The Kali Yuga

René Guénon’s Critique of Modernity

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René Guénon, 1886–1951

5,312 words

The Conservative critique of modernity is by no means a recent phenomenon; it begins rather with the responders to Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his Jacobin followers in the late Eighteenth Century. It is sufficient in this regard to mention the names of Edmund Burke (1729–1797) and Joseph de Maistre (1753–1821) and of their successors, S. T. Coleridge (1772–1834) and François-René de Chateaubriand (1768–1848), to suggest the range and richness of immediately post-revolutionary conservative discourse. In the Twentieth Century, José Ortega y Gassett (1883–1955), Oswald Spengler (1886–1936), and T. S. Eliot (1888–1965), among others, continued in the line established by French réactionisme. In Ortega’s case and in Spengler’s this continuation entailed incorporating the iconoclastic skepticism of Friedrich Nietzsche into the discourse qualifiedly. In Eliot’s case, it meant rejecting Nietzsche’s atheism and taking up from Chateaubriand and Coleridge the apology for Christian revelation and for a theological, as opposed to a secular, view of existence. René Guénon (1886–1951) belongs by his dates with the generation of Ortega, Spengler, and Eliot; like Eliot, Guénon is a theist, but despite his favorable treatment of Catholicism he is less identifiably Christian than Eliot. Guénon sees Catholicism as the vessel of tradition in the West, but elsewhere tradition has other forms that are valid in their own contexts.[1]

Spengler’s Decline of the West undoubtedly made an impression on Guénon, much as it did on Guénon’s younger contemporary Julius Evola (1898–1974). Guénon and Evola knew each other and mutually influenced one other.[2] Both Guénon and Evola together exemplify a branch of modern critical anti-modernism affiliated much more than casually with the Twentieth Century occult revival. Guénon at one time, in the 1920s, edited the chief French-language occult periodical, La Gnose or “Gnosis.” Yet Guénon, a fierce un-masker of religious mountebanks, can hardly be accused of employing mystic obscurantism to push a doctrinaire agenda. Guénon’s interest in occult topics, even more than Evola’s, strikes one as rigorous and objective. As for Guénon’s awareness of ideological deformations of reality, it ran to the acute. The driving force of deformation, in Guénon’s analysis as in Evola’s, is the stultifying massiveness of modern society, with its conformism on an unprecedented scale, and its receptivity to oratorical manipulation.

I.

Guénon’s study Theosophy: History of a Pseudo-Religion (1921) offers a useful entry into the man’s view. This comprehensive account of Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891) and her idiosyncratic cult also serves valuably as a study of modern ersatz-religion in general, delving as it does beyond Blavatsky and Theosophy into related sectarian developments, some of which exhibit a distinctly political character. Guénon never uses the term Gnosticism pejoratively in Theosophy, where it designates only a species of ancient theological speculation. Anyone familiar with Eric Voegelin’s usage of the same term will, however, recognize that Guénon frequently addresses the identical phenomenon of antinomian rebellion, motivated by libido dominandi and expressing itself in apocalyptic language, as addressed by Voegelin. Such self-aggrandizing rebellion, which would impose itself on the whole world, attempts to disguise its libidinousness under the banner of sweeping moral imperatives. Crusading slogans of this type make an appeal to the compensatory self-righteousness of the frustrated and resentful. According to Guénon, Blavatsky’s movement belongs generically to the revolt of distorted moral righteousness against nature; specifically it belongs to the type of destructive petulance that he denominates under the term mystic socialism, a peculiar development of Western civilization in the early Nineteenth Century.

The Blavatsky phenomenon thus serves for Guénon as a case study with broad implications beyond its peculiarities. In the chapter in Theosophy on “The Principle Points of Theosophical Teaching,” in a discussion of reincarnation in Blavatsky’s thought, Guénon writes that, “most revolutionaries [of the 1830s and 40s] were ‘mystics’ in the worst sense of the word, and everyone knows of the extravagances occasioned among them by the theories of Fourrier, Saint-Simon, and others of this kind.” Guénon echoes numerous others in his insight. Nathaniel Hawthorne, Joseph Conrad, Henry James, and Anatole France, all note-worthily perceived the same overlap between radical leftwing politics and what Guénon calls “pseudo-mystical aspirations.” Hawthorne writes about political religiosity in The Blithedale Romance (1852); Conrad in Under Western Eyes (1911); James in The Princess Casamassima (1886); and France, using sacrificial terminology and borrowing not a little from de Maistre, in The Gods Will Have Blood (1912). The convergence of judgment bolsters the plausibility of the observation.[3]

Where Voegelin, for his part, commented on a pronounced mystic strain in the writings of Karl Marx, Mikhail Bakunin, and others Guénon commented on a pronounced political strain in modern mysticism, taking Theosophy as his main instance. Voegelin would have agreed with Guénon’s observation that a “restless and misguided religiosity,” coupled with evangelical “eagerness” to propagate doctrine, animates much of what is characteristically modern in both religion and politics, Voegelin having made similar observations in his own work. Guénon even anticipates Voegelin in his assertion that radical preaching, whether for the advancement of socialism or for the disestablishment of authority, invariably employs “a sentimental and ‘consoling’ moralism,” just as in modern liberal oratory, with its parade of alleged victims of iniquity. Such “moralism” finds fertile ground in the varieties of Protestantism, especially in its Puritan offshoots, like Unitarianism. “The modernist mentality and the Protestant mentality,” Guénon writes, “differ only in nuance,” both being directed at an ancien régime, or religious establishment, denounced as intolerable; both being moralistic; and both being politically messianic.

Theosophy, in Guénon’s analysis, exhibits in its organization the telltale features of a political cabal. Not only did Blavatsky and her collaborators conduct their activities in clandestine and conspiratorial ways, but also Theosophy articulated itself as the inner party/outer party configuration noticeable in Communist organizations. In this way, by recruiting a large exoteric enrollment, the actual ruling minority provides itself with an instrument of willing drones and propagandists. Idealism finds its locus in the movement in the large following. The inner circle, by contrast, aware of its own manipulative character and jealous of its privileges, quickly becomes cynical if it were not so from the beginning; it extracts money from the membership and delegates to volunteers the workaday and unsavory tasks that it prefers not to undertake directly on its own. In a chapter on “The Oath in Theosophy,” Guénon writes, “a secret society is not necessarily a society that conceals its existence or that of its members, but is above all a society that has secrets, whatever their nature.” The secrets might be absurdities, as was the case with many Theosophical secrets; but by pledging the inner-circle to keeping the secrets, on pain of denunciation, the organization inculcates obedience – the real objective of what otherwise might appear so much pointless flummery.

The heart of Guénon’s History of a Pseudo-Religion consists of its twenty-seventh through twenty-ninth chapters – “Theosophical Moralism,” “Theosophy and Protestantism,” “The Political Role of the Theosophical Society” – and its “Conclusion.” In these sections of the book, Guénon begins to abstract from the mass of details concerning the peccadilloes of Blavatsky, Colonel Olcott, Annie Besant, and the other capital mountebanks of the cult. Under the topic of “moralism,” Guénon remarks that while a vaguely Christian “universal brotherhood” had been a stated goal of Theosophical activity, Blavatsky steadily described her many social enterprises as incompatible with “confessional differences.” Blavatsky’s enterprises were nevertheless, as Guénon writes, “in direct competition with charitable institutions having a confessional character.” Theosophy resembles in its practical activity the socialism contemporary with it, not least in seeing itself as the opposition to constituted religion, from which it wishes to recruit away the membership; and after that in its aggressive and imperious character, expressed in crusades of shaming and prohibition.[4]

According to Guénon, “Humanitarianism, pacifism, anti-alcoholism, and vegetarianism [are] ideas that are at root sentimental.” In appropriating these themes Theosophy shows itself to be thoroughly informed by “the essentially ‘moralistic’ mentality of Anglo-Saxon Protestantism,” just as Fabian socialism was. The modern moralization of politics undoubtedly runs in train with the modern politicization of religion. Theosophy reveals much about the generics of modern agitation and complaint: Modern sentiment-driven prohibition-crusades, Guénon writes, organize themselves for “puerile ends.” Yet the crusaders also expect, when they have succeeded in imposing their prohibitions universally, that the event will transform the world. One recalls Fourier’s belief that on the accomplishment of the global Phalanstery the seas would turn to lemonade. Such “pietism” reacts to principled resistance by amplifying its wont as an authoritarian stance.

Because Christianity is an ethos of freedom, all “moralist” – that is to say, “immanentist” – programs “must logically become anti-Christian,” hence also despotic. There is a syllogistic connection, Guénon argues, between a movement “which does not even admit the divinity of Christ,” and the “messianic and millenarist” themes that predominate among “contemporary pragmatists and intuitionists.” The first is the premise and the others are variants of the conclusion.

II.

In the term pragmatist Guénon implicates the psychologist William James and in the term intuitionist, the philosopher Henri Bergson. That Guénon yokes James and Bergson with Blavatsky and Besant will outrage many a sensibility. Yet Bergson in fact yoked himself to James, whom he first met in London in 1908 and whom he had quoted approvingly as early as 1889 in Time and Free Will; James repaid that compliment twenty years later in A Pluralistic Universe. James’ best-known book, The Varieties of Religious ExperienceThe Varieties of Religious Experience (1902), might seem somewhat anti-modern, validating as it does visionary events and a type of non-empirical knowledge. In Guénon’s view, however, as he expresses it in his keynote The Crisis of the Modern World (1927) Jamesian pragmatism merely exemplifies the modern tendency to emphasize action over contemplation and instrumentality over knowledge. Guenon remarks how under the Protestant dispensation religion descends towards two privative states, “moralism” and “sentimentality,” until it dwindles down to jejune “religiosity.” Guénon writes: “To this final stage [of dispirited religion] correspond theories such as that of the ‘religious experience’ of William James, which goes to the point of finding in the ‘subconscious’ man’s means of entering into communication with the divine”; thus “a limited God [of subjective rather than transcendental experience] is stipulated as being more ‘advantageous’ than an infinite God.”[5]

As for Bergson, he too according to Guénon is “anti-metaphysical,” his “reality” corresponding blandly “to a vaguely defined sensory order… conceived as something essentially changing and unstable.” But if everything were “change” no possibility of knowledge would exist; nor could intuition have an object, not even itself.[6]

Guénon wrote The Crisis of the Modern World to summarize his encyclopedic assessment, shared by such illustrious contemporaries as Ortega and Spengler, and canvassing every aspect of life, that Western civilization had entered a phase of terminal deliquescence. Guénon saw in the modern era not merely the age of the vulgate flouting itself en masse, as did Ortega, or of Culture fossilizing into Civilization, as did Spengler: He discerned the “Kali Yuga,” the “Dark Age” of willful havoc, borrowing the label from Hindu scriptures. Thus: “The human cycle [Sanskrit: Manvantara] is divided into four periods marking so many stages during which the primordial spirituality becomes gradually more obscured; these are the same periods that the ancient traditions of the West called the Golden, Silver, Bronze, and Iron Ages. We are now in the fourth age… and have been so already… for more than six thousand years.” (“The Dark Age” is the title of the book’s first chapter.)

The sequence of metallic ages comes from Hesiod’s Works and Days (Eighth Century BC). Hesiod laments having been born into the Iron Age, saying, “Would that I were not among the men of the fifth generation, but either had died before or been born afterwards”; Hesiod’s catalogue of prevailing evils encompasses the triumph of “envy” and the dissolution of justice in selfish claims.

Describing modernity in terms similar to those in Hesiod’s complaint, Guénon refers to such phenomena as “occlusion,” “dispersion in pure multiplicity,” and “progressive materialization” as traits of the times. Guénon traces the remote origin of the specifically modern crisis to the Greek world of two centuries later than Hesiod, particularly to the differentiation of philosophy (self-denominated and as such) from traditional wisdom. In its Pythagorean etymology, as the “love of wisdom,” philosophy connoted modestly “the initial disposition required for the attainment of wisdom,” a “preliminary and preparatory stage.” Soon, however, “the perversion… ensued that consisted in taking this transitional stage for an end in itself and in seeking to substitute ‘philosophy’ for wisdom.” Such arrogance generated “a pretended wisdom that was purely human and therefore entirely of the rational order, and that took the place of true, traditional, supra-rational, and ‘non-human’ wisdom.” These events reflect, in small, and likewise forecast the larger crisis, which Guénon characterizes as inevitable. “The reason [for their inevitability] is that the development of any manifestation implies a gradually increasing distance from the principle from which it proceeds.”[7]

Tendencies like sophism (egocentric) and skepticism (epistemologically nihilistic) gradually undermined the foundations of Greco-Roman civilization, Guénon opines. Modern consensus-scholarship takes the dominance of Stoicism and Epicureanism over the views of the imperial upper classes as signifying progress in rationality. Guénon assesses the same transformation contrarily as showing “to what point intellectuality had declined.” He writes: “The ancient, sacred doctrines… had degenerated through… lack of understanding into [actual] ‘superstitions’ [that is to say] things which, having lost their meaning, survived for their own sake merely as manifestations.” When the Gothic tribes belatedly dismantled the western Imperium, they did little more in Guénon’s view than put the period to a sentence long completed. The ensuing Gothic Christianity represents for Guénon a temporary positive “readjustment” to tradition. The so-called Renaissance, which follows the Middle Ages “was in reality not a rebirth but the death of many things,” so much so that in respect of the medieval mind modernity is “unable to understand its intellectuality.” Together the Renaissance and the Reformation correspond with “the disruption of Christendom” and they therefore together mark “the starting-point of the modern crisis” in a “definitive rupture with the traditional spirit.”[8]

Modernity invariably caricatures the Middle Ages as socially and technically stagnant, in contrast to itself, which it conceives as meritoriously active. The modern mentality chiefly demands “change,” which, in a mood of self-congratulation, modern people call dynamism or progress. But, as Guénon writes in the chapter on “Knowledge and Action,” “change, in the widest sense of the word, is unintelligible and contradictory”; thus no society can actually predicate meaningful order purely on “change.” Quite the opposite, constant “change” is indistinguishable from anarchy, toward which all agitating trends like “humanism,” “individualism” and “materialism” lead or so Guénon believes. In the chapter on “Individualism,” Guénon defines that sacrosanct term as, in fact, “the negation of any principle higher than individuality, and the consequent reduction of civilization, in all its branches, to purely human elements.” Individualism existed in ancient society without ever becoming the dominant ethos, but with humanism and Protestantism it broke its fetters and became the defining omniprevalent motif.

For Guénon, Florentine humanism corresponds to Luther’s schismatic rebellion with a Latinate accent – an insight, one might add, that a calm re-reading of Pico’s famous Oration will support. Both movements position themselves resentfully as anti-Catholic and anti-traditional. Florentine neo-Platonism is of the very late, magical variety. As for Protestantism as such, The Crisis classifies it under the formula of “individualism as applied to religion.” Guénon puts it this way: “Protestantism, like the modern world, is built upon mere negation, the same negation of principles that is the essence of individualism.”

III.

Much of the refraichement in Guénon’s work comes from its author’s forthright judgment, his judgment of Protestantism furnishing a signal specimen. In The Crisis, Guénon goes on to say that, once it had undergone the Protestant transformation, “The modern outlook was bound to reject all spiritual authority in the true sense of the word, namely authority that is based on the supra-human order, as well as any traditional organization.” One can easily imagine the faculty of a contemporary philosophy department squirming in response to Guénon’s words or bursting into demonstration of outrage. The ire would be unanimous. But that is precisely the paradox that Guénon’s analysis of modernity reveals: In the vaunted individualism noticeable individuality swiftly ceases to exist; a welter of contending subjects replace it, who, in their egocentric contentiousness, soon resemble one another indistinguishably. Guénon has the temerity to write: “Protestantism denied the authority of the organization qualified to interpret legitimately the religious tradition of the West and in its place claimed to set up ‘free criticism,’ that is to say any interpretations resulting from private judgment, even that of the ignorant and incompetent, and based exclusively on the exercise of human reason.” Having validated the subjective, the Protestant or modern mind has no criterion by which it might reject any opinion; so it embraces the opposite and declares a regime of mandatory relativism in ideas and moeurs. From this turn-around arises the social, cultural, and epistemological chaos of the modern age.

Readers of The Crisis, especially of the chapter on “Social Chaos,” must remind themselves every few paragraphs that the writing dates from over eighty years ago, so aptly does it depict existing circumstances in 2010. Guénon denounces “the pseudo-principle of… ‘equality,’” which as he says, “almost all of our contemporaries blindly accept.” Along with pseudo-principles there are “pseudo-ideas” such as “progress” and “democracy,” which have “nothing in common with the intellectual order.” These “false ideas” are, properly speaking, “suggestions,” rooted in sentiment, whose “contagious” character endows them with propagandistic effectiveness; these “verbalisms” are the “idols” of the contemporary masses. As for democracy, “The higher cannot proceed from the lower, because the greater cannot proceed from the lesser.” Guénon’s analysis of mob-behavior (“a sort of general psychosis”) owes something to Gustave Le Bon’s The Crowd (1895). Guénon would return to the basic plan of The Crisis in 1945, enlarging the scale of the presentation, with The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times, reading whose pages is, if possible, an even more powerful experience than reading those of The Crisis.

The great “signs of the times” in 1945 offered themselves in the wrecked cities of Europe and Japan, the “liberated” concentration camps and POW camps, the presence of the Red Army in Eastern Europe all the way to Vienna, and the new omen of the mushroom cloud. The world’s victorious governments and their eager servants, the agencies of the free press, hastened to call the concatenation of these things “peace” – a “verbalism” which when seen starkly against its background becomes suggestive of actual dementia. Guénon had written The Reign of Quantity during the conflict yet tellingly and deliberately the book barely mentions the war. Eschewing the topical, Guénon returns to his patient diagnosis of modern intellectual and cultural degradation, always keen to reveal the origin of modern perversity. Vital – which is to say, traditional – civilizations acknowledge quality as superior to quantity; such civilizations eschew quantity for its own sake and thus often appear to modern people to have lived in material poverty. The modern idea of the Middle Ages corresponds to this prejudice, which in its turn indicates the impoverishment of modern thinking.[9]

For Guénon the idea of “democracy” belongs ineradicably to the mentality that values quantity over quality, so much so that it despises the latter – in the social, moral, and esthetic senses – for being incompatible with the so-called equality. It is this, equality, which supplies that mentality’s overriding desideratum. Guénon steadfastly refuses to allow any dignity to the word “democracy,” which he takes as synonymous with modernity’s mad insistence on equalizing all human achievement at the lowest level, the only level at which such a project could come near to completing itself. Thus in the chapter on “The Hatred of Secrecy,” Guénon addresses the pedagogical folly that tries to bring the totality of knowledge and every associated practice “within the reach of all.” Nowadays conservative commentary refers to such programs under the names of “dumbing down” and “affirmative action,” which it would locate as recent developments. Guénon sees the process as co-incipient with Protestant and Revolutionary spitefulness against constituted authority in any domain. Guénon writes: “The modern mentality… cannot bear any secret or even any reserve,” but “such things appear [to it] only as ‘privileges.’” The modern mentality again despises “any kind of superiority” of intellect or mastery because the fact that these things require preparation, capacity, and attunement “is just what ‘egalitarianism’ so obstinately denies.”

Guénon’s Reign makes a telling comparison with another apocalyptic book, H. G. Wells’ Mind at the End of its Tether, like The Reign written during the war and published in 1945. Wells (1866–1946), the great prophet of material civilization and “progress,” suddenly knows what Guénon has long known: “The writer finds very considerable reason for believing that, within a period to be estimated by weeks and months rather than by aeons, there has been a fundamental change in the conditions under which life, not simply human life but all self-conscious existence, has been going on since its beginning.” Wells writes of “the abrupt revelation of a hitherto unsuspected upward limit to quantitative material adjustability.” But Wells, militantly secular in his lifelong orientation, cannot grasp that his own sudden disorientation stems from the very attitude that his career successfully promoted. What dawns belatedly on Wells as a mysterious and abrupt alteration presents itself to Guénon only as the inevitable outcome of a long trend. An earlier book by Wells, The Work, Wealth and Happiness of Mankind (1931), is an extravagant instance of what Guénon means by “The Reign of Quantity.”

In the chapter in The Reign on “The Illusion of ‘Ordinary Life,’” Guénon writes, “Materialists, with all their boasted ‘good sense’ and all the ‘progress’ of which they proudly consider themselves to be the most finished products… are really only [people] in whom certain faculties have become atrophied to the extent of being completely abolished.” What materialists like Wells call “normal” is, from a traditional perspective, quite paltry and abnormal. A world organized purely on material lines – as Wells and those of his convictions first prescribed and then realized – exists “as it were in an eminently unstable state of equilibrium.” Hence those mushroom clouds. Unsurprisingly then “the world has even now reached a point where the security of ‘ordinary life,’ on which the whole outward organization of the modern world has rested up till now, runs serious risks of being troubled by unanticipated ‘interferences.’” Those last phrases resemble the opening sentence from The Mind at the End of its Tether previously quoted, but the shock of an unexpected discovery is entirely absent from Guénon’s prose.

IV.

Wells, about whom much in a positive way could be said, nevertheless serves as an exemplar of the modern, anti-traditional mentality and thus also as a useful counter-figure to Guénon; indeed, at the end of his life, Wells might be said to have encountered himself uncannily, with The Mind at the End of its Tether and the less pessimistic but equally quirky The Happy Turning testifying to the event. Knowledge of Wells helps in understanding Guénon’s diagnosis of modernity in another way, for, having been raised by a Methodist mother, a good deal of righteous evangelism remained in Wells’ makeup even after he rejected any notion of God and adopted as one of his hobbies the making of nasty attacks on organized religion. Guénon argues that modernity is a deviation from but also a deviation of religion or at any rate from and of the “sacred” – the realm of the “profane” being the same as the realm of matter and of quantity. Several French contemporaries of Guénon saw socialism as a Christian heresy, not least Gustave Le Bon (1841–1931) and Henri de Lubac (1896–1991). Much more recently the American Paul Gottfried (born 1941) has argued that political correctness is a continuation of Protestant Nineteenth-Century social crusades. The distance between Gottfried’s view as expressed in Multiculturalism and the Politics of Guilt (2002) and Guénon’s view either in The Crisis or The Reign is hardly great; both men remark the intolerant, dogmatic character of “liberal” crusades and the appeal of those crusades to base emotions rather than to intellect.

The liberal professoriate, from which Gottfried is maximally distant, creates theories aplenty that have a superficially intellectual appearance and that deploy arcane terminology, but in the very thickness of the verbalism one can discern Guénon’s themes of “materialization” or “solidification” as keynote characteristics of the prevailing situation.

Wells’ bulking Work, Wealth and Happiness again offers itself as emblematic: It is a two-volume bludgeon of statistics of its day with audacious quantitative prescriptions for realizing global socialism. In The Reign, in the chapter on “Cain and Abel,” Guénon lists, as figuring among the consequences that “materialization” and “solidification” have devolved on the social order, that regime “in which everything is counted, recorded and regulated,” as he writes. This “mania for census-taking,” which Guenon associates with the centrality of statistics in modern thinking, belongs to “the endless multiplication of administrative interventions in all the circumstances of life.” The sixty-five years since The Reign’s appearance have only strengthened the legitimacy of Guénon’s lexical choice of the term mania.” Thus whatever else they might be (articulating that would entail a long list of invidious motives), both “diversity,” on the one hand, and “climate change policy,” on the other, to name but two Twenty-First Century political programs, are maniacally quantitative and anti-traditional.

In describing bureaucratic number-fixation Guénon writes clairvoyantly that: “These interventions [in tradition] must naturally have the effect of insuring the most complete possible uniformity between individuals, all the more so because it is… a ‘principle’ of all administration to treat individuals as mere numerical units all exactly alike… thus constraining all men to adjust themselves… to the same ‘average’ level.”

The tyranny of quantity, it will be seen, overlaps in the Venn diagram of Guénon’s commentary almost entirely with the tyranny of equality; any manifestation of quality, as such, then looms as the enemy of both. Because an egalitarian dispensation can only be achieved at the price of quality in itself, all modern intellectual activity will be constrained by mandatory simplification toward numerical dumbness. This engrossment of thinking – indeed of the perception and experience from which thinking derives its material – is also a topic in The Reign. Traditional society, Guenon argues, being hierarchical is also initiatory. Entrance into the guilds and brotherhoods of traditional society occurs by rigorous selection and arduous training, thus assuring that those who fill the established offices are those best suited to discharge the work that their appointed stations entail. Guénon writes: “Initiation, in whatever form it may appear, is that which really incarnates the ‘spirit’ of ‘supra-human’ states.” For the rebellious mentality that spurns hierarchy, “initiation is the thing that must be opposed.” Modern society, in Guénon’s vocabulary, realizes its program through “counter-initiation,” which strives to effect “a change in the general mentality” and the concomitant “destruction of all traditional institutions.”

Protestantism (once again), rationalism, and humanism re-enter the discussion. Guénon sees them all as agitating, corrosive forms of “counter-initiation,” most obviously in the cases of Calvin and Luther, but no less perniciously in other later non-religious and anti-religious discourse. According to Guénon, “the most astonishing thing is the speed with which it has been possible to induce Westerners to forget everything connected with the existence of a traditional civilization in their countries.” The modern self-congratulatory enlightenment of the European and North American nations therefore corresponds, as Guenon observes, with “total incomprehension of the Middle Ages and everything connected with them.” This forgetfulness is not a spontaneous or natural development, but the result rather of deliberate hostility against the traditional past – of the propaganda, in the exercise of which modern movements, whether political, cultural, sectarian, or scientific excel.

The “Reign of Quantity” requires that its constituency live unconnected with any past in a kind of perpetual present, on the multiplying distractions of which the untutored mind remains stupidly fixed. Guénon remarks how industry fills life with things, objects and devices, which monopolize attention, and which assimilate individuals to the pattern of the consumer. In our own time the variety and fascination – and the idiocy – of these things have only increased. The trend toward “materialization” thus converges with the trend toward mental stultification and, in the stultifying vocabulary of modern politics, “democracy.” Having abolished the normal and the traditional, modernity offers counterfeits in the form of “pseudo-religion,” “pseudo-nature,” and even “pseudo-comfort.” Thus the modern regimes organize “civic or lay ‘pseudo-rites’ that… provide the ‘masses’ with a purely human substitute for real religious rites.” Such counterfeits include the reintroduction of “nature,” or what is supposed to be nature, as an object of worship. Guénon’s analysis of the counterfeit anticipates Jean Baudrillard’s theory of the Simulacrum although as far as I know no one has ever called attention to Guénon’s priority in this respect.

Many literate people nowadays have the gnawing sense that a crackup of the world is at hand. This sense too belongs to The Reign, in whose pages Guénon predicts repeatedly that the “descent” into the nullity of pure quantity is about to hit its lowest depth, its stopping point, at which moment the Kali Yuga will have completed its cycle and a new, opposite motion will begin. Reading Guénon, many literate people will very likely experience some nervousness about the mystic-mythic vocabulary with which he articulates his philosophy of tradition. It is significant, however, that someone as temperamentally opposite to Guénon as was Wells had, at the end of his life, a vision of modern fraudulence as stark as Guénon’s. Given then the total jejuneness of everything modern, including the scrubbed-clean, anti-transcendent vocabulary of positivism; given the vapidity and imposture of Foucault-speak and Derrida-speak, both designed to destroy thinking; given, I say, the rampant perniciousness of the socialistic-egalitarian experiment in all its guises – Guénon’s insistence on the archaic, the traditional language of symbol and myth begins to appear in a new light as both useful and urgent. Guénon displays a kinship in this regard with another explorer of tradition, Richard Wagner.

Notes

1. Guénon was sympathetic with Islam, especially with the Sufi movement of Islam; he underwent initiation in Islamic mysteries and took an Arabic name.

2. Evola wrote a book about Guénon, René Guénon: a Teacher for Modern Times (1933). Other writers who have addressed Guénon are: Frithjof Schuon, Paul Chacornac, Robin Waterfield, and Jean Borella.

3. I am, of course, aware that France later became a Communist, an event proving only the vast capacity of human beings for self-delusion and oblivious self-contradiction. France’s novel La Revolte des Anges (1914) is explicitly Gnostic, using actual Gnostic nomenclature; but it is also Marxian and revolutionary, making it a complete turn-around from The Gods will have Blood.

4. In the United States, “Spiritism,” Feminism, and the Temperance Movement were all related; their chief personae were the same.

5. I assess James more positively than Guénon does although I prefer the James of The Varieties of Religious Experience to the James of Pragmatism.

6. Hence in Heraclitus, the symbol of the river, ever-changing, on the one hand, and the symbol of the Logos, or eternal idea on the other, with the latter making it possible for the investigating subject to recognize that the river is one and the same even though it is always changing.

7. By “manifestation,” Guénon means revelation – of metaphysical truth, vouchsafed by the equivalent of deity, to truth’s original human codifiers. Spengler too wrote that every “Great Culture” begins in a mystic vision, but in Spengler’s scheme revelation is immanent, effective but subjective; for Guénon the source of revelation is living, an entity, and the basis of existence. It is quite real.

8. Spengler refers to the Renaissance as an “imbroglio.”

9. For Guénon, the Middle Ages represented the last normal phase of Western Civilization.

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