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A Sufi Master's Message: In Memoriam René Guénon
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A Sufi Master's Message: In Memoriam René Guénon
By Shaykh 'Abd al-Wahid Pallavicini
Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011. PP. 80. \$16.95
Paper

“Despite everything, there are still present, even in the [postmodern] West, men who, by their ‘interior constitution’, are not ‘modern [or postmodern] men’ but who are instead able to understand what the tradition essentially is and who do not agree to consider lay error as a *fait accompli*; it is only to such men that we have always wanted to turn.” – René Guénon

While the crisis of modernity has progressively escalated into a global meltdown and the masses are besieged by—the tyranny of mindless distractions, obsessive consumption of unnecessary goods, the insatiable thirst for unrestrained quantity, exploitation by illogical mechanisms of fear, the assault by hostile economic policies devised by the corporate hegemony virtually bloodletting the populace, the endless perpetuation of the war machine, the ever quickening of time, and the collapsing ecosystems of planet earth to name only a few—these are none other than reflections of the inner disarray, if not an utter eclipse of the human microcosm itself. One wonders where the regulatory agencies of today are to be found in this late hour and who would be the appropriate authority to be contacted regarding the imploding world that appears to be on an inescapable trajectory of self-destruction for it is not a simple question to answer and rightfully deserves considerable reflection. The struggle for physical survival palpably includes the psychological but there appears to be very little response to the

ruptured spiritual compass from which all these compounding crises derive.

For those who are familiar with the works of the Traditionalist or Perennialist authors, principally the French philosopher René Guénon (1886-1951), the answer to this question is tangible yet no less consoling, for the prognosis is that we are living at the end of a temporal cycle known as the *Kali-Yuga* or Dark Age. This diagnosis, while often contextualized within the—Hindu tradition also known as the *sanātana dharma*—primordial, eternal code of conduct disclosed at the conception of this temporal cycle culminates in its equivalent expression *al-hikmat al-khalidah* or *din al-qayimah* within the Islamic tradition, the last revealed sapiential tradition of this cycle. One could suggest that René Guénon, functioned as such a regulator however not in the conventional sense as he was indefatigably monitoring and illuminating single-handedly one might add, in an unparalleled fashion the most neglected conspiracy of all—the spiritual crisis of modern man.

Shaykh ‘Abd al-Wahid Pallavicini, born in 1926 in Milan, Italy, as a young seeker was moved by Guénon’s *oeuvre*, and although he perceived the importance of theory he also perceived its indispensable and corresponding practice of an authentic spiritual form. This work discloses the serendipitous events that led Shaykh Pallavicini to embrace Islam which incidentally took place on January 7th, 1951, when he was twenty-five years old and was given the name ‘*Abd al-Wahid*, “servant of the One”. Shortly after, Shaykh Pallavicini learned that Guénon had passed away in Cairo on the same day, this event served as an omen indicating that he needed to carry on this vital work.

For the next twenty years Shaykh Pallavicini lived and traveled in the East and was in proximity to some of the most illumined masters of Islamic spirituality known during this generation. While he was initiated into the *Alawiyah* Sufi brotherhood, through a European branch that was in touch with René Guénon, he also

received authorization to conduct an independent branch of Sufism—*Ahmadiyyah Idrisiyyah Shadhiliyyah*—in Europe and in the mid-eighties he founded the Center for Metaphysical Studies, the *Comunità Religiosa Islamica* or the Italian Islamic Religious Community (CO.RE.IS.). He is extensively engaged in interfaith dialogue with numerous representatives of diverse religious traditions and has also participated in many noteworthy projects in order to spread truthful information on authentic Islam.

Sparing no time and mincing no words Shaykh Pallavicini underscores the distinct challenges of living one's spiritual tradition in the contemporary era: “[W]e do not reject life or the world in itself, but instead denounce the parts of the modern [and by extension postmodern] world that are anti-traditional and thus inhibit our spiritual development.” While this book is presented within the context of his own spiritual tradition, that of Islam and its inner dimension known as Sufism (*tasawwuf*), he never deviates his attention from the integral metaphysics of the—Primordial Tradition—the source from which all authentic traditions originate *in divinis*. The inner dimension, what is often referred to as the Heart of Islam, has a unique eschatological implication for seekers in this era, when understood in light of the Primordial Tradition: “Sufism, the living initiatory expression of the last revealed tradition, Islam.” Shaykh Pallavicini explains that if men and women were closer to the Primordial Tradition, as was the case in earlier ages, most evident in the *Krita-Yuga* or *Satya-Yuga* known as the Golden Age in Western cosmology, there would be no need for the exoteric or the outer dimension of religion. Due to the extreme level of decadency in the contemporary psyche—*the lost sense of transcendence*—one needs the outer dimension of religion to realign with the sacred if the esoteric dimension is to be sought.

Clearly, there is no Zen without Buddhism, and although the inner or esoteric dimension of every religion necessarily has affinities with those of other religions, there is also no Yoga without

Hinduism, no Kabbalism without Judaism, or Sufism without Islam, nor is there true Hesychasm (the last surviving form of Christian esoterism) outside the Orthodox Church.

While Shaykh Pallavicini, like Guénon, acknowledges the universality of all authentic spiritual revelations, he astutely illuminates the essential unanimity of the three Abrahamic traditions: “‘monotheism’ should not have a different meaning than that of ‘universality,’” which etymologically refers ‘to the One,’ the one God of Abraham.” He continues to express the common ground between the Abrahamic traditions: “Nothing in the *shari’ah* (compilation of Islamic Law) could abrogate the Ten Commandments nor could the Commandments constitute an obstacle to spiritual fulfillment.” A very contentious subject that greatly needs elucidating is that of “conversion” and what this signifies when understood according to the Primordial Tradition, which has implications beyond the three Abrahamic faiths:

The perspective of some born Muslims, any conversion to Islam should imply a repudiation of Christian beliefs. Their repudiation, in the best cases, denies Christianity’s validity in its esoteric and exoteric forms because of its pre-Islamic origin, despite the completely opposing statements of the Qur’an itself.

While monotheism intrinsically reveals universalism and universalism essentially discloses monotheism, both *ipso facto* are derivatives of orthodoxy and orthodoxy is none other than doctrinal purity which provides discernment and illuminates the path in order to prevent deviation. The importance of authentic or orthodox doctrine at the core of the Primordial Tradition for present-day seekers is its ability to cut through and recognize the radical errors of New Age pseudo-spirituality. This is what Guénon termed “counter-tradition” the ill-fated succession of “anti-tradition”, and it

also applies to particular trends in interfaith dialogue that all too often endorse syncretism or a mixture of traditional forms which gravely distort the understanding of both the outer and inner dimensions of religion:

It is very important to understand that the right metaphysical Path, and the primordial Tradition that constitutes its formally revealed expression, are not to be looked for in a hypothetical essence, nor in an even more hypothetical “quintessence” located somewhere above the revealed religions. There is not a “transcendent unity” of religions that can be extracted, or abstracted, from forms. There does not exist an “eternal wisdom,” or a *sophia perennis*, independent of the messages of the Prophets that would be sufficient to study in these so-called “post-Prophetic” times in order to inherit knowledge.

The book—*A Sufi Master’s Message*—pays homage to one of the great luminaries of the XXth century René Guénon who played a providential role in resuscitating the integral metaphysics of the Primordial Tradition for contemporary seekers. While some might argue that Guénon’s mission to establish an “intellectual elite” to thwart the spiritual crisis in the modern and now postmodern world has failed, to the contrary this work is a living demonstration that the intellectual elite has taken root in the West and is diligently working to confront the militantly anti-spiritual forces that have been systematically unleashed into the current era.

Paradoxically, the good news is that the dissolution of the present world can be slowed down by the presence of integral spirituality which this work reaffirms and acts as a rich well for sincere seekers to drink from—the waters of the Primordial Tradition, the tributary from where all sapiential traditions derive. In closing, the significance of this much needed work of Shaykh Pallavicini dedicated to the remarkable figure of René Guénon could be summarized per the memorable saying of Prophet Muhammad: “God will not withdraw all knowledge with an act that will take it

away from all men, but will withdraw it by reducing the number of the wise until no more are left.” And let it be known that René Guénon was regarded as such a one.

Reviewed by Samuel Bendeck Sotillos