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INTRODUCTION[1]

As regards the early part of the life of René Guénon our knowledge is very limited because of his extreme reticence. His objectivity, which is one aspect of his greatness, made him realize the evils of subjectivism and individualism in the modern world, and impelled him perhaps too far in the opposite direction; he shrank at any rate from speaking about himself. Since his death book after book has been written about him and the authors have no doubt felt often extremely frustrated at being unable to find out various things and as a result, book after book contains factual errors.

What we do know is that he was born at Blois in France in 1886, that he was the son of an architect; he had a traditional Catholic upbringing and at school he excelled in philosophy and mathematics. But at the age of 21 he was already in Paris, in the world of occultism, which was in full ferment at that time, about 1906-1908. And the dangers of that world were perhaps counteracted for him by the fact that it was more open to wider perspectives. It seems to be about this time, in Paris, that he came in contact with some Hindus of the Advaita Vedanta school, one of whom initiated him into their own Shivaite line of spirituality. We have no details of time or place and he seems never to have spoken about these Hindus nor does he seem to have had further contact with them after one or two years. But what he learned from them is in his books and his meeting with them was clearly providential. His contact with them must have been extremely intense while it lasted. His books are just what was and is needed as antidote to the crisis of the modern world.

By the time he was nearly 30, his phenomenal intelligence had enabled him to see exactly what was wrong with the modern West, and that same intelligence had dug him out of it altogether. I myself remember that world in which and for which Guénon wrote his earliest books, in the first decade after the First World War, a monstrous world made impenetrable by euphoria: the First World War had been

[1] This is a transcript of a lecture entitled "René Guénon", given in the autumn of 1994 at the Prince of Wales Institute in London and reprinted in the first issue of *Sophia*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1995. ED

the war to end war. Now there would never be another war; and science had proved that man was descended from the ape, that is, he had progressed from apehood, and now this progress would continue with nothing to impede it; everything would get better and better and better. I was at school at that time and I remember being taught these things with just one hour a week being taught the opposite in religious lessons. But religion in the modern world had long before then been pushed into a corner. From its corner it protested against this euphoria, but to no avail.

Today the situation is considerably worse and considerably better. It is worse because human beings have degenerated still further. One sees far more bad faces than one did in the 1920s, if I may say so, at least, that is my impression. It is better because there is no euphoria at all. The edifice of the modern world is falling into ruin. Great cracks are appearing everywhere through which it can be penetrated as it could not be before. But it is again worse because the Church, anxious not to be behind the times, has become the accomplice of modernity.

But to return to the world of the twenties, I remember a politician proclaiming, as who would dare to do today, "We are now in the glorious morning of the world". And at this same time, Guénon wrote of this wonderful world, "It is as if an organism with its head cut off were to go on living a life which was both intense and disordered" (from *East and West* first published in 1924).

Guénon seems to have had no further contact with the Hindus and no doubt they had returned to India. Meantime, he had been initiated into a Sufi order which was to be his spiritual home for the rest of his life. Among the ills which he saw all around him he was very much preoccupied with the general anti-religious prejudice which was particularly rife among the French so-called intelligentsia. He was sure that some of these people were nonetheless virtually intelligent and would be capable of responding to the truth if it were clearly set before them. This anti-religious prejudice arose because the representatives of religion had gradually become less and less intelligent and more and more centered on sentimental considerations. In the Catholic Church especially, where the division of the community into clergy and laity was always stressed, a lay figure had to rely on the Church, it was not his business to think about spiritual things. Intelligent laymen would ask questions of priests who would not be able to answer these ques-

tions and who would take refuge in the idea that intelligence and pride were very closely connected. And so it is not difficult to see how this very anti-religious prejudice came into being especially in France.

Now Guénon put himself the question: Since these people have rejected Christianity would they be able to accept the truth when expressed in the Islamic terms of Sufism, which are closely related to Christian terms in many respects? He decided that they would not, that they would say that this is another religion; we have had enough of religion. However Hinduism, the oldest living religion, is on the surface very different from both Christianity and Islam, and so he decided to confront the Western world with the truth on the basis of Hinduism. It was to this end that he wrote his general *Introduction to the Study of Hindu Doctrines*. The French was published in 1921 to be followed in 1925 by what is perhaps the greatest of all of Guénon's books, *Man and His Becoming according to the Vedanta*.

He could not have chosen a better setting for his message of truth to the West because Hinduism has a directness which results from its having been revealed to man in a remote age when there was not yet a need to make a distinction between esoterism and exoterism, and that directness means that the truth did not have to be veiled. Already in Classical Antiquity the Mysteries, that is esoterism, were for the few. In Hinduism however they were the norm and the highest truths could be spoken of directly. There was no question of "Cast not your pearls before swine" and "Give not holy things to dogs". The sister religions of Hinduism, for example, the religions of Greece and Rome, have long since perished. But thanks to the caste system with the Brahmins as safeguarders of religion we have today a Hinduism which is still living and which down to this century has produced flowers of sanctity.

One of the points to be mentioned first is the question of the distinction which has to be made at the divine level and which is made in all esoterisms but cannot be made exoterically, that is, in religions as given to the masses today—the distinction between the Absolute and the beginnings therein of relativity. The Absolute which is One, Infinite, Eternal, Immutable, Undetermined, Unconditioned, is represented in Hinduism by the sacred monosyllable *Aum*, and it is termed *Ātmā*, which means Self, and *Brahma* which is a neuter word that serves to emphasize that it is beyond all duality such as male and female. And it is also termed *Tat* (That), just as in Sufism, the

Absolute is sometimes termed *Huwa* (He). Then we have what corresponds in other religions to the personal God, *Īshvara*, which is the beginning already of relativity, because it is concerned with manifestation, the term that Hindus use for creation, and creation is clearly the beginning of a duality—Creator and created. *Īshvara* is at the divine level, yet it is the beginning of relativity.

In all esoterism one finds the same doctrine. Meister Eckhart came into difficulties with the Church because he insisted on making a distinction between God and Godhead—*Gott und Gottheit*. He used the second term for the Absolute, that is for the absolute Absolute, and he used God for the relative Absolute. It could have been the other way around, it was just that he needed to make some difference. In Sufism one speaks of the Divine Essence and the Essential Names of God such as the One, the Truth, the All-Holy, the Living, and the Infinitely Good, *al-Rahmān*, which contains the roots of all goodness and which is also a name of the Divine Essence. Below that there are the Names of Qualities, like Creator, the Merciful, in the sense of one who has Mercy on others, and that is clearly the beginning of a duality. In every esoterism this distinction is made even at the level of the Divinity. It cannot exist below esoterism because it would result in the idea of two Gods; a division in the Divinity would be exceedingly dangerous in the hands of the mass of believers. The Divine Unity has to be maintained at all costs.

Now Guénon, in this book, traces with all clarity the hierarchy of the universe from the Absolute, from the personal God, down to the created logos, that is *buddhi*, which is the word which means intellect and which has three aspects—Brahmā (this time the word is masculine), Vishnu, and Shiva. Strictly speaking in the hierarchy of the universes these *deva*s (this is the same word linguistically as the Latin *deus*), have the rank of what we would call archangels. Hinduism is so subtle however that though they are created they can be invoked as Names of the Absolute because they descend from the Absolute and they return to the Absolute. They can be invoked in the sense of the Absolute *Brahma*, in the sense of *Ātmā*, in the sense of *Aum*.

The Hindu doctrine, like Genesis, speaks of the two waters. The Koran speaks of the two seas, the upper waters and the lower waters. The upper waters represent the higher aspect of the created world, that is, of the manifested world, corresponding to the different heavens in which are the different paradises. It is all part of the next world from

the point of view of this world. The lower waters represent the world of body and soul, and all is a manifestation of the Absolute.

In *Man and His Becoming According to the Vedanta*, Guénon, having traced the manifestation of man and having shown what is the nature of man in all its details, then proceeds to show how, according to Hindu doctrine, man can return to his absolute source. It ends with the supreme spiritual possibility of oneness with the Absolute, a oneness which is already there. A Brahmin boy at the age of eight is initiated by his father and the words are spoken into his ear, "Thou art That", meaning thou art the Absolute, *tat tvam asi.* This shows how far we are from religion as understood in the modern world. But that truth which is called in Sufism the secret, *al-sirr*, is necessary in all esoterism in the present day, otherwise it would not deserve the name esoterism.

Another aspect of Hinduism which made it the perfect vehicle for Guénon's message is the breadth of its structure. In the later religions it is as if Providence had shepherded mankind into a narrower and narrower valley: the opening is still the same to heaven but the horizontal outlook is narrower and narrower because man is no longer capable of taking in more than a certain amount. The Hindu doctrine of the *samsāra*, that is, of the endless chain of innumerable worlds which have been manifested, and of which the universe consists, would lead to all sorts of distractions. Nonetheless, when one is speaking of an Absolute, Eternal Divinity, the idea that that Infinitude produced only one single world in manifesting itself does not satisfy the intelligence. The doctrine of the *samsāra* does, on the other hand, satisfy, but the worlds are innumerable that have been manifested.

Another point in this respect is that Hinduism has an amazing versatility. It depends first of all on Divine Revelation. The Vedas and the Upanishads are revealed; the *Bhagavad Gītā* is generally considered as revealed but not the *Mahābhārata* as a whole, this "inspired" epic to which the *Gītā* belongs. In Hinduism this distinction between revelation, *sruti*, and inspiration, *smriti*, is very clearly made, as it also is in Judaism and in Islam: the Pentateuch, that is, the first five books of the Old Testament, were revealed to Moses, the Psalms to David, the Koran to Muhammad. That is something which Christians as a rule do not understand. They have difficulty in realizing, in the Old Testament for example, the difference between the Pentateuch and the Books of Kings and Chronicles which are simply sacred history, inspired no

doubt, but in no sense revealed. For Christians the revelation is Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh; the concept of "the Word made book", which is a parallel revelation, does not enter into their perspective.

Hinduism also has the *avatāra*s, and that a Christian can well understand, that is, the manifestations, the descents, of the Divinity. Of course a Christian would not recognize the descents of the Hindu *avatāra*s because for the average Christian there has only ever been one descent and that is Christ Himself, but Hinduism recognizes the descent as an inexhaustible possibility and it names ten *avatāra*s who have helped maintain the vitality of the religion down to the present day. The ninth *avatāra*, which is called the foreign *avatāra*, is the Buddha himself because, although he appeared in India, he was not for Hindus but clearly for the Eastern world. The breadth of Hinduism is seen also in its prefiguration of exoterism which is the recognition of the Three Ways. These are still Ways back to God—the three *mārga*s—the way of knowledge, the way of love, and the way of action—three ways which correspond to the inclinations and affinities of different human beings.

Another point which makes the terms of Hinduism so right for giving Europeans the message is that they have as Aryans an affinity with Hinduism because they are rooted in the religions of Classical Antiquity which are sister religions to Hinduism; their structure was clearly the same as the structure of Hinduism. Of course they degenerated into complete decadence and have now disappeared. Nonetheless our heritage lies in them and Guénon gives us, one might say, the possibility of a mysterious renascence in a purely positive sense by his message of the truth in Hindu terms. This affinity must not be exaggerated however, and Guénon never advised anybody who was not a Hindu, as far as I know, to become a Hindu.

His message was always one of strict orthodoxy in one esoterism, but at the same time of equal recognition of all other orthodoxies, but his purpose was in no sense academic. His motto was *vincit omnia veritas*, "Truth conquers all", but implicitly his motto was "Seek and ye shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you". Implicit in his writings is the certainty that they will come providentially to those who are qualified to receive his message and they will impel them to seek and therefore to find a way.

Guénon was conscious of having a function and he knew what belonged to this function and what did not belong to it. He knew that

it was not his function to have disciples; he never had any. It was his function to teach in preparation for a way that people would find for themselves, and this preparation meant filling in gaps which are left by modern education. The first of these gaps is the failure to understand the meaning of the transcendent and the meaning of the word intellect in consequence, a word which always continues to be used, but the intellect in the traditional sense of the word, corresponding to the Sanskrit *buddhi*, had simply been forgotten in the Western world. Guénon insisted in his writings on giving this word its true meaning which is perception of transcendent realities, the faculty which can perceive the things of the next world, and its prolongations in the soul are what might be called intellectual intuitions which are the preliminary glimmerings before intellection in the full sense takes place.

One has the impression that Guénon must have himself had an intellectual illumination at quite an early age. He must have perceived directly spiritual truths with the intellect in the true sense. He fills in gaps by explaining the meaning of rites, the meaning of symbols, the hierarchy of the worlds. In modern education the next world is left out altogether whereas in the Middle Ages students were taught about the hierarchy of the faculties and correspondingly the hierarchy of the universe.

Now I must for the moment speak on a rather personal level, but perhaps it may not be without interest. When I read the books of Guénon in the early thirties it was as if I had been struck by lightning and realized that this was the truth. I had never seen the truth before set down as in this message of Guénon's that there were many religions and that they must all be treated with reverence; they were different because they were for different people. It made sense and it also was at the same time to the glory of God because a person with even a reasonable intelligence when taught what we were taught at school would inevitably ask, well what about the rest of the world? Why were things managed in this way? Why was the truth given first of all only to the Jews, one people only? And then Christianity was ordered to spread over the world, but why so late? What about previous ages? These questions were never answered, but when I read Guénon I knew that what he said was the truth and I knew that I must do something about it.

I wrote to Guénon. I translated one of his first books, *East and West*, into English and I was in correspondence with him in connection

with that. In 1930 Guénon left Paris, after the death of his first wife, and went to Cairo where he lived for twenty years until his death in 1951. One of my first ideas upon reading Guénon's books was to send copies to my greatest friend who had been a student with me at Oxford, because I knew he would have just the same reaction as I had. He came back to the West and took the same way that I had already found, a way of the kind that Guénon speaks of in his books. Then being in need of work he was given a lectureship at Cairo University, and I sent him Guénon's *poste restante* number. Guénon was extremely secretive and would not give his actual address to anybody; he wanted to disappear. He had enemies in France and he suspected that they wished to attack him by magic. I do not know this for certain but I know that Guénon was very much afraid of being attacked by certain people and he wished to remain unknown, to sink himself into the Egyptian world where he was, the world of Islam. And so my friend had to wait a long time before Guénon agreed to see him. But when the meeting finally took place Guénon became immediately attached to him, and told him that he could always come to his house whenever he liked.

In the summer of 1939 I went to visit my friend in Cairo and when I was there the war broke out. I had a lectureship in Lithuania at that time and, being unable to return there, I was forced to stay in Egypt. My friend, who had become like a member of Guénon's household, collecting his mail from *poste restante* and doing many other things for him, took me to see Guénon. A year later I was out riding in the desert with my friend when his horse ran away with him and he was killed as the result of an accident. I shall never forget having to go to tell Guénon of his death. When I did he just wept for an hour. I had no option but to take my friend's place. I had already been given the freedom of the household and very quickly I became like one of the family. It was a tremendous privilege of course. Guénon's wife could not read and she spoke only Arabic. I quickly learned Arabic so I was able to talk to her. It was a very happy marriage. They had been married for seven years without children and Guénon, who was getting fairly old—he was much older than she was—had had no children with his first wife, so it was unexpected when they began to have children. They had four children altogether. I went to see Guénon nearly every day. I was the first person to read *The Reign of Quantity*, the only book he wrote while I knew him since the other books had

all been written earlier. He gave it to me chapter by chapter. And I was able also to give him my own first book when I wrote it, *The Book of Certainty*, which I gave him also chapter by chapter. It was a very great privilege to have known such a person.

During this time a rather important question was resolved. The Hindus with whom Guénon had made contact in Paris had given him a wrong idea, not a strictly Hindu idea, about Buddhism. Hinduism recognizes the Buddha as the ninth *avatāra* of Vishnu but some Hindus maintain that he was not an *avatāra*, that he was just a revolted Kshatriya, that is a member of the royal caste, against the Brahmins and it was this latter view which Guénon had accepted. Consequently he wrote about Buddhism as though it was not one of the great religions of the world. Now Ananda Coomaraswamy, Frithjof Schuon, and Marco Pallis altogether decided that they would remonstrate with Guénon about this point. Guénon was very open to being persuaded and in 1946 I took Marco Pallis to see him with the result that he agreed that he had been mistaken and that the mistakes must be rectified in his books. Marco Pallis started sending him lists of many pages that needed correction.

Guénon almost never went out except when he came to visit us. I would send a car to fetch him and he would come with his family to our house about twice a year. We lived at that time just near the pyramids outside of Cairo. I went out with him only once and we went to visit the mosque of Sayyidnā Husayn near al-Azhar. He had a remarkable presence; it was striking to see the respect with which he was treated. As he entered the mosque you could hear people on all sides saying, "*Allāhumma salli ʿalā Sayyidnā Muhammad*", that is, "May God rain blessings on the Prophet Muhammad", which is a way of expressing great reverence for someone. He had a luminous presence and his very beautiful eyes, one of his most striking features, retained their luster into early old age.

With his book on the Vedanta ranks his book on symbols, entitled *Fundamental Symbols: The Universal Language of Sacred Science*,[2] which was published after his death from all the articles which were written about symbols in his journal, *Études Traditionnelles*. It was marvelous to read these articles when they came out month after

[2] Also entitled *Symbols of Sacred Science*. ED

month, but this book takes us back almost to prehistoric times as does *Man and His Becoming According to the Vedanta* but in a wider sense. Everything is a symbol of course, it could not exist if it were not a symbol, but the fundamental symbols are those which express eloquently aspects of the Supreme Truth and the Supreme Way. For example, one of these aspects of both the Way and the Truth is what is called the "axis of the world", the axis which runs through all the higher states from the center of this state. That is the meaning of what is called the Tree of Life. The Tree of Life is symbolized by many particular trees: the oak, the ash, the fig and others throughout the world. The axis is the Way itself, the way of return to the Absolute. It is also symbolized by man-made things: the ladder, the mast, weapons like the lance, and the central pillar of edifices. As architects know, many buildings are built round a central axis which is not in fact there, which is not materialized. Very often in traditional houses the hearth is the center of the house and the chimney through which the smoke rises is another figure of the axis. And things which are normally horizontal are symbols of the axis: a bridge is also a symbol of the world axis. Witness the title Pontifex, the maker of the bridge, which is given to the highest spiritual authority of the Church—the bridge, which is the bridge between Heaven and earth.

Another fundamental symbol is the river. There are three aspects to the river: the crossing of the river symbolizes the passage from this world to a higher world, always, but then there is the river itself. There is the difficulty of moving upstream which symbolizes the difficulties of the spiritual path, of returning to one's source against the current. There is also the symbolism of moving in the other direction to the ocean, of returning finally to the ocean; that is another symbol of the Way. In this book amongst many other symbols, Guénon also treats of the symbolism of the mountain, the cave, the temporal cycle. In the temporal cycle the solstices of summer and winter are the gates of the gods according to Hinduism. The gate of the gods is the winter solstice, in the sign of Capricorn; the gate of the ancestors is the summer solstice, in the sign of Cancer.

As I have said, Guénon did not like to talk about himself and I respected his reticence; I did not ask him questions and I think he was pleased with that. To sum up what his function was, one might say that it was his function, in a world increasingly rife with heresy and pseudo religion, to remind twentieth century man of the need for

orthodoxy which itself presupposes firstly a divine intervention, and secondly a tradition which hands down with fidelity from generation to generation what Heaven has revealed. In this connection we are deeply indebted to him for having restored to the world the word orthodoxy in the full rigor of its original meaning, that is, rectitude of opinion, a rectitude which compels the intelligent man not merely to reject heresy, but also to recognize the validity of all those faiths which conform to those criteria on which his own faith depends for its orthodoxy.

On the basis of this universality, which is often known as *religio perennis*, it was also Guénon's function to remind us that the great religions of the world are not only the means of man's salvation, but that they offer him beyond that, even in this life, two esoteric possibilities which correspond to what were known in Graeco-Roman Antiquity as *mysteria pava* and *mysteria magna*, the "Lesser Mysteries" and the "Greater Mysteries". The first of these is the way of return to the primordial perfection which was lost in the fall. The second, which presupposes the first, is the way to gnosis, the fulfillment of the precept, "know thyself". This one ultimate end is termed in Christianity *deificatio*, in Hinduism, *yoga*, union, and *moksha*, deliverance, in Buddhism, *nirvāna*, that is, extinction of all that is illusory. And in Islamic mysticism, that is Sufism, *tahaqquq*, which means realization and which was glossed by a Sufi shaykh as self-realization in God. The Mysteries and especially the Greater Mysteries are explicitly or implicitly the main theme of Guénon's writing, even in *The Crisis of the Modern World* and *The Reign of Quantity*. The troubles in question are shown to have sprung ultimately from loss of the mysterial dimension, that is, the dimension of the mysteries of esoterism. He traces all the troubles in the modern world to the forgetting of the higher aspects of religion. He was conscious of being a pioneer, and I will end simply by quoting something he wrote of himself, "All that we shall do or say will amount to giving those who come afterwards facilities which we ourselves were not given. Here as everywhere else it is the beginning of the work that is hardest."

Martin Lings

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