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Theme of prayer in Frithjof Schouon's poetry: An analysis

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Abstract

Frithjof Schuon (Isa Nur-ud Din), originally a German mystic, is a towering sage of the twentieth century. He has been instrumental in reviving perennial philosophy. He has written more than twenty books on metaphysical, spiritual, ethnic, and artistic themes. His writings have been reviewed in a wide range of scholarly and philosophical publications around the world. The present paper deliberates on the select poems of Frithjof Schuon which deal with theme of prayer. The study is important as it helps one to understand importance of meditation and prayer in our lives and will also pave way for deeper understanding of his mystical poetry.

Keywords: Schuon, Prayer, *Wird*, *Dhikr*

Introduction

Schuon has insisted on the importance of prayer in our day to day lives. He also taught his community the *wird* of his spiritual master Shaikh Al-Aalwi. He practiced the invocation with the determination. About prayers Schuon says: "Prayer. To be a human means to be connected with God. Life has no meaning without this, prayer, Prayer, and also beauty, of course; for we live among forms and not in a cloud, Beauty of soul first and then beauty of symbols around us". (qtd. in Oldmeadow 305). Schuon divides the prayers in three parts personal, canonical, and invocatory prayers. In the individual prayers, soul (*nafs*) enters in close contact with the Absolute (*Rabb*). In book "*Echoes of Perennial Wisdom*", Schuon states:

The aim of this prayer is not only to obtain particular favors, but also purification of the soul: it loosens psychological Knots or, in other words, dissolves subconscious coagulations and drains away many secret poison: it externalizes before the God the difficulties, failures and the tensions of the soul, which presupposes that soul be humble and upright; this externalization-carried out in face of Absolute –has a virtue of reestablishing equilibrium and restoring peace ,in a word, of opening us to a grace. (qtd. in Renaud 98) Schuon has summarized the teachings of personal prayers in many poems. One of them is from his poetic collection "*Adastra Stella Maris*" in which he says:

Praise of God and thanks to God; and then another
Prayers of God and thanks to God; and then another
Prayer arises from our soul; petition
Ask not for thyself ask for the neighbor too
One asks not for our daily bread
And do not think that thy plea is not needed-
It too is remembrance of Highest
And ask for ultimate Good: for God. (Trans. Stoddard *et al.*, 193)

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In the above poems, Schuon insists on the purification of soul through personal prayer. The Personal prayer is the medium where an individual purifies his lower self and there sincerely speaks to God. This kind of prayer is not restricted to petitions rather it depends on subjective situation of an individual. The above poem involves thanks giving on the things which God has bestowed on an individual. One's resignation to submit to the will of God and regret of shortcomings which take an individual away from God. Resolutions about one's transgressions and praise of the Absolute Truth.

Canonical Prayer

Canonical Prayer is a prayer which is a traditional prayer and hence involves a set of rules which one needs to follow. “In the Canonical prayer, which has been revealed by a Prophet or an *Avatar*. It is the whole humanity who speaks to his creator. That is why Schuon could write that the very fact of our existence is a prayer and compels us to pray, so that it could be said: I am, therefore I pray: *sum ergo or*”. (Schuon 155). So, for a human being, it is important to pray. “In Song without Names XII”, Schuon states:

The Lord’s Prayer, The *Fatiha*, and the *Shema*
Correspond to Names of God.
They are revealed frameworks
Of what God has to say about Himself.
On the other hand, the syllable *Om* contains
The river of the whole Vedic revelation (Trans. Stoddard *et al.*, 219)

In the above poem, Schuon refers to Canonical prayers which are important for every human being. These prayers are the part of daily supplication that an individual has to follow to remember the absolute truth. In Islam, *Surah Fatiyah* is a daily part of supplication of every believer. It is a part of a ritual prayer. The lines are “*Guide us to the straight path*”. This supplication is a part of the prayer which Muslims offer five times a day. Likewise, *Shema* is the Jewish prayer which proclaims unity of God. This verse is “*Hear O Israel*”. This formula repeats throughout *Torah*. This prayer is repeated every morning and evening by all Jews. These prayers are within the domains of revelatory frameworks through which one comes to know what God has to say about Himself. Again, in Hinduism the syllable *Om* constitutes the whole of the Vedic revelation. According to Hinduism, the whole essence is contained within the Divine monosyllable *Om*. Again, in “Songs without Names V”, he states:

Canonical prayer-it should come
From within; what thou must say-
What Heaven has prescribed for thee -
Thou must say it out of the joy of thy heart. (Trans. Stoddard *et al.*, 237)

Schuon recalls that Canonical prayers or Lord’s Prayer, which have been descended from Heavens on the earth through revelations. These prayers are essential for an individual to take man closer to truth. These prayers are Universal in nature. Schuon highlights the significance of prayer saying that the prayers should be part of one’s day to day lives and one should recite them with heart or what Schuon calls “Centre of Psychic substance”.

The third prayer is the “Invocatory prayer” or “Prayer of heart”. These prayers involve chanting Divine names. Schuon has throughout laid emphasis on the invocatory prayer. These are the prayers which Schuon has stressed the most. He opines “It is in the Divine Name that there takes place mysterious meeting of created and the Uncreate, the contingent and the Absolute, the finite and Infinite. The Divine Name is thus a manifestation of supreme Principle, or to speak still more plainly, it is Supreme Principle manifesting Itself”. (qtd. in Oldmeadow 306-307). The method of invocation is found in all traditions like *Japa* in Hinduism and *Dhikr* in Islam. These prayers are the noblest

prayers in every tradition.

Schuon had categorized “six themes of meditations” which he considered like “immovable stars” of his life. He writes about them in “Songs without Names VI” as:

The six essential themes of meditations,
I bought into to the world many years ago;
But on the other hand –this I must confess-
The themes of meditations are what made me. (Trans. Stoddard *et al.*, 271)

In the above lines, Schuon points to three spiritual themes of which human nature is composed i.e., Will, fear, love. Each theme consists of two aspects - Knowledge compliments to Discernment and Union, Love compliments to Peace and Fervor and the Will compliments to Renunciation and Act. These themes for Schuon were “Firmament of his Soul”. The above themes paved way for Schuon to realize his relation to God and to the world. Again in “Songs Without Names III”, he says:

In the range of all possible thoughts
One thing alone is absolute: Most High.
And then the way thou understand this;
The enlightening theme of meditation comes next.
The Supreme Name and the Theme of meditation-
These are the golden keys to Eternity.
Truth and then the path there is nothing more
The life of Truth is immortality. (Trans. Stoddard *et al.*, 145)

In the above poem, Schuon emphasizes that the Divine truth is only one. In order to understand the Absolute Truth six themes of meditations are important. These are themes that will take one closer to the Divine essence. In fact, these are the golden keys by which one’s door will be opened to the Absolute being. The golden keys are Knowledge, Will, and Love. The knowledge is a way to seek refuge in God and Love is a factor of thankful repose towards God. The path i.e., Will is essential to reach the path of eternity.

Schuon himself emphasized the importance of prayer of heart and for that he followed the traditional teachings. “He who invokes must have right to this method, that is, he must have received it from master who likewise received it, which presupposes an initiation regularly transmitted throughout centuries since the origin of the corresponding Revelation”. (qtd. in Oldmeadow 50) Thus the invocation of Divine names is to be done under a Sufi *Shaykh* or the Hindu *Guru* or else one has to face serious repercussions. Schuon himself practiced the *Dikhr* (remembrance) under his *Shaykh*, *Shaykh al-Alawi* He was the spiritual master of Schuon. He wrote about the essential teaching of his master in the following poem in his poetic Collection named “Autumn Leaves and the Ring” as:

“*Ayn al Qalb*”
The heart’s eye, which sees *Allah*-
The *Ayn al -Qalb*- a shaykh described to me:
With mere thinking, one does not go far-
Who sees with the heart, learns to love *Allah*.
(Trans. Stoddard *et al.*, 33)

In the above poem, Schuon had a very profound bond with his spiritual master *Shaykh al-Alawi* of *Shadiliyya* order. He

was taught by him the *Wird* (invocation) which involved the petition of forgiveness, prayer to the Prophet (PBUH) and lastly the recitation of first part of *Shahada*. Schuon states that the practice of *Wird* (invocation) is to be done by one's heart (*Ayn al qalb*). The practice of *Wird* (invocation) helps one to purify one's soul, restore the primordial condition (*fitra*), Union with the Absolute truth. It is only after this mystical stage; one can reach God. Here again, he, refers to his guide (*murshid*) in his poem, "Adastra and Stella Maris", as:

Shaikh Ahmed said: the wealth of Revelation
Is fully present in the Name of God;
In it are all the powers of mercy-
Blessed is who rests in Allah's Name. (Trans. Stoddard *et al.*, 39)

In the above poem, Schuon reiterates that his master has repeatedly stressed on the practice of remembrance of God. According to him all the essence of the universal truth lies in the Name of God. He further asserts that all Infinite good is within the Name of Allah. One who chants the name of Almighty will have a blessing of getting mercy from the Infinite being.

Schuon, therefore, in this poem asserts strongly that his *murshid* has repeatedly laid emphasis on the practice of *Dhikir* (Remembrance). The practice of remembrance is a way by which one can achieve the union with the Absolute. Again in "Songs Without Names X" he refers to remembrance as:

Candles are burning in a sanctuary:
Take to heart their motionless flames-
And remember the Most High, the only Real,
And confer on thy surroundings the nearness of God.
(Trans. Stoddard *et al.*, 190)

Schuon asserted a lot about the importance of Comprehension, Concentration and Conformation throughout his life. In order to practice them, he insisted on the importance of having Sanctuary (*Zawiya*) in the house. In Schuon's house too, there was a small room which was based on the traditional Islamic style where he used to meditate and other rooms were extensions of it. Schuon in the above poem refers to the same Sanctuary where he tirelessly used to meditate and practice *Wird* (invocation). It was this place *Zawiya* where Schuon remained in solitude and felt the bliss of being in close to the Absolute Unity. Here again, in the poem, "Song without Names XIII", he says:

Inwardness based on certainty;
This is primordial law and happiness of spirit;
And then, the soul's highness above earthly things-
The Way that comes from God and leads to God. (Trans. Stoddart *et al.*, 217)

In the above poem, Schuon states that within the individual lies a spirit which instigates one's will to search the Divine essence. The will along with the beauty of soul i.e., goodness and virtue and the intellect help one to reach the infinitude by opening the eye of the heart which is in other words veiled in the fallen man. This way, Schuon leads one towards the God's narrow gate or the tight passage through

which the fallen man was thrown downwards on the earth. Only that person can cross the tight passage who has ability to gain this sacred knowledge by the power of will and goodness of soul. These alone are the things which help one to lead oneself back towards the Absolute truth from where he was thrown down to earth.

Conclusion

The Schuonian poetry explains central elements or components of mysticism like God, Prayer, Virtue or infinite goodness and the beauty of the external world as the manifestation of Divine. All these elements depict Schuon as an inspirational and poetic philosopher who explains mystic philosophy and concept of spirituality in a poetic manner.

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