

The Elect and the Predestination of Knowledge: 'Esoterism' and 'Exclusivism' - A Schuonian Perspective

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Esoterism is hidden by its nature, not its form.

Frithjof Schuon

He sendeth down water from heaven so that the valleys are in flood
with it, each according to its capacity.

Qur'an, XIII, 17

Intelligence is only beautiful when it does not destroy faith, and
faith is only beautiful when it is not opposed to intelligence

Frithjof Schuon

With God all things are possible.

St. Matthew 19:26

Introduction

According to common understanding the term 'esotericism' designates doctrines and methods that are more or less secret, maintained, as it were, by an 'elite'. On the one hand it is asserted that esotericism is the case because these doctrines and methods transcend the limited capacities of average men.¹ On the other hand it is argued that esotericism is a tool manipulated by the elite to control knowledge and maintain the *status quo*. The first point of view offers a positive recognition of esotericism as a necessity of the metaphysical hierarchy of Being. The second point of view considers esotericism *a posteriori* as a human construct. This position tends towards negative connotations associated with the control of knowledge, thence power,

¹ F. Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, Middlesex, 1981, p. 7, (Schuon, 1981a).

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and the subsequent denial of liberty imposed upon those not of the elite. It might be said that this second point of view coincides, in principle, with the first inasmuch as a tool is neither good nor evil but only what one makes of it, and inasmuch as the control of knowledge and maintaining of the *status quo* are in a certain sense the responsibility of the elite, although here it would be a case of control for the benefit of all. Having recognised this, we have in mind, concerning this second position, the negative view of esotericism.

Both of these points of view are from their respective positions and to varying degrees valid. Those who recognise the hierarchy of Being will readily accept this. With respect to the negative view of esotericism they will recognise that; to say hierarchy is to say degrees and to say degrees is to say movement away from the source of stability and unity. Hence it is inevitable – in an entropic sense – that human understanding should fall to a point where it ceases to recognise its place in the scheme of the whole and close ranks about itself. Once the individual becomes its own measure it is inevitable that an ‘elite’, in the pejorative sense, should emerge and that it should jealously control both knowledge and power for its own good to the detriment of the common populace. In this instance the control of knowledge considered as ‘esotericism’ refers effectively to the concept of a contrived secrecy and here only inasmuch as this is a human practice. From the perspective of those who deny the hierarchy of Being, which is generally to say, from the modern egalitarian perspective, the notion of a valid esotericism escapes understanding.

It is not the place here to argue the above two points of view. In our mind the hierarchy of Being is self-evident. As such esotericism properly refers to the esoteric domain, that which is most ‘hidden’ by virtue of transcending the purely human domain. Again, this domain is hidden by virtue of being ‘inward’ such that it is not immediate in what is most accessible or ‘outward’. In this latter sense we recognise that what is most inward is necessarily the principle, as the centre is the principle of the circumference. Hence the esoteric domain while transcending the purely human domain nevertheless remains the principle of this domain and is thus accessible through it.

Esotericism refers to things as they are; not as they appear in the world of flux but as they exist in their metaphysical perfection. Between the metaphysical and the physical realms there is the same

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difference as between the *intelligible* and the *sensible* worlds of the Platonic doctrine of Forms. Esotericism refers to direct and inward knowledge. This, as Frithjof Schuon remarks, is the knowledge of the Heart-Intellect, what the Greeks called *gnosis* and the Hindus, *jñāna*. For Schuon 'esoterism' as such is identifiable with the *sophia perennis*.¹

A parallelism can be drawn between esotericism and exotericism and the 'elite' and the 'popular'. The elite are those capable of metaphysical discernment, those, who in the words of the *Gospels*, have 'ears to hear'. This tends to suggest that they are predisposed to hear, an idea highlighted by the fact that the term 'elite' means, in its root, to be 'chosen'. These points give rise to the question of Predestination. This question becomes more urgent if considered in terms of the theological dichotomy of the 'elect' and the 'damned'.

This paper considers the idea of the elite, or elect, with respect to the problems of Predestination and the notion of the exclusivity of esotericism. It is our opinion that the questions raised here can only be resolved in light of the metaphysical knowledge that is the proper subject of esotericism, where, as said, this is understood as the *sophia perennis*. Frithjof Schuon stands as the preeminent voice of the *sophia perennis* for our day and age and it is thus that this paper is largely a reiteration of what he has said on these points. For himself, Schuon would undoubtedly admit that what he has said is in turn a reiteration of the perennial teachings of the world's great Traditions.

Esoterism²

In a general sense esoterism is considered as complementary to exoterism. Thus one might talk of inwards-outwards, centre-circumference, Spirit-letter, Heart-body, Suprafomal-formal; likewise, elite-popular or initiate-novice. However, this complementarity reflects the exoteric perspective only, where, in fact, it tends to appear as a

¹ *Loc. cit.*

² Schuon favours the terms 'esoterism' and 'exoterism' over 'esotericism' and 'exotericism'. Given that we are presenting the Schuonian perspective we will continue with his usage from here in.

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dichotomy. From the perspective of esoterism, which is to say, from the perspective of truth, esoterism exists independently of exoterism. Esoterism, as Schuon says:

... is not, in its intrinsic reality, a complement or a half; it is so only extrinsically and as it were 'accidentally'. This means that the word 'esoterism' designates not only the total truth inasmuch as it is 'coloured'¹ by entering a system of partial truth, but also the total truth as such, which is colorless... Thus esoterism as such is metaphysics, to which is necessarily joined an appropriate method of realization.²

As with the symbolism of the circle, the centre is not dependent on the circumference in the sense of being a complement; the centre is the principle of the circumference; the circumference, in a sense, is the 'appropriate method of realization' of the centre. In the context of this paper the importance of this point is paramount. It is only from the perspective of exoterism that exclusivism can be envisaged. Esoterism is necessarily inclusive considering that it is rooted in the essential Unity of Being, what the Islamic tradition calls *al-Wāhidiyah* or the Divine Unicity.³

Schuon remarks: 'Esoterism, by its interpretations, its revelations and its interiorizing and essentializing operations, tends to realize pure and direct objectivity; this is the reason for its existence. Objectivity takes account of both immanence and transcendence'.⁴ 'Objectivity' here indicates the perfect adequation of the knowing subject to the known object. Thus: '[t]o say objectivity is to say totality, and this on all levels: esoteric doctrines realize totality to the extent that they

1 As the Persian sage, Abu 'l-Qasim al-Junayd, said: 'The colour of the water is the colour of the vessel'.

2 F. Schuon, *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*, Indiana, 2000, p. 115.

3 As distinguished from *al-Ahadiyah* (the Divine Unity), which is abstracted from all distinctive knowledge, whereas the Unicity appears in the differentiated, in the same way that the principal distinctions appear in it. See T. Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, Wellingborough, 1976, 'Glossary'.

4 Schuon, 1981a, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

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realize objectivity'.¹ Again, the 'totality' of intrinsic esoterism denies the possibility of exclusivism.

The totality of esoterism does nothing to deny the contingency of exoterism, just as the Absolute does not deny the Relative but on the contrary affirms it by definition; for 'the All-Possibility must by definition and on pain of contradiction include its own impossibility'.² This distinction is prefigured *in divinis* 'by the differentiation between the Absolute as such and the Absolute relativized in view of a dimension of its Infinitude; but the difference, precisely, is real only from the standpoint of Relativity'.³ Esoterism by its very unicity cannot exclude exoterism; exoterism by necessity of its standpoint must present an exclusivism of sorts. This is not to suggest a 'necessary evil' but simply a necessity. Questions of morality are invalid at this level.

As esoterism penetrates the exoteric domain it is 'coloured' by Relativity or by its 'appropriate method of realization'.⁴ 'Thus' says Schuon, 'it is necessary to distinguish ... between an esoterism more or less largely based upon a particular theology and linked to speculations offered to us *de facto* by traditional sources ... and another esoterism springing from the truly crucial elements of the religion and also, for that very reason, from the simple nature of things; the two dimensions can be combined, it is true, and most often do combine in fact'.⁵ Again, 'the esoterism of a particular religion - of a particular exoterism precisely - tends to adapt itself to this religion and thereby enter into theological, psychological and legalistic meanders foreign to its nature, while preserving in its secret centre its authentic and plenary nature, but for which it would not be what is it'.⁶

¹ *Loc. cit.*

² F. Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, London, 1987, p. 108.

³ F. Schuon, *In The Face Of The Absolute*, Indiana, 1989, p. 73.

⁴ The 'colouring' of esoterism does not affect its essential nature. As Schuon remarks, 'it goes without saying that the radiation of grace within esoterism extends, by reason of the letter's very universality, through all the domains of the traditional civilization and is not halted by any formal limit, just as light, colourless in itself, is not halted by the colour of a transparent body', *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, Wheaton, 1993, p. 34, (Schuon, 1993a).

⁵ Schuon, 2000, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

⁶ *Loc. cit.*

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The continuity from the esoteric to the exoteric does not however imply a similar continuity in reverse. Herein lies the error of pantheism.¹ 'Reality' as Schuon remarks, 'affirms itself by degrees, but without ceasing to be "one"', the inferior degrees of this affirmation being absorbed, by metaphysical integration or synthesis, into the superior degrees'.² A superior degree of Reality contains all inferior degrees within it. Therefore from the Divine perspective all is one. From the human or terrestrial perspective there is a substantial discontinuity between the degrees of Reality, for it is obvious that the lesser cannot contain the greater. The esoteric domain both contains and transcends the exoteric domain. Thus esoterism operates in two seemingly opposed ways. So Schuon states that: 'esoterism on the one hand prolongs exoterism - by harmoniously plumbing its depths - because the form expresses the essence and because in this respect the two enjoy solidarity, while on the other hand esoterism opposes exoterism - by transcending it abruptly - because the essence by virtue of its unlimitedness is of necessity not reducible to form, or in other words, because form inasmuch as it constitutes a limit is opposed to whatever is totality and liberty'.³

Esoterism, inasmuch as it coincides with the human, comprises three dimensions: metaphysical discernment, mystical concentration and moral conformity.⁴ Through metaphysical discernment the esotericist sees the Absolute in the Relative;⁵ through mystical

1 On this point see Schuon, 1993a, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

3 Schuon, 1981a, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

4 Schuon, 1989, *op. cit.*, p. 36. Schuon continues to remarks that, through these dimensions, esoterism 'contains in the final analysis the only things that Heaven demands in an absolute fashion, all other demands being relative and therefore more or less conditional. The proof of this is that a man who would have no more than a few moments left to live could do nothing more than: firstly, look up towards God with his intelligence; secondly, call upon God with his will; thirdly, love God with all his soul, and in loving Him realize every possible virtue. One may be surprised at this coincidence between what is most elementarily human and what pertains quintessentially to the highest wisdom, but what is most simple retraces precisely what is highest; *extremities aequalitates*, "extremes meet"'.⁵

5 As Schuon remarks, 'if the relative did not comprise something of the absolute, relativities could not be distinguished qualitatively from one another', *Language of the Self*, Indiana, 1999, p. 17.

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concentration they lay root to the Centre, the interface between Transcendence and Immanence - this is 'mystical' (= 'silent') precisely, in virtue of its participation in Transcendence which is inexpressible in that it escapes the limits of form;¹ through moral conformity they actively realise the Absolute in the contingent forms of the Relative in accord with the Hermetic formula: 'As Above so Below'.

The recognition of the Absolute in the Relative and the moral conformity to the contingent recognised as a mode of the Absolute means that the esotericist must submit, almost without exception, to the exoteric forms. 'Forms' says Huston Smith in his introduction to Schuon's, *The Transcendent Unity of Religion*, are to be transcended by fathoming their depths and discerning their universal content, not by circumventing them'.²

That esoterism should exist is prefigured in the radiation of the Infinite. That it must 'exist' - where this term indicates contingency - in a complementary relationship with exoterism derives from the fact that, 'esoterism, in order to exist in a given world, must be integrated with a particular modality of that world, and this will necessarily involve relatively numerous elements of society'.³ That it must exist as a human condition derives from the fact that the human must love the Lord God with 'all one's heart, with all one's soul, and with all one's mind' (Mt. 22:34). According to a Sufi saying, 'There are as many paths towards God as there are human souls'. Again: 'There are many different ways of serving, but it is always the same Lord'. (1Cor.12: 4-5) This diversity does nothing to contradict the Unity of God but on the contrary proves the all-embracing possibility of God's plenitude and fullness. As Schuon remarks, 'A religion by definition must satisfy all spiritual possibilities'.⁴ Hence, 'if' as Schuon says, 'in every religious climate such an esoterism is necessarily to be found, it is for the simple reason that everywhere there are men whose nature requires it; namely,

¹ See M. Pallis, 'Is there a Problem of Evil?' from J. Needleman (ed), *The Sword of Gnosis*, Baltimore, 1974, p. 236. As Dionysius the Areopagite says: 'The best that one can say about God is for one to keep silent out of the wisdom of one's inward riches' (*Mystical Theology* 1.1).

² H. Smith, 'Introduction,' in Schuon, 1993a, *op. cit.*, p. xxv

³ Schuon, 1993a, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

⁴ Schuon, 1999, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

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men whose intelligence, discernment and contemplativeness are proportionate to pure metaphysics and thus to the corresponding path'.¹

That esoterism is hidden by its inwardness is inevitable because of its transcendent nature; that it must be accessible is inevitable due to its role as ontological principle and in view of the extension of the Infinite. As Schuon remarks, 'Esoterism is hidden by its nature, not its form'.² 'The paradox of esoterism' says Schuon, 'is that on the one hand "men do not light a candle and put it under a bushel", while on the other hand "give not what is sacred to the dogs"; between these two expressions lies the "light that shineth in the darkness, but the darkness comprehend it not". There are fluctuations here that no one can prevent and which are the ransom of contingency'.³

Exoterism

'The exoteric point of view' says Schuon, 'is fundamentally the point of view of individual interest considered in its highest sense, that is to say, extended to cover the whole cycle of existence of the individual and not limited solely to terrestrial life'.⁴ To say exoterism is the point of view of the 'individual' is to say it is the point of view of a human subjectivity. Exoterism colours its Divine Object with this very subjectivity. Schuon states: 'The characteristic - and inevitable - misunderstanding of all exoterism, is to attribute to God a human subjectivity'.⁵ This 'misunderstanding' is, in a sense, rooted in the manner in which the personal God, or God as interlocutor between the universal and the individual, communicates with the individual. As Schuon remarks: 'In addressing Himself to the individual and to the collectivity - which by definition is made up of individuals - the personal God makes Himself an individual: that is to say, He creates a religion which is necessarily particular and formalistic and which for

1 Schuon, 1989, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

2 Schuon, 1987, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

3 Schuon, 1981a, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

4 Schuon, 1993a, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

5 Schuon, 1989, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

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that reason could not be universal as regards its form, anymore than an individual as such can represent or realize universality'.¹

The Absolute communicates itself by necessity of its Infinitude. Being is necessary as a possibility of the Infinite and to say Being is to say manifestation; to say manifestation, as Schuon observes, is to say limitation.² Thus God is *a priori* bound - for God cannot not be God - to communicate in limited mode truths that in their essence transcend and burst open the limitations of Being. Moreover, at this level it is necessary that these truths, colourless and limitless on their own, be coloured or limited so that they may be effective. 'A stream has need of banks in order to flow', says Schuon, 'and thus it is that exoterism, or the religious form, has need of limitations in order to be a living influence; "grasp all, lose all," as the proverb has it'.³

One must realise that the mission of exoterism is not to offer definitive explanations of the Absolute, which would be incomprehensible by definition at the level of the Relative, but to communicate the Absolute in a manner that reabsorbs the Relative back into the Absolute, or more precisely, that awakens it to the fact that it is not other than the Absolute.⁴ Thus, as Schuon remarks, 'One has to realise that outward religion is not disinterested; it wants to save souls, no more no less, and at the cost of the truths that do not serve its holy strategy. Sapience, by contrast, wants only the truth, and the truth necessarily coincides with our final interests because it coincides with the Sovereign Good'.⁵ To talk of a 'holy strategy' is to recognise what the Buddhists call *upāya*, 'skillful means', and it is thanks to this

1 *Ibid.*, p. 40. It might be objected that 'Christ became all things to all men', but to say 'an individual *as such*' is to say that 'individual' by definition is not 'universal'. Christ the individual does not realize universality, Christ the universal does. Nevertheless Christ is simultaneously individual and universal, a fact that does nothing to confuse these two states.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

4 As Ibn 'Arabi teaches, it is not a question of 'becoming one' with God, rather the contemplative 'becomes conscious that he 'is one' with Him; he 'realises' real unity. This is the realisation of the Divine Uniqueness (*al-Wahidiyah*). Cited in Schuon, 1987, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

5 Schuon, 1989, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

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efficient intention that all 'orthodox'¹ dogmas are justified and are in the final analysis compatible despite their apparent antagonisms. Schuon says that: 'Intrinsically "orthodox" dogmas, that is, those disposed in view of salvation, differ from one religion to another; consequently they cannot all be objectively true. However, all dogmas are symbolically true and subjectively efficacious, which is to say that their purpose is to create human attitudes that contribute in their way to the divine miracle of salvation'.² That exoterism is somewhat bound to 'misunderstandings' derives from the fact that, given its mission, it 'has to take into account the weakness of men, and thus also, be it said without euphemism, their stupidity; like it or not, it must itself take on something of these shortcomings, or at least it must allow them some room, on pain of not being able to survive in human surroundings'.³

Exoterism must be recognised as a filter or buffer designed to allow knowledge to penetrate each person according to their individual ability to receive it; 'each according to their capacity', as it says in the *Qur'an*.⁴ In this way it acts as a protection against the dangerous effect of an excess of the Divine Light of Knowledge upon one that is unprepared to receive it, and here we recall Plato's 'Simile of the Cave'. Schuon remarks: 'It is evident that no kind of knowledge is bad in principle or in itself; but many forms of knowledge can be harmful in practice as soon as they cease to correspond to the hereditary experience of man and are imposed on him without his being spiritually prepared to receive them'.⁵

¹ As René Guénon remarks, the 'necessary and sufficient condition' of orthodoxy is the 'concordance of a conception with the fundamental principle of the tradition', *Man and his becoming*, New Delhi, 1981, p.15. Schuon says that 'orthodoxy is the principle of formal homogeneity proper to any authentically spiritual perspective', *Stations of Wisdom*, London, 1961, p.13. Orthodoxy coincides with the truth of esoterism.

² Schuon, 1989, *op. cit.*, p. 110

³ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁴ 'He sendeth down water from heaven so that the valleys are in flood with it, each according to its capacity' (*Qur'an*, XIII, 17). Ghazali adds that 'the commentaries tells us that the water is Gnosis and that the valleys are Hearts'. *Mishkat al-Anwar*, cited in M. Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, London, 1971, p. 177.

⁵ Schuon, 1981a, *op.cit.*, p. 2.

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Exoterism is prefigured in esoterism but this is not to say that it is reliant upon esoterism for its existence. Schuon says: 'Exoterism does not come from esoterism; it comes directly from God. This reminds one of Dante's thesis according to which the Empire comes from God and not from the papacy. "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's"'.¹

On the one hand exoterism *per se* must exist to satisfy the All-Possibility of the Infinite. On the other hand the 'exoteric mentality', says Schuon, 'has a right to exist so long as piety wards off abuses'. He continues to add that the exoteric mentality 'has nothing supernatural about it' and that, 'its rights coincide more or less with those of human nature'.² This is true insomuch as this mentality is a 'product' of human nature. At the same time the right of human nature is *de facto* the right of freedom, and this is prefigured *in divinis* and is precisely 'supernatural'. Here it is a question of a 'human margin', which, observes Schuon, 'Heaven concedes to our freedom'.³

The Elect

The term 'elite' means 'chosen'; this might also be rendered 'elect'. This idea is central to the Judaic notion of the 'Chosen People' (see Is.45: 4) and continues into the Christian 'elect' for whose sake the time of the Apocalypse will be shortened (Mt.24:22; Mk.13:20). The Hebrew word is *bâchîyr* (9*(v)). The Greek word is ἐκλεκτός. Both mean 'to select'. More interestingly, both terms imply a return to the 'origin'. The Greek ἐκλεκτός is derived from the roots ἐκ- ('origin') and λέγω ('to lay forth', with the implication of discourse). This latter root implies the idea of the creative Word that is universally seen to be the origin of Creation. The Hebrew *bâchîyr* is derived from the root (9(v): both *bâchar* ('to try', as in 'trial') and *bâchûr* ('a youth'). The former implies the idea that one is elected by virtue of trial. The symbolism of the 'youth' or 'Child' is commonly associated with the

¹ Schuon, 1987, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

² Schuon, 1989, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

³ F. Schuon, *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence*, Indiana, 1981b, p. 29. On the complexities of the 'human margin' see Schuon, 1989, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-105.

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idea of the 'original state'.¹ This is the principal and central state, the 'kingdom of heaven', as Jesus says: 'In truth I tell you, anyone who does not welcome the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it' (Lk.18: 17). Concerning this idea, in the Judaic tradition, *Metatron* (the 'word' of God) is said to undergo the cyclic process of aging and then rejuvenating as a child.² Moreover, *Metatron* is the repository and supreme teacher of Judaic esoteric knowledge.³

The term 'elite' is also, in certain instances, rendered as 'remnant': 'in our time, there is a remnant, set aside by grace' (Rm.11: 6). This is the 'remnant of Israel' that is 'destined' - 'noted down to live' (Is.4: 3) - to once again become a great people. In this sense the elite become the remnant of the Age once this Age has been brought to an end by a cleansing dissolution, effected symbolically by 'water' (the Flood) or 'fire' (the Christian Apocalypse); in the Hindu tradition this dissolution is called a *pralaya*. The remnant then becomes the 'seedling' (Is.4: 2) for the next Age, as was the Ark of Noah. In this respect, René Guénon addresses his masterpiece of metaphysical analysis, *The Reign of Quantity*, to 'the small number of those who are destined to prepare in one way or another, the germs of the future cycle'.⁴ Elsewhere he refers to these as the 'elect'.⁵

The etymology of the term 'elect' is rooted in the idea of the return to the Centre. At the Centre resides the metaphysical knowledge that constitutes esoterism in its 'absolute' sense.⁶ To be elect is to be situated in the esoteric domain and thus to be capable of metaphysical discernment. Every human being has the potential to realise this state,

1 This symbolism is particularly developed in the Alchemical tradition in the symbol of the *Homunculus*.

2 In this respect *Metatron* is known as *na'ar* (boy or lad), see I. Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, Vol. 2, Oxford, 1991, p. 626-29.

3 Concerning *Metatron* (Yahoel) as Abraham's spiritual teacher, see G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York, 1995, p. 69. For the original tradition see *The Apocalypse of Abraham* 15:4. Concerning Melchizedek in this role see Z. b. S. Halevi, *The Way of Kabbalah*, London, 1976, p.16; *Kabbalah The Divine Plan*, New York, 1996, p. 14.

4 R. Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity & The Signs of the Times*, Middlesex, 1972, p. 11.

5 R. Guénon, *Crisis of the Modern World*, London, 1975, p. ix.

6 Schuon speaks of an 'absolute' and a 'relative' esoterism, 1981a, *op. cit.*, p. 26. This is the same distinction we have noted earlier.

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even if this is not *de facto* the case. As noted above, if the Relative did not comprise something of the Absolute relativities could not be distinguished qualitatively from one another. Schuon says that: 'To say human knowledge is to say knowledge of the Absolute'.¹ Hence the Bodhisattva ideal in Buddhism, and hence the Christian and Islamic doctrine of the *Apocatastasis*.

However, esoterism prefigures exoterism in the same way that the Unity of Being *a priori* prefigures the hierarchical extension of manifestation. Within the context of hierarchical manifestation, esoterism - and here we refer to 'relative esoterism' - must, according to its relativity, its centrality, and its nature as principle, be realised by only a minority. Thus Schuon observes, 'esoterism is reserved, by definition and because of its very nature, for an intellectual elite necessarily restricted in numbers'.²

The above point demands a brief consideration of the hierarchic nature of Being. Metaphysically or symbolically speaking Being extends in two directions: 'vertical' and 'horizontal'. Vertically, Being extends 'downwards' sinking away from the luminous Principle into the tenebrous Substance (the *tohu wa bohu* of Genesis, the *khaos* or 'void' of Hesiod, *materia prima*). This symbolism of 'sinking' or 'heaviness' corresponds to the 'solidification', and thus limitation, of Being in the process of manifestation. Horizontally, Being extends 'outwards' as it proceeds 'downwards'. This 'outwardness' expresses, at the ontological level, the Infinite's tendency to radiate. Ontological Radiation is precisely indefinite as a matter of distinction with the Infinite as such. The radiation of Being upon a horizontal plane corresponds to the limitation of the indefinite within the Infinite or the Relative within the Absolute. Thus, in what seems paradoxical but is not, the expansion of Being, which it to say, the expansion of the indefinite, corresponds directly to an increase in limitation.

This idea is expressed in Lurianic Kabbalism by the doctrine of *tsimsum* which teaches that God withdraws Himself into Himself thereby allowing an empty 'primordial space' into which 'that which is not God' can come into being. The phase 'that which is not God' is as if to say 'that which is not of itself the Absolute' *ipso facto* the

¹ F. Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, Indiana, 1982, p. 19.

² Schuon, 1993a, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

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Relative. Horizontal Radiation is directly proportional to the vertical 'distance' from the Principle; thus Being projects itself hierarchically. To consider hierarchy symbolically: the value laden 'triangle' of hierarchy can be seen as a cone viewed side on; with a shift in perspective, the same cone viewed from above appears as a circle, where the pinnacle of the triangle is now the centre of the circle.

In calling this an 'intellectual elite', Schuon in no way means to limit esoterism to a purely mental domain. Metaphysical discernment is bound with mystical concentration and moral conformity, and can be realised, according to the temperament, through either 'knowledge', the path of the *jñāna*, or though 'love', the path of the *bhakti*.¹ It is sometimes erroneously supposed that *jñāna* and *bhakti* imply the distinction of esoterism and exoterism. In truth both of these paths are constituted by esoteric and exoteric elements. As Schuon observes: 'The esoterism of *bhakti* transcends outward form, namely the prescriptions, just as the esoterism of gnosis, *jñāna*, transcends inward forms, namely anthropomorphist dogmas and the individualistic and sentimental attitudes that correspond to them; nevertheless, every esoterism needs doctrinal, ritual and moral supports, not forgetting the aesthetic supports relating to contemplatively. To say man is to say form; man is the bridge between form and essence, or between "flesh" and "spirit"'.²

Again, calling this an 'intellectual elite' is not meant to indicate what might be taken as an 'intellectual superiority'. Schuon says: 'The notion of esoterism evokes not so much intellectual superiority as the totality of truth and the imprescriptible rights of intelligence, always within the climate of a human and thus lived relationship with Heaven. The idea that non-esoterists by definition lack intelligence, or that esoterists are *de facto* necessarily possessed of it, does not in any case enter our mind.'³ Moreover, he remarks: 'In some people... intelligence resides less in their theology than in their sanctity'.⁴

¹ This distinction can be likened to that between the sage and the saint. Let it be noted that 'a perfect sage is always a saint, but a saint is not always a sage', see Schuon, 1981a, *op. cit.*, pp. 22 & 24.

² *Ibid.*, p. 29.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴ Schuon, 1981b, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

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Esoterism is knowledge of the Heart-Intellect, where the term 'Intellect' is intended in the sense of Plotinus or Meister Eckhart.¹ Inasmuch as the Intellect is the Principle it resides, at least virtually, in all humans. Then, to say 'intellectual elite' is to say, not that these 'chosen ones' are exclusively endowed with the Intellect, but that they are 'chosen' in the sense of recognising it, be it through *jñāna* or *bhakti*. In fact recognition of the Intellect as Principle is the criteria for being 'chosen'. This ability to recognise the Intellect raises the question of 'predisposition' or Predestination.

Predestination

In his first letter the apostle Peter addresses himself to those 'who have been chosen in the foresight of God the father' (1Pt.1: 2). From the point of view of exoterism the absolute 'foresight' of God gives rise to the classical problem of Predestination, which, as Schuon remarks, 'calls into question, on the one hand man's freedom and therefore his responsibility, and on the other hand both the Goodness and Justice of God'.² It is worth rehearsing the ramifications of this 'problem'. The following discussion is limited to the Christian tradition although we will touch on issues pertinent to all theological treatments of salvation.³

There are two principal theological schools of thought concerning the issue of election: Calvinist and Arminian. According to Calvin election is absolute, unconditional, by virtue of an eternal decree. Thus Calvin sacrifices human freedom to a doctrine of Predestination. According to Arminius, election is conditional upon repentance and faith, which are themselves contingent upon the acceptance of the gifts of Grace. In stressing human free will Arminius is seen to somewhat sacrifice God's omnipotence. Almost as if in compensation he stresses the 'gift of Grace'. Here the Calvinist will argue that the freedom of

¹ Plotinus discusses the nouV (*Nous*), the Intellect, or 'Divine Mind' (Fifth Ennead, 9); Meister Eckhart likens the Intellect to the 'principle' or the *Logos* (Comm. Bk. Genesis 6 as an example).

² Schuon, 1989, *op. cit.*, pp. 39-40.

³ Schuon discuss aspects of this 'problem' as it appears in the Islamic tradition, particularly the 'Asharite thesis', in 1981b, *op. cit.*

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our acts is still contingent upon an *a priori* Grace, and thus, in the end, is not a true freedom. They may draw upon the words of St. Paul, of which we quoted a part earlier: 'In the same way, then, in our time, there is a remnant, set aside by grace. And since it is by grace, it cannot now be by good actions, or grace would not be grace at all' (Rm.11: 5-7).¹

Schuon observes that these two standpoints reflect 'a piety nourished by anthropomorphism' from which the problem of Predestination is somewhat inevitable. However, as he continues to remark, 'from the stand point of metaphysical knowledge, the only problem is that of expression through language'; he continues, 'on the principal plane, there are no unsolvable questions, for all that "is" can in principle be known'.²

The solution to the difficulty of Predestination, says Schuon, lies 'in the distinction between Being and Beyond-Being'.³ Schuon is not alone in recognising such a 'distinction' to solve this problem. Working from Cicero - 'nothing happens without a preceding efficient cause' - Augustine reasons that 'our choices fall within the order of the causes which is known for certain to God and is contained in His foreknowledge - for, human choices are the causes of human acts'.⁴ Thus, for Augustine, the freedom of human choice is realised at the level of 'acts' or effect, while God's foreknowledge of these actions resides at the level of their 'cause'; thus the distinction between effect and cause, or, expression and principle. For Boethius God's omniscience operates on two planes of interconnected being. He calls these Providence and Fate: 'Providence is the divine reason itself. It is set at the head of all things and disposes all things. Fate, on the other hand, is the planned order inherent in things subject to change through the medium of which Providence binds everything in its own place.

¹ St Bernard says: 'Grace is necessary to salvation, free will equally so—but grace in order to give salvation, free will in order to receive it. Therefore we should not attribute part of the good work to grace and part to free will; it is performed in its entirety by the common and inseparable action of both; entirely by grace, entirely by free will, but springing from the first to the second', cited in E. Gilson, *The Mystical Theology of Saint Bernard*, London.

² Schuon, 1989, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁴ St. Augustine, *The City of God*, ed. V. J. Bourke, New York, 1958, p. 106-7.

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Providence includes all things at the same time, however diverse or infinite, while Fate controls the motion of different individual things in different places and at different times'.¹

Adopting the neo-Platonic language of Proclus, Boethius explains the relationship between Providence and Fate as that of the point of the immediate emanation of the One, and the perpetual ebb and flow of the manifested One. In Book Four of *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, Philosophy explains that the relationship between 'the ever-changing course of Fate and the stable simplicity of Providence is like that between reasoning and understanding, between that which is coming into being and that which is, between time and eternity, or between the moving circle and the still point in the middle'.² From the central point of Providence God is afforded total and immediate knowledge of all the possibilities that precisely 'do or do not' eventuate in the manifest realm of Fate. All destinations are allowed for virtually if not efficiently.³

Schuon comments: 'The Absolute by definition includes the Infinite – their common content being Perfection or the Good - and the Infinite in its turn gives rise, at the degree of that 'lesser Absolute' that is Being, to ontological All-Possibility. Being cannot not include efficient Possibility, because it cannot prevent the Absolute from including the Infinite'.⁴ The distinction between Being and Beyond-Being is like that between the 'lesser Absolute' and the 'pure Absolute', again, between what Meister Eckhart calls the personal God (*Gott*) and the Godhead (*Gottheit*). Predestination, as Schuon says, 'could not stem from a "will" - which in that case would be arbitrary - of the personal God; it stems from pure Possibility, whose source ... lies in the Infinitude of the Absolute'.⁵ He continues: 'From this standpoint we could say that a creature is a possibility, and a possibility is what it is; therefore, in a

¹ Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, tr. V. E. Watts, Middlesex, 1969, p. 135.

² H. Chadwick, *Boethius The Consolations of Music, Logic, Theology, and Philosophy*, Oxford, 1990, p. 136-37. We return here to our symbolism of exoteric circumference and esoteric centre.

³ For an excellent overview of these points as they concern Time and Eternity in the Greek, Christian and Islamic traditions, see Adrian Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity*, Vol. 1, New Delhi, 1990, Ch. 8.

⁴ Schuon, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

⁵ 'With God all things are possible' (Matt. 19:26).

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sense it is what it “wants to be”; destiny is one of its aspects among others. The individual “wants” to be what he “is,” and it could even be said, more profoundly, that he is what he “wants”: what his possibility, the very one he manifests, wants - or wanted initially'.¹

For the exoterist this explanation will still appear as Predestination. As noted above, the ‘misunderstanding of all exoterism, is to attribute to God a human subjectivity’; thus, from the exoteric perspective, Possibility is not recognised as the ‘Freedom’ of the Infinitude, which for that matter is misunderstood, but as the choice of the Divine Will, and thus, Possibility is envisaged not as what ‘may’ be, but as what ‘will’ be, by Necessity. Here the exoterist commits the error of applying their subjectivity to the meanings of both Freedom and Necessity. For the exoterist these terms must be at variance, being that from this position ‘necessity’ implies a constraint on ‘freedom’. However, from the esoteric position, Necessity and Freedom are intimately related. As Schuon remarks, ‘Necessity - not constraint - is a complementary quality of Freedom’; he adds, ‘Liberty is related to the Infinite, and Necessity to the Absolute’.² The Absolute is Necessary by definition; the Infinite expresses Freedom by virtue of its Totality, which is to say, by virtue of being Absolute.

Freedom

The All-Possibility must by definition and on pain of contradiction include its own impossibility; the Absolute must contain the illusion of the Relative. To say Relative is to say Manifestation, which, in turn, is to say limitation. Thus, paradoxically, the limitation of the Relative satisfies the achievement of the All-Possibility, and with it Divine or Absolute Freedom, is maintained. From the exoteric perspective Divine Freedom comes at the cost of human freedom. However, this point of view rests on a confusion of the two levels of Relative and Absolute, or Being and Beyond-Being. Thus the exoterist mistakenly places the Divine Foreknowledge - itself beyond Time in virtue of being at the principal level - within the realm of Being. Divine

¹ Schuon, *op.cit.*, p. 40.

² *Ibid.*, p. 57.

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Freedom relates to the Absolute. Human freedom, at least exoterically, relates to the Relative.

The esoteric perspective recognises two modes of ‘human’ freedom: a ‘lesser’ freedom that operates at the level of Being and a ‘greater’ freedom that coincides with the Divine Freedom.¹ Just as esoterism prefigures and recognises the contingent reality of exoterism, so too does it recognise the contingent reality of the ‘lesser’ freedom. At the same time, esoterism recognises the illusory nature of the Relative in comparison to the Absolute. Hence, the ‘lesser’ freedom of the Relative is, in the final analysis, a limitation in comparison to the Divine Freedom. Thus Augustine of Hippo stressed ‘freedom in God’ not ‘freedom in man’.²

In *Genesis* it says: ‘God created man in the image of Himself’ (Gen.1: 27). ‘In the image’ is to say analogous and this gives rise to the two-fold nature of analogy. As Schuon remarks: ‘If between one level of reality and another there is a parallel analogy in respect of positive content, there is on the other hand an inverse analogy in respect of relationship’.³ Thus human freedom reflects the Divine Freedom on the one hand in respect of positive content and on the other in respect of relationship. In the first instance the human has a ‘relative absolute’

¹ Augustine talks of *libertas minor* and *libertas major* in the Pelagian controversy.

² From this Calvin was able to misinterpret Augustine as leading to a doctrine of Predestination.

³ For example, adds Schuon, ‘there is a parallel analogy between earthly and heavenly beauty, but there is an inverse analogy as regards their respective situations, in the sense that earthly beauty is “outward” and divine Beauty “inward”; or again, to illustrate this law by symbols: according to certain Sufic teachings, earthly trees are reflections of heavenly trees, and earthly women are reflections of heavenly women (parallel analogy); but heavenly trees have their roots above and heavenly women are naked (inverse analogy, what is “below” becoming “above”, and what is “inward” becoming “outward”). F. Schuon, *Treasures of Buddhism*, Indiana, 1993, p. 84, n. 2 (Schuon, 1993b); see also, Schuon, 1987, *op. cit.*, p. 106, n. 1; Schuon, 1999, *op. cit.*, pp.35-6, where he refers to ‘direct’ and ‘inverse’ analogy. On the ‘law of inverse analogy’, see R. Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity & The Signs of the Times*, Middlesex, 1972, Ch. 25; also *Fundamental Symbols*, Cambridge, 1995, Chs. 52 & 53; and *The Great Triad*, New Delhi, 1994, Ch. 7. This law follows the oft-quoted Hermetic aphorism, ‘As Above So Below’, taken from the *Emerald Tablet* of Hermes Trismegistus: ‘It is true without lie, certain and most veritable, that what is below is like what is above and that what is above is like what is below, to perpetrate the miracles of one thing’.

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freedom within the domain of Being, the 'relative Absolute'. The human is here 'absolutely' free within the context and limitation of manifestation. In the latter instance the human, by virtue of the possibility of recognition of the Intellect, enjoys the privileged position of realising the illusion of Relativity and thus freeing his or her self from the limitation of manifestation. In fact it is here that the essential purpose of the human condition lies, for the return of the human to God satisfies the possibility, inherent in Relativity, that God may 'know' Himself. For Schuon this is expressed in the Patristic formula: 'God became man so that man might become God'.¹

It is the *raison d'être* of the human condition to recognise God. The starting-point of this anamnestic journey is necessarily the exoteric realm, for it is precisely here that one experiences the illusion of 'otherness'. From the exoteric circumference to the esoteric centre there are the two fundamental paths of knowledge or *jñāna* and love or *bhakti*. As to how these relate to freedom, Schuon remarks: 'The starting-point of *jñāna* is the idea that man is free as to his own destiny; for those who wish to be saved, there are the mysteries and initiations; the mass of profane people go their own way. *Bhakti*, when it has become a religion, has on the contrary this characteristic, that it seeks to force men to be saved'.² The 'force' or limitation that *bhaktic* religion seeks to apply to the 'lesser' human freedom has as its end the 'greater' Divine Freedom; here it is suffice to say that the ends justify the means.

In the final analysis the human being has, potentially, the freedom to realise the necessity of Divine Unity, thereby surrendering their own individualism, and with this their free will as it exists within the illusion of Relativity. In this act of renunciation and detachment, one returns to the Divine Freedom. The Union of the human with the Divine Self does not however negate the ego self of the individual, which remains valid within its own context and inasmuch as it satisfies the possibility of Relativity. For Schuon: 'the realization of the 'Self' does not

¹ Schuon, 1987, *op. cit.*, p. 109. Schuon again: "'Union" (*yoga*): the Subject (*Ātma*) becomes object (the Veda, the *Dharma*) in order that the object (the objectivized subject, man) may be able to become the (absolute) Subject.' (*loc. cit.*); '*Ātmā* became *Māyā* so that *Māyā* might become *Ātma*'. (*Light on the Ancient Worlds*, London, 1965, p. 96)

² Schuon, 1981a, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

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exclude an individuality liberated from concupiscence'.¹ In the bosom of the Divine Freedom the human is born again as the 'New Man created on God's principles' (Eph.4:24), as 'true man and true God'.

God became man so that man might become God. To say that the human being can 'become God' is to say, with ibn 'Arabi that the human being can realise 'real unity' or, that one is not other than God.² The realisation of 'real unity' is achieved through recognition and integration of the Intellect, the centre and principle of the human condition. This is to say, by recognition of the knowledge of the Heart-Intellect or esoterism *per se*. Thus it is, as Schuon says, that 'esoterism aims at actualizing what is divine in the mirror of God that is man'.³

That the human can and, moreover, must achieve the knowledge of the Heart-Intellect is prefigured in this possibility of the Infinitude. Every human contains this possibility by virtue of being human. Thus every human is 'called' in the words of the evangelist Matthew. That an individual human will achieve this knowledge depends on the free choice of that individual. As Schuon observes, 'man, being free, is condemned to freedom'.⁴ In accord with the hierarchical nature of Being it cannot but be that 'many are called but few are chosen' (Matt.22: 14). The human is 'chosen' or 'elect' by virtue of placing his or her self at the Centre. They have the potential to achieve this precisely because the human manifests the possibility for this centrality. This possibility is prefigured in the Foreknowledge of God, for God's Foreknowledge is knowledge of All-Possibility.

In a sense one can say that esoterism is inclusive in 'essence' and exclusive in 'practice'. Absolute esoterism is inclusive inasmuch as it is the Principle wherein Being is prefigured or, if you like, included. Relative esoterism is exclusive inasmuch as it derives from the hierarchical nature of Being, which is precisely exclusive in the sense that relativization excludes one thing from being another. It is in this latter sense that esoterism coincides with exoterism.

¹ Schuon, 1981b, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

² Schuon states that: 'To the extent that God makes Himself the object of our intelligence, it is He Himself who knows Himself in us', in *From the Divine to the Human*, Indiana, 1982, p. 24.

³ F. Schuon, *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*, Indiana, 2000, p. 117.

⁴ Schuon, 1981a, *op. cit.*, p.8

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Through seeing the exoteric in the light of esoterism the vision of 'the Outward' is joined with that of 'the Inward'; this, as Schuon remarks, is Man's mission precisely: 'to be at once witness to God as Principle and to God as Manifestation or Theophany'. He continues, 'Man has therefore a God-given right to these two perspectives; they constitute his sufficient cause and therefore serve to define him; in other words, man is essentially a pontifex, a link between Earth and Heaven, and between the Outward and the Immanent'.¹

Salvation

In conformity with their possibilities there must be an esoteric and an exoteric domain. Similarly there must correspondingly be an elite and a collectivity. However, exoteric sentimentality will inevitably remain uneasy at the idea that some be 'saved' while others are 'damned'. On this point Schuon remarks, firstly: 'Man is not damned for not believing that God is One, or that Christ saves or that the world is illusory; he becomes lost because, not believing it, he remains at the mercy of the dehumanizing powers of centrifugal *māyā* which appear to be envious of the unique chance that is offered by the human state'.² Secondly, he adds: 'That man is saved who understands the purpose of human subjectivity: to be, in relativity, a mirror of the Absolute, at the same time as being a prolongation of Divine Subjectivity. To manifest the Absolute in contingency, the Infinite in the finite, Perfection in imperfection'.³

To say that God does not demonstrate mercy in allowing damnation is to commit a triple error: Firstly, it is the individual that damns or saves his or her self according to their own free will. Here, the Traditionalist writer Lord Northbourne, remarks: 'We have the freedom to choose which of these two attitudes or tendencies shall predominate and which shall be subordinate in directing the course of our thoughts and activities. Collectively we have chosen, and must accept the consequences; but the individual is always free to conform to that

1 F. Schuon, *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, London, 1976, p. 182.

2 Schuon, 1989, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

3 Schuon, 1981a, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

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collective choice or to reject it. If he rejects it, he can only act within the limits of the possibilities of his individuality and his situation, for God does not ask the impossible of anyone'.¹

Secondly, 'damnation' *per se* resides in the illusion of Relativity, but Relativity is precisely the satisfaction of the Divine Infinitude that in turn realises the Divine Freedom, which is none other than the expression of the Infinite Mercy of God. The human state exists precisely to mercifully satisfy the possibility of Relativity and to achieve Divine Freedom; the human can realise the Divine to mercifully satisfy human freedom from the illusion of Relativity.

Thirdly, God's mercy allows that 'salvation' is not, in an absolute sense, simply the prerogative of an individual, nor for that matter, of the elite. To be human is to be a part of the human whole, whether one recognises this or not. The relationship of the elite and the collective is one of symbiosis. *Vox populi, Vox Dei*, as the saying goes, 'the voice of the people is the Voice of God'; and here Schuon remarks that 'it may be said that the people, in their capacity as passive and unconscious transmitters of the symbols, represent, as it were, the periphery or the passive or feminine reflection of the elite, the latter possessing and transmitting the symbols in an active and conscious way'.²

To be saved is to give oneself to God. As Schuon observes: 'It is metaphysically impossible to give oneself to God in such a way that good does not ensue to the environment: to give oneself to God, though it were hidden from all men, is to give oneself to man, for this gift has a sacrificial value of an incalculable radiance'.³ Salvation can never be egocentric. To be saved is, like Christ, to sacrifice oneself for all humankind.

¹ Lord Northbourne, *Looking Back on Progress*, London, 1970, pp. 18-19.

² Schuon, 1993a, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

³ F. Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, London, 1965, p. 121.