



René Guénon: Saint of the Threshold

Rodney Blackhurst

Anyone who considers himself a "traditionalist" must normally declare himself "anti-modern", but he may not be any the less affected, though he be unaware of the fact, by modern ideas in a more or less attenuated form; they are then less easily detected, but they always correspond in fact to one or other of the stages passed through by these same ideas in the course of their development ; no concession, even unconscious or involuntary, is admissible on this point, for from the very beginning up to the present day, and beyond that too, everything holds together and is inexorably interlinked. - Guénon, Reign of Quantity

Someone once complained, quite astutely, that all of the saints of the modern era have been social workers and do-gooders. Religion, that is to say, has been reduced to charity, virtue has been reduced to being "nice" to others and churches and religious institutions have been reduced to humanitarian and welfare organizations. There have been few, if any, towering spiritual figures in our times, and the only ones who are commonly recognized as saints have been distinguished by their work with starving children, lepers, the homeless, the poor, and not for other less tangible spiritual achievements. Modernity as a whole has a shallow and sentimental estimation of what constitutes religion. For some religion is synonymous with a type of God-endorsed social activism, while for others it equates with so-called "family values" and an "old-fashioned" social conservatism. For most the pastoral functions of religion have become paramount, even to the point that most do not even suspect that religion has dimensions beyond "helping" and "care-giving". Certainly, the notion that religion is an endeavor of the intellect and that one of its primary functions - perhaps its most important function - is the sanctification of the intellect, is lost to modern understandings. The whole idea of an intellectual saint - the man who attains sanctity by the devotion of his intellect to divine purposes - is alien to the modern *zeitgeist*. Indeed, modernity regards religion as non- and anti-intellectual, an irrational exercise of the heart inherently at odds with reason, science and learning. We live in times in which metaphysics is regarded as heart-felt mush rather than a precise nobility of mind.

It is small wonder, then, that the man who is arguably the greatest metaphysician and the most luminous pneumatic of modern times, René Guénon, is not only not acknowledged as a saint but is routinely subject to vilification and petty criticism. He is not only underestimated by those who would label him a "philosopher" or a "French thinker" or a "Vedantist" or the like, but he is commonly maligned with labels such as "reactionary" or "fascist" or "nostalgic anti-modernist". Such coarse misjudgments are revealing and

René Guénon: Saint of the Threshold

unsurprising in themselves. The modern order lacks the perspective by which it might place such a person in a true light. In fact, by any proper estimation, René Guénon is as significant a figure as any of the intellectual saints of the Middle Ages - as substantial an intellect as an al-Farabi or even, in his own context, an al-Ghazzali - but it is one of the conditions of his sainthood that he spoke (as an anonymous voice) to a world already numb with amnesia, a world incapable of appreciating his status as well as his message.

This is to speak generally. To speak more precisely, as we look back on the life and work of Guénon from our vantage point in the early twenty-first century, a number of things have become clearer yet a number of other things need new clarification. The passage of time allows a wider perspective - which is why wisdom comes with age - but it is the peculiar circumstance of our era, with a hurtling pace of change driving a chattering madness that gathers volume as the world lurches blithely towards global-scale calamities, that we have lost even a faint recollection of the things that the vast majority of human beings in all previous eras regarded as essential, to the extent that we increasingly lack the means to understand who and what is important and who and what is not. There has been a very marked decline in the intellectual depth of cultural discourse in our times - a "dumbing down" of the civilization - and this has generated no end of mistaken assumptions and misunderstandings about Guénon that need to be set right. The current 'War on Terror' that defines our present time, and the "clash of civilizations" between Islam and the West, multiplies them exponentially, for suddenly Guénon's status as a Muslim, and his position as a modern Muslim intellectual, comes under new scrutiny - suddenly his name is placed in the context of the "revolt against modernity" that supposedly inspires all the "enemies of civilization", according to the fashionable rhetoric.

Guénon was a European convert to Islam; this calls for a raft of new clarifications and explanations in these days of al-Qaeda and the 'Axis of Evil'. Once it was the bogey of Nazism that prevented Guénon from being seen clearly - Hitlerism was once famously described as "Guénon with tanks" - but nowadays it is the Muslim bogey that is likely to distort our contemporary view of him. The studies of so-called "Traditionalism" conducted by Sedgewick in the last decade already resituates Guénon in exactly this way: he is now contextualized with anti-modernists in general and Muslim ones in particular. In the post 911 environment a lazy mind will readily conflate Guénon with Qutb or Khomenie. It is only a matter of time before some academic "researcher" attempts to associate "Guénonism" (whatever that might be) with Muslim "terrorism" pure and simple. This sort of travesty, it seems, is another condition of his sainthood. He is forever "out of phase", forever lurking behind the "bad guys" of modern history. He suffers a degree of misunderstanding that is truly absurd. The modern mind cannot place him.

To give an instance of how our view from the early twenty-first century does allow a clear perspective, it is from our distance that we can appreciate the sweep of events through which Guénon lived and that took him into the embrace of Islam. Looking back, we can see that Guénon lived at the watershed that separates traditional Islam from its modern forms. The most obvious dividing line is the dissolution of the Ottoman Caliphate; we can speak of a traditional and a post-Caliphate Islam. Guénon's life spanned the period during which this shift in the shape and form of Islam occurred. He saw the breach of the levy. We must remember that the great calm and steady detachment of his message was in the face of profoundly turbulent times. The best reports say that he made the Muslim confession of faith in 1912 just before the Great War. In his prime he witnessed the aftermath of that war,

René Guénon: Saint of the Threshold

the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire, and relocated to Cairo living as Abd al-Wahid Yahya. It was in exactly that period that the body of Islam was wrenched apart and was, perforce, dragged into modernity.

It had been unthinkable that the Muslim Ummah could be without a Caliph. Suddenly the institution of the Caliphate was ended and the last of the classical Muslim Empires collapsed. With the demise of the Turks the Wahabis took control of the Muslim Holy Places and set about imposing their regressive vision of post-Caliphate Islam upon the Ummah. The Sufis suffered especially. The Orders were disbanded and made illegal in Ataturk's secular Turkey while the Wahabis, belligerent externalists, demolished the shrines and purged the entire Arabian peninsula of Sufism. Guénon lived in Cairo - as an altogether ordinary Muslim family man - in the years that these events took hold upon and transformed Islam. Living as we do with the consequences of these shifts in Islam, we are better able to appreciate that Guénon's journey to Islam placed him at the very threshold of Islam's passage into modernity; Sheikh Yahya was like a final voice from classical Islamic sanctity - he caught the very end of it - and he is, at the same time, an announcement to the new world, a saint of the threshold.

As is well known Guénon rarely if ever indulged in autobiography or personal writings. He maintained a steely anonymity. We can be sure, however, that he lived in same world as that recorded by the far more autobiographical Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, a contemporary, a fellow convert and, for a time, fellow resident of Cairo and frequenter of Al-Azhar University. Pickthall wrote of Egypt and the Levant in the twilight years of the Ottomans, "What struck me, even in its decay and poverty, was the joyousness of that life compared with anything that I had seen in Europe. The people seemed quite independent of our cares of life, our anxious clutching after wealth, our fear of death." Pickthall's *Oriental Encounters* records a world where most "never set eyes on a policeman, and lived for decades without engaging with government in any way. Islamic law was administered in its time-honored fashion, by qadis who... were local scholars. Villages chose their own headmen, or inherited them, and the same was true for the bedouin tribes. The population revered and loved the Sultan-Caliph in faraway Istanbul, but understood that it was not his place to interfere with their lives." Guénon saw the end of this world and the rise of the so-called modern "Islamic state".

No doubt the Ottoman Empire was spent and corrupt; its demise was fated. But its demise was at the same time a fall, a dislocation, not only in the geopolitical fortunes of *Dar as-Islam* but also in terms of Islam's mystical depth - something of the fragrance of Islamic sanctity was lost, there was a collective forgetting among the faithful. As we know, the collapse of the Ottomans left the heartland of Islam to be torn apart by Arab nationalism in its various forms, religious and secular. Guénon was a first-hand witness of these events living quietly in Cairo, in many ways the eye of the storm. It was to Al-Azhar in Cairo that Pickthall brought his English impression of the Holy Koran seeking an imprimatur from its scholars. He pleaded with them - in his excellent Arabic - arguing that the new realities of the world-order called for a faithful rendering of the message of the Koran into English. Pickthall was a modernist. He subscribed to a modernizing Hanafi school of thought characterized by a tendency to downplay the miraculous elements in the traditional life of the Prophet, formulating a type of progressive humanist Islam instead. His English rendering of the Koran is admired for its faithful conversion of the Arabic into an archaic but virile English.

René Guénon: Saint of the Threshold

As a fellow convert in Cairo, he makes an interesting contrast to Guénon. Pickthall is the activist convert, a social Muslim, an educator, devout in external Islam. Guénon lived Islam's ideal of the married monk, whose home was an extension of his mosque, and where he lived with his wife and children in simple, unpretentious domesticity and a sincere Muslim piety. He lived aloof and was so unassuming even his neighbors had no idea he was the "orientalist" René Guénon. This wholesome earthiness and simplicity of life is the exterior of Guénon's intellectual sanctity which is, in turn, comparable not to earth but to gold, in a sublime submission to a primordial gnosis, as if his mind was a perfectly clear mirror reflecting ancient truths. The enigma of Guénon consists in people's inability to match his external and internal lives. The best way to understand this is by way of the very traditional earth/gold analogy. There is an *aurumic* quality to his work. It is as if he carries an echo (or a foreshadowing) of the Golden Age, a primordial exactness, an effortless grasp of metaphysical perspective the absence of which might as well define modern man. There is a sense in which Guénon was drawn to the very soil and dust of Egypt, the dark, Adamic soils of the Nile. Islam is the religion revealed by the Prophet Muhammad, and, at the same time, it is the religion of Adam, the primordial man. Pickthall's Islam was an Islam of Muhammad but Guénon's Islam was an Islam of Adam as well. That is the difference between them. Pickthall was always a very fine advocate for his religion and a very worthy convert, but he is not a saintly figure. Guénon's depth is genuine. His lucidity is truly crystalline. His understanding of metaphysical truths is as sure on its level as his observance of the Sunnah of the Prophet is on another level. Guénon was a remarkably *axial* being, even if, on yet other levels, such as his physical health, he suffered severe deficits and disequilibriums as if in counter weight to his exceptional gifts. Islam became his ground. He was not a convert in any ordinary, partisan sense. Yet, in an extraordinary way, it is his complete unaffected ordinariness as a Muslim that speaks most of his sanctity.

The venue of Cairo also suggests another contrast that further underlines Guénon's special status. Looking back we can see that he was one of dozens of figures from that period who journeyed to the east in search of initiation and illumination. The pioneering Ivan Aguéli (Sheikh Abd Al-Hadi Aqhili) had preceded him to Cairo, for example. But so too had the sinister occultist and black mage Aleister Crowley. It was in Cairo that Crowley claims to have received his "Book of the Law", a pornographic parody of the Quran that announces Crowley ("The Beast") as the prophet of a new aeon. Guénon, of course, is routinely described as an "occultist" too, but he is almost the antithesis of Crowley. Both men had moved in masonic, gnostic and theosophical circles in Europe, but the outcome of their journeys was as diametrically opposed as dark and light. In many respects Crowley was indeed a personification of that grim period and he was, in a fashion, indeed a prophet of the modern. He was not "out of phase" like Guénon. In our own times we have seen him become a subculture celebrity, a messenger of the post-industrial age, whose creed of 'Do what thou wilt' is the catch-phrase of cultic rock music and the indulgent "Me" generation. He captured the flavor of the twentieth century. His influence has been quite remarkable and grows stronger with the passage of time. It is an extraordinary feat in itself, and a measure of his integrity, that Guénon managed to avoid the spirit of malevolence to which Crowley sold his soul. Guénon's journey to Cairo was a triumph over the murky pseudo-spiritualities that stalked Europe's intellectuals. Crowley's journey to Cairo was a submission to those same dark forces.

Guénon's detractors sometimes report his "paranoid" fears of psychic attack. We need only recall a figure like Crowley to understand the reasonableness of such fears; Guénon

René Guénon: Saint of the Threshold

understood very well what malignant influences were afoot, oozing out of the fissures that had opened in the modern order. In part his sanctity must be measured by his steadfastness against such malignant influences. There is not the slightest sign that he ever surrendered to the evil spirit of the "new aeon". The charges of betrayal, syncretism, self-aggrandizement and counterfeiter can be leveled against nearly all the European intellectuals and spiritual seekers of the early twentieth century - besides Crowley we might mention, say, Gurdjieff - but Guénon never deviated a single step from the "straight path" of true tradition. His so-called "occultism" was not some shadowy, garbled parody of a lost wisdom, but was a genuine and sincere acquaintance with the hidden foundations of the world's orthodox traditions. He resisted every temptation to be anything more than a true and faithful expositor of those foundations.

The modern world, as we said at the outset, is unaccustomed to intellectual sanctity. It has no trouble glorifying an Einstein and misapplying the word "genius" to all manner of profane thinkers, but it has no way of recognizing the scope and depth of a soul such as Guénon. The irony is that this collapse into a purely quantitative world-view was never better understood and explained than by Guénon himself. Nothing could be more wrong than to suppose that Guénon was shaped by a merely temperamental and simple-minded aversion to modernity, as if he was a man who just happened to like horses better than automobiles and had trouble "adjusting" and "going with the flow". On the contrary, he knew modernity better than any modernist, just as he knew tradition better than any of the representatives of the traditional world he saw fade away in the mud and blood of the Great War and its aftermath. It is conspicuous how half-hearted, complacent and intellectually emaciated were the spokesmen for the fading Ottoman world in its final phases. It is equally conspicuous how second-rate and unintelligent were the voices who spoke up for religion and the priorities of the spirit during the European Enlightenment when Christendom persuaded itself to follow a deviant path. Even a man as miserably shallow as Voltaire is celebrated as a "genius" in the history of modern European ideas. Where were the Guénons needed to answer the Philosophes? There were no competent representatives of tradition to withstand the half-witted vandals who tore Christendom apart. And it was fate that a qualified spokesman - René Guénon - would not appear until the days when Europe would be dragging the Muslim world into modernity with it, dismantling the caliphate, imposing bizarre boundaries and reconfiguring Islam into the form by which we know it today, not "traditional" but "fundamentalist", not mystical but externalist. Guénon's critique of modernity was not "influenced" by such events - very few men have so definitely not been a "man of his times" - but they fulfilled his prognosis exactly. He would not be surprised by the events of our own times, and least of all by the dilemmas and crises faced by contemporary Islam.