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RENÉ GUÉNON, TRADITION AND TRADITIONALISM (I)

The present journal, *Oriens*, is based upon the authority of René Guénon's work and we cannot go further without saying a few words about Guénon and the Tradition he served so well.¹ First, we should explain what we call Tradition, as it appears in René Guénon's works.²

In contrast with a profane society (like the modern one), based not on super-human principles, but on conventional rules, of an individual order (being, therefore, a "drifting" society, threatened by chaos since the link with the Principle was broken), a traditional society means a homogenous human group, not from the point of view of nations or race, but from the point of view of mentality and spirituality. It means that all the individuals of the specific group obey the same doctrinal form, think and act, spiritually and ritually, inside a one-and-only metaphysical doctrine, behave in the social life in accordance with the laws derived as contingent applications from the divine principles, and in fact, respect completely the celestial archetypes that were used as models for earthly traditional civilizations. The traditional doctrine, conferred on a specific society, is of super-human origin, derived from the primordial Tradition, and a traditional society allows the

¹ Those who disagree with Guénon's work should try to understand, following Ramana Maharshi's teachings (a spiritual master whom nobody contests), "who is the one who disagrees?" When somebody says: "I disagree," who is this "I"? An honest attempt to comprehend this will lead to the surprising discovery that only the ego, the individual side, could be in disagreement with Guénon's work and the Tradition. The more we disagree, the more we are controlled by the ephemeral ego. As Coomaraswamy said, we better try to understand the traditional texts than spend so much energy disagreeing and criticizing.

² "Guénon succeeded to unify the various particular traditions, to pacify the apparent contrarities, to restore the "ideal model" of what would have been the primordial Tradition" (**Agarththa, the Invisible Center**, p. 6), in accordance with René Guénon's sayings: "It is strange that, when we affirm the fundamental unity of all the traditional doctrines, some could understand that we are talking about a «fusion» of different traditions" (René Guénon, **Orient et Occident**, Guy Trédaniel, 1987, p. 192). We should not confuse Guénon's synthetically and integrative perspective with that of a "one-and-only religion" (as Schuon's followers promoted, using his expression "unité transcendante des religions") or, much worse, with that antitraditional syncretism of the occultists. On the other hand, if others use the same expressions, that should not stop us to employ them. Guénon wrote: "Because the occultists, these counterfeiters of esotericism, took possession of some elements that do not belong to them, almost always altering them, should we abandon and stop talking about them, risking to be qualified as «occultist»?" (**Comptes rendus**, Éd. Traditionnelles, 1973, p. 130).

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unaltered transmission, usually in an oral form, of the doctrinal elements, with the essence remaining the same, only the envelope changing as it is influenced by historical circumstances. We must not confuse tradition with “traditionalism”; the latter has no spiritual connection with the Principle, and is limited to a summation of habits and customs, more or less ancient, with their true significance lost in time, as well as the principles that used to activate them. Even though the tradition was oral at its origin, we have to accept that it can also be written, as with the “traditional scriptures,” which are of great importance today. We should add that, etymologically, *tradition* means “what is transmitted” under one or another mode (Guénon, **Introd.**, p. 67), yet we are talking here about the transmission of sacred elements, operated without interruption, and using a regular and continuous channel, with the origin of these elements being beyond the cycle of present humanity, that is, having a “non-human” origin.

In a traditional society, everything had a sacred essence, each member providing in a ritual mode an activity learned through a regulated transmission, that is, through tradition, imitating, in a way, what gods did at the beginning of time. Only with cyclic decadence, when the profane perspective gained more and more terrain, was the chain of regular transmission broken; the communication with the principles’ order was lost and for modern man, any vulgar and common habit or individual invention became something “traditional.” Tradition, due to its non-human and transcendent characteristics, has a permanent essence, reflecting the Principle’s immutability, which is, actually, the origin of any orthodox transmission, while for modern man all the “traditional customs” are in an incessant state of change, following the caprices of fashion and belonging therefore to the profane domain. The Way (*Dao* in the Far-Eastern tradition) of Heaven and Earth, as recorded in **Yi Jing** in connection with the hexagram *Heng* (number 32), is permanence. Also in **Yi Jing** there is a hexagram, *Li* (number 30), composed of *Li* (fire) up and *Li* (fire) down, about which the commentary says that it expresses the inner void as luminosity and clarity, and adds: “The great man watches the symbolic image of clarity in a reciprocal sequence, and applies this concept to the transmission of intelligence from generation to generation; by perpetuating this brightness he illumines the four quarters of the world.” Tradition might be considered such a Light, such a Fire transmitted from generation to generation, governing the four cardinal points, hence, the whole manifestation.

The primordial Tradition manifested on earth at the same time as the beginning of the human cycle and, without confusing it with the revelation conferred on some individuals by God, in a religious sense, Tradition can be identified with the Principle in manifestation, constituting a super-human “treasure” of metaphysical knowledge offered to humanity when it was produced by the same Principle, and assimilated through direct inspiration (*Shruti* in the Hindu tradition). Tradition has, therefore, a permanent and infallible nature. Since any traditional doctrine participates to the *principal* essence of the Truth, it is, in its turn, infallible and, specifically for this reason, the exponents of some traditional forms, invested in exposing the doctrines, are infallible, not as human individuals but as instruments of those traditions. Having a super-human origin and being absolutely true, the traditional doctrine represents, beside the spiritual master or *guru*, the

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infallible guide; hence, the condition of *çraddhâ* (total faith) for the neophyte.³ What is fallible is the so-called “human factor” or “individual factor.”

The primordial Tradition is identical in its essence to the “doctrine of non-duality” (*adwaita-vada*), a pure metaphysical doctrine, which comprises the “vision,” the “science” (*vidya*) about the supreme Principle, *Brahma nirguna*: That which is beyond the duality of the manifestation, but also beyond One. *Adwaita-vada* is the only doctrine that mirrors the universality of metaphysics. Metaphysics cannot be limited in any mode and represents the sum of the spiritual principles and of all the data of an intellectual order, which constitute the reality of the entire manifestation, without being though dependent on this one. If the form used to express the metaphysical knowledge is influenced by elements of contingent order, its essence remains immutable and above any human activity, since the traditional doctrines are specifications of metaphysics for the specific conditions of some particular civilizations.⁴ Metaphysics, delving into the order of pure intellectuality and pure spiritual principles, represents the kernel of primordial Tradition; all traditions, and traditional societies respectively, depend on and listen to a doctrine of an intellectual order; yet, only in the case of the pure intellectuality we can talk about a traditional doctrine indeed metaphysical (Guénon, **Introd.**, pp. 87 ff.).

Islam, Guénon showed, represents a tradition having two distinct aspects: a religious one, which refers to the assembly of the social institutions, and a purely *oriental* one, that is, one indeed metaphysical (in this latter aspect, Sufism plays a major intellectual role).⁵ In the Middle Ages, there was something similar in the Occident. This was the Scholastic doctrine containing a metaphysical kernel, which was unfortunately insufficiently detached from theology, since Western mentality, the heir of Greek and Judaic mentalities, was more apt for the religious aspect, and the assimilated metaphysics was incomplete and limited (Guénon, **Introd.**, p. 69). Today it is hard to find any trace of genuine metaphysics in modern thoughts. We might hope that Orthodox Christianity still hides a metaphysical kernel; yet, from what we said previously, there are slim chances that, even if it is true, this kernel will flourish again.

Immediately after World War II, René Guénon published a book called **Le Règne de la quantité et les signes des temps**, in which he introduced a chapter called *Tradition and traditionalism*. In reviewing this chapter for the present work, we realized again that all we can do is to repeat Guénon’s sayings. It is a good opportunity for us to join the advice of some traditional *pilgrims*, and declare that, regardless of how many contemporary works we read of a more or less traditional nature, we must always return to Guénon’s works if we do not want to wander. However, due to René Guénon’s function in the Occident, it is impossible to write about Tradition and traditional doctrines without referring to Guénon; therefore, everything written in the Occident in connection with traditional studies repeats, willy-nilly, in a better or worse mode, the teachings found in his works.

³ The condition of *çraddhâ* implies the absence of a conceited ego, eager to criticize everything, including the master.

⁴ Milk is white, regardless of the colour of the cow. Ether is the same; the form of the containers, which apparently contain it, doesn’t matter.

⁵ Hesychasm, we can say, also has such an *oriental* kernel.

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Many biographies were written about Guénon and some people still await an even better one; which means that he continues to be misunderstood, and that there is little comprehension regarding who and what he was, since many individuals, even though they read Guénon, cannot or do not want to understand. René Guénon, knowing how easily the ego and individual elements intervene in the traditional domain, not to talk about other suspect forces, repeated the same statements many times, considering that for some people this repetition “will be never enough.” One of the important statements is that we should not heed his individuality, since the individual René Guénon is a private matter, and there is no reason why should anybody be interested in this; the only thing that counts is his work, the work signed with the name René Guénon, and not the articles signed with nicknames, not his personal letters, not the notes he made with regard to his social life, not his family life.⁶

Of course, there is a natural justification for those who did not listen to Guénon’s sayings. There are some who purely and simply are incapable of matching the challenge of his work and therefore, it is much easier to lower Guénon to their profane and worldly level, which means a special interest in everything related to his individuality. It is something we see around us every day: the intense attraction for gossip, for all sorts of intimacies, for scandal and dirt. Others, erudite and academic people, even if they have the capacity to read Guénon’s works, do this considering him another “philosopher,” “orientalist,” or “thinker,”⁷ and the only natural desire of their ego is to criticize and to contest Guénon, to find errors in his work, to show that they also can think and even better than him.⁸

There is a proverb saying, “The truth bothers man.” When we first had one of Guénon’s books in our hands, the ego revolted against the inexorability, the self-confidence and the air of “all-knowing” the book transmitted. We understand why those who are the servants of their ego are so upset with René Guénon; hence their obsession with his individuality, since any weakness, error or scandal, would make those full of ego feel better, allowing them to say: “He is not better than us.” It is an old tactic, belonging to the profane world, and we see the same thing occurring today with Jesus, who is reduced to the level of some individual.⁹ Guénon wrote: “What we could call

⁶ Guénon wrote: “Sometimes, individualism, in the most common and low sense of the word, manifests in an even more obvious mode: do not we see everywhere individuals who want to judge the work of somebody by delving into his or her private life, as if it would be possible to make a connection between these two?” (Guénon, *Crise*, p. 108). Did those who pretend to be “Guénonians” and interested in René Guénon’s life, not really read these lines? Guénon added: “From the same tendency, joined with an obsession for details, also derives the interest for the smallest particularities of «great men»’s lives and the illusion that everything they did can be explained through a kind of «psycho-physiological» analysis” (Guénon, *Crise*, p. 108).

⁷ Guénon wrote: “We categorically refuse any Western label, because there is not one that could be applied to fit us” (Guénon, *Crise*, p. 180).

⁸ To give just one example: a “Christian Guénonian,” who spent a lot of energy in combating Guénon’s sayings about Christianity, at one point had to admit that René Guénon stated very clearly the correlation between exotericism and esotericism. Yet for him this meant nothing and he started immediately to criticize as if there were an irreconcilable opposition between the two domains!

⁹ We must stress that we do not compare Guénon with Jesus, far from it, even if there are some traditionalists who consider Guénon a sort of god, forgetting too that his individuality does not count.

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«individualism» is identical to the antitraditional spirit, and its multiple manifestations, in all domains, constitute one of the important factors of modern disarray” (Guénon, **Crise**, p. 88).

What counts is not René Guénon’s individuality, but his function and his work as a consequence of this function.¹⁰ That is why when some people called themselves Guénon’s “heirs” or his “successors” or even “Guénonians” we could not be more amazed. It is known beyond any doubt that René Guénon did not delegate his function to anybody. Is there somebody who can claim to possess now Guénon’s function as a “heritage” from René Guénon? Anyone who has any doubts just have to read again Guénon’s works; he will understand immediately that the appellation “Guénonian” is improper, as well as that of “Guenonian doctrine,” that his function was unique for the Occident and non-transmissible.¹¹ Similarly illusory is the endeavour to discover René Guénon’s “sources,” his spiritual masters, his initiatory status; if Guénon would have considered that somebody’s business, he would have shared all this information.

Regarding the “sources,” we want to refer to the lack of references in Guénon’s work, which frustrated the erudite and academic persons, who were used to tons of bibliographic titles. Considering René Guénon’s function, the problem is not one of believing what he wrote, and having the possibility of checking his sayings by confronting his writings with various sources, but of comprehending what he wrote and of making use of available parallel traditional authorities. Yet today, when some people accuse Saint Paul of duplicity or consider Shankarâchârya biased with regard to Buddhism, we cannot expect anything else.

The problem of the “sources” is connected to the error of considering Guénon just another “thinker” or “philosopher” or even a “cultivated man,” since some individuals read Guénon only to cultivate themselves, as an act of erudition or even to try to follow literary fashion. A Romanian Orientalist, in vogue two decades ago, referred to René Guénon’s doctrine as “close to ancient Gnosticism”¹²; and recently we found this inanity again, where Guénon was labeled a Neoplatonian Gnostic.¹³ It is most ridiculous that there are men of letters who chose Guénon as a subject for their thesis, similar how others

¹⁰ We presented Guénon’s function in our *Introduction to Agarttha, the Invisible Center*. With even more profit one can consult Michel Vâlsan’s articles about René Guénon’s function, and also the works of Charles-André Gilis. Many other publications need vigilance and extreme circumspection. However, in a recent work, we find the declaration (to motivate why it was written) that it is impossible to separate Guénon’s work from his life (considered saintly and holy) and from his letters; the declaration is insulting with respect to Guénon, who insisted upon exactly the opposite, warning that his life is a personal matter and nobody has a right to delve into it, and that his work has nothing to do with his individuality, sacred or not.

¹¹ We recently saw the barbarism “Guénonianism” used, and somebody suggested a “Guénonian esotericism” and was asking to which exotericism it would correspond.

¹² This Orientalist also attacked Michel Vâlsan, yet he mistook his first name: “... René Guénon, whose successor George (*sic*) Vâlsan died recently in Paris. [Vâlsan] was the manager of the Guenonian publication «Études Traditionnelles,» where absurdity was in competition with lack of culture.” No comments.

¹³ René Guénon received this accusation even when he was still alive, more than fifty years ago, and he gave a response, but it seems nobody listened to it.

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have chosen Mark Twain or Balzac, and they call René Guénon “notre ami” (“our friend”), or “notre penseur” (“our thinker”)! Eventually we saw with stupor a “Guénon dictionary” being published; the “dictionary,” representing the result of the author’s mental operations with regard to Guénon’s work, obviously disappoints.

It is interesting to notice in these cases of abuse regarding Guénon’s work that the tactics are the same, regardless of the period of time (today or fifty years ago), which represents one of the typical signs betraying the *tamasic* influences involved. For example, in 1946, the first attempt was made to publish a work about René Guénon; the occultist Jacques Marcireau wrote a book called **René Guénon et son oeuvre**,¹⁴ which is in fact a “Guénon dictionary.” It is a stupid book. Since it was published while Guénon was still alive, this one was able to give a reply to such an insult:

[M. Paul le Cour] felt the need, with this occasion, to recommend to his readers a booklet called **René Guénon et son oeuvre**, by Mr. Jacques Marcireau, which he declares «very well written,» when we, from our part, have exactly an opposite opinion; we hope he will admit that we are better qualified to judge it. The book, which was published with us being unaware of it (and we cannot approve its publication), is nothing more than a simple compilation of extracts taken out from our works and articles, from here and there; there are a good number of phrases detached from their context and consequently, incomprehensible, sometimes truncated or altered; and everything is put together in an artificial way, we should say in an arbitrary mode, in paragraphs having titles which are the only thing belonging to the author. (Guénon, **Comptes rendus**, pp. 180-181)

It seems that the modern author of the “Guénon dictionary,” by some strange inspiration, felt that his book does not match exactly Guénon’s words we just quoted, and he published now (2004) a what he calls “complement” to the Dictionary, a sort of book named **La Métaphysique de René Guénon**, this “complement” being precisely the type of work Guénon would vehemently reject.¹⁵

¹⁴ Jacques Marcireau, Éditeur, Poitiers (Vienne), France.

¹⁵ To see how such kind of individuals operate, we should note that the title “René Guénon’s Metaphysics” is improper, of course, since the Metaphysics is universal and doesn’t belong to an individual. The author, knowing very well this simple truth, tackles it in his *Introduction*, and even though admitting it, he motivates the title as “une nécessaire commodité de langage et clarté d’énonciation à l’intention d’un large public” (a necessary convenience of language and clarity of enunciation for the general public). What he is saying makes no sense and we hope that only the author’s ignorance is involved here; it is obvious that Metaphysics has nothing to do with a general public and so a “convenience of language” is not only futile but also misleading. Yet this author is not an isolated case and we would like to give another example. In 1988, Elie Lemoine published in *Études Traditionnelles* a review regarding Antoine Faivre’s article, **René Guénon**. Lemoine highlighted Faivre’s erroneous expressions “Guénonian metaphysics” and “Guénon’s doctrine of Supreme Identity” (see Elie Lemoine, **Theologia sine metaphysica nihil**, Éd. Traditionnelles, 1991, p. 106; the book is a gathering of Lemoine’s articles published in the *Études Traditionnelles* Journal).

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The abuse and detour of René Guénon's work seems to have no limits today and we recently encountered the expression "Guénonian traditionalism," as well as the attempt to classify the "traditionalists" into groups and individuals, starting with the "Guénonians." The idea of classifying and systematizing the traditional domain is so profane and anti-metaphysical, that its effect is not a clarification, but an increase of disarray. Beside this, the term "traditionalist" accentuates the same disarray too.

Guénon underlined the difference between Tradition and "traditionalism." Warning about language abuse and the detour of some keywords' meanings occurring as part of the Great Disarray which rules today, he showed that in the modern world "tradition" represents all kinds of profane things that don't have anything in common with genuine Tradition (Guénon, **Règne**, pp. 277-8); "the idea of tradition was so much damaged that those who strive to find it don't know where to go" (Guénon, **Règne**, p. 279). Any abuse of the word "tradition," such as considering tradition a simple "habit" or "custom," or talking about a "revolutionary tradition," only amplifies the disarray (Guénon, **Règne**, pp. 281, 283); all these abuses have in common the fact that they consider tradition something purely human, a human invention.

Regarding the "traditionalists," they are the ones "who have only a tendency or a kind of aspiration toward tradition, without really possessing any authentic knowledge about it; we can measure through this the distance which separates the «traditionalist» spirit from the true traditional spirit. ... In conclusion, the «traditionalist» is only a simple «researcher» [or «searcher»], and for this reason he is always in danger of waywardness" (Guénon, **Règne**, p. 280).¹⁶

The irony is that, after René Guénon clearly established the difference between Tradition and "traditionalism," he was labeled as "traditionalist"! A recent work, which wants to be a history of "traditionalism," talks about the "traditionalist philosophy," abusing the sense of the word philosophy, and about the "traditionalist movement," in which Guénon is placed too.¹⁷

¹⁶ Normally, the "traditionalist" should oppose the "modernist" (of course, understood as antitraditional and profane), yet the danger is that the "traditionalist" himself is affected by modern ideas, as actually happens in some cases, some who criticize aspects of the profane point of view, being conquered by other aspects, no less antitraditional (Guénon, **Règne**, p. 284).

¹⁷ What makes it more ridiculous is that Guénon himself exposed the expression "traditionalist philosophy" as a wrong one (Guénon, **Crise**, p. 49). There are also other labels such as "political traditionalism," applied to a "group of Romanian traditionalists," containing Michel Vâlsan and Mircea Eliade, the latter being considered the exponent of a "soft" traditionalism.