



# Initiation and Spiritual Realization

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René Guénon was asked many times about initiation and spiritual realization, questions that prompted him to write a series of articles, collected later in two essential volumes, **Aperçus sur l'initiation** and **Initiation et réalisation spirituelle**. If Guénon's articles brought many clarifications and important specifications, they created, at the same time, new questions, uncertainties, confusion and even opposition.

After René Guénon explained the difference between sacred and profane, between the western and eastern mentality, between esotericism and exotericism, between initiation and religion, after he highlighted the function and importance of the spiritual influence and of the metaphysical knowledge, after he exposed the counterfeit antitraditional, pseudo-spiritual and pseudo-initiatory societies and currents, a fissure into the modern mentality started to develop and a sincere desire for a true initiation was born in Occident. Yet Guénon, in his articles about initiation, stopped short the enthusiasm of many, stipulating with his uncompromising and categorical style a number of restrictions. There are, Guénon said, three fundamental initiatory conditions, in accordance with the triad potential – virtual – actual: the “qualification,” composed of some inherent possibilities in the individual nature; the “transmission” of a spiritual influence (inside a traditional organization to which the neophyte has to belong), representing the “illumination” that awakens the dormant possibilities; the “inner work” through which, and with the help of some external “supports,” the being passes from degree to degree, along the initiatory hierarchy, reaching at the end Liberation or the Supreme Identity.<sup>1</sup>

The second of these three conditions has been a great grief for those who wanted an initiation. Probably, the individuals who studied Guénon's work (that generated in them the quest for an initiation) considered themselves qualified (complying with the first condition) by their very desire to follow an initiatory path, which, of course, represented a false supposition; regarding the third condition, that one was too vague to worry them. The second condition, though, was received by René Guénon's readers with consternation. As Guénon said many times, the West was completely subjugated by the profane point of view and there were no effective and accessible initiatory organizations left for the possible candidates. Masonry was the sole initiatory organization that survived in the West, but even this one was living difficult times. Therefore, the

<sup>1</sup> René Guénon, **Aperçus sur l'Initiation**, Éd. Traditionnelles, 1992, p. 34.

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westerner that discovered in himself a vocation for Tradition and wanted to pass from theory to effective realization was placed in an impossible situation.

For this reason, all kinds of subterfuges were used to elude the categorical conditions that René Guénon imposed upon initiation. Some tried to demonstrate that the Christian religion is not only exotericism, but also esotericism, the religious rites having initiatory powers (Schuon, Borella, etc.); others tried to change the exception into rule, stating that a “spontaneous initiation” is at hand or an “auto-initiation” is acceptable (Evola). This unrest about initiation persisted in the present days and the confusion with regard to initiation did not diminish, on the contrary. There are opinions suggesting that an initiation through the Internet and letters is possible, or that reading Guenon’s work represents an initiation, or that initiation is something similar to a College course.

The disarray with respect to initiation, fed also by the pseudo-spiritualists and pseudo-traditionalists’ phantasmagorias, is a victory of the adversary, which, as suggested by Ananda Coomaraswamy, found a home into man’s “soul.” Therefore, when we tackle initiation, we should ask, paraphrasing Ramana Maharshi, “who wants to be initiated?” Too many times the desire for initiation is an impulse of an ego without any qualification. In the traditional fairy tales, which hide an initiatory journey, from the beginning the initiatory qualifications are brought up, when the older brothers are rejected and only the youngest (the hero) is accepted for the journey. Such an examination is necessary for any candidate to initiation, and not the individual’s ego will decide in this respect. The initiatory qualification is an important condition, neglected today in Occident, and its non-observance creates an imaginary pseudo-initiatory journey, having sometimes devastating effects. For this reason, normally, the entrance in an initiatory organization is possible only after the neophyte’s qualifications were checked, which stresses the necessity of an attachment to an initiatory organization (the second initiatory condition).

In fact, the attachment to an initiatory organization is not only a necessary condition, but also designates the very initiation, in a strict etymological sense, and this attachment has to be real and effective, since we deal with the transmission of a spiritual influence; as we said, it is not enough that an individual wants to enter in an initiatory organization, much more decisive is for him to obtain acceptance from that organization after his initiatory qualifications were verified, and, of course, the initiatory organization, in order to be authentical, has to be the actual keeper of a spiritual influence.

Yet, even assuming that a neophyte has the needed qualifications and was initiated in a genuine traditional organization, that is, he accomplished successfully the first two conditions, he is far away from being what commonly is called an “initiate.” The initiate is not the same thing as the “adept.” To say it correctly, the initiate is an individual who just embarked on a spiritual path; he is a new-born to whom was transmitted, through the initiatory rites, the spiritual influence kept and guarded by that specific organization, which corresponds to a virtual “realization.” The neophyte is, even in an etymological sense, a “new plant,” but at a germinal stage. If the soil is rich (that is, if, indeed, the initiatory qualifications were correctly identified), it could be expected that the planted seed in this soil (the initiation) will grow and become a glorious tree (the spiritual realization). In various traditions, the comparison with the seed or the grain allows one to understand the initiatory process. Obviously, the seed, to become a mature plant, needs

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favorable conditions (water, light, etc.); similarly, the initiate, to pass from initiation to spiritual realization, must travel a long way, using all the supports he can get.

The journey from initiation to spiritual realization represents the third initiatory condition, stated by René Guénon. Too often, today, the initiation is confused with the spiritual realization and many think that, once initiated, they do not have to spend any other effort, the one who was initiated becoming automatically a perfect and spiritual master. The difference between initiation and spiritual realization is, though, significant. It is known that some initiates, even if they covered some stages of the journey, fell afterwards. Of course, it is easy for the ego to deceive and suggest, with its usual conceit, that the adept status was achieved, thus protecting its domination, while the Self is dormant. Moreover, the ego will inspire the initiatory travelers to boast that they are initiates. No true initiate, who covered indeed a spiritual path, will ever describe himself as a perfect initiate. Therefore, the neophyte that was just initiated in a genuine traditional organization and in whose heart was planted the spiritual influence has no reason to speak highly of his status, but he must understand that he just entered Janus' gate. Even in the case of some famous exceptions, there was a gap of time between "illumination" and "perfection" (understood as ascendant and descendent realization). Saint Paul, after his illumination on the road to Damascus, has disappeared for three years in Arabia and only after that he returned into the world; Ramana Maharishi spent years at Arunachala and only after that he returned to Tirunavamalai.

The development of the present human cycle brought us in *Kali-yuga*, and due to this "fall" we need initiation. In the Golden Age the initiation had no reason to be. Today we live the end of *Kali-yuga*, and for this reason there are so many difficulties – some insuperable – with regard to initiation and spiritual realization. As René Guénon explained, because today the profane point of view invaded the world, the neophyte needs, more than ever, "supports" to help him travel along the initiatory path or just to aid him escape the profane. That is the role of exotericism. There are people who think that today we do not need to participate to the exoteric rites anymore, that the initiation and a pure contemplation are sufficient.<sup>2</sup> This is an illusion, like the others, with regard to initiation. Today, more than ever, exotericism is necessary as one of the supports for spiritual realization. The modern individuals live an important part of their life overwhelmed by profane activities and the so much criticized Templars could be a good example for them.

When the Templars were not on campaign or were established in preceptories in non-combatant areas in the west, therefore, the Rule laid down a manner of conventional life centred upon the canonical hours not dissimilar from the daily round of other monks. Clause 279 sets out this obligation without ambiguity:

Each brother of the Temple should know that he is not committed to anything so much as to serve God, and each one should apply all his study and understanding to this, and especially to hearing His holy office; for none should fail or be lacking in this, as long as he is content in it. For as our Rule says, if we love God, we should willingly hear and listen to His holy words.

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<sup>2</sup> Jonas, **Pour en finir avec René Guénon**, Vers la Tradition, no. 83-4, 2001, p. 242-3.

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The day began with attendance at matins which in the summer would have been at about 4:00 a.m., where the brothers heard or recited thirteen paternosters, followed by prime at 6:00 a.m. and the hearing of mass, terce at 8:00 a.m., and sext at 11:30 a.m. A brief sleep was permitted between matins and prime, provided everything had been attended to, at the end of which they would be summoned by the bell which determined the divisions of the day. By late morning each brother should have said sixty paternosters for the benefactors of the house “that is to say thirty for the dead, that God may deliver them from the pains of Purgatory and place them in Paradise, and the other thirty for the living. That God may deliver them from sin and pardon them the sins they have committed, and lead them to a fine end.” Sext was followed by the first meal of the day, usually taken in two sittings, the first for knights, the second for sergeants. Whenever possible, a priest gave the blessing and during the meal a clerk read a holy lesson, while the brothers ate in silence. Afterwards they went to the chapel to give thanks. Nones at 2:30 p.m. and vespers at 6:00 p.m. divided the afternoon, followed by supper, the second meal of the day. The final office was compline, where the assembled brothers drank communally, either water or diluted wine. Sleep followed and silence was observed from compline to matins the following morning<sup>3</sup>.

The Templars had their life filled with exoteric rites (sacerdotal and chivalric) as a support for their initiatory spiritual realization. The modern man needs even more to participate, effectively and sincerely, to the exoteric rites, which will save him from the profane mentality. It is difficult to understand why today, in the West, there is such a gulf between exotericism and esotericism. For example, it is well-known, and we do not have to stress it, the savage opposition between the Church and Masonry. The Greek-Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church have a blind repulsion for anything related to Masonry.



René Guénon, in all his work, considered that, for the West, Masonry stays as a genuine initiatory organization, despite its decadence, which means that Masonry is a true exponent of esotericism and of the initiatory domain. Of course, the problem is not the Masonry itself, but the masons. A victim of the counter-initiatory forces, Masonry decayed inevitably, today, in its lodges, being possible only a virtual realization or a virtual (speculative) initiation. The Masonic initiation has to comply with the three conditions discussed above. Obviously, today, the first condition is almost nonexistent. Reghini said, “not any profane may become a mason, and not any fellowcraft may become a master mason.”<sup>4</sup> Yet, in most of the cases, the individuals accepted in Masonry have a profane and antitraditional mentality, the lodges being changed into a sort of clubs, either having moral and humanitarian objectives, or imitating the Royal Society of London. The passing through the initiatory degrees is often only a formality and occurs in a hurry, those many years needed for an operative mason to be promoted being forgotten. Moreover, there is today an increasing Masonic proselytism aiming at attracting new members, as many as possible, as if the number has any importance. Guénon said: “the

<sup>3</sup> Malcolm Barber, **The New Knighthood**, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994, p. 208.

<sup>4</sup> Arturo Reghini, **Les Nombres Sacrés**, Archè, 1981, p. 172.

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real remedy for the present decadence of Masonry, and the only one, no doubt, would be (...) to change the masons' mentality or at least of some of them, who are capable to understand their own initiation.”<sup>5</sup>

For Masonry, the quality of its members is a capital thing, since the passing from initiation to spiritual realization is accomplished not with the guidance of a spiritual master, but during an initiatory collective work. In an article, written at the end of his life, in 1949,<sup>6</sup> Guénon, underlining that Masonry is a genuine initiatory organization, explained that in the case of the Masonic initiation, besides the personal effort, which is indispensable, takes place an initiatory collective work, the spiritual influence or the spiritual “presence” operating through the masons of the lodge. For this “presence” to operate efficiently, it is necessary to have a qualified “frame” or “collective body,” otherwise, as the spiritual center hid underground, so would the spiritual “presence,” and only something virtual would remain.

Only the present degeneracy of the world allowed such a multiplication of the masons. It is, of course, a sign of the times, when we are approaching the pure quantity. But even if this number will be significantly less and, miraculously, the candidates would be accepted only based on their initiatory qualifications, the modern world with its profane perspective would remain a great danger and a serious obstacle. Therefore, Masonry has to consider the exoteric domain and the masons must participate to the exoteric rites, as the operative masons and the Templars participated in the past. The *Old Charges* clearly stipulated that an operative mason had to go to church and follow the religious rites.

It is distressing to see the Greek-Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church using their energies to fight and condemn the Masonry; yet it is even more distressing to see the masons disregarding the exoteric rites, when they should be an example for the common people. Today, more than ever, the Church, despite its regrettable compromises, is a sacred land and a healthy support for the personal initiatory effort of any genuine mason. Also, the pilgrimages, which in the past were part of the Royal Art, should represent one of the objectives of any mason. But how many occidental masons accomplish today such a pilgrimage? How many masons understand the fundamental importance of the spiritual “supports” for their initiatory journey, opened by the Masonic initiation?

What we are saying here does not intend to direct the mason (or any other initiate) toward an illusory eso-exotericism. René Guénon explained as clearly as possible the difference between exotericism and esotericism; he also showed the correlation between these two domains, the exotericism being the skin and the esotericism the kernel. It would be a mistake, therefore, to think that, today, an initiation could disregard the exoteric rites or that the exotericism is sufficient for a perfect spiritual realization.

The symbolism of the “golden chain” (*Aurea catena Homeri*), mentioned by Homer (**Iliad** VIII, 18-26), is well-known, and so is the symbolism of the “chain of light,” mentioned by Dionysius the Areopagite (**The Divine Names** III.1).<sup>7</sup> If we consider, from

<sup>5</sup> René Guénon, **Études sur la Franc-Maçonnerie et le Compagnonnage**, Ét. Trad., 1980, I, p. 246.

<sup>6</sup> **Travail initiatique collectif et «presence» spirituelle**, in **Initiation et réalisation spirituelle**, Éd. Traditionnelles, 1980.

<sup>7</sup> See also **The Everlasting Sacred Kernel**, Rose-Cross Books, 2002, pp. 13-4.

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one point of view, this chain as being the spiritual influence of a non-human origin, which operates both through the exoteric rites and the esoteric ones, we will be able to understand the difference between the natures of the exoteric domain and of the esoteric one, considering that, for the former, the communication with the super-individual states of the being occurs by pulling the golden chain and assimilating its vibrations, while for the latter the initiate climbs the golden chain, higher and higher, taking effectively in possession link after link. Both, the exoteric and the esoteric rites, carry spiritual influences (and not only psychical ones), but as we see, the difference between these two types is fundamental. On the other hand, the exoteric rites allow us to be attached to the golden chain and to participate to its vibrations, which already is a significant gain. It is true that the esotericism is not limited by any exotericism, and the Masonry is considered to have a universal character, but, in a natural way, the esoteric domain has to be covered and protected by an exoteric skin, which represents a starting point.<sup>8</sup> From this “starting point,” located symbolically on the circumference of a circle, the neophyte “enters” the lodge, “travels” along a radius, reaching the center of the circle, and from there rises along the vertical axis: these are precisely the three steps of the Masonic initiation (corresponding to the three degrees, entered apprentice, fellowcraft, master mason) called in the Masonic ritual *Initiation – Passing – Raising*.

What we said here about Masonry could be applied to any other Western initiatory organization, yet, besides Masonry, if there still are such organizations in the West they are well hidden and almost out of reach (regardless if they belong to a Hermetic, Chivalric or Hesychastic way). For this reason, we should say that the Occidental initiation is not dead, but hidden and waiting, similar to the initiatory symbols of Masonry, perpetuated through the centuries, their significance and operative power being there even if invisible for the majority of the masons.

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<sup>8</sup> Even if Masonry has this universal nature, it does not mean that a mason could shift from a traditional form to another during his initiatory journey.