Guenon and Islam

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Regarding Rene Guenon’s ultimate decision to follow a Sufi path, he wrote:

Contrary to what takes place in ‘conversion’, nothing here implies the attribution of the superiority of one traditional form over another. It is merely a question of what one might call reasons of spiritual expediency, which is altogether different from simple individual ‘preference’.

It may be instructive to explore the reasons behind that “spiritual expediency”, which is not the same as psychoanalyzing Guenon from afar. No, it is a question only of intellectual reasons, not personal or psychological.

For reasons of spiritual expediency, Guenon followed a path beginning with the French Hermetic revival. He came to reject this, but not in toto, since he continued to refer to the writings of certain Hermetists. He then tried to influence Catholic circles. For example, Fundamental Symbols is replete with Christian symbolism. In Crisis of the Modern World, Guenon asserted that only a return to Catholicism could restore Tradition to the West. Eventually, however, Guenon was rejected by the Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain, precipitating Guenon’s break with this approach. Personal factors — the death of his wife followed by a trip to Egypt — provided the opportunity to adopt Islam totally. As we will see, certain characteristics of Islam fit perfectly into Guenon’s idea of Tradition; we therefore suspect that he may even have generalized Islamic theology to provide his understanding of Tradition. Therefore, there is no surprise that most of his closest followers themselves adopted Islam.

Tradition

We owe it to Guenon for delineating the features of religious traditions intellectually. This accounts for the variety of religious forms in a manner totally different from the historical, empirical, archaeological, empirical, and exegetical approaches appropriate to academic research. He identified several specific traditions, specifically, Taoism, Hinduism, certain pagan mystery schools, Medieval Christianity, and Islam.

Nevertheless, certain traditions are more comfortable within the parameters specified by Guenon than others. In particular, Christianity, as conventionally understood, rejects certain aspects of it. The most prominent theologians favorable to Guenon — Jean Borella, Philip Sherrard, Seraphim Rose — eventually rejected the Traditional approach. Neo-pagan revivals, as long as they are bound to certain of Evola’s heterodox notions, also reject some primary elements of Tradition, so are doomed to insignificance. Let’s look at the lineaments of Tradition as Guenon outlined.

Categorical

The fundamental point to grasp is that for Guenon, Tradition is categorical, not essential. That is, it categorizes traditions according to certain criteria, but is not a Tradition itself. Therefore, to call oneself a Traditionalist, “at-large” as it were, represents a misunderstanding. Rather, one must follow a specific tradition, albeit understood within these categories. Under normal circumstances, that means a man follows the Tradition of his own place and time. Whether or not a specific religious form is a Tradition is a question decided by these categories.

Authentic

A religious form is an authentic tradition if it is “orthodox” in Guenon’s sense. I.e., is it doctrinally consistent with the ultimate metaphysical principles?

Complete

Does it have a complete understanding, or are some things lacking? This lack does not necessarily make it heterodox.

Living

Since principles cannot be fully understood merely from reading and studying, continuously existing initiatory organizations are required to pass on that knowledge. A living tradition will have such groups; a religious form may have lost them, remaining just a shell of what it once was.

Note that the Evolian categories have absolutely no relevance. Hence, his several attempts to label traditions as solar vs lunar, Nordic vs Mediterranean, Aryan vs Semitic, etc., add nothing to our understanding. They are not based on any metaphysical principles but derive from profane sources, primarily Bachofen and Weininger.

Esoteric vs Exoteric

Traditional doctrines have two complementary aspects. Guenon writes (incidentally illustrating our point):

Of all traditional doctrines, perhaps Islamic doctrine most clearly distinguishes the two complementary parts, which can be labeled exoterism and esoterism.

He defines them this way:

The exoteric aspect is the “great way”, common to all.

The esoteric is the inward truth, reserved to an elite. This is from the very nature of things, since not all men possess the qualifications required to reach knowledge of the truth.

The exoteric part is a rule of action (laws, rites, etc.) and the esoteric represents pure knowledge. The esoteric must also include a way, or path, to achieve that knowledge. There must be no conflict between the exoteric and the esoteric; they look at the same thing from a different perspective. (The exoteric from the circumference, the esoteric from the center).

Unfortunately, what often happens is that the vulgar misinterpret the verbal formulations of the esoteric as a new doctrine, opposed to the exoteric. This causes strife and results in religious forms detached from any tradition; New Age movements are obvious examples.

Multiplicity of Forms

This is a fundamental doctrine of Islam, which teaches that there have been several revelations made to mankind at various times. The Koran names 25 prophets (including Jesus), and admits many more. Hence the existence of multiple religious forms poses no threat to exoteric dogma. Exoteric Christianity regards those religious forms as false and Jesus as unique. Although we have provided several examples of a broader outlook, this is a hurdle many will find difficult to overcome.

Primordial Tradition

Guenon claims that there was a Primordial Tradition, and subsequent religious forms derive from it. Guenon uses the doctrines of the Vedanta as the prime examples for Tradition; this is consistent with the belief of some Traditionalists that the Vedanta was the original revelation made to Adam. The idea of a Primordial Tradition is consistent with Islamic dogma.

Exoteric Christianity believes in a series of covenants made between God and Adam, Abraham, Moses, etc., but specifically excludes all peoples outside them. Furthermore, outside from a few writers, salvation is not the attempt to return to the Primordial state of Adam.

Ahistorical

Tradition is ahistorical, that is, it depends on a revelation from above, not on any specifically historical factors. Once again, this is consistent with Islam, but not exoteric Christianity, which sees tradition as the outcome of specific historical events.

Final Revelation

Islam claims to be the final revelation made to man, an idea also asserted by Guenon, although he would add “in this cycle”. This doctrine is difficult to justify solely from metaphysical principles, so we can explore the reasons. Guenon’s justification is that it is the only tradition to arise within history rather than prehistory. Another factor is that previous revelations were given to specific peoples at specific times for their own benefit. Islam, on the other hand, claims to be universal, the final revelation for which every prior one was a preparation. This universality is affirmed by Guenon:

If there is a tradition where questions of race and origin do not in any way arise, it is certainly Islam, which in fact counts among its adherents men belonging to the most diverse races.