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Christ never said that two and two make four, and therefore anyone who says so is a miscreant or even a Satanist; someone who did say so had a concubine, which is one more proof that two and two do not make four; and no logic please, since the pagans use it! ¹

What is Plato but Moses speaking Greek? ²

In 1540 the Augustinian monk, Agostino Steuco published a treatise with the title *De Perenni Philosophia* which possibly for the first time gave a fixed systematic meaning to an already well developed tradition which had arisen in response to a 'diabolical dilemma' within Christianity, namely the presence of 'pagan' thought within a culture grounded in revelation. The desire to discover the essential unity of theology and philosophy has always remained strong and is perhaps best represented in the 20th century by Frithjof Schuon who has been called one of the greatest expositors of the *philosophia perennis*. Unfortunately his work has been neglected within academia, particularly within the emergent discipline of western esotericism whose early pioneers attempted to define themselves in contrast to perennialism and through the rejection of metaphysics. This neglect, I will argue, is a consequence of a fundamental tension which lies at the heart of the divergence between those committed to the scientific method, and those who see scientific enquiry as merely one amongst many means to the acquisition of knowledge, which is that the latter do not intend to discover anything new but to merely restate what is already known. This position can be clearly traced through an analysis of the *philosophia perennis*, and I believe, establishes Schuon's thought within a greater historical framework.

Frithjof Schuon and the Transcendent Unity of Religions

Along with Rene Guenon (1886-1951) and Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998) the German philosopher and poet, is considered one of the founders of the "perennialist" school of thought. Publishing over twenty books and contributing to journals such as *Études Traditionnelles*, *Islamic Quarterly*, *Tomorrow*, *Studies in Comparative Religion* and *Sophia Perennis*, his work forms an imposing corpus covering an impressive range of metaphysical and religious subjects.³ Labelled a 'Swiss esotericist' and 'Sufi master' in the *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, his writings "rank among the most clear, profound, and gifted ones produced

¹ Schuon Frithjof. Rationalism Real and Apparent. In *Logic and Transcendence: A New Selection With Translated Letters*. Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2009, 45.

² Schmidt-Biggemann, Wilhelm. *Philosophia Perennis: Historical Outlines of Western Spirituality in Ancient, Medieval and Early Modern Thought*. Dordrecht: Springer, 2005, 34.

³ Oldmeadow, Kenneth. *Traditionalism: Religion in the Light of Perennial Philosophy*. San Rafael, CA: Sophia Perennis, 2011, 39.

by any similar author in the 20th century.”⁴ Suggestions are not given as to whom exactly he might be compared to, but a cursory glance through the dictionary gives an idea of just how important Frithjof Schuon was considered to be by the editors of the dictionary.⁵

Schuon’s major work, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (1953) contains the doctrinal claim for which he is best known. Very simply put, it is the idea that “at the centre of each religion, there is a core of truth (about God and man, prayer and morality) which is identical.”⁶ Two important ideas inform Schuon’s work, which we will return to throughout this essay, namely the identification of three different modes of knowing and the distinction between the exoteric and the esoteric or the outer and the inner aspects of the religious traditions. All religions, all symbols and all dogmas are, according to Schuon, outward forms of Truth which, despite their apparent contradictions enable access to that Truth.

The three modes of knowing just mentioned are; philosophical, theological and metaphysical. The first, proceeds from reason, whilst the second and third enable participation in divine Knowledge. Theology is identified with faith which is an indirect and passive participation, whilst metaphysics participates in a direct and active manner via intellectual intuition.⁷ The latter is supra-individual in nature whereas both philosophy and theology are individual modes of knowing. This distinction between the two modes is important because as Schuon goes on to say,

in the case of intellectual intuition, knowledge is not possessed by the individual insofar as he is an individual, but insofar as in his innermost essence he is not distinct from his Divine Principle. Thus metaphysical certitude is absolute because of the identity between the knower and the known in the intellect.⁸

Platonic Certainty

The above claim to certitude is deeply problematic for some though. The possibility of certitude is not something most scholars would subscribe to, being considered an outdated and unfashionable assertion. For example, the phenomenologist Alan W Hughes notes

⁴ Quinn, William. Schuon. In Hanegraaff, Wouter J. (Ed.) *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*. Leiden: Boston: Brill, 2006, 1043.

⁵ With just three columns, there is less space given to his biography than Jane Roberts, the channeller of the spiritual entity Seth, with five columns; George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff (1866-1949) has ten; Benedict Franz Xaver von Baader (1765-1841) The German Christian Theosopher has thirteen; whilst Saint-Martin (1743-1803) the French “Unknown Philosopher” has twelve.

⁶ Stoddart, William. *Remembering in a World of Forgetting: Thoughts on Tradition and Postmodernism*. Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2008, 52.

⁷ *Ibid.*, xxx.

⁸ *Ibid.*

[A]ppeals to metaphysics, to essences, to the experiential, to the technology of science lead to the false gods of certainty and inevitability, and thus to intellectual stagnation...[S]uch claims do, however, provide a sense of certainty or security where there is none.⁹

Now whilst appeals to metaphysics and the consequent certainties they may produce are rejected as being untenable by many scholars they are held to be true by others and it is with this issue of certainty that Schuon finds himself completely out of step with contemporary thinking. Indeed, on reading many of his works one is struck by the certainty of his certitude. If he were responding to the above statement perhaps he would say that the author seemed certain that there is no certainty and that he risked falling into intellectual stagnation himself. For Hughes maintains in the same paragraph that there exists, “no point at which we can safely say that interpretation is over and that we understand something finally or definitively.”¹⁰ - A more categorical and definitive statement could not be made. Schuon, on the contrary, is steadfast in his defence of the notion of certainty, which he argues is correlative with that of objectivity, and that the capacity for objectivity and thus absoluteness “amounts to an existential – and “preventative” – refutation of the ideologies of doubt”. If a man is able to doubt, he continues, “it is because there is certainty”.¹¹ But where does this conviction stem from?

It has been noted by scholar Richard Bush, of which more will be said below, that a “strong Neo-Platonic flavor permeates Schuon's thinking”,¹² although if we were inclined to link this aspect of his thought to any specific philosophy it would most probably be that of Plato, who in the doctrine of Forms or Ideas puts forward the notion that knowledge must be certain if it is to be anything more than conjecture and opinion.¹³ Whilst Schuon’s metaphysical premises are by their very nature, closed to empirical demonstration, his verbal formulations based on them are clear demonstrations of a logic with which the validity can hardly be doubted, unless one “seeks to demolish the very principles of reasoning”.¹⁴ His statements often come across as dogmatic, but again there is a sound logic at work here, whatever one may think. The following statement is an example of this Schuonian style which perhaps more than anything else can be cited as a reason why his work is either met with resistance or is merely ignored within the Academy.

A thought is “dogmatist,” or else it is nothing; a thought that is “criticist” is in contradiction with its own existence. A subject who casts doubt on man’s normal subjectivity thereby casts doubt upon his own doubting.¹⁵

⁹ Hughes, Aaron W. Science Envy in Theories of Religion. In *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 22, (2010) 293-303, 298.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Schuon, Frithjof. The Contradiction of Relativism. In *Logic and Transcendence*. Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2009, 11.

¹² Bush, Richard C. Frithjof Schuon’s The Transcendent Unity of Religions: Con. In *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 44/4 (1976), 715-719, 717.

¹³ Louth, Andrew. *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys*. Oxford: OUP, 2007, 1.

¹⁴ Schuon, Frithjof. In Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. (Ed.) *The Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon*. Amity, NY: Amity House, 1986, 145, note 1.

¹⁵ Schuon, Frithjof. Rationalism Real and Apparent. In: *Logic and Transcendence*. Indiana: World Wisdom, 2009, 29.

Although offering just a glimpse of what one can expect from his writings, style or manner of expression are not in themselves enough to justify indifference. Kenneth Oldmeadow, discussing the lack of scholarly interest in Schuon's work points out that "there has been no serious and sustained intellectual confrontation such as we might dignify with the term 'critique'". Whilst exciting sharply polarised responses, he continues, "we look in vain for any cogent challenge to the work of Schuon and his fellow traditionalists."¹⁶ What follows will be an analysis of some of the scattered responses to his work which I have found gathering dust in old academic journals.

Criticisms and the Neglect of Schuon within Academia

The obstacles which face the scholar who attempts to incorporate Schuon's thought - or at the very least explore the possibilities of engaging with it in positive and constructive ways – have not gone unnoticed by some. Seyyed Hossein Nasr believes that the neglect shown towards his work within religious studies circles, is due to the seriousness with which he approaches the subject.¹⁷ This extensive body of writings, continues Nasr, are

so seriously concerned with religion that one cannot even take cognizance of their presence and take their challenge seriously without having to change one's own halfhearted engagement with the religious world, without questioning the sceptical and secularized world of modern man".¹⁸

William Stoddart, a Perennialist author writing an introduction to a book about Schuon, believes that his profound metaphysical and spiritual insights could be considered disturbing and unsettling, leading people to shy away from his writings.¹⁹ Wouter Hanegraaf sees the neglect as unsurprising though, "given the wholesale rejection by the founders of the perennialist perspective of modernity in all its forms, including the academic study of religions which is scorned for promoting the evils of relativism, reductionism, and historicism."²⁰ Any hostility though, overtly or covertly shown by Schuon towards academic study, must be understood in light of his view of knowledge and its purposes. Its pursuit is not governed by academic considerations but by spiritual concerns which, according to Oldmeadow, shed light on his indifference to liberal-secular humanist ideals of scholarship for scholarship's sake. Indeed, there is absolutely no credence given to progressive and cumulative knowledge.²¹ Len Bowman writing in *ARIES*, a journal dedicated to esotericism, and a Catholic scholar informed by medieval Franciscan mysticism, writes that this uncompromising approach towards the study of religions by Schuon and the Perennialists does violence to his tradition "by imposing elements of alien particular traditions as if they were universally normative." He goes on to list instances where these elements have been superimposed onto his own Christian Tradition and gives examples of the universalization of particulars which he sees as endemic within Perennialism, a consequence he argues, of claiming metaphysical status for their concept of

¹⁶ Oldmeadow, 165.

¹⁷ Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. (Ed.) *The Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon*. Amity, NY: Amity House, 1986, 4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁹ Stoddart, William. Forward. In Oldmeadow, Harry. *Frithjof Schuon and the Perennial Philosophy*. Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2010, viii.

²⁰ Hanegraaf, 110, note 22.

²¹ Oldmeadow, 166.

hierarchy and degrees of reality.²² Again we return to the difficulty faced by scholars who reject metaphysical premises, even those who accept particular ones themselves, in engaging with those who subscribe to them.

In a review of Schuon's *Transcendent Unity of Religions*, Richard Bush identifies two problems which deeply trouble him with regards to the thesis. The first is that because of the claimed metaphysical status of the doctrine of unity, all scientific investigation is out. Every observable facet of religious life, he observes, "belongs to the exoteric realm and cannot be cited to support any contention about the esoteric". He continues, "[A]ll we can do is accept the word of Schuon and his fellow esoterics that they have intuited this transcendent unity, which is to say we exercise our faith, which in turn is exoteric." His second point relates to the deep division between esoteric and exoteric which he sees as creating a division between an elite few and the "masses of human beings who cannot participate in the transcendent unity." Thus a metaphysical dualism, he argues, "has been avoided at the expense of an epistemological and anthropological dualism, both of which are grounds for a subtle arrogance which is hardly becoming in those who desire religious unity."²³ Versluis holds that this critique is fairly ineffective because it does not address "the fundamental question of whether or to what degree Traditionalism might form a basis for an approach to the study of Western esotericism or to the study of comparative religion more generally."²⁴ The charge of elitism and arrogance is not uncommon amongst scholars but in themselves are not grounds for rejecting the thought in its entirety. Indeed, it necessitates closer examination because as Versluis maintains, "it represents a major intellectual contribution to contemporary thought". Whilst the work of Schuon and the Perennialists displays a certain hostility toward academia and, acknowledges Versluis, may not be entirely academic, they are at the very least worthy of academic study because they manifest "important reactionary currents of thought in the modern era."²⁵

All of the above criticisms are valid and the issues that they raise need to be addressed, but there is one which I believe reveals the fundamental nature of the misunderstanding which informs the debate leading to neglect within academic circles. The following words by Hanegraaf expose the philosophic fault lines. "The fact that perennialism considers its own metaphysical framework to be absolute truth about the nature of religion logically precludes the possibility of discovering anything new or unexpected. Taking "the truth of religion" as a starting point of "investigation" reduces the latter to mere illustration."²⁶ Here, I would argue, is the deadlock, the fundamental disagreement that necessarily precludes any constructive dialogue between scholars committed to the scientific method, to empirical research and those who, like the Perennialists, see scientific enquiry as merely one amongst many means to the acquisition of knowledge. The latter do not intend to discover anything new but merely to reformulate and restate what has already been discovered. Schuon in particular, is very clear on this point, and echoes the words of many others who think like him when he says, "everything has been said already, though it is far from being the case that everyone has

²² Bowman, Len. *The Status of Conceptual Schemata: A Dilemma for Perennialists*. In *ARIES: Association pour la recherche et l'information sur l'ésoterisme*, No. 11 (1990), 9-19, 10.

²³ Bush, 716-717.

²⁴ Versluis, 7.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁶ Hanegraaf, 110, note 23.

always understood it. There can therefore be no question of presenting “new truths”.²⁷ Indeed, for Schuon, the very idea of a “new truth” is an oxymoron, it is merely just a case of rediscovering or of recalling it anew.²⁸

Following what Richard Bush has said about the flavour of Schuon's thinking, we might ask whether this attitude towards originality in any way derived from the Neoplatonic current of thought, and if it were possible to make that connection, would it be desirable? I say this because the term “Neoplatonist” on further inspection appears, according to one scholar, to have retained many pejorative associations and is tainted with anti-Christian bias.²⁹ Oldmeadow gets straight to the point with regards to pejorative associations;

A good deal of polemical and critical academic literature is pockmarked by the habit of affixing pejorative labels to the thought of one's opponents and leaving it at that, as if nothing more need to be said. In the case of the response to the traditionalists we find terms like ‘neo-Platonic’, ‘Vedantic’, ‘neo-scholastic’, ‘perennialist’, ‘essentialist’ and suchlike used to close rather than open debate, as if these were dishonourable epithets which expose a type of thinking now ‘outmoded’. (Oldmeadow, 179.)

One might just as well add ‘religionist’ and ‘reductionist’ to the list of ‘dishonourable epithets’ along with ‘empiricist’, for it seems that the Academy is awash with pejorative labels, but for now our interest lies with ‘Neoplatonist’ so let us turn our attention to the 3rd Century CE with the hope of finding out a little more with regards to this loose term.

“Neoplatonist”: A Dishonourable Epithet?

The school of thought called Neoplatonism is generally believed to have begun with Plotinus (204-270 CE), an Alexandrian who studied philosophy under Ammonius Saccas, and moved to the capital of the Roman Empire in approximately 245 CE, where he began teaching his interpretation of Plato's philosophy.³⁰ Based on both written works and oral teachings, these interpretations were thought to contain esoteric wisdom collected from Plato's dialogues and developed into doctrines which emphasised metaphysical and mystical insights.³¹ Unfortunately, the combination of rational philosophy with non-rational elements has led to some unsympathetic readings of Plotinus and Neoplatonism, the latter term, being coined relatively recently to serve a polemical agenda. According to Algis Uždavinys, the term itself

appears to have originated in the eighteenth century as a derisory label invented by Protestant scholars who regarded Neoplatonism as the root and source of all kinds of evils, attributing (as did Johann Lorenz von Mosheim) the invention of such a philosophy to the Devil himself. Even such

²⁷ Schuon, Frithjof. *Understanding Islam*. Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 1998, viii.

²⁸ Schuon, Frithjof. *In the Face of the Absolute*. Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 1994, 5.

²⁹ Uždavinys, Algis. (Ed.). *The Heart of Plotinus: The Essential Enneads*. Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2009, 1.

³⁰ Remes, Pauliina. *Neoplatonism*. Stocksfield: Acumen Publishing, 2008, 1.

³¹ Uždavinys, 2.

philosophers as Leibniz declared that Plotinus, in his vain craving for the mystical and marvellous, had corrupted the teaching of Plato.³²

It also reveals a hidden bias, for as Andrew Louth points out, attached to the label “Neoplatonist” is an assumption that Plotinus and his followers were in some way innovators, marking a new departure in the Platonic tradition. This he says is a false picture and a modern construction,³³ for they saw themselves simply as Platonists:

These doctrines are no novelties, no inventions of today; they were stated, though not elaborated, long ago. Our present teaching is simply an exposition of them – we can prove the antiquity of these opinions by Plato’s own testimony. (Plotinus, *Enneads*, V.1.8)³⁴

Pauliina Remes also questions the implications, stemming from nineteenth-century German scholarship that this school of thought was somehow committed to the teachings of Plato ‘but in some novel manner’, arguing instead that Plotinus and his followers simply understood themselves as spiritual and philosophical pupils of Plato who were much more concerned with proving the founder right than gaining personal originality.³⁵ Uždavinyš tends to agree pointing out that they “regarded themselves as Platonists pure and simple” and that the term “Neoplatonism” was intended to distinguish them from other interpreters of Plato.³⁶ In an interesting study entitled *The Decline and Fall of the Neoplatonic Interpretation of Plato: An Outline and Some Observations* (1974), E. N. Tigerstedt characterises two traditional schools of Platonic interpretation; the Neoplatonists with their mystical posture regarded Plato as a systematic metaphysician and theologian whilst to the New Academy he was a disputer and doubter.³⁷ The driving force behind the accusations of novelty and originality levelled at the Neoplatonists was a desire to marginalise them, for as Tigerstedt observes, a crucial problem

was the relationship between Platonism and Christianity...the separation of Platonism from Neoplatonism seems to have been inspired by the wish to dissociate Plato from his later followers, who were regarded as anti-Christian, and thus maintain the venerable view of Plato as *anima naturaliter christiana*.³⁸

I asked earlier whether Schuon’s attitude towards originality was to be derived in any way from the Neoplatonic current of thought. The aim was not to imply that because Plotinus and Schuon had made similar claims denying novelty for their doctrines that Schuon must then be a Neoplatonist, but merely to situate his thinking within a greater historical context, and to draw attention to the pejorative nature of some of the labels we employ as scholars when doing our work. As we shall soon see, he makes the claim himself that his philosophy is merely a continuation of themes which have been expounded throughout the centuries by a variety of philosophers. These themes –

³² Ibid., 1.

³³ Louth, 36.

³⁴ Plotinus, *Enneads*, V.1.8. Quoted in Louth, 36.

³⁵ Remes, 2.

³⁶ Uždavinyš, 2.

³⁷ Tigerstedt, E. N. *The Decline and Fall of the Neoplatonic Interpretation of Plato: An Outline and Some Observations*. Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1974, 42.

³⁸ Ibid., 49.

particularly those of the discord between faith and reason and the existence of eternal, unchanging truths - will form the backbone for our understanding of the *philosophia perennis*, and while I agree with Versluis that the thought of Schuon in particular and Perennialism in general merits academic study because it represents a major intellectual contribution to contemporary thought, we must not forget that it also represents or is an expression of an intellectual tradition which is claimed to be timeless.

In reality, the *philosophia perennis*, actualized in the West, though on different levels, by Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, the Fathers and the Scholastics, continues a definitive intellectual heritage, and the great problem of our times is not to replace them with something better....but to return to the sources, both around us, and to examine all the data of contemporary life in the light of the one, timeless truth.³⁹

It is with these words by Schuon that we now turn to the analysis of the *philosophia perennis*, tracing the historical roots of the term and attempting to place it within a broader philosophical and cultural context with the express purpose of identifying Schuon as one of its greatest expositors in the twentieth century.

Philosophia Perennis

First though, I must point out a conscious change in approach in that the following section I will limit myself to using those sources which adhere to the strictly historical method. This decision has been made in part as a response to the assertion by Antoine Faivre that the perennialists have “almost always been superbly ignorant” of the specific historical currents of which the *philosophia perennis* is just one example.⁴⁰ Therefore, if this is true we would not expect Schuon for example to furnish us with any new information regarding these currents. I have also opted to leave out, for now, material derived from Perennialists for the very same reason. More importantly, I would like to point out that as we shall see, one of the defining characteristics of the *philosophia perennis*, perhaps *the* defining characteristic is the claim to the ahistorical nature of the ideas of which it is comprised. My decision then to place its development within a strictly historical framework is useful for the purpose of offering a general overview which I hope will enable a more nuanced understanding of a complex subject, but also in some way to fill in a gap in the literature. Though not unsurprising, writings focusing on Schuon and the Perennialists tend to ignore any historiographical data, which is understandable, but at the same time it was not always so. The implicit respect for historiography which as we shall see was a hallmark of many of the followers of the *philosophia perennis* from the Renaissance onwards is not shared by the Perennialists who postulate that its source cannot be identified with scholarly historiography.⁴¹ The disdain shown towards history is not unsurprising for those who claim to have access to timeless truth.

³⁹ Schuon, Frithjof. *Orthodoxy and Intellectuality*. In *Stations of Wisdom*. Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, [1961], 1995, 33.

⁴⁰ Faivre, xxvii.

⁴¹ Hanegraaff, Wouter J. *Traditionalism/Perennialism*. In (Ed.) *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esoterism*. Leiden: Boston: Brill, 2006, 1132.

“Nothing new under the sun.” (Ecclesiastes 1:9)

According to the ‘Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esoterism’, *philosophia perennis* is one of the many terms given to a perceived enduring tradition of superior spiritual wisdom which has been “available to humanity since the earliest periods of history” and has been transmitted through the ages through “a chain of divinely inspired sages or initiatory groups.” It has also been known as *prisca theologia*, *prisca sapientia*, perennial philosophy, *pia philosophia*, perennial wisdom, “the wisdom of the ancients, and Tradition.⁴² Unfortunately there is no agreement on the precise meaning of the term, although there are recurring themes such as the continuity of enduring and lasting truths which are detectable in the philosophical writings of all historical periods.⁴³

Whilst incorporating elements from ancient philosophy, it would be useful to start from the first historical use of the term, with the intention of understanding its initial signification. The term *Philosophia Perennis* originates from the Vatican librarian and Augustinian monk, Agostino Steuco (1497-1548), who in 1540 published a treatise with the title “De Perenni Philosophia”, a synthesis of philosophy, religion, and history, giving perhaps for the first time a fixed, systematic meaning to an already well developed philosophical tradition.⁴⁴ Its subject was the Christian philosophy which he believed to be common the world over and known by all people at all times, descending as it were from its Edenic beginnings.⁴⁵ As Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann observes, “it had its roots in late antiquity, especially with the Christian church fathers” and consisted in the idea that “Jewish-Christian theology and pious philosophy derived from participation in the same divine ideas, and that they revealed the same essential truths.”⁴⁶ From the very beginning, the *philosophia perennis* of Steuco was a syncretic attempt to adopt and assimilate all philosophical topics into its philosophical-theological system with the express purpose of tracing all forms of knowledge back to God’s original Edenic revelation.⁴⁷ The driving force, Schmidt-Biggemann argues, was the desire to discover the essential unity of theology and philosophy, fitting it within a biblical framework.⁴⁸

More precisely, the roots of the *philosophia perennis* lay in the combination of Judeo-Christian revelation with Platonic philosophy; the latter serving as support for the former. Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BCE-c. 50 CE), a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher, attempted to assimilate the Platonic doctrine of ideas into a biblical framework through his interpretation of the Adamite language – believed to be an insight into the essence of things given by God to Adam in the garden of Eden – as offering a deeper meaning to that doctrine. Although heavily influenced by the thought of Plato, his philosophy contained a much clearer conception of a transcendent God which was lacking in Plato’s world of the Forms and the idea of the divine.⁴⁹ In an attempt to make philosophy dependent upon

⁴² Ibid., *Tradition*, 1125.)

⁴³ Schmitt, Charles B. Perennial Philosophy: From Agostino Steuco to Leibniz. In *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (1966), 505-532, 505.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 506.

⁴⁵ Schmidt-Biggemann, xiii.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., xiv-xv.

⁴⁸ Ibid., xiv.

⁴⁹ Louth, 17.

revelation, it enabled Platonic and Christianised Neoplatonic themes to penetrate Christian thinking.⁵⁰ Philo's ideas were taken up by Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-c. 215 CE) and Origen, an early 3rd century Christian theologian, spreading to the Latin Church fathers via Ambrosius who translated Philo's works into Latin. In this way the Neoplatonism of Plotinus and Proclus was transmitted to the Christian West and into the Middle Ages via Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and John Scotus Eriugena.⁵¹

Reason and Revelation: Pagan Philosophy and Christianity

It may seem obvious to some why Greek philosophy should be incorporated into Christian theology but why could it not just be ignored? The fact is that Greek civilization *en toto* "exercised a profound influence on the Christian mind"⁵² and it has to be remembered that the Christian *kerygma*, the oral gospel, did not stop at the Dead Sea or Judaea but penetrated a world which was unified and dominated by the Greek civilization and the Greek language.⁵³ The process of the Christianization of the Greek-speaking world meant also the Hellenization of the Christian religion.⁵⁴ Werner Jaeger argues that Christian Hellenism, was in no small part a consequence of the use of the Greek language which brought with it "a whole world of concepts, categories of thought, inherited metaphors, and subtle connotations of meaning" that would have entered Christian thought.⁵⁵ For example, Paul's discussions with the Jews to whom he tried to bring the gospel of Christ were carried on in Greek "with all the subtleties of Greek logical argumentation."⁵⁶ The Greek Fathers, whose role was to enter into dialogue with pagan Greece, did not "divest themselves wholly of their Greek cast of mind on becoming Christians",⁵⁷ but continued to be Greek-speaking and Greek-thinking. Greek terms such as *theos* and *psyche*, which were put to good use by the Christians, would have kept from their secular past a whole host of assumptions and associations which were more often than not unquestioned or unnoticed.⁵⁸ Attempts to transfer Biblical conceptions of God into Platonic conceptions turned difficulties of interpretation into logical impossibilities.⁵⁹ Nearly all the Greek Fathers, argues David Wright, reveal the influence of secular thought in their writings, confusing biblical and secular wisdom and more often than not reading the Greek Bible through the eyes of Greek philosophy "without realizing that they were wearing tinted – or tainted – spectacles."⁶⁰

⁵⁰ Schmidt-Biggemann, xiv.

⁵¹ Ibid., xv.

⁵² Jaeger, Werner. *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985, 4.

⁵³ Ibid., 5.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁵⁷ Wright, David F. Christian Faith in the Greek World: Justin Martyr's Testimony. In *The Evangelical Quarterly*, 54.2 (Apr.-June 1982), 77-87, 78.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 77.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

A Diabolical Dilema

All this goes to show that from the very beginning of Christianity, Greek ideas and notions were integral to the expression of the Christian message which at the very least must have created an inherent and problematic tension between faith and philosophy. That tension, argues Hanegraaf “constitutes one of the most fundamental ‘deep structures’ of Western intellectual history”, and is due to a problem that could not be resolved: The presence of ‘pagan’ thought within a culture grounded in revelation.⁶¹ It appears that only two options were available to deal with that tension: rejection or assimilation. The first represented by Tertullian sought to isolate and protect the faith against abstract metaphysical speculations, whilst the second position toyed with the idea of “grafting its doctrines onto the established system of Greek philosophy” the purpose being to give the new religion a degree of respectability in an environment hostile to it.⁶² Not only respectability but persuasion and clarity, for philosophy could be used in a number of ways; philosophical reasoning might persuade one who could not accept divine revelation whilst philosophical techniques might be used to help the theologian clarify imprecise or ambiguous theological claims through logical consistency.⁶³ The consequence of assimilation only made matters worse, for once Christian theologians had adopted ‘pagan’ philosophy it created what Hanegraaf playfully calls a diabolical dilemma: the presence within Christianity of a ‘paganism’ which stood for the very thing that was meant to be rejected, whilst at the same time relying on it to explain what the religion was actually about.⁶⁴ The influence of Greek philosophy in general and Platonism in particular cannot be overemphasised, and was duly noted by Endre von Ivánka:

The phenomenon which characterizes the whole of the first millennium of Christian theological thought...is the use of Platonism as the form for [its] philosophical expression and the framework of the world-picture in terms of which the proclamation of revealed truths was made – in other words, Christian Platonism.⁶⁵

Whilst the incorporation of philosophy into Christian thought may have been, as Wright holds, a bold attempt to claim secular wisdom for Christ,⁶⁶ it was to have both favourable and unfavourable consequences, for at their very core there was an irreconcilable difference which has been summed up by Louth as follows;

Within the Platonic framework, the soul’s search for God is naturally conceived of as a return, an *ascent* to God; for the soul properly belongs with God, and in its ascent it is but realizing its own true nature. Christianity, on the other hand, speaks of the Incarnation of God, of his *descent* into the world

⁶¹ Hanegraaf, Wouter J. The Power of Ideas: Esotericism, Historicism, and the Limits of Discourse. In *Religion*, 43: 2 (2013), 252-273, 256.

⁶² Cooper, David E. *World Philosophies: An Historical Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003, 156.

⁶³ Murray, Michael and Rea, Michael. Philosophy and Christian Theology. In Zalta, Edward N. (Ed.). *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2012 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.). Accessed 29/03/13 from www.plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2012/entries/christiantheology-philosophy/.

⁶⁴ Hanegraaf, 256.

⁶⁵ Endre von Ivánka. *Plato Christianus*. Einsiedeln, 1964, 19. Quoted in Louth, xi.

⁶⁶ Wright, 78.

that he might give to man the possibility of a communion with God that is not open to him by nature.⁶⁷

Reconciling Faith and Reason

Attempts to resolve the dilemma occupied the greatest Christian minds but it was not until St Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) that the conflict between faith and reason seemed to be resolved with Aquinas arguing that as both come from God, there can be no contradiction between the two.⁶⁸ Accordingly, philosophy and theology were to be considered as two distinct enterprises differing only in their intellectual starting points, the former taking its data from sense perception, the latter from revelation.⁶⁹

Now whilst the resolution of contradiction was obtained through an appeal to their shared origin in God, it came at a price which it could be argued created the intellectual climate from which the *philosophia perennis* emerged. Not only was philosophy as understood by Aquinas to be regarded as the servant of theology – *ancilla theologiae*⁷⁰ - but the very conception of philosophy, or more precisely the intellectual capacity of the philosopher was to be limited in its scope. This point is very important and it requires that we take a break from the strictly historical overview and very briefly hear what Schuon has to say about this:

The reduction of the notion of intellectuality to that of simple rationality often has its cause in the prejudice of a school: St Thomas is a sensationalist – in other words he reduces the cause of all non-theological knowledge to sensible perceptions – in order to be able to underestimate the human mind to the advantage of scripture; in other words, because this allows him to attribute to Revelation alone the glory of “supernatural” knowledge.⁷¹

It was, I believe, this ‘reduction of the notion of intellectuality to that of simple rationality’ which created the necessary intellectual conditions for the rediscovery of ancient philosophy and the renewed interest in the ancient philosophers at the close of the 14th Century. More on this will follow, but for now I wish to continue the historical overview without Schuonian or Perennialist input, for the reasons previously stated. Perhaps, as Frederick Copleston remarks, the Renaissance was a period in which “speculative reason once more began to enjoy freedom after the dark night of the Middle Ages”⁷² but this human reason was, as we have seen, somewhat compromised.

⁶⁷ Louth, xiii.

⁶⁸ Thomas Aquinas. *Summa contra Gentiles*, I, 7. Quoted by John Paul II, *Fides et ratio* #43.

⁶⁹ Murray.

⁷⁰ Gracia, Jorge J. E. and Noone, Timothy B., (Eds.) *A Companion to Philosophy in the Middle Ages*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2002, 1.

⁷¹ Schuon, Frithjof. *Tracing the Notion of Philosophy*. In Nasr, 137.

⁷² Copleston, Frederick. *A History of Philosophy, Vol. 2*. New York: Doubleday, 1993, 2.

As Greek Byzantine manuscripts found their way to Italy by way of refugees fleeing the advancing Ottoman armies,⁷³ there began to be signs of an awakening to the historical nature of philosophy albeit with a lack of critical awareness which could hardly have been helped with the fragmentary nature of the sources.⁷⁴ The recovery of these philosophies of classical antiquity unencumbered by the strictly fideist Christian consciousness forced a re-examination by Christian philosophers of the relationship between rationality and revelation. This, argues Copleston, summed up briefly was the Renaissance Project.⁷⁵ This re-examination lacked the historiographical awareness that was necessary to approach particular works with caution, and so the theological and metaphysical premises which supported the philosophers world view led to the need to “demonstrate the sources of true knowledge and wisdom, trace the paths they had followed through time, and make clear how those trajectories harmonized or coincided with the unquestionable truth of Christian doctrine.”⁷⁶ In other words, the resulting access to new philosophical material, an inability to correctly attribute works, a thirst for non-theological knowledge coupled with a commitment to the Church, created the perfect conditions for the creation of a new tradition. It is with the invention of this tradition that we will now turn to.

As we have seen, it was Agostino Steuco who first employed the phrase *philosophia perennis* in his work of the same name in 1540, but his formulation drew upon earlier sources particularly those of Marcilio Ficino (1433-99) and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-94). Ficino, founder of the Platonic Academy in Florence and a conscious reviver of Platonism drew significantly from a number of philosophers such as Lucretius, Plotinus, Jamblichus, Augustine, Proclus, Pseudo-Dionysius, Psellus, Pletho and from a number of pseudonymous writings including the Hermetic *corpus* and the *Chaldic Oracles*.⁷⁷ The central theme running throughout his writings and which was taken up by Steuco was that of the metaphysical unity underlying the apparent diversity of the world, and the concordance of truth represented by Christian theology and Platonic philosophy, which he believed emerged from a single more ancient source, the *prisca theologia*.⁷⁸ This religio-philosophical tradition, believed Ficino, could be traced through a lineage of ‘true philosophers’:

In those things which pertain to theology the six great theologians of former times concur. Of whom the first is said to have been Zoroaster, head of the *magi*; the second is Hermes Trismegistus, originator of the priests of Egypt. Orpheus succeeded Hermes. Aglaophemus was initiated to the sacred things of Orpheus. Pythagoras succeeded Aglaophemus in theology. To Pythagoras succeeded Plato, who in his writings encompassed those men's universal wisdom, added to it, and elucidated it.⁷⁹

The writings of these ancient theologians, it was argued, enabled a better understanding of Christian Scripture and were to become, asserts Schmitt, the foundation for a principle of toleration which

⁷³ Hanegraaf, 260.

⁷⁴ Hanegraaff, Wouter J. *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 5.

⁷⁵ Copleston, 2.

⁷⁶ Hanegraaf, 5.

⁷⁷ Schmitt, 507.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 508.

⁷⁹ Ficino, quoted in Schmitt, 508.

permeated the *philosophia perennis*.⁸⁰ What is important to note though is that the genealogies produced by Ficino and others were flexible and open to adaptation. Moreover the tracing of two distinct lines of transmission of knowledge from a single source, one Platonic – Plato being *divinus* Plato, the inheritor of the wisdom of Zoroaster - the other Christian, the *prisca theologia* was not the only approach as can be seen from the attempt by Giovanni Pico to formulate a single system of truth.⁸¹ Not satisfied with the combination of the two traditions mentioned he went much further and sought to develop a philosophy drawing on a much larger range of sources but with one important caveat, as Schmitt observes “where insoluble disagreement was found other traditions had to bend to the authority of Platonism.”⁸² Thus the difference in the attitudes of Pico and Ficino can be seen in their arguments over Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysics, the former holding that Aristotle agreed with Plato that Being and Unity are coextensive, the latter rejecting this interpretation holding – along with the Neoplatonists – that the One is above Being. With Pico then we have a much more ambitious enterprise for as Schmitt notes, not being content with the notion of two separate and unbroken traditions emerging from a single source - philosophical and theological - he proposed that truth could be found in many traditions such as the Quran, the Kabbala, and the medieval schoolmen.⁸³

As we have seen it was not until Steuco that the concept of the *philosophia perennis* took the shape of a coherent philosophical system of which I will now say more about. His desire was to incorporate all traditions within a concordistic scheme drawing on the writings of Ficino and Pico with their roots grounded firmly in the thought of the Neoplatonists, the Fathers and other ancient writers.⁸⁴ The key theme, points out Schmitt, is that this philosophy always contains the idea that there is a single *sapientia* knowable by all if only one is to look closely.⁸⁵ Another important point, one that can be observed in the writings of Schuon and the Perennialists and which has survived into the 20th Century is the idea of degeneration. Whilst there is continuity within history it is not a progressive one. Steuco draws heavily on the Greek notion of a three stage fall from perfect knowledge. In the beginning it is perfect, received directly from God, but soon it becomes dissipated and scattered and eventually becomes forgotten or obscured, available only to those who search for it.⁸⁶ It is always there, but difficult to find. Another important point, and one which relates to what has already been said about the devaluation of philosophy in the eyes of the Christian theologians, is that the former far from being subordinate to the latter serves the same purpose, for as Steuco says, “the aim of philosophy is the knowledge of God, and, as it were, the actual beholding of Him.”⁸⁷ In other words there is no distinction between them in their end, only in their means. Drawing heavily on Neoplatonism and the acceptance of the Plotinian One, the traditional faith-reason problem, argues Schmitt, has no meaning within the *philosophia perennis* which at heart proposes a unity which goes

⁸⁰ Schmitt, 511.

⁸¹ Ibid., 512.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., 513.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 515.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 518.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 520.

beyond difference.⁸⁸ As Schmitt puts it, “it turns out to be little more than *prisca theologia* in slightly novel dress.”⁸⁹

Hanegraaf believes that both the *prisca theologia* and the *philosophia perennis* are grounded in what he calls ‘Platonic Orientalism’. This was a perspective that Plato had neither been an original thinker nor a strictly rational philosopher but the inheritor of ancient religious wisdom originating in Egypt with Hermes Trismegistus, Persia with Zoroaster and the Hebrews with Moses. The Christians sought to explain how wisdom could have appeared outside Christianity by arguing that it was Moses who had passed it on to the gentiles from where it found its way to Plato and the Platonists before receiving its full revelation in the Christian message. In this way, he argues, the existence of true wisdom could be explained, as all truths could be seen as anticipating this message.⁹⁰

As we have seen, the *philosophia perennis*, was the consequence of the recovery of the philosophy of classical antiquity. Forced to reconsider the relationship between rationality and revelation, and lacking both critical neutrality and a historical consciousness, the Italian humanists who began to study the earliest philosophers, became instead writers of the history of truth.⁹¹ The “wisdom of the pagans” which was central to the ancient wisdom narrative, eventually became a target for Catholic and Protestant polemicists, and was “expelled from intellectual discourse altogether... end[ing] up as a discredited waste-bucket category of rejected knowledge”, known as esotericism.⁹² The following and final section will look at how the academic field of esotericism emerged and defined itself in contrast to those who claimed to represent a continuation of the *philosophia perennis*.

The Study of Western Esotericism and the Drive for Legitimacy

Esotericism is a notoriously vague and ambiguous word, but for all its faults it has come to be accepted by scholars as the term which best encompasses the diverse and eclectic assortment of ideas and philosophies which have generally, until the last thirty years or so, been avoided by most academics within western universities. Antoine Faivre has been at the forefront of research which has, according to one scholar, been slowly developing in response to a need to make sense of the “medley of apparently unrelated and often suspect subjects” found in books gathering dust on the shelves of esoteric bookstores.⁹³ The result has been the emergence of a new academic field of enquiry known as ‘Western Esotericism’ which Faivre has almost singlehandedly defined.⁹⁴ The term esotericism, he explains, has been retained for want of a better word as a convenient way to talk about “specific historical currents” or “forms of thought” which include such diverse topics as alchemy, astrology, magic, Christian Kabbalah, Neo-Alexandrian hermeticism, Paracelsism,

⁸⁸ Ibid., 519.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 520.

⁹⁰ Hanegraaf, *The Power of Ideas*, 260.

⁹¹ Hanegraaf, 2012, 5.

⁹² Ibid., 369.

⁹³ Von Suckrad, Kocku. *Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge*. London: Equinox Publishing, 2005, vii.

⁹⁴ Versluis, Arthur. 'What is Esoteric? Method in the Study of Esotericism. *Esoterica*, Vol. 4, 2002, 1-15, 1. Accessed 21/01/14 from <http://www.esoteric.msu.edu/VolumeIV/Methods.htm>

theosophy and Rosicrucianism, and the fundamental ideas which underlie them.⁹⁵ This list is not exhaustive but is given to offer some examples of the subject matter of the discipline. The study of western esotericism has opened up a whole area of research hitherto before neglected by serious academics but the interest in all things esoteric has not been extended to Schuon and the Perennialists.

Indeed, not only have they been neglected, but the very discipline itself was from the beginning defined with the intention of keeping it that way. In their drive to attain academic legitimacy for the field, two scholars in particular, Faivre and Wouter Hanegraaf, Professor of Esoteric Studies at the University of Amsterdam, explicitly attempted to distance themselves from perennialism. The former seeing the “necessity to establish the study of esotericism on solid academic bases, of fixing clear demarcations from the perennialist point of view”,⁹⁶ the latter agreeing that “the first necessary step towards establishing the study of esotericism as a serious academic pursuit would be to demarcate it clearly from the perennialist perspective.”⁹⁷ As a consequence of the quest for academic legitimacy, the work of the Perennialists in general and Schuon in particular has been excluded from ‘serious’ academic research, precisely in the same way that the many “esoteric” subjects which are now considered legitimate were excluded prior to the end of the twentieth century. Why two of the leading scholars within the field saw the necessity for defining that field to the exclusion of certain currents will be explored below.

One of the reasons given for claiming legitimacy for the newly emergent field of western esotericism was the conscious intention not to ensure its propagation through its study.⁹⁸ Faivre’s goal was clearly not an attempt at disseminating the ideas but instead merely to pull them from their historical context in order to understand their significance within the framework of scientific knowledge.⁹⁹ Unlike the perennialists whose methodology was clearly marked by doctrinal considerations, Faivre wanted to develop a new methodology which would not be tainted with metaphysical assumptions and would be scientifically rigorous. The result was a new methodological approach known as ‘empirical method’ or ‘empirical research’ which was widely accepted amongst scholars.¹⁰⁰

Now I may be accused here of stating the obvious, that a scholar working within academia is primarily concerned with making the subject scientifically rigorous in order to have it accepted by the wider academic community, but I believe that the question of validity has not yet been answered adequately within the academic field of religious studies in general and the emerging field of esotericism in particular. For example, the discussions surrounding the validity of the emic and etic positions and the debates over the mediated or unmediated nature of consciousness in the former have never been satisfactorily concluded but on the contrary, continue within the latter albeit with

⁹⁵ Faivre, Antoine. *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition: Studies in Western Esotericism*. Rhone, Christine. (Tr.) Albany: SUNY Press, 2000, xxviii.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, xxvii.

⁹⁷ Hanegraaff, Wouter J. Empirical Method in the Study of Esotericism. In *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 7-2, (1995), 99-129, 110.

⁹⁸ Faivre, xxviii.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, xxvii.

¹⁰⁰ Versluis, 1.

slightly different emphasis. That these problems reappear might be considered as proof that they have not yet been resolved, or perhaps they illustrate the fact of their contested and unresolvable nature. Indeed, the particular field of esotericism is like the microcosm to the macrocosmic field as a whole, the main issues are like echoes of the ones which preceded them.

And what are these issues? They are perennial ones such as the nature of valid knowledge, and on what grounds subjects, or for that matter methodologies are to be considered valid. But most significant is the question as to the possibility of the scientific study of subjects which necessarily are not open to empirical validation. This latter question has far reaching implications because the concern for rigour under the guise of scientific validity has given rise to a dominant view within the study of western esotericism which has become characterized by “the rejection of metaphysical premises”.¹⁰¹ This has unfortunate consequences, not only because it rules out much useful and interesting material, but because it gives the impression of objectivity when it is in fact driven by considerations of value which are not open to empirical validation, of which it places great importance. Just why it must reject metaphysical premises is explained as follows.

Axiomatic and non-axiomatic views of reality and scientific validity

For the empirical researcher, access to the subject of esotericism is limited within its scientific framework to that which is observable. Therefore study is restricted to human events which unfold in time and space, ruling out *a priori* access to the meta-empirical. This decision is taken, not because empirical reality is claimed to be the only reality but because it is the only one accessible to investigation¹⁰² based on this empirical premise. Wouter Hanegraaf expands on this by saying that whilst the scholar depends on those who express their awareness of this reality in ‘empirically perceptible ways’, without their own personal means of access, methodological agnosticism is the only appropriate attitude toward the meta-empirical reality because “it can neither verify or falsify its existence.”¹⁰³ He compares this attitude to two others which have been a common for scholars of religion namely the reductionist and the religionist approaches which he argues are both non-scientific because they hold to a view of reality which is axiomatic. The question of scientific validity must be understood in relation to the claim that only empirical research is based on non-axiomatic principles, and will need further analysis.

Much of Hanegraaf’s understanding for the scientific basis of empiricism which he presents in his essay *Empirical Method in the Study of Esotericism* from which we have been quoting, is drawn from an article entitled *The Definers Defined: Traditions in the Definition of Religion* by Jan Platvoet, which attempts to offer tools for the analysis of religious experiences defined as “postulated communicative events within believed networks of relationships between believers and their non-verifiable/non-falsifiable beings or (addressable) reality.”¹⁰⁴ The empirical study of religions, according to Platvoet, “emerged after 1960.....from an ideological or theological to a non-axiomatic

¹⁰¹ Faivre, xxvii.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Hanegraaf, 101.

¹⁰⁴ Platvoet, Jan. *The Definers Defined: Traditions in the Definition of Religion*. In *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 2/2 (1990), 180-212, 180.

use of science.”¹⁰⁵ He goes on to say that “Scholars, however, as scientists, can discuss religion only from the perspective of a one-tier cosmology, that of the empirical world, because scientific research can only be conducted about the observable world.”¹⁰⁶ We will return to the analysis of the first statement below, but first I would like to address the second one which I will show rests on questionable assumptions. Even if we accept that Platvoet is advocating a position based on his understanding of the tradition from which he speaks, that of the scholar as a scientist, we are still faced with the question as to the value he places on that position with regards to other positions. I point this out because as Faivre and especially Hanegraaf, who develops his methodology drawing in a greater or lesser degree on his work argue, the perception of the study of esotericism as a serious academic pursuit rests on the assumption that empiricism is scientific, and that scientific knowledge is somehow more legitimate than non-scientific knowledge, inferred as it is from its claimed non-axiomatic status. As we shall see, it is important to challenge this self-understanding because the whole enterprise of the academic study of esotericism and its rejection or marginalization of Perennialist ideas stands or falls on the legitimacy of this claim.

Based on my reading of Platvoet, the justification for the non-axiomatic foundation of empirical research is as follows. It is a scientific enterprise which can neither prove nor disprove the existence of a meta-reality. There may or may not exist beings which are meta- or intra-invisible, which interact or are seen by believers. Positivist-reductionist scholars deny the existence of that reality and those beings, explaining them as human products, without proof. In other words they can neither prove that they exist nor prove that they do not exist but deny them all the same. Religionists, on the contrary, whilst having no proof hold their existence to be true. Both have no proof yet both hold a position – “it exists/it does not exist” - therefore axiomatic, and non-scientific. Simply put, both positions are disputable. The empirical position on the other hand, has no proof for the “exist/does not exist” positions so takes a third position. Platvoet explains that this position is “restricted to the study of those data about religions that can be obtained by the procedures of the several empirical sciences and which can be tested in its scholarly communities.”¹⁰⁷ One assumes that the conclusions arrived at within those communities are indisputable facts such as the fact of four being the consequence of the addition of two and two, but the point is that the empirical position is indisputable and therefore non-axiomatic. Or is it?

Platvoet goes on to say that though,

scholars of religion are, required, as scientists, not to be committed to any one cosmology, whether religious or positivist, they are factually limited in their work to the perspective of a one-tier cosmology, because the non-perceptable realm(s) are not accessible to scientific investigation and all that it entails. For this reason only, and not for any ideological or theological one, can historians of religion present analyses of humankind’s religions only from the perspective of a one tier cosmology.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 197.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 187.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 185.

Now he may claim that his reasons for concentrating only on the perceptible realms are non-ideological and thus non-axiomatic, but as we shall see there is a subtle ideological choice being made here, one which places greater value on the material world. Value judgements, as far as I am aware, are not accessible to scientific investigation and therefore are held axiomatically.

In the following excerpt from an essay on mysticism by Steven Katz, we can see the non-falsifiable/non-verifiable position more clearly if we replace the word 'mysticism' with 'metaphysical', for as scholar Huston Smith, who is sympathetic to the Perennialist position notes, "Katz's arguments about mysticism can be read as applying *pari passu* to metaphysical intuitions."¹⁰⁹ Katz's position is that "[T]here are major, perhaps insuperable, problems involved in the issue of trying to verify mystical claims, if by verification we mean the strong thesis that independent grounds for the claimed event/experience can be publicly demonstrated. Indeed it seems to me....that it is not possible to provide 'verification' of this sort."¹¹⁰ Whilst it may not be possible in some cases (all of the most interesting ones), the underlying assumption is that some form of verification is preferable. If in deed empirical validation is preferable then it follows that non-empirical validation, as one form of validation against other forms can be equally preferable, and what in fact we are talking about here is an axiomatic statement which itself can neither be verified nor falsified. Forms of verification which are dependent upon consensus and not for example, logic or any other form of demonstration, merely draws attention to the dominant mode of legitimization; public as opposed to private. That reproducibility is assumed to confer legitimacy on the object only reveals the underlying materialistic bias of the researcher and tells us more about their ideological presuppositions than it does about anything else. Therefore, the empirical researcher's claim to non-ideological, non-axiomatic status is in itself axiomatic and must be taken as such.

It is perfectly reasonable to restrict ones study to human events which unfold in time and space because one is not inclined toward meta-empirical research, but it is altogether another thing to justify this restriction based on claimed non-ideological grounds. The desire to establish the study of esotericism as a serious academic pursuit, or to place it on a solid academic base, to the exclusion of the perennialist position should be seen for what it is, an illustration of the dissemination of a materialist ideology whose very assumptions are "shrouded by words like "science"...in order that their axiomatic and disputable nature not be put to the question."¹¹¹ It turns out then, that whilst methodological agnosticism may be the only appropriate attitude one can take towards the meta-empirical, that decision is a consequence of an axiomatically held view of reality and is based on faith. Perhaps in the end all that we have is faith?

Conclusion

¹⁰⁹ Smith, Huston. Is there a Perennial Philosophy? In *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. Vol. 55, No. 3 (1987), 553-556, 555.

¹¹⁰ Katz, Steven T. Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism. In Katz, Steven T. (Ed.). *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978, 22.

¹¹¹ Griffiths, Paul J. On the Future of the Study of Religion in the Academy. In *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, March 2006, Vol. 74, No. 1, 66-74, 72.

The one overarching theme to which all others have played a secondary role throughout this analysis of Frithjof Schuon, the *philosophia perennis* and the status of esotericism within academia has been the existence of irreconcilable differences and the attempts to resolve them. In whatever form those differences have taken, whether between faith and philosophy, appeals to the authority of revelation or reason, or between claims for the axiomatic or non-axiomatic grounds for the validity of knowledge, there have always been those who have desired to find some kind of resolution. Whilst Tertullian sought to isolate and protect his faith from reason, and Aquinas to make use of it, others such as Steuco and Ficino struggled to develop a synthesis which would incorporate the best of both worlds. The problems caused by the presence of pagan thought within a culture grounded in revelation cannot be overemphasised and was at heart an attempt to explain how wisdom could have appeared outside Christianity. Schuon must be seen in light of these considerations. His doctrine of the transcendent unity of religions is merely another expression of the fundamental desire to create harmony from disharmony by proposing a unity which underlies all multiplicity, and for that reason his work should be more widely read by both scholars and non-scholars alike.

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