René Guénon & Integral Traditionalism

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Elsewhere (in La Destra, in May 1972), we have discussed the necessary relationship of an authentic, non-makeshift Right with the concept of Tradition. In the sense discussed there, references to authors with a traditional orientation may be useful in dealing with certain complex problems. Here, however, we wish to provide an account of the ideas of René Guénon (1886-1951), who was regarded as the proponent of “integral Traditionalism.”

Guénon is already quite well known in Italy. His books were translated before the war and some have recently been republished. In Turin, a Guénonian group circulates a journal that is a replica of the French publication Études Traditionnelles, of which Guénon was magna pars. The latter journal still exists and is edited by orthodox Guénonians. Today, Guénon is regarded as a teacher and the founder of a school, and in France has come to be accepted by the official and academic culture, albeit with various reservations.

Guénon’s work is complex but also forms an organic whole. Firstly, it formulates a radical critique of the modern world, a critique that differs from that of various authors of the past and the present, to the extent that it has a positive point of reference: the “world of Tradition,” of which the modern world is the antithesis. The term “traditional” refers to a universal type of civilization which, in varied, but analogous forms, was realized more or less completely in both the East and in the West.

Traditional civilization — Guénon affirms — has metaphysical points of reference. It is characterized by the recognition of an order higher than all that is human and contingent, and by the presence and authority of elites that draw from this transcendent plane the principles and values necessary to found a well-articulated social organization, to open the paths to higher knowledge, and finally, to give life true meaning. At the opposite pole lies modern civilization, which is defined by desacralization on a grand scale, by the systematic denial of all that is superior to man as an individual or as a collective group, by materialism, and by the impulse to realization in the sense of productive activity on a purely secular and temporal plane, an insane activism. Two books by Guénon, La crise du monde moderne [Crisis of the Modern World] and Le règne de la quantité et les signes des temps [The Reign of Quantity and the Sign of the Times], contain the essential elements of this critique. In those two works, themes already discussed by various authors of the past and the present acquire a particular sharpness and a firmer foundation.

The same critique is formulated in the book Orient et Occident, but there it is associated with other, questionable claims. While Guénon recognizes — and cannot fail to recognize — that civilizations of the traditional type have existed in both the East and the West, in this latter work, he claims that they are now only found in the East (especially India), and that taking them as a point of reference may be an effective means of Western reintegration. Now, this claim may at the most be valid with regard to Eastern esoteric doctrines, but certainly not for the factual reality of the East. Guénon was convinced of the existence, in the East, in spite of everything, of groups that were still depositaries of the Tradition. In practice, he had direct contact with the Islamic world, where initiatic veins (Sufi and Ismaeli) still exist parallel to the exoteric (i.e., religious) tradition. He Islamicized himself to the extreme. Having moved to Egypt, he took the name of Sheikh Abdel Wahid Yasha, and also acquired Egyptian nationality. In a second marriage, he took an Arab wife.

Guénon makes no mystery of the fact that, after several disappointing experiences in French “occult” circles, it was thanks to exponents of Eastern doctrines that he managed to find the right path, that of the “initiatory” or “metaphysical knowledge.”

These esoteric teachings are the stated or implied foundation of the doctrines expounded by Guénon in several books, most notably Le symbolisme de la Croix [The Symbolism of the Cross], Les états multiples de l’être [The Multiple States of the Being], and L’homme et son devenir selon le Vedanta [Man and His Becoming According to Vedanta]. Here, one of our reservations is that often, what Guénon presents as “metaphysics” in a special transcendent meaning, is in fact, aside from differences in terminology, essentially not very different from what goes by that name in the history of Western, profane philosophy, and often ends up in rather tedious abstractions, as for example in the case of all the expositions on “Universal Possibility” and the like. Nevertheless, a point that remains valid is that the rational is not the extreme noetic limit of man, and that the normal human condition can be removed, since man “does not represent, in fact, more than a transitory and contingent manifestation of true being.” Thus, in principle, it is possible for him to strive towards a higher plane in which knowledge signifies being the thing known, so that in knowing, the individual transforms and integrates himself. The ancient concept of “gnosis” is analogous to this. Initiation, he claims, is the most direct and regular path to such a realization. Guénon clearly differentiates it from anything that is mere mysticism.

Tradition, in a first sense, refers to all of this “metaphysical” and not merely human knowledge. It admits of a variety of forms, while remaining, in its essence, one. Concerning its unity, Guénon also speaks of a “primordial tradition,” a concept that had been formulated before him. There are hints of it in De Maistre, in Fabre d’Olivet, and in a way it was also accepted by the Catholic Wilhelm Schmidt, in his remarkable work on ”idea of God.”

With regard to the concept of “primordial tradition,” one must, however, distinguish between a metaphysical aspect and an historical aspect. The former concerns forms that are related in ways that are not the result of material, historically verifiable transmission; a single law can give rise to distinct, but corresponding and analogous forms, in the same way that in several points of a stream of water, separate whirlpools with the same morphology can form as a result of the same law and similar situation.

Regarding the second aspect, it is the result of a concrete first origin common to a complex of traditions. Guénon accepts the idea of a “Hyperborean tradition” placed at the beginning of this cycle of civilizations (of Indo-European civilizations in particular). This idea had already been affirmed by other esoteric authors (but also by profane authors like Herman Wirth, who in his vast work of uneven value, Der Aufgang der Menschheit [The Rise of Mankind], tried to establish a basis for it).

All this leads to the thesis of the ”transcendent unity of traditional forms” (and in particular, of the ”transcendent unity of religions,” as F. Schuon, a disciple of Guénon, calls it). One of the abilities attributed to one who has risen to the level of higher knowledge discussed earlier, would be that of glimpse that unity, as well as, conversely, to be able to express a given content in terms of one or the other tradition, just as a concept can be expressed in the words of one or another language (symbolically, this would be the “gift of tongues,” and furthermore the foundation of an essential “ecumenism,” very different from the grey, illusory ecumenism that has emerged from the climate of post-conciliar Catholicism). Guénon has shown himself to possess this capacity, beyond what can be attributed to mere erudition.

Guénon again uses traditional ideas in his criticism of the modern world. He has no doubt that we are today approaching the end of a cycle, that we are in the Kali Yuga or the “dark age” predicted by ancient Hindu doctrines, but also in other traditions (Hesiod’s “Iron Age,” for example). He rejects, then, every form of progressivist delusion. Progress, outside of the material domain (where, however, it often comes at a high price), is for Guénon merely a superstition of Western man. Guénon interprets history in decidedly anti-Marxist terms, as an involution, indicating its real meaning in terms of the so-called “regression of the castes.”

The reference point here is the traditional articulation of society into four castes or “functional classes”: at its summit, the exponents of spiritual and sacred authority, then the warrior aristocracy, then the bourgeoisie, and finally, the working masses. Now, a society governed by the first caste recedes into almost mythical remoteness. The subsequent reign of the second caste ended with the decline of the great monarchies. Then began the reign of the third estate, of the bourgeoisie, of industrialism and capitalism. Finally, what corresponds to the fourth caste emerges and has begun its struggle for world domination: Marxism and communism. Any anti-Marxist interpretation of the course of history, from the Right, should refer to this essential scheme, which we have ourselves developed on several occasions.

One of Guénon’s theses is that a normal, i. e., traditional, civilization would be characterized by the primacy of contemplation and pure knowledge over action. This is also one of the foundations of his critique of the modern Western world, where he finds the very opposite, namely the primacy of action. But this is precisely the point at which we must begin to formulate certain reservations. Our critique can take as its starting point the indication of the characteristic nature of the power at the apex or center of traditional civilization. It is not correct that it was occupied by elites who cultivated “contemplation” or “pure knowledge” in more or less priestly terms. Historically, this was not the case even in India, for despite its predominantly Brahmanical civilization, it had royal dynasties and representatives of the warrior caste who possessed traditional knowledge. In fact, the aforementioned apex is characterized rather by an undivided unity of sacredness and royalty, of spiritual authority and temporal power. Aside from ancient China and a number of other ancient civilizations, Japan has almost up to the present time maintained itself at that level, and it is significant, with regard to Guénon’s idiosyncrasies, that he never referred to Japan and its specific “traditional character” because it did not correspond to his scheme.

While Guénon notes the completely desacralized and deviant character of the modern West, this has not prevented him from considering the problem of the possibility of a rectification, of a redressement. Based on his conviction that if the West has had a tradition, it was in Catholicism, he believed that the starting point of such a rectification would have to be in an integration of “traditional” Catholicism, not ruling out the advantageousness of contacts with oriental elements. But even before the recent trends of post-conciliar Catholicism would reveal the reality of the situation (and here we must again emphasise that the illusory “ecumenism” of post-Vatican II Catholicism has nothing in common with what “integral traditionalism” aimed for), he did not entertain too many illusions in this regard; he also explicitly stated as much in a letter he wrote to us, confessing that as a matter of principle, he had felt compelled to not exclude certain possibilities, without, however, actually expecting any results. In the face of attempts of this kind, Catholicism has remained indifferent, as it did with the regard to those, albeit much inferior, once made by Abbé Constant (aka Eliphas Lévi). The only real result has been that thanks to Guénon, several Catholics have come to penetrate the deepest meaning of Catholicism, of its symbols and its dogmas. Unfortunately, these individuals have no power in the official hierarchy, which would allow them to exert any significant influence. On the other hand, a Catholic theologian would probably detect incompatibilities between the truths of orthodoxy and all that is derived from the “metaphysics” which Guénon refers to, opposing une fin de non recevoir [a legalistic pleading] to “integral traditionalism.”

Guénon was allergic to politics in the narrow sense, claiming that there was no currently existing movement he felt he could support. As an exception, he consented to having extracts from his writings published with his signature as articles in a special cultural section — unique in its kind — that we edited in the years 1934-1943: “Diorama,” in the Cremona newspaper Regime fascista. In any case, Guénon belongs in essence to the culture of the Right. His work is a radical negation of democracy, socialism, and individualism. He goes even further, into areas barely touched upon by current Right-wing critiques. He opposed traditional knowledge and “traditional sciences” to modern science and scientism, not hesitating to rehabilitate the former, once their true meaning had been clarified. Not only did he point to the limits of profane scientific knowledge, but also to the devastation that inevitably follows from its world-view and its applications. One statement by Guénon succinctly sums up the meaning of the adventure that Western man has devoted himself to since the Renaissance: “He has detached himself from the heavens with the excuse of conquering the earth.” We can also quote the far-eastern saying that: “The net of Heaven has large meshes, but no one passes through,” indicating the play of concordant actions and reactions that led to the current “dark age” (dark, despite what Henry Miller calls its “putrescent splendor”).

Aside from what he believed was possible for an “integrated” Catholicism, Guénon indicated the rectifying action of élites intellectuelles. Here, he may have had in mind the kind of influence once exercised — but in an opposite, subversive direction — by the so-called sociétés de pensée, up to the French Revolution and in the margins of Freemasonry. Even if Guénon does not use the term “intellectual” in the current sense and even though he is not referring to today’s intellectuals, but to a conservative and “traditional” form of intellectuality, the concept remains somewhat abstract under current conditions. If anything, to us a more adequate conception would be a kind of Order, bringing together personalities loyal to certain principles, rooted in traditional spirituality, but also more directly in contact and in confrontation with reality and historical forces. Such an Order would make up the backbone of a true Right, and if its members, without necessarily flaunting their connection with the organization, were gradually able to occupy certain key positions in contemporary culture and society, a rectification would be possible.

All this only in principle, because today’s environment and men are such that initiatives of this kind would have little chance of success. As a fallback, there remains more or less what Guénon had in mind, the formation of centers of traditional intellectuality with an activity that, realistically, would be limited to the cultural domain. Even such an activity should not be underestimated. Today, it has become quite fashionable to speak of a “culture of the Right,” but without it being clear what it is supposed to consist in and without it being possible to avoid the feeling of something improvised. However, there does seem to be favorable soil, and the various publishing initiatives confirm this. In this context, a use (but not a slavish one) of Guénon is desirable. Given the variety and multiplicity of subjects treated by him, it would be well, however, to leave aside those that are specially concerned with esotericism, “metaphysics,” and initiation. Although they are the ultimate foundation of everything else, given their unusual nature, there is no need to put them in the foreground, thereby possibly alarming a certain circle of readers and providing pretexts for ostracism.

Of course, apart from the intellectual aspect, there is the existential aspect. Traditional knowledge, as has already been stated, is necessarily at same time realization. The Nietzschean axiom “Man is something that can be overcome” is also the axiom of esoteric knowledge, which — as we have noted — starts from the idea that the human state of existence should not be hypostatized, that it is just one the multiple states of being. Only one must indicate how to prevent distorted, mistaken or dangerous applications of this postulate.

This is not an appropriate place for particular considerations of this domain of realization, which would entail an examination of Guénon’s book Aperçus sur l’initiation [Perspectives on Initiation]. We will simply note that there are reservations that must be made with regard to the possibilities almost exclusively considered by Guénon. He insists on the necessity of a connection with a given “chain,” with a given “regular organization” transmitting a spiritual influence. For clarification, an analogy would be the consecration of a priest by a bishop, who is the administrator of the spiritual influences of which the Church is believed to be the custodian. In the case of Guénon, this connection must mainly have been realized — as we have already stated — through Islamic “chains.” But to those who do not feel like turning to Muslims and Orientals, Guénon offers very little.

Those who read, in La Destra (March 1972), the extracts of our correspondence with him, will remember that we could not follow the Guénon in the idea that today’s Freemasonry — despite its degeneration (which he admitted) — in principle remains a dispensing organization of real, and not only symbolic and ritual initiation. There are personalities in the West who certainly have had the rank of Masters, such as Gurdjieff and, in the so-called “Left Hand Path,” Aleister Crowley. Or perhaps we are supposed to seek out some surviving branch of operative Kabbalism, which again cannot be considered a Western tradition. Naturally, the teeming occult, theosophical, pseudo-Rosicrucian sects and cliques of today are spurious and inauthentic, and are completely out of the question. Thus, the situation is difficult, for most of us the problem remains open and must perhaps be reformulated in terms other than those indicated by Guénon.

However, the theme of “integral traditionalism” can be detached from this problem and be used in the formation of a culture of the Right.

Source: Julius Evola, Ricognizioni: uomini e problemi (Rome: Edizioni Mediterranee, 1974).