

Schuon Lectures 2026 – Day 3

“What is the Role of Art in the Spiritual Life?”

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Nota bene: This lecture is the third of four lectures in a series entitled: “Schuon’s Path of Truth & Beauty: The Perennial Philosophy in the Modern Era.”

The original lecture was presented with PowerPoint and contained over 300 illustrations and a film clip. This transcription of the audio portion of the lecture cannot convey all of the information on the slides. Interested readers should view the entire film recording of the lecture. This transcription has been edited to provide context for viewers who have not seen the film of the lecture.

My intention today is to try to explain, through Schuon's metaphysical writings and photographs, the important presence of sacred beauty. Before considering the role of art in the spiritual life, we have to have a common understanding of the sacred and traditional beauty that was produced by each of the major religions. However, the vibrant traditional civilizations that surrounded each of the major religions have largely disappeared or become corrupted by the modern world, particularly in the industrialized West.

There are virtually no visual points of reference for contemporary readers to compare the aesthetics of a modern city with past traditional civilizations. The visible and experiential links are broken. You might think I am embarking on a fool's errand, perhaps I am, by attempting to give you a taste of the beauty of traditional civilizations from around the world and throughout history in less than two hours. I look forward to your verdict. I recognize that the cumulative power of the visual images you will see today may be somewhat overwhelming. My intention is that it will lead you to a deeper appreciation of sacred art. Many of the images in the presentation can be found in one of World Wisdom's illustrated books.

We begin by reviewing Schuon's fundamental principles of traditional and sacred art. We then will trace the rise and eventual decline of traditional forms of art. Our case studies are in Western Christianity. Some of the photographs illustrate the errors that Schuon identifies. Thus, you will be able to form your own judgments. In a 1991 interview, I asked Schuon, "What is the role of art in the spiritual life?"

Q: You were speaking a moment ago about beauty. I was wondering if you could talk about the role of art in the spiritual existence of man.

A: “Now, man needs beauty and he needs also symbolism. It is not enough to think about metaphysics. One wants also to see and to hear metaphysics in visible forms. And this is symbolism. And symbolism—how do you say this in English?—coincides with beauty.

Symbolism. If a thing exists, it must be beautiful. So, God created man, and he was obliged, metaphysically speaking, to create him beautiful because beauty is the norm.”

Q: Is this related to what you refer to as the metaphysical transparency of phenomena?

A: “Yes. If I see something beautiful, a landscape or a beautiful music or a beautiful human being, I see the *Raḥmah*, I see *Ānanda*. I see the principle.”

For the next several minutes, we will view examples of sacred art from diverse sources as we listen to Schuon's general principles on beauty, first, then sacred art. Unfortunately, our limited time does not allow me to go into some of the insightful digressions and precisions in Schuon's writings. Schuon placed importance, particular importance, on a proper understanding of the role of beauty as one of the four essential elements of his philosophy. He wrote “metaphysical truth, a life of prayer, moral conformity, interiorizing beauty. This is the essential and this is our message.” Interiorizing beauty. We will return to that notion.

For Schuon, beauty is not in the eye of the beholder, but rather is an objective reality determined by its source in the True or the Absolute. Schuon often quoted Plato, “beauty is the splendor of the True.” I turn to Schuon. “Beauty is a crystallization of some aspect of universal joy. It is something limitless expressed by means of a limit. The archetype of beauty or its divine model is the superabundance and equilibrium of the divine quality.” Schuon again: “The cosmic or more particularly the earthly function of beauty is to actualize in the intelligent creature the platonic recollection of the archetypes. This leads us to the conclusion that the full understanding of beauty demands virtue and is identifiable with it. The message of beauty is both intellectual and moral. intellectual because it communicates to us aspects of substance and moral because it reminds us of what we must love and consequently be. Art in the broadest sense is the crystallization of archetypal values.”

“We must recognize the obligatory role played by the aesthetic quality in every traditional civilization. No religion is situated outside beauty. Every religion expresses it through itself. Every traditional world is necessarily a world of beauty. And this proves beauty's interiorizing that virtue.”

In a seminal article, “The Principles and Criteria of Art,” Schuon says, “Before going further, we should define the term ‘sacred;’ what then is the sacred in relation to the world? It is the interference of the uncreate in the created, of the eternal in time, of the infinite in space, of the supraformal in forms. It is the mysterious introduction into one realm of existence of a presence which in reality contains and transcends that realm.”

“The sacred is the incommensurable, the transcendent hidden within a fragile form belonging to the world. It has its own precise rules, its terrible aspects, and its merciful qualities. Moreover, any violation of the sacred, even in art, has incalculable repercussions. The sense of

the sacred is the innate consciousness of the presence of God.” It bears repeating. “The sense of the sacred is the innate consciousness of the presence of God: it is to feel this presence sacramentally in symbols and ontologically in all things. Hence the sense of the sacred implies a kind of universal respect kind of circumspection before the mystery of the animate and inanimate creatures.”

“Ramakrishna, when he saw a flight of cranes, a lion, a dancing girl, used to fall into ecstasy. This is what is called ‘seeing God everywhere;’ not by deciphering the symbolisms but by perceiving the essences. Art is a quest for and the revelation of the center, within us as well as around us.”

“Sacred art is far from always being perfect, although it is necessarily so in its principles. In traditional worlds, to be situated in space and time is to be situated in a cosmology and in an eschatology, respectively. Time has no meaning save in relation to the perfection of the origin and the maintenance of that perfection and in view of the final breaking up that casts us almost without transition at the feet of God.”

The photo in the upper right was taken in 2001 at sunrise at Angkor Wat. It is an ineffable experience to feel these types of celestial presences and know the sacred is still alive in the world.

Back to Schuon: “On the plane of spiritual values, no two things are more divergent than wisdom, which is inward, and art, which is outward; between them is all the distance separating essence and form. Yet ‘extremes meet’ and nothing is closer to wisdom and sanctity than sacred art, which explains the value, in no way disproportionate, that traditional civilizations attach to these disciplines. Sacred and traditional forms, even the most unimportant, are the work of human hands in a secondary manner only. They originate first and foremost from the same supra-human source from which all tradition originates, which is another way of saying that the artist who lives in a traditional world without fissures, works under the discipline or the inspiration of a genius that surpasses him. Fundamentally, he is but the instrument of this genius, if only from the fact of the craftsman's qualification.”

Where are we now? We turn to the human vocation. Schuon: “The vocation *sine qua non* of man is to be spiritual. Spirituality, no distraction, passions, worldly ambitions. The spiritual first of all, to live for the spiritual. The fundamental importance of art, both in the life of a collectivity and in contemplative life, arises from the fact that man is himself made in the image of God. Man alone among earthly beings can think, speak and produce works; only he can contemplate and realize the Infinite.”

“Traditional humanity wants to manifest or to exteriorize at a particular level something that it carries within itself and is in danger of losing; and the danger increases as a cycle unfolds, the cycle inevitably ending in decline and Divine Judgment. . . . It is not the sole obligation of art to

come down towards the common people; it should remain faithful to its intrinsic truth in order to allow men to rise toward that truth.”

“The rights of art, or more exactly the artist, lie in the technical, spiritual and intellectual qualities of the work. These three qualities are so many modes of originality. . . . In other words, the artist can be original through the aesthetic quality of the work, by the nobility or piety reflected in it, and by the intelligence or knowledge that enables him to find inexhaustible variations within the framework laid down by tradition. True genius can develop without making innovation. It attains perfection, depth, and power of expression almost imperceptibly by means of the imponderables of truth and beauty, ripened in that humility, without which there can be no true greatness.”

Where are we? Next, we go to the function of sacred art. Schuon: “Sacred art is made as a vehicle for spiritual presences. It is made at one and the same time for God, for angels, and for man, profane art, on the other hand, exists only for man and by that very fact, betrays him. Sacred art helps man to find his own center, that kernel whose nature is to love God.” “The supernatural value of sacred art arises from the fact that it conveys and communicates an intelligence which is lacking in the collectivity. Like virgin nature, it has a quality and function of intelligence which it manifests through beauty because, in essence, it belongs to the formal order. Sacred art is the form of the Supra-formal; it is the image of the Uncreate, the language of Silence.”

“The first aim of sacred art is didactic; whether it be a pictorial catechism for the use of the unlettered or, on the contrary, a metaphysical or mystical doctrine suggested by symbols, which does not mean that the two things are separate. Sacred art transmits not only abstract truths conveyed by symbolism, it equally transmits, precisely, by its beauty, at once vivifying and appeasing, of the Divine Love.” Now, I ask you as we continue to consider the different symbolic hand gestures, the mudras to use the Hindu term. Each gesture in every statue or painting of sacred art is a teaching.

“An art is sacred, not through the personal intention of the artist, but through its content, its symbolism and its style, that is through objective elements. By its content: the subject represented must be prescribed either when following a canonical model or in a wider sense; always, however, it must be canonically determined. By its symbolism: the sacred personage or the anthropomorphic symbol must be clothed or adorned in a given manner and not differently and may be making certain gestures but not others. By its style: the image must be expressed in a particular hieratic formal language and not some foreign or imagined style. In brief, the image must be sacred in its content, symbolical in its detail and hieratic in its treatment; otherwise, it will be lacking in spiritual truth and for the same reason in sacramental character.”

I speak now and ask you to look at what is called the “true image of the Buddha,” shown on the right. Then note the transposition of the true image to the stupa. A stupa is a sacred Buddhist monument designed to house relics. I had the opportunity to visit the state sponsored traditional workshops in Bhutan. The workshops provide instruction and also include a retail store to sell traditional crafts—a wonderful idea. In the workshop for the preparation of *thangkas*, paintings and sculptures there are diagrams on the walls with the mathematical proportions of the “true image” of the Buddha and other symbolic images. On the one hand, the artists must work within the traditional rules; on the other hand, there is ample opportunity for each artist to display true genius. Here you see many examples of genius, all within the sacred rules. Now let us revisit the true image of the Buddha and again, we see the transposition to the stupa. Consider, each sacred art is a teaching.

Back to Schuon: “On pain of losing all right to existence, sacred art has no right to infringe these rules and less interest in doing so since these seeming restrictions confer on it, by their intellectual and aesthetic truth qualities of depth and power such as the individual artist has very small chance of drawing out of himself. Perfect art can be recognized by three main criteria: nobility of content—this being a spiritual condition apart from which the artist has no right to exist—then the exactness of symbolism, or at least, in the case of profane works of art, harmony of composition, and finally, purity of style or elegance of line and color. We can discern with the help of these criteria the qualities and defects of any work of art whether sacred or not.”

We step away from Schuon. Symbolism is also integral to all sacred architecture. Hindu temples, for example, are modeled on the sacred mythical Mount Meru, a cosmic mountain considered the center of the universe in Hindu cosmology. Mount Kailash represents the meeting place between the human and divine worlds for the Hindu, Buddhist, Jain and Bon traditions. While Mount Kailash is a specific revered mountain and the mythical abode of the god Shiva, it is often viewed as the earthly representation of Mount Meru. Here you can see the juxtaposition of the forms of the actual mountain with the Hindu temple that represents the mythical mountain.

Back to Schuon. “Art exteriorizes truths and beauties in view of our interiorization, of our return to the ‘kingdom of God that is within you.’ The Principle becomes manifestation so that manifestation might become Principle, or so that ‘I’ might return to the Divine Self, or simply, so that the human soul might, through given phenomena, make contact with the heavenly archetypes and thereby with its own archetype.”

Where are we? I hope you have a little better appreciation of beauty and sacred art. Now we turn to traditional art. Back to Schuon. “Within the framework of a traditional civilization, there is a distinction to be made between sacred art and profane art. The purpose of the first is to communicate, on the one hand spiritual truths, and on the other hand a celestial presence;

sacerdotal art has in principle a truly sacramental function. The function of profane art is obviously more modest: it consists in providing what theologians call 'sensible consolations', with a view to an equilibrium conducive to the spiritual life rather in the manner of the flowers and birds in a garden. If within the framework of traditional civilization art is doubtless never wholly profane, it may however become relatively so precisely because its motive force is to be found less in symbolism than in the creative instinct: such art is thus profane through the absence of the sacred subject or a spiritual symbolism but traditional through the formal discipline that governs its style."

"In traditional art are to be found creations—or rather what might well be called revelations—which may appear unimportant to those who are prejudiced in favor of individual 'masterpieces' as well as from the standpoint of the 'classical' categories of art; but these creations are nonetheless among the irreplaceable works of human genius. Such also are the Abyssinian processional crosses, the Shinto torii, the majestic eagle-feather headdresses of the American Indians and the Hindu saris in which splendid dignity is combined with grace."

"Sacred art is vertical and ascending, whereas [traditional] art is horizontal and equilibrating. Traditional profane art never loses all contact with the sacred; in the prints of a Hokusai, an Utamaro, or a Hiroshige, there exists something contemplative and rigorous which makes one think of Zen and Taoism; the same holds true— a fortiori perhaps— for tools, clothing, houses, where the sacred and profane are often intimately linked. The primitive tool is often a revelation and a symbol and thus also a 'spiritual instrument.'"

Now I speak. These traditional crosses are an excellent example of the primordial symbols used in traditional art. The crosses shown here were collected by my brother during the 13 years he lived with the Tuareg in Niger and Chad, in the heart of the Sahara Desert. Each village has its own primordial symbol. A symbol may adorn jewelry, crafts, or clothing. A Tuareg will immediately recognize the home village of someone they meet for the first time. The cross represents the four directions. We recall this same symbolism in other traditions.

Where are we now? We turn to traditional crafts. This slide is an homage to my brother and his great love for the Tuareg. Our then 13-year-old nephew accompanied us on one of our trips to the Sahara. Upon return, he remarked, "It was like living in biblical times. They are the poorest people I have ever seen or imagined, but they are the happiest people I have ever seen." Traditional beauty is an integral part of the daily lives of these primordial nomads. My brother's sister-in-law is in the upper right.

Back to Schuon. "The purpose of art of every kind—and this includes craftsmanship—is to create a climate and forge a mentality; it thus rejoins, directly or indirectly, the function of interiorizing contemplation, the Hindu *darshan*: contemplation of a holy man, of a sacred place,

of a venerable object, or of a Divine image. In the beginning, nothing was profane; each tool was a symbol, and even decoration was symbolistic and sacral. With the passage of time, however, the imagination increasingly spread itself on the earthly plane, and man felt the need for an art that was for him and not for Heaven alone; the earth too, which in the beginning was experienced as a prolongation or an image of Heaven, progressively became earth pure and simple, that is to say that the human being increasingly felt himself to possess the right to be merely human.”

“In primordial periods, art always was limited to either objects of ritual use or working tools and household objects, but even such tools and objects were, like the activities they implied, eminently symbolical and so connected with ritual and with the realm of the sacred.” And, the artists can be super-cute. “[W]hether one likes it or not, the great things in this world are bound up with the little things, at least extrinsically, and it would be abnormal to see in the outward expressions of a tradition merely a facade.”

I digress for a moment to mention the important works of Titus Burckhardt and Jean-Louis Michon. They both received many awards from many different Islamic countries for the incredible work they did preserving the material cultures. So, Perennialists have really been instrumental in trying to retain the beauty, the integral beauty, of these traditional worlds.

Back to Schuon. “What the people need in order to find meaning in life, hence the possibility of earthly happiness, is religion and the crafts: religion because every man has need of it, and the crafts because they allow man to manifest his personality and to realize his vocation in the framework of a sapiential symbolism; every man loves intelligible work and work well done. Now, industrialism has robbed the people of both things: on the one hand of religion, denied by scientism from which industry derives, and rendered implausible by the inhuman character of the ambience of machinery; and, on the other hand, of the crafts, replaced precisely by machines; so much so, that in spite of all the ‘social doctrines’ of the Church and the nationalistic bourgeoisie, there is nothing left for the people which can give meaning to their life and make them happy.”

So, we have an overview. Next, we are going to touch on various crafts from calligraphy to interior furnishings. “It is important to keep in mind that traditional and sacred art reaches into almost every aspect of our lives. To [sacred art]—in the widest use of the term—belong ritual psalmody in a sacred language—among others Sanskrit, Hebrew and Arabic—and, the calligraphic copying—likewise ritual—of the sacred Books; architecture, or at least the decoration of sanctuaries, liturgical objects and sacerdotal vestments, are in general of a less direct order of sacred art.” “It would be difficult to do justice in a few lines to all possible types of sacred expression, which comprises such diverse modes as recitation, writing, architecture, painting, sculpture, dance, the art of gestures, clothing.”

I digress and point out the sand paintings here—the Navajo and the Tibetans—symbolize the impermanence of life in the material world. They spend all of this time making these ritual symbols, with many, many prayers. Some of you may have been to the *Kalachakra* rite here some years ago with the Dalai Lama. Then, when all is done and all is perfect, it is erased with a prayer.

We turn to music. Back to Schuon. “Visible forms manifest the heavenly essences by crystallizing them; music in a certain fashion interiorizes forms by recalling their essences through a language made of unitive sweetness and unlimitedness. Earthly music evokes in the soul the transforming ‘remembrance’ of heavenly music.” “According to Pythagoras and Plato, the soul has heard the heavenly harmonies before being exiled on earth, and music awakens in the soul the remembrance of these melodies. Music is, essentially, Melody and Rhythm. For the warlike Soul, the Melody is combative, and the Rhythm, rapid; for the priestly, contemplative Soul, the Melody is rather melancholic because it expresses the Heart’s nostalgia for the Divinity; whereas the Rhythm is slow because of the Heart’s rest in God’s Peace. Singing means: Communication — or Exteriorizing — of the Inward. The Flute, origin of all the other instruments animated by Blowing, means Calling the Divinity. The Harp is the Ancestor of all the stringed Instruments; it means pure Musicality, and in a way the Beauty of the Universe and of the Soul.”

“The roll of drums marks, like heaven’s thunder, the voice of Divinity: by its very nature and by its sacred origin it is a ‘remembrance of God,’ through which human art canalizes the divine manifestation and in which man participates through dancing.” “A [traditional] dance is always an identification with an archetype, hence in the final analysis with a Divine Name. Now the human prototype of the elementary American Indian dance is the spiritual essence of the Indian soul or, symbolically speaking, it is the eagle rising towards the sun in limitless space. The sacred dance is the ascent of man to God. We meet with the same symbolism in dervish dances and, in principle, in every ritual dance. Love dances, harvest dances, or war dances are designed to abolish the barriers between different levels of existence and to establish a direct contact with the ‘genius’ or ‘divine Name’ in question.

“The Dance of *Shiva* summarizes the dimensions of *Māyā*; if the Dance of *Shiva* is said to bring about the destruction of the world, this is because, precisely, it brings *Māyā* back to *Atmā*. And it is thus that all sacred dance brings the accidents back to the Substance. This is moreover the function of music and, more or less indirectly, of all inspired art; it is above all the function of love in all its forms, whence the character intrinsically sacred—yet ambiguous under the reign of human decadence—of love and the arts.”

Schuon underlines the importance of the art of dress. Back to Schuon. “To wear a traditional and sacred garment to which one has a sufficient right, is to be invested with an archetype and

virtuality of perfection. *A priori*, dress is the outward, hence exoterism, but it is interiorized and becomes esoteric through its symbolical elements, its sacerdotal language precisely. When the arts are enumerated the art of dress is too often forgotten though it none the less has an importance as great, or almost as great, as architecture.”

“Doubtless no civilization has ever produced summits in every field. Thus, the Arab genius, made up of virility and resignation, has produced a masculine dress of unsurpassed nobility and sobriety, whereas it has neglected feminine dress, which is destined in Islam, not to express the ‘eternal feminine’ as does Hindu dress, but to hide woman’s seductive charms. The Hindu genius, which in a certain sense divinizes the ‘wife-mother,’ has on the other hand created a feminine dress unsurpassable in its beauty, its dignity, and its femininity. One of the most expressive and one of the least-known forms of dress is that of the Red Indians, with its rippling fringes and its ornaments of a wholly primordial symbolism; here man appears in all the solar glory of the hero, and woman in the proud modesty of her impersonal function.”

My words. We now contrast the images of traditional dress with western “fashion.” Schuon: “It goes without saying that the costume expresses the mentality of a people. It is impossible to escape an impression of ridiculousness when confronted by the famous portraits of certain kings. The appearance of a king of the Renaissance or of the age immediately following is an extravagant episode. This is explained in part by the unrealistic and clumsy scission between a religious world and a secular world, the latter never having been integrated normally into the religion, whence the Renaissance on the one hand and the Reformation on the other.”

We turn to Schuon's thoughts on interior furnishing. “What we say of clothes holds true equally for interior furnishings, especially furniture. It is hardly credible that the same men that made the marvels of sober majesty that are Gothic and Nordic furniture, could have created and tolerated the lacquered and gilded horrors of the courtly and bourgeois furniture of the 18th century—that the noble and robust gravity of the works of the Middle Ages could have given way to the miserable affectation of later works; in short, that utility and dignity should have been replaced by a hollow, trivial, and flaunting luxuriousness.”

So, we have an overview of variety of things. We now turn to Schuon's observations about the development and emergence of different forms of art in different religions. I have chosen to use illustrations of Christian cathedrals, but the principles are true of every religion. “One has to keep clearly in mind the following: the marvels of the basilicas and the cathedrals, of the iconostases . . . , as well as the splendors of the Tibeto-Mongol and Japanese art or . . . of Hindu art, not forgetting the summits of the corresponding literatures—all this did not exist in the primitive epochs of these various traditions, epochs which were precisely the ‘golden ages’ of these spiritual universes. Thus, it appears that the marvels of traditional culture are like the swan songs of the celestial messages; in other words, to the extent that the message runs the

risk of being lost, or is effectively lost, a need is felt— and Heaven itself feels this need—to exteriorize gloriously all that men are no longer capable of perceiving within themselves.

“Thenceforth it is outward things that have to remind men where their center lies; it is true that this is in principle the role of virgin nature, but in fact its language is only grasped where it assumes traditionally the function of a sanctuary. Moreover, the two perspectives—sacred art and virgin nature—are not mutually exclusive.” “Saint Paul had no need of Cathedrals, for all profundities and all splendors were within himself, and all around him in the sanctity of the primitive community. . . . [M]ore or less late epochs—the Middle Ages for example—are faced with an imperious need for exteriorizations and developments, not to change that [spiritual] patrimony, but to transmit it as integrally and as effectively as possible.”

“Sacerdotal art sets out to express a symbolism that is either simple or complex, and in so doing it transmits at the same time, and inevitably since its language is one of form, an influence of beauty, hence of joyous ‘expansion.’” Where are we? We have seen examples of Christian sacred art and architecture and the beauty of early Cathedrals. We now begin to explore the decline of Christian religious art. The next six slides are examples of what Schuon termed non-traditional religious art and naturalistic art. This art has a continuing commitment to the religious tradition in question, but it has lost its metaphysical bearing and symbolic content, thus it is vulnerable to the caprice of human imagination and the prejudices of each period.”

The degeneration of sacred art originates in the seeming innocence of naturalistic art. Back to Schuon. “The error of naturalism is not that it is blind to aesthetic qualities, certainly, but, in the first place, that it lacks sufficient reason insofar as it takes itself for an end in itself, and insofar as it attributes glory to the artist or to the sensible model alone; and secondly, that it violates the rules resulting from tradition on the one hand, and from the nature of things on the other. Naturalism in art violates tradition because it is unaware that style is a providential discipline proceeding from a genius at once spiritual and ethnic and developing according to the laws of organic growth in an atmosphere of contemplative piety that has nothing individualistic about it. [Naturalism] violates the nature of things because, in painting, it treats the plane surface as if it were three-dimensional space, and the immobility of the surface as if it could contain movement; and in sculpture, naturalism treats inert matter as if it were living flesh, and then as if it were engaged in motion, and it sometimes treats one material as if it were another, without regard for the soul of each substance.”

I draw your attention here to Michelangelo and Bernini. Bernini was the main architect of the interior furnishings of St. Peter’s Basilica, which are complete naturalism. All of these sculptures are Bernini. Schuon: “Complete naturalism, which reproduces the chance variations and accidental aspect of appearances, is truly an abuse of intelligence. This abuse of intelligence is extremely characteristic of modern civilization. Many things are taken to be superior—as indeed

they are if considered in artificial isolation—which are in fact merely hypertrophic. [Naturalism] amounts to a substitution of reason alone for intelligence as such; apart from the rationalism which inaugurated it, artistic naturalism would have been inconceivable. When art ceases to be traditional and becomes human, individual, and therefore arbitrary, that is infallibly the sign—and secondarily the cause—of an intellectual decline, a weakening.”

Where are we? Given that we live in the West, we will now examine the influence of modernism on the sacred art of Christianity. I have selected a case study of the icons of Christ and the Virgin Mary, both summits of Christian sacred art, to illustrate the consequences when the caprices of human imagination replace divinely inspired principles. It is important to first understand sacred iconography before we turn to the degeneration of Christian religious images. Now to Schuon.

“Objectively, the true function of sacred images is to represent symbolically and sacramentally a transcendent Reality, and subjectively, to permit the fixing of the mind upon this symbol in view of obtaining habitual concentration upon the Reality contemplated, something which can be conceived in devotional as well as in intellectual mode, or in both manners at once. It is to be remembered that according to the Eastern Church the icon is not properly speaking a human work, but rather a manifestation of the heavenly Model itself. The icon has been compared to a window from earth to Heaven and from Heaven to earth; the gold background of the paintings reflects the celestial aura, the luminous substance that envelops deified beings.”

“Tradition says that [the archetype for icons of the Christ] goes back to the likeness of Christ miraculously imprinted on a cloth sent to King Abgar. Another archetype of icons of the Blessed Face is, by its very nature, the Holy Shroud, prototype of the sacred portraits, and then the Crucifix. By painting the first icon of the Blessed Virgin, Saint Luke introduced painting into Christianity and created the entire artistic dimension of this religion, which has been maintained in the Eastern Church. The Seventh Ecumenical Council (787 AD) declared that ‘the painting of icons was in no wise an invention of painters, but is on the contrary an established institution and tradition of the Church.’ Far from serving only for the more or less superficial instruction and edification of the masses, the icon establishes a bridge from the sensible to the spiritual: ‘By the visible aspect,’ states Saint John Damascene, ‘our thoughts must be drawn up in a spiritual flight and rise to the invisible majesty of God.’”

Where are we? In the next eight slides, we will see the traditional sacred art on the left and the naturalistic image on the right. Schuon observes that most people today who claim to understand “art” believe that a modern naturalistic representation of the Holy Virgin is superior in all ways to traditional icons or sculpture. To this proposition Schuon responds: “The answer is quite simple: the Byzantine Virgin—which traditionally goes back to Saint Luke and the Angels—is infinitely closer to the truth of Mary than a naturalistic image, which of necessity is always that of another woman. Only one of two things is possible: either the artist presents an

absolutely correct portrait of the Virgin from a physical point of view, in which case it will be necessary for the artist to have seen the Virgin, a condition that cannot easily be fulfilled, or else the artist will present a perfectly adequate symbol of the Virgin, but in this case physical resemblance is no longer in question. It is this second solution that is realized in icons; what they do not express by means of a physical resemblance they express by the abstract but immediate language of symbolism, a language that is made at once of precision and imponderables. Thus, the icon, in addition to the beatific power that is inherent in it by reason of its sacramental character, transmits the holiness or inner reality of the Virgin and hence the universal reality of which the Virgin herself is an expression; whereas a naturalistic image transmits—apart from its obvious and inevitable falsehood—only the fact that Mary was a woman.

“In the ancient Church, and in the Eastern Churches even down to our own times, the icon-painters were monks who, before setting to work, prepared themselves by fasting, prayer, confession and communion; it even happened that the colors were mixed with holy water and the dust from relics, as would not have been possible had the icon not possessed a truly sacramental character. They drew their creative joy from a loving recreation of the revealed prototypes, and this resulted in a spiritual and artistic perfection such as no individual genius could ever attain.” In a footnote, Schuon adds: “How can one unreservedly call ‘sacred’ an art which, forgetful of the quasi-sacramental character of holy images—and forgetful, too, of the traditional rules of the crafts—holds up to the veneration of the faithful carnal and showy portraits of concubines painted by libertines?” Some notable examples of Renaissance and Baroque artists who used their mistresses as models include Fra Filippo Lippi, Raphael, Rubens and Caravaggio.

Back to Schuon. “On the one hand we have a treatment that is naïve, but charged with graces and diffusing an atmosphere of security, happiness and holy childhood; while on the other hand—from the Cinquecento onwards—we have on the contrary a treatment that is scientifically executed but the content is human and not heavenly—or rather it is ‘humanistic’—and the work suggests, not a childhood still close to Heaven, but an adulthood fallen into disgrace and expelled from Paradise.”

Before proceeding, I have to note that Schuon recognizes the genius and the greatness of many notable Renaissance artists, including Michelangelo. Back to Schuon. “The human greatness of Michelangelo appears chiefly in his sculpture, in works like the *Moses* and the *Pietà*, and that apart from any question of principles or style. In his painting and architecture this greatness is as if crushed by the errors of the period; it gets lost in heaviness and pathos or in the cold gigantism that also characterizes the statues, and which is a dominant mark of the Renaissance.”

Where are we? We have a little bit of history and now we will go to three summits of Catholic sacred architecture, before turning to the profane architecture of the post-medieval Europe. Schuon: "A cathedral covered with sculpture is assuredly a profound and powerful expression of Christianity. A Gothic facade aims at embodying a preaching as concretely as possible; it may include esoteric elements— and indeed must do so by reason of its symbolism." Sainte Chappelle, I note, was one of Schuon's favorite cathedrals when he lived in Paris. Schuon: "The Sainte Chapelle: a shimmer of rubies and sapphires set in gold. No individual genius could improvise its splendors. One might think that they had sprung from the lily and the gentian." "One of the glories of the Western cathedral is its stained glass, which is like an opening towards heaven: the rose-window is like a sparkling symbol of the metaphysical universe, of the cosmic reverberations of the 'Self.'"

The next seven slides illustrate the decline of the non-traditional architecture during the Baroque and Rococo periods. Back to Schuon. "Byzantine, Romanesque and primitive Gothic arts are theologies: they proclaim God, or rather 'realize' Him on a certain level. When standing before a cathedral one truly feels situated at the center of the world; standing before a church of the Renaissance, Baroque, or Rococo period, one merely feels oneself to be in Europe. The pseudo-Christian art inaugurated by the Renaissance seeks and realizes only man. The mysteries it should suggest are suffocated in a din of superficiality and inability, inevitable features of individualism. The Renaissance still retained certain qualities of intelligence and grandeur, whereas the Baroque style could hardly express anything but the spiritual penury and the hollow and miserable turgidity of its period. It is strange that no one has understood to what a degree this barbarism of forms, which reached a zenith of hollow and miserable boasting in the period of Louis XV, contributed—and still contributes—to driving many souls (and by no means the worst) away from the Church; they feel literally choked in surroundings that do not allow their intelligence room to breathe."

Schuon had these insights into the creation of St. Peter's Basilica. "The center of the Western Christian world was the basilica of Constantine in Rome; now one fine day the Popes had the disastrous idea of destroying this venerable jewel of sacred art and replacing it by a gigantic, pagan and glacial imperial palace, as pretentious within as without, and of adorning it with naturalistic works expressing all the sensual and marmoreal megalomania of the time." In a footnote, Schuon adds, "And since the price of this monstrous edifice was the sale of indulgences, one should have renounced building it; it is a question of a sense of proportions as well as of moral sense, or a sense of *barakah*."

I note that Martin Luther's break from the Catholic Church occurred while St. Peter's was being built. Luther was critical of many things and strongly against the sale of indulgences, as pardon for sins, to raise the money to build St. Peter's. For purposes of comparison, the Hagia Sophia in

Istanbul is 182 feet high whereas St. Peter's is 448 feet, 250% higher. You can see that the photograph on the left gives you an idea of the proportion of people in that photo. The interior of Notre Dame is 64,000 square feet. St. Peter's is 276,000 square feet, more than 400% bigger. Again, this is me: Luther was highly critical of the construction of St. Peter's, where Baroque images are the main form of interior decoration. Most historians concur the construction of St. Peter's was a material cause of Luther's break with the Catholic Church and the start of the Protestant Reformation. Cause and effect was rather immediate.

I was fortunate to visit many of the great Gothic cathedrals of Europe before visiting Vatican City. I echo Schuon's remarks about the celestial magnificence of the Romanesque and Gothic cathedrals. In contrast, I was shocked upon entering St. Peter's. I was overwhelmed with the projection of temporal power, not spiritual power, and wasted human genius. There are many works of non-traditional genius throughout the edifice, but almost a total lack of divine blessings from my point of view.

Where are we? We now turn to completely profane modern art. "The definition, laws and criteria of art cannot be derived from art itself, that is, from the competence of the artist as such; the foundations of art lie in the spirit, in metaphysical, theological and mystical knowledge, not in knowledge of the craft alone nor yet in genius, for this may be just anything; in other words the intrinsic principles of art are essentially subordinate to extrinsic principles of a higher order."

"Art, as soon as it is no longer determined, illuminated, and guided by spirituality, lies at the mercy of the individual and purely psychic resources of the artist, and these resources must soon run out Reaching the extreme limit of its own platitude, naturalism inevitably engendered the monstrosities of sur- realism. The latter is but the decomposing body of an art and in any case, should rather be called 'infra-realism.'"

"Independently of any question of naturalism, it frequently happens in modern art — as in literature — that the author wishes to say too much: exteriorization is pushed too far, as if nothing should remain within. This tendency appears in all modern arts, including poetry and music; here again, what is lacking is the instinct of sacrifice, sobriety, restraint . . . The desire for originality on this plane is one of the least pardonable of sins." {The PowerPoint is showing "The Duct Taped Banana"} I have to interject and say that this is an example of true genius—the artist is a marketing genius.

"Non-traditional art embraces the classical art of the Renaissance, and continues up to the 19th century which . . . gives rise to impressionism and analogous styles; this reaction rapidly decomposes into all sorts of perversities, either 'abstract' or 'surrealistic': in any case, it is of 'sub-realism' that one ought to speak here The least that one can say is that it is not this

kind of grandeur that brings us closer to Heaven. What defenders of surrealist tendencies either forget or do not know is above all that forms, whether in pictures, in sculpture, in architecture or in some other medium, arise from a hierarchy of cosmic values and translate either truths or errors so that there is no place here for adventuring; the psychological efficacy of forms, so beneficial when they are true, makes them on the contrary deadly if they are false.”

I return with the wisdom of the American Indians, which always makes me smile. A Sioux chief remarked after a visit to a museum of fine arts: “You whites are strange men; you destroy the beauties of nature, then you daub a board with colors and call it a masterpiece.”

Where are we? One of the great injustices of our time, in my opinion, is to anoint someone who creates profane modern art as a genius. We are therefore obliged to stop for just a moment and consider the “cult of genius.” This cult of genius honors originality of extravagant artistic creations produced by the whims of human imagination. Artists race to be more extravagant. Many in our society seem to think originality requires that they break loose from the constraints imposed by sacred and traditional art. Numerous collages of sacred images throughout this presentation, including the ones that now follow, demonstrate that creative genius can still manifest within the strict limits imposed by the rules of sacred art.

Back to Schuon. “True genius can develop without making innovations: it attains perfection, depth and power of expression almost imperceptibly by means of the imponderables of truth and beauty ripened in that humility without which there can be no true greatness.” “Koranic manuscripts and the mosques are the two summits of Moslem art; they are also ‘proofs of the religion’, for men would be incapable of inventing such splendors. Nothing is more monotonous than the illusions of originality found in men who have been inculcated from childhood with an exaggerated respect for ‘creative genius.’

This is Schuon's 1925 diary entry at the age of 18. “It seems to me that the cult of genius is veritably satanic, quite apart from the fact that it has no kind of knowledge as its background and is possible only in a life that is excessively sentimental; especially is this so in the case of unbridled and violent enthusiasts. . . . Belief in genius leads us into the discordant sphere of the earthly; it completely bypasses truth.” Schuon's 1988 article “To Have a Center” addresses multi-dimensional aspects of the modern “cult of genius” in detail.

Where are we? Given Schuon's criticisms of modern art, the question arises: “did he approve of any forms of non-traditional contemporary art? Yes, he approved of various forms and we will see some of those shortly. This present-day Balinese folk art is displayed in Schuon's home. Schuon: “[P]ositive experiments of modern art can be found in the most varied of traditional art, which proves not only that these experiments are compatible with the universal principles of art, but also that—once again—‘there is nothing new under the sun.’” “Insofar as [non-

traditional] art can be legitimate—and it can be, more than ever before, in this period of disfigurement and vulgarity—its mission is one of transmitting qualities of intelligence, beauty and nobility; and this is something which cannot be realized apart from the rules which are imposed on us, not only by the very nature of the art in question, but also by the spiritual truth flowing from the divine prototype of every human creation.”

Schuon also identifies various circumstances and conditions under which naturalistic works of art can have an interiorizing effect. Back to Schuon. “It is true that a naturalistic work may have an interiorizing effect through its content, but in this case, it is the model that has this effect and not the work as such . . . ” I draw your attention to Howard Terpning, whose painting is shown on the left. We were at one of his gallery openings in Scottsdale, Arizona with Mrs. Schuon. She admired his work and bought a large, illustrated book of his paintings to show her husband.

Schuon, again: “One should not forget—but the modernists will never admit it—that the choice of the subject matter is a part of art, and that the subject, far from being the ‘anecdote’ of the work, as some people stupidly assert, is on the contrary its reason for being.”

What about personal affinity? “An important point in Schuon's doctrine is that beauty is not a matter of taste, thus of subjective appreciation, but that, on the contrary, it is an objective and hence obligating reality; the human right to personal affinity--or to ‘personal selection,’ if one likes--is altogether independent from aesthetic discrimination, that is to say from the understanding of forms.” Barbara Perry. This statement was written as part of the “Foreward” she wrote for Schuon's gallery art show that was made in Colorado Springs of his paintings of traditional Indian art.

Schuon again. “That we may prefer a given beauty to another is a matter of personal affinity or complementary relationship, not pure aesthetics. Taste is legitimate to the same extent as are individual characteristics, that is, to the extent these characteristics translate positive aspects of a given human norm. Different tastes should be derived from pure aesthetics; they should be treated as equivalent, like different visual perspectives.”

Time does not allow us to review Schuon's comments about the archetypes that inspire the different religions. Those insights are scattered through his book.

Where are we? We know a little bit about a variety of different things. But how and why are these insights relevant in each of our lives? More particularly, how can we apply this knowledge in our spiritual lives? Schuon: “In a world where traditional art is dead, where consequently form itself is invaded by everything that is contrary to spirituality and where nearly every formal expression is corrupted at its very roots, the traditional regularity of forms takes on a very special spiritual importance that it could not have possessed at the beginning, since the absence of the spirit in forms was then inconceivable. We must live the experience of beauty so as to

draw from it a lasting, not ephemeral, element, hence realizing in oneself an opening towards the immutable Beauty, rather than plunging oneself into the current of things; it is a question of viewing the world, and living in it, in a manner that is sacred and not profane; or sacralizing and not profanating.” Let us recall what Schuon said in the film interview. “if you understand what is essential and what is Absolute, you want to assimilate it; otherwise, one is a hypocrite. In order to assimilate the truth of the absolute you must pray.”

In 1986, a spiritual aspirant asked Schuon to explain the proper role of existential supports in the spiritual life. Schuon: “The ‘cerebral’ should be balanced by the ‘existential.’ Now the existential element is brought out by the sense of beauty and the sense of the sacred. Indeed, these are two sides of the same reality. Spirituality should never be something that accentuates the mathematical aspects of Truth to the detriment of its musical aspects. In India, home of the most rigorous metaphysic, one never sees such a hypertrophy; the atmosphere is suffused precisely with a sense of the sacred and with beauty, as is shown by its temples, its dancers, music, and other aspects. Sense of Truth, sense of Beauty and the Sacred. ‘Beauty is the splendor of the True.’

To perceive beauty rightly is to perceive in it the sacred, and conversely, the sacred always combines majesty with a musical element, so that faced with the sacred one finds oneself in a state combining ‘fear,’ or reverential awe, and love. In the sacred we are fascinated as it were, and immobilized. And similarly, when we perceive beauty, we ought to discern the sacred that lies in its depths. For example, to appreciate a beauty of nature or that of a woman without reaching this aspect of the sacred is not to have perceived this beauty entirely. Thus, one must discern not only truth, but one must also perceive beauty and the sacred.”

The next eight slides are excerpts from a text entitled “Beauty.” “‘God is beautiful and He loves beauty (*hadith*)’ Beauty must have in itself a spiritual function, otherwise there would be no beauty. This function is interiorization. The aesthetic emotion mingles with invocatory prayer; and this interiorizing alchemy confers the capacity to resist temptation. Beauty may lead to passion and sin, but in the case of contemplative persons—of saints like Ramakrishna—it has led to ecstasy. This is the mystery of *darshan*: of union with an archetypal reality through sensory perception. The interiorization of beauty presupposes nobility and produces nobility.

“Given the spiritual degeneration of mankind, the highest possible degree of beauty, that of the human body, plays no role in ordinary piety; but this theophany may be a support in esoteric spirituality, as is shown in Hindu and Buddhist sacred art. Nudity means inwardness, essentiality, primordially and thus universality; clothing signifies social function, and in this framework the sacerdotal function as well. Nudity means glory, radiation of spiritual substance or energy; the body is the form of the essence and thus the essence of the form. But there is not visual beauty

only; poetry, music, and dance are likewise means of interiorization; not in themselves, but combined with the remembrance of the Sovereign Good.

“The *de facto* ambiguity of beauty, and consequently of art, comes from the ambiguity of *Māyā*: just as the principle of manifestation and illusion both separates from the Principle and leads back to it, so earthly beauties, including those of art, can favor worldliness as well as spirituality, which explains the diametrically opposed attitudes of the saints towards art in general or a given art in particular. This explains the danger, so far as Semitic peoples are concerned, that lies in the painting and especially in the carving of living things. Where the Hindu and the inhabitant of the Far East worships a Divine reality through a symbol—and we know that a symbol is truly what it symbolizes as far as its essential reality is concerned—the Semite will display a tendency to deify the symbol itself.

“Integral Esoterism is aware of the metaphysical transparency of phenomena, hence the possibility of communication, through them, with the celestial archetypes; and this is exactly the meaning of beauty, music, and dance. There is not visual beauty only; poetry, music and dance are likewise means of interiorization; not in themselves but combined with the Sovereign Good.”

Are your preferred forms of music and dance a support for prayer?

Where are we? We know why beauty of the sacred and of the traditional worlds is relevant. Now we turn to aspects of Schuon's personal life. He then explains how “seeing God everywhere” and possessing “the sense of the sacred” can help in our daily lives.

Schuon's interest in music spread over many cultures including diverse modalities. He had a deep appreciation for traditional spiritual music, such as Hindu ragas, Gregorian chants and Islamic liturgies, but he rarely listened to sacred music. He explained that ritual music was created in order to induce a spiritual state, often as part of the methodic spiritual practice of the religion that produced the music. He rather preferred to listen to music that contained strong contrasting melodies, and which would simulate a melancholy or longing for God within the listener. His wife explains her husband's interest in music in the book, *The Letters of Frithjof Schuon: Reflections on the Perennial Philosophy*.

Poetry was for Schuon the highest expression of beauty in writing, so it is not surprising he was an inspired poet in three different languages. In just the last three years of his life, he wrote over 3,500 German language poems.

Schuon was at one in the same time an inspired metaphysician and artist. A rare combination. “What I seek to express in my paintings—and indeed I cannot express anything other—is the Sacred combined with Beauty, thus, spiritual attitudes and virtues of soul. And the vibration that emanates from the paintings must lead inward.” These are both Schuon's paintings. These are

also Schuon's. Almost all of Schuon's paintings fall into one of two categories. The red Indian world, which fascinated Schuon from youth, and celestial femininity. Most of his paintings of the Virgin Mother are not in the style of Christian icons but reminiscent of the form of the biblical Shulamite or the Hindu Shaktis. Schuon also painted this icon of the Christ. The feathered sun is the traditional Plains symbol of all creation, as we know. Schuon painted this feathered sun. Schuon wrote, "I painted many Indian Feathered Suns, and this Feathered Sun has become a symbol of our spiritual message, without my having had this deliberate intention."

Schuon's love of virgin nature is another of the leitmotifs that recur in diverse parts of his writing. The area around the Matterhorn is one of his favorite retreats. He visited this chalet in the Swiss Alps for extended retreats in the mountains. When Schuon returned from the American West in 1959, he told Titus Burckhardt, "If ever I should disappear, you will find me in the Big Horn Mountain." Schuon often walked and meditated in the woods behind his home in Indiana, shown in this picture.

Schuon, "It is in the midst of his own artifices that man most easily becomes corrupted, it is they that make him covetous and impious; close to virgin Nature, who knows neither agitation nor falsehood, he has the hope of remaining contemplative like Nature herself. And it is Nature—quasi- divine in her totality—who, beyond all the erring ways of human beings, will have the final word. 'For the sage each flower is metaphysically a proof of the Infinite.'"

Let us recall virgin nature is the ultimate cathedral for the Indians. Schuon: "Traditional nomadic cultures had no need of monuments—virgin nature was their sanctuary and spiritual support. In complete contrast, sedentary civilizations, particularly our modern cities, have almost no access to true virgin nature. This explains the critical role sacred and traditional art plays for urban societies."

This photograph is Schuon in front of his home, the one in Indiana. This excerpt is from one of Schuon's papers on personal ambience. "In a traditional civilization, the question of the congenial ambience—dress and habitation—poses no problem; every formal element is a gift of Heaven and thus constitutes a pre-existent basis. In the modern world on the contrary, this basis practically no longer exists; the individual must consequently be aware of the problem and keep an eye on the formal integrity of his ambience, in order to avoid as far as possible the presence of forms that are contrary to the truth, the path, and virtue; hence to Grace."

I had the privilege to travel overnight with Mr. Schuon in Zurich, Boston, and twice in Chicago. Each time I was struck by his continual discernment of forms. The resulting focus was on the beautiful things in his surroundings that made him reflect of God. Once, when we went into a restaurant, there was a beautiful autumn scene of various natural elements. He focused on the

pumpkin in the display, which reminded him of the red sun of the Japanese. He went on to talk about Amatarasu, the sun goddess, and her role in Japanese culture.

When we were driving through the steel mill region in Chicago in 1980, I apologized for driving through that hellish place. At that time, the sulfuric smell permeated the air. Silence. He did not say a single thing. A moment later, he commented and looked at an outdoor sign for going to the South Sea Islands, a beautiful South Sea Island. I started apologizing that I had been focusing on the ugly. And he said, "Even in the most ugly circumstances, you will find something beautiful to remind you of God. It is a metaphysical principle. You must concentrate on what is beautiful and leads you toward God, not on what is ugly and lead you away from God." And then came one of my favorite expressions, "in this way, beauty can be an antidote to the modern world." Beauty can be an antidote to the modern world. A few moments later, he remarked that the Chinese yin-yang symbol represents the cosmic principle that there is always a white spot in the middle of the darkness. He then added, "You must focus on that white spot."

Schuon's own life sets the example for us to follow as we attempt to recognize the metaphysical transparency of phenomenon in the world and to see God everywhere and to possess a sense of the sacred.

I close with one of Schuon's poems. He wrote in beautiful rhyming German. This English translation, for the sake of meaning, loses its rhyme. "Beauty would have no meaning in the eyes of God / if it had not an importance for the spirit / if it did not call to interiorization / and to nobility and to the abode of the Most High / Many believe that from seduction they must flee; / I would not entirely blame this misunderstanding / because people are what they can be; / But blessed be they who through beauty are enobled."

I look forward to your verdict about whether I've succeeded in giving you a deeper appreciation of the beauty of the traditional civilizations and the importance of interiorizing beauty.

Thank you.

Q & A

Beginning with the questions and answers for day three.

Q: Can you explain more about the latitude for personal affinity in art, the personal affinity?

A: First, one has to realize and recognize if something is sacred, profane, non-traditional, religious, infra-realism—what it is. For example, within naturalistic art—we saw several examples of it—if the subject is noble, it can have a certain interiorization quality. So, there is a wide latitude, but only within what I will call the traditional or acceptable boundaries. There are even some contemporary statues that are acceptable even though they are not sacred art, as

such. So, there is wide latitude but one must recognize the different limits of each of the types of art.

Q: Why is it that many traditionally minded Catholics are not able to see the eruption of humanism into the church through non-traditional forms of religious art, such as St. Peter's Basilica and the Sistine Chapel?

A: Well, we have at least one person who was here earlier, I do not see him right now, who left the Catholic Church precisely because of the ambience of the ugliness of the surroundings in the churches in Switzerland. It became too confining, so he left and sought a different path. So, in my personal experience there are people that this has impacted. The reaction should not be unusual if you look at the churches of the Baroque and Rococo periods, to pick two of the worst of all artistic periods. Unfortunately, those are the periods that produced much of the art that is in St. Peter's Basilica. It is a work of what I will call human genius, but completely misapplied.

This is exactly what Schuon said about Michelangelo. Here is a genius, but it is misapplied. He was outside the protective umbrella of tradition, and it had its incalculable effects. When I look at his painting of the Sistine Chapel, I do not think of something that is sacred origin. It does not do that for me. Now, it may for some people, but I believe that the imperial nature of the basilica and the decadence of the gold and the various embroidery that you see, has driven out people of the Catholic Church. I do not know why this ugliness is not more widely recognized. Thank God, when Notre Dame was burned that they had the good judgment to rebuild it as it was. So, there is some good judgment left.

Q: Can we say that modern abstract art fund is fundamentally about breaking with tradition, whereas Islamic abstract art preserves and transmits tradition and sacredness.

A: Well said. I do not have anything to add to that. That is exactly it.

Q: Do you think Mr. Schuon's poetic side is stronger or his philosophical side.

A: I do not think you can separate them very easily. The 3,500 poems that he wrote in the last three years of his life are what he called "didactic poems," teaching poems. And if you look at them, everything is there. He even talks about some aspects of the spiritual life that he did not talk about in his published writings. So, it is remarkable, what he produced.

We would have lunch with him and each time he would say, "I am done. There are no more poems." And we would all laugh, because each time there would be more poems. As he wrote in his final poem, "the poems came unbidden to my pen." They were just like a flowing river. The meanings of his poems were a major topic of conversation whenever we were together, what was each poem teaching. And then he said in this final poem, "And now I lay down my pen. I must prepare for other preoccupations." The hair on the back of my neck stood up

because he had told me that everything would be in order, certain practical things, before he passed. And I knew when I heard that poem that he was preparing to leave us; and he did, about 6 weeks later. So, the poems teach everything about life and are an integral part of his metaphysical doctrine.

Q: Would the speaker kindly elaborate on the pitfalls of treating beauty as an end in itself, particularly in modern contexts where it can become an idol or almost a religion?

A: This goes back to what Schuon was talking about in terms of the “ambiguity of beauty” because beauty can be very seductive. People, as he said particularly the Semitic peoples, will look at a sacred object and tend to idolize the object rather than see the Divine archetype within the sacred object. The sacred object could be many different things, the human body, for example. The human body is sacred, but there is a proliferation of skimpy, sexually provocative clothes all over the modern world—it manifests all over the media. Many people lack the metaphysical transparency of phenomena so they “idolize” the object and fail to see through the object to the Divine archetype. They lack “a sense of the sacred,” it is also a lack of moral sensitivity. People get sucked in; that is part of the seduction of the world, if you will. The world is a very seductive place, and it is therefore very important to have interiorizing beauty in your ambience and in dress, and of traditional art that allows you to see the sacred within it, if you will. This is the “sense of the sacred” and “the metaphysical transparency of phenomenon.” Those two phrases: “sense of the sacred,” “metaphysical transparency of phenomenon.” That is the key. If you see the sacred within the symbol, you are fine. But otherwise, the objects can be seductive, and it is an ambiguity because the same object can produce completely different results..

Q: Could the speaker clarify the hierarchy of beauty in the spiritual life, especially the primacy of inner beauty of the soul, followed by speech, behavior, dress, and one's living environment?

A: Tomorrow you will hear Schuon address that directly in a film clip from 1991. He talks about the importance of beauty, inner beauty, as well as beauty in one's life, interiorizing beauty as a support. I see them as two sides of the same coin, if you will, because the beauty of comportment, “beauty of soul,” is what you are aiming to achieve with the “interiorizing beauty” that you surround yourself with. One is a result, beauty of the soul, the other is a method or a means of support to find one's sacred center.

Q: What was Schuon's reaction when encountering something ugly or negative.

A: To ignore it. As I related with the situation in the steel mills, he just would not address it. And then a few moments later, he focuses on something that is beautiful and that reminds him of God. And it was that way in everything that I recall with him. Always looking for something that

can help support his inner life of prayer. All of the different forms of art that we spoke about were something that were very close to him.

Q: And final question, this at first quotes from a poem from the collection “World Wheel, Fourth Collection.” When I decorate a house or an apartment, I keep in mind three artistic summits. The Maghreb, Japan, and the South Seas. Simple and beautiful. These are three formal languages and three spiritual worlds. For the ambience that is the framework of our everyday life is not indifferent. It should not be dull or heavy but close to nature, simple and free. The peasants wooden house can also be a model, a primordial dwelling even in our time. And the question is, Schuon has written multiple times about the importance of our ambience, both within our homes as described in the poem above, but also within our souls in practicing the virtues, avoiding what takes us away from God and doing what brings us near to him. What comments did Schuon make about the Plains Indians and their ambience, such as their clothing, decorations, and way of life?”

A: The first part is an important poem. I had it in my earlier lecture, but I reduced it realizing that I had done too much. Those are the three summits that Schuon looked toward in decorating. He loved the Japanese influence—shoji screens; South Seas—here is a Sumatran wedding sarong from 1900; and then the Maghreb. The Maghreb is one of the most still intact Islamic traditional civilizations that I have seen. In the Maghreb the crafts are still intact, especially when you are away from the cities in remote areas. This is just to say that those three material cultures are important to Schuon.

His interest in the Red Indians was very profound, as you know. He has a little museum in his house with a variety of Indian artifacts in them. What I will do is pull up for tomorrow a slide of the entry to his house where you see a feathered sun and a Cheyenne sacred pipe bag. The visitors who go into his house are greeted with the American Indian presence, the *barakah*. He wrote a quite a long letter to William Stoddard in the 1980s about American Indian traditional art. It is reproduced in the letters book and he turned it into an article which is in “The Feathered Sun” and there is a copy of “The Feathered Sun” in the other room for anyone who wants to look at it.

So, there is quite a lot that can be said. A very important support was the Plains Indian way. As I read at the beginning, in the very first day's lecture, I believe: there are three spiritual worlds to which I belong, the Veda, then Sufism and then the world of the Red Indians.” That really summarizes the important importance he placed on those traditions.

Q: Since we are on the subject of the American Indians, there is one I can find it. Please speak to *Wakan Gli*, seen briefly two summers ago at Yellowstone. Auspicious for the environment, good or bad, is the question.

A: *Wakan Gli* is the white buffalo calf that appeared two years ago. One actually appeared probably 12 years ago, briefly. Both of them appeared briefly and then went into some type of occultation after a time. Different people will interpret them in different ways. I happen to be at the home of Arvol Looking Horse, the 19th generation keeper of the original Sacred Pipe. He is a friend—we have been to his home three times, he has been to Indiana—and the subject came up. He believes this appearance is very auspicious but that it is also a warning. Let us go back to what we were talking about yesterday. You have both exteriorizing signs and interiorizing signs. He believed that, in a way, this appearance is both. He hoped the recollection of the revelation of the bringing of the Sacred pipe by the White Buffalo Cow Woman would be a sacred remembrance for people; but at the same time a warning because you had two things happen with the legend of the coming of the Pte San Win.

I will try to recap the legend briefly. A sacred being came toward two men who were out in the wilderness hunting. She was naked in the traditional teaching. One of the men looked at her and said, "I want her." The other man said, "no, this is a sacred person. You must stay away." But the man who had bad intentions went toward her and a cloud came up around them. Snakes came out afterwards and the man was dead, completely gone. And the Pte San Win then approached the other man and said to him, "I come with a gift for the people to heal the people. Tell the chief that I am coming." And he raced away. He said, "There is a sacred woman who is coming." And then she walked into the tribe. There are different accounts of it, but she carried a Sacred Pipe and gave that Sacred Pipe to the chief, Hollow Horn Bear. Then later during that visit she gave them several of the seven rites of the Ogalala. Subsequently in visions she gave them the other seven, all seven rites of the Ogalala. So, it is a very important part. The Sacred Pipe, as Schuon said in the quote on Monday, is one of the items that connects most of the Indians in, certainly in the West. It is common through all of the tribes, and it is something that Yellowtail prayed with in the morning, first thing, and in the evening, before bed. So this legend and the appearance is truly a warning and a gift, an interiorizing gift, to remind people to go back to their religion. But if they do not, then wrath will come, Divine Wrath. So, it is an important event, manifestation for the Indians. It is not surprising to me—it was in Yellowstone that the calf appeared most recently—that it would disappear because that warning took place; so now it is up to mankind, each individual, to decide how to respond. So, it is something major.

Thank you all very much.