

From the online Library at: <http://www.frithjofschuon.info>

Who is Frithjof Schuon?

by Seyyed Hossein Nasr

Source: *The Essential Frithjof Schuon* (World Wisdom, 2005).

The following is taken from the "Introduction" to The Essential Frithjof Schuon, and was written by the editor of that collection, Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr. This short excerpt does not include the fact that Mr. Schuon moved to the United States in 1980, nor that he died there in 1998.

© World Wisdom, Inc.

Considering the grandeur and depth of his metaphysical expositions and the fact that he is the premier living expositor of that *sophia perennis* which lies at the heart of all revelations, it might appear strange that so little is known about Schuon. But it is in his character and also as a part of his intellectual and spiritual function to remain personally secluded, keeping at a distance from the sound and fury which characterize the lives of so many great and less than great men of this century. His works have caused echoes in East and West while he himself has refused to teach or lecture publicly in contrast to most of the well-known religious and spiritual teachers of this age.

Frithjof Schuon was born of German parents in Basle, Switzerland in 1907. His father was a musician and the household was one in which, in addition to music, other arts were prevalent, including the literature of the East as well as of Europe. Schuon lived in Basle and attended school in that city until the death of his father after which his Alsatian mother moved to Mulhouse, where Schuon was obliged to become a French citizen. Having received his earliest education in German, he was now exposed to a French education and hence gained perfect knowledge of both languages early in life. At the age of sixteen he left school to support himself as a textile designer, beginning his first steps in the field of art which he had always loved as a child but in which he never received formal training.

Also, as a child Schuon had been drawn to the Orient, to the lofty songs of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, which was his favorite work, as well as to *The Thousand and One Nights*. He had also a natural propensity for metaphysics and read Plato even when he was of a tender age. While still

in Mulhouse he discovered the works of René Guénon, which only confirmed his intellectual intuitions and provided support for the metaphysical principles he had begun to discover.

Schuon journeyed to Paris after serving for a year and a half in the French army. In Paris not only did he work as a designer but also began his study of Arabic in the Paris mosque school. He was also exposed in a much greater degree than before to various forms of traditional art, especially those of Asia which he had always loved even as a child. This period marked, therefore, on a more extensive scale than before both an intellectual and an artistic familiarity with the traditional world, and was followed by Schuon's first visit to Algeria in 1932. North Africa was still witness to a more or less intact traditional pattern of life. This journey therefore marked Schuon's first actual experience of a traditional civilization and also his first immediate contact with the Islamic world, resulting in his gaining firsthand knowledge of and intimacy with the Islamic tradition, including Sufism, some of whose greatest representatives such as Shaykh al-'Alawi he encountered. In a second journey to North Africa in 1935, he was to visit not only Algeria but also Morocco, while in 1938 he journeyed to Cairo, where he finally met Guénon, with whom he had been corresponding for years.

In 1939 he stopped in Egypt again while on a journey to India, a land which he had always loved and whose spirituality had attracted him since his childhood days. Shortly upon his arrival in India, however, the Second World War broke out forcing him to return to France where he began to serve in the army. After several months, he was captured by the Germans and imprisoned. When he discovered that the Germans were planning to induct him into their army because of his Alsatian background, he fled to Switzerland where he settled and whose nationality he finally accepted.

For some forty years Switzerland became Schuon's home. Here in 1949 he married a German Swiss with a French education who, besides having interests in religion and metaphysics, is also a gifted painter. It was also here that he wrote most of his works and was visited by many well-known religious scholars and thinkers of East and West. Besides traveling from time to time to the majestic mountains of this land to breathe the fresh air of the morning of creation, he also journeyed occasionally to other countries. These voyages included regular visits to Morocco, and a visit in 1968 to Turkey, where he spent some time at the House of the Holy Virgin in Kusadasi near Ephesus.

In 1959 and again in 1963, Schuon journeyed to America to visit some of the American Indian tribes for whom he had had a special love and affinity since childhood and some of whose members he had met before in Europe. He and Mrs. Schuon visited the Sioux and Crow reservations in South Dakota and Montana and were received into the Sioux tribe. The paintings of haunting beauty of the life of Indians as well as the exposition of their traditional teachings by Schuon attest to his particular relation with the spiritual universe of the American Indians, a relation which was especially fortified and extended during these journeys.