

Against Blavatsky: Rene Guenon's Critique of Theosophy

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Theosophical Society - Richard Smoley is editor of *Quest: Journal of the Theosophical Society in America* and a frequent lecturer for the Theosophical Society. Over the past two decades, academic scholars have begun to investigate the long-neglected field of esoteric spirituality. They have singled out five figures as the chief guiding lights of Western esotericism in the twentieth century: H.P. Blavatsky, Rudolf Steiner, C.G. Jung, G.I. Gurdjieff, and Rene Guenon. Of these, Guenon is by far the least-known. Reclusive and contemptuous of the modern world, he did little to make himself famous. Nevertheless, even before his death in 1951, he had become a cult figure, and over the last half-century his influence has only increased—particularly among those who regard contemporary civilization as a spiritual blight.

Guenon's thought resembles Theosophy in certain important ways. They share a common emphasis on a central esoteric teaching that underlies all religions, and they even agree about many aspects of this teaching. Nonetheless, Guenon was extremely vitriolic about Theosophy and denounced it at great length in his 1921 book *Le theosophisme: Histoire d'une pseudo-religion*. This work was not published in English until 2003, when it appeared under the title *Theosophy: History of a Pseudo-Religion*. This translation is not entirely accurate. The original French title refers not to "theosophy" (*theosophie*) but "theosophism" (*theosophisme*), a word coined by Guenon to suggest that Blavatsky's Theosophy had nothing to do with genuine theosophy as practiced by the Western esoteric traditions but was a counterfeit, and a dangerous one at that.

Born in Blois, France, in 1886, Guenon had a conventional education in mathematics. In his youth he began to explore occult currents in Paris and was initiated into esoteric groups connected with Freemasonry, Taoism, Advaita Vedanta, and Sufism. Like Blavatsky, he held that there was a universal esoteric tradition that was the source of all religions, but he differed very much with her about what constituted a genuine continuation of this lineage. Theosophy, he insisted, was not. Why was he so contemptuous of it? The question becomes more perplexing when we learn that Guenon was first introduced to esotericism by Gerard Encausse (better known under his pseudonym Papus), who was a correspondent of HPB and cofounder of the Theosophical Society in France (Quinn, 111).

Ironically, one reason for Guenon's attitude may be that he and Blavatsky were in many ways not so far apart. In fact scholar Mark Sedgwick, whose book *Against the Modern World* is the best introduction to the impact of Guenon's thought, sees Theosophy as one of Guenon's chief influences (Sedgwick, 40—44). We have already seen that Blavatsky and Guenon agreed about the existence of a universal esoteric tradition. They both made liberal use of Sanskrit terms in expounding their ideas, and they agreed about

the dangers of spiritualism, arguing that spiritualistic seances do not enable one to make contact with dead individuals but merely with their astral shells, which have been shucked off as the spirit ascends to higher planes. Guenon devoted an entire book, *L'erreur spirite* ("The Spiritist Error"), to this issue. In it he writes: "It is well known that what can be evoked [in a seance] does not at all represent the real, personal being, which is henceforth beyond reach because it has passed to another state of existence...but only the inferior elements that the individual has in a manner left behind in the terrestrial domain following the dissolution of the human composite which we call death" (Guenon, *L'erreur spirite*, 54—55).*

This bears more than a faint resemblance to Theosophical teaching. Guenon himself quotes Blavatsky as saying that spiritualist phenomena are frequently due to astral elementals or "shells" that have been left behind by the departed. Nonetheless, he insists that the Theosophists are wrong: "The Theosophists believe that a 'shell' is an 'astral cadaver,' that is, the remains of a decomposing body. And, apart from the fact that this body is thought not to have been abandoned by the spirit for a more or less long time after death, rather than being essentially tied to the 'physical body,' the very conception of 'invisible bodies' seems to us to be greatly in error" (Guenon, *L'erreur spirite*, 57). While Guenon admits that the distinction between his view and Blavatsky's is a subtle one, it is difficult to see any distinction at all except in terminology. But this is a common problem in most forms of thought, particularly esotericism: the smaller a difference is, the more vehemently one insists upon it. The history of religion offers countless examples.

Guenon also contends that HPB talked out of both sides of her mouth regarding spiritualism. And in fact she was deeply engaged in the spiritualist movement in the early 1870s. Speaking of her later claims that mediums are generally either fraudulent or seriously imbalanced, he writes: "It seems that she was faced with the following dilemma: either she was only a fake medium at the time of her 'miracles clubs' or else she was a sick person" (Guenon, *Theosophy*, 115—16). Blavatsky's supporters may reply that she always intended to sift the truth from the false in spiritualism—to acknowledge the reality of life after death and even to a degree of spiritualistic phenomena, while showing that these are of a low and sinister kind. One letter of hers, dated to 1872, says, "[The spiritualists'] spirits are no spirits but spooks—rags, the cast off second skins of their personalities that the dead shed in the astral light as serpents shed theirs on earth, leaving no connection between the reptile and his previous garment" (Blavatsky, *Letters*, 1:20). Another letter, however, written in 1875, contends, "Those that seek to overturn the truth of Spiritualism will find a furious Dragon in me and a merciless exposé whoever they are" (Blavatsky, *Letters*, 1:101).

What HPB really meant to accomplish by participating in the spiritualist movement is hard to fathom, especially since anyone wanting to collect contradictory statements in her writings, on this subject or on

many others, could readily do so. Nevertheless, her attitudes toward spiritualism in the last fifteen years of her life are hard to distinguish from Guenon's.

It is quite another matter when it comes to two other Theosophical doctrines: karma and reincarnation. In both cases, Guenon insists that the Theosophical view is a pure fabrication and has nothing to do with genuine Eastern teaching: "The idea of reincarnation . . . , like that of evolution, is a very modern idea; it appears to have materialized around 1830 or 1848 in certain French socialist circles" (Guenon, *Theosophy*, 104). This may be true of the term "reincarnation" per se, but the teaching can be found in the West as far back as Pythagoras, and is discussed at length in Plato's *Republic* and *Phaedo*, not to mention its long heritage in Hinduism and Buddhism.

Guenon denies all this. Regarding the transmigration of human souls into animals, he says:

In reality, the ancients never conceived of such transmigration, any more than they did of a human into other humans, which is how one might define reincarnation. There are expressions, more or less symbolic, that could give rise to such misunderstandings, but only when one does not know what they are really saying, which is this: There are psychic elements in the human being which separate themselves after death, and which can pass into other living beings, human or animal, although this has no more importance than the fact that, after the dissolution of the same individual, the elements that made him up can be used to make up other bodies (Guenon, *L'erreur spirite*, 206—07).

Unfortunately, the ancient accounts of reincarnation say nothing of the kind. At the end of the *Republic*, Plato tells the myth of Er, a soldier who has a kind of near-death experience in which he learns the fates of individuals after death (Plato, *Republic*, 614b-621d). In one famous passage, Er sees the dead choosing their lots for new incarnations. Odysseus, the shrewdest of men, refuses lives of riches and honor and instead chooses that of an ordinary citizen. However "symbolic" this story might be, it is hard to see how it might accommodate itself to a theory like Guenon's. One could make the same point about a similar myth in the *Phaedo* and about the teachings of the Orphic and Pythagorean mysteries, to the extent that we know anything specific about them.

Guenon's own views about the fate of the spirit after death are complex. Defining transmigration in what he considers the true sense, he contends, "It is not a matter of a return to the same state of existence....but on the contrary, the passage of the being to other states of existence, which are defined...by completely different conditions from those to which the human being is subject....Whoever speaks of transmigration is essentially speaking about a change of state. This is what all the traditional

doctrines of the East teach, and we have many reasons to believe that this was also the teaching of the 'mysteries' of antiquity; it is the same thing even in heterodox doctrines such as Buddhism" (Guenon, *L'erreur spirite*, 211).**

Guenon conceives of existence as a kind of three-dimensional grid, with a vertical axis transecting an infinite number of horizontal planes. The vertical axis represents the Self, the true essence of a given being; each of the innumerable horizontal planes constitutes a separate plane of manifestation. Human life on earth is only one of these planes. A given being can manifest itself only once on any particular plane. Therefore you cannot be born more than once as a human.

Like much of Guenon's thought, this is rigorously precise and would seem to be irrefutable except for one thing. Guenon assumes that any given plane—such as earthly, human life—is static. But in fact there is nothing to prove that this is so. On the contrary, the earth and earthly life are themselves changing form ceaselessly, whether we look at them from the perspective of geological ages or even of human history. The possibilities for human life on earth today are not the same as they were in ad 1000 or will be in ad 3000. You can never be born onto the same earth twice, any more than you can be born as the same person twice.

Moreover, there is little evidence for Guenon's claim that his view is the true teaching of Hinduism and Buddhism. Teachers of these lineages frequently speak of reincarnation in ways that are far more similar to the Theosophical view than to his. The Dalai Lama writes: "There have been and are found at the present time, many incidents illustrating rebirth, from many countries in the world. From time to time small children talk about their work in a previous life and can name the family in which they lived. Sometimes it is possible to check such cases and so prove that the facts remembered by the child are not at all nonsense but are indeed true" (Dalai Lama, 28—29). This does not jibe with Guenon's claims that incarnation as a human takes place only once, yet the Dalai Lama's status as the exponent of a "traditional" doctrine is far higher than Guenon's own.

For a Hindu perspective, we might turn to Paramhansa Yogananda's classic *Autobiography of a Yogi*. Yogananda quotes his guru, Sri Yukteswar, as saying, "Beings with unredeemed earthly karma are not permitted after astral death to go the high causal sphere of cosmic ideas, but must shuttle to and fro from the physical and astral worlds only" (Yogananda, 428). The process of shuttling to and fro from the physical world would suggest that physical incarnation is not a once-only option. And again, the credentials of both Yogananda and Sri Yukteswar as transmitters of traditional teaching are far higher than Guenon's.

Guenon's denunciation of Theosophy includes its teachings on karma, "by which [say the Theosophists] the conditions of each existence are determined by actions committed during previous existences." He counters: "The word 'karma' quite simply means 'action' and nothing else. It has never had the sense of causality, and even less has it ever designated that special causation whose nature we have just indicated" (Guenon, *Theosophy*, 107-08). While it is true that karma can simply mean "action," as Guenon says, it is used in more senses than that.

Again, practically every discussion of these matters by a Hindu or Buddhist teacher agrees not with Guenon, but with Theosophy. Pandit Rajmani Tigunait of the Himalayan Institute writes, "Each school of Hindu philosophy accepts the immutable law of karma, which states that for every effect there is a cause, and for every action there is a reaction. A man performs his actions and receives remunerations for them" (Tigunait, 24). As we have seen above, Sri Yukteswar also uses the word in this sense.

Other charges of Guenon's are equally erroneous. In one footnote he remarks, "The Theosophists reproduce...a confusion of the 'uninitiated' orientalists: Lamaism has never been a part of Buddhism" (Guenon, *Theosophy*, 130). But here it is Guenon who is reproducing a confusion of the "orientalists"—the nineteenth-century European scholars who were the first to treat Eastern religion in an academic fashion. The term "Lamaism" does not exist, or have any equivalent, in Tibetan; in fact it is merely a name for Tibetan Buddhism that was invented by the orientalists. As far back as 1835, the scholar Isaac Jacob Schmidt declared, "It hardly seems necessary to remark that Lamaism is a purely European invention and is not known in Asia." Even by Guenon's time the term had fallen into disrepute (Lopez, 15). Elsewhere, challenging the existence of HPB's Mahatmas, Guenon insists, "the very word 'Mahatma' never had the meaning she attributed to it, for in reality the word indicates a metaphysical principle and cannot be applied to human beings" (Guenon, *Theosophy*, 39). This contention is refuted by the practice of all of India, which uses the word to refer to the revered Mohandas Gandhi.

Having seen all this, we are led to ask what prompted Guenon's assault. One answer lies in this statement: "If so-called Theosophical doctrine is examined as a whole, it is at once apparent that the central point is the idea of 'evolution.' Now this idea is absolutely foreign to Easterners, and even in the West it is of quite recent date" (Guenon, *Theosophy*, 97). He adds that the Theosophists regard reincarnation "as the means by which evolution is effected, first for each particular human and consequently for all humanity and even for the entire universe" (Guenon, *Theosophy*, 104). Moreover, he writes, "We have...presented the doctrine of evolution as constituting the very core of the entire Theosophical doctrine" (Guenon, *Theosophy*, 293).

Here Guenon stands on firmer ground. The concept of an evolving humanity in an evolving universe is very difficult to find in traditional Eastern texts. Blavatsky seems to be aware of this when she writes, "The day may come...when the 'Natural Selection,' as taught by Darwin and Herbert Spencer, will form only a part, in its ultimate modification, of our Eastern doctrine of Evolution, which will be Manu and Kapila esoterically explained" (*The Secret Doctrine*, I, 600; emphasis Blavatsky's). As the Theosophist Anna F. Lemkow observes, "Blavatsky integrated the idea of evolution with the venerable idea of the hierarchy of being" (Lemkow, 128; emphasis Lemkow's).

Before Blavatsky's time, while the doctrines of karma and reincarnation were known to the East and at least to some in the West, these ideas did not entail evolution. (One tantalizing exception appears in Rumi's famous lines "I died a mineral, and became a plant. I died a plant and rose an animal. I died an animal and I was man. Why should I fear? When was I less by dying?") That is, an individual monad was not thought to progress or evolve merely by virtue of going through endless incarnations; rather incarnation was viewed as a ceaseless whirligig that runs endlessly round and round and from which only moksha or liberation provides an exit. This is the gist of the Wheel of Life in Buddhist art, which shows the six lokas or realms—those of the gods, demigods, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, and denizens of hell—as a cycle of bondage whose chains are the Three Poisons of desire, anger, and obliviousness. By merit an individual may mount to the abode of the gods, with their abundance of pleasures; but when his good karma is exhausted, he falls back down to the hell realms and starts all over again. Only enlightenment can break the cycle. The Wheel of Fortune card in the Tarot contains a similar teaching.

Theosophy, by contrast, often portrays evolution as more or less automatic. By passing through countless incarnations throughout all the races, round, and globes, eventually each monad will attain divinity. Esoteric development is meant chiefly to accelerate this process for those who want to move faster—ideally with the goal of service to others. This version of evolution differs from the conventional Darwinian view in that the latter has no direction or purpose; it is merely the blind and adventitious result of adaptation to natural circumstances.

This integration of evolution with the esoteric doctrine may be the most seminal idea that Theosophy has introduced to world culture. It has been echoed and amplified by any number of thinkers—Henri Bergson, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Alfred North Whitehead, Sri Aurobindo—who have little or no connection with Theosophy per se. It has been picked up by the New Age movement and its present-day successors: The Reality Sandwich Web site, for example, has the tag line "Evolving consciousness, bite by bite."

Whether or not the Theosophical view of evolution is right, it seems harmless enough. Why should Guenon have hated it so intensely? For Guenon, tradition is the ne plus ultra of human life. He conceives of tradition as a spiritual hierarchy, with higher knowledge emanating from a now-hidden spiritual center to all of humankind through the "orthodox" traditions, among whom he includes (with many caveats and qualifications) the great world religions as well as certain other lines such as Freemasonry. In the present age, the Kali Yuga, the age of darkness, this transmission of traditional knowledge—the "doctrine," as he often styles it—has become almost completely blocked. Because this is the result of a long cosmic cycle, there is not a great deal one can do about it except wait for its end and in the meantime find refuge in one or another of the last holdouts of genuine tradition. Guenon took his own advice. In 1930 he moved to Cairo, where he converted to Islam and lived until his death in 1951.

For Guenon, the idea of evolution is pernicious because it denies the truth about the present era. We are not in an ascending arc toward greater consciousness; we are at the very nadir of a cycle, in what he called "the reign of quantity" (the title of his most famous book), and to pretend that we are evolving is more than deluded; it smacks of the handiwork of sinister—"counterinitiatic"—forces (see, e.g., Guenon, *Theosophy*, 272n.).

Still other charges of Guenon's against Theosophy are true, but most readers today would hesitate to take his side on the issues. He correctly contends, for example, that the Theosophical Society in India struggled against the caste system, adding, "Europeans generally display so much hostility to caste because they are incapable of understanding the profound principles on which it rests" (Guenon, *Theosophy*, 276). It is true that the Vedas, the Laws of Manu, and the Bhagavad Gita all validate the caste system on the grounds that each of the castes represent one of the bodily parts of the cosmic man. But there are probably not many today who would want to support such a system, no matter how many holy texts endorse it.

There are more elements to Guenon's critique of Theosophy than I can do justice to here, principally his denial of HPB's bona fides and of the existence of the Masters. Dealing with these issues—which have been explored from any number of angles—is beyond the scope of this article.

What can we make of all this? To begin with, Guenon deserves his place among the foremost esotericists of the twentieth century. His metaphysical writings—such as *Man and His Becoming* according to the Vedanta, *The Multiple States of Being*, *The Symbolism of the Cross*—are models of depth and lucidity in a field that is overgrown with profuse and meaningless verbiage. But in a curious way Guenon's greatest strength is also his greatest weakness. His view of "traditional" metaphysics is of a Cartesian clarity and precision (although Guenon would have hated the analogy). And yet it is precisely

this Cartesian precision that constitutes the chief problem with his thought. It cannot accommodate anything that does not fit into its elegantly geometrical grid, that partakes of the untidiness of ordinary reality; hence Guenon's relentless and indiscriminate hatred of the modern world. Everything of the Kali Yuga is reprehensible. There is nothing to do but hide in one of the last holdouts of "tradition" until a new age dawns.

It is not a hopeful vision; or rather its hope is based on the complete and utter ruin of the world that we see around us. Years ago one former Traditionalist (as Guenon's followers are often known) confessed to me that he had to drop it all because it was making him too depressed. Some Traditionalists have not been satisfied with Guenon's rather passive position and have sought to undermine what they see as the evil, materialistic milieu of the contemporary West. Thus in Europe Traditionalism has often fueled an impulse toward extreme rightist politics. One well-known Traditionalist, the Romanian scholar of comparative religions Mircea Eliade, supported the fascist Legion of the Archangel Michael (which he unsuccessfully tried to influence along Traditionalist lines) in pre—World War II Romania (Sedgwick, 113—15); another, the Italian nobleman Julius Evola, was not only connected with Mussolini's Fascist party (which he also tried to turn in a Traditionalist direction, equally unsuccessfully; he would later make the same attempt with Germany's Nazi party) but served as the doyen of far right elements in postwar Europe, some of them terrorists (Sedgwick, 98—109; 179—87). Still another form of Traditionalism penetrated to Russia during and after the Soviet era, where it mutated into an increasingly influential movement called Neo-Eurasianism, which holds that Russia should dominate the Eurasian land mass as a counterweight to American influence (Sedgwick, ch. 12).

Traditionalism has also fueled the anti-Western reaction in the Muslim world. While Traditionalism is an extremely obscure philosophy in the West, "in Iran and Turkey Traditionalism occupies a far more important position in public discourse than is the case elsewhere," as Mark Sedgwick observes on his blog. In prerevolutionary Iran, the Traditionalist scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr was a protegee of the Shah, under whose patronage Nasr established the Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy as a Traditionalist bastion. Nasr's Traditionalism backfired in his native country: it helped inspire the Islamic revolution of 1979, forcing him to emigrate to the U.S., where today he is a professor of Islamic studies at the George Washington University.

In the English-speaking world, Traditionalism has been more benign and less politicized. Its most prominent advocate in the U.S. is Huston Smith, author of *The World's Religions*, who published a book in 1976 entitled *Forgotten Truth: The Common Vision of the World's Religions* containing his exposition of Guenon's thought (including a chapter echoing Guenon's critique of evolution called "Hope, Yes; Progress, No.") In Britain, the most prominent adherent of this school is the Prince of Wales, who set up the Traditionalist-oriented Temenos Academy in 1990 as an umbrella for his cultural projects (Sedgwick, 214).

There has even been some recent interpenetration between Traditionalism and Theosophy: William Quinn's 1997 book *The Only Tradition* attempted to reconcile the two, while the Theosophical Society's imprint Quest Books has published *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, an important work by Frithjof Schuon, Guenon's most influential disciple.

Guenon remains unknown to the larger culture (Bill Moyers's 1996 PBS documentary on Huston Smith made no reference to

Guenon's influence on Smith), and yet his presence has been remarkably pervasive in the modern world he so despised. Today we must, I think, approach Guenon with the same clarity and discrimination that we must apply to any esoteric teaching—including Theosophy. He is a figure of uncommon brilliance, but contrary to his own self-portrayal, he does not come across as a figure of Olympian remoteness and serenity. He had a grudge against the world around him—one that was no doubt as much personal and psychological as it was spiritual—and following him too far in this direction will most likely lead to confusion and distress.

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*Quotations from this book are my own translations. An English version of this work entitled *The Spiritist Fallacy* was published in 2004.—R.S.

**Guenon's concept of orthodoxy is chiefly based on his understanding of the Hindu Vedanta (with many references to other traditions). Early in his career, he regarded Buddhism as "heterodox" (as it is from the Hindu perspective); although later in life he grudgingly granted it the status of a valid esoteric doctrine.