From the online library at www.worldwisdom.com

PREFACE

The respective worldviews of tradition and science frame the nature of reality in starkly contrasting ways, and in this divided house of our time, it is clear which of the two views has gained the greater share of our attention and respect. The rational, material, and secular worldview of modern science threatens to overwhelm the traditional human quest for the metaphysical and spiritual realities that underlie the grand design of the natural world. The ascending ladder of the multiple states of being no longer inspires the mind to reach beyond itself; the hierarchical orders of knowledge have vanished in the mist; the great cycles of the cosmos have been rolled up like an ancient scroll; and eternity and infinity have been reduced to the here-and-now of sensorial perception. An intellectual and moral haze hangs around our souls and obscures the promise of supreme Mystery that awakens human consciousness to a vision beyond the stars.

Already early in the twentieth century, René Guénon identified the deep chasm that separates ancient from modern, sacred from profane, and true knowledge from empirical science, a series of deep wounds such as can fully be healed only by the ending of this cosmic cycle and the beginning of another. Is it surprising that a person emerged to explain the nature of the great divide we experience as spiritual beings living in an anti-spiritual world of our own making? The answer must be a resounding "no" given the beneficence of Heaven. Do we, however, still have the capacity to appreciate the message of this voice that speaks to us from across the decades like a grand patriarch and true visionary? The answer must be an equally resounding "yes" given the native intelligence of the human heart.

The burden of our age lies in responding to Guénon's penetrating critique of the modern world and his assessment of its near total state of disarray. Guénon resurrected a truly universal vision that draws upon an ultimate mystery that was revealed at the beginning of time and which continues to haunt the dark night of the modern soul with its promise of unity and perfection. Are we in today's sophisticated world willing to heed the warning of this man whose message has struck a celestial cord, or do our hearts only feel the faint rhythms of a distant bell that will never be struck in reality?

* * *

In the 1970s, I came across a dusty little hardback with a cracked spine that had been published during the Second World War, entitled *The Crisis of the Modern World*.[1] The title struck me, like the sting of a whip, with its seemingly accusatory reference to the modern world, a world in which I had been raised to believe in the myth of a progressive, technological society that was on the brink of a brave new world. After briefly skimming its Foreword, I reached into my pocket for the dollar bill that would buy me this treasure.

In this short but intense book, Guénon invokes such notions as a "primordial spirituality" now "obscured", truths once "within the reach of all" that are now "hidden and inaccessible", and the "absence of principle" that now dominates today's anti-traditional worldview. It was as though someone had lowered a bucket into the well of my being allowing me to draw upon our deepest resources—the water of "pure spirituality" that lies within human nature. In buying the book I had unknowingly sown the seeds of a new understanding that in time would lead me out of the *cul de sac* of the modern worldview and point me down the path of a spiritual future.

Thirty years later, having read through the entire range of the Guénonian corpus, I feel that I have emptied myself of the false hopes and opaque dreams that the modern world offers the unsuspecting soul. I have immersed myself instead in a comprehensive body of traditional knowledge that is not as distant as thunder and as fragile as ashes—as are the promises of the modern world—but that exists as a living reality, open to those who partake in one of the orthodox pathways that lead back to God.

* * *

Guénon is considered one of the founders, together with Frithjof Schuon and Ananda Coomaraswarmy, of the "traditionalist" or

[1] London: Luzac & Co., 1942 (the original French edition was published in 1927). Its first chapter, entitled "The Dark Age", opens the present anthology of Guénon's writings. See Appendix 2 for a full listing of Guenon's works in the original French editions, along with a complete listing of English translations by Sophia Perennis publishers (the Collected Works of Rene Guenon series).

"perennialist" school of thinking that has flowered in the present era. Schuon wrote that "in a series of remarkable works" Guénon "took upon himself the task of interpreting the still living intellectuality of the East and more especially India",[2] while Rusmir Mahmutćehajić characterized him as the "bearer of a lost and forgotten knowledge, of the universal experience of movement along the *axis mundi*, of the ascent towards the Absolute".[3] Martin Lings, a close friend of Guénon during his final years in Cairo, revealed that he "was conscious of being a pioneer":[4] one who reminded the modern world of the need for orthodoxy through revelation, followed by a tradition that can preserve the revelation in some practical manner from generation to generation.

Much of Guénon's writing could be described as a meditation on the first principle that there must exist a non-individual, non-formal body of knowledge—a Primordial Tradition—which acts like the hub of a cosmic wheel whose spokes radiate outwards into the world of formal manifestation. Through this emphasis on metaphysical knowledge as the source material for the great world religions, Guénon prepared the way for an understanding of what Frithjof Schuon described as "the transcendent unity" of the world's religious traditions, wherein each religion casts the same universal truth within the mold of an individual form that suits a particular mentality and a given era. As to the question of the source or derivation of the metaphysical doctrines of this one Primordial Tradition, Guénon states emphatically that "The origin of tradition, if indeed the word 'origin' has any place at all in such a case, is as 'non-human' as is metaphysics itself".[5] In his mind, "metaphysical truth is eternal"; it is all the rest that is subject to change and contingency.

In the Guénonian worldview, the thinking man or woman is by nature a metaphysician and only later a scientist, teacher, or craftsman. As metaphysicians, we are equipped with inner faculties and senses not

[2] *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (London: Faber & Faber, 1953), p. 13.

[3] *Dialogue*, Sarajevo, 5 June 1997.

[4] "René Guénon", *Sophia*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Oakton, 1995, pp. 36-37.

[5] "Eastern Metaphysics", in *Studies in Hinduism* (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), p. 100.

only to navigate our way through "this world", but also to see things in themselves, just as our forefather Adam, by knowing the "names of things", knew their inner meaning. In principle and as a part of human nature, we can perceive this essential knowledge through the intellect with its capacity to capture directly and without question the nature of reality, a revelatory perception that paves the way for human consciousness to reach higher realms of spiritual awareness. Today, sadly, this capacity often goes unused, for we see the forms of things and want to know what they can do for us, but we are not interested in what lies beyond the outer shell. We see an object but no horizon, and we hear a myth that entertains us, but no meaning beyond the telling of the tale. We are aware of this man and that woman, but not of the soul and the spirit that vivifies the human form.

People today are searching for something, though they may not know what exactly. What they instinctively feel lacking within themselves is precisely what Guénon has endeavored to proclaim and preserve in the hearts of modern-day generations who need not be irrevocably excluded from the knowledge that, since time immemorial, has effectively resolved the mystery of life and provided a sense of wonder. Imagine a sacred wand that has the power to transform existential truths into celestial realities; picture a universal symbol that when gazed upon could raise human consciousness to a higher order of perception, or a word that when remembered could transform nature's images into archetypal verities of a transcendent order, truths that trace their source and ultimate origin to a Primordial Tradition that leads us back to the edge of time. What Guénon has accomplished is nothing less than the restatement of the traditional doctrines, rites of worship, and universal symbols and planted them as the seeds they were meant to be within the ground of the human soul.

* * *

Four adjectives come to mind that help characterize Guénon's unique style: exactness, intelligibility, harmony, and purity. His writing displays a mathematical precision on all planes, a clarity of language that bespeaks a spiritual intelligence, a harmony of composition that is remarkably consistent throughout his *oeuvre*, and a crystalline purity of style. Glimpses of Guénon the man may occasionally shine through his sober, intellectual style, but essentially he remains in the shadows,

allowing instead his spirit to shine through the art of his language and the depth of his perceptions.[6]

In order to give some definition and shape to the vast array of subjects Guénon wrote about, ranging from pure metaphysics to the symbolism of the Holy Grail, we have chosen to group selected excerpts of his writings under four headings: the Modern World, the Metaphysical World, the Hindu World, and the Traditional World. Each part has its own clear identity and relevance for today's readership, and taken together they provide a point of departure for readers who have enduring questions about the source and true nature of metaphysical knowledge, the role of the world religions in preserving the traditional doctrines, and the means and methods of spiritual realization. These sections may be described briefly as follows:

Part I: The Modern World—Guénon identifies a crisis of the modern world that, in keeping with the Hindu cosmological principle of cycles, could lead to the end of this particular world, and by doing so he touches a nerve that is near to breaking. For Guénon, the emergence of a spiritually darkened modern world is the natural result of a gradual process in which primordial spirituality and the truth to which it aspires "have become more and more hidden and inaccessible".[7] This downward spiral from higher to lower has created a host of antagonisms: Unity has become a multiplicity without center or purpose, while the sublimity of a wondrous spirituality has become a pedantic display of materialism dressed in the pretensions of rationality. The intellectual witnessing of divine ideas has become the cognitive search for the cold logic of facts. The multiple states of being and the hierarchical order of knowledge have been leveled. Spirit has become matter; quality has been reduced to quantity; pure intellectuality has degenerated into rationalism, or worse, sentimentality. The traditional sciences that found their legitimacy in the genuine sources of knowledge have disappeared just as surely as the prehistoric civilization of Atlantis vanished through cataclysm.

[6] For biographical details on René Guénon, see the Introduction by Martin Lings as well as Appendix 1.

[7] *The Crisis of the Modern World* (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001) p. 7.

Part II: The Metaphysical World—Already in his first work, *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines*, published in 1921 when he was only 36 years old, Guénon clearly identified the metaphysical foundation upon which his thought rests. With a certitude that he says is an "intrinsic characteristic" of intuitive knowledge, he affirms that metaphysics is "essentially the knowledge of the Universal"[8] which he further clarifies as a "knowledge of principles belonging to the universal order". The rest of Guénon's *oeuvre* can be seen as an identification of the universal principals that exist within the world of manifestation and form. In this perspective, which can be found particularly in the Hindu tradition, but also in Taoism and Buddhism, as well as in the more inward and esoteric dimension of Christianity and Islam, myths, rites, symbols, and the rhythms of nature are considered as "signs" of a higher order of knowledge or as echoes of celestial ideas that in themselves are beyond form and words. As Guénon at one point clearly states, "Metaphysics, because it opens out a limitless vista of possibilities, must take care never to lose sight of the inexpressible, which indeed constitutes its very essence."[9]

Part III: The Hindu World—Guénon understood Hinduism to represent "a traditional order purely and exclusively [that] has no need to depend upon any more or less exterior form of organization, or upon the support of any authority other than that of the doctrine itself".[10] Hinduism has the additional advantage of having arisen in a remote epoch in which the knowledge of metaphysical reality could be presented directly to the people of that time, living as they did in closer proximity to the Primordial Era that forms the velvet backcloth of Guénon's thinking. That Hinduism has come down into the modern era essentially unchanged, that it is a living tradition which still has the capacity to produce men and women of great sanctity, Guénon attributes, in part, to its having been founded and fully grounded upon the Vedic scriptures, and, in part, to the survival of the caste system in which the Brahmins are the chosen safeguarders of the Hindu way

[8] *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines* (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2002), p. 71.

[9] Ibid., p. 75.

[10] Ibid., p. 123.

of life. We are, however, reminded by Marco Pallis, one of Guénon's translators, that there is no question of Guénon choosing to write on a "special subject", and that his writing "might just as well serve as a key to the understanding of any of the traditional doctrines, or all of them. As for the Hindu doctrines themselves, . . . they have simply been selected to exemplify the principles and workings of a traditional civilization".[11]

Part IV: The Traditional World—We conclude this summative anthology with some of Guénon's writings on the root symbols that both enrich and transcend the individual religions. Considerations of space allow us to include only a representative sampling of his numerous articles on various aspects of symbolism; interested readers are encouraged to refer to the work *Symbols of Sacred Science*, a posthumous collection in which is spread out a rich tapestry of symbolic exegesis that actually forms the foundation for a universal and esoteric symbology.

In his writings on symbolism, Guénon places great emphasis on the fact that "in the strict sense [symbolism] is essentially synthetic 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, and which must not be confused with that lower intuition to which numerous contemporary philosophers so often refer".[12] He points out that man himself "is a symbol by the very fact that he is 'created in the image of God' (Gen. 1:26-27)" and reminds us that the sensible realities of nature are not to be used for purely human benefit, rather they should be seen as signposts of a higher domain and pictograms of a higher reality. "In nature the sensible can symbolize the supra-sensible; the natural order in its entirety can in its turn be a symbol of the divine order."[13] In seeing the sun lifting itself over the horizon, one can see not only a flaming orb but the Supreme Light of the Heavens and in the image of the cross one can witness at a glance the axis between the horizontal plane of this world and the vertical

[11] Translator's Preface to *Introduction to the Study of Hindu Doctrines.*

[12] *Symbols of Sacred Science* (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2004), pp. 7-8.

[13] Ibid., p. 10.

perspective that cuts through the cosmos with the sword of Heaven, thereby creating the duality of creation.

We must understand the things of this world as symbols of a higher order of reality, but the bud of understanding finds its fulfillment only in the flower of realization. We can surpass the domain of manifestation, "only through liberating ourselves entirely from the limiting conditions of individual existence by metaphysical realization".[14] Given this human requirement, Part IV also includes several of Guénon's articles on initiation in which he provides "spiritual direction", including a description of the function of a spiritual master and the obstacles an aspirant is likely to encounter on the way.

* * *

In his essay "Experience", Ralph Waldo Emerson writes that: "Man is a golden impossibility. The line he must walk is a hair's breadth. The wise through excess of wisdom is made a fool."[15] It is a stunning thought that fits well with the themes of Guénon's work. The miracle of the human being would be an "impossibility" without the creative hand of a Supreme Intelligence; the line dividing the traditional from the modern world is indeed finer than a hair's breadth and sharper than a razor's edge; and all the deductions of modern science would add up to nothing more than the "wisdom of a fool" without the guiding principles of metaphysics. René Guénon has shown us that the human being is an "impossibility" made possible by virtue of the golden thread of perennial truth that is woven into the very fabric of existence. Perhaps this mystery is the true point of departure in our journey of return to that mythical land beyond the celestial horizon, where "Spirit is still, but it sings sweetly and universes are born".[16]

John Herlihy

The text above is the Preface from the book *The Essential René Guénon: Metaphysics, Tradition, and the Crisis of Modernity*, by René Guénon, edited by John Herlihy.
© 2009 World Wisdom Inc. All Rights Reserved. For Personal Usage Only.

[14] *The Multiple States of Being* (Hilladale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2002), p. 23.

[15] *Essays* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1891), p. 59.

[16] *The Essential Swami Ramdas*, ed. Susunaga Weeraperuma (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2005), p. 18.