

Mysticism: A Masonic Interpretation

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Abstract

Mysticism has, since ancient times, been the subject of philosophical and religious reflection, as well as various contrasting interpretations. This essay intends to bring some order to these, by finding the common ground shared by the major stances on mysticism encountered throughout history. Examining these shared features or characteristics will enable us to identify two distinct ways of regarding mysticism: mysticism seen as a *conception of the world* and mysticism seen as an *attitude of wisdom* towards life. Religious interpretations of mysticism belong to the first category, whereas secular considerations belong to the second. Esoteric and initiatory Orders, such as the Illuminati, the Freemasons and Dignity, draw inspiration from mysticism seen as wisdom toward life. With these thoughts in mind and after presenting a common ground for a more precise definition of mysticism, we will examine the views of René Guénon, before comparing them with the Initiatory Path of Freemasonry.

Introduction

The etymology of the word “mysticism” is Greek, and stems from the term *mystes* meaning, “to put a finger to one’s lips, to be quiet or mute.” By derivation it has come to mean a “secret, arcane” initiation into the mysteries, thus suggesting a form of sacred, mysterious and hidden rite reserved only for a select group.

In general, mysticism signifies a philosophical or religious doctrine that claims there is an opportunity for man to reach the Absolute, independently of any process based on reason or on the facts of perceivable experience, by evoking the secret, supernatural abilities of which man is mysteriously endowed. This is the meaning we will use here.

When defining mysticism, it is important to distinguish between the brand of mysticism that is expressed in the Hellenistic world and the mysticism that developed within the great religions, particularly Judeo-Christian-Islamic monotheism.

In the ancient Greek world, mysticism developed along two distinct lines: the *ritualistic* and the *intellectual*.

The mystery religions, eastern in origin but which later spread to the West, aimed to establish an intimate, profound and permanent union between the divine and their initiates through sacred ceremonies, which, featuring dances, orgies and stimulating drinks, created a state of fervor called *ecstasy*. Among the most important mystery cults, it is worth mentioning those of Mithra, Attes, Osiris and Isis, and Adonis.

The other strain of mysticism, the one that characterizes the Hellenic world, is intellectual in nature and finds its fullest expression in Plato. According to Plato and his followers, liberation from the evils of the earthly world can-

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not be attained through sacred rituals, worship or expiatory practices, but rather through *contemplation*. Since the philosophy of Plato has become the point of reference for various western mystical traditions, we should, at least, examine its conception of reality, which finds expression in the famous allegory of the cave. According to Plato, those who are devoid of philosophy are like prisoners in a cave, tied up and therefore only able to look in one direction. Behind them is a fire, in front of them a wall. There is nothing between them and the wall, so all they can see are their own shadows projected onto the wall by the light of the fire. Naturally, they believe these shadows are real. One manages to escape from the cave and, once in the sunlight for the first time, he sees things as they really are. Thus he understands that he had been deceived by the shadows in the cave, which he had mistaken for reality.¹ The description of the cave conveys Plato's faith in a reality that is more real than that of the senses. The world that appears to us is similar to the shadows cast on the wall and is therefore an illusion, while reality is all that is immutable, beyond time, the becoming of things, made up of eternal ideas.

The theory of ideas, as well as the dualism of the body and the soul, the doctrine of the immortality of the soul and its transmigration came to Plato from the Orphic-Pythagorean tradition, but he revised it systematically with his own original thought. The most authoritative representative of the mystical developments of this philosophy is Plotinus, who maintains that the thirst for the divine can be quenched by participating in His way of being and therefore in His bliss.² The only purpose for which man is worthy is communion with the One. Man's soul reaches the highest perfection when he joins the One and lives his immortal life in Him. In the *Enneads*, Plotinus expounds the method of contemplation considered to be the only means of reaching the Absolute and identifying with It. Man must free himself of the material world through asceticism and perfect his spirit through philosophy, in preparation for contemplation of the One. Ecstasy consists in the temporary yet infinitely joyful experience of devotion to the Absolute. Immersion in the One clears the soul of every

bond and every memory, even the memory of the self, to make way for a new, ineffable experience, namely the mystical experience.³ For Plotinus, though transcendent, the One is found in the very core of the soul. To reach Him, it is necessary to collect oneself in contemplation in order to live solely in Him. Within himself man finds the Absolute, the One, the Being. This joining with divinity is not an act of discursive reasoning: man does not know the One, but he grasps Him with an eagerness that is a seeing without seeing, an understanding without understanding; it is *ecstasy*. Its meaning is the same as the ritualistic approach.

This Neoplatonic mysticism has strongly influenced Christian mysticism, which is an expression of a faith that deeply changes the relationship between man and God. The abyssal distance that separated them is filled with the manifestation of God through the revelation and the incarnation of the Word. In this way, the ascent towards God is no longer the privilege of a few wise men: the vision of God, the sublime goal of mystic contemplation, is promised, in the future life, to all redeemed men.

With this reflection, we come to our analysis of mysticism within the great religions, particularly Judeo-Christian-Islamic monotheism. The purpose of this limitation, and the exclusion of the great eastern religions, such as, Hinduism and Buddhism, is so that we can consider a unified approach to mysticism. In fact, only by remaining within the context of Judeo-Christian-Islamic monotheism is it possible to find biblical roots, which, although theologically diverse, have a common foundation. The inclusion of the great eastern religions would require an investigation of such complexity that would be too onerous for the purposes of this work, without changing the substance of the thesis it sets out.

In Jewish-Christian-Islamic monotheism, mysticism shares several common characteristics. The first of these concerns man's *passivity* vis-à-vis the divine, and the special relationship that man establishes with it. In fact, in all three religions, preparatory exercises consisting in silence and prayer are given for ascetic purposes.

By its very nature, the mystical experience is *ineffable* and *incommunicable*. This leads to a paradoxical situation: mysticism is the negation of history within history itself. Whereas on the one hand, it seeks to transcend history, on the other, it is from history that it draws the language it uses to define itself, including in relation to the very religions of which it is an integral part. Consequently, in addition to the claim to ineffability and incommunicability, mystics often develop and express complex interpretations of their own experiences, giving rise to what is known as mystical theology. To avoid this contradiction and to define the sublime nature of their experiences, mystics do not have words at their disposal. Indeed the only appropriate language is the silence of contemplation, which, in fact, represents the essence of all authentic mysticism. If mysticism is ineffable, then it is silence, because only in silence can the other requirement, that of incommunicability, be met. If mystics speak (and speak sensibly), then they are communicating. If they are communicating, then they are expressing the ineffable, which, by its very nature, is inexpressible. And therein lies the contradiction. Right from its earliest manifestations, mysticism has been unable to solve this paradox.

This contradiction is even stronger, if we examine mysticism within the great religions. Here it finds an insurmountable limitation precisely in several of their fundamental principles, such as faith in one God, the creator of all things, the revelation of the Holy Scriptures and eschatology. The doctrine of Creation excludes the existence of a second divinity, one that has the same dignity as God and which, on the mystical path, acts as an intermediary between man and God. Faith in a revelation, entrusted to the Bible (Hebrew and Christian) and to the Koran, is the original, normative moment, which can never be denied by mystical experience. But the greatest limitation of mysticism is found in eschatology, understood as the final prospect for history: an attempt to escape history by anticipating its conclusion is considered an act of conjecture, since only God can bring to an end the historical path of humanity. It is precisely here that the paradox of mysticism reappears. In particular, we can

consider Paul, who was torn between the desire to be freed from the body so he could be with Christ, and the need to remain in the flesh in order to fulfill his apostolic service.

Outside of religion, mysticism follows the fate of Neoplatonism, especially through the works of Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus and Proclus. After the Platonic Academy was closed by order of Justinian, mysticism survived in the philosophical doctrines of Scotus Eriugena, Avicenna, Averroes and Meister Eckhart. It regained strength with the philosophers who gathered in the New Academy, such as Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, Giordano Bruno, Jakob Böhme, right up to Fichte, Schelling, Goethe and other philosophers no less important, who, although supporting the thesis that man can reach the divine by following the path of intuition, never carry mysticism to the extreme limit of ecstasy.

Two Conceptions of Mysticism

The mystical experience is a very complex phenomenon which, historically, has found numerous and manifold manifestations. It is not our intention here to trace these developments, but rather to highlight the theoretical traits that they share.

The first trait is faith in the possibility of a path towards the divine based on *intuition* or revelation, as opposed to the senses and reason, which are considered to be the source of all illusions (for example, in Plato's allegory of the cave). This faith starts from the belief that there is a reality that lies behind the world of appearances, which can be discovered through non-discursive intuition. Only mystical knowledge is true knowledge. In comparison, any other knowledge (including scientific knowledge) is ignorance.

The second characteristic of mysticism concerns the belief in the *unity* of all things, which is the cornerstone of monism in philosophy and pantheism in religion. It is to Parmenides⁴ that we owe the idea that the universe is one and indivisible, whereas the parts of which it seems to consist are nothing more than illusions. Thus, in western thought, we see the

advance of a conception of reality that is different from the reality of the world of the senses, and is one, indivisible and immutable.

The third characteristic concerns *negation of the reality of time*: the distinction between past and future is illusory. It is a consequence of the previous trait, according to which all is one and the One is immutable. If the reality of time were acknowledged, then the unity and immutability of things would be denied. Therefore, if man wants to rise up to be part of the Absolute, he must learn to leave history behind.

The fourth trait concerns *negation of the distinction between good and evil* and is a consequence of the negation of the reality of time. This does not mean, however, that evil becomes good, merely that evil does not exist. Thus we say that, in the world of appearances and the senses, there is good, evil and the mutual conflict between them, but, in the real, immutable world, there is only the mystical good, which is not the opposite of evil because evil does not exist in it.

The fifth trait concerns the *ineffability* and the *incommunicability* of the mystical experience, which are the basis of the paradox of mysticism mentioned earlier in this chapter.

All of these characteristics together represent mysticism as a *conception of the world*.

Nevertheless, we can also give another meaning to mysticism, namely an *attitude of wisdom towards life*. Bertrand Russell wrote: “The possibility of this universal love and joy in all that exists is of supreme importance for the conduct and happiness of life, and gives inestimable value to the mystic emotion . . . it is necessary to realize exactly what the mystic emotion reveals. It reveals a possibility of human nature—a possibility of a nobler, happier, freer life than any that can be otherwise achieved. But it does not reveal anything about the non-human, or about the nature of the universe in general. Good and bad, and even the higher good that mysticism finds everywhere, are the reflections of our own emotions on other things, not part of the substance of things as they are in themselves.”⁵

While rejecting mysticism as a conception of the world, the English philosopher nevertheless considers it a prerequisite for leading a nobler, happier and wiser life. Taken in this way, mysticism allows man to become perfect as he practices good, without, however, adhering to a (mystical) conception that is, among other things, the negation of human reason. We will return to this conception of mysticism when we examine its relationship with Masonic thought.

René Guénon’s Thoughts on Mysticism

After setting out the general characteristics of mysticism, we will now consider the work of René Guénon,⁶ not only for its intrinsic value, but also, and above all, for the influence it has had and continues to have in certain Masonic circles. These reflections are based on the following works of Guénon: *Perspectives of Initiation* (Sophia Perennis, 2004) and *Studies in Freemasonry and the Compagnonnage* (Sophia Perennis, 2004).

First, it is important to define the philosophical tradition within which Guénon’s work is placed. I believe this tradition is mysticism. To justify this conviction of mine, I will compare Guénon’s thought with the five characteristics of mysticism already outlined above.

The first characteristic — belief in the possibility of a path towards the divine based on intuition as opposed to reason and the senses — is the main basis of his thought. Guénon believes that the Supreme reality derives from the world of eternal ideas. The highest activity of man is his intuition of these ideas and this is only possible by going beyond reason.

The second characteristic — belief in the unity of all things — is considered by Guénon as the condition needed for man to move from diversity to unity. Here, Guénon rediscovers Parmenides and Plotinus.

The third characteristic — the negation of the reality of time — emerges in Guénon’s claim that there is no historical origin, since the real

origin lies in a world to which the conditions of time and place that define historical facts do not apply. Here we find, among others, Plato and Parmenides. Indeed, when Guénon speaks of real origin, he is referring to a super-rational, supersensory, metaphysical reality.

The fourth characteristic — negation of the distinction between good and evil — is a consequence of the previous characteristic, hence, if the third is valid, then so must be the fourth.

The fifth characteristic — ineffability and incommunicability — is found throughout Guénon's work. He explains it when he says that the initiatory secret is secret because it consists solely of the "inexpressible," which, of necessity, is "incommunicable."

It is clear, then, that the five characteristics of mysticism are all found in Guénon's work. Therefore, it is justified to say that he is a mystic and that his thought is essentially mystical. However, that is not to say that we should deny that his work presents certain distinct aspects, original in their own right and which, in some respects, differentiate it from other forms of mysticism. So why does Guénon himself say that his thought is not mystical? This point should be clarified if we are to avoid confusion and misinterpretation.

First, the very notion of "mysticism" seems reductive, since Guénon confines it to the West and qualifies it as specifically Christian. He certainly does not completely ignore the forms of mysticism of the Greco-Roman world, the phenomena of mysticism that characterize Jewish and Islamic monotheism, and particularly the schools of eastern mysticism. Why, then, does he not take them into consideration? Furthermore, even if we wished to exclude them, is it justified to state that his conception of initiation has nothing in common with mys-

ticism? I do not believe so. The above comparison reveals large swathes of common ground between the essential characteristics of mysticism and Guénon's conception of initiation. Of course, they do not coincide entirely, but nor are they completely distinct. Indeed, the links

between them are very strong. We can therefore affirm that Guénon is wrong to claim that his vision of initiation is completely unrelated to mysticism. He is perfectly right when he says that pursuit of the path of initiation is incompatible with pursuit of the path of mysticism. However, it is difficult to justify his conclusion that the incompatibility between the two paths implies

an absolute difference between the conceptions of initiation and mysticism. Finally, the differences identified by Guénon concern the modalities of the mystical experience, rather than the very notion of "mysticism." And this is why, notwithstanding the common ground shared by initiation and mysticism, the Initiatory Path and the mystical paths are incompatible: pursuit of one excludes pursuit of the other.

Guénon's is a precise philosophical conception inspired by Plato, Plotinus, early Christian Gnosticism, certain aspects of Scholasticism and the great eastern speculative schools. These far from new concepts are redeveloped by Guénon within a very specific conceptual framework.

The starting point for Guénon's reflections is the Platonic distinction between the world of eternal ideas and the world of reason and the senses. This distinction is translated into "non-human/human" duality, where the "non-human" is represented in metaphysics, intuition, real knowledge, pure intellectuality, and the "human" is represented in reason, philosophy, sensory experience, science and history. The "non-human" is timeless, eternal, immutable, while the "human" is subject to the be-

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coming of time and history. Therefore, it follows that the development of time offers nothing that is essential to man, because that which is essential is made up of the principles of metaphysics, which are immutable. Thus, metaphysics occupies a central place in Guénon's thought.

The world of the "non-human," characterized by metaphysics, is contrasted with the world of the "human," led by science and philosophy, both expressions of discursive reason. Since true knowledge is the eternal and immutable knowledge of metaphysics, all other forms of knowledge, including scientific knowledge, are to be understood as the mere semblance and degeneration of true knowledge. Thus, for example, Guénon's believes that there is more essential truth in astrology, with all its naivety, than in astronomy, with all its technology. With this he is not suggesting a return to astrology, but rather, that we should understand its profound symbolic meaning, not just the material use we can make of it. He illustrates this idea in an example in the essay *The King of the World* (Sophia Perennis, 2004), where he speaks of the emerald that fell from Lucifer's forehead, from which it is said the Grail was fashioned. We can consider the material characteristics or the commercial or emotional value of the emerald, but what is more real is the symbolic meaning of its color and its hardness, and this meaning can only be understood by an alchemist (and not a scientist). The same applies to astronomy, which only gives us information on the mechanics of the heavens, but reveals nothing of the profound meaning with which the firmament is laden. Only the astrologer is able to decipher them. It also applies to mathematics and geometry, which convey, not merely the numerical relationships they represent, but rather a qualitative and symbolic value, which can be applied to all numerical relations and to all forms of figuration.

This criterion, on which Guénon bases his interpretation of modern science, does not represent a conflict between scientific knowledge and real knowledge, since these are on two distinct and different levels. Scientific knowledge can be expanded, but man remains prisoner: he can only get out by getting onto

another level, where it is possible to acquire true knowledge, that is, metaphysical knowledge, which science will never be able to provide.

Just as science, as an expression of the "human," is unable to grasp real knowledge, so too is philosophy.

These considerations mean that the origins of man are "non-human," divine, sacred, and are characterized by pure intellectuality, metaphysical knowledge, transcendence, the eternal and the immutable, the inexpressible (ineffable) and the incommunicable. From these "non-human" origins, man descends "vertically" towards the "human," which is expressed through reason, philosophy and history. The transition from "non-human" to "human" is, in itself, a fundamental loss, a fall, an obscuring of the spirit. From the first "human" state — the primordial state — there follows a further "horizontal" degeneration, which reaches its pinnacle, or perhaps we should say depths, in the era in which we now live. These are the rational forces that gain the upper hand over pure intellectuality and intuition, while philosophical reflection takes the place of metaphysical knowledge, immanence the place of transcendence and the individual the place of the universal.

At the heart of the "human" is the "primordial state," followed by gradual degeneration into other states. Departure from the primordial state leads to loss of the sacredness of which it is made up and the consequent emergence of the distinctions between the sacred and the secular, tradition and anti-tradition, and initiation and anti-initiation. However, there has always been a bond linking the primordial state with the successive states, and it is found in authentic, orthodox tradition, kept alive by the Great Initiates.

The purpose of initiation is to restore the primordial state through a journey back in time: this is the *Initiatory Path*.

According to Guénon, restoring the primordial state is a prerequisite for rising to the higher states, from the "human" to the "non-human" through "vertical" transmission. Thus, the whole of the Initiatory Path is travelled and, at

the end of it, there is the initiatory secret that is ineffable and incommunicable.

Before concluding this presentation of Guénon's thought, it is appropriate to mention his estimation of the modern age and the West. He firmly believes that certain western schools have possessed metaphysical knowledge, finding proof of this in the Pythagorean doctrine of numbers and in some of the true metaphysics found in Scholasticism. But from Humanism onwards, Guénon sees the emergence of an obscurantist and degenerative culture founded on the "human." From Europe, the centre of corruption, barbarism has even spread, albeit in the name of modernization, to the East (Islam, India, China). He hopes for a decline in the modern world, imagining that this can be achieved through the formation of *elites* in whom a sense of metaphysical reality can be awakened. He believes that Catholicism, more than any other religion, was once the repository of the primordial tradition, although, its subsequent degeneration led to the current state of doctrines and symbolism that no longer has any relation to authentic metaphysics. Therefore, it is necessary to reawaken metaphysical knowledge within Catholicism and integrate it with the principles of eastern doctrines, such as those of the Vedanta, which retain the orthodoxy of tradition. Only this way can Catholicism renew itself and act as a barrier against the spread of the crisis in the East.

Why does Guénon attribute this privileged role to the Christian-Catholic tradition? To understand this, we need to look again at the meaning that he ascribes to symbolism. Earlier we saw that Guénon considers symbolism to be the timeless expression of metaphysics and claims its origins are divine. Therefore, symbolism is present in all initiatory traditions that are founded on metaphysics, hence the existence of a universal symbolism that pervades all initiatory traditions. In his search for the contingent manifestations of such symbolism, he recognizes profound analogies between Christian symbolism and the symbolism of other religions. Examples include the symbolism of the cross in Christianity and in India, the pope's white vestments and the similar significance of white that is found in all religions.

This leads Guénon to see Christianity as a manifestation of primordial tradition and Catholicism as spiritual degeneration, which, nevertheless, preserves certain symbols and truths of metaphysics, albeit latently. The task of the Catholic elite would therefore be to renew Christian doctrine, integrate it with the principles of eastern philosophy and use symbolism as the only valid criterion for interpreting historical facts beyond their individual, contingent meaning.

Guénon's Conception of Freemasonry

We will reflect further on Guénon's thought, after setting out his conception of Freemasonry, and critically analyze several of the interpretative errors made by some of his supporters in Masonic quarters.

While, on the one hand, Guénon acknowledges the authentic affiliation of Freemasonry, on the other, he also identifies in it the dangers of the complete degeneration of metaphysical principles.

In his view, metaphysics is indeed the origin of the Masonic tradition and is considered the "Perfect Gnosis," the "Integral Knowledge" (Heavenly Paradise). From there on, after a process of degeneration and spiritual obscuration, there has been a "vertical" fall in the primordial state (earthly Paradise or the Centre of the World). This spiritual degeneration continues with the loss of the primordial state. Thus, from one stage to the next, Freemasonry has gradually and increasingly distanced itself from Integral Knowledge, until it reached the current state of crisis. Here, in order to represent the process of spiritual obscuration, Guénon refers to the "non-human"/"human" distinction which is represented in "vertical"/"horizontal" duality. In other words, we can say that the Masonic tradition gradually but unceasingly moves away from the primordial tradition. In the transition from one state to another, there has been a "loss," beginning with the loss of Perfect Gnosis (a state that is typical of the "non-human"), which is followed by the loss of the primordial state. The loss was made up with something meant to replace it, which, in turn, was lost, thus making further

substitutions necessary, and so on until we get to the present day. In this process of repeated losses, tradition has never ceased. Every era has had its Great Initiates who have transmitted to other Initiates the Truths of which they were the custodians. Thus, there have been no interruptions or gaps in the esoteric initiatory tradition.

The fundamental task of Freemasonry is therefore to retrace this path of spiritual obscuration back through these numerous stages to the primordial stage (horizontal path), and from there, rise to Perfect Gnosis (vertical path). This regression is the Initiatory Path, which, in Freemasonry, has particular forms and modalities.

After rigorously setting out the scope of Freemasonry, Guénon formulates its principles, reprising and applying the concepts already outlined in his general ideas on initiation.

One initial characteristic of the Initiatory Path is the fulfillment of the “little mysteries,” which bring Masons back to the primordial state (horizontal path), and the “great mysteries,” which raise them to Perfect Gnosis (vertical path). At the beginning of their initiation, all Masons have the same starting point, but only a select few (the Great Initiates) are able to reach Perfect Gnosis. All other Masons find themselves on different points of the Initiatory Path, according to their subjective traits and their ability to relate to metaphysical principles.

Another feature is Initiatory Degrees. Every initiation involves a series of phases, corresponding to the same number of degrees. Guénon believes that these phases can and should always represent the three degrees of the Order (Apprentice, Companion, Master), which correspond to the triple mission of the Freemasons, consisting in first seeking, then possessing and finally spreading the Light. Guénon’s judgment of the High Degrees (the Rites) seems critical at first, but he later softens it.⁷

Before comparing Guénon’s conception of Freemasonry with the conception that has prevailed since the modern origins of Freemason-

ry up to the present day, it is appropriate to reflect critically on some aspects of his work.

A Critical Analysis of Guénon’s Metaphysics

One initial consideration regards the notion of “metaphysics” which, according to Guénon, has a fundamental role to play. We have seen that, in his definition, metaphysics is not only an unlimited extension of mathematical truth, but is also rational and can be expressed through the laws of the spirit. It is difficult to understand exactly what he means by this. Perhaps he alludes to a kind of formal ontology, but there is nothing in his work to confirm this hypothesis. He speaks of metaphysics conforming to immutable, eternal laws, such as the laws of mathematics, although, not based on reason but on intuition. The least that can be said is that he is referring to two different forms of rationality, or that he is using the same concept of reason with two different meanings. However, one thing is certain: he wants to secure the indisputability of his idea of metaphysics, so that it can be immune from value judgments. And here it is even more difficult to follow him. What is the purpose of establishing a metaphysics based on mathematics, with laws as rigorous as those of the physical world, only to give it the properties of ineffability and incommunicability? Furthermore, all brands of metaphysics (whether specifically religious or non-religious) have their own basis on which judgments are usually expressed. From this point of view, all forms of metaphysics can be called into question. But Guénon states that his metaphysics cannot be the subject of debate because it is true metaphysics. But where does this truth come from? Perhaps from the fact that it cannot be judged or debated? But can it really not be judged? These questions need a precise answer, if we are to make sense of his work, especially as regards the very first principle.

Guénon’s metaphysics is expressed through the laws of the spirit, which are as rigorous as the laws of the external world, albeit on a different level. We are to know nothing more a

bout the nature of these laws. According to Guénon, only the Great Initiates will know them, and only after completing their journey along the Initiatory Path and having attained Perfect Gnosis. And this presents another difficulty: what is the purpose of knowing the laws of the spirit, if they cannot be talked about because they are inexpressible and incommunicable? It should be noted that incommunicability is absolute, since it affects not only the initiates who are still far from Perfect Gnosis, but also the Great Initiates who have already attained it. In short, how can the rationality of metaphysics and the laws of the spirit be reconciled with the impossibility of expressing them and communicating through them? And this is another point that should be clarified.

A second consideration concerns the transition from the “non-human” to the “human.” Philosophy has put forward several doctrines to characterize this transition, including Plato’s, which states that, owing to its immortal nature, after its fall into the body (the “human”), the superior soul (the “non-human”) is destined to become separate from it after death. The soul lives in the body as if in a prison, hence it yearns to be free in order to return to the never-forgotten world of eternal ideas. In this state of deprivation, it suffers on account of the limitations imposed by the senses, which prevent it from achieving perfect knowledge. Therefore, the soul must move towards a Path of Perfection based on eternal values, against the illusory appearances of the world of the senses.

On such an important point, Guénon is silent, meaning that we can only interpret it through supposition. For example, we can suppose that this transition is continuous, that is, we go from the “non-human” to the “human” without any intervals. In this case, however, it becomes necessary to identify the point where the “non-human” ends and the “human” begins, the limit at which intuition gives way to reason, transcendence to immanence, being to becoming. Moreover, if the “non-human” is characterized by the ineffable and incommunicable (and therefore by the silence of metaphysical contemplation), then it is important to establish when exactly we begin to speak, to express

ourselves, to communicate. We cannot avoid wondering when this happens and on what basis.

The same applies to the reverse process, from the “human” to the “non-human” (the Initiatory Path): when, after learning the little mysteries, the initiate can begin the ascent towards metaphysical knowledge, how and on what basis does this transition take place? The ascending path is the exact opposite of the descending path; hence, if there are no criteria to justify the latter, then the former is also unjustified. This aspect of Guénon’s work needs clarification.

A third consideration concerns the notion of the “primordial state.” Here Guénon returns to a concept that is far from new. The concepts of “Primordial State” or “Golden Age” or “Paradise on Earth” and the like are recurrent in archaic societies and find expression in myth, religion and philosophy. To argue that man once lived in a state of happiness and blissfulness, that all his actions were sacred and that he knew all the profound truths of metaphysics is only a fascinating exercise in hypothesis. On the contrary, if we consider the natural development of man, as described by biological and evolutionary science, then we would imagine that his physical and intellectual characteristics were much further behind those of the present day. But one could argue that man’s spiritual development has nothing to do with his physical and rational development. This is also true, but if the argument is applied to the primordial state, it is difficult to understand how this could have happened. And even admitting that the Golden Age really existed as it is described in the myths and religions of ancient societies, what sense would there be for modern man, who has discovered history and the becoming⁸ of time, to return to it? The most recent developments in science and technology are having a profound effect on man, thrusting him further and further into a future that will have nothing in common with ancient civilization. However, it could be argued that, if we want to save humanity, it is precisely for this reason that we need to return to the spirituality of the primordial state. Undoubtedly, this is an important proposition for those who share it. But I do not

believe it is the right path to take. Science and technology should not be demonized, but merely directed towards the good of humanity. To do this, we need to move towards the future, not to the past.

The core of Guénon's thought is clear and defined, but it is accompanied by a series of gaps, ambiguities and generalities. Any judgment of his views must take account of the overall reference framework or risk misinterpreting them. This is the main error made by some of Guénon's followers in the Masonic lodges. By only considering part of his work, they make it even more difficult and obscure. Indeed, there are those in Freemasonry who, after adhering to Guénon's conception of initiation, argue that a) Freemasonry is not philosophy, and b) Freemasonry is a method. Since these positions derive from a reductive interpretation of Guénon's thought, we will address them.

The statement "Freemasonry is not philosophy" can stem from two different points of view. The first can be expressed thus: since the Initiatory Path consists of what man experiences subjectively, Freemasonry is not philosophy. I am in full agreement: experience is not philosophy. Experience and philosophy (which is a reflection on experience) are on two different levels, but are also closely related. Supporters of this statement are only able to see the experiential plane and therefore do not realize that experience can only be expressed through language (facts do not speak for themselves). Denying language (and philosophy, which is a form of expression) is equivalent to abstaining from talking about experience.

If by reality we mean the Initiatory Path, then one way of talking about it is through philosophy, and this is the method that Guénon himself prefers. In fact, certain philosophical doctrines are found in his writings, but he also uses the same philosophical language to express his conception of initiation. To deny

Freemasonry a philosophical basis means to deny the possibility of talking about it. Thus, the error lies in only considering part of Guénon's thought rather than the whole, by denying the validity of the ideal and the philosophical.

There is another position that leads to the same misconception of Guénon's work, and like the previous one, does not grasp the overall stance of Guénon's work. This can be summarized as follows: the true and authentic foundation of Freemasonry is metaphysics (expression of intuition and super-rational knowledge); since philosophy (the expression of discursive reason) is a degenerated form of metaphysical

knowledge, it cannot represent the true conception of Freemasonry, which is metaphysics. Holders of this belief are inspired by Guénon's distinction between the "non-human" and the "human," and only apply the "non-human" characteristics (such as eternal and immutable truths) to Freemasonry, while considering "human" characteristics (such as reason and philosophy) to be completely negative. Here, too, Guénon's ideas are misunderstood. While it is true that he speaks of the "human" (and therefore of philosophy) as a degeneration of the "non-human," he does not consider the "human" to be completely negative, as do some of the interpreters of his views. In fact, Guénon considers the "human" (in all of its aspects) as a prerequisite for returning to the "non-human." The eternal truths of metaphysics (vertical path) can never be recovered from the great mysteries, unless the initiate has already pursued the "human" path (horizontal path, characterized by the small mysteries). Therefore, as representations of the "human," philosophy, reason, history and science have a positive value. According to Guénon, Freemasonry is founded on both the "non-human" and the "human," although the latter is lower than and subordinate to the former.

Mysticism is a mysterious and fascinating vision of life that has inspired man since ancient times. It can be spoken of in terms of its connection to a particular religion, and in secular terms—as a mysticism that is not oriented toward religion.

These interpretative errors spawn negative judgments on books that set out to speak philosophically of Freemasonry: for they are human, indeed too human. Upholders of this opinion would prefer real books on Freemasonry to discuss the “non-human.” Is this possible? If the “non-human” involves the initiatory secret, which, by its very nature, is ineffable and incommunicable, then no book can discuss it. Guénon himself failed to write books on the “non-human,” and he did not do so for the simple reason that no man can write books of this kind. This is as true for a recent initiate as it is for a Great Initiate who has attained Perfect Gnosis, since it is not expressible or communicable. Therefore, Guénon’s books are “human” books that use philosophy and discursive reason in exactly the same way as I am writing this essay on Freemasonry. No one, not even Guénon, can talk of the absolute Truths of Perfect Gnosis, because they are shrouded in silence.

Another error made by certain interpreters and followers of Guénon is that they define Freemasonry as being solely a method. Again, they are not considering Guénon’s work as a whole, but only partially. This position can be summed up as follows. After receiving initiation, a Mason starts his journey along the Initiatory Path, which he follows according to his subjective capacity. Since the Path is experienced subjectively and directly, the task of Freemasonry is only to teach him how to pursue it. Since these teachings include a series of prescriptions, Freemasonry is a method. Those who hold this position do not realize that the Initiatory Path is not an end in itself, but rather it is geared towards the attainment of the eternal truths of metaphysics and that it is metaphysics that gives meaning to the initiatory method. Thus, by excluding metaphysics, the method is made absolute. In other words, they believe that the method and only the method can provide the Mason with all he needs to pursue the Initiatory Path.

It is clear that such reductive interpretations fail to correctly understand the nature and function of the method, which, as Wittgenstein says, is like a ladder, which, after it has been climbed, can be thrown away. By this we mean to underline the instrumental nature of the

method. The method (the ladder) is always constructed in such a way as to allow one to attain knowledge of something: the external world, mental states, Perfect Gnosis, etc. Indeed, it is the kind of knowledge we wish to attain that forms the basis for constructing the method. Thus, for example, scientific method is built on the need to investigate the external world, according to a certain conception of science (the one developed by Galileo, which is based on both “sense experiences” and “necessary demonstrations”), without which that particular method would not make sense. The same applies to the Masonic method: it can only be practiced if it is known which conception of Freemasonry has inspired it. There is no doubt, as far as Guénon is concerned: as the Initiatory Path strives towards metaphysics, then metaphysics itself is the foundation on which the Masonic method is built. Returning to the metaphor of the ladder, we know that it must be supported by something else (e.g. a wall or a tree). Without such support, it would not stand up. Those Masons who define Freemasonry as merely a method claim they are holding the ladder, but without any support. This is something that no one has ever achieved.

We will end these considerations by specifying that the above criticisms are valid even beyond Guénon’s work; that is to say, those who claim that “Freemasonry is not philosophy” or that “Freemasonry is a method” are subject to the same criticisms regardless of the conception of Freemasonry to which they adhere.

Comparison Between Metaphysic and Regulatorist Conception of Freemasonry

What we have seen so far has allowed us to make a comparison between the conception of Freemasonry as set out by Guénon in his work and the conception of Freemasonry that has developed in the modern era (from 1717 to the present day), on the basis of Constitutions and Declarations.⁹ I will make this comparison by using the term “metaphysics” for Guénon’s conception and the term “regulatorism” for the other conception, as shown in the following table:

Metaphysical conception of Freemasonry

1. Based on a series of eternal and immutable truths.
2. The Initiatory Path leads to Perfect Gnosis (Integral Knowledge of Eternal Truths).
3. The immutable truths of metaphysics are, by their very nature, shrouded in the Initiatory Secret.
4. The Initiatory Secret is ineffable and incommunicable even to the Great Initiates.
5. Knowledge is intuitive and non-rational.
6. The “non-human” (the Divine, Perfect Gnosis, Integral Knowledge) dominates the “human” (philosophy, science, history).
7. Symbols and Rituals have a divine (“non-human”) origin.
8. Symbols and Rituals are prerequisites for attaining the Eternal Truths of metaphysics (Perfect Gnosis).
9. Truth is always revealed and absolute. Those who possess it are infallible.
10. It is fundamentally integrist: those who hold the absolute truth and are infallible cannot make compromises with anyone.
11. It is characterized by negation of time and history: autonomous historical facts are irrelevant to the symbolic conception of the world.
12. The Initiatory Path is oriented towards the past and the search for lost truths.
13. The secular world is completely negative and irrelevant to initiation.

Regulativist conception of Freemasonry

1. Based on practical philosophy, concerning man, his nature and his purpose.
2. The Initiatory Path leads to a state of wisdom, which is the maximum attainment of man.
3. By convention, the state of wisdom is shrouded in the initiatory secret.
4. The Initiatory Secret is also expressible and communicable to initiates.
5. Knowledge is rational.
6. The “human” prevails over the “non-human.”
7. Symbols and Rituals have a human origin.
8. Symbols and Rituals are a means to achieve a state of wisdom.
9. Truth is never revealed and is absolute: man is only given a chance to gradually get close to it but without reaching it. However wise he may be, man is never infallible.
10. It is fundamentally tolerant: precisely because man does not have the truth and is not infallible, other men should have the right to hold different ideas from one’s own.
11. It acknowledges the validity of historical facts and time.
12. The Initiatory Path is projected into the future, in search of a man that is increasingly better, fairer and wiser.
13. The secular world supports the initiatory world.

Commentary on Selected Points

Commentary on point 4: it is widely believed in Freemasonry, even among regulativist Masons, that the initiatory secret is solely ineffable and incommunicable. This, however, is true only for those Masons who adhere to the metaphysical conception based on revealed and absolute truth. Of course, it does not apply to all Masons. If the truth remains circumscribed to the “human,” it can only be relative, while the initiatory secret only contains conventions that are agreed upon among Masons. Seen in this light, the secret may seem relative-

ly insignificant when compared with the other meaning, but this is the only way to refer to it without sliding into the metaphysical conception.

Commentary on point 6: the claim that the “human” prevails over the “non-human” does not mean accepting an idea of Freemasonry that is based on a materialistic and atheistic type of immanentism, since the “human” is guided by the transcendent, which is the dimension that gives meaning to the moral ac-

tions of man. It is the transcendent that justifies and gives rise to morality.

Commentary on point 11: the main reason why Guénon's conception is not acceptable in Freemasonry concerns the fact that autonomous historical events are given less consideration than symbolic interpretation. Freemasonry is steeped in history and it draws from history the values that it asserts as the principles of ethical perfection. Important historical events, such as the American and the French Revolutions, hold significance for Freemasonry in their own right, as messengers of universal values (concerning man as man and not just a privileged class), according to which, all forms of fanaticism and intolerance have been fought. All this is meaningless when considered in relation to Guénon's conception of Freemasonry. The only significance he recognizes is that which goes beyond historical fact and is indeed symbolic interpretation.

Commentary on point 13: Guénon's conception of the relationship between the secular world and initiatory knowledge leads him to demand a completely unnatural attitude from man. Man was born in the secular world and brought up in it, from infancy to later life. From the very start of his existence, the secular world penetrates his consciousness and molds it. How is it possible, therefore, to separate from it completely? This request is humanly unattainable: those who would like to achieve it should come out of the secular world while continuing to live in it. Here again we find the paradox of mysticism, albeit in other guises. The regulativist conception, for all the reasons that justify it, rejects this schizophrenic separation and therefore creates a bridge between the secular world and initiatory knowledge. Man is born into the secular and becomes initiated, developing to his utmost the positive qualities (goodness, justice, tolerance, solidarity, etc.) that already exist in the secular world. Therefore, he need do nothing more than follow the path that will lead him to a state of wisdom, a state that can only place him in a position where he can improve others. When we speak of the secular world, too often we forget that we are in fact referring to other men, who are mirror images of ourselves and therefore have

the same problems to solve, albeit choosing different paths from our own. However, all these roads converge at the same point, hence there is a common foundation, from which no one can completely separate himself. If he could do so, he would no longer be a man. Therefore, as stated earlier, Freemasonry has a secular counterpart, made up of the basic concepts of Freedom, Tolerance, Brotherhood and Transcendence, and a specific part consisting in the Initiatory Secret. Only this way, by perfecting himself, can a Mason also improve humanity.

Before us, we have two visions of Freemasonry. Which is the true one? Ideally, both can claim that title, each being founded on certain constituent parts of man. All conceptions of man (philosophical and anthropological), which communicate a specific point of view about him, tend to be true. Only by choosing and adopting a particular point of view, can we make a judgment of truth, opportunity, utility, or anything else. Thus, if we define Freemasonry as the conception based on the symbolic interpretation that lies beyond historical fact, Guénon's proposition is undoubtedly true and, consequently, the regulativist view is false. If, however, we base Freemasonry on the autonomy of historical facts and on the official documents (such as Constitutions, Declarations, etc.) that have been produced by this school of thought, then regulativist Freemasonry is true and, consequently, Guénon's metaphysical version is false.

Can the two ideas of Freemasonry be integrated? According to my thesis of non-exclusive regulativism, the regulativist conception, which sets out the minimum requirements of being a Freemason, can be integrated with other conceptions (whether metaphysical or not). On the basis of this philosophical thesis, we have argued that Masons can integrate their ethical ideals with religious faith. Does the same argument also apply to Guénon's metaphysical vision of Freemasonry? Before answering that, we should rephrase the question: can the minimum requirement be integrated with anything else? Is integration only possible if certain conditions are met? It is my belief that integration is not always possible and only

applies under certain conditions. Thus it follows that the regulativist conception of Freemasonry can only be integrated with other conceptions (whether metaphysical or not) that have certain characteristics and, thus, meet the conditions for integrability. The first condition is a common foundation: the regulativist conception can be integrated with another conception if, and only if, the two conceptions have at least one point in common. A comparison of the regulativist conception and Guénon's metaphysical conception clearly shows that there is no single point of common ground between them, but rather that they are independent and alternative. They therefore cannot be integrated with one another. A Freemason must choose one or the other. If he tried, in spite of everything, to combine the two conceptions, taking a little from one and a little from the other, he would create an absurd confusion and Freemasonry would simultaneously be everything and the opposite of everything. The minimum requirement of being a Freemason can, on the other hand, be integrated with religion, since regulativist Freemasonry and religion do share, albeit partially, some fundamental elements, such as the importance ascribed to history and morality.

Conclusion

Mysticism is a mysterious and fascinating vision of life that has inspired man since ancient times. It can be spoken of in terms of its connection to a particular religion, and in secular terms—as a mysticism that is not oriented toward religion. From its very origins, philosophy has understood mysticism in terms of metaphysics, and its researches have been centered on “being” intended as absolute and immutable. However, philosophical interpretations are numerous and contradictory. Thus a true definition of mysticism, its nature and significance is not easy to grasp. One must begin by examining specific aspects of mysticism, such as its identifying characteristics and their commonality, its many interpretations, or by looking at its various historical, religious and cultural influences. This means isolating certain interpretations and subjecting them to a thorough and comprehensive analysis.

In taking this approach, I have introduced the distinction between mysticism as “a conception of the world” and mysticism as “an attitude of wisdom toward life.” This is followed by another distinction between “religious mysticism” and “secular mysticism.” Religious mysticism belongs to “a conception of the world,” while secular mysticism is “an attitude of wisdom.”

My interest mainly concerns secular interpretations such as those found in the esoteric and initiatory Orders of the Rosicrucians, the Illuminati, Freemasonry and Dignity. Since these Orders are not inspired by mysticism as “a vision of the world” and for this reason they are not religious, every attempt to give them a mystical foundation is in error and inevitability leads to degeneration.

While Guénon was an influential figure in the domain of metaphysics, sacred science, symbolism and initiation, his view of mysticism is presented as a typical example of degeneration within the Masonic doctrine and runs counter to what is proper and foundational to the “regulativist conception of Freemasonry,” which I have compared with the “metaphysic” one. Hence, his alternative interpretation of mysticism is unacceptable since it undermines Masonry's foundations, which are rigorously represented by the “regulativist conception.”

¹ Plato's “Allegory of the Cave” is presented in *The Republic* (520a–520a).

² Plotinus, *Plotinos Complete Works, XXII: The Apollonian Oracle About Plotinos*, by Plotinus. <http://www.hellenicaworld.com/Greece/Literature/Plotinos/en/Vol.1.html>. Available online at: <http://www.hellenicaworld.com/Greece/Literature/Plotinos/en/Vol.1.html> (accessed May 12, 2018).

³ Plotinus, *Plotinos Complete Works*, Third Ennead, Book Eight. Of Nature, Contemplation and Unity.

⁴ Parmenides (c. 485 BCE), was a Pre-Socratic philosopher from southern Italy. He is known as the founder of the Eleatic School of philosophy, which taught a strict Monistic view of reality. Parmenides was the first philosopher to inquire into the nature of

existence. As such, he is known as the Father of Metaphysics and for his famous poem, *On Nature*, which has survived only in fragmentary form.

⁵ Bertrand Russell, *Mysticism and Logic* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2004), 22.

⁶ René Guénon (1886–1961), was a French metaphysician, a life-long Freemason, author and intellectual who was largely responsible for laying the metaphysical groundwork for the Perennialist school of thought. In Cairo, Guénon discovered Islam and was initiated to the Shadhilitie Sufic Order.

⁷ See, René Guénon, *Studies in Freemasonry*

and the Compagnonnage, and also *Initiation and Spiritual Realization* (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2004).

⁸ The concept of “becoming” in Philosophy refers to the idea that “everything flows, nothing stands still.” It is also connected with movement and evolution, as becoming assumes a “changing to” and a “moving toward.” Becoming is the process or state of change coming about in time and space.

⁹ James Anderson, *The Constitutions of the Freemasons of the Premier Grand Lodge of England, 1815–1896*, edited by W. Hagan (London: Kenning, 1899).