



Mark Sedgwick: Against the Modern World

by ATHOS

Recently, Oxford University Press has published Mark Sedgwick's book, **Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century**.

Mark Sedgwick is an Assistant Professor at the American University in Cairo, and he says he is also a Sufi. He worked hard for this book, gathering a lot of interesting information, using many references and interviewing various individuals, including René Guénon's son and Michel Vâlsan's son. His efforts must be appreciated. However, if these efforts generate confusion and errors, they become futile or, even worse, instruments of dubious forces.

The title itself is an unhappy one. It wrongly suggests that "Traditionalism" and "Intellectuality" are just equivalents of "Anti-modernism."

The author starts his book with this line: "The book is a biography of René Guénon and a history of the Traditionalism movement that he founded..." Nothing is true in this first line, which wants to specify the objective of the book. We would assume that an author, writing "a biography of René Guénon and a history of the Traditionalism movement that he founded," has read Guénon's work, but Mr. Sedgwick shows that he has no idea about it. First of all, the book is not a biography of Guénon; in fact, there have already been so many biographies written that another one would be just a nonsense. And Guénon stressed that his individuality does not count, so his biography means nothing. Second, René Guénon did not found any movement, even less Traditionalism. For this reason, we cannot talk about "Guénonism" and so on. We can ask ourselves: is René Guénon the creator of a new doctrine? No, absolutely not! In the *Foreword* of his book **Le Symbolisme de la Croix**, Guénon confesses that he wants "soit exposer directement certains aspects des doctrines métaphysiques de l'Orient, soit adapter ces mêmes doctrines de la façon qui nous paraîtrait la plus intelligible et la plus profitable, mais en reste toujours strictement fidèle à leur esprit."¹ Guénon dressed in essential clothes the traditional data, presenting a unitive doctrine about Unity, which brightly illustrates his providential function.² Guénon writes: "nous n'avons jamais entendu nous

¹ René Guénon, **Le symbolisme de la croix**, Guy Trédaniel, 1989, p. 9. Guénon writes that he wants either to expose directly some aspects of the Oriental metaphysical doctrines, or to adapt these doctrines to our mentality, preserving their spirit.

² "The Islamic spirituality as a whole is specially sensitive to recognizing the divine Unicity, which, for it, is the fundament and the first criteria of validity for any religious form. Or, René Guénon teaches and

Mark Sedgwick: Against the Modern World

renfermer exclusivement dans une forme déterminée, ce qui serait d'ailleurs bien difficile dès lors qu'on a pris conscience de l'unité essentielle qui se dissimule sous la diversité des formes plus ou moins extérieures, celles-ci n'étant en somme que comme autant de vêtements d'une seule et même vérité."¹

The expression "traditionalism" M. Sedgwick uses across his entire book is a wrong one, especially in connection with René Guénon. 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 do not 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 do not 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).²

Coming back to the title of the book, in fact "traditionalism" does not exist, and if we refer to Tradition, that is something totally different, with its main characteristic of not being "against the modern world," but being directed "towards God." The modern world is actually "against God," and therefore René Guénon rejected the modern mentality as a profane and abnormal one. With regard to the word "intellectual" used in the title, the author confuses what an intellectual is from a traditional point of view, even if René Guénon has clearly defined it.

After the *Preface*, Mr. Sedgwick presents a "List of Main Characters," which is an arbitrary and misleading list; defining Guénon in that list as "French, then Egyptian. Developed Traditionalism" is just a fantasy or worse. In the same list we find the name of Jean Reyor, of whom the author says that he is "widely known as Marcel Clavelle" (p. 32); in fact, Reyor is an alias of Marcel Clavelle. Yet after that his name is changed by Mr. Sedgwick in *Maurice Clavelle*! (see pp. 275, 288, 302, 304).

affirms the fundamental unity of the existent traditions because he notices that the essence of all doctrines is that of Unity or Non-Duality of the Principle of the Truth" (Vâlsan, **Islam**, p. 27).

¹ Guénon explains that he does not want to be limited by the frame of a specific doctrine, especially when someone is aware of the essential unity of all these doctrines, the various forms being just garments of the same truth.

² 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 it 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).

Mark Sedgwick: Against the Modern World

The first chapter of the book starts with a grave error. It defines “tradition” as “belief and practice” (p.21)! and identifies traditionalism with tradition. Tradition is not a “belief” and not a “practice” but has as its core a divine element. Even if declared Sufi, the author keeps God away and does not understand that without God being present you cannot talk about Tradition. We may accept that Mr. Sedgwick has in view “traditionalism,” but then what does René Guénon have to do with it??? The first chapter starts with the words, “There are many sorts of «traditionalists»,” which is a non-sense, and having Guénon listed with these many sorts of “traditionalists” is an insult.

The author uses some very erroneous expressions like “Traditionalist movement” or “Traditionalist philosophy” (p. 22); what makes it more ridiculous is that Guénon himself exposed the expression “traditionalist philosophy” as a wrong one (René Guénon, **La Crise du monde moderne**, Gallimard, 1975, p. 49). Even if the author seems to be very cautious (he says more than once “may or may not have,” see for example p. 182), he mischievously implies an equivalence traditionalism, Sufi Islam and European fascism (p. 22), which is very disturbing.

Mr. Sedgwick introduces a useless term “perennialism” (p. 24), which has no meaning at all, even if it is the title of the second chapter of this book. This chapter starts with another fundamental error or false statement. The author considers that Guénon developed the “Traditionalist philosophy” having occultism as source (p. 39). This statement makes us wonder: is Mr. Sedgwick naïve or has he a malevolent purpose? The author declares that Guénon’s “Vedanta-Perennialism” derived from occultism. Again, each word is incorrect. There is no such thing like “Vedanta-Perennialism,” and nothing, even Tradition, is Guénon’s property. Also, it is well-known, René Guénon exposed occultism as antitraditional and pseudo-spiritual. Mr. Sedgwick continues what Nataf did in his “dictionary,” **The Occult** (see our review, *Oriens*, September 2004), and others did before Nataf (as we are going to expose in other reviews). It seems that for modern authors (even if they claim to be Sufis or Christians) the way to success is to put together the most incompatible ingredients, like occultism, theosophy, religion, tradition, metaphysics, fascism, politics, New Age, Templars and Masonry, and come up with a common title for all these, a title like Perennialism or Traditionalism. Such a way is a *tamasic* one and must be vigorously rejected. Unfortunately, it is Mr. Sedgwick’s way, at least in this book.

There are many things in this work we could argue about. For example, Mircea Eliade was not a “traditionalist,” not even a “soft” one (p. 111). Then, at one moment, Mr. Sedgwick quotes Aymard’s article about Schuon. In that article, Mr. Aymard says, “Schuon a été ... rattaché au dernier maillon d’une tradition réellement primordiale,” yet Mr. Sedgwick translates as “join[ing him] to the last link [of the initiatic chain] of a genuinely primordial religion” (p. 151). For him tradition and religion is one and the same thing! (Not to mention the translation error). And when we think that this author said at the beginning of the book that he wants to present René Guénon!!!

The book ends as it started. The last chapter begins with the insulting statement: “In the years before the 1927 publication of his *Crise du monde moderne*, René Guénon constructed an anti-modernist philosophy, Traditionalism” (p. 263). We must repeat, René Guénon did not construct anything, tradition has nothing to do with philosophy (a modern term) and there is no such thing as “Guénon’s philosophy” (p. 264). René

Mark Sedgwick: Against the Modern World

Guénon was traditional and not “anti-modernist.” He was against fascism and any sort of extremism. He was not against the West, but he fought against the modern mentality as antitraditional and pseudo-spiritual, as an “anti-God” mentality. And all his work was directed to the Western people to help them recover from the disaster induced by the profane mentality. This mentality has no location. What better example than the author of this book, who, even if he lives in Egypt, has exactly the mentality René Guénon’s battled all his life.