René Guénon, Sameness And Digestion Of Dharma

1 Comment / Digestion, Giuliano Morais, Reversing the Gaze

Author: Giuliano Morais.

This article offers a short, but essential, description of René Guénon’s point of view about Hinduism and succinctly points out why his position cannot be considered dharmic, and how he contributed to the “sameness” approach (Malhotra, 2011, Ch. I) and to the digestion of dharmic traditions into Western paradigms.

I – Background

French metaphysician René Guénon (1886-1951), in the first half of the last century, declared that the solution for the “Crisis of the Modern World” was to be found in the East (Guénon, 2001a, p. 156). He wanted that an intellectual elite should be formed by study of Hindu doctrines and “Traditional symbolism” and, ideally, resort to medieval religious formats and the possible collaboration of institutions such as the Catholic Church or Masonry. This elite should try to reestablish traditional order, thus avoiding a possible civilizational calamity. The author eventually seems to have given up on that initial idea and converted to Islam, spending the rest of his life in Egypt, wherefrom he wrote several other books and even collaborated to the creation of a Masonic lodge which is still today operative in France (Sedwig, 2004, Ch. VI).

Hinduism was an essential part of his work. Besides having written two books devoted exclusively to this matter, there is also a posthumous collection of articles called Studies in Hinduism and many minor references scattered throughout his oeuvre. Guénon criticized distortions of oriental doctrines by esoteric organizations of his day, as in that time information on those subjects was normally precarious and occultists’ fantasies indeed prevailed. He managed to stand out as a solid advocate of “traditional knowledge” in opposition to fake spiritualism. His later conversion to Islam was understood by some as a possible solution to the diagnostic he offered to the Western crisis, and many followed him along the same path. He was also indirectly responsible for conversions to Christianity, such as the famous Father Seraphim Rose’s (Damascene, 2014, Ch. IX), who later on became a kind of saint within the Orthodox Church.

Traditionalism

Along with Swiss thinker Frithjof Schuon and a few other intellectuals, he comprised what was known as the “Traditionalist” school of thought. The title was given not by themselves, as they were considerably heterogeneous. However, it is appropriate, if for nothing else than to show their overall agreement on criticizing Modernity and their common use of so-called “traditional symbolism” as a tool that allowed them to stand beyond religious exclusivism, propose a transcendental unity between traditions and express their common belief in some sort of “Primordial Tradition”.

The vital message of Traditionalism seems to be that, in spite of Modernity, being “traditional” or even “religious” is possible. Its core ideology did not propagate among the general public, but had considerable importance in silently influencing a couple of generations of notorious intellectuals like Mircea Eliade, Huston Smith, Hossein Nasr and also Philip Sherrard and Kathleen Maine, founders of the Temenos journal, which gave also origin to an academy by the same name, patronized by Prince Charles of Wales, who was himself strongly influenced by so called traditionalist values as he himself demonstrates in the message below:

The work of Temenos could not be more important. Its commitment to fostering a wider awareness of the great spiritual traditions we have inherited from the past is not a distraction from the concerns of every-day life. These traditions, which form the basis of mankind’s most civilised values and have been handed down to us over many centuries, are not just part of our inner religious life. They have an intensely practical relevance to the creation of real beauty in the arts, to an architecture which brings harmony and inspiration to people’s lives and to the development within the individual of a sense of balance which is, to my mind, the hallmark of a civilised person. (Temenos Academy, nd.)

We could also mention some currently active thinkers influenced to different degrees by Traditionalist ideas, such as Russian political analyst Alexander Dugin, Brazilian polemist and thinker Olavo de Carvalho, a key intellectual figure in the emergence of the new Brazilian political right, and even Steven Bannon (Vanity Fair, 2017), who had some participation in Donald Trump’s political trajectory.

The Primordial Tradition and Symbolism

Guénon traces the origin of the Primordial Traditional to the North Pole, and advocates that its purest representation today is Hinduism[1]. In an article on the subject, “Hyperborea and Atlantis” Guénon corrects French astrologer Paul Lecour, who had written that “in spite of his Hinduism” Guénon did accept the Western origin of all traditions, to which Guénon responds:

We should note, moreover, that it is not at all ‘in spite of his Hinduism’ (in using this word Le Cour probably spoke more correctly than he knew), but on the contrary because of it that we consider the origin of the traditions to be Nordic, en even more exactly as polar, since this is expressly affirmed in the Veda as well as in other sacred books.

(Guénon, 2001e, p.16)

That is interesting for a start because it manifests very concisely Guénon’s core point of view on the subject of tradition: he considers himself perfectly Hindu, while belonging formally either to Christianity or Islam, which he portrays as equally legitimate manifestations of that Primordial Tradition:

There is, however, a reason why the notion of the Sanātana Dharma appears to be bound more particularly to the Hindu tradition. This is because the latter is, of all the presently living traditional forms, the one that most directly derives from the Primordial Tradition, being somehow a sort of external continuation of it.

(Guénon, 2002, p. 97)

Guénon does not present robust evidence to corroborate such claims. His main tool is “symbolical traditional science”, which, according to him, is proportionated to the synthetic “intellect” and not analytic “reason:”

Symbolism, in the strict sense and thereby as it were intuitive, which makes it more apt than language to serve as a support for intellectual intuition which is above reason.

(Guénon, 1995, p. 13)

The legitimacy and possible methodology for symbolic science is something to be discussed philosophically, but the curious thing about the Guenonian methodology, as we shall see, is mainly the wide-ranging applications he makes of this science, even before delimiting it clearly. The basis of his proposal, and the basis of his doctrines, rest on the existence of so called Primordial Tradition (as he understands it), and this in turn can be “unveiled” or evidenced by an epistemology of symbolic unity. However, sometimes Guénon states that symbolism can only “suggest” rather than express:

Symbolism, as usually understood, is in much more constant use for the expression of Oriental than of Western thought; and this is quite understandable when it is realized that it constitutes a much less narrowly limited means of expression than ordinary language; suggesting as it does far more than it expresses. It provides the support that is best adapted to possibilities of conception that lie beyond the power of words.

(Guénon, 1945, p. 130-131)

And if it seems that symbolism only suggests, he says it is also mathematically exact in its suggestions, which is a peculiar kind of exactness:

Indeed symbolism in which conceptual indefinitude in no wise precludes an absolutely mathematical exactness, thus reconciling apparently contradictory qualities is, as one might say, the natural language of metaphysic.

(Guénon, 1945, p. 131)

Not only is symbolism the natural language of metaphysics, but elsewhere Guenon even points out that symbolic implications also have rigorous spiritual efficacy, provided one has intellectual qualifications to receive it:

[…] every symbol, in so far as it must essentially serve as a support to a conception, is also endowed with a very real efficacy ; and the religious sacrament itself, in so far as it is a sensible sign, does indeed play a similar part as support of the “ spiritual influence” which will turn the sacrament into an instrument of immediate or deferred psychical regeneration ; just as in the parallel case the intellectual potentialities included, in the symbol are able to awaken either an effective or simply a virtual conception, according to the receptive capacity of each individual.

(Guénon, 1945, p. 133)

According to Guénon, symbols are not only an efficient cause of “revelation,” but they are the somewhat efficient cause of reality itself[2], as though the whole reality is constituted by a series of symbolic processions. The higher aspects of Being would therefore be reflected (sometimes inversely) in the lower aspects through symbolism, resulting in a complex hierarchical structure of nonhuman origin:

[…]once it be accepted that symbolism has its basis in the very nature of beings and things, that it is in perfect conformity with the laws of this nature, and if it be borne in mind that natural laws are basically only an expression and as it were an exteriorisation of the divine Will—does this not authorize us to affirm that symbolism is of ‘non-human’ origin, as the Hindus say; or in other words, that its principle goes further back and higher than humanity?

(Guénon, 1995, p. 14)

We will see that the “once accepted” which Guénon takes as a precondition, cannot be established, and that Hindus do not, in fact, say that symbolism is of non-human origin. This is just one of some important generalizations and misappropriations that Guénon makes in relation to Hindus, as when he peremptorily states that a “statue” (mūrti) is also just a symbol:

Thus according to the teachings of the Hindus, any figure, a statue, for example which symbolizes this or that aspect of the Divinity, must be considered only as a ‘support’, a referent point for meditation. It is therefore simply an aid and nothing more.

(Guénon, 1995, p. 14)

Guénon’s statement, if taken absolutely, is incorrect. Hindu understanding is more subtle than that of pure “symbolization for intellectual support;” it also includes, for example, notions such as the prāna-pratistha ritual, which infuses life (prāna) in the mūrti (statue) as Malhotra explains:

[…] the dharmic understanding of the nature and usefulness of these representations may have something to teach the West. The Sanskrit word for sacred image is murti, which means ‘awakened’, ‘real’ and ‘expressive of the Divine Spirit’. ‘Prana-pratishtha’ is the ritual of infusing the image with prana, or divine presence.

(Malhotra, 2011. Ch.V)

As we saw above, for the French metaphysician, sensible symbolism, in comparison to discursive language, has the advantage of representing multiple levels of reality simultaneously. Symbols existing in all spiritual traditions around the world such as the “cross” or “heart” emanate and indicate the unity of the Primordial Tradition, which in turn is also referred to as the “axis of the world”. In the end, everything becomes a symbol of this great supra-historical source:

[…] if symbolism in its essence conforms strictly to the ‘divine plan’ and if the Sacred Heart is the centre of the being, both really and symbolically, this symbol of the Heart, in itself or in its equivalents, must occupy a central places in all doctrines issuing more or less directly from the Primordial Tradition.

(Guénon, 1995, p. 16-17)

The Symbolism of the Cross and the Multiple States of Being, two of his main books, formed the geometric and metaphysical representation of total reality on top of which stands ineffable Non-Being or Infinity, the absolute lack of all limitation, the Supreme.

It is important here to draw attention to the logical devices used by Guénon while operating his symbolic science: he often makes use of hypothetical reasoning, intending to suggest connections, ambiguously and without definite support, as when he refers to the symbol of the heart both “in itself “and” in its equivalents”- which is curious, since we could even include there symbols different from the heart (whenever he considers them equivalent), emptying the very notion of symbolism; expressions such as “both really and symbolic” are also peculiar, as it is difficult to understand what is the advantage of claiming that the Sacred Heart is both symbolically and “really” the center of the human being, if the sensible image of the heart is the symbol and not the symbolized (as though the symbol could point to a false symbolized?).

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[1] This point of view was probably reinforced by his acquaintance with the book “The Arctic Home of the Veda” by G.B Tilak. Guénon considered Tilak a model of a “non-westernized Hindu” fighting colonial forces.

[2] A Shaivist would perhaps notice here that Guénon fails to conceive a clear distinction between sṛṣṭi-śakti (power of creation) and anugraha-śakti (power of revelation) and also tirodhāna-śakti (power of occultation), everything seems to be accomplished by means of some kind of symbolical procession.

René Guénon, Sameness And Digestion Of Dharma – Part 2

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II- Departing from Dharma

The question of reincarnation

Guénon openly departs from dharmic doctrines sometimes, as in the case of punarjanman (reincarnation), the existence of which he denied. His point of view was also endorsed over the years by also famous Sri Lankan traditionalist Ananda Coomaraswamy, to whom he wrote the following in 1936 comparing the belief in reincarnation to belief in fantastic animals:

[…] the belief in reincarnation can be considered partly due to the misunderstanding of the symbolic meaning of some expressions. Although the approximation may be odd, I’m thinking here of another fact that has exactly the same cause: It’s the belief in existence some monsters and fantastic animals, which are only ancient misunderstood symbols.

(cited by “Des Vertues, Un Combat,” 2010)

Supported by his theory of multiple states of being, he not only affirms that reincarnation is metaphysically impossible, but also denies that it had ever been seriously taught in India by any traditional master. When pressed against evidence Guénon would normally assert that reincarnation was purely symbolical. That reincarnation (also translated indifferently as rebirth, metempsychosis or transmigration) is really (not symbolically) taught in shastras is so obvious that no special effort would be required to prove Guénon was wrong, but as it is necessary to establish it beyond doubt, the point of view of a traditional master like Vātsyāyana on the subject might prove useful.

Rebirth or transmigration is connection again with the body, the senses, the mind and cognition. Whether here or elsewhere. The condition of recurrent births and deaths has no beginnig and ceases on the attainment of release

(Gotama, 2003, p.29)

If confronted with the above excerpt, Guénon would probably state, as he normally does, that “metempsychosis” was meant instead, which for him represented mere transmission of psychic residues, without a real being participating in the process. So, we have to put it in a clearer way in the words of Udayanācārya:

This Birth and Death (samsara),—does it belong to the Soul or to the Mind? If by ‘samsara’ you mean the action (of entering and moving off from the bodies), then it belongs to the Mind; as it is the Mind that actually moves, the ‘samsarati’; on the other hand, if by samsara you mean experiencing (of pleasure and pain) [as it really is], then it belongs to the Soul[3], as it is the Soul that experiences pleasure and pain.

(Jha, 1984, p.280)

Guénon would again retort that Nyāya, being a dualistic point of view, does not comprehend the superior non-dual approach of Ātman as identical to Paramātman. Anyway, if what he meant in the first place, was that the Paramātman does not reincarnate, that is an obvious statement for all Hindu darshanas, including nyāya, and the issue could have been sorted out if he had resorted to the concept of Jivâtman (which does not mean mere psychic residues), or to the distinction between vyāvahārika-satya (practical truth) and pāramārthika satya (absolute truth) in the case of Vedanta; he preferred to maintain things ambiguous and obscure when clear

conceptual distinctions were easily available.

No traditional teacher ever implies, as Guénon does, that reincarnation is only symbolically meant, or that it is about transmission of psychic residues with no “real being” behind it, and nobody would suggest that Paramātman reincarnates; so his whole point is senseless, and it is quite strange that Guénon could manage to be so evasive on such a key subject for so many years. To silence all objections, here is the way a Vedantic like Swami Shivananda, following strictly the commentary of Ādi Śaṅkarācārya on the Brahma-Sūtra-s, handles this issue:

The Jiva (individual soul), along with the pranas, the mind and the senses leaves his former body and obtains a new body. He takes with himself avidya, virtues and vicious actions and the impressions left by his previous births.

(Shivananda, 2008, p.307)

Guénon is also quite dubious on the technical subject of apūrva, which is understood traditionally as the efficient cause of reincarnation. He seems undecided on whether it is cosmical or individual and curiously seems to imply post-mortem subsistence of individuality:

The apurva can be regarded, on the one hand, as remaining attached to the being which has performed the action, since it is henceforth a constituent element of its individuality considered in its non-corporeal aspect, and will continue to exist as long as the individuality itself; on the other hand, it may also be regarded as quitting the limits of that individuality in order to enter the realm of potential energies of the cosmic order.

(Guénon, 1945, p. 274)

Again, had he resorted to traditional sources, he would certainly find a definite answer. As the one given by Vātsyāyana:

[…] To say that the production and destruction of entities constitute pretyabhava [reincarnation] is to deny the moral law according to which one experiences the consequences of one’s own acts. While the doctrine of total annihilation would render the teachings of the rishis meaningless.

(Gotama, 2003, p. 288)

Methodological and epistemological issues

Guénon’s work is internally cohesive, almost geometrical in its consistency[4], but I would say his style and methodology would draw him closer to philosophers such as René Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz than to traditional Hindu masters and their methods of instruction or exposition. When it comes to doctrine, traditional ācārya-s, unlike Guénon, hardly ever put themselves in a majestic impersonal point of view, as if revealing non-human mathematical truths, nor do they refuse to engage in dialectical process, what is widely evidenced by the rich tradition of debate in Indian soil. Even among the staunchest non-dualists, Hindu logic never works with pure ideal realities or symbolical lucubrations, without collaboration of pramāṇa-s[5].

In the traditional Hindu methodolgy, as Vātsyāyanācārya explains (Gotama, 2003, p.18), each of the five members of Nyāya (logical procedure) corresponds to stages by which supernatural truth is established: śabda, product of supernatural experience, is, as far as reason is concerned, mere possibility. Inference (anumāna) brings this truth to empirically-supported rational domain. Illustration (dṛṣṭānta) offers a proper empirical representation, analogy (upamāna) affirms finally the relation between word and object and conclusion ensues. This acid-washing of siddhānta (doctrine) is generally known as tarka, and that is how manana, or reasoning of traditional doctrines, is accomplished.

Guénon demonstrates a precarious understanding of darśana-s[6] other than Vedānta, of which he also has a very idiosyncratic interpretation. He can make very general and even wrong statements about doctrines of these schools[7]. His own method sometimes was no better than psychoanalytic free association: in The Lord of the World, for instance, he puts forward very bold theories, only supported by symbolical association and unverified legends such as the one, of the alleged existence of the city of Agartha in central Asia[8]. All sorts of non-verifiable associations are thereof made: symbolical correlations between the Grail with Hindu amṛta, Shiva and Lucifer, as well as suggestions of mysteries, supposedly unknown to any “exoteric” authority[9]. Here we have a demonstration of his usual methodology where he rhetorically implies the conformity of Christianity to the Primordial Traditional:

After the death of Christ, according to the legend, the Holy Grail was brought to Britain by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. Then began to unfold the history and exploits of the Knights of the Round Table […]. The Round Table was destined to receive the Grail when one of the Knights should have succeeded in winning it and bringing it from Britain to Armorica; and this Table was also probably a very ancient symbol, one of those associated with the idea of the above mentioned spiritual centres. The circular form of the Table relates to the ‘zodiacal cycle (itself a symbol which deserves special study) by the presence around it of twelve principal personages, a particularity which is to be found in the make-up of all the centres in question. That being so cannot one see in the number of twelve Apostles one sign among a multitude of others, of the perfect conformity of Christianity with the Primordial Tradition? (Guénon, 1995. p.19)

This is basically the essence of his methodology. When he is criticized, he simply dismisses criticism as mere “profane” perspective and, in his usual majestic plural, he puts himself in a privileged position of interpreting all religions while not being criticized by any:

Being absolutely independent of all that is not pure and selfless truth, and determined to remain so, we simply propose to say things as they are, without the least concern to please or displease anyone; we have nothing to expect from each other, we do not even expect that those who could benefit from the ideas we formulate to be grateful to us in any way, and, moreover, that matters very little to us. We warn once again that we are not willing to let ourselves be shut up in any of the ordinary frameworks, and that it would be perfectly futile to seek to apply any label to us, for, among those which prevail in the Western world, there is none that suits us in reality.(Cited by “Les Classiques des Sciences Sociales”, n.d.)“[10]

Soteriological issues

Guénon also affirms the existence of the Devil, which is an original doctrine from non-dharmic resources:

The devil is not only terrible, he is often grotesque; let each one take this according to his own understanding. But as to those who may be astonished or scandalized by such an assertion, let them refer to the absurd details inevitably found in every account of sorcery and then relate these to the inept manifestations which spiritists foolhardily attribute to the ‘disincarnate’.

(Guénon, 2001d, p.262)

When he does rejects a “personal” or “religious” Devil, it not because this (theological) point of view is considered false, but because it is not his own, metaphysical and symbolical:

These remarks make possible an understanding of what we have said regarding ‘wandering influences’, some of which can truly be taken as ‘satanic’ or ‘demonic’, whether one regards them as pure and simple forces or as the means of action used by certain beings in the proper sense.Either may be true according to a given case, and we must leave the door open to all possibilities. Yet this changes nothing as to the intrinsic nature of the influences in question. This shows to what degree we intend to abstain from all theological discussion, which is not to say that we do not fully recognize the legitimacy of this point of view.

(Guénon, 2001d, p. 261)

And also:

Every theological truth can be transposed into metaphysical terms; but the reverse does not hold true, for there are metaphysical truths not susceptible of translation into theological terms.

(Guénon, 2001d, p.260)

In The Reign of Quantity he adopts frankly apocalyptic tones, associating the rise of Individualism, Modernity and even theories like Vitalism and Psychoanalysis to what he called “counter-initiation”, which is the instrumental procedure for operation of evil in the world. Moreover, he seems to have even some inside information on how those procedures and strategies take place:

It is known that there are in the world a certain number of ‘repositories’ of influences, the distribution of which is certainly no matter of chance, serving only too well the designs of the ‘powers’ responsible for the whole modern deviation;

(Guénon, 2001c, p.184)

Much of Guénon’s is based on the expectation of the end of Kali-Yuga and the consequent beginning of a new cosmic cycle, which for him is very near (also differing from classical shastric view on the subject). That is one of the reasons why he emphasizes the major importance of so called “intellectual elite.”

[…]we have in fact entered upon the last phase of the Kali- Yuga, the darkest period of this ‘dark age’, the state of dissolution from which it is impossible to emerge otherwise than by a cataclysm, since it is not a mere readjustment that is necessary at such a stage, but a complete renovation. Disorder and confusion prevail in every domain and have been carried to a point far surpassing all that has been known previously, so that, issuing from the West, they now threaten to invade the whole world.

(Guénon, 2001b, p.17)

Guénon’s understanding of the “cosmic cycles” is also very peculiar and serves to show his high regards for Islam in detriment of Hinduism, as when he approvingly cites his traditionalist colleague Schuon in a footnote on the following:

[…]one is within one’s rights to say that the expansion of an orthodox foreign tradition, Islam, seems to indicate that Hinduism itself no longer possesses the full vitality or actuality of a tradition in integral conformity with the conditions of a given cyclic period. This meeting of Islam, which is the last possibility issuing from the Primordial Tradition, and of Hinduism which is doubtless the most direct branch of that Tradition, is moreover very significant and leads to very complex considerations”

(Schuon as cited in Guénon, 1995, p.112)

In the same page Guénon endorses the soteriological rule of Islam as the “Seal of Prophecy” which the concept used by Muslims to emphasize the superiority of their own religion.

The fulfillment of a cycle, as we have envisaged it, should have a certain correlation in the historical order with the encounter of the two traditional forms that correspond to its beginning and its end, and which have respectively Sanskrit and Arabic for sacred languages – the Hindu tradition insofar as it represents the most direct heritage of the Primordial Tradition, and the Islamic tradition as “Seal of Prophecy” and therefore the ultimate form of traditional orthodoxy for the present cycle.

(Guénon, 1995, p. 113)

One has no choice here but to understand that, for Guénon, Islam was somehow destined “Divine Will” to overcome and supersede Hinduism in its own land, for in Guénon’s Kali Yuga, Hinduism, legitimate as it could be, was already a weakened tradition. That understanding is actually very coherent with his decision to adopt Islam and not Hinduism after all.

Dogma and Sanātana Dharma

For Guénon, dogma was no more than a sentimental expression of a metaphysical truth:

The word “dogma” applies properly speaking to a religious doctrine; without at present going further into the special characteristics of such a doctrine, we can say that though it is obviously intellectual as regards its profounder meaning, it does not belong to the purely intellectual order, for if it did so, it would not be religious but metaphysical. It follows then that this doctrine, in taking on the special form that is adapted to its point of view, must undergo the influence of extra-intellectual elements, ‘for the most part of a sentimental order; the very word “beliefs” which is commonly used to denote religious conceptions clearly reveals this character.

(Guénon, 1945, p. 103)

This understanding enables him to adhere, for instance, to any Christian dogma without feeling the need to reject Islamic principles, for instance:

But who would dare to maintain that the eternal Word and His historical, earthly and human manifestation are not really one and the same Christ under different aspects? We touch here on the relationships between the temporal and the timeless, and perhaps it is not appropriate to insist further on this; for these are precisely those things which symbolism alone can express in the measure that they are expressible.

(Guénon, 1995, p. 24)

He also believes the term Sanātana Dharma could be used equally to define Hinduism, Christianity, Islam and Judaism

In a certain sense, all these various traditional are principally contained in Sanātana Dharma. For they are so many regular and legitimate adaptations of it. […] And in another sense, inverse en complementary to this, they all contain Sanātana Dharma as something most inner and ‘central’ in them. […] This being true for all traditional forms, it would be a mistake to wish to assimilate Sanātana Dharma purely and simply with one among them, whatever that might be. Moreover, even the Hindu tradition, in terms of which it actually presents itself to us.

(Guénon, 2002, p. 96).

He observes that there can be a “relative” or “absolute” definition to Sanātana Dharma, but he did not derive all the consequences of that division: if Hinduism is Sanātana Dharma in a primary sense, he should declare that other traditions should align themselves with the principles of Hinduism in order to find their true nature again.

[…] the followers of each of the other traditions could also say, in the same sense and with the same right, that their own tradition is Sanātana Dharma. Such an affirmation would always be true in a relative sense, although it is obviously false in the absolute sense.

(Guénon, 2002, pg.97)

Sameness and digestion of Dharma

Guénon’s game-changing interpretation of Modernity contributed to the conversion of not few intellectuals and served to mitigate the Western crisis of religion versus science. He offered a new narrative, powerful enough to justify “being religious” in today’s circumstances. Many readopted their faiths, now reinterpreting them in terms of “traditionalism.” He also contributed to the digestion of Dharma by portraying religions as equivalent branches with the same occult Primordial Tradition roots.

René Guénon, Sameness And Digestion Of Dharma – Part 3

1 Comment / Digestion, Giuliano Morais, Reversing the Gaze

Author: Giuliano Morais.

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III – Some responses

1) Symbolical unity and Primordial Traditional: Hindu teachings, while making use of symbols, do not invest them with the garb of reality itself. Symbols can be used in poetics, aesthetics and even as directed means of upāsana, as instructed by each tradition or guru, but there is no “tracking” of the Absolute or of some “Primordial Traditional” by means of symbolical operations of human intellect, nor is symbolism an independent pramāna in itself.

2) Unproven authority: He writes from a point of view of śruti or revelation, invested with impersonal authority rather than engaging dialectically with traditional opponents or at least offering evidences of being an āpta, an authorized exponent of Dharma. Not only that, but without offering sufficient evidence, he puts himself in a position to judge all spiritual traditions “from above”.

3) History centrism: Guénon indeed asserts, very emphatically, that the metaphysical point of view is superior to the historical one. Nonetheless, in practice, his discourse has a consistent concern and shows a diligent effort and appeal towards the Western apocalyptic imaginary of the End of the World, even proclaiming erroneously that the end of Kali Yuga was near. He also does not reject Christian historical dogma.

4) Evil as an active force: His diagnosis of an active principle of evil as efficient cause of Modern problems – with many “centers of power” distributed all over the world, controlling history and fighting all “traditions” by means such as counter-initiation – has no support in dharmic sources, and would actually indicate traces of synthetic unity and anxiety of difference (Malhotra, 2011, Ch. IV) typical of Abrahamic religions.

5) Reincarnation as a symbol: His misunderstanding of punarjanman as purely symbolical does have the possibility of harmonizing conflicting doctrines among Abrahamic and dharmic traditions, but this conciliation, as we have seen, does not come from a dharmic standpoint. Actually it directly benefits the other side, whose dogmas are never compromised.

6) Wrong use of the term Sanātana Dharma: Sanātana Dharma implies a particular understanding of time and eternity which is not present in historical spiritual traditions[11]. I can use here the simile (not a symbol) of a tree standing in the middle of a field. The field is burned from time to time, and with it the tree is also turned to ashes, only the roots remaining underground. After the fire ceases, the tree always grows back.

The tree is Dharma, while its root, branches and trunk are “different manifestations of Dharma”. The “tree-ness” residing in the tree is eternity, and the fire is pralaya, the cosmic dissolution. Dharma, as the manifested tree, remains from the beginning to the end of a universe, then recoils back into non-manifested form (root), only to become manifest again in the next cycle. This process repeats itself without beginning or end, and, as “tree-ness”, Dharma remains eternal.

Therefore Sanātana Dharma does not imply only eternity or Platonic “ideas”, but it is also perennial continuity in time through manifested and non-manifested stages. That is why Dharma cannot be founded on a particular historical point, nor can it be born as a new tree just from contact of the parts with “tree-ness”. Let us see the alternatives:

a) Christianity and Islam do have a connection with the tree of Dharma, in which case we must admit some sort of secret connection of which not even authorities of those traditions are aware, only Guénon and his occult sources.

b) Christianity and Islam, while being Dharma’s branches or leaves, have a direct connection with the eternal “tree-ness”, which is impossible, as isolated parts do not support a universal: branches and leaves have an eternal connection with branch-ness and leaf-ness respectively.

c) Christianity and Islam are newly created trees, therefore, they are not “Sanātana”, as they originate at some point in time.

d) There are many perennial trees, which goes against the so called unity of Guénon’s “Primordial Tradition” and also would not be accepted by any scripture of any of those traditions.

7) Acceptance of Christian dogma: as dogmas are supposedly sentimental expressions of metaphysical truths, Guénon thought it possible to accept them indirectly via metaphysical or symbolical understanding. However, he does not actually deny the historical validity of the meaning of “incarnation”, and consequently, the singularity of such historical phenomenon. He ends up with an ambiguous standing: if he does accept incarnation as the dogma explains it, he has to accept its exclusivity, if he does not accept the exclusivity, he rejects the dogma. If he says the historical aspect of the dogma is sentimental, he should have clearly declared which part he understood as sentimental.

IV – Conclusion

René Guénon did not have the initiative to openly declare that spiritual traditions like Christianity or Islam could not handle the Crisis of Modernity and that the solution would be to correct their wrong history-centered dogmatic understanding of reality by returning to the principles of Sanātana Dharma. Reading between the lines, one can see he had this knowledge. By benevolence, discarding malice or ill-intention, let us say he possibly made another choice, maybe a “historical” choice[12].

Whatever may be the case, only Sanātana Dharma has the right technologies to guide the world to a new stage after Modernity. That is why, from Guénon’s perspective, the whole phenomenon of Modernity appears as insurmountable, demonic and apocalyptic. Guénon is part of the collective anxiety and the chain reactions entailed by the end of a civilization. He has positive points in comparison with esoteric and new-agers, but his choices and mistakes definitely contributed to further the Western digestion of Hinduism and to reinforce of the narrative of “sameness”, even though at a very sophisticated level.

Editorial Note: The author acknowledges his debt to the work of Rajiv Malhotra on his seminal Theory of Digestion, and in particular the extensive discussions the author has had with him regarding René Guénon. The author was given privileged access to an entire book manuscript developed by Patricia Renaud and Renaud Fabbri on a comparison between René Guénon and Hindu dharma. That book was funded by Infinity Foundation and the foundation is its copyright holder. The book was the brainchild of Rajiv Malhotra in the 1990s when he explained digestion to Patricia Renaud and Renaud Fabbri and they decided to take it up as a topic of research leading to the book. Many ideas of Mr Malhotra and the authors of that book have been incorporated in this series of articles.

Giuliano Morais is Brazilian translator and teacher, follower of the shakta path, he has been studying Hindu traditions and thought for more than 15 years. He understands that Sanatana Dharma has principles and technologies, View More

References: –

[11] Guénon could not even claim to have a different understanding, as he himself makes a very precise distinction between eternity and perennity, as published in the Chapter XI of his Studies in Hinduism: “Indeed, the term Sanātana implies an idea of duration, while eternity, on the contrary, is essentially ‘non-duration’” As he does understand this concept and cannot be accused of ignorance, it is difficult not to understand in that negligence or even malice.

[12] Which would also be quite an issue for an alleged supra-historical work.