

A Note on René Guénon

by

Frithjof Schuon

Source: *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 11, No. 1 & 2 (Winter-Spring, 1985).
© World Wisdom, Inc.

www.studiesincomparativereligion.com

The question has been asked why Guénon “chose the Islamic path” and not another; the “material” reply is that he really had no choice, given that he did not admit the initiatic nature of the Christian sacraments and that Hindu initiation was closed to him because of the caste system; given also that at that period Buddhism appeared to him to be a heterodoxy. The key to the problem is that Guénon was seeking an initiation and nothing else; Islam offered this to him, with all the essential and secondary elements that must normally accompany it. Again, it is not certain that Guénon would have entered Islam had he not settled in a Muslim country; he had already been given an Islamic initiation in France through the intermediation of Abdul-Hadi, and at that time he did not dream of practicing the Muslim religion. Thus, in accepting a Shadilite initiation, it was initiation that Guénon chose, and not a “path”.

Besides there is, in the expression “chose a path”, when applied to a case like that of Guénon, something inadequate, tiresome and awkward-sounding; for Guénon was intrinsically a “pneumatic” of the “gnostic” or “*jnāni*” category; and, in this case, there is no question of a “path” or at least, if there is, the meaning is so altered that the expression itself becomes misleading. A pneumatic is in a way the “incarnation” of a spiritual archetype, which means that he is born with a state of knowledge which, for other people, would actually be the goal, and not the point of departure; the pneumatic does not “go forward” towards something “other than himself”; he stays where he is in order to become fully what he himself is—namely his archetype—by ridding himself, one after the other, of veils or outer surfaces, shackles imposed by the ambience or perhaps by heredity. He becomes rid of them by means of ritual supports—“sacraments”, one might say—not forgetting meditation and prayer; but his situation is nonetheless quite other than that of ordinary men, even prodigiously gifted ones. From another point of view it must be recognized that a born gnostic is by nature more or less independent, not only as regards the “letter” but also as regards the “law”; and this does not make his relation with the ambience any simpler, either psychologically or socially.

At this point the following objection has to be parried: does not the “path” consist for every man in getting rid of obstacles and in “becoming oneself”? Yes and no; that is to say: metaphysically it is so, but not humanly because, I repeat, the pneumatic “realizes” or “actualizes” what he “is”, whereas the non-pneumatic realizes what he “must become”—a difference at once “absolute” and “relative” about which one could argue indefinitely.

Another objection—or question—is the following: how are we to explain the imperfections and gaps—altogether surprising—in Guénon’s writing, given the quality of the author’s substance? The fact is that these gaps were by no means of an order opposed to this quality; they were, one might say, “accidental” and “superimposed” and certainly had nothing passionate or worldly about them. It was a matter partly of traumatism, intensified by the lack of compensatory factors in the soul and in the ambience.

One may well wonder, even so, why Providence allowed there to be flaws in Guénon’s writings which seem at odds with the profound personal character of the author; the answer is that Providence would never have permitted—and this can be said without temerity—a Guénonian corpus that would have no positive results; we are thinking here of his influence attested to in the most diverse circles, and that is the very least that can be said. Guénon was the victim of a certain dogging by fate, but his essential message was not in vain and could never be so, and that is all that matters.

Guénon was like a personification, not of straightforward spirituality, but of intellectual certitude in its own right; or of metaphysical self-evidence in a mathematical mode, and this explains the tenor of his teaching, which is abstract and reminiscent of mathematics, as well as explaining—indirectly and because of the lack of compensatory features—certain of his traits of character. No doubt, he had the right to be “one-sided” but this constitution went ill with the broad sweep of his mission, or with what he believed to be his mission; he was neither a psychologist nor an esthete—in the best sense of these terms—which is to say that he underestimated both aesthetic values and moral values, particularly in relation to their spiritual functions. He had an inborn distaste for everything that is human and “individual”, and there are certain points on which this affected his metaphysics as when, for example, he felt himself bound to deny that the “human state” has a “privileged position”, or that the “mind”—the essence of which is reason—constitutes a privilege for man; in reality, it is the presence of the faculty of reason that proves the “central” and “total” character of the human state and it would not exist without this character, which is its entire *raison d’être*.

However that may be, it is important, in recording flaws of this kind, not to lose sight of two things: the irreplaceable worth of what makes up the essence of Guénon’s writings, and the author’s gnostic or pneumatic substance.

Guénon was quite right to declare that the Vedanta is the most direct expression of pure metaphysics and, in a certain respect, the most assimilable; no attachment to any non-Hindu tradition obliges us to ignore it or to pretend to ignore it. In the realm of the monotheistic Semitic religions there is one esoterism “of fact” and another “by right”; it is the latter which—whether or not it is “seen for what it is”—corresponds to the wisdom of the Vedanta; *de facto* esoterism is the esoterism that has come about from what has in fact been said or written, with such veilings and side-tracking as are almost bound to be demanded by a particular framework of theology and, above all, by a particular religious *upāya*. It was doubtless esoterism *de jure* that the

Qabbalists had in mind when they said that if the esoteric tradition were lost the sages could restore it.

I have had occasion more than once to point out that esoterism displays two aspects, one being an extension of exoterism and the other alien to it to the point of occasionally opposing it; for if it be true that the form “is” in a certain way the essence, the essence on the contrary is by no means the form; the drop is water, but water is not the drop. “Error alone is handed on”, said Lao-tzu; likewise, Guénon did not hesitate to say in the review *La Gnose* that the historical religions are “so many heresies” compared with the “primordial and unanimous Tradition”, and he declares in *Le Roi du Monde* that “true esoterism is quite another thing than outward religion and, if it has certain relationships with it, this can only be insofar as it finds a mode of symbolical expression in religious forms; it matters little, moreover, that these forms should belong to this religion or that ...” Guénon speaks of “true esoterism”, and thus admits the existence of a modified esoterism and that is what I am referring to when I speak, in certain of my books, of “average Sufism”; a somewhat loose expression, but in practice adequate.

Let us come back now to the question of the “pneumatic”, quite apart from any personal application of the term: the quality of the born gnostic involves not only modes but also degrees; there is the difference between the *jnāni* and the *bhakta* on the one hand and, on the other, differences of plenitude or breadth in the manifestation of the archetype. In any case, the pneumatic is situated, by his nature, on the vertical and timeless axis—where there is no “before” or “after”—so that the archetype which he personifies or “incarnates”, and which is his true “himself” or “his very self” can, at any moment, pierce through the contingent, individual envelope; it is therefore really “himself” who is speaking. The real gnostic does not attribute any “state” to himself, for he is without ambition and without ostentation; he has a tendency rather—through an “instinct for holding back”—to disguise his nature inasmuch as he has, in any case, awareness of “cosmic play” (*lila*) and it is hard for him to take secular and worldly persons seriously, that is to say, “horizontal” beings who are full of self-confidence and who remain, “humanists” that they are, below the vocation of man.

What the natural gnostic seeks, from the point of view of “realization”, is much less a “path” than a “framework”—a traditional, sacramental and liturgical setting which will allow him to be ever more genuinely “himself”, namely a particular archetype of celestial “iconostasis”. This puts us in mind of the sacred art of India and the Far East which demonstrates in supernaturally evocative fashion the heavenly models of earthly spirituality; therein lies, in fact, the *raison d’être* of that art which is at once “mathematical” and “musical” and which is founded upon the principle of the “*darsana*”, the visual and intuitive assimilation of the symbol-sacrament. Moreover, this symbol does not belong to art alone but rises up also—and *a priori*—from animate and inanimate nature for there is, in all beauty, a liberating and, in the final account, saving element; which enables us to voice the esoteric paraphrase: “He that hath eyes to see, let him see!”

“Know thyself” was the inscription written above the portico of the Temple of Delphi; that is, know thine immortal essence but also, by that very token, know thine archetype. This injunction no doubt applies in principle to every man, but it applies to the pneumatic in a far more direct manner, in the sense that he has, by definition, awareness of his celestial model in spite of the flaws which his earthly shell may have undergone in contact with an all too uncongenial ambience. Paradox is part of the economy of this world below, given that the limitlessness of Universal Possibility necessarily implies unexpected, if not incomprehensible, combinations of things; phenomena can be what they are, but *vincit omnia veritas*.

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

To get a crop one must needs sow the grain with the husk on.... So rites and ceremonies are necessary for the growth and perpetuation of a religion. They are the receptacles that contain the kernel of truth, and consequently every man must perform them before he reaches the central truth.

Sri Ramakrishna.