
RENÉ GUÉNON ON THE REALIZATION OF TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the ‘metaphysical’ perspectives of the French philosopher named René Guénon. Although Guénon was French, he was often critical of Western ways of thinking. Especially with regard to the concept of the metaphysical. Turning to the etymology of the word metaphysics, for Guénon metaphysics stands for whatever lies ‘beyond physics.’ This is different than the Aristotelian understanding of metaphysics, since it is always directed to the idea of the natural sciences viewed as a whole. This is a kind of thinking recognized by ancient traditions. So based on this perspective of thought, Guénon is known as a traditionalist or perennial philosopher. The preservation of traditional knowledge is becoming an important issue today with the pressures of conformity with Western models of science and rationalism. So this paper will investigate his viewpoint on ‘realization of traditional knowledge’ and its relevance today. The conclusion of this study shows that this ‘realization’ can be preserved by the harmonious integration of ‘theory’ and ‘practice’, where traditional practices of initiation, oral transmission, performance of rites and use of symbols, are in balance with modern forms of codification and information.

Introduction

When we consider the age of information, we are considering a system where everything is rationally interconnected. Everything is increasingly valued in terms of its purpose, its efficiency or its measurable value. We consider this epoch of information to be an advance beyond earlier ages where everything had not been archived and rendered instantly retrievable. Our older traditions and religious beliefs have an uneasy status within the age of information. They become oddities, trivia, superstitions. Today we are facing the destruction of traditions, even as we see them colorfully depicted in the media or in travel brochures.

What is traditional knowledge? What is its value? And if it has value, how can this value be preserved in our age of information? There have been many scholars throughout history who have been interested in older traditions. We can mention many thinkers from al-Biruni to Vico to the Romantic philosophers to Eliade. These thinkers tend to catalogue and rationalize the traditions which they examine or place them in a larger philosophical framework. But the philosopher René Guénon in his many writings attempts to show how traditional wisdom differs from rational scientific thought, and from religious thought as it is understood especially in the West. He attempted to show the dignity of traditional thought on its own terms and show the poverty of a rational thinking that abandons its traditional wisdom.

During his lifetime, Guénon published several books, the first one – *Introduction to the Study of Hindu Doctrines* – was published in 1921, which becomes the main source of this research. With the title of the book *Hindu Doctrines*, some would expect to find only a consideration of Hindu doctrines, but in reality, as he writes in the Forward, “this book might just as well as serve as a key to the understanding of any of the traditional doctrines, or of them all”.¹

In his many works, he frequently attacks Western civilization, which according to him, are based upon a Greco-Roman influence. The West as a result has failed to appreciate the traditional doctrine and metaphysics of Eastern thought. Yet he sometimes takes this criticism

too far. As Schuon asserts: “Guénon is magisterial in his defense of the traditional East and his condemnation of the anti-traditional West, but he overestimates Eastern man as such and underestimates Western man as such”.² But the value of Guénon is that he provides a theory concerning why Western thought is often incapable of comprehending the metaphysical nature of Eastern civilization, failing by defining what cannot be defined, resulting in wrong understandings on traditional doctrines of metaphysical nature.

Guénon’s masterpiece, *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times* (1945) together with *The Crisis of the Modern World* (1927), “mounted an increasingly elaborate and merciless attack on the foundations of the contemporary European world-view”, explains John Herlihy.³ Other works such as *Man and His Becoming According to the Vedanta*, *Oriental Metaphysics*, *The Great Triad* and other significant publications, allowed Guénon to bring back the metaphysical view concerning traditions, which as Schuon said, was forgotten by the modern thought. According to Herlihy, “what Guénon has accomplished is nothing less than the restatement of the traditional doctrines, rites of worship, and universal symbols and planted them as the seeds they were meant to be within the ground of the human soul... in the Guénonian worldview, the thinking man or woman is by nature a metaphysician and only later a scientist, teacher, or craftsman”.⁴

Guénon died in 1951 in Egypt, and even though his influence seems to be minimal in Western academic community, he has contributed greatly to the development of metaphysical thought. Philosophers such as Coomaraswamy and Schuon were deeply influenced by him. Guénon has not created or built a new school of thought, what he has done was clarify the universal aspect of metaphysical domain, which has no room for ‘individual considerations’. In agreement, Schuon adds “Guénon explained the true nature of metaphysical doctrines, by distinguishing clearly from ‘philosophies’ in the current meaning of this term”.⁵

Guénon on Metaphysics

Schuon observed that “the work of Guénon is ‘traditional’ because the fundamental facts that it conveys are strictly in conformity with the teaching of the great traditions, or with one of these traditions when it is a case of one form amongst others”.⁶ For Guénon, since the time of the Greeks, a variety of confusions led Western civilization to a complete disconnection of humanity with its own origins, that is to say, their tradition. Guénon states, “philosophers like Plato openly declared that they did not know how to interpret the most ancient writings they possessed concerning the nature of the gods”.⁷ In *The Laws*, Book X, Plato asserts:

“There are tales preserved in writing [...] Whether these stories have in other ways a good or a bad influence, I should not like to be severe upon them, because they are ancient; [...] I cannot praise them, or think that they are useful, or at all true. Of the words of the ancients I have nothing more to say”.⁸

This ‘silence’ of Plato on the ancient writings, is one of the points that leads Guénon to affirm the incapacity of Western mind in comprehending traditional civilizations. Guénon points, “among the Greeks especially, rites and symbols inherited from more ancient and already forgotten traditions rapidly lost their original and exact meaning”.⁹ Which means, due to the ‘advancements’ of world, that man begun to be more and more disconnected to his own origins. Philip Sherrard explains, “according to Guénon’s metaphysics of history, the further you go back in time the closer you get to the most primordial form of wisdom”.¹⁰ That is to say, the more remote thought, the more metaphysical it may be. According to Guénon, his understanding of metaphysics is “equally true of Taoism, of the Hindu doctrine, and also the inward and extra-religious aspect of Islam”.¹¹

In the book *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines*, the translator Marco Pallis, adopted the term ‘metaphysic’, without ‘s’, to describe Guénon’s perspectives on metaphysics. This differentiates it from

‘metaphysics’ as it is commonly understood in the West, as a branch of philosophy. It is stated, “adopting the term ‘metaphysic’, in actual fact, taken in its most natural sense, even etymologically, it denotes whatever lies ‘beyond physics’”. The word ‘physics’, Guénon explains, does not refer to any sciences in particular, “the word ‘physics’ must here be taken to denote the natural sciences viewed as a whole and considered in quite a general manner, as they always were by the ancients”.¹² In this sense, metaphysic is not a branch of philosophy, because according to him, “a philosophical system is always a system of some particular person, that is to say a construction the value of which can only be purely individual”,¹³ whereas the metaphysic is Universal, it refers to the ‘Whole’, and “the absolute Whole cannot form a part of something nor can anything else whatsoever enfold or compromise the Universal”.¹⁴ This ‘Universal’ aspect of metaphysic, as explained by Schuon’s as ‘the one Truth’, “it is ‘universal’ inasmuch as it views the different Revelations in terms of the one Truth, while adopting, as the occasion demands, the language of a particular tradition”.¹⁵

In addition, metaphysic excludes any kind of systematization, because a system is limited. Guénon explains, “pure metaphysic necessarily excludes all systematization, because system cannot avoid being a closed and limited conception, contained in its entirety within more or less narrowly defined boundaries, and as a such is in nowise reconcilable with the universality of metaphysic”.¹⁶

It should be emphasized that Guénon did not give a new meaning for ‘metaphysics’, or attempt to define metaphysic, because as he explains, “only something that is limited is capable of definition, whereas metaphysic is on the contrary by its very nature absolutely unlimited, and this plainly does not allow of our enclosing it within a more or less narrow formula”.¹⁷ What Guénon, in fact, intended, was to place metaphysic to its right position, which is ‘beyond physics’, that is to say, beyond any type of scientific knowledge, where ‘scientific knowledge’ stands for “all knowledge that is confined to the domain of reason, whether or not it is called philosophical, it is strictly speaking scientific knowledge”.¹⁸

To distinguish metaphysic from scientific knowledge, he writes, “The first [metaphysic] is derived from the pure intellect, which has the Universal for its domain; the second [scientific] is derived from reason, which has the general for its domain since, as Aristotle has declared, ‘there is no science but that of the general’”.¹⁹

The pure intellect mentioned above, refers to “a faculty that does not belong to the individual order, and which, by reason of the immediate character of its operation, may be called ‘intuitive’”.²⁰ However, in order to avoid the common understanding of ‘intuition’ as a ‘hunch’, as the definition of Bealer, “intuition as unjustified true belief not preceded by inference; in this (the commonest) sense ‘an intuition’ means ‘a hunch’. The existence of hunches is uncontroversial and not of philosophical interest”;²¹ Guénon calls this faculty as ‘pure intellect’ or ‘intellectual intuition’:

“To be more precise, it should be said that the faculty we are now referring to is intellectual intuition, the reality of which has been consistently denied by modern philosophy, which has failed to grasp its real nature whenever it has not simply ignored it; this faculty can also be called the pure intellect, following the practice of Aristotle and his Scholastic successors, for to them the intellect was in fact that faculty which possessed a direct knowledge of principles”.²²

The terms ‘pure intellect’ or ‘intellectual intuition’ seem to contradict one another, because the word ‘intellect’ can be understood as the faculty of reason. The researcher understands that Guénon uses the term ‘intellect’ because he follows the concept of ‘intellect’ from the Aristotle’s view, which Guénon states, “Aristotle expressly declares that ‘intellect is truer than science’, [...] he also says that ‘nothing is more true than the intellect’”.²³ Following the Aristotelian idea, ‘intellect’ is beyond reason, and therefore, it is by nature metaphysical (but not metaphysical in the “Aristotelian sense”). In addition, the researcher

asserts that Guénon wanted to avoid the negative use of the term ‘intuition’ in its common usage, as a ‘hunch’, pointed out by Bealer. Last but not least, Guénon says, “intellectual intuition is even more immediate than sensory intuition”.²⁴ In this sense, using the term ‘intellectual intuition’ or ‘pure intellect’, Guénon places these terms beyond reason and avoids the negative use of the term ‘intuition’. Schuon explains that the understanding of Guénon is ‘intellectual’, “because it concerns knowledge and because it envisages this in conformity with its nature, namely in the light of the intellect, which is essentially supra-rational”.²⁵

To conclude the analysis of Guénon on metaphysic, it is added “metaphysic must of necessity be self-sufficient, since it is the only kind of knowledge which is really direct, and it cannot be based on anything other than itself from the very fact that it consists of the knowledge of universal principles”.²⁶ Thus, the metaphysic of Guénon is related to traditional knowledge, which stresses on knowledge in conformity with its nature, where the intellect is supra-rational.

Metaphysic is therefore the absolute Whole, from which the knowledge is collected through the pure intellect of an individual practitioner, who has received an accurate transmission and who has accomplished his practice/performance accurately, from which allows the connection to their teachers – the source of knowledge.

Tradition

Tradition, in its most usual sense, is viewed as a transmission of customs and beliefs from one generation to another, which ‘beliefs’ are commonly understood in a religious sense of the word. Those who interpret tradition in such limited way, are unable to comprehend the true nature of traditional civilizations, which according to Guénon, is a pure metaphysic. Guénon explains that the word ‘belief’ which “pre-supposes the presence of the religious view-point, is really confined to certain civilizations only and is not to be found in others”.²⁷ This means that tradition is not always the same as religious belief, the knowledge that is transmitted by traditional civilizations, is based on ‘pure intellect’, and not faith.

Looking at the word ‘tradition’ itself, it comes from the Latin word *traditum*, which means “to deliver, to hand down”. For Guénon, tradition is understood in its most etymological sense, “that which is transmitted”. He asserts, “for us tradition, taken in a much more general sense, may be written as well as oral, though it must usually, if not always, have been oral originally”.²⁸ It may be said that all traditional civilizations, before any human interpretation, are metaphysical by nature.

Guénon emphasizes oral transmission, because it is one of the characteristics that makes a civilization traditional. For Guénon, oral transmission belongs to an esoteric nature, while writings, texts or scriptures, are considered exoteric. The differentiation of the terms ‘esoteric’ and ‘exoteric’, using the analogy of transmission of knowledge, either oral or written, brings the understanding of what is tradition. “There is something peculiar to metaphysical doctrines which must always be esoteric”.²⁹

‘Exoterism’ with ‘x’, is explained by Guénon as “the ‘letter’” or the writings. “Exoterism is the only aspect to be expressed through the writings that have come down to us in a more or less complete form”.³⁰ The traditional texts are recordings of teachings that used to be transmitted orally. The recordings that attempt to express the metaphysical knowledge, which is unlimited, in format of texts, are considered limited. In this sense, Guénon explains that all expression of metaphysics in format of text is imperfect and limited. Therefore, exoteric is the anti-traditional, and in any case of limitation of the knowledge that belong to metaphysical nature, it is considered exoteric, because it is imperfect.

‘Esotericism’ with ‘s’, is explained by Guénon as the oral teachings; “esoterism, being more profound and of a higher order, addressed itself as such only to regular disciples of the school who were specially prepared to receive it, and was the subject of a purely oral teaching.”³¹ It consists in something wholly interior, “he who possesses true understanding is always the person who is able to see beyond the words, and it may be said that the ‘spirit’ of any doctrine is of esoteric nature”.³² This term ‘esoteric’ shall not be mistaken with the term ‘esotericism’ that came to be known with the movement in the West called ‘Western Esotericism’.

“‘Western Esotericism’ could be described in terms of secret organizations or hidden brotherhoods”, that is to say secret spiritual teachings reserved to a specific group of people³³. The ‘esotericism’ from Guénon has nothing ‘secret’ or ‘hidden’, because it belongs to metaphysics, and accessible to the individual who is initiated.

In conclusion, the exoteric is the anti-traditional, because it is the expression of the metaphysical knowledge in a limited form; the esoteric is the traditional, because it is the transmission of the knowledge that goes beyond the words, and therefore, it is unlimited. To complete the understanding of tradition, Sherrard explains that tradition must carry two aspects, knowledge and action: “for Guénon tradition must cater for the two main aspects of human life, the first being intellectual – knowledge – and the second being the active aspect – action or practice, and which may be described as man’s capacity for art in all its form”.³⁴ This ‘knowledge’ and ‘action’ cited by Sherrard, stands for ‘theory’ and ‘practice’, which in a tradition of a metaphysical order, are not treated separately, they are integrated, as one thing, which forms what it is called, the traditional knowledge.

The Transmission of Traditional Knowledge

In modern societies, it has become usual to oppose theory and practice, but for tradition, they are sympathetic. Ernst Cassirer, in his work *An Essay on Man*, explains that “we are in the habit of dividing our life into the two spheres of practical and theoretical activity. [...] Primitive man’s view of nature is neither merely theoretical nor merely practical, it is sympathetic”.³⁵ In traditional knowledge, theory and practice complements each other. Theory stands for preparation, which is accomplished by an initiation; “theory is regarded as if it were in some way self-sufficient, an end in itself, whereas it should normally be looked upon as nothing more than a preparation, [...] leading to a corresponding realization”³⁶. Practice, as Sherrard explained, stands for the man’s art in all its forms, which it is what moderns often call ‘art of ancient people’, such as traditional medicine, astrology, music and martial arts.

Initiation is given by a master or a teacher, who works as a ‘transmitter’ or ‘supporter’ for the traditional knowledge, because according to Guénon, “initiation must have a ‘non-human’ origin, for without this it can never attain its final end, which extends beyond the domain of individual possibilities”. In this sense, the person who confers initiation does not act as individual, says Guénon, “but as the support of an influence not belonging to the individual order; he is only a link in the ‘chain’ of which the starting-point lies outside and beyond humanity”.³⁷

Guénon explains that initiation constitutes two aspects, the transmission of spiritual influence and the transmission of traditional teaching. The first aspect, the ‘transmission of spiritual influence’, plays a fundamental importance to the realization of knowledge, not as an end, but as a point of departure. Knowing that tradition is esoteric, that is to say, wholly interior, the transmission of ‘spiritual influence’ stands for what Guénon calls ‘non-human’ influence, an influence of a ‘supra-human order’. For a better understanding, we can look to Guénon’s explanation of ‘vertical’ transmission, from where the spiritual influence comes from:

“We could speak of a ‘vertical’ transmission from the supra-human to the human [...]; the vertical transmission is of course essentially ‘non-temporal’. [...] We might add that the vertical transmission, which we have just envisaged as from above, when taken in the reverse direction from below, becomes a ‘participation’ by humanity in realities of the principal order, indeed, a participation assured by tradition in all its forms since it is precisely through it that humanity is put into effective contact with a superior order”.³⁸

This vertical aspect of spiritual influence shall not be interpreted as something ‘transcendental’ from the religious sense. The vertical transmission, from which spiritual influence is received, represents the metaphysical aspect itself. Being ‘beyond physic’, spiritual influences are, by the very fact, from above traveling downward.

The spiritual influence should not be interpreted as ‘clairvoyance’ nor as ‘psychic-powers’. According to Guénon, the “communication with the superior states cannot be regarded as an end but only as a point of departure”. In this sense, it serves only as a support towards the end, which is the realization of traditional knowledge. This ‘communication’ may be said to be through the ‘pure intellect’ mentioned before. It is not a kind of ‘grace’ that descends upon the individual, explains Guénon, “it is only to permit the prospective initiate effectively to take possession of these states”³⁹. Thus, in order to possess these states, an initiation is necessary.

The second aspect pointed by Guénon, the ‘transmission of a traditional teaching’, stands for the relationship between teacher and student, where the transmission of knowledge is accomplished orally. In traditional civilizations, Guénon explains that there is a “deep and indissoluble bond which unites the disciple to his master, [...] a relationship that has no parallel in the modern West”.⁴⁰ The relationship between master and pupil is very important, not only by the fact that the teacher instructs students to the traditional knowledge, but also because teacher, as initiator, links the student to the chain, where spiritual influences are received in order to assist the individual towards realization of knowledge. In another passage, Guénon adds, “secular teachers who communicate to their pupils by bookish formulas cannot communicate in the same inwardly way, and that is the importance to maintain in the traditional way of teaching.”⁴¹ That means, teachers of modern times, who communicate with student under standard forms, are not able to communicate in the same inwardly way as the traditional teachers that preserves the dissemination of knowledge in traditional way.

Regarding oral transmission, it is an unlimited transmission, it guarantees the perpetuation of knowledge not structured in a standard or scientific way, it may allow the participation of spiritual influence, which is received through ‘pure intellect’. In contrast, as explained before, writings, which are the texts or scriptures, are considered by Guénon limited, because they are records of the knowledge that used to be transmitted orally.

An initiation process is considered as a ‘second birth’ for those who receive it, and for this reason the relationship between teacher and student is similar to a father and son, and teachers are considered one of the most important figures in traditional civilizations. “The function of a teacher is in fact a true ‘spiritual fatherhood’, and the ritual and symbolic act of initiation constitutes a ‘second birth’ for the man who is to receive the teaching through a regular transmission”. It shall be explained that the term ‘spiritual fatherhood’ used by Guénon, stands for ‘ancestor’, “‘spiritual fatherhood’ which is the name given to a teacher by the Hindus and which also bears the secondary meaning of ‘ancestor’”.⁴²

Next, let observe us the other constitution of traditional knowledge, which is ‘practice’. Observing that in tradition, ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ are not oppositions, they are one thing, that forms the traditional knowledge.

The Practice of Traditional Knowledge

Practice is the other aspect that compounds traditional knowledge. Practice is action itself, which was mentioned to be the practice of man’s art that implies the performance of rites. On the practice of man’s art, it was explained that it stands for what moderns often call ‘art of ancient people’. The researcher will not go deep at this instance, because the ‘art of ancient people’ is particular to each tradition or art field, which deserves a proper investigation on it.

Before discussing rites, it should be emphasized that for Guénon, ‘rite’ cannot be interpreted as ‘ceremony,’ they are two different things. ‘Rite’ is metaphysical in essence, of a universal order, because it is natural and habitual; whereas a ‘ceremony’ is of an individual order, because it is a human creation. Guénon asserts, “in a traditional civilization, rites are something altogether natural and in no way exceptional. [...] If one goes back to its origins, a rite is nothing other than ‘what conforms to order’, according to the meaning of the Sanskrit *rita*; it is this alone, therefore, that is really ‘normal’”.⁴³ This ‘normality’ means that rites are something accomplished as a routine, it does not require any artifice or organization, there is no ‘formalization’, it may be said to be something habitual.

Guénon explains that a rite is made of a group of symbols, “every rite is literally made up of a group of symbols which include not only objects used or the figures represented, [...] but also the gestures effected and the words pronounced”.⁴⁴ The words pronounced, mentioned by Guénon, are not ‘prayers’ in the religious sense, but recitations of words, called ‘auditory symbols’, such as *mantras* of Hindu tradition. In this sense, it can be seen that theory and practice are intertwined as a single thing, because the teachings from the *guru* (theory) are important in order to vivified the chanting of *mantras* (practice).

Guénon explains that rites are vehicle of spiritual influences, “rites are essentially and above all the vehicle of spiritual influences, which cannot be transmitted in any way without them”, which is only through initiation that an individual is able to have ‘communication’ with spiritual influences. Thus, once more, theory and practice are sympathetic.⁴⁵

Symbols, alone, are means of teaching, explains Guénon, “symbols are essentially a means of teaching, and not only of outward teaching but of something more insofar as they serve above all as ‘supports’ for meditation, which is at the very least the beginning of inner work”.⁴⁶ Schuon adds “symbolism is necessary because the natural and universal expression of metaphysics is the symbol”. This ‘expression’ is not the same as an exoteric expression, Schuon clarifies, “this expression is natural, because it resides in the nature of things, in other words, in real analogies, and it is universal in that it is capable of unlimited applications in the order of the Real”.⁴⁷ Therefore, the symbols serve as a support for concentration, in order to connect the individual with the ‘chain’ (or ‘family of traditional wisdom’). Therefore, both, rites and symbols are “none other than the ‘correspondence’, that binds together all the degrees of universal Existence in such a way that by means of it our human state can enter into communication with the higher states of being”.⁴⁸ That means, through the performance of rites, and the use of symbols (practice), the individual is able to maintain his link in the chain, which was made on the day of his initiation (theory), allowing thus, the achievement of realization of traditional knowledge.

Theory and practice are sympathetic, which this sympathy stands for the ‘traditional knowledge’, which accepts knowledge as a Whole. The theory, which is the transmission of knowledge that is accomplished by an initiation, implies the transmission of spiritual influence and traditional teaching, and guarantees the perpetuation of knowledge not structured in a standard and scientific way. The performance of rites allows the maintenance of the link to the ‘family of traditional wisdom’, ensuring the regular and uninterrupted transmission. In another words, the individual who performs the rite, is able to maintain the communication with spiritual influences, from which the knowledge is also transmitted. The symbols allow the student to remind himself about his commitment to the inner work, which will lead towards realization of traditional knowledge.

The Differentiation of Traditional Knowledge from Religious and Scientific Knowledge

Religion comes from the Latin word *religare*, which means ‘to bond’. Latin was the language spoken by the ancient Greco-Roman, and at that time, according to Guénon, “religion, was indissolubly in the body of social institutions, in which recognition of the ‘gods of the city’ and observance of the lawfully established forms of worship played a fundamental part, providing them with a guarantee of stability”. Yet according to Guénon, at that time, ‘religion’ had “a genuinely traditional character”, that is to say, religion used to be metaphysical.⁴⁹

However, due to a variety of historical circumstances, the meaning of religion gradually changed, turning to mere social concerns, based on laws created by man. In this way, the metaphysical intellectuality that ‘religions’ of the past used to have, was substituted by a moral and lawful intellect, based on a sentimental order. Where ‘sentimental order’, according to Guénon, undergoes “the influence of extra-intellectual elements, [...] which the very word ‘beliefs’, commonly used to denote religious conceptions clearly reveals this character, for it is an elementary psychological observation”.⁵⁰ In other words, religion became a kind of moral legislation, ruled by manmade institutions, in order to control their

followers. Sentimental psychological observations begin to oppose to metaphysical certitude, because the individual, of a metaphysical doctrine, is only able to truly know by reaching realization of knowledge. In religion, it is accepted that a supreme 'Being' governs and 'legislates' over the beings, where such a 'Ruler' is absent in traditional doctrines.

The difference between religion and traditional knowledge can be summarized in the explanation of Guénon on religion, "the social and sentimental elements preponderate over the intellectual, both the dogma and cult have their share reduced more and more, so that religion of this kind tends to degenerate into 'moralism' pure and simple".⁵¹ In another words, religion became pure moralistic, and thus out of the metaphysical order.

Moving the discussions to the scientific knowledge, it was said that from the perspectives of Guénon, scientific knowledge is confined to the domain of reason, which also includes philosophy. Scientific knowledge is based on reason, it is a knowledge by reflection., "science is rational, discursive knowledge, always indirect, a knowledge by reflection; metaphysic is a supra-rational, intuitive and unmediated knowledge".⁵²

In traditional knowledge, due to its metaphysical nature, it is "absolutely impossible to make any 'discoveries'", says Guénon; whereas scientific knowledge depends upon experimentation. "The domain of metaphysic is essentially constituted by that of which no external investigation is possible: being 'beyond physics' we are also, by that very fact, beyond experiment".⁵³ For Guénon, logic and mathematics are the only scientific knowledges that get close to metaphysical knowledge, because they are not based on experimentation. However, as they fall under general definitions, which are in no doubt limited, they contradict the limitless essence of metaphysic. That is the reason why, in some cases, Guénon uses the term 'pure metaphysic', to avoid the understanding of things considered by him as 'pseudo-metaphysic'. In this sense the only way to know the truth is by pure intellect, which leads to realization of traditional knowledge.

The Realization of Traditional Knowledge

Guénon's perspective on traditional knowledge is that traditional knowledge is a knowledge that belongs to the Universal, and an intuitive, or immediate knowledge. It is this 'immediate knowledge' that leads to the idea of the 'realization of traditional knowledge', which is the achievement of the most inward and elevated aspect of knowledge.

Sherrard explains that Guénon gives two distinct stages of realization: "one that it is potential in our human individuality; and other that embarks on the stages of 'great mysteries', stages that are supra-human".⁵⁴ To the second, Guénon compares realization of knowledge to the supreme goal of the Hindu doctrine called *moksha* or *mukti*, "that is to say 'Deliverance', because the being who reaches it, [...] is freed from the bonds of conditioned existence by perfect identification with the Universal".⁵⁵ However, since the understanding of 'moksha' leads to the end of the reincarnation cycle, what concerns us is the realization of knowledge evident in man's capacity for art in all its form, which is the first stage of realization.

Therefore, let us observe the first stage of realization by Guénon, which is the "development of all possibilities contained in a potential stage in our human individuality". 'All possibilities' means the capacity for art in all its form. As Sherrard, explains, "this development is not achieved by way of any exterior action; it is achieved by an ever-deepening process of inner concentration".⁵⁶ In order to achieve this 'inner concentration', only the sympathy between theory and practice will lead the individual towards realization.

When the individual combines theory and practice, he is putting efforts of his own to attain realization of traditional knowledge, achieving all possibilities contained in a potential stage in his human individuality. Guénon writes, "if it is only a question of approaching this knowledge, [...] it can be effectively reached only by strictly personal effort, which cannot be made up for by any external teaching".⁵⁷ In other words, after having been initiated and receiving an accurate transmission, it is the individual's personal efforts that will lead him to achieve his fullest development of his potentialities as human being, that is to say, his achievement of a

realization of traditional knowledge.

Concluding Remarks

This gives us some clue to the nature of traditional knowledge. It is a kind of knowledge accessible only through initiation and practice. To reach realization of traditional knowledge, it is necessary for accurate transmission and practice, which is insured as following:

(1) **Initiation** is considered as a ‘second birth’ for those who receive it. It is an ‘opening of the doors’ for the traditional knowledge. Initiation implies the transmission of spiritual influences and transmission of traditional teachings. The transmission of spiritual influences stands for a vertical transmission, which is ‘non-temporal’, which effectively puts the individual in contact with a superior order.

(2) **Traditional teaching** is the relationship between teacher and student where the transmission of knowledge is accomplished orally. For Guénon, oral transmission is unlimited, because it is considered esoteric. In contrast, writings are said to be exoteric, and therefore, limited, because they are records of the knowledge that used to be transmitted orally. Therefore, oral transmission guarantees the perpetuation of a knowledge not structure by modern science.

(3) **Performance of rites and the use of symbols** are used as a vehicle of spiritual influences and as a means of teaching. They serve as points of support to achieve realization of traditional knowledge. Through performance of rites and the use of symbols the individual is able to maintain the link to the chain, which was made on the day of his initiation.

(4) **Communication with spiritual influences.** After undergoing initiation, the individual is linked to a chain, from where he is able to receive transmission of knowledge from spiritual influences. By performing rites, his link is maintained, which allows the continuing communication with spiritual influences. This ‘communication’ with spiritual influences does not stand for a ‘clairvoyance’ nor as ‘psychic-powers’, because it is not considered the end, but the point of departure for realization of traditional knowledge.

(5) **Personal effort** is crucial for the development of the individual's art, so that he will be able to reach realization of traditional knowledge. On personal efforts implies discipline and concentration.

Now we are living in the age of information. The teaching of traditional rites and practices is now available through the media. Tradition has been often reduced to information. But in-formation suggests something coming from the outside and shaping us. Information and data are presented as a pool of wisdom which is disconnected and presented in such a way that it lacks the ability to transform us. The value of understanding traditional wisdom and its realization presents us with a more organic idea of wisdoms which recognize it as a continuous process handed down through time. It reminds us of the ethical responsibility of knowledge and the discipline required to master a certain kind of knowledge.

From an individual perspective, these insights are important and fundamental for the achievement of the fullest development of individual's potentialities as human being, it is a self-achievement. Therefore, realization of traditional knowledge, of the first stage, from the perspective of Guénon, is self-achieved by personal efforts, based on the elements that were here cited.

ENDNOTES

¹ Guénon, René. *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines* (London: Burleigh Press, 1945), 7

² Schuon, Frithjof. *René Guénon: Some Observations* (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2004). p.20

³ Herlihy, John. *The Essential René Guénon: Metaphysics, Tradition, and the Crisis of Modernity* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2009), 280

⁴ *Ibid.*, xi-x

⁵ Schuon, Frithjof. *René Guénon: Some Observations* (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2004). p.1-2

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1

⁷ Guénon, René. *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines* (London: Burleigh Press., 1945), 93

- ⁸ Plato, *Laws, Book X*, Benjamin Jowett. 2009
- ⁹ Guénón, René. *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines* (London: Burleigh Press., 1945), 93
- ¹⁰ Sherrard, Philip. *The Universal Tradition*. India International Centre Quarterly, 1987, 8
- ¹¹ Guénón, René. *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines* (London: Burleigh Press, 1945), 119
- ¹² Ibid., 109
- ¹³ Ibid., 147
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 138
- ¹⁵ Schuon, Frithjof. *René Guénon: Some Observations* (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2004), 1-2
- Ibid., 1
- ¹⁶ Guénón, René. *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines* (London: Burleigh Press., 1945), 147
- ¹⁷ Ibid., 110
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 139
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 118
- ²⁰ Ibid., 116
- ²¹ Bealer, George. “Intuition.” *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Vol. 4. New York: Thomson Gale, 1996), 722
- ²² Ibid., 117
- ²³ Ibid., 117
- ²⁴ Ibid., 168
- ²⁵ Schuon, Frithjof. *René Guénon: Some Observations* (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2004), 1
- ²⁶ Guénón, René. *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines*. (London: Burleigh Press., 1945), 140
- ²⁷ Ibid., 88-89
- ²⁸ Ibid., 87
- ²⁹ Note that Guénón refers traditional civilizations as ‘doctrines’, Sherrard, on the Guénón, explains “the aspect of intellect, or knowledge, or wisdom in a Tradition is represented by that which we call doctrine,” 6.
- ³⁰ Guénón, René. *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines* (London: Burleigh Press., 1945), 158
- ³¹ Ibid., 158-159
- ³² Ibid., 162
- ³³ Hanegraaff, Wouter J. *Esotericism and the Academy. Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 243
- ³⁴ Sherrard, Philip. *The Universal Tradition*. India International Centre Quarterly,

1987. 5

³⁵ Cassirer, Ernst. *An Essay on Man. An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), 82

³⁶ Guénon, René. *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines* (London: Burleigh Press., 1945), 170

³⁷ Guénon, René *Perspectives on Initiation* (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2004) p.52-53

³⁸ Ibid.58

³⁹ Ibid., 20

⁴⁰ Guénon, René. *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines* (London: Burleigh Press., 1945), 289

⁴¹ Guénon, René *Perspectives on Initiation* (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2004), 25

⁴² Guénon, René. *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines* (London: Burleigh Press., 1945), 289

⁴³ Guénon, René *Perspectives on Initiation* (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2004), 132

⁴⁴ Ibid., 113

⁴⁵ Ibid., 194

⁴⁶ Ibid., 194-195

⁴⁷ Schuon, Frithjof. *René Guénon: Some Observations* (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2004), 3

⁴⁸ Guénon, René *Perspectives on Initiation* (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2004), 114

⁴⁹ Guénon, René. *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines* (London: Burleigh Press., 1945), 93

⁵⁰ Ibid., 103

⁵¹ Ibid., 104-105

⁵² Guénon, René. *Studies in Hinduism* (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2004) 90

⁵³ Guénon, René. *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines* (London: Burleigh Press., 1945). 112

⁵⁴ Sherrard, Philip. *The Universal Tradition*. India International Centre Quarterly, 1987, 12-13

⁵⁵ Guénon, René. *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines* (London: Burleigh Press., 1945), 282

⁵⁶ Sherrard, Philip. *The Universal Tradition*. India International Centre Quarterly, 1987. 12

⁵⁷ Guénon, René. *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines* (London: Burleigh Press., 1945), 277

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