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Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17239637>**Rene Guenon and his Perennial Philosophy****Muhammad Iqbal Asif**

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Abstract

Rene Guenon founded the Traditionalist school. He wrote on different subjects such as metaphysics, symbolism, modern world and traditional sciences. The constant theme of his writings is the sharp contrast between the traditional world view shared by various religions of the world and modernism. In traditional worldview shared by various religions of the world and modern world which contains some of the most profound and enduring analyses of the modern world and its philosophical outlook. In this article, his early days of life, his education, his journey and his contact with spiritual groups and occasional visits with the members of Traditionalist School as Titus Burckhardt, Frithjof Schuon and Martin Lings, his conversion to Islam, his stay in Egypt and devotion to work on his major books and articles., his publication and his work on comparative philosophy and spirituality and esoterism, his traditional doctrines and his attempt to revive traditional concepts and sciences and his views about Traditional school of thought will be discussed.

Keywords: René Guénon, Perennial Philosophy, Traditionalism, Esotericism, Metaphysics

Rene Guenon and his Perennial Philosophy:

Rene Guenon is considered to be the founder of the Traditionalist school. He was born in Blois, France on November 15, 1886. He devoted his early years of his life to the study of mathematics and philosophy. He traveled to Paris in 1906, where he maintained regular contact with various spiritualist groups. In 1909, he edited and published a review journal called *La Gnose* for which he wrote a numbers of essays and reviews on spirituality and esoterism. He met the famous French painter Gustav Agley in 1910, that time he had embraced Islam and take the name Abd al-Hadi. He was initiated into Sufism in 1912 and became Muslim and he took the name Abdul-Wahid Yahya. (1)

In 1916, Guenon finished his university education with a thesis called “Leibniz and Infinitesimal Calculus”. The same year, he met Jacques Martin who was one of the most influential Catholic thinkers and scholars of 20th century. He prepared his doctoral dissertation in 1921 under the title “General Introduction to study of Hindu Doctrines”. His thesis was rejected by his doctoral committee and he finished his university education in 1923. That dissertation was later published as a book under the same title. (2) In 1924, he published his book *Orient and Occident* that was

one of his major works on comparative philosophy and spirituality. In 1927, he published his other book titled "The Crisis of the Modern World" that was perhaps his most famous and widely read book. (3)

A year after the publication of *The Crisis of the Modern World* in 1928, Guenon's wife died. He traveled to Egypt in 1930 as part of a project for the study and publication of some Sufi texts. He settled in Egypt and never left Egypt again. In 1934, he married Fatima, the daughter of the Sufi Sheikh Muhammad Ibrahim and settled in a house near al-Azhar University where he had regular contact with Abd ul-Halim Mahmud, the famous president of al-Azhar and scholar of Sufism. He had contacts and received occasional visits with the members of the Traditionalist School as Titus Burckhardt, Frithjof Schuon and Martin Lings but mostly he remained reclusive during these years in Egypt and devoted to work on his major books and articles.(4)

The term *philosophia perennis* first appeared in the Renaissance. It is widely associated with philosopher Leibniz who himself owes it to the sixteenth century theologian Augustines Steuchius.

The French author Rene Guenon was a pioneer in the rediscovery of this *Philosophia Perennis* or better *Sophia Perennis* in the 20th century. His views largely shared with later Perennialist authorities, is that "Semitic religions" have an exoteric /esoteric structure. Exoterism is the outward dimension of religion and it is constituted by religious rites and a moral but also a dogmatic theology. The exoteric points of view are characterized by its "sentimental", rather than purely intellectual, nature and remain fairly limited. Based on the doctrine of creation and the subsequent duality between God and creation, exoterism does not offer means to transcend means to transcend the limitations of human state. The goal is only religious salvation, which Guenon defines as a perpetual state of beatitude in a celestial paradise. (5)

A major theme in the works of Guenon is the contrast between traditional world views and modern world views, "which he thought to be an anomaly in the history of mankind. "For Guenon, the physical world was a manifestation of metaphysical principles, which are maintained in the perennial teachings of the world religions, but were lost to the modern world. For Guenon, "the doldrums of the modern world lies in its denial of the metaphysical realm."

Guenon wrote on different subjects such as metaphysics, symbolism, critique of the modern world and traditional sciences. The constant theme of his writings is the sharp contrast between the traditional world view shared by various religions of the world and modernism. In traditional worldview shared by various religions of the world and modern world which contains some of the most profound and enduring analyses of the modern world and its philosophical outlook. His book *Orient and Occident* and *The Crisis of the Modern World*, both published in the first half of the 20th century and these books are still widely read today and have been translated into various languages. In addition to those two books, he devoted exclusively to the critique of the modern world from a traditionalist point of view. (6) His other writings contain many references to metaphysical and philosophical misconceptions prevalent in modern Western Societies.

The other part of Guenon's writings deals with traditional doctrines and in these works he attempted to revive traditional concepts and sciences that had been either ignored or lost with rise of modern philosophy. In his writing such as *The Reign of Quantity and the sign of the Times*, *Multiple States of Being* and *Fundamental Symbols of Sacred Sciences*, he devotes himself to the

revival of traditional doctrines and become an instrumental in the rise and spread of Traditionalist School followed by such important figures as Frithjof Schuon, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Titus Burckhardt, Marco Pallis, Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Martin Lings.(7) In addition to these, his following writings, *The Symbolism of the Cross*, *Man and His Becoming According to the Vedanta*, *Introduction to the study of Hindu Doctrines* and *the Grand Trial*, deal with specific religious traditions and all of these books have been written from the same the perspective of esoterism and traditional metaphysics.(8)

Guenon's view of science is an integral part of his attempt for the reviving of the traditional worldview and it cannot be properly understood in isolation from the general purview that he adopted throughout his works. The gist of his metaphysical views also lies at the heart of Traditionalist School: the primordial and perennial Truth, which manifests itself in a variety of religious traditions and metaphysical systems which was lost in the modern world. The modernists sought to reduce all higher principles and levels of reality to their manifestation in the world of multiplicity and relative existence. Modern philosophy carried this out by reducing everything to the individualistic horizon of the subject any by relegating objective reality to their manifestation in the world of multiplicity and relative existence. Modern philosophy carried this out by reducing everything to the individualistic horizon of subject and by relegating objective reality to the discursive constructions of the knowing subject. (9)

In the field of natural sciences, positivism and its scientific allies similarly rejected any reality that was beyond the reach and scrutiny of the quantitative measurement of physical sciences. In the social realm, the moral and aesthetic principles were left to arbitrary decisions and consensus of the majority, thus jeopardizing the objective reality of the truth. For Guenon, the malaise of the modern world was its denial of the metaphysical realm and this metaphysical world consisted on both philosophy and spirituality. Guenon saw everything in the worlds of creation as an application and manifestation of metaphysical principles that are comprised of the perennial teachings of religions and he applied them to every single subject that he addressed in his works. Guenon is a metaphysician par excellence who devoted his life to the diagnosis and correction of metaphysical mistake of the modern world. (10)

As far Guenon's writing on science are concerned, we can apply the aforementioned two-fold distinction and analyze his views in two categories. The first category of writing contains on the critical analysis of modern science and its philosophical viewpoint. The second group of writings consists of traditional sciences of traditional sciences of nature, such as cosmology, alchemy, philosophy of numbers, and the science of soul, which Guenon clarified as numerous applications of metaphysical principles to the domain of the relative and the physical. To elucidate the deep contrast between the traditional and modern sciences, Guenon called the former (traditional science) sacred science and the latter (modern science) profane science. In particular context, sacred science is synonymous with traditional science and it is based on "intellectual intuition" on the one hand, and the acceptance of the hierarchy of being, on the other. According to Guenon, intellectual intuition, which lies at the foundation of traditional societies, precedes discursive knowledge for it is directly related to the knowledge of the Absolute. (11) The relative, which is the domain of physical sciences and their applications in the form of various quantitative

methods and technology, is not to be denied but placed in its proper position in the great chain of being.

Sciences of nature deal with the relative in the total economy of things and in this sense they belong to the world of multiplicity. According to Guenon, it explains the existence of various traditional sciences that display differences in form and language from one traditional civilization to another but remain the same in essence and principle. When it is interpreted as multifarious adaptations and “illustrations” of metaphysical principles to the realm of corporeal existence, the tradition cosmological and scientific systems that use different methodologies and languages within and across civilizations become justified. (12)

To know Guenon’s notion of science, therefore, one can hardly overemphasize the significance of the relation between the Principle and its adaptations. For Guenon, metaphysics studies the Principle and provides principal knowledge whereas the sciences of nature investigate its earthly, relative, and multi-layered manifestation in the cosmos. When scientific theories are enunciated as empirically established and universal truths, cannot function as substitutes for higher principles but only as further corroborations of the principle of which they are but applications. In this regard, metaphysics, as Aristotle has said, is the science of all sciences, namely it is a knowledge that provides a total framework for all other forms of knowledge, whether based on theory or praxis. Consequently, metaphysics connects all branches and forms of knowledge, supplying a frame of reference within which the physical sciences function. To carry this point a step further, Guenon reverses the relation between theory and experiment and gives priority to “preconceived ideas” a point of view remarkably close to Thomas Kuhn’s concept of paradigm. For Guenon, it is a “peculiar delusion typical of modern experimentalism, to suppose that a theory can be proved by facts whereas really the same facts can always be equally well explained by a variety of different theories.”(13)

Rene Guenon passed the last twenty years of his life in Cairo as practicing Muslim. He is the reviver of tradition in the West and a severe of modernity in all its facets. He wrote comprehensively about metaphysics, tradition, initiation and symbolism in the context of Hinduism, Taoism, Islam and Christianity. His critique of modernity including scientism, materialism, secularism, democracy and different precursors to the New Age movement was like a sword that distinguished truth from falsehood and a powerful to his appreciation of tradition. Indeed, Guenon’s *The Crisis of Modern World* proves the famous saying, “The pen is mightier than the sword”.

He is responsible for explaining the principles of tradition in the modern world. Guenon made the strategic decision to first express himself through writing about the Hindu tradition in his introduction to the study of Hindu Doctrines and Man and His Becoming according to the Vedanta because he thought that many in the West would not accept tradition if it came in Islamic garb which was closely related to the Jewish and Christian traditions which many had already rejected. This is the fact that Guenon desired privacy and traveled to Egypt, he concealed this fact that Guenon lived here and died as a traditional Muslim in the fullest sense of term. (14)

It is certainly true that Guenon’s Catholic background and his meetings with the knowledgeable people of other traditions especially Hinduism and Taoism enabled him to appreciate the Truth in these religions and further understand the essential unity of all traditions. But what is mostly

overlooked is Guenon's providential embracing of Islam both its exoteric shell and esoteric kernel and how the universality of the Islamic tradition provided a foundation for Guenon's acceptance of other religions as well as nourishment and support for his vertical journey to the One. Islam is certainly a central theme in numerous of Guenon's works including *Insight into Islamic Esoterism and Taoism* and *The Symbolism of the Cross* which is dedicated to Sheikh Abdul Rahman Ilyash al Kabir of the Shadhiliyyah order.(15)

Guenon's essay "Islamic Esoterism" In *Islamic Esoterism and Taoism* is an essential requirement for anyone interested in the inner dimension of Islam because of its insistence on Islamic Law and a regular initiatic chain that goes back to the Prophet Muhammad. He also constantly reminds us of the aim of all wayfaring which is the knowledge of the One True Reality. These writings on Islam reveal Rene Guenon's own tradition and the spiritual path which he adopted to reach the Formless. He reminded the West that all the religious forms, symbols and signs are on the way to the Transcendent.

In 1912, Rene Guenon was initiated into the Shadhiliyyah order by a Swedish Muslim, Abdul Hadi, who was a disciple of Sheikh Abdul Rahman Ilyash al Kabir. Sheikh Abdul Rahman emphasized the teachings of the great Sufi Ibne Arabi which can be seen in Guenon's *Symbolism of the Cross*. This text is essentially about that man, which we have seen, is a central doctrine in the Akbar school. This spiritual link to Sheikh Abdul Rahman and by the Prophet Muhammad connected Guenon to the heart of Islamic tradition. Finally, he defended tradition against the most powerful pseudo religions of the present day including modernism, scientism, materialism, secularism, democracy and individualism.(16)

Traditionalists from all faiths continue to take advantage from his spiritual expediency which is altogether different from simple individual preference. Rene Guenon clearly understood the essential identity of all traditions yet felt that he could not find a proper initiation in Christianity. He also felt the necessity of exoteric and esoteric forms to know the transcendent unity of Being which is at the heart of tradition. Muslim and non-Muslim traditionalists continue to benefit from his explanation of the perennial philosophy. Seyyed Hossein Nasr described:

The central character who was most responsible for the presentation of the traditional doctrines of the Orient in their fullness in the modern West was Rene Guenon and he was a man who was chosen for this task by Tradition itself he was who fulfilled an intellectual an intellectual function of a supra individual nature.(17)

In addition to the above mentioned text, some of Rene Guenon's most important books include, *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, *East and West* and *Traditional Forms and Cosmic Cycles*. Rene Guenon restored the meaning of the word tradition in the modern world through an authentic understanding of metaphysics, symbolism, the traditional sciences and various religion doctrines. He used the term tradition to entitle all of the above realities in a way that had not been necessary before. He also condemned various precursors to the New Age movement as can be seen in his *Theosophy: History* immense contributions. A. K. Coomaraswamy wrote:

No living writer in modern Europe is more important than Rene Guenon whose task it has been to illustrate the universal metaphysical tradition that has been the essential Muslim Intellectuals

and perennial philosophy. Sophia perennis foundation of every past culture and which represents the essential basis for any civilization deserving to be called so. (18)

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