René Guénon and Islam

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René Guénon, the French writer who was of Islamic faith, died in Cairo in 1951. Egypt was the place he found to live out the last twenty years of his life and where he met and followed the teachings of several Muslim masters. He is the author of important books such as East and Westand The Crisis of the Modern World, and his work has influenced many people worldwide: people who have tried to refocus their lives according to spiritual values ​​and a newfound intellectual dynamism.

According to his own words, "the sole cause of this disorder is the ignorance of the principles. Let pure intellectual knowledge be restored, and all the rest will return to normal"[1]:the crisis of contemporary society lies in the loss of this spiritual dimension, in the contamination of pure intellectuality in favour of an exaggerated unintelligent rationalization, in the abandonment of the certainties of religious doctrine in favour of a pseudo culture that feeds the insecurities of the passionate soul, in the sensitivity lost by modern man for good taste and quality of contemplation because of an obsessive hyperactivity that produces misery and "the reign of quantity", in forgetting the nature of creation and the purpose of life, causing barbarism among peoples and ignorance amongst individuals.

His meditations on the crisis of modern man, and on secular, scientific, psychological, anthropological, epistemological and democratic thinking, have mistakenly led to Guénon being classified as one of the "traditionalist" intellectuals, placing him next to conservative authors who are often the object of partisan discrimination from the "right-thinking world of Western culture" for the mere fact of expressing thoughts that are different from market trend and the fashion of the day. In the case of Guénon, this classification has resulted in at least two deleterious consequences. The first was undoubtedly that of "cataloguing" him as part of the labyrinth of "lovers of tradition and the esoteric sciences," disregarding the call for intellectual renewal in his work, going far beyond these narrow literary or occult circles. Paradoxically, it is precisely these pseudo-elite circles that claim to defend the work of Guénon, using the ridiculous and contrived means of a "Guénon language" or "an esoteric cult of its function" to legitimize their inability to deal with the spiritual responsibilities of every man: so justifying their separation from the "things of this world" and their morbid attachment to individual imaginings on the afterlife.

On the opposite side, there is a dangerous re-evaluation and exploitation of the work of Guénon as the inspirer of a "traditionalist" or "spiritualist" reaction to the modern world. They are often nothing other than attempts to manipulate the universal doctrine in order to legitimize certain thinking or power trends that are only interested in the government of this world, and which have no sense of the sacred. These readers of Guénon seem to get lost in fruitless analytic speculation about the crisis of the modern world or about a hypothetical militant revolt against it. So they make the mistake of always looking for evil outside themselves, creating a justification for being better than other people simply because they have read the work of Guénon and because the rest of the world is in chaos. They confuse their contempt for the chaos in the world with their contempt for the world itself, and their contempt for individuality with their contempt for humanity. They forget that humanity and the world are the fruit of God's creation and that, in any phase of a cosmic cycle, the life of every man is necessarily subject to the battle between the forces of good and evil.

It is therefore to overcome those illusions of the soul that are a product of that imagination that is so typical of modern man who, not wanting to make the necessary changes to raise himself up spiritually by learning to control his instincts and stifling his own individuality, by a biased interpretation of tradition, tries to drag down the level of the world by disapproving of the decline of modern man in order to congratulate himself on his own supposed superiority. These people, rather than constructively delving into traditional teaching, only drag out arguments from tradition in order to oppose today's aberrations, and inevitably end up being trapped and fall into a form of dualism between good and evil, incapable of understanding the providential nature of the world that will remain like this as long as God allows it to continue to exist to be used for good. The next steps taken by these incurable idealists are usually to build a sand castle or an ivory tower lived in by a group of people romantically banded together by elective affinities or by an unstoppable missionary spirit aimed at forming a traditional society. Both cases are only a parody of the spiritual responsibility of every person on earth who lives in the world with the sincere aspiration to a genuine intellectual elevation, with a balanced awareness of a dimension of the Creation that is both universal and eschatological.

On the one hand, we have people trapped like prisoners in a fantasy about the other world who often become theorists about the detachment from this world and, on the other hand, there are the militants of the illusions of this world who create confusion about the reality of the other world. Prisoners and theorists, fantasies, illusions and confusions, are all expressions of how far we are from an authentic traditional and spiritual perspective. But, above all, we must recognize that in some of these poor readers, there is a chronic inability to distinguish and bring together this world and the other world, without confusing them, and therefore cannot really understand the teachings of Shaykh 'Abd al -Wahid Yahya René Guénon and apply them to their lives.

With the levelling out of culture through the process of radical secularization in progress, the reading of the works of Guénon has often led to the rediscovery of an esoteric perspective that the modern West has largely forgotten or hidden. The opportunity to reconsider the inner aspect of several contemplative orders that are present in all of the traditions has, however, created some danger for many of those who have taken it upon themselves to approach certain realities without adequate preparation and sufficient sensitivity for the trials of the spiritual path. The attraction to the symbolism of the ceremonies, the mystery of the sacred or the search for occult powers by some readers of Guénon has fuelled the tendency of certain academic researchers to want to lump the "Guénon movement" with the spiritual and heterodox tendencies of modern sects and New Age movements, against which, metaphysical teaching is truly the only real antidote. This erroneous interpretation has certainly been helped by the part played by certain well-known people who owe their own personal success to the subtle manipulation of some parts of the works of Guénon in order to legitimize, from an operational point of view, pseudo-spiritual paths that aspire to metaphysical knowledge outside the traditional framework of orthodox religions.

In this case, we are witnessing a subtle phenomenon of the offer of an exclusive esoteric opportunity which tends to confuse the metaphysical doctrine handed down by Guénon with the reworking of traditional forms that have since lost their exoteric legitimacy or any esoteric element. The lack of a spiritual order and any orthodoxy makes the operation of these elite circles not just ineffective but, above all, harmful to any balanced understanding. Needless to say, the obsessive emphasis within these organizations of the alleged exceptional qualities or the special qualifications of certain rare individuals and "great initiates" represents the most obvious sign of a radical departure from the depth, regularity and simplicity of Guénon's message, which is considered too dogmatic, linear and simple for the "superior" mentality of modern man in search of "special effects"!

It is precisely the defects inherent in the modern Western mind that prevent a useful and intellectually valid reading of the writing of René Guénon, even for those who can feel its irresistible attraction: this is due precisely to that non-human spring that inspired it from start to finish. We are also witnessing the seemingly contradictory phenomenon of the very people who, that for years have excessively emphasized the hermeneutics of Guénon's work, are now turning against this with great hostility; probably because they are "saturated" because of a mental access to a teaching which needs to be assimilated progressively, bending one's entire existence to Divine Will (and not replacing it with a supposedly intellectual form), to all of traditional teaching and the necessary life experiences, and spiritual witness.

The traditional conformity expressed by Shaykh 'Abd al-Wahid Yahya Guénon in Cairo was recognized by the worthy rector of the Religious Institution Al-Azhar, Shaykh 'Abd al-Halim Mahmoud, who knew and appreciated Guénon as a wise Western Muslim. Undoubtedly some of the merits recognized in Guénon by the rector of Al-Azhar were his outstanding knowledge of sacred doctrine and its correspondences within the various different religious traditions, as well as a rare ability to hand on this knowledge, without vulgarization, using terms that were still understandable to modern Western ears.

Guénon's tomb in Cairo, in the centre of the immense madinat al-mawt, the "city of the dead," has become the destination for numerous pilgrimages by those who, in one way or another, have benefited from his work, his teachings and his example. I still remember the first time I went to his tomb, accompanied by my father and Guénon's youngest son, who both have the same name, 'Abd al-Wahid - the servant of the Only One." As I walked behind them, I realized that neither of them had ever met Shaykh 'Abd al-Wahid Yahya in person. My father had never met his own master and the posthumous son had never seen his father, but, nevertheless, on that occasion they were both able to show me a deep knowledge of the essence contained in the message and life of Guénon, which I could summarize by saying that it was entirely the expression of true spiritual practice. It is no coincidence that day that, after our visit to his tomb, we went to pray in the Hamidiyya Shadhiliyyamosque where Shaykh 'Abd al-Wahid Yahya Guénon himself would go to take part in the rituals of the Islamic community and invoke the name of God with his fellow brothers of the initiatory order that he was part of. So we passed from the centre of the "city of the dead" to a residential island in the middle of the Nile, not far from what was once the house and place of study of the Master.

Even today, after fifty years, many people still stop and look for this house and visit his studio, which has remained just as it was on the day of his death. There are still many who seek to know all the details of the Master's life and his written work, analyzing the epistemological approach, dissecting his private correspondence and proposing bold interpretations of his early acquaintances. However, many of these scholars are at risk of unfortunately never getting beyond the outer veil of his person in order to deeply understand the function and work: they are hopelessly clouded by their very own nature and modern mentality, which has lost any vision of God and His spiritual practice. This blurring is expressed in a psychological attraction to the person or to the letter of Guénon's writings, completely missing the maieuticand wise aspect of divine action that rules all.

The works of Shaykh 'Abd al-Wahid Yahya can be understood only through their practical application, be it exoteric or esoteric, and it might be said that the people who have benefited the most deeply are those who have been helped by their reading to find a religious faith: those who were driven by an obsessive and unnatural search for esotericism have ended up giving worrying signs of imbalance, being unable to benefit from the necessary safety net of religion. This is not to give the works of Guénon any blame for certain poor interpretations or even worse applications: just as it is not possible, as some do, to attribute anti-traditional distortions to Tradition. Evil has a purely negative nature and can only fit into established forms, beyond which it can go no further. That is why we must be very careful in approaching a traditional function that cannot be approached just from the outside, but requires an effort of interior identification where, each at his own level, we take on a spiritual responsibility that involves an acknowledgment of the truth, be it even the most simple and basic.

Too often, those who approach the work of René Guénon fool themselves into thinking they have really absorbed the teachings, but these have only been taken in at an exterior mental level: the understanding of metaphysical doctrine is not the same as spiritual fulfilment and the clarity of the Master's argument should not give rise to the illusion of possessing such clarity. Besides, one cannot oppose the spiritual maieutics of a true Master through a schematic literalistic reading of Guénon's works: basically, it is just one of those cases of an attempt to classify metaphysics that was so repeatedly condemned by Guénon himself.

In the West, moreover, doctrine is often readily confused with vain speculation, which prevents bringing what has been truly assimilated to fruition, even at the theoretical level of the teaching received. The doctrine itself cannot create any problem, in that good cannot come from evil; but the inability to distinguish between what is truly assimilated and a purely literal knowledge of traditional information handed down for the use of an elite can provoke severe forms of imbalance and be the cause of certain maladies of the soul, especially if there is no active check on the ability of a master and of a spiritual community. So, often the rediscovery of an intellectual dimension may be manipulated to give free rein to supposed doctrinal powers or some mysterious traditional knowledge, which are really nothing more than an expression of the puffing up of personal pride. This approach has produced skilled writers and speakers who have only absorbed the formal appearance of Guénon's message: choosing to follow him as a literary example without ever thoroughly sticking to the undeniable spiritual function.

Many people may not have really believed in the "miracle" of the works of Guénon, almost not considering them as being part of a spiritual economy that is coming to an end. They have not realized their preparatory function, and so, because they do not have the ability to find the truth in the works, they have decided that it is better to declare them a failure: thus opposing those who have never believed that such a discovery of the truth would come through the writings themselves. It is natural that, at the level of contingent applications, it is not possible to use an abstract and schematic interpretation of metaphysical teachings as a basis, and that references should be looked for in all of the tradition as a whole, and to which the work of Guénon has tried to give back intelligibility, not replace it. Those who have never really believed that this function has its origins in the Centre of the World have not even tried looking for ways to access it, contenting themselves with speculation about it and accusing some undeniable representatives of the tradition of over-exposure. Often, the idea that some people have of the spiritual centres has an aura of occultism and perhaps some of them even have trouble understanding the very outward manifestation of those sent by God. The fact is that, unable to tap into the true mysteries, they would like to reduce the inexpressible to a simple formal question of an apparent withdrawal from a world whose psychological influences they suffer all the same. It is not possible to escape physically from certain suggestions.

For others, the truth in the teachings of Guénon is a rather embarrassing phenomenon that they do not want to believe because it would prevent them from continuing to speculate on a truth that really ought to manifest itself openly. For them, the spiritual centres should remain secret, without any contact with the outside world: as if this communication were able to externalize or limit in some kind of way that which is internal by definition. Does the sight of a saint perhaps reveal his more intimate nature? Why should it be different for the external visibility of the means of access to spiritual centres? The deeper nature of these centres will also remain inaccessible to those who have achieved nothing more than the first few steps on the path, even though they are actively participating.

In the conclusions of The King of the World,Guénon is quite clear about the proper balance to keep in order to find a means of access to the spiritual centres and why they must be visible. In fact, their apparent concealment with the progress of the cycle must not be seen as an exterior phenomenon which would prevent even those qualified to gain access to them. Therefore, spiritual effort consists mainly in preparing oneself inwardly to receive teachings that are closely linked to the very function of the work of Guénon. On the other hand, the speculative attitude that we talked about not only does not recognize this fact, considering the work of the Master as having no effective communication with the supreme spiritual Centre, but also does not recognize the ways of access, even where these are outwardly manifested, and ends up even opposing them.

In the words of Guénon: "In the present period of our Earth cycle, in the Kali-Yuga, this Holy Land, defended by guardiansthat hide it from secular eyes while still, however, ensuring certain external contacts, is in fact invisible and inaccessible, but only for those who do not possess the qualifications required to enter it." It seems that many of these "followers" of Guénon mentally multiply the difficulties of an "external" access to the spiritual centres, instead of naturally realizing that these difficulties must be essentially interior.

If, as Guénon usually said, Man is both much more and much less than is believed in the West, it seems that those who have a speculative approach to the works of Guénon end up, on the one hand, by replacing their own individuality with the King of the World, while, on the other hand, they no longer believe that their true self can still outwardly manifest itself to indicate the effective means of access for attaining holiness, and thus end up by turning their backs on it.

Finally we must mention the mistake of some Westerners who have turned to Islam, following the example of Shaykh 'Abd al-Wahid Yahya Guénon, but, unlike him, when they become Muslims forget all universal and metaphysical principles and get caught up in an exotic process of "Arabic", mystical, linguistic and formalistic transformation.

The legacy of René Guénon, however, has not been lost, and his work has, in fact, produced significant results among those "men of good will" who have here found the inspiration and strength to create a coherent reorientation of their existence on traditional and sacred bases. It was necessary to not only be able to create a traditional situation in a world increasingly forgetful of its heavenly origin, but also stimulate a sense of confidence of being able to overcome the crisis of modern man and find the order and dignity that have been lost. This is not a task for mere simple writers, but becomes the natural maieutic function of those who, while continuing to read and write, have discovered a taste for spiritual testimony. In Europe, many of these men have turned to the Islamic religion while continuing their search for a deeper intellectual understanding of the metaphysical doctrine that might be guided and "protected" by the inclusion of the orthodox into a traditional form and the subsequent participation in the spiritual influences present in both exoteric and initiatory rites.

In this scenario, the presence of a community of Western Muslims who know how to follow the intellectual Islamic example of Shaykh 'Abd al-Wahid Yahya Guénon is a particularly interesting possibility for the future of the Islamic community and Western civilization. The return to tradition by the members of this community, combined with an awareness of the historical, scientific and cultural factors that have led to the development of the Western way of life, makes these Muslims stand as an example of an Islamic universality integrated into contemporary society. It is to be hoped that these Western Muslims can give visibility and greater voice to an intellectual perspective able to renew the contribution made by the reflections of Muslim scholars to world history and science, without falling into transversal conflicts or into confusion between the sacred and the profane, or between spiritual and material reality.

The future of the Islamic community depends on the way they manage to interact with the epic changes and the many historical, legal, economic and cultural situations in the world. Needless to say that, if the Islamic community manages to retain its character of intellectual elasticity and spiritual integrity, the contacts shared with other religious communities, cultures, nations and fellow citizens will benefit from a widespread enrichment that will lead to the growth of the entire international community. Otherwise, wherever Muslims maintain an attitude of intellectual isolation and a defensive position that is hypercritical of others and of the changing world, we must accept the blame for being complicit in the chaos and incapable of effectively following the enlightened example of the Prophet Muhammad and of the sages in the victory of the forces of good over the forces of evil.

The hypothesis of a return to a period of barbarism feared by Shaykh 'Abd al-Wahid Yahya Guénon seems to be becoming a reality just as much as the cyclical miracle of the formation of a spiritual elite in the West. God is the most wise on the fate of the East and the West; as for our individual fates, we will no doubt give an account to Him of the use we made of the witness and sacrifice of the masters, and how we will stand before the King or the Centre of the World.[2]

[1]René Guénon, Precisazioni necessarie, Padua 1988, p. 75

[2]The reference here is to The King of the World, an important work by Rene Guenon. It discusses the establishment of spiritual centres as a concrete expression of spirituality in our world. Holiness and spirituality should not be interpreted as vague and psychological phenomena, as extemporaneous phenomena tied to specific individuals, but as the embodiment of specific functions, which proceed from a divine mandate, without which the world itself would cease to exist. A potential or virtual reconnection of immanent reality with the higher worlds is not sufficient: there need to be intellectual functions in the form of men belonging to the inner communion of the saints who embody, in immanent form, the consciousness of this continuity and unity. This, in particular, is the inner meaning of Islamic doctrine according to which there is necessarily a spiritual pole in every age that invisibly guides it.

So, consciously or not, every man necessarily takes sides for or against visible and invisible reality which consists of these spiritual centres which, although apparently less "visible" in certain phases of the cycle, never cease to be the true heart of the world: giving it life and keeping it alive. This spiritual stand will, however, become apparent during eschatological times, with the second coming of Christ, when the Centre of the World will return to manifest Himself in visible form, but this stand will already be clear during the preparation for this His re-manifestation. Some secondary spiritual centres will also aid this preparation: just as John the Baptist prepared the first coming of Christ.