

# Correspondence

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## REINCARNATION

Sir,

THE "vindication" of René Guénon by Marco Pallis in the Winter 1967 edition of *Studies in Comparative Religion*, in reply to the criticism of Messrs. Calmeyer and Osborn, was for me a great disappointment, inasmuch as the letter of Mr Pallis (who may not wish to be characterized as a "disciple" of Guénon, although he acknowledges his "indebtedness" to him) was hardly in sympathy with the spirit of Guénon's writings. I might even go so far as to say that Mr Pallis seemed to share not a little of the vague feminist sentimentalism—a substitute for clear logic—of Guénon's critics, which Guénon had so often denounced in his adversaries.

Take for example the following quotation from Mr Pallis's letter: "In mitigation, it can be said that his frontal attack on all the most cherished illusions of our modern Western civilization called for special qualities in the man, such as rarely-go with delicately adjusted expression; the vocation of an *Athanasius contra mundum* is often accompanied, humanely speaking, by a tendency to over-simplification in the field of applications, even when principles are clearly envisaged." In the first place, Guénon would be the last to admit that his adversaries need be appeased by any sort of "mitigation," for it is precisely his refusal to compromise with clearly recognized principles which constitutes Guénon's unparalleled integrity: the very characteristic which provided the (masculine and heroic) *raison d'être* of his writings, and which places them in a class by themselves, on a level incommensurately higher than those of other authors with similar pretensions. Guénon himself stated that, when one begins to "compromise" in such matters, it is difficult, if not impossible, to know when to stop compromising. In this connection, to speak "humanely"—in Mr Pallis's words—is to identify oneself with the "humanist" movement which refuses to concede the existence of any super-human or super-mundane principles or beings whatever,—with a thoroughly "sick" and "profane" civilization like our own as the inevitable consequence.

I know of no "over-simplification" in Guénon's writings, of whose ulterior developments he was not aware, or which he did not signalize as material for enlargement elsewhere. On the other hand, an often-overlooked aspect of Guénon's many-sided personality was his qualities as a mathematician, clearly evidenced in his (unfortunately) neglected work on the Principles of the Infinitesimal Calculus—qualities which almost none of his disciples seem to share. These very qualities—which Mr Pallis seems to regard as representing Guénon's "weakest side," his "lack of sense of beauty"—on the contrary enabled him to suffuse his entire work with the type of clarity, exactness and authority which is characteristic of mathematical thought in general, and which, on its highest levels, may even coincide with what Plato called "Absolute" Beauty—

however incapable the sentimentalist viewpoint may be of appreciating the intellectual heroism and asceticism which characterize the austere beauty of mathematics in its highest forms. We might for similar reasons regard the work of Aristotle as "lacking a sense of beauty," whereas Plato, while extolling the virtues of the mathematician, seemed to have his reasons for banishing the poets from his Republic.

As Guénon states in his aforementioned book on the calculus, it is perfectly true that modern mathematics, like all modern disciplines, is permeated with "samsaric" identifications (to purify the modern viewpoint of such identifications is precisely Guénon's purpose in writing that work); nevertheless the presence of a "Pythagorean" element in all esoteric traditions is sufficient testimony of its inevitability as ingredient of and prolegomena to all true Metaphysics. Indeed, if Metaphysics is the supreme science of the Absolute, of Universal Possibility, as Guénon understands the term, then it must contain all the positive possibilities of the lesser science of mathematics, including the aforementioned qualities of clarity, precision and authority, if only because, as Guénon insistently maintains, the lesser must be contained in the greater, and not vice-versa. Guénon's more strictly metaphysical works, like *Les Etats Multiples de l'Etre* or *Le Symbolisme de la Croix*, contain themes which are developed with admirable mathematical precision, simplicity, clarity and grandeur; Mr Pallis's own "sense of beauty" must be singularly truncated if he fails to recognize these qualities in Guénon's work.

Plato's denunciation of the poets while he himself achieves the status of a supreme poet is no more inconsistent than Guénon's "systematization," i.e. mathematization of Metaphysics while at the same time decrying modern "systems." When Mr Pallis affirms "It would seem, however, that Guénon, despite warnings offered to others, somewhat systematized his own views on the subject" he forgets that the pejorative sense arises from the basing of systems on mere conventional hypotheses rather than unified metaphysical principles—hence the proliferation of mutually contradictory systems even in modern mathematics.

Again, Mr Pallis states: "What neither Guénon nor his critics have brought out with sufficient clearness is that *samsara*, transmigration, the existential round of birth and death as presented by Hinduism and Buddhism (where it constitutes a basic doctrine) is before all else *indefinite*;" and then proceeds to identify the word "indefinite" with a kind of "vagueness" which easily lends itself to the usual sentimentalist and moralist interpretations of transmigration. However, it is significant that Guénon's aforementioned work on the calculus emphasizes precisely the fundamental distinction between the mathematical indefinite and the metaphysical Infinite, so that even the word "indefinite" can be defined with technical clarity, for there is nothing vague—in Mr Pallis's sense—in the concept of indefinite sequences and series in mathematical analysis. When Mr Pallis states that "it is contrary to its real meaning for us to try and define the particular form which "rebirth" will take for such and such a being," thus reducing transmigration to the problem of the individual, he fails to take account of Guénon's other distinction between the *individual* and the *person*, so that his criticism, in the last analysis, is beside the point.

As for Guénon's "experimentalist" critics, they are sufficiently refuted by the observation that two viewpoints are here possible (all rhetorical *petitii principii* regarding false pride and false modesty aside): (1) Whether we accept the modern "horizontal"

evolutionist viewpoint, or Guénon's principle of non-repetition, no circumscribed event or "experiment" at any particular time and place could ever be repeated in precisely the same way at any other time or place. It is true that one can attempt to force the issue by abusive decrees of conformism on the social level, but even the physiological faculties of, say the Greeks during the Periclean Age, must have differed in some significant respects from our own. (2) "Experience" does not necessarily imply "participation" in the vertical sense; that is, the qualities of an experiment are conditioned by the awareness and aptitudes of the experimenter, however much he tries to be "objective." If every scientific description of an event merely approximates that event (giving rise to the artificial machine-approximations of organic nature), it is also true to say that every event approximates its description, in which case the form precedes and contains the matter, and not vice-versa. The modern Epimethean experimentalist viewpoint, which exalts hindsight at the expense of the Promethean wisdom of foresight, has opened ("liberated") Pandora's box, from which the final evil to emerge may yet be the "experiment" of atomic annihilation. In this connection, Guénon's work is essentially a hymn to Hope. This refutation of experimentalism is of course valid only from the standpoint of Metaphysics, a standpoint which Guénon consistently maintained. He admitted that Magic, and consequently psychic research, is an experimental science, so that, from this angle, it is seen that his critics are "beating a dead horse."

The preceding discussion of Mr Pallis's letter is of course primarily an exercise in the clarification of terminology; the authenticity of Mr Pallis's rich contacts and wide experience in the Orient, his grasp of Oriental doctrines, and his qualities as an author remain unquestioned. It is another type of "orientation" afforded by the providential touchstone of Guénon's writings which prompts the assessment of Mr Pallis's appeal to experience on the basis of a distinction between exoteric observation and esoteric participation.

New York, 2.5.67  
IRWIN ROBERT TUCKER.

Sir,

WITH reference to Guénon's literary style, I would like to draw attention to a most important point which the recent correspondence has omitted. This is, namely, that where the style of Guénon's works is not understood there can be little chance of their content being understood either. If his ideas had just been of a personal nature, then such terms as "intolerant" and "hectoring" would be only too mild to describe their mode of expression, but the whole point is that his ideas were not only not personal to himself, but that they were in the main direct expressions of a vast body of universal truths which is as old as knowledge itself. Consequently, it must be acknowledged that to state such things too strongly or too intolerantly is, strictly speaking, an impossibility.

That wisdom and unclouded conviction should look like empty dogmatism, while stultification and egoism are able to parade themselves as honesty and good sense, is certainly a dire reflection, but not a reflection on Guénon.

Coventry, 20.3.67

ROBERT BOLTON.