich schaue andachtsvoll Dein frommes All;
 Ich gehe auf im Dufte Deiner Seele.
 Du öffnest meinen Sinnen sanft ein Tor;
 ein milder Glaube rieselt lind herab.

(Doth thy velvet arm raise me to thee?
 Doth thy mantle silently descend on me?
 Devotedly I contemplate thy holy all;
 I dissolve and blossom in the perfume of thy soul.
 Tenderly thou openest a door to my heart,
 a peaceful faith gently ripples down.)

Baptized and then confirmed at the age of fourteen, he received the Catholic names François and Joseph. Of Protestantism and Catholicism he later wrote, "I experienced both forms of faith inwardly, and consequently I experienced, beyond all theology, their respective relationships to God. . . . In both camps I met precious people" (letter to Hans Küry, August 7, 1982).

Nevertheless, he soon ceased all outward practice. His discomfort ("I felt like an awkward stranger"), his feeling of dissatisfaction, and his melancholy tinged with romanticism caused him to see the world in its negative aspect. Everything seemed to him petty, mediocre, or ugly.

In 1923, when his brother⁸ entered the seminary, Frithjof, aged sixteen, had to leave school to provide for the needs of the family, and he became a textile designer. He immersed himself in Plato and the philosophers, but above all he read and reread the *Bhagavad Gîtâ*. "For about ten years I was completely spellbound by Hinduism, without however being able to be a Hindu in the literal sense. . . . I lived no other religion but that of the Vedânta and the *Bhagavad Gita*; this was my first experience of the *religio perennis*" (letter to Leo Schaya, August 11, 1982).

He was in fact interested in everything connected with the Orient, particularly India. One day in 1924 Lucy von Dechend gave him a newspaper cutting referring to a book, *East and West*, by a certain René Guénon. Schuon found in this book everything that he had already felt by intuition. Thereafter he enthusiastically read *Man and his Becoming according to the Vedânta*, *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines*, and, when it was published in 1927, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, all of which confirmed his rejection of the modern world. He saw in Guénon "the profound and powerful theoretician of all that he loved," but he did not yet know what this encounter would entail for him and many others.

At no time, even in his youth, did Schuon allow himself to be tempted by occultism, with its artificial and syncretistic language, its weird babble, and its so-

called great initiates. His own discourse was rather of a mystical nature and in his intimate diary one sees a great melancholy, a feeling of irrepressible solitude, a nostalgia for the Eternal Feminine, an unutterable aspiration toward the Beautiful and the Sovereign Good. "My every step touched the earth with a tender feeling of *Tat twam asi*. . . . In the Cathedral I prayed before the Madonna 'im Rosenhag' (in the hedge of roses). An impressive requiem mass was being sung—wonderfully liberating, noble, and serene in suffering—as the organ sobbed to the exultant bells."⁹ He also wrote, in 1924, "The nature of the higher ego, in which the noble man must be consumed, is feminine: he must be consumed in the Eternal Feminine, just as woman must be consumed in the Eternal Masculine" (1924).

When he was sixteen he also noted, "I await my inner rebirth."

EX ORIENTE LUX

At the age of twenty-one, Schuon left to do his military service for eighteen months. He was assigned to Besançon as a military orderly, which resulted among other things in his taking care of the horses. This position had some advantages, especially that of being permitted to have a beard and the possibility of going out of the barracks in the evening. He used his moments of freedom to climb up to the caves of Mt. Brégille, one of the seven hills in the area, in order to meditate or to read. In the barracks, he fraternized with North Africans, with whom he felt more affinity than he did with his other brothers-in-arms. It is doubtless as a result of these contacts that he began to have the wish to learn Arabic and the temptation to go to Yemen or some Oriental oasis. In one of his letters he quotes, in Romanian, the nostalgic words sung by a gypsy in his barrack room, who accompanied himself on the violin. In another letter, written at that time to his friend Johann Jakob Jenny, he says: "When I first came to the barracks, I fell into a lot of Slavic trivialities" (he had been reading the Russian classics). He continued:

I tried to console myself with cupfuls of sweet coffee, I stroked the horses and talked to them, I wandered about restlessly in the rain, I tried to speak Arabic with the Moroccans, and thought of far-away cities and people, until a sudden clarity would sweep over me and, closing my eyes, I would remember a golden silence and become river, rhythm, ocean again. At the same time many anxieties fell away, the path before me became free and existence lighter. . . . Night is falling and I would like to close my eyes and return home. I can tell you that I had never understood your love of the Alps as well as I do these days; but it is my Master's will that I should be deprived of their cool enchantment.

And in the form of a postscript he asks, showing his growing interest in Islam, "Could you tell me how much the paperback edition of Kröner's Quran costs?" (letter of October 1928).

Schuon wrote in German, in Gothic script, in a close, dense handwriting almost without margins. He wrote mostly to his friends Johann Jakob Jenny and Albert Oesch, and confided in them his reflections on religion, language, morals, poetry, authors, the soul, the virtues, and the modern world. He even wrote for them a long doctrinal dissertation on the Vedânta and the books of Guénon. There are passages in some of these letters that are particularly striking:

There are hours whose messages touch us more deeply than words that one's overly light brain is able to grasp. . . . The day before yesterday, in the evening, one of my companions threw himself out of the window. . . . Seeing his body covered with blood, I thought of everything which, like orchids, flowers in the minds of young people, and how our joys and sorrows are a terrifying and even despicable nothingness, and how egocentric, and without compassion, our dreams are: faced with the simplest facts of human life and death, they can only crumble, as if carried away by the breath of an infinitely severe silence. . . . We are encircled by death. Nothing is born that is not destined to die; life seems to be a proliferation, a trifle, an absurdity or a weakness—everything sinks into death; death alone is of consequence and is victorious. . . . Death is an expression of Being or a facet of Reality; the "now" is another. This "now" is everything; may we take hold of it! When we die we look at the world from the point of view of a single present which compensates for our existence and absorbs it into the Immutable. (letter of November 9, 1929)

After his military service and in the wake of the economic crisis of 1929, Schuon moved to Paris, where he found work as a textile designer. His financial situation was still precarious but he was quite indifferent to this. Though he detested the district of the Bourse where he lodged, he unquestionably loved Paris itself ("the love of my youth"), with its rich past and its old streets around Notre-Dame, the Île de la Cité, and the Luxembourg Gardens. He learned Arabic from a Jewish friend and took courses at the Mosque, but did not yet seriously imagine entering Islam, despite his obvious interest.

Nevertheless, on a visit to the International Exhibition at Vincennes in 1931, he felt a very strong presentiment of his destiny as he stood in front of a replica of the great Temple of Angkor Wat; and in the notes he wrote at the time there is a sign of a great inward agony:

I have to stammer out the Name of the Eternal and close my eyes. I wanted to make peace with the world and with myself, and to repose

in a sweet and sun-filled illusion, until an invisible sword would come and destroy the dream. . . . I am still filled with the tender pain of a vanished world; O that I might be consumed and made ready for the challenge that has now suddenly burst upon me! The West seeks to extinguish my spirit and steal my heart. I want to give both of them back to God, even if only in death. My heart wounds me, I must tear it out and throw it from myself. I must be melted down and recast. Thy Will, not mine, be done, O Lord. (1931)

In a letter to Jenny (April 9, 1931), which he surmounts with a very traditional *Bismillâh al-Rahmân al-Rahîm* (In the Name of God, the Clement, the Merciful) written in Arabic, he explains in French, which he has evidently not yet fully mastered:

One Tuesday evening, on returning home after speaking with Guénon's publisher, to whom I handed a letter for the master, I found your message which I had expected. Guénon is in fact in Cairo,¹⁰ and even if he had been in Paris, one wonders if it would have been possible to see him. I cannot say that the simple fact of living in Paris, especially in circumstances as difficult as those of my present existence, constitutes pure happiness.

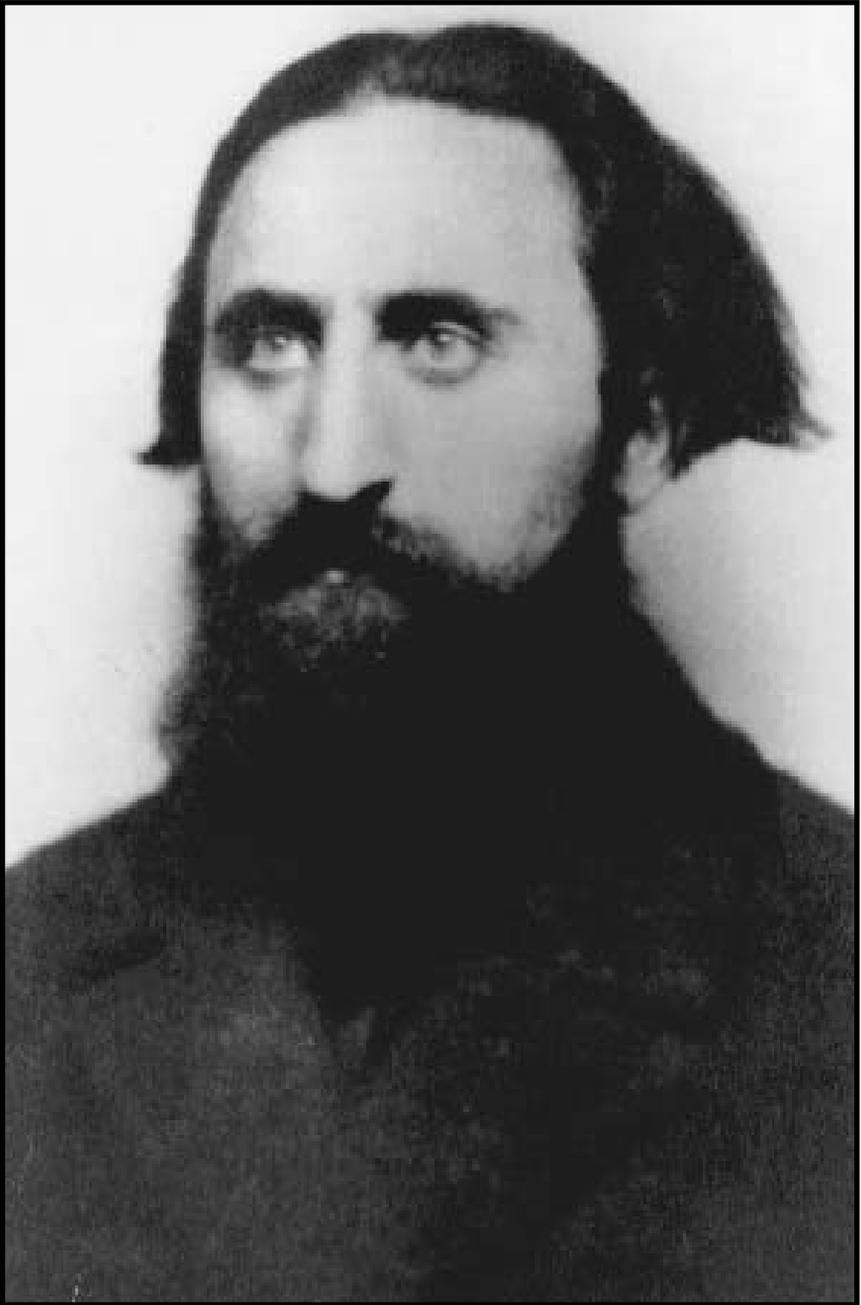
In his first letter to René Guénon he had written, amongst other things:

You have several times mentioned in your books the possibility of a restoration of Western mentality, of a return to a traditional civilization, and of a meeting between East and West; and on the other hand, you have spoken of the necessity for the truly intellectual elements in the West to become conscious of themselves through a knowledge of principles, whatever may be the ultimate solution to modern anarchy. (letter of April 1931)

And he adds a little further, "Is it not to be feared that those best qualified to cooperate in the restoring of Western intellectuality might all too easily be absorbed by the East which has cast its light on them, however indirectly?"

On June 5, 1931, Guénon replied courteously:

I am sorry to have been so long in replying to your letter, which I read with much interest, and in thanking you for your kind remarks, which are really too laudatory in my regard: for, basically, my only merit is to have expressed to the best of my ability certain traditional ideas. . . . As to the constitution of a Western élite, it is certain that only those who have a Western *mind* can be a part of it, and this is not the case of



Schuon in Paris, 1932. Personal collection, Catherine Schuon.

those who, as you say, may have been absorbed by the East, which is indeed a possibility; and there is not only the question of birth to be considered, especially in an era in which no one and nothing are any longer in their rightful place. As for adherence to an Eastern tradition, it is clear that not only is Islam the form least removed from the West, but it is also the only one for which the question of origin does not arise and is not an obstacle. . . . You say that French is not your language and even that you have only recently acquired a knowledge of it; in this case, allow me to congratulate you on the way you write. Would it be indiscreet to ask where you come from?

A few months later, Schuon wrote to his friend Jenny, "Islam is looking at me with its golden eyes; am I going to plunge into it without return, exhausted by my resistance to the vile atmosphere that gnaws at me like poison? Everything depends on the Will of God." He asks after various friends, mentions the arrival of Albert Oesch the previous month, asks Jenny to pass on his best regards to Ernst Küry, and explains, "I always express aspects of doctrine in aphorisms¹¹—though they are perhaps too long to be called such—or in 'sutras,' in German, unfortunately, since I do not know Latin and I do have a command of German, which is not the case for French. . . . For speaking, the best European language is Italian; for writing, Latin. With a language like German, in which there are hardly any words with a definite meaning, there is nothing to be done without complications and lyricism" (letter of November 15, 1931).

The Arabic formulas he used, however, and his Arabic calligraphy, show that he was acquiring an ever better mastery of the Arabic language.

On December 22, 1931, he received another letter from Guénon: "I too am increasingly convinced that the forms of Christianity, as at present constituted, are unable to provide an effective support for the restoration of the traditional spirit. I had previously envisaged this mainly so that I could not be reproached for having neglected some possibility."

On February 20, 1932, Schuon wrote to Jenny, "I have suddenly lost my job. . . . Everything is finished. I have sufficiently 'enjoyed' Europe. It has repelled me like dust. Next week, I shall already be in Algeria, without the least earthly hope, and even without money. What does it matter? . . . Good-bye to the here-below, and on to the Garden of Allah!" The next day he wrote to Oesch in the same state of mind and concluded, "I should like to reach Biskra (an oasis in the desert), not in order to die, but to be decanted according to the will of the All-One. I no longer need anything. Perhaps I will evaporate like a song never heard. The West has run over me like a wheel, and broken my ribs. Now there can be no more concessions, there is only the Supreme Solitary, the Lord of the living and the dead."

However, one of the next days Schuon had a visit—probably from a friend—and after some “terrible hours” of discussion, he let himself be persuaded to return to Basel for a period of reflection. However, he first went to the Abbey of Notre-Dame de Scourmont, where his brother lived, thinking to see him for the last time, so great was his conviction that he was leaving Europe forever. From Belgium he sent a letter (April 25, 1932) to one of his Swiss friends: “[My brother] agrees with me completely concerning my view of my future and would do the same if he were in the world. . . . Yesterday we discussed the expressions of the Intellect and the diversity of truths with some intensity, but with no result.” Then he added, “When shall I be able to realize that Unity which is perfectly consonant with my being?” One month later, in a very significant letter to Oesch, he vehemently wrote:

Have I ever said that the path to God passes through Mecca? If there were any essential difference between a path that passes through Benares and one that passes through Mecca, how could you think that I would wish to come to God “through Mecca,” and thereby betray Christ and the Vedanta? In what way does the highest spiritual path pass through Mecca or Benares or Lhasa or Jerusalem or Rome? Is the Nirvana of Mecca different from the Nirvana of Benares simply because it is called *fanâ* and not *nirvâna*? Do I have to explain to you once again that either we are esoterists and metaphysicians who transcend forms—just as Christ walked over the waters—and who make no distinction between Allah and Brahma, or else we are exoterists, “theologians”—or at best mystics—who consequently live in forms like fish in water, and who make a distinction between Mecca and Benares? (letter to Albert Oesch, May 15, 1932)

A few weeks later Schuon did indeed go to Basel, and then Lausanne, where he continued to perfect his Arabic and where he met a Persian¹² who taught him the *Fâtihah* (the *surah* that opens the Quran). Finally he went to Mulhouse, where he was offered a well-paid job; but there was nothing to be done, his decision had been made.

In November, after putting the finishing touches to the manuscript of his book *Leitgedanken zur Urbesinnung*, which he saw as a sort of testament, he left for Marseilles, where he stayed for some time in the district of the Vieux Port (the Old Harbor). Lucy von Dechend joined him there and brought him the money she had obtained by selling some of her personal possessions to help him embark on his journey. Walking around the harbor, Schuon and Lucy von Dechend made the acquaintance of a seaman of Arab origin, Hâjj Shuti Mohammed, who invited them to visit a ship about to leave for China, and to see the little *zâwiyah*—or prayer room—that the sailors had set up in the hold.

They explained that they were members of a brotherhood based in Mostaghanem. On leaving the ship, Schuon and his friend went to a coffeehouse near the port. A man of Indian appearance came in. At the request of Schuon, who still dreamed of going to India, he sat down at their table. At that moment a child came up to Schuon and insisted that he write something. To satisfy the child, Schuon wrote the *Shahâdah* in Arabic on a piece of paper that he then held out to him—something that did not fail to surprise their new friend,¹³ who, having thus gained confidence in them, explained that he was an Indian Muslim, and that he had just returned from Mostaghanem where his master, the venerable Shaykh Al-'Alawî, lived. The very next day, Hâjj Shuti—of whom Schuon said later that he was like a “guardian angel” for him—took them to a little *zâwiyah* near the Vieux Port where Yemeni dervishes gathered. They too were disciples of the aged Sufi master and they too encouraged Schuon to go to Mostaghanem.¹⁴ Schuon had most likely never heard of this Shaykh in spite of the growing influence of his *tariqah*, which was often criticized or even opposed.

Soon after the departure of Lucy von Dechend, who returned to Basle, Schuon embarked for Oran, but not before visiting Notre-Dame de la Garde one last time. In his mind this escape to Algeria was irreversible and marked his definitive rupture with a West which he, like Guénon, abhorred.

When he disembarked in Oran, Schuon was immediately sensitive to the change of atmosphere. As he did not yet possess any traditional garments, he went to a shop in the Arab quarter:

At the back of the shop sat the proprietor: an Arab with an aristocratic air, whose face is unforgettable; it was like the image of resignation to God. . . . He was like the incarnation of Islam, and his face alone would have sufficed to convert someone. He did not speak to me, but only looked at me with his deep gaze, while his son—a young, distinguished looking man—served me, offering me a cup of mint tea and asking me a few kindly questions as to the purpose of my journey. (letter to Titus Burckhardt, January 5, 1983)

In spite of the state of health of the aged Shaykh, who had just returned from Mecca, Schuon was received by him the day after his arrival in Mostaghanem:

One could compare the meeting with such a spiritual messenger with what, for example, it would have been like, in the middle of the twentieth century, to meet a medieval saint or a Semitic patriarch; such was the impression given by him who, in our own time, was one of the great masters of Sufism: Shaykh Al-Hâjj Ahmad Abu 'l-'Abbâs ibn Mustafa 'l-'Aliwa. . . . Dressed in a brown *jellabah* and white turban—

with his silver beard, visionary eyes and long hands, the gestures of which seemed laden with the flow of his *barakah*—he exhaled something of the pure and archaic ambience of the time of Sayyidnâ Ibrâhîm al-Khalîl (Abraham). He spoke in an enfeebled, gentle voice, a voice of cracked crystal, letting his words fall drop by drop. His eyes, two sepulchral lamps, appeared to settle on nothing, but, through whatever objects might lie in their path, to see only one sole reality, that of the Infinite—or perhaps, only one sole void, within the husk of things: a very straight gaze, almost hard in its enigmatic immobility, yet full of goodness. Often the long slits of his eyes would widen suddenly, as if captivated by a marvelous sight. The cadence of ritual songs, dances, and incantations seemed to be perpetuated in him in unending vibrations; his head sometimes moved in a rhythmic rocking, while his soul was plunged in the inexhaustible mysteries of the Divine Name, hidden in the *dhikr*, the remembrance of God. . . . An impression of unreality emanated from his person, he was so distant, closed, and unfathomable in his abstract simplicity. . . . He was surrounded by the veneration due to a saint, to a leader, to an old man, and to one who is dying.¹⁵

A short time after his arrival, at the end of November 1932, Schuon received a letter from René Guénon which Lucy von Dechend had forwarded: “I am shocked,” Guénon wrote, “to see the date on your letter and wonder whether this will reach you and where; all sorts of regrettable circumstances are to blame, related to the relentless war being waged against me, of which *Le Voile d’Isis* may have given you some echoes. . . . Having said this to explain my unintentional delay, I wonder if you have already realized your plan of leaving for Algeria, or if you are going to do so. . . . I would advise you to go to Mostaghanem and see Shaykh Ahmad ibn ‘Aliwa, to whom you can introduce yourself from me.”

At the beginning of January 1933 Schuon, who had in the meantime replied to Guénon, received another letter (whose envelope he kept) addressed directly to Mostaghanem: “You were perhaps surprised to see that I advised you to go to precisely the place where you are now, and yet this ‘coincidence’ has nothing strange about it.” Then, after giving some details about the Darqâwî and Shadhîlî Orders, and expressing his concern for the state of the Shaykh’s health, Guénon adds, “[I]n any case, the first essential is affiliation with the Order: the rest can come afterwards, often in an unexpected way. . . .”

Schuon¹⁶ stayed nearly four months in the Shaykh Al-‘Alawî’s proximity and became affiliated at the end of January 1933 by the old Shaykh himself in the presence of Adda Ben Tounes, who was then *muqaddam*.

Some people—some in the ‘Alawîya *Tariqah* itself—now question the reality of this affiliation. Without even referring to all the indirect testimonies which

confirm the simple historical reality of this initiation, we can give here the formal proof of Schuon's initiation by Shaykh Al-'Alawî. This proof is provided by a letter written to Titus Burckhardt on February 15, 1955,¹⁷ by a then influential member of the 'Alawîya *Tarîqah* at that time, namely 'Abdallâh Reda (the sculptor Alphonse Izard), who had long been in charge of the journal *Les Amis de l'Islam* ("The Friends of Islam," the official publication of the *Tarîqah*) and who was the author of a collection of the sayings of Shaykh Adda entitled *Jesus, Soul of God* (Oran: Plaza, 1958). The letter contains the following passage:

Since the name of Sidi 'Îsâ Nûr ad-Dîn (Frithjof Schuon) has been mentioned, permit me to tell you the story of his becoming affiliated to Shaykh Al-'Alawî, the *murshid* of his time and the one who foretold the *maqâm* of the venerable Shaykh Sidi Hâjj Al-Mahdî (may God be satisfied with both of them). My story has witnesses, living witnesses known to 'Îsâ Nûr ad-Dîn; they are the great ones of our beautiful and pure *Tarîqah* of Allâh. Sidi 'Îsâ Nûr ad-Dîn placed his hand in the hand of the venerable Sidi Ahmad Al-'Alawî. . . .

This more than explicit manuscript letter was written on paper bearing the letterhead of *Les Amis de l'Islam* in connection with an exchange of controversial letters with Artébas Saïd following the visit to Schuon and Burckhardt in 1955 by a group of 'Alawî *fuqarâ* accompanying the second successor to Shaykh Al-'Alawî, the young Shaykh Al-Mahdî. We shall speak of this visit later. Bearing in mind the nature of his position and the tone of the rest of his letter, which is about something entirely different, the writer has no reason to falsify the truth. He limits himself to a spontaneous testimony. Besides, other letters exchanged at this time corroborate and authenticate the version of the facts scrupulously reported by 'Abdallâh Reda.

One can only deplore the fact that, some sixty-six years later, the memory of this initiation should apparently be so poorly preserved by the present representative of the 'Alawîya *Tarîqah*, according to whom it was not Shaykh Al-'Alawî, but his successor, Shaykh Adda Ben Tounes, who initiated Schuon in 1935. This is not without importance, as the future was to show.

The French authorities in Algeria did not look kindly on the presence of a European among the Arabs. They therefore decided to summon Schuon and Shaykh Al-'Alawî himself. Because of his state of health, the old Shaykh was represented at this convocation by a *muqaddam*. Following these interrogations,¹⁸ and in order not to needlessly complicate the situation of the *Tarîqah*, Schuon decided to cut short his stay and, having given up the idea of going to Morocco as he had originally intended, he returned to France.

Schuon had sent an article from Mostaghanem¹⁹ to *Le Voile d'Isis*—the journal in which Guénon wrote—dedicated to Shaykh Al-'Alawî and entitled "The

Ternary Aspect of the Monotheistic Tradition.” It was his first contribution. In it he evoked, for the first time, the notion of the “essential and transcendent unity” of the three monotheistic religions. This text appeared in June 1933, immediately following an article by Guénon entitled “Spiritual Knowledge and ‘Profane Culture.’” Thereafter Schuon contributed regularly to this journal, which Guénon was soon to rename *Études Traditionnelles*. For a few years, Schuon’s contributions had strongly Islamic connotations.²⁰ It was in the “entirely primordial simplicity”²¹ of Islam that he was now commencing that “inner rebirth” to which he had so ardently aspired.

Guénon was very satisfied by Schuon’s initiation: “The essential thing is that you have been able to receive the *ṭarīqah* [this word written in Arabic], for this constitutes a link which cannot but be very useful to you in the future, from many points of view.”

Shortly after his return to Europe, Schuon once again met his old school friend Titus Burckhardt and had a long conversation with him about Islam, the Maghrib, and Guénon. Burckhardt said later that this meeting had been “decisive” for him. An exemplary friendship was formed between them. On the advice of his friend, Burckhardt soon went to Fez, where he stayed for a whole winter and learned Arabic, which he later mastered perfectly and which enabled him to undertake his well-known translations. After several fruitless attempts to contact Sufi circles, he was initiated into the Darqâwīya *Ṭarīqah*, a Shadhilite branch close to that of Shaykh Al-‘Alawī. From then on he immersed himself in Sufi wisdom, traditional art, and science, in which he became a renowned expert.

In Paris, Schuon met Louis Massignon, Émile Dermenghem, and Mohammed Al-Fâsi, and continued his regular correspondence with Guénon, whose counsels he gladly sought. He also met Léopold Ziegler in Überlingen. Meanwhile, a little more than a year after his return from Mostaghanem—on July 11, 1934, to be exact—Schuon recounts that he had an exceptional spiritual experience which was to change the course of his life. He wrote later that while sitting in his little room in the Hôtel de Lodi in the Rue Dauphine in Paris, absorbed in reading the Bhagavad Gītâ, he felt that the Divine Name was being actualized in him with an overwhelming resonance and intensity. He later said that the Name had “swooped down on him like an eagle on its prey.”²²

For three days this “Presence” vibrated within him. Walking along the bank of the Seine, he had the feeling that everything was “transparent, fluid, infinite. . . .” A few days later he learned from some Algerian friends that Shaykh Al-‘Alawī had died on that same date, July 11, 1934.²³

THE SHAYKH

Schuon’s first book, on which, as we know, he had been working for several years, was published in 1935. Written in German, and with a preface by Siegfried Lang

(who had already published several favorable commentaries on Guénon's books), it was published by the Orell Füssli Verlag in Zürich.²⁴ Its title, *Leitgedanken zur Urbesinnung*, may be translated as Guiding Thoughts for Meditation on the Real or, as Jacques-Albert Cuttat suggested in his book review in *Le Voile d'Isis* of November 1935, Supports for Meditation. This childhood friend, who was to become one of Schuon's early disciples before leaving him many years later, wrote at that time:

In this collection of metaphysical fragments the most diverse aspects of human life are reduced, in pithy turns of phrase, to their principal meaning. . . . We scarcely know of any pages in which these two indivisible aspects of the Principle—its absolute transcendence and its immediate actuality—are evoked with such power. . . . Under Schuon's pen, the fundamental words of Eckhart spontaneously regain their metaphysical meaning, a meaning which they doubtless had when they were written, at a time closer to spiritual realities than is ours.²⁵

In March 1935, Schuon returned to Mostaghanem, where the Khalîfa Sidi Adda Ben Tounes, nephew by marriage of the late *murshid*, had succeeded Shaykh Al-'Alawî. Contrary to what has sometimes been alleged, Schuon did not solicit the function of *muqaddam* which Shaykh Adda conferred upon him at that time. It appears rather that, in order to conform to Shaykh Al-'Alawî's wishes,²⁶ Shaykh Adda took this decision after Schuon had gone through a long and edifying *khalwah* (retreat). In accordance with custom,²⁷ Shaykh Adda presented the new *muqaddam* with a diploma (*ijâzah*) signed by himself. This says in particular:

I attest . . . that we have had the visit of that person of pure soul, excellent virtues, and "sincere penitence," our brother in Allâh Sidi 'Îsâ Nûr ad-Dîn, European by birth and residence, and that he has recently had prolonged contact with us, which has allowed us to scrutinize his spiritual states, his words and his actions, and we have—and the truth must be told—seen only what reassures the believer and pleases the initiate of Allâh, the Loving-Kind and the Knowing, "who chooses for Himself whom He pleases, and guides to Himself him who turns to Him in penitence." Considering the foregoing in the light of our knowledge of this brother in Allâh, I have authorized him to spread the call to Islam among his own people, the Europeans, transmitting the word of the *Tawhîd*²⁸

The principal function of a *muqaddam* is of course to transmit an initiation, a spiritual influence, and in this very way to link those initiated to the *silsilah*, the uninterrupted line of descent from the Prophet, and thereby give them access to the invocation of the Divine Name, the "Way of the Heart."

After his stay in Mostaghanem, Schuon went for a time to Fez, where Titus Burckhardt was then living, and later returned to France. Soon afterwards, Guénon wrote him a warm letter: "My congratulations on your new dignity of *muqaddam*."

In fact, Guénon—for whom initiation was the key to everything, as he explained on many occasions—saw in this an opening for all those who approached him and sought to be initiated into a traditional esoteric line. From then on he suggested to several of his correspondents that they make contact with Schuon. However, the latter, who was only twenty-eight years old, had much difficulty with the showy pretensions of some of these aspirants, filled to the brim as they were with Guénonian talk about the intellectual élite. "It is extremely difficult," he later wrote to Jean-Pierre Laurant, "for a young man to judge, or give the impression of judging, men of mature years, or even very old men, who seek admission, and who obviously believe that they are 'qualified'; the few refusals meant interminable difficulties for the *muqaddam*. . . ."29

Three groups were formed: one in Basel where Schuon had several friends who followed him, another in Lausanne, and a third in Amiens under the direct authority of Schuon himself, who had just found work there as a designer. From that time on the *muqaddam* traveled from one town to another to give advice and instruction. He wrote many letters about questions of form and doctrine for the edification of novices. Titus Burckhardt, who had returned to Basel, gave him the support of the considerable expertise he had acquired in these matters.

In France it was the time of the Popular Front; the social and economic difficulties of the moment were not without repercussions for Schuon, whose salary was not always paid regularly. To buy his train tickets he had to seek the help of his friends. "I will give you back the 15 francs when I receive my pay. . . . If I had not had S.K.'s help I would have had to sleep under the Pont Neuf. . . . The Lausannois think that the Baslers and the French are supporting me, the Baslers think that the Lausannois and the French are supporting me, and the French think it is the Swiss who are supporting me," he wrote to Titus Burckhardt in an undated letter.

Some time later, however, he found a better paid job in Thann in Alsace, which brought him closer to Switzerland and enabled him to live in the family home in Mulhouse where his mother and his half-aunt Hélène still lived. The situation was not easy, and relations between them often proved difficult. Schuon thought several times of abandoning everything. A plan to emigrate to Tahiti—quite unrealistic but no doubt connected with the development of the international situation at the time—was made by two of his friends. Guénon was alarmed, but the project was abandoned after they had been on the island for only two months. About the same time, Schuon gave a few lectures in Basel on the universality of religions. He said of these very rare public appearances that they had attracted only one worthwhile listener who in himself was a sufficient

justification for their having taken place.³⁰ This person was Leo Schaya, then nineteen years old, who asked Schuon to guide him in his personal spiritual quest. Leo Schaya was to become one of his confidants and intimate friends and later a valued spiritual counselor for many.

At almost the same time Michel Vâlsan, a Romanian who already knew Guénon's works well and had unbounded admiration for him, was spending a period in Paris. Brilliant, and with a very strong personality, he had suffered harmful psychic influences which had profoundly disturbed him. Informed of the existence of Schuon's group, he made contact with Schuon. He then went back to his own country for two years, profitably using the time by learning Arabic and studying Islam; then he returned to Paris for good, taking up a post at the consulate of Romania. He became a distinguished Arabic scholar and the veritable pioneer of Ibn 'Arabî studies in France.

At the end of 1936 however, a new event of a spiritual order was to change the situation. Schuon was living through a period of doubt and discouragement, a sort of dark night, when one morning he woke up with the dazzling and intrinsic certitude that he had been invested with the function of *Shaykh*. That same night several of his friends had visionary dreams concerning him, all of which confirmed his acquisition of this new function from on high.³¹ One thing is certain: Schuon received this unexpected grace more as a burden than as a consecration. He said later that this function had come too soon but that "he did not have the choice."

It was at about the same time that there began for him an unhappy love that caused him to suffer for more than ten years. He fell deeply in love with the sister of one of his childhood friends, but the inconstancy of this young woman, who was remarkably beautiful and very feminine, and who would be close and distant by turns, wounded him painfully. This trial lasted until the marriage of this woman with somebody else. Schuon was later to write that through this double life—at once a spiritual master and a true *fedele d'amore*³²—Providence had in a fashion forestalled the pride that lies in wait for the metaphysician or esoterist and compelled him to retain a sense of everyday realities.

Guénon encouraged the young *Shaykh* to assume the full consequences of his function, which fact distanced the latter from Mostaghanem. The two men wrote to each other very often at this time. Schuon deferentially asked questions of a doctrinal order, expounded his own point of view, and replied to questions from Guénon, who asked for news about this person or that, and repeatedly referred to the attacks to which he considered himself relentlessly subjected, or to his constant fear that his letters were not arriving.

Questions were of course asked as to the traditional regularity of Schuon's assumption of independence with respect to the 'Alawîya *Tariqah* (from that time on he had become *Shaykh 'Îsâ*). Traditionally, it is considered that the function of a *Shaykh*, like that of a king, comes not from man but from God. On the other

hand, it is said that the function of a *khalifah* (lieutenant, representative) who, like an elected president is merely *primus inter pares*, comes from man. This is the reason why a *muqaddam*, a *khalifah*, or a *nâ'ib* (designated successor) can be removed from office by the Shaykh who has appointed him, whereas a Shaykh himself cannot be deposed. The direct affiliation of Schuon with Shaykh Al-'Alawî—and not with his successor—thus gave him a de facto independence. “It is certain that you can perfectly well consider yourself as being spiritually answerable to none other than [Shaykh Ahmad] alone,” Guénon wrote to him at the time (letter of April 24, 1935). Besides, Shaykh Adda never called Schuon’s independence into question. Guénon several times confirmed the regularity of this assumption of independence as well as the perfect continuity of the *silsilah*. It can even be said that he was pleased about this independence, and he clearly explained, “What is unfortunate is that these are things which can scarcely be understood in Mostaghanem, because they are completely unknown there; I fully agree with you about this.”

The independence that a *muqaddam* of Schuon—in fact Michel Vâlsan—later claimed in his turn gave Guénon the opportunity to reaffirm this “regularity,” and this cuts short to some current speculations about Schuon’s initiatory status: “The necessary and sufficient condition is to be the representative of an authentic *silsilah*; this is what the whole question of ‘regularity’ really comes down to” (letter from René Guénon to Frithjof Schuon, October 5, 1950).³³

WAR YEARS

Frithjof Schuon met René Guénon for the first time when he visited Cairo in 1938. He was thirty-one and Guénon, fifty-two. At their first meeting Guénon awaited him, dressed in Egyptian style, “tall, thin, and distinguished like a Byzantine mosaic.” His welcome was kindly and warm, but if Schuon was a little disappointed by the psychic lassitude that he thought he perceived in Guénon (he spoke later of a “sort of mental exhaustion”), by the banality of his subjects of conversation (which others had also noted), and indeed, by his almost permanent restlessness, he nevertheless affirmed that “the man was sufficiently fine and mysterious to make up for what might trouble or disappoint me in one way or another.”³⁴ It is no doubt this impression that led him to note in his posthumous tribute to Guénon, “The man seemed to be unaware of his genius, just as his genius, inversely, seemed to be unaware of the man.”³⁵

Schuon stayed in Cairo for a week, visiting Guénon nearly every day. Staying in the neighborhood of the Sayyidnâ Hussein mosque, near Al-Azhar and not far from the bazaar, he made the acquaintance of two venerable Shaykhs. One of them, Shaykh Abd ar-Rahîm, told him that “*Tasawwuf* is a taste