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RENÉ GUÉNON, TRADITION AND TRADITIONALISM (II)

As a reaction to the modern world where everybody talks about occultists, esotericists, theosophists, etc., the term “traditionalist” tries to delineate itself from the other appellations, and to define those who are more or less sincerely interested in traditional studies and doctrines. Yet we have already seen how Guénon defined the “traditionalist.” For this reason the label “traditionalist” is also in disaccord with traditional teachings; it should be used in connection with Tradition only if we want to indicate those who wander around it, without finding the gate to it.

The philosophers (in the modern sense of the word), who invented systems after systems, are fond of labels, which give them a feeling of order in the flood of words and complicated ideas composing their philosophies. There are today categories such as “Guénonian,” “Schuonian,” “Evolian,” etc. in the ambiance of people attracted to traditional doctrines. We have nothing against seeing those with a philosophical background of an academic type interested in traditional doctrines; on the contrary, we think that philosophy could be useful, the same way mathematics are more than necessary in the individual endeavour to assimilate metaphysical knowledge.¹ The difference between mathematics and philosophy is that the first one forces us to limit our flood of words, often so shallow, while philosophy encourages it.

Labeling some as “Guénonians” even if it seems an easier mode of communicating does not reflect the truth but only the fact that in the mind of the “traditionalists” the division is implicit. Taking into account that René Guénon did not found his own doctrine, the label “Guénonian” is nonsense and expressions like “Guénonian esotericism” are absurd. As much as it is comfortable to imitate the philosophers’ model

¹ “Nobody crosses the threshold without mathematics” (Ioan Tzetzes, **Chiliades**, VIII, 973). Agrippa, in his turn, declared that without mathematics it is impossible to study the science of magic (Henry Cornelius Agrippa, **Three Books of Occult Philosophy**, Llewellyn Publications, 1998, p. 233). Nicholas of Cusa wrote: “Mathematics represents the scientific domain that offers the most numerous similarities with metaphysics,” and added: *Nihil certi habemus in nostra scientia, nisi nostram mathematicam*, stressing that from Pythagoras and Plato to Saint Augustine and Boethius, the philosophers stated that nobody can reach the knowledge of the divine order without learning mathematics. “On this path,” concluded Cusa, “we will follow them, and, because there is no other way to lead to the divine order but that of the symbols, we affirm that we may select the mathematical signs, which contain an incorruptible certitude” (Nicolas de Cusa, **De la docte Ignorance**, Guy Trédaniel, 1979, p. 58).

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regarding their systems and categories, we have no right to falsify the truth. Reading and agreeing with Guénon's books does not make us "Guénonians," even if the modern world adores labels, tags and acronyms.²

"The consequence of incantation (*dhikr*)³ is inseparable from the total and perfect fraternity amid the initiates," Shaikh Tâdîlî said, and warned: "Beware of a science where is found your and our salvation: do not divide the groups (*tawâif*) of initiates (*mansûb*), even if they do this themselves! Because division is an error which facilitates the heterodoxic innovations that divide the hearts."⁴ It is exactly what Saint Paul cautioned: "My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, «I follow Paul»; another, «I follow Apollos»; another, «I follow Cephas»; still another, «I follow Christ.» Is Christ divided?" It is exactly what happened to those who have been in a direct relation with René Guénon,⁵ but also to others who came later.

Of course, it is "human" for differences and different opinions to exist, and hence it was expected that, after Guénon's corporeal disappearance, various "traditional[istic] groups" would appear. The problems begin when the "human" becomes too human and much less traditional. Michel Vâlsan narrated how he was denigrated in front of Guénon's widow, who thought that he is the most acerbic enemy of René Guénon.⁶ Almost immediately after René Guénon's death diverse "groups" were born, which, forgetting sometimes why they came to life, focused more on the worldly aspects, like for

² Michel Vâlsan used the epithet "Guénonian," but only in a given context and with reservation: "we normally trust the data we receive from individuals having indeed a traditional mentality and, if it is the case (and we have to say the word), of a «Guénonian» doctrinal formation" (**L'Initiation Chrétienne**, p. 178). Gilis followed Vâlsan in this respect: "Only, indeed, the veritable «Guénonians», those who, using Michel Vâlsan's expression, presented «a perfect fidelity with regard to the teachings» of their grand predecessor, have taken up and developed this aspect of his doctrine..." (Gilis, **Introd. Guénon**, p. 17); yet Gilis stressed also that, "Guénon does not lead to Guénon, and it would be the worst insult to his memory of wanting to change the *Traditional Studies* into «Guénonian Studies»" (p. 105). On the other hand, labels like "Schuonian" and "Evolian," even if we disapprove of them because of the division they endorse, are, at least partially, understandable, considering that both Schuon and Evola have been marked by their powerful individuality.

³ In the Islamic tradition, *dhikr* is an initiatory rite (Guénon, **Aperç. sur l'Init.**, p. 170).

⁴ Sheikh-Tâdîlî, **La vie traditionnelle c'est la sincérité**, Edizioni Studi Tradizionali, pp. 23-24.

⁵ We understand "direct relation" either as "face to face" or through letters.

⁶ Look at what kind of individuals, he complained, "are the exponents of Guénon's family's interests, and therefore, of «Guénon's work»"; see Michel Vâlsan, **Rumeurs, médisances et vérités**, Études Traditionnelles, no. 423, 1971, p. 30. Related to Vâlsan, we note his polemic with Marco Pallis on the subject of Christian initiation and the extremely instructive fact that no one, after their long duel, has changed his opinion. We do not want to take Vâlsan's side, even if we are in complete disaccord with Pallis, but we must underline the "callousness" of the hearts of those who undertake such polemics from a human and worldly perspective. Over many years we have witnessed a lot of disputes among the "traditionalists" and very rarely was an accord reached; usually, energies were concentrated on a better and stronger response, than on listening and understanding, and eventually, when no arguments were left, the personal attacks started.

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example the battle for leadership with regard to the “Guénonian heritage.”⁷ It was and still is possible to watch an aggressive polemic between groups and individuals, each one imagining they are the only genuine defenders of Tradition, hence the labels “Guénonian,” “Schuonian,” “Evolian,” etc.⁸

Guénon wrote about polemic: “Those who are qualified to speak in the name of a traditional doctrine should not discuss with the «profane» ones and should not be involved in «polemics»; they must only transmit the doctrine as it is, for those who can understand it, and, at the same time, denounce the errors where they show up” (Guénon, **Crise**, p. 109); and: “we decided to stay out of any kind of polemic, of any kind of dispute between schools or parties” (Guénon, **Crise**, p. 180).⁹

Sure, the present division is caused, among other reasons, by the ego’s powerful position in our modern world.¹⁰ There is, even in the case of good people, a significant activity of the ego, which wants to be noticed and appreciated; this ego has a tremendous appetite to criticize, yet does not accept any criticism; this ego today is extremely aggressive¹¹ and has a “wrath” that makes the individual have no patience to listen to somebody else, and to want just to expose his own point of view. As we have already seen, Guénon considered that “individualism” is the main factor of the present disarray. René Guénon wrote: “What we understand through «individualism» is the denial of any principle superior to individuality and, consequently, the limitation of civilization, in all fields, at its purely human elements... and this defines what we called «the profane point of view»” (Guénon, **Crise**, p. 90); and “who says individualism says necessarily division” (125).

“Individualism,” Guénon continued, “introduces everywhere the addiction to discussions. It is very difficult to make your contemporaries understand that some things,

⁷ It is true that a member of such a group, more than twenty years ago declared that, what seems to be from an individual point of view a quarrel among “traditionalists” or “Guénonians,” hides in fact a much more important stake and of a completely different nature.

⁸ Marco Pallis used the bizarre expression “Christian Guénonians” and argued that those who were influenced by Guénon can nevertheless have opposite opinions, as an apropos to the problem of Christian initiation. Yet, Pallis should have decided: or these ones are “Christian Guénonians” and follow Guénon with respect to Christianity; or they are against what Guénon stated and then they are no longer “Guénonians”! It is not the first time Pallis contradicted himself. For example, at one point he suggested that even an atheist could receive an initiation, as if somebody would strive with all the energies and with all the sacrifices to reach something that he is convinced does not exist. One of Pallis’ “successors” recently stated his worries about a “guénonization” of Christianity; he spoke about a “Guénonian doctrine,” yet his work is of poor quality.

⁹ No doubt, there are alarming signals with regard to division, and we should mention Jonas’ article **Pour en finir avec René Guénon** published in the journal *Vers la Tradition*, no. 83-84, 2001, in which we are reminded of the confrontations among diverse “groups” composed of “guénonians, anti-guénonians and guénotaries” (p. 234). “The majority of criticism against René Guénon comes from pharisee, «phony esotericists,» scholars or intellectuals... whose thoughts make you smile” (p. 236). We should mention also, in the same journal, Abdellah Penot’s article, **Guénon et les «Guénoniens,»** where are listed, not by name, some of the modern “guénonians” and their errors.

¹⁰ Schuon said: “According to some Sufis, the devil was the first being that uttered the word «I»” (Frithjof Schuon, **Forme et substance dans les religions**, Dervy, 1975, p. 39).

¹¹ “God does not love those who are aggressive” (**Qur’ân** 7:55).

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because of their nature, cannot be discussed; the modern man instead of trying to ascend at the level of truth, imagines to bring it down, to his level” (Guénon, **Crise**, p. 107). And Guénon wrote too:

In the domain of individual opinions discussions are always possible, because they are not beyond the rational order and, without considering any superior principle, various arguments more or less valid can be found to support the «pro» and the «cons»; it is even possible, in many cases, to continue the discussion indefinitely without reaching an agreement... and the most common result is that, each one, striving to convince the opponent, becomes more and more acerbic attached to his own opinion and locks himself even more exclusively. (Guénon, **Crise**, pp. 107-108)

Today, some of the “traditionalists” (we must use this word) behave in the same way as the “opponents” against whom Guénon fought in the past; that is very alarming. In the name of tradition, some people believe that insults can replace arguments, that personal attacks can substitute for doctrinal opinions, and polemics do not need an urban language and a minimum of civility. They imagine they are intransigents and, with wrath, they defend the traditional doctrines, as seemingly René Guénon did. Yet René Guénon, even if inexorable with regard to the Truth, admitting no compromises or concessions, without mercy in his task of denouncing pseudo-esotericism, pseudo- and antitradition, counter-initiation, and the profane point of view, never lowered himself to the level of personal attacks, never used boorish and uncivil language, never used ill-famed words, never trespassed the limits of politeness. As ruthless as Guénon appeared to be, he never attacked individuals as such, but only wrong ideas, pseudo-doctrines and conceptual errors. He stressed relentlessly the main errors of the modern world; yet, at the same time, he offered it a fundamental work, revealing Tradition and eternal wisdom. His whole work is addressed to the Occident, because it is not enough only to criticize and exhibit an emphatic wrath with respect to profane people.¹² And, René Guénon clearly said, “we are not attacking the Occident in itself at all, but only, and this is completely different, modern mentality, in which we see the cause of the intellectual decline of the Occident” (**Orient et Occident**, p. 115).

The same thing cannot be said about some of his opponents and here we would like to give an example.¹³ This is what an individual wrote to René Guénon in 1949: “Between us, face to face, I am telling you: «Guénon, my boy, you are a humbug»¹⁴... If you would have been indeed a *jīvan-mukhta*, you would not lie or falsify texts, you would not make assumptions worthy of Abbot Barbier or of brave Delassus, you would totally avoid

¹² For the same reason, Guénon instead of attacking and condemning the occultist journal *Le Voile d'Isis*, he transformed it in *Études Traditionnelles*.

¹³ Vâlsan wrote: Guénon, “fulfilling his mission, consciously accepted the misunderstanding, the hostility, the attacks and disapproval of the academic generation (Orientalists, theologians, philosophers) and of the pseudo-spiritualists (theosophists, occultists), not to talk about other groups” (Vâlsan, **Hésychasme**, p. 178).

¹⁴ In English, in original.

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attributing without justification intentions to the opponents.”¹⁵ Guénon replied: “And we, to this individual who for sure is much younger than us and to whom one tongue is not enough to exhale his wrath, we answer: «you are a boor!»”¹⁶; Guénon added that he never pretended to be a *jīvan-mukhta* and “our individuality, which pleasant or not, does not matter and has nothing to do with what we are writing.”¹⁷ As a reply to a new attack, René Guénon wrote: “It is impossible for us to answer such profanities and sarcasm. And this one [Dr. G. Mariani] claims that he «never attacks individuals»; yet what else does he do?” (Guénon, **Franc-Maçonnerie**, I, p. 191). Eventually, on another occasion, René Guénon responded: “We are nobody’s «servant» [either group or individual], but of the Truth” (Guénon, **Franc-Maçonnerie**, I, p. 197).

We presented these quotations since such a wrath and aggressive attitude can be encountered today in some of the so-called defenders of Tradition: the same old personal attacks, the same old comparisons with who knows what individuals, the same old accusations of servility. Sure, we can find explanations for such a bizarre attitude. Some people think that if they imitate Guénon’s intransigence, they will come closer to the level of his work. Yet, more probably, our modern world sows in the individual an extreme aggressiveness. As Plutarch wrote, wrath (gr. *orge*¹⁸) replaces intelligence, producing mental chaos¹⁹; but all the traditional doctrines stress that worldly anger is one of the strongest obstacles on the spiritual journey, the opposite of peace and quietness.

We must not confuse anger with rigor though. The Wrath of the Gods refers to Justice and Rigor; worldly wrath is nothing of this kind. And it should be remembered that in the Islamic tradition the highest name of Allāh is “the Merciful,” while human anger is a characteristic of great disarray, the wrath of traditionalists being nothing else than another “sign of times.” Like individual manifestations, worldly wrath cannot be cured otherwise than through knowledge, being a type of ignorance. Guénon was accused of writing his work without optimism or joy (Guénon, **Initiation**, p. 129); sadness, joy, anger and calmness, understood as individual elements have nothing in common with the traditional doctrines and their comprehension.²⁰

Conversely, during all these years there were also valid interventions coming from various traditional[ist] groups, and justly criticizing the abuse and profanation of Guénon’s work, or warning about the “wrath of traditionalists” (even if they did not called it so) and about the “fights” among the “guénonians” and / or “traditionalists.” These legitimate interventions exposed those who claimed to be knowledgeable about Tradition yet had an antitraditional mentality, if not worse. Yet the Evangelic question, “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to

¹⁵ René Guénon, **Comptes rendus**, pp. 211-212.

¹⁶ It is the “strongest” word ever used by Guénon.

¹⁷ Many times Guénon underlined that his individuality does not count, but only his work (see, for example, Guénon, **Franc-Maçonnerie**, I, p. 182).

¹⁸ We must not confuse *orge* with *orgia*, the initiatory rites in the Eleusinian Mysteries.

¹⁹ Plutarch, **Essays**, Penguin books, 1992, pp. 176 ff.

²⁰ That is why the traditional writings do not have to produce joy, love for life, or sadness, anguish; if they do this, either the text is at a psychical level, or the reader cannot surpass the ego.

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the plank in your own eye?” (**Matthew 7:3**) rises by itself, since each human intervention is biased.²¹ There are a small visible number of “sons of Tradition” (there are others, invisible) who activate in this world and their intervention has nothing to do with “the wrath of traditionalists.”²² They are the guardians of the Truth, they do not take sides, and their “criticism” aims not so much at individuals but at the doctrinal errors²³; the less their words contain worldly anger, the more we know that they are close to Knowledge and Truth.

²¹ Since we mentioned Michel Vâlsan, we may note that some of Guénon’s “associates,” belonging to another “group,” rightly criticizing dubious authors, who wrote without any discrimination about René Guénon, also blamed Vâlsan for being quoted by those individuals; they even insinuated that Vâlsan was open to some deviated psychical influences. In fact, what the critics could not stand was the opinion of some who considered Michel Vâlsan “the most authoritative commentator of Guénon’s work.” It is difficult to understand that even today, after only fifty years since Guénon’s corporeal disappearance, somebody could think that there exists a commentator more authoritative than René Guénon himself. Guénon obsessively tried to preempt any error of interpretation and he tirelessly repeated his comments; the study of his work should be totally sufficient (and necessary) to understand Tradition, and any commentator of Guénon is usually an unwanted intermediary who could bring the errors of his own individuality.

²² There are very few in the Occident interested in traditional studies. In 1935 already, Guénon, commenting on the Romanian traditional journal, *Memra*, which was just published, said that the journal had many difficulties to be printed, “which is not surprising, since in our days that is what occurs to everything related to the traditional studies” (René Guénon, **Articles et Comptes Rendus I**, Éd. Traditionnelles, 2002, p. 215).

²³ Of course, that does not mean to weaken the rigor and forgive the individuals who are a danger to Tradition.