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## FACING THE TRADITIONALISTS

AN APPROACH TO RENÉ GUÉNON  
AND HIS SUCCESSORS

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This uncompromising camp of esoteric thinkers has much  
to offer in their critique of the modern world,  
despite certain dispeptic quirks.

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One's first encounter with the mind of René Guénon (1886–1951) can be a traumatic experience. Anyone who feels at ease with the intellectual attitudes and the scientific theories of our time should think twice before opening *The Crisis of the Modern World* or *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, for they may find, with this author, that their worldview suffers a blow from which it will never recover. Guénon aims, with deadly effect, at the very vitals of the modern age: not just at the easy target of its materialism, but at most of its spiritual aspirations as well.

Guénon and those who more or less share his principles, grouped together for convenience as "Traditionalists," have long been a recognized intellectual, even a political, force in his native France. In Britain, more resistant to esoteric ideas, a small but faithful group published *Studies in Comparative Religion* for many years, a journal whose title

belied its far from academic concerns. In the United States, Traditionalism has been represented by two immigrants, the brilliant Iranian scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr and the profound and prolific Frithjof Schuon, while professors Jacob Needleman and Huston Smith have also helped to publicize it. There is every reason to welcome their efforts.

First, the Traditionalists cut across the barriers that separate East from West and one religion from another, to find the esoteric truth that reconciles them. Once this is in view, their differences can be seen for what they are: exoteric, hence contingent on the time, place, and style of each religious revelation. Esoteric doctrines, on the other hand, and the initiatic experiences that accompany them, can only be the same, always and everywhere. Thus a man like Frithjof Schuon can write with equal authority on Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, or Christianity, "believing" in all of them because he is able to appreciate their transcendent unity.

This unity is first approached theoretically, through the study of metaphysics. The Traditionalists use this term specifically to refer to the ultimate realities, beyond cosmology and beyond theology. Theologies differ (are there many gods, as in Hinduism, or only one, as in the Abrahamic religions?), but metaphysical principles do not: instead, they provide the means for reconciling apparent contradictions, and of seeing each belief system on its own terms and at its own level. Eventually these principles are known experientially. But the quest begins with intellectual knowledge, as one might set out on a pilgrimage prepared with a map of the territory. Without this knowledge one is no better off than the narrow sectarians, even the mystics among them, for whom their own religious path is the only true one. Mystical experience and religious devotion are certainly intrinsic elements of the spiritual path, but as Guénon never tired of emphasizing, the ultimate realization of a human being is through Knowledge.

Some may find this whole approach too intellectual, but they cannot

deny that the Traditionalists' discipline of metaphysics cuts like a razor through the sloppy thinking and sentimentality prevalent among "New Age" types. It sets standards of integrity, against which other spiritual teachings either stand or fall. It assumes from the outset that absolute truth has always been there for the finding, so it has no time for the fumbings of Western philosophy, so-called, or for a science whose basic dogma is that man is still searching for the truth. And it incidentally forces a reevaluation of all the modern ideals that most North Americans take for granted, such as individualism, equality, evolution, and progress. One looks at the world with new eyes once one has passed through a Traditionalist reeducation.

One might stop here, simply recommending the study of Guénon and his successors to whoever feels the urge to embark on it. But it seems advisable, while doing so, to explain some of the obstacles that these thinkers have placed in the way of their audience. For one soon discovers that this movement, in one sense the broadest of all since it is based on the reconciliation of all religions, tends in other respects toward the narrowness of a cult. The natural revulsion that many people feel at this point may turn them against the Traditionalists forever, and that would be a pity. Better to face their challenge with equanimity and discrimination, accepting what is of value and discarding what is prompted by animus and prejudice. This article begins, in a very modest way, to sift the two apart.

One of the first shocks for those who already sense a spiritual dimension to life, beyond what an agnostic or exoteric upbringing may have offered them, is the Traditionalists' insistence that spiritual development is virtually impossible outside the great religions. There is, they say, no other salvation, whether for those who need only the reassurance and regularity of faith and worship, or for the aspirants to mystical, initiatic, or philosophic paths. While admitting that in the past there have been a few "independents," any modern leanings in that direction are firmly put down as spiritual pride. The Traditional-

ists' view is that an orthodox exoteric practice is essential to discipline the body and soul, and to provide a firm foundation for the higher flights of esotericism for which only a few are qualified. And in the present age, they add, one surely needs all the help one can get.

One cannot doubt the sincerity of those who have followed this precept and found their home in one of the living religions. Few of the Traditionalists, however, have stayed with the one in which they were born or brought up, for reasons that will soon be apparent. Several of the most prominent have followed Guénon's own example in entering Islam and making connections with esoteric Sufi orders. Those who have stayed within Christianity have usually gravitated toward the Orthodox churches, for modern Catholicism is considered very dubious, while all Protestants are by definition antitraditional. Orthodox Judaism is the obvious choice for Jews, but difficult to enter from outside, since gentile converts are not exactly welcomed by Hasidic and suchlike communities. "Reformed" Judaism, on the other hand, is no better than Protestantism, having made fatal compromises with the modern world. A fourth and last possibility is Buddhism, though Guénon accepted it only grudgingly and late in life. Hinduism is excluded for Westerners because one cannot be a genuine Hindu unless one was born into one of the castes. The traditions of the American Indians, of Black Africa, and the Far East (Taoism, Shinto) are barely feasible nowadays, especially in view of the difficulty of finding any living esoteric masters. Moreover, in all these cases it is only the most ancient and integral streams that are acceptable: most of the so-called Sufi, Vedantic, and Buddhist groups in the West are suspect, having become polluted with modern ideas. So the choice of an exoteric religious allegiance is extremely limited, if not geographically inaccessible, for many people.

The reader can perhaps sense already, behind this quest for perfect doctrinal purity, that the Traditionalists have a kind of blacklist of what they consider pseudo- or antitraditions. There are of course de-

grees of leniency among them, as in any broad and disparate group. But to the strictly orthodox, the vast majority of the world's Christians (to take the example closest to home) are schismatics and heretics, cut off—maybe through no fault of their own—from the authentic transmission from Jesus Christ through his Church. The fiercest Traditionalists accuse the Roman Church of having disqualified itself through the doctrinal and liturgical innovations of the past century, so that the only Catholics left are those who defy the pope—or rather the current antipope—by maintaining the Latin Mass and other traditional rites. With a literalism that is truly medieval, they say that the bishops and priests consecrated and ordained under the new liturgy are technically incapable of performing transubstantiation and of making the sacraments effectual for their people.

This kind of extremism betokens a strange mentality and a stranger conception of God. For while willing to accept that he reveals himself through different religions, they seem to imagine him only willing to funnel his grace through a very narrow channel in each case. There is little difference between this attitude and that of the fanatical Christian to whom all non-Christians are damned: it is the same desire to limit God's grace to oneself and one's community, and its roots cannot be anything but psychological. To Guénon, any considerations of a psychological nature were beneath contempt, and any mention of such motives strikes Traditionalists as very insulting. But like it or not, the compulsion to divide one's fellow humans into sheep and goats is of a psychological order; metaphysically it is meaningless, as they should know who acknowledge the inherent divinity of every person.

When we turn from this to the particular case of René Guénon, we find at his best a vast and liberating vision for which every serious reader (and that does not include those who stop with *The Reign of Quantity*, or, worse, *The Lord of the World*) will be grateful. He shares with Plotinus, Meister Eckhart, and Jakob Boehme the privilege of access to the very summits of conceptual thought. For he does not conclude his

philosophical ascent with Being, nor does his theology begin with God the Creator. Beyond both, and beyond any distinction of philosophy from religion, lies the ultimate mystery to which those few Western masters have alluded. Guénon calls it Non-Being, surpassing the limits of manifestation and thought, yet paradoxically supporting them both. This is the Nirvana of the Buddhists, eternally copresent with Samsara, the nonmanifest with the manifest. Those who wish to follow him into these realms will read *Man and His Becoming According to the Vedanta*, *The Symbolism of the Cross*, and *The Multiple States of Being*, and perhaps they will do best to ignore the rest of the Traditionalist literature.

Guénon himself, however, could not resist descending from these philosophical peaks to wander through the forest of symbolic images and to do battle down on the plains where Opinion holds sway. In private life he was a gentle soul, an introverted family man with no financial or social ambitions. There is no record of his ever doing a mean act or of saying anything to hurt an individual, while the last thing he wanted was to head a "Guénonian" cult. In his writings, however, there is no denying that he is intellectually arrogant, polemical, and opinionated, never considering himself as less than an absolute authority—on everything.

Two of Guénon's earliest books cleared the way for his doctrinal work by disposing of his rivals in the esoteric field. Translated, but still unpublished in English, they are *Le Thésophisme, Histoire d'une Pseudo-religion* ("Theosophy, the History of a Pseudo-religion," 1921) and *L'Erreur Spirite* ("The Spiritualist Error," 1923). The work on modern theosophical movements, which is a feast of esoteric gossip, is aimed at Madame Blavatsky, the Rosicrucian revival, Annie Besant, C. W. Leadbeater, the young Krishnamurti, and Rudolf Steiner, to name only the most eminent targets. The one on Spiritualism, in turn, exposes the origins and absurdities of that movement, showing that whatever is contacted in séances, it is not the spirits of the dead. But

what emerges from the two books, besides many entirely valid criticisms, is Guénon's refusal to make moral judgments except in absolute terms. Either someone is an authentic representative of Tradition, or else they are antitraditional and hence subversive of all that is truly sacred. Later he would coin for the latter the term "Counter-initiation."

From the 1920s onward Guénon contributed hundreds of book reviews and articles to the journal *Le Voile d'Isis*, later renamed *Études Traditionnelles*. Here he had free rein as arbiter of the whole esoteric and pseudoesoteric world, never in any doubt as to who belonged where, often amusing in a sardonic way. Following more ponderously in his footsteps, his disciples continue the heresy-hunting, picking on figures as various as Vivekananda, Aurobindo, the later Krishnamurti, Gurdjieff, Teilhard de Chardin, Hans Küng, Mircea Eliade, Chögyam Trungpa, and last but not least, C. G. Jung. But one does not have to be much of a Jungian to notice in these polemics a certain projection of their own shadows.

This brings us to the matter of Guénon's shadow, which was projected not so much on personalities as on the whole modern world. In his view of history, based on the Hindu system of cycles, mankind deteriorates in the course of each cycle of four ages, becoming ever more materialist—more materialized, even—and ignorant of spiritual realities. At the start of each cycle a "primordial tradition" is revealed that is progressively obscured and distorted, yet never entirely lost. It is preserved in the symbolism of the revealed religions, each one a certain specialization and limitation of it, and its esoteric purposes are fulfilled in their initiations. Contrarily to the traditional Hindu dating, which gives the current dark age (Kali Yuga) many thousands of years still to run, Guénon believed it to be now nearing its close, and consequently that the modern age represents the *ne plus ultra* of spiritual decline. He used the memorable phrase "the Reign of Quantity" to describe a civilization for which qualitative considerations no longer counted. In deliberate distinction from the imagination of mankind

striding ever upward, evolving from ape to technocrat, focusing its energies and its aspirations to progress on the material world alone, Guénon saw the rot setting in as far back as ancient Greece, with its rationalism and religious skepticism. Having little regard for Classical civilization and none at all for the Renaissance, he deplored the end of the Middle Ages and of any possibility of a Christian theocracy in Europe. Since that time, he saw the sacred giving way to the secular on every front: in religion, with the fragmentation of the Christian tradition and the driving of esoteric knowledge underground; in philosophy, with its denial of true metaphysics and its futile attempt to dispense with any sacred foundations; in society, with the lower elements usurping the controlling functions of the priestly and noble castes; and in the arts, always the surest barometer of a civilization's soul. Yet what else could one expect at the end of a dark age? Perhaps the most realistic response is that of Jean Rohin, author of two books on Guénon, who actually welcomes that bogeyman, the "Counter-initiation," for hastening the end of this wretched time and the advent of a new postapocalyptic golden age.

In *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, Guénon created an imagination all his own, a living myth complete with picturesque details through which to view the end of an age. Yet the spread of his own ideas since 1945 and the very existence of the Traditionalists shows that things are not so simple, and that the ascendancy of the West is not synonymous with mankind's degradation. In those Middle Ages of which they seem so fond, they would all have been burnt for heresy and apostasy—if they could ever have learnt what they now know. The secular humanism they abhor is a far more favorable climate for their work than the fundamentalism that would at least burn all their books if it came to power again. One would think that past and present held enough lessons on the evils to which exoteric religion is prone for them at least to hesitate in their support of it. But unlike Guénon, who lived in Cairo from 1930 onward, most of them support

it from a safe distance, enjoying the advantages of life in Switzerland, Britain, the United States, and other strongholds of the Reign of Quantity, while cherishing some fantasy of traditional civilization that probably never existed on earth. Certainly there is a need for a polemic against the modern frame of mind, as there is for a critique of phony religions. But the Traditionalist approach lacks subtlety. It lacks it, first, in its determination to make orthodoxy a moral issue, choosing not to admit that the construction of orthodoxies themselves is at best a dubious historical process. Second, it makes a far too simplistic condemnation of this extraordinary and unprecedented age, as if time had no lessons for mankind, or as if the Kali Yuga were a mistake on Ishvara's part.

Although Guénon's eschatology does indeed foresee the return of the blissful Satya Yuga at the start of a fresh cycle, he evidently did not expect any of us to be around to enjoy it, not even in some future incarnation. He felt very strongly on this point, and always waxed emotional when he mentioned it in print. While the question of reincarnation is a secondary one, the main point being to get liberated here and now, it is a commonplace in many esoteric doctrines, and Guénon made some quite erroneous statements in his attempt to gloss over this fact. In *Le Thésophisme*, chapter 11 and *L'Erreur Spirite*, chapter 6, he points out that homo sapiens is only one among many other states that a being can occupy, but draws the unwarranted conclusion that the repetition of any state is "metaphysically impossible," so that no soul can ever return to earth again. A. K. Coomaraswamy, sharing Guénon's aversion, would also try to prove it in an article on "The One and Only Transmigrant," but his argument on the level of the Supreme Self, by all means the only ultimate reality in man, cannot honestly be transposed to the secondary reality of the reembodying soul.

The debate *pro* and *contra* reincarnation had long been in the forefront of spiritualist literature, each side amply supported by the revelations of its spirits. The rejection of reincarnation had become a

cornerstone of the anti-Theosophical camp in French occultism, with which Guénon was aligned from his early spiritualistic experiments. Subsequently, when Guénon's hopes centered for a while on the restoration of a Catholic traditionalism, he had no reason to change his position: anything else would have wrecked his chances, as it would later have made him a suspiciously unorthodox Muslim. However, it would be a very odd Buddhist or Hindu who denied the possibility of ever returning to earth as a human being, however little they wanted to dwell on the question. I have dwelt on it here only to show how one man's psychological or political needs can become entrenched as dogma and defended as "metaphysical necessity." No doubt the history of religions could furnish other examples.

One must finally admit that the whole Traditionalist movement has been colored, so far, by Guénon's own decision to enter the Islamic tradition. However irrelevant it may be on the mountaintop of metaphysics, the choice of religion based on an unquestionable book and on the exhortation to holy war betokens a certain "spiritual style." How different Guénon's dogmas, and the attitudes of his followers, might have been if his first initiation had been into Buddhism, for instance, or if he had managed to find a *modus vivendi* with Christianity. Nevertheless, he is to be thanked for inspiring a group of writers and teachers who are among the guiding lights of our time. Besides those whose names have already been mentioned, the works of Marco Pallis, Titus Burckhardt, Martin Lings, and Philip Sherrard stand out like gems from the occult and pseudoesoteric trash that delays the seeker after wisdom.

Like all the best spiritual literature—like "revealed" scripture itself—the work of the Traditionalists is not easily faced. It threatens the very ground on which one stands. But that is no reason to let it sweep one off one's feet. My own heresy, and one I would hope other students of the Traditionalists might share, is that the holy trinity of reason, compassion, and intuition, taken together, are better guides than any

authority whatsoever. There is no tradition on earth that is not tarnished with age, no revelation that can, or need, be reconstituted in its pristine purity hundreds or thousands of years later and on another continent. The Spirit still descends as it will, indifferent as a bird to anyone's notions of where it should or shouldn't land. It descends on Quakers and Theosophists as well as on Traditionalists, and even on those who wear no label at all.

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