



Christianity and initiation

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In every authentic tradition, a religious form (exotericism) accessible to the public coexists with an inner, hidden spiritual path (esotericism) which, using the former as a support, aims at the individual realization through initiation. Even though they are sharing a same doctrinal basis (the former mostly ontological and the latter metaphysical), these respective paths to realization differ on their final goal. The religious approach sees in faith and moral the way to knowledge and experience; the exoteric rites are considered as the path to realization and salvation as the supreme target; hence the promises of the immortality of the soul and of an Earthly Paradise in Heaven. The initiatory path, on the other hand, is based on a knowledge directed by the intellect, which can reach the understanding and the assimilation of the Principle, One and non-manifested; beside the exoteric form, the initiatory path has rites of its own, searching in this very life the spiritual realization, leading to a liberation.

While in most traditions the two aspects described above are more or less explicit without being completely separated, in the case of Christianity they are implicit and strongly linked, sometimes beyond recognition. Even though it is not clearly expressed in the Holy Scriptures, a hidden initiatory path is suggested besides the dogmatic form; however, the Christian religion, with rare exceptions, does not mention that different approach, even if it is practiced as we will see it.

Before developing Christianity's initiation aspects, we will try to define the initiatory path more closely, as illustrated in several traditions and by the French thinker René Guénon. [...]

Death and rebirth

First of all, the initiatory path is characterized by a death and a rebirth within this present life, meaning a detachment from mundane life in order to access the spiritual life and to be able to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. It represents in fact a second birth, a spiritual one, and a first step (initiatory) on the path to spiritual realization, not only theoretical (virtual), but effective. Guénon is telling it with all his power: *We can say that every change of state, of any kind, is at the same time a death and a birth, in the sense that it is considered from one aspect or the other: death compared with a former state, birth in relation to the next state.* The initiation is often described as “a second birth”, which it really is; but this “second birth” implies, necessarily, the death to the profane

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world, following it immediately, because those are, consequently, the two faces of the same change of state. [...] It must be noted that every change of state, mainly, should be realized in darkness [...]: the candidate for initiation has to pass through complete obscurity before being granted access to the “true light”.

The Qualifications for Initiation

Entering the path of initiation cannot be done without certain aptitudes and qualifications, not only physical and moral, but, mostly, of psychological and spiritual nature. Among other things, these qualifications presuppose the capacity to search for the most subtle elements of truth in the doctrine, to be able to understand their mysterious essence, in order to assimilate them, not as much through erudition, as through a suitable experience and identification. As Guénon says, these qualifications are an attribute of individuality's superiority. *First of all it has to be well understood that these qualifications find their place only at the level of the individuality [...] which has to be understood as a mean and a support of initiation's achievement; then, in order to realize the initiation, the presence of the required aptitudes is necessary. [...] It is clear that these conditions have to be fulfilled because we are talking about characteristics which by definition are not common to the individuals, but are instead common to those who belong, at least potentially, to the “elite”, understood in the connotation we used before for this term.* Without getting too deep into details, these qualifications have to involve, beyond the mental aptitudes, the existence of a spiritual or intellectual intuition, capable of exalting faith and love and to be able to reach the highest levels of the spirit. *As long as the knowledge is only achieved through a mental process, it is only knowledge “by reflection”, similar to the one obtained through the shadows seen by the prisoners in the symbolical cave of Plato, therefore an indirect and all external knowledge. [...]* The intellectual intuition alone overcomes these limits, because it does not belong to the order of individual faculties.¹ The transition from the “outer” to the “inner” is also the passing from multiplicity to unity, from the circumference to the center, the unique point where the human being who has returned to the “primordial condition” can reach the higher states.

To overcome the human individuality, beside potential intellectual qualifications, special spiritual and ascetic qualities are needed. Therefore, because it requires such special qualifications, the initiatory path cannot be a path for all, neither for the many, but for a minority, for an elite of chosen ones capable of following and fulfilling a series of rigorous rules, possessing the needed spiritual energy in order to be able to overcome the multitude of endeavors that can appear in life and mostly to perform the spiritual work in question.

¹ In the Hindu tradition, there is a relation in between the three paths of initiation and the three most important casts: Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya, which have their correspondence in the *jñanic* (knowledge), *bhaktic* (devotion, love) and *karmic* (crafts) initiations. In the case of Christian Middle Ages they can only be linked to the social classes, like the priests, the knights and the workmen, the peasants being a different social class, constituted by the majority of believers.

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The secret of initiation

The initiatory path is, in larger part, a secret one, because, for a common believer, its truths and rituals are impossible to be comprehended at the exterior level of the religion, they can have the role of stumbling stones and can be an occasion of insanity. And the secret or the mystery is an intrinsic part of any traditional spiritual doctrine that remains inexplicable and, sometimes, unutterable for the many, for those who don't have feeling of the unspeakable and the help of grace. Following Guénon:

The secret of initiation is such because it is, first of all, “unspeakable” and, considering this, is necessarily “incommunicable”. [...] The secret of initiation, alone, cannot be betrayed at all, because it is in itself and, in a way, by definition, inaccessible and imperceptible for the profanes, making it impossible for them to grasp it, initiation being the only way of knowing it [...] when each one will be able to reach and grasp this secret more or less complete, more or less deep, depending on his own possibilities of understanding and realization. [...] In the presence of an environment more or less hostile, carefulness is, of course, justified, and the profane misunderstanding, rarely being indifferent, easily shifts itself in hatred, which manifestation becomes a danger that is not illusory at all. And, very important for Christianity, Guénon adds: “(the secret of initiation) in this perspective can be seen like an attenuated and summarized form of “the discipline of silence”, which was used in certain antic esoteric schools [also in certain monastic Christian orders, n. n.]. [...] Disciplina secreti or disciplina arcani, were terms used also in the first centuries of the Christian Church, which apparently some opponents of the “secret” seem to forget. (A.I. chap. 13)

We think it is superfluous to add that the truth told above is confirmed even by Jesus.

Trials of initiation

Due to its difficult character, the initiatory path is strewn with a lot of obstacles and trials, with more temptations than usual, with sufferings that the demon manifests against the apprentice, knowing that his intention and will are stronger in order to spiritually achieve realization, the aim being not only redemption, but perfection. This explains why the hermits are more tried than the common unbelievers; these trials have a role of purification, but sometimes they can take the face of a “descent to hell”, that can hinder the upwards route of the initiate. Also, regarding this matter, Guénon makes some very important observations:

In consequence, and this brings us again to the shared idea of “trials” or tries, in some particular cases, it is not impossible that “suffering” should be the occasion or the starting point of certain developments of latent possibilities, but exactly in the same way other things can be in other cases; this situation doesn't have to make us attribute to suffering in itself any special or privileged virtue, in spite of all that has been usually said in this matter. [...] It happens, it is true, often enough that those who follow a path of initiation perceive these trials multiplying in an unusual way. The fact is due, purely and

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simply, to a kind of unconscious hostility in the surrounding environment; ...it seems that this world is fighting through every means to hold that who is about to get away from it.

For more precision, Guénon adds next: *After all, the trials of initiation are essentially purifying rites... And what is of interest in knowing the fundamental principle of the rite is taken into consideration of the fact that the purification is achieved through “elements”, in the cosmological sense of the term, [...] for that who says “element” says “simple and who says “simple” says “incorruptible”.* Among these elements, the most important is the water and Guénon thinks that among the rites that use it, the most important one is the Christian Baptism, and some ritualistic fasting. He adds that certain initiatory journeys play the same purification role. *It is all about bringing the being again to a state of non-differentiated simplicity, similar to the state of the materia prima, in order to be able to receive the vibration of the initiation’s **Fiat Lux**.* (A. I. Cap. 25)

Aims and steps on the path of initiation

...Not like the common religious path that has redemption as its aim, the initiatory path drives us to perfection. The advancement on this path is done in general through the fulfillment of gradual states, which corresponds to the degree of assimilation of the specific ritual for each step. And if for the common believer redemption is the work of faith, of liturgical rituals and of morals, for the initiate, besides all these qualifications, an effective knowledge is required as well as living these states, states that lead to the deification.

Referring to the authentic initiations, R. Guénon considers that the main steps of the initiations were the *lesser mysteries* and *greater mysteries*, corresponding in the medieval western Christianity to the royal initiation and the sacerdotal initiation. Even if these stages have no exact correspondence in the Eastern Christianity, they are nonetheless equivalent to the realization of the heavenly, of the transcendent or perfect man.

First of all, what one should well understand is the fact that there is no different types of initiation in this distinction, but stages or steps of one and the same initiation, if it is seen as forming a complete whole and is followed until its last goal; in principle, “lesser mysteries” are nothing else but a preparation for the “greater mysteries”, because their realization is nothing else but a stage in the path of initiation. [...] “Lesser mysteries” include all that corresponds to the melting of human state possibilities seen in its integrality [...], meaning the restoring of the “primordial state”. “Greater mysteries” are concretely about the fulfillment of superhuman states [...] until the unconditioned stage that alone constitutes the true aim named “The final Liberation” or “The Supreme Identity”. [...] To use Dante’s words, the “Earthly Paradise” is a step on the path that takes to the “Heavenly Paradise”. [...] Applying the geometric symbolism, one can speak about a “horizontal” and a “vertical” fulfillment. (A. I. Cap. 39)