



René Guénon and initiation

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René Guénon was reticent to write about initiation, not only because he did not perform the function of a spiritual master, and did not accept disciples, but also because it is almost impossible to write in general terms about spiritual realization, when this one is very real and “positive,” containing a great number of specific initiatory ways, in accordance with the human diversity.¹ Nevertheless, Guénon considered, at one moment, that it was important to write a series of articles having spiritual realization and initiation as subjects; our present article is dedicated to these written teachings. Of course, anybody can challenge the validity of what René Guénon transmitted, and there were such antagonists. Yet we have not seen up to the present even one of these opponents provide a different teaching about initiation, or a coherent one, or a better and essentially richer one. That is because what René Guénon transmitted are not his individual inventions, but traditional and ineffable data that he reformulated in an understandable language.

The Islamic tradition affirms that the number of initiatory ways (*turuq*), which aim towards the spiritual center, is indefinite, each human being following a suitable liberating way called *tarîqah*². The center is unique, but the points on the circumference are multiple, and therefore the ways connecting these points to the center are multiple, adapting themselves to the diversity of individual conditions (Guénon, **Initiation**, p. 136). In Islam there is this saying: “each shaikh has its own tarîqah,” which makes the multiplicity of the Islamic ways (*turuq*) correspond to the multiplicity of yogas from the Hindu tradition (Sri Aurobindo spoke of “his yoga,” even though Yoga is one-and-only, and only the methods are different). Using Ibn ‘Arabî’s expressions, we may say that the circumference of the circle is the skin of the fruit (*el-qishr*), that is, *shariyah*, the religious law or exotericism, addressed to all, comparable (and only from a specific point of view) to the Christian baptism with water (*via lata*, “the wide way,” *pitri-yana* of the Hindu tradition); while the center of the circle is the kernel (*el-lobb*), Rabelais’ marrow (*la substantifique moelle*), the essence, esotericism, *haqîqah* (the truth, the essential reality), reserved for an elite, and comparable to the Christian baptism with fire or Holy Spirit for

¹ Guénon wrote in a letter to Vasile Lovinescu (August 1934, in French): “Quant à indiquer à quiconque une voie de « réalisation », c’est là une chose que je dois m’interdire rigoureusement; je ne puis accepter de « diriger » personne ni même de donner de simples conseils particuliers, cela étant entièrement en dehors du rôle auquel je dois me tenir. ... Je ne pourrais mettre personne en relation directe avec des organisations initiatiques, ni en ayant point reçu la charge; j’avoue d’ailleurs que je suis fort loin de souhaiter que cela m’arrive jamais, pour de multiples raisons...”

² René Guénon, *Aperçus sur l’ésotérisme islamique et le Taoïsme*, Gallimard, 1973, p. 32.

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the chosen ones, the spiritual men (*via arcta*, “the narrow way,” *dêva-yana*). *Shariyah* is the “body” (*el-jism*), and *haqîqah* is the marrow (*el-mukh*), the former protecting and hiding the latter like a hide or a cloak, and reflecting it outwards (Guénon, **L’ésot. islam.**, p. 29).

The passage from skin to kernel occurs following a radius of the circle, that is, a “way,” a *tarîqah*, a narrow way like the sword’s blade, and there are few daring enough to embark on this road; “For many are invited, but few are chosen” (**Matthew 22:14**). The word *initiatio* derives from *in-ire*, “to enter” a gate or a way (Guénon, **Symboles**, p. 149), hence initiation means to penetrate the skin and enter within the fruit,³ to embark on a spiritual way, to enter the gate of gods, to “begin” a spiritual journey aiming at the Truth, that is, the Center, where the initiate will surpass the particular ways, reaching beyond any differentiation. In the center, the neophyte suffers a “conversion” or an “intellectual metamorphosis” (as Coomaraswamy wrote, see Guénon, **Initiation**, p. 101).⁴ In consequence, the initiatory process is, essentially, a purely inner process; on the other hand, spiritual realization imposes a specific way on the initiate, that is, an adequately traditional form and in accordance with his or her nature and possibilities. For this reason an exoteric “conversion” could (and should) sometimes occur, through which the being passes to a more adequate traditional form (especially if the former one does not possess an initiatory possibility anymore). Yet any “conversion” due to some sort of proselytism would be a mistake and a misunderstanding of the intimate concordance, which has to be between the individual nature and the traditional form; without this concordance the “converted” one could wander to sectarianism and other deviations, even to a lack of sincerity.⁵ Therefore, there has to be a strict distinction between the conversion due to esoteric and initiatory reasons (imposed by *Kali-yuga*’s conditions and disarray), and the one as a result of contingent and exoteric motives.

The initiate, the one who “enters” a way or “begins” a spiritual voyage, has his status transformed in the center, from a “chosen” one to a perfect and accomplished Chosen, that is, *El-Mustafâ* of the Islamic tradition; though, he is from the beginning the “chosen” one, possessing some “initiatory qualifications” previously proved in order to be accepted as an initiate. The initiatory qualifications are part of his own possibilities and refer to the individual domain (the mortal ego), since from the point of view of the “personality” (the immortal Self), all beings are “qualified.” Amid the qualifications we should mention first the intellectual possibility that makes the intervention of the spiritual influence possible, and then the “aspiration” or “intention” (spiritual desire or vocation), a tendency toward Truth, toward the Center, without which we cannot talk about initiation; there are also the qualifications regarding the whole individuality, they are all defining the “chosen” one (Guénon, **Aperç. sur l’Init.**, p. 283).

³ To penetrate inside the fruit, there must first be a skin as a starting point; in other words, to aspire to initiation, an attachment to a traditional form is first needed (Guénon, **Initiation**, p. 73).

⁴ We have in mind here the original sense of the Greek word *metanoia* (the change of *nous*), this inner transformation or conversion (lat. *cum-vertere*) implies a “reassembling” of the being’s energies in the center, a passage “from the human reasoning to divine comprehension,” when the being rediscovers its Self.

⁵ That is why, the “conversion” to Orthodoxy or to Islam should not be just a fashion or even a “try” (let’s see what it is all about).

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It is true that in a society in which many individuals fill functions and positions that are in disaccord with their individual nature and in which the traditional sciences do not exist anymore, the finding of those qualified for initiation is much more difficult, almost impossible, the initiatory organizations admitting, in consequence, by mistake, profane elements, which desecrate and produce decadence in those organizations (as has occurred in Masonry⁶). The initiatory qualifications constitute the first condition of the initiation; the second one, very important for the present situation of humankind, is the attachment to an authentic and regular initiatory organization.

There are ignorant people who imagine that they can “initiate” themselves, by simply reading some books or imitating some rites, or who think that they can be “initiated” through the Internet (“on line”). The word *initium* means, as we showed, “entrance,” “beginning,” that is, “a second birth,” yet how could somebody give birth to himself? (Guénon, **Aperç. sur l’Init.**, p. 31). There are, it is true, exceptions, human beings who are born seers from the beginning and who are exempted from the difficult effort or the initiatory work under the *guru*’s supervision, but even these, in our dark age, must be initiated in a specific traditional form to actualize their supernal possibilities; Ramana Maharshi is the most known example, yet we should not forget that Jesus also accepted the need to obey the regular rules, being baptized by Saint John the Baptist.⁷ Actually, everybody has to respect the laws that govern the world and to obey the temporal conditions of the world, and as children are born from corporeal parents,⁸ so initiation and the entrance into an initiatory organization is a necessary condition. On the contrary, at the beginning of the cycle the initiation was not required, since primordial man spontaneously obtained the perfection of his (her) individuality (Guénon, **Initiation**, pp. 46 sq., Guénon, **Aperç. sur l’Init.**, p. 32).

Yet entrance into an initiatory organization cannot replace active and personal effort, the inner effort of the chosen one, without which spiritual realization would not be possible, but would remain only in the “initial” phase. There are, consequently, three fundamental initiatory conditions, in accordance with the triad potential – virtual – actual: the “qualification,” composed of some inherent possibilities in the individual nature; the “transmission” of a spiritual influence (inside a traditional organization to which the neophyte has to belong), representing the “illumination” that awakens the dormant possibilities; the “inner work” through which, and with the help of some external “supports,” the being passes from degree to degree, along the initiatory hierarchy, reaching at the end Liberation or the Supreme Identity (Guénon, **Aperç. sur l’Init.**, p. 34).

⁶ The “Morgan case” is a good example.

⁷ In the Islamic tradition, there are the *Afrâds* (“the solitaires”) who follow an initiatory realization outside the regular ways (see, for example, Charles-André Gilis, **Introduction à l’enseignement et au mystère de René Guénon**, Les Éditions de l’Oeuvre, 1985, p. 25).

⁸ That is, human beings are born today through an intermediary and not spontaneously from subtle seeds (seeds sheltered in the World’s Egg from the beginning, as possibilities of manifestation), as they could very well do (and that is how it probably occurred at the beginning of the cycle, since otherwise nothing could have started). We know the old dilemma: which came first, the chicken or the egg? The discussion of this dilemma can be found in Macrobius’ **Saturnalia** VII, 16. In fact, from a *principal* point of view, the rooster was at the beginning; from a worldly point of view, it was the egg.

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In fact, the attachment to an initiatory organization is not only a necessary condition, but defines precisely the initiation, in its strict etymological sense, and this attachment must be real and effective, since a spiritual influence (a divine blessing) has to be transmitted. As we said, it is not enough that an individual desires to enter an initiatory organization; he also has to be accepted, due to his initiatory qualifications, as “chosen,” and, in addition, the initiatory organization must be authentic and effectively possess a spiritual influence. The spiritual influence is transmitted within an initiatory organization through rites, yet we ought to underline that, on the one hand, the initiatory rites (in fact, all rites in general) have their own efficacy (if they are distorted, for example, no effective result is obtained anymore), and on the other hand, the rites can be operated only by qualified personnel (for example, in the religious domain, only by those who have been consecrated as priests, the consecration being the modality through which the spiritual influence is transmitted⁹).

The word “rite” derives from Sanskrit *rita*, meaning “in accordance to order.” In a traditional society, the sacred represented the normal situation and all the daily activities were in accordance to order, that is, were pursued in a ritual mode, yet we have to keep in mind that the rites also respect a hierarchy with regard to their domain of operation. The initiatory rites aim at an elite, characterized by special qualifications, while the exoteric rites are public, intended for a community, without discrimination (the spiritual influence using the “psyche” to descend upon that community); the exoteric rites are destined exclusively to the individual domain, the Christian religion, for example, having as its unique goal salvation, that is, the Eden-like state, a state which represents the quintessence of the individual order. Any rite is an assembly of symbols, both the rite and the symbol being of non-human origin: the gestures, the words uttered in a specific mode, the graphical figures, the objects, the place, all the rite’s elements are symbolic, rites therefore being “working” symbols (Guénon, **Aperç. sur l’Init.**, p 118).

Since both language and human reason are by definition discursive, the “ritual” transmission of the initiatory teachings can be done only through symbolism, the only adequate “language” for the intellectual intuition and super-rational (with roots beyond the beginning of the world and time); the symbols, due to their universal characteristic are the only ones capable of “translating” the inexpressible into an “intuitive” mode, the true foundation of the symbolism being the correspondence existing between all the levels of Reality (for this reason the whole of Nature is nothing else than a symbol, namely, a support helping us to reach the knowledge of the supernatural and metaphysical realities: that is precisely the essential function of the symbolism and the profound reason why the traditional sciences exist). The myth is a special type of symbol, and represents symbolical tales, these myths being integrated in rites, as has happened in Masonry. The myth, like the fairy tale, is far from being a product of individual fantasy; it has a non-human origin, and only cyclic decadence has caused its real significance and

⁹ It seems obvious (even if some people do not want to recognize or do not care) that if the chain of consecration is interrupted, the spiritual influence is lost. In consequence, the priests who do not have a regular consecration, which should be unbrokenly linked to Christ and his Apostles, are without real sacred power and will deceive their community. We should add that “consecration” does not mean some profane, formal gesture, as we can see today when profane individuals are allowed to perform marriages.

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its function to be forgotten.¹⁰ In the Western Middle Ages, various symbolic tales accompanied the pilgrims, helping them on their spiritual voyage; the fairy tales are vestiges of such initiatory symbols. The Greek word *mythos* derives from the radical *mu*, which indicates silence (Latin *mutus*); indeed, the myth, similar to other symbols, is an initiatory teaching instrument, teaching that operates first of all through silence; the myth transmits the incommunicable essence, translating the silence into human language as an allegory (Guénon, **Aperç. sur l'Init.**, pp. 122 ff.).

One of the serious errors of the modern world is the desecration of the myths and fairy tales. Today all types of “tales” and “legends” are elaborated by individual fantasy and imagination, which makes them just some parodies, often noxious and generating mental disarray. Yet there is little else we can expect in a profane world, that is, in a world totally opposed to any authentic rite (and genuine “order”), where the mystic is considered an ecstatic religious character, the fairy tale is a human invention for children, and the rites are replaced by ceremonies and glamorous festivities of individual origins, destined to substitute for the essence of the traditional life.

It is not useless to remind ourselves that the word “tradition” means “transmission,” a transmission of sacred elements; consequently, the initiatory organizations are the most justified to be called traditional, when we think of the quality of the influences transmitted within their bosom. These influences were obtained through a regular way, through a regular transmission, from a secondary spiritual center linked, in its turn, to the supreme center, the keeper of the primordial Tradition. The entrance into an initiatory organization, through the transmission of spiritual influences, represents the attachment to the tradition of a spiritual center, in the most profound possible mode; this constitutes the virtual initiation, while the inner work that follows represents the effective initiation (when the possibilities marked by the virtual initiation are developed in “act”).

The initiation means the transmission not only of a spiritual influence, but also of an initiatory teaching, the latter being an outer “support” for the inner work, helping and guiding the neophyte as much as possible. Initiatory instruction can only prepare the human being in view of assimilating genuine initiatory knowledge as a result of personal work. It can indicate the way to follow, and create a mental and intellectual attitude needed to achieve the effective and not just theoretical comprehension. It can assist and guide the neophyte, controlling his work, yet not even the most perfect spiritual master can realize the inner work in his place, because nobody from outside can communicate what he himself must obtain, namely, the initiatory secret.

“Gods love secret things,” **Aitareya Upanishad** says. The initiatory secret is the inexpressible and incommunicable Truth,¹¹ and for this reason it is impossible for it to be betrayed, being inaccessible to the profane world, its comprehension being realized only through initiation. Initiatory instruction uses symbols and rites as the only possible instruments to express the inexpressible, yet only the inner work permits the uncovering of the Truth. On the other hand, the initiatory organizations are tightly closed and

¹⁰ In the Occident, the Greeks were those who started to desecrate their myths, in the same way they desecrated art and changed the sacred “love for wisdom,” *philo-sophia*, into profane philosophy.

¹¹ We understand very well that for some common people, too disappointed by politics, words like “truth” do not mean much. Yet, from a traditional perspective the Truth means everything.

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secretive in order to protect themselves against external pernicious infiltrations and especially against counter-initiatory forces; also, they try to prevent the danger that would be generated if some “secrets” were exposed outwardly and used by unqualified people. More than that, the “discipline of secretiveness” is an exercise, a method of training, reflecting the “discipline of silence” (as in the case of the Pythagoreans); in India, the *sannyasins* hidden in the caves of the mountains, following Yoga, favoured silence. The early Christianity contained *disciplina arcani* or *disciplina secreti*; the word “discipline” primary meant “instruction,” and so appeared the word “disciple.” The obligation to keep silent, not to talk at all, or to keep some teachings secret, refers exactly to the act of disciplining the disciples; the one embarked upon the initiatory journey needed all available energies in order to succeed in his inner transformation, and silence was a very efficient way to make sure that his powers were not wasted outwardly (Guénon, **Aperc. sur l’Init.**, pp. 90 ff.). More than that, the silence was a sort of “preview” of the non-manifestation, of the super-luminous darkness.¹²

The first steps of the inner work, though, require initiatory instruction and the presence of a spiritual master and guide. Sri Aurobindo wrote: “In the process of the descent [of the divine influence] and of the [inner] work, it is extremely important to count not only on yourself, but to accept the guidance of a guru and to let him judge your work and make decisions. Since it often occurs that the inferior forces will be stimulated and excited by the descent, and will try to intervene and hijack it in their favour.”¹³ Submission to a spiritual master is the mirror of genuine “humility,” humility (the only one truly valid) with regard to the Principle, this status of vassalage, of servitude (“God’s servant”), representing the inner opening of the being for Divinity and for divine grace, which does not mean that submission implies passivity in the inner work.

The initiatory work is an active process and truly within, the supreme and authentic goal of the effective initiation being the Supreme Identity, the realization of the Universal Man, the integral of the individual and super-individual states. There is a fundamental qualitative and hierarchic difference between the goal of the Christian religion and that of the initiation: the former aims at salvation, the latter at Liberation. Liberation targets the spiritual domain and the states of the pure intellect; salvation deals with the subtle domain, that is, the individual one. In the best of cases, religion leads the individual to the Earthly Paradise, yet “Paradise is a prison,” because the one who has obtained salvation is still chained by human individuality for an indefinite period, and only the Heavenly Paradise, the goal of effective initiation, allows a real and complete “liberation.”

Of course, we might ask the questions: why do we need an initiation and an inner effort if, in fact, nothing is different from the Principle, and the individual being is the same as the Universal Man? Why do we need an initiatory attachment if, actually, everything is tied to the Principle? There are, always, multiple points of view, yet two are

¹² We are amazed how much talking occurs in our days. The lack of discipline in this sense (a child or a student thinks that he or she should feel insulted if the teacher or parent utters the magic words “shut up”) is exactly the opposite of initiatory discipline. Yet what is worse is that everybody talks but nobody has the time and patience to listen. On the other hand, in any traditional society silence played an important role, both in the exoteric and esoteric domain. René Guénon wrote in 1949 an article called **Silence and solitude**, in which he stressed the importance of silence in connection with the initiatory rites.

¹³ Sri Aurobindo, **Le guide de Yoga**, Albin Michel, 1970, p. 168.

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fundamental: the *principial* point of view and the worldly one; the questions refer to the former, the *principial* one; but for the human individual, the latter is the normal one, and therefore inner work is needed to make the individual become effectively conscious (not only theoretically) of the *principial* unity; “liberation” (*moksha*) regards the ego and dissipates the illusion that ego is different from the Self. If for the primordial man initiation made no sense, for the decadent man of *Kali-yuga* it becomes indispensable in the endeavour to remove the thick curtains of ignorance and illusion.