

Frithjof Schuon and Prayer

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In the preface to one of the last books he wrote, Frithjof Schuon affords us a rare glimpse into one of the key intentions—or personal hopes—that underlay his writings: ‘If our works had on the average no other result than the restitution for some of the saving barque of prayer, we would owe it to God to consider ourselves profoundly satisfied.’²³⁸

In addition to all of the other aspects of his contribution to the revival of religion and spirituality in the contemporary world, it can be confidently asserted that the restitution of prayer has indeed been realized, and not just for some, but for many, as a direct consequence of reading and assimilating Schuon’s books. It is upon this altogether fundamental theme of prayer in the corpus of Schuon’s works that we intend to dwell in this essay, albeit within a compass that can do scant justice to all of its aspects and ramifications. The intention, rather, is to draw attention to the subtlety, depth, and comprehensiveness that characterize Schuon’s elucidation of prayer, an elucidation which renders prayer not only an intelligible necessity for man in his quest for God, but also an irresistible summons and an inestimable gift from God to man.

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of prayer in Schuon’s perspective. As is well known, this perspective is, above all, intellectual, and as such, is aimed first and foremost at the exposition of truth at all levels; but the doctrine is not intended to remain on the discursive plane alone: for ‘it is as though true ideas took their revenge, on anyone who limits himself to a thinking of them’.²³⁹ These ideas are intended to be realized in depth, they should ‘unleash interiorizing acts of the will’. Now prayer is the interiorizing act *par excellence*, it is the key to realization, to ‘making real’ that which

²³⁸ *The Play of Masks*, World Wisdom Books, 1992.

²³⁹ *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, Faber & Faber, 1954, p.11.

is mentally comprehended. Without prayer—without the assimilation by the heart of the truths perceived by the mind—there is no realizatory will, no spiritual development; the realities provisionally expressed by doctrine will remain abstractions. Ideas that go no further than the mental faculty, far from contributing to ‘remembrance’, on the contrary, carry the risk not only of being forgotten, but also, of further enmeshing us in our natural state of heedlessness; for if the ego is ‘a kind of crystallization of forgetfulness of God’, the brain, for its part, is ‘the organ of this forgetfulness; it is like a sponge filled with images of this world of dispersion and of heaviness.’²⁴⁰ The heart, on the other hand, ‘is the latent remembrance of God, hidden deep down in our “I”.’ Part of the realizatory power of prayer—in one of its modes—consists in its temporary displacement of concepts in the mind, the better to assimilate them permanently and in depth, in the heart, precisely: ‘prayer is as if the heart, risen to the surface, came to take the place of the brain which then sleeps with a holy slumber; this slumber unites and soothes, and its most elementary trace in the soul is peace. “I sleep, but my heart waketh”.’²⁴¹

The reason why peace of soul is the ‘most elementary trace’ of this holy slumber, induced by prayer, is that ‘prayer places us in the presence of God, Who is pure Beatitude.’²⁴² To pray is to give oneself to God; and since God is pure Beatitude, prayer itself is already something of this Beatitude, whether the person praying is conscious of it or not. The awareness of what prayer is, and of what God is, imparts to the very act of prayer the capacity to bestow peace on the soul. Once this peace is ‘tasted’, and the sense of the sacred is awoken, with the heart rendered receptive to the presence of God—then does metaphysical doctrine begin to take root in our being, conviction deepens into certitude, the ‘obscure merit of faith’ begins to give way to the ineffable verities of gnosis.²⁴³ At a time when ‘metaphysics’ is all too commonly associated with occult phenomena, it is all the more important to be reminded of what is immutable and

²⁴⁰ *Understanding Islam*, World Wisdom Books, 1994, p.148.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.149.

²⁴² *The Transfiguration of Man*, World Wisdom Books, 1995, p.98.

²⁴³ Schuon often refers to certitude as preceding and producing serenity; the relationship between the two elements is clearly one of reciprocal influence, each element deepening, and in turn being deepened by, the other. This reciprocity, as well as the principle of the hierarchical degrees of faith, is affirmed in the following verse of the Qur’an: *He it is who hath caused the Spirit of Peace (sakina) to descend upon the hearts of the believers, that they might add faith unto their faith.* (Sura al-Fath, 4)

indubitable: that permanent, inalienable miracle, the Presence of God. When this Presence becomes the true goal of the spiritual life, it attracts and absorbs all the spiritual energy of the aspirant, imparting to his soul that ‘peace which passeth all understanding’. In the face of this principial peace, all transient phenomena—inward and outward—lose their captivating power. ‘The thirst for the marvellous is one thing, and metaphysical serenity another.’²⁴⁴

Prayer, then, is the key to metaphysical realization and, *a fortiori*, to human salvation; for this reason, prayer cannot be regarded simply as an individual act, it is, rather, an existential imperative:

‘The very fact of our existence is a prayer and compels us to prayer, so that it could be said: “I am, therefore I pray; *sum ergo oro.*”’²⁴⁵ No more succinct means of illustrating the chasm that separates the ‘intelligent stupidity’ of Cartesianism and the metaphysical realism of Schuon’s perspective can be imagined than this reformulation—and refutation—of Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum*. To exist—something no sane person can doubt—is to be aware of the need for prayer, to be aware, that is, of the need to transcend existence. For if, on the one hand, universal existence is a prayer or hymn to the Creator, on the other, the very distance between the creation and God implies otherness, denial, contradiction: awareness of this hiatus between existence and its Principle impels man to rise above existence, to reach out for God, to be true to his vocation. The very fact of ex-isting—of ‘standing apart’ from God—then, is a motive for fervent prayer:

‘...existence means not to be God and so to be in a certain respect ineluctably in opposition to Him; existence is something which grips us like a shirt of Nessus. Someone who does not know that the house is on fire has no reason to call for help, just as the man who does not know he is drowning will not grasp the rope that could save him; but to know we are perishing means either to despair or else to pray.’²⁴⁶

²⁴⁴ *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence*, World Wisdom Books, 1981, p.37.

²⁴⁵ *Understanding Islam*, op. cit., p.155.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.156.

Schuon continues this passage with an extremely significant analogy between the subjective dream state and the macrocosmic dream, that is, the objective world and all that it contains:

‘If a man has a nightmare and, while still dreaming, starts calling on God for aid, he infallibly awakens; this shows two things: first, that the conscious intelligence of the Absolute subsists during sleep as a distinct personality—our spirit thus remaining apart from our states of illusion—and secondly, that when a man calls on God he will end by awakening also from that great dream ... life, the world, the ego.’²⁴⁷

This ‘awakening’ brought about through prayer—more specifically, through God’s response to prayer—is effective liberation or spiritual realization. All prayer, thus, to some degree or another, participates in this realization which, properly speaking is the fruit of the liberating grace of God, responding to the deepest prayer. Even the most elementary prayer, however, can be seen as a kind of liberation from the totalitarian grip of the world, and the suffocating pretensions of the ego.

‘Prayer—in the widest sense—triumphs over the four accidents of our existence: the world, life, the body and the soul; ... It is situated in existence like a shelter, like an islet. In it alone are we perfectly ourselves, because it puts us into the presence of God. It is like a miraculous diamond which nothing can tarnish and nothing can resist.’²⁴⁸

The rest of this essay will explore the way in which Schuon treats prayer in this ‘widest sense’, that is, by looking briefly at the modes and degrees of prayer, beginning with the most ordinary meaning of prayer—personal petition to God—and culminating in the most exalted form of prayer—methodic invocation of the Name of God. The comprehensive manner in which prayer is expounded by Schuon reveals that, in the last analysis, prayer is something which not only engages all that we are, but also encompasses all that is.

Four principal degrees of prayer are delineated in one of Schuon’s most impressive and important essays, ‘Modes of Prayer’, in the book *Stations of Wisdom*.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., p.156.

²⁴⁸ *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, op. cit., p.212.

What follows is based on this chapter, with additional material from other published works of Schuon being brought in to shed further light on certain points. The four degrees of prayer can be understood in relation to the nature of the praying subject: such and such a man—the subject of personal, non-canonical prayer; man as such—the subject of canonical prayer; both man and God—both being in a sense the subject of meditative prayer; and God—the true subject of invocatory prayer.

As regards the first of these, personal supplication by a given individual addressed to the Personal God, it is ‘the direct expression of the individual, of his desires and fears, his hopes and gratitude’.²⁴⁹ Despite its elementary nature, this type of prayer cannot be dismissed as something negligible, as compared to the ‘serious’—supra-individual—work of esoteric realization. To those who would minimize the importance of personal prayer or deny its necessity, the reply is that its importance is rooted in the need for the human person as such to have a personal, intimate, and spontaneous relationship with the ‘Personal’ God; and the necessity of personal prayer is a consequence of the incapacity of such and such a person: ‘If petition is a capital element of prayer, it is because we can do nothing without the help of God; man’s resolves offer no guarantee—the example of Saint Peter shows this—if he does not ask for this help.’²⁵⁰ Moreover, in laying bare to God the personal needs, weaknesses and desires of the soul, the aim is ‘not only to obtain particular favors, but also the purification of the soul: it loosens psychic knots or, in other words, dissolves subconscious coagulations and drains away many secret poisons.’²⁵¹

Schuon specifies that this form of prayer also has its own rules, even if they are not always stipulated formally, as is the case with canonical prayer. These rules are so many conditions for the integrity of the prayer, for ‘it is not enough for a man to formulate his petition, he must express also his gratitude, resignation, regret, resolution and praise.’²⁵² Each of these is then defined by Schuon. While all five of these attitudes

²⁴⁹ *Stations of Wisdom*, World Wisdom Books, 1995, p.121.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.123.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.121-122.

²⁵² *Ibid.* p.122.

are of great importance, we should like to dwell on one in particular, that of resignation: ‘Resignation is the anticipated acceptance of the non-fulfillment of some request.’ This attitude is strongly linked to trust, of which it is the complement. It is one thing to trust in God’s goodness, another to expect Him to respond immediately to each and every request we make of Him. The antidote to this unrealistic trust is resignation in advance to the possibility that God will not necessarily answer our petition when and how we would like it to be answered. Such exaggerated trust—expressive of a gross worldliness masquerading as piety—is often the cause of a loss of faith: for when ‘vertical’ trust is displaced by ‘horizontal’ expectation, one’s faith is placed not in God but the world; no longer is it nourished by the infinite goodness of God, rather, it becomes the slave of the vagaries of the life of this world. Especially in our times, many are they who have become atheist due to God’s apparent refusal to answer fervent prayers for help. In previous ages, prayer was nearly always accompanied by a decisive—doubt-dissolving—intuition of the unimpeachable goodness of God, so that even if specific prayers went unanswered, this goodness was not in the least questioned; in modern times, however, this intuition ‘has been artificially paralyzed’ by ‘a perfectly sterile and “unreal” rationalism.’²⁵³

For this reason, it is all the more important to grasp the necessity of resignation as a condition for the integrity of personal prayer. To combine fervent, trusting prayer with this quality of resignation is subtle and challenging—avoiding, on the one hand, foolhardy expectation and, on the other, apathetic fatalism—but it is also liberating: for, irrespective of the nature of the immediate response from God, every such prayer not only anticipates, but already participates in, its own fulfillment, a fulfillment whose nature will be ultimately determined by God’s grace and wisdom, and not by our own desires. In such a light, one can better understand what is meant by God’s promise in the Qur’an: *I answer the supplication of the suppliant when he supplicates Me.* (Sura al-Baqara, 186)

The following sentence by Schuon might be read as a commentary on this verse:

²⁵³ Ibid., p.101.

‘God readily answers humble, charitable, reasonable and fervent prayers, but sometimes He answers them belatedly, and sometimes in a form other than the suppliant had in view, so much so that a refusal on the part of God is an answer since it announces a better gift, to the very extent that the prayer possessed the requisite qualities.’²⁵⁴

On a still more fundamental level—going beyond the vicissitudes of time and space—it might be said that the ‘refusal’ is but a mask over an eternally present ‘acceptance’:

“‘Before” we formulated our prayers, the divine replies “were” in eternity; God is for us the eternal, omnipresent Response, and prayer can have no other function than to eliminate all that separates us from this Response which is inexhaustible.’²⁵⁵

Turning now to the second mode, that of canonical prayer—such as the Lord’s Prayer in Christianity and the *salat* in Islam—this is no longer the prayer of such and such an individual, but of the individual as such. It is a prayer that has God as its author, and is thus itself of a revealed substance; by this very fact it is ontologically superior to individual prayer, and, being universal, includes ‘eminently or in addition, all possible individual prayers.’ Whoever recites the canonical prayer prays ‘for all and in all.’²⁵⁶

Again, it is folly to belittle the significance of the canonical prayer—or exoteric rites in general—out of some presumptuous notion of esoterism. Schuon repeatedly stresses throughout his writings the indispensable nature of the exoteric framework of formal religion; without this framework, all ‘esoteric’ exercises are doomed in advance to being nothing more than ‘psychological exploits’. He insists on distinguishing between ‘the function of the exoteric viewpoint as such’ and ‘the function of exoterism as a spiritual means’.²⁵⁷ The viewpoint proper to exoterism is limited to that of the individual and his final ends, on the one hand, and the Personal God, at the level of Being, on the other; it is this limited perspective that esoterism transcends, in the first place, by its

²⁵⁴ *Christianity/Islam: Essays in Esoteric Ecumenicism*, World Wisdom Books, 1985, p.217.

²⁵⁵ *The Eye of the Heart*, World Wisdom Books, 1997, p.165.

²⁵⁶ *Stations of Wisdom*, op. cit., p.121.

²⁵⁷ *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, Faber & Faber, 1953, p.24.

awareness of the immanent Self in the transpersonal essence of the soul, and then by its awareness of the transcendence of the supra-personal Essence of God, ‘Beyond-Being’. But this opening to metaphysical truths does not absolve esoterists from the obligation to observe the exoteric rites; the exoteric framework is transcended by esoterism, as it were, from within, not abolished on its own plane; no one, in other words, can dispense with the ‘function of exoterism as a spiritual means’. These means will be used in two ways, according to Schuon:

‘... on the one hand by intellectual transposition into the esoteric order—in which case they will act as supports of intellectual “actualisation”—and on the other hand by their regulating action on the individual portion of the being.’²⁵⁸

Poorly assimilated esoterism always carries the danger of pride; and this is most often expressed in the abandonment of religious rites, in the name of the supra-formal essence. Because a certain—purely mental—awareness of the supra-personal Essence is obtained, a cavalier attitude towards the personal dimensions of the spiritual life can easily develop. What Schuon stresses, on the contrary, is that the ‘individual portion of the being’ does not cease being so simply upon the recognition of certain esoteric truths, far from it: such truths cannot be realized without the total conformity of the individual’s character to these truths. Now the individual, as stated earlier, can do nothing without the help of Heaven. The performance of the exoteric rites—in a spirit of humility towards Heaven and the sacred substance of the divinely revealed Law —is of inestimable value, both in itself, and in relation to the cultivation of virtue, without which no spiritual endeavour can bear fruit. The relationship between prayer and virtue is fundamental, for the effort of the soul, on its own, to attain virtue is inadequate; a heavenly power is needed, and it is precisely this power that is attracted by prayer. Hence it can be said that to pray is ‘to actualize a virtue and at the same time to sow the seed of it.’²⁵⁹

²⁵⁸ Ibid., pp.24-25.

²⁵⁹ *To Have a Center*, World Wisdom Books, 1990, p.145.

Moreover, the exoteric rites are the indispensable guarantee,²⁶⁰ and the *conditio sine qua non*, of the efficacy of the esoteric rites of any tradition:

‘It is obvious that a spiritual means has significance only within the rules assigned to it by the tradition which offers it ... nothing is more dangerous than to give oneself up to improvisations in this field.’²⁶¹

Meditation is the third mode of prayer identified by Schuon in this chapter. The reason why the thinking subject in meditation cannot be regarded as man alone is that what is actually engaged in authentic meditation is the ‘impersonal intelligence’, which is not delimited by the ego; and the goal of meditation is metaphysical knowledge, which also goes beyond the individual. The thinking subject is therefore defined by Schuon as ‘man and God at the same time, pure intelligence being the point of intersection between human reason and the divine Intellect.’ The final chapter of this book, also entitled ‘Stations of Wisdom’, is itself a rich source of meditation—an unrivalled source, one might say, certainly for our times. Taking as its point of departure six fundamental aspects of Reality, Schuon in masterful fashion shows the application of these aspects at different levels: divine and human, cosmic and symbolic, ethical and alchemical. Through studying carefully these six ‘stations of wisdom’ one will gain a more keen insight into what Schuon understands by ‘meditation’, the function of which he describes as follows:

²⁶⁰ It is important to reinforce this point: ‘If we start from the idea that intellection and concentration, or doctrine and method, are the foundations of the Path, it should be added that these two elements are valid and effective only by virtue of a traditional guarantee, a “seal” coming from Heaven ... the importance of orthodoxy, of tradition, of Revelation is that the means of realizing the Absolute must come “objectively” from the Absolute.’ *Understanding Islam*, op. cit., p.157.

²⁶¹ *Stations of Wisdom*, op. cit., p.130. This point is made after making mention of the possibility, primarily found within Hinduism and Buddhism, of outward rites being replaced by the supreme rite of invocation. But this replacement is also conditioned by rules proper to the traditional framework in question, so it cannot be used as a justification for the abandonment of rites in the context of a religious framework wherein these rites are legally binding on all. Shankara’s emphasis on knowledge as the sole means of deliverance is also often cited by pseudo-esoterists to support the wholesale abandonment of rites; for such pretenders it is rather inconvenient that Shankara also insists that the performance of ritual is a ‘cause’ of knowledge insofar as it ‘is instrumental in extinguishing that demerit arising out of past sins which obstructs knowledge of the Absolute.’ Religious rites in general are *arad-upakaraka*, or ‘remote auxiliaries to knowledge’. *Samkara on Discipleship* Vol.V of *A Samkara Source-Book*, Tr. A.J. Alston, Shanti Sadan, 1989, p.89.

‘Meditation acts on the one hand upon the intelligence, in which it awakens certain consubstantial “memories”, and on the other hand upon the subconscious imagination which ends by incorporating into itself the truths meditated upon, resulting in a fundamental and as it were organic process of persuasion.’²⁶²

Schuon also refers briefly to ‘pure concentration’ as a possible mode of orison, ‘on condition that it have a traditional basis and be centred on the Divine; this concentration is none other than silence which, indeed, has been called a “Name of the Buddha”, because of its connection with the idea of the Void.’²⁶³

Now whilst meditation may be readily grasped as a mode of prayer, it may not be so clear as to how the ‘silence’ of pure concentration can be assimilated as a form of prayer. The ontological basis of the spiritual efficacy of concentration lies in its negation of negation: everything that is ‘other than’ God —all that can take objective form, that is, all phenomena of existence, inward and outward—in a certain sense ‘negates’ God; by eliminating from consciousness all possible objects—or, what amounts to the same, all ‘alterity’, everything that is other than pure consciousness itself—there occurs that negation of negation which is pure affirmation. This is one of the applications of the double negation, *neti neti*:

‘The negation of pleasure, of the world, or of manifestation is equivalent to the implicit affirmation of the Principle which is, in relation to the world, “void” (Sanskrit: *shunya*) and “not this” (*neti*) ... There is no spirituality which is not founded, in one of its constituent elements, on the negation of this dream; there is no spirituality devoid of ascetic elements. Even simple mental concentration implies sacrifice. When the concentration is continuous, it is the narrow path, or the dark night, and then the soul itself, this living substance full of pictures and desires, is sacrificed.’²⁶⁴

²⁶² Ibid., p.124. The six ‘stations’ referred to here are also treated, with slightly different accentuations, in the chapter entitled ‘Meditation’ in *The Eye of the Heart*, op.cit.

²⁶³ *Stations of Wisdom*, op. cit., pp.124-125.

²⁶⁴ *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, op. cit., p.131. It might be noted in this connection that Shankara refers to concentration as the greatest form of asceticism (*tapas*).

Turning finally to invocation, this refers to the methodic repetition of a divine Name, a practice that is universal; Schuon refers, at the end of the chapter, to the practice such as it is found in four traditions: the Jesus prayer in Christianity, the invocation of the Name *Allah* in Islam, *japa-yoga* in Hinduism, and the *nembutsu* in Amidist Buddhism. The universality of this mode of prayer is nowadays well known; but less well understood is the reason why it should be the ‘Name’ of God that functions as the key sacramental support for methodic interiorization in such formally diverse spiritual worlds. Schuon, in demonstrating so convincingly the metaphysical foundations of the practice of invocation, renders the invocation all the more intelligible, and hence, its practice all the more compelling. He begins by asserting that it is God Himself who is, in a fundamental sense, the true subject of this mode of prayer:

‘The foundation of this mystery is, on the one hand, that “God and His Name are one” (Ramakrishna), and on the other, that God Himself pronounces His Name in Himself, hence in eternity and outside all creation, so that His unique and uncreate word is the prototype of ejaculatory prayer and even, in a less direct sense, of all orison.’²⁶⁵

As regards the first point, ‘God and His Name are one’, this is found expressed in diverse traditions, in formulations analogous to Ramakrishna’s, such as the Sufi maxim: the Name is the Named. While this principle on its own is sufficient to render intelligible the practice of invocation, Schuon adds further to this intelligibility by elaborating on the divine archetype of the invocation, indicating the manner in which God may be said to ‘invoke’ Himself, eternally:

‘The first distinction that the intellect conceives in the Divine Nature is that of Beyond-Being and Being; but since Being is so to speak the “crystallization” of Beyond-Being, it is like the “Word” of the Absolute, through which the Absolute expresses Itself, determines Itself, or names Itself.’²⁶⁶

²⁶⁵ *Stations of Wisdom*, op. cit., p.125.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.125.

It should be noted that this ‘Self-naming’, coterminous with Self-determination, takes place *in divinis*, that is, within the Divine Nature; in ‘naming’ Himself as Being—or, in determining Himself with a view to entering into principal relationship with manifestation—God does not cease being God. The essence of God has but expressed Itself as Person, at the level of Being. It is thus that God can be said to invoke ‘His Name in Himself, hence in eternity and outside all creation’.

Schuon then proceeds:

‘Another distinction which is essential here, and which derives from the preceding by principal succession, is that between God and the world, the Creator and the Creation: just as Being is the Word or Name of Beyond-Being, so too the world—or Existence—is the Utterance of Being, of the personal God; the effect is always the “name” of the cause.’²⁶⁷

Every link in the chain of descent from the Essence down to the world is, then, the cause, or the ‘named’, with regard to what is beneath it, and the effect or ‘name’ of what is above it. This way of conceiving of the ontological unfolding of manifestation reveals that God’s ‘invocation’ results in the world; the cosmos is the spoken ‘word’ of God. This whole invocatory cosmogony, however, is reversed when the starting point is the invocation as performed by man. For man, being made in the image of God, reflects God both positively and inversely, as is the case with all reflected images: in one respect the image directly reflects its archetype, and in another respect it inverts the archetype, the reflection of a face in a mirror reveals the form of the face, but what is on the right of the face will appear on the left of the reflection, and vice versa. Transposed onto the vertical plane, this inversion means that descent by God is reflected by the ascent of man. Man’s invocation, then, in the first respect directly reflects and participates in the eternal invocation of the Divine; and in the second, it inverts the ontological process described by its divine archetype:

‘...man, for his part, when pronouncing the same Name, describes the inverse movement, for this Name is not only Being and Creation, but also Mercy and

²⁶⁷ Ibid., p.125-126.

Redemption; in man, it does not create, but on the contrary “undoes”, and that in a divine manner since it brings man back to the Principle. The divine Name is a metaphysical isthmus (in the sense of the Arabic word *barzakh*): as “seen by God”, it is determination, limitation, “sacrifice”; as seen by man, it is liberation, limitlessness, plenitude. We have said that this Name, invoked by man, is nonetheless always pronounced by God; human invocation is always the “outward” effect of eternal and “inward” invocation by the Divinity. The same holds true for every Revelation: it is sacrificial for the divine Spirit and liberating for man; Revelation, whatever its form or mode, is descent or incarnation for the Creator, and ascent or “excarnation” for the creature.’²⁶⁸

If the above be a description of the objective processes involved in divine descent through manifestation and human ascent through invocation, the following refers to the subjective aspect of the process, the essential function of the invocation as regards the human soul:

‘The sufficient reason for the invocation of the Name is the remembering of God; and this, in the final analysis, is not other than consciousness of the Absolute. The name actualizes this consciousness and, in the end, perpetuates it in the soul and fixes it in the heart, so that it penetrates the whole being and at the same time transmutes and absorbs it. Consciousness of the Absolute is the prerogative of human intelligence, and also its aim.’²⁶⁹

It is this perpetuation of the consciousness of the Absolute that is the supreme aim of the spiritual path. As Schuon says elsewhere: realization is an easy thing for it suffices to remember God; but it is also the most difficult, for man is by nature forgetful. The invocation of the Name of God is the key methodic support for this perpetuation of the consciousness of the Absolute. The invocation of the Name, by virtue of its unitive nature, is proportioned to the pure Absolute, whilst other prayers, differentiated and multiple, correspond to the Personal Divinity. This basic division indicates a key distinction between what Schuon calls the ‘initiatic’ as opposed to the religious or ‘mystic’ way. The first is active, whereas the second is passive; the activity and passivity

²⁶⁸ Ibid., p.126-127.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., p.127.

in question being in relation to grace: for the ‘initiate’, practising esoteric rites, an active method is being pursued, with a view to opening up the heart to grace. In other words, ‘grace is actively brought into play by means of the contemplative intelligence which identifies itself more or less directly with that which it contemplates.’²⁷⁰ It is important to stress that this methodic activity is not based on the presumption that grace can be attained or produced simply upon the mechanical performance of the rites in question; such a presumption is excluded for two reasons, one concerning the human dimension and the other, the nature and operation of divine grace. On the human plane, as already noted above, Schuon insists that the integrity of prayer demands conformity of soul, or good character; this highest form of prayer, ‘leads to the highest pinnacle of perfection, on condition ... that the activity of prayer be in agreement with all the remainder of the being’s activities ... [T]he virtues—or conformity to the Divine Law—constitute the *conditio sine qua non* without which the ‘spiritual prayer’ would be ineffective...’²⁷¹

On the divine side, grace does not so much descend in response to the human performance of the invocatory rites; rather such rites ‘provide a means of removing the obstacles which are opposed to the principally permanent radiation of grace.’²⁷² Grace is never absent, in other words, it is we who are absent from grace, albeit in appearance only; the invocation makes us present to the omnipresent reality of grace, and is thus to be considered not so much as the ‘cause’ of grace, as its ‘effect’. It is itself constitutive of grace, the consummation of which in the human soul is properly the concern of God.

The following passage, which concludes *Stations of Wisdom*, expresses in a powerful manner the mystery of this ‘permanent radiation’ of grace, obscured by the veils of outward existence:

‘All great spiritual experiences agree in this: there is no common measure between the means put into operation and the result. “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible”, says the Gospel. In fact, what separates man from divine Reality is but a thin partition: God is infinitely close to man, but man is infinitely

²⁷⁰ *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, op. cit., p.73.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.181.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, p.73.

far from God. This partition, for man, is a mountain; man stands in front of a mountain which he must remove with his own hands. He digs away the earth, but in vain, the mountain remains; man however goes on digging, in the name of God. And the mountain vanishes. It was never there.’²⁷³

To conclude: Frithjof Schuon laid bare the essentials of prayer in the manner of one who spoke, not speculatively, but out of concrete experience. Neither the profundity of his exposition nor the impact of his writings on the soul can be accounted for apart from this altogether fundamental fact. One feels absolutely sure that his vivid, often poetic, descriptions of the inner unfolding of the life of prayer stemmed from a direct vision, not from imaginative genius. The authority of his tone in this, as in so many domains, bears witness, not so much to one who was simply sure that he was right, but one who was effaced in the essence of that which he spoke about, and, consequently, one through whom the communicable aspects of that essence were expressed. Having given himself to prayer, he was, one feels, ‘fashioned’ by prayer:

‘Man prays and prayer fashions man. The saint has himself become prayer, the meeting-place of earth and Heaven; and thus he contains the universe and the universe prays with him. He is everywhere where nature prays and he prays with and in her: in the peaks which touch the void and eternity, in a flower which scatters itself or in the abandoned song of a bird.

He who lives in prayer has not lived in vain.’²⁷⁴

In so directly helping many souls to ‘live in prayer’—or at least, to live *for* prayer—Frithjof Schuon certainly effected that ‘restitution’ for which he hoped; and, by that very token, helped them to fulfill the very purpose for which they were created; for, as the Qur’an tells us: *And I created the jinn and humankind only that they might worship Me.* (Sura al-Dhariyat, 56)

²⁷³ *Stations of Wisdom*, op. cit., p.157.

²⁷⁴ *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, op. cit., p.213.