

BIOGRAPHY OF RENÉ GUÉNON



René Guénon (1886-1951) was a French metaphysician, writer, and editor who was largely responsible for laying the metaphysical groundwork for the Traditionalist or Perennialist school of thought in the early twentieth century. Guénon remains influential today for his writings on the intellectual and spiritual bankruptcy of the modern world, on symbolism, on spiritual esoterism and initiation, and on the universal truths that manifest themselves in various forms in the world's religious traditions. His writings on Hinduism and Taoism are particularly illuminating in this latter regard.

René Guénon was born in Blois, France, in 1886. He grew up in a strict Catholic environment and was schooled by Jesuits. As a young man he moved to Paris to take up studies in mathematics at the College Rollin. However, his energies were soon diverted from academic studies and in 1905 he abandoned his formal higher education studies. Guénon submerged himself in certain currents of French occultism and became a leading member in several secret organizations such as theosophical, spiritualistic, masonic, and "gnostic" societies. In June, 1909 Guénon founded the occultist journal *La Gnose*. It lasted a little over two years and carried most of Guénon's writings from this period.

Although Guénon was later to disown the philosophical and historical assumptions on which such occultist movements were built, and to contrast their “counterfeit spirituality” with what he came to see as genuine expressions of traditional esoterism, he always steadfastly opposed contemporary European civilization. There have been suggestions that during this period Guénon received either a Taoist or an Islamic initiation—or both. Whitall Perry has suggested that the “catalyzing element” was Guénon’s contact with representatives of the Advaita school of Vedanta.[1] It was during this period that he embarked on a serious study of the doctrines of Taoism, Hinduism, and perhaps Islam.

Guénon emerged now from the rather secretive and obscure world of the occultists and moved freely in an intensely Catholic milieu, leading a busy social and intellectual life. He was influenced by several prominent Catholic intellectuals of the day, among them Jacques Maritain, Fathers Peillaube and Sertillanges, and one M. Milhaud, who conducted classes at the Sorbonne on the philosophy of science. The years 1912 to 1930 are the most public of Guénon’s life. He attended lectures at the Sorbonne, wrote and published widely, gave at least one public lecture, and maintained many social and intellectual contacts. He published his first books in the 1920s and soon became well-known for his work on philosophical and metaphysical subjects.

Whatever Guénon’s personal commitments may have been during this period, his thought had clearly undergone a major shift away from occultism and toward an interest in esoteric sapiential traditions within the framework of the great religions. One central point of interest for Guénon was the possibility of a Christian esoterism within the Catholic tradition. (He always remained somewhat uninformed on the esoteric dimensions within Eastern Orthodoxy).[2] Guénon envisaged, in some of his work from this period, a regenerated Catholicism, enriched and invigorated by a recovery of its esoteric traditions, and “repaired” through a prise de conscience. He contributed regularly to the Catholic journal *Regnabit*, the *Sacre-Coeur* review founded and edited by P. Anizan. These articles reveal the re-orientation of Guénon’s thinking in

which “tradition” now becomes the controlling theme. Some of these periodical writings found their way into his later books.

The years 1927 to 1930 mark another transition in Guénon’s life, culminating in his move to Cairo in 1930 and his open commitment to Islam. A conflict between Anizan (whom Guénon supported) and the Archbishop of Reims, and adverse Catholic criticism of his book *The King of the World* (1927), compounded a growing disillusionment with the Church and hardened Guénon’s suspicion that it had surrendered to the “temporal and material”. In January 1928 Guénon’s wife died rather abruptly, and, following a series of fortuitous circumstances, Guénon left on a three-month visit to Cairo. He was to remain there until his death in 1951.

In Cairo Guénon was initiated into the Sufic order of Shadhilites and invested with the name Abdel Wahed Yahya. He married again and lived a modest and retiring existence. “Such was his anonymity that an admirer of his writings was dumbfounded to discover that the venerable next-door neighbor whom she had known for years as Sheikh Abdel Wahed Yahya was in reality René Guénon.”[3]

A good deal of Guénon’s energy in the 1930s was directed to a massive correspondence that he carried on with his readers in Europe, people often in search of some kind of initiation, or simply pressing inquiries about subjects dealt with in his books and articles. Most of Guénon’s published work after his move to Cairo appeared in *Études Traditionnelles* (until 1937 titled *Le Voile d’Isis*), a formerly theosophical journal that was transformed under Guénon’s influence into the principal European forum for traditionalist thought. It was only the war that provided Guénon enough respite from his correspondence to devote himself to the writing of some of his major works including, *The Reign of Quantity* (1945).

In his later years Guénon was much more preoccupied with questions concerning initiation into authentic esoteric traditions. He published at least twenty-five articles in *Études Traditionnelles* dealing with this subject, from many points of view. Although he had found his own

resting-place within the fold of Islam, Guénon remained interested in the possibility of genuine initiatic channels surviving within Christianity. He also never entirely relinquished his interest in Freemasonry, and returned to this subject in some of his last writings. Only shortly before his death did he conclude that there was no effective hope of an esoteric regeneration within either masonry or Catholicism.

Guénon was a prolific writer. He published seventeen books during his lifetime, and at least eight posthumous collections and compilations have since appeared. The oeuvre exhibits certain recurrent motifs and preoccupations and is, in a sense, all of a piece. Guénon's understanding of tradition is the key to his work. As early as 1909 we find Guénon writing of "... the Primordial Tradition which, in reality, is the same everywhere, regardless of the different shapes it takes in order to be fit for every race and every historical period." [4] As Gai Eaton has observed, Guénon "believes that there exists a Universal Tradition, revealed to humanity at the beginning of the present cycle of time, but partially lost.... [His] primary concern is less with the detailed forms of Tradition and the history of its decline than with its kernel, the pure and changeless knowledge which is still accessible to man through the channels provided by traditional doctrine." [5]

Guénon's work, from his earliest writings in 1909 onward, can be seen as an attempt to give a new expression and application to the timeless principles which inform all traditional doctrines. In his writings he ranges over a vast terrain—Vedanta, the Chinese tradition, Christianity, Sufism, folklore and mythology from all over the world, the secret traditions of gnosticism, alchemy, the Kabbalah, and so on, always intent on excavating their underlying principles and showing them to be formal manifestations of the one Primordial Tradition. Certain key themes run through all of his writings, and one meets again and again such notions as these: the concept of metaphysics as transcending all other doctrinal orders; the identification of metaphysics and the "formalization", so to speak, of gnosis (or jñana if one prefers); the distinction between exoteric and esoteric domains; the hierarchic superiority and infallibility of intellectual knowledge; the contrast of the modern Occident with the

traditional Orient; the spiritual bankruptcy of modern European civilization; a cyclical view of time, based largely on the Hindu doctrine of cosmic cycles; and a contra-evolutionary view of history.

Guénon repeatedly turned to oriental teachings, believing that it was only in the East that various sapiential traditions remained more or less intact. It is important not to confuse this Eastward-looking stance with the kind of sentimental exotericism nowadays so much in vogue. As Coomaraswamy noted, “If Guénon wants the West to turn to Eastern metaphysics, it is not because they are Eastern but because this is metaphysics. If ‘Eastern’ metaphysics differed from a ‘Western’ metaphysics—one or the other would not be metaphysics.”[6]

By way of expediency we may divide Guénon’s writings into five categories, each corresponding roughly with a particular period in his life: pre-1912 articles in occultist periodicals; exposés of occultism, especially spiritualism and theosophy; expositions of Oriental metaphysics; treatments both of the European tradition and of initiation in general; and lastly, critiques of modern civilization. This classification may be somewhat arbitrary, but it does help situate some of the focal points in Guénon’s work.

Although his misgivings about many of the occultist groups were mounting during the 1909-1912 period, it was not until the publication of two of his earliest books that he launched a full-scale critique: *Theosophy: History of a Pseudo-Religion* (1921) and *The Spiritist Fallacy* (1923). As Mircea Eliade has noted: “The most erudite and devastating critique of all these so-called occult groups was presented not by a rationalist outside observer, but by an author from the inner circle, duly initiated into some of their secret orders and well acquainted with their occult doctrines; furthermore, that critique was directed, not from a skeptical or positivistic perspective, but from what he called ‘traditional esoterism’. This learned and intransigent critic was René Guénon.”[7]

Guénon’s interest in Eastern metaphysical traditions had been awakened around 1909, and some of his early articles in *La Gnose* were devoted to Vedantic metaphysics. His first book, *Introduction to the*

Study of the Hindu Doctrines (1921), marked Guénon as a commentator of rare authority. It also served notice of Guénon's formidable power as a critic of contemporary civilization. Of this book Seyyed Hossein Nasr has written, "It was like a sudden burst of lightning, an abrupt intrusion into the modern world of a body of knowledge and a perspective utterly alien to the prevalent climate and world view and completely opposed to all that characterizes the modern mentality." [8]

However, Guénon's axial work on Vedanta, *Man and His Becoming According to the Vedanta*, was published in 1925. Other significant works in the field of oriental traditions include *Oriental Metaphysics*, delivered as a lecture at the Sorbonne in 1925 but not published until 1939, *The Great Triad*, based on Taoist doctrine, and many articles on such subjects as Hindu mythology, Taoism and Confucianism, and doctrines concerning reincarnation. Interestingly, Guénon remained more or less incognizant of the Buddhist tradition for many years, regarding it as no more than a "heterodox development" within Hinduism, without integrity as a formal religious tradition. It was only through the influence of Marco Pallis, one of his translators, and Ananda Coomaraswamy, that Guénon decisively revised his attitude.

During the 1920s, when Guénon was moving in the coterie of French Catholicism, he turned his attention to some aspects of Europe's spiritual heritage. As well as numerous articles on such subjects as the Druids, the Grail, Christian symbolism, and folkloric motifs, Guénon produced several major works in this field, including *The Esoterism of Dante* (1925), *St. Bernard* (1929), and *The Symbolism of the Cross* (1931). Another work, *Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power* (1929), was occasioned by certain contemporary controversies.

The quintessential Guénon is to be found in two works that tied together some of his central themes: *The Crisis of the Modern World* (1927), and his masterpiece, *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times* (1945). The themes of these two books had been rehearsed in an earlier one, *East and West* (1924). The books mounted an increasingly elaborate and merciless attack on the foundations of the contemporary European world-view.

While Guénon's influence remains minimal in the Western academic community at large, he is the seminal influence in the development of traditionalism. Along with Coomaraswamy and Schuon, he forms what one commentator has called "the great triumvirate" of the traditionalist school. Like other traditionalists, Guénon did not perceive his work as an exercise in creativity or personal "originality", repeatedly emphasizing that in the metaphysical domain there is no room for "individualist considerations" of any kind. In a letter to a friend he wrote, "I have no other merit than to have expressed to the best of my ability some traditional ideas." [9] When reminded of the people who had been profoundly influenced by his writings, he calmly replied "... such disposition becomes a homage rendered to the doctrine expressed by us in a way that is totally independent of any individualistic consideration." [10]

Most traditionalists regard Guénon as the "providential interpreter of this age." [11]

It was his role to remind a forgetful world, "in a way that can be ignored but not refuted, of first principles, and to restore a lost sense of the Absolute." [12]

Adapted from Harry Oldmeadow, *Journeys East: 20th Century Western Encounters with Eastern Religious Traditions* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2005), pp. 184-194.

NOTES

[1] Whitall Perry, "The Revival of Interest in Tradition", in R. Fernando (ed) *The Unanimous Tradition* (Colombo: Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies, 1991), pp. 8-9.

[2] Guénon's slightly lopsided view of Christianity has been discussed in P. L. Reynolds *René Guénon: His Life and Work* (unpublished) pp. 9ff. See also B. Kelly: "Notes on the Light of the Eastern Religions", in S. H. Nasr and William Stoddart (eds.), *Religion of the Heart* (Washington, D.C.: Foundation for Traditional Studies, 1991), pp. 160-161.

[3] Whittall Perry, "Coomaraswamy: The Man, Myth, and History", in *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 1977, p. 160.

[4] René Guénon, "La Demiurge", *La Gnose* 1909.

[5] Gai Eaton, *The Richest Vein* (Ghent, NY: Sophia Perennis et Universalis, 1995), pp. 188-189.

[6] A. K. Coomaraswamy, *The Bugbear of Literacy* (London: Perennial Books, 1979), pp. 72-73.

[7] Mircea Eliade, "The Occult and the Modern World", in *Occultism, Witchcraft and Cultural Fashions* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1976), p. 51.

[8] S.H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), p. 101.

[9] Perry, "The Man and His Witness", in S.D.R. Singam (ed.), *Ananda Coomaraswamy: Remembering and Remembering Again and Again* (Kuala Lumpur: privately published, 1974), p. 7.

[10] Marco Bastriocchi, "The Last Pillars of Wisdom", in S.D.R. Singam (ed.), *Ananda Coomaraswamy*, p. 356.

[11] Frithjof Schuon, "René Guénon: Definitions", quoted by M. Bastriocchi, "The Last Pillars of Wisdom", p. 359.

[12] Perry, "Coomaraswamy: The Man, Myth, and History", p. 163.