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The possible ways of realization of man in the explanation of René Guénon

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The French intellectual René Guénon (1886–1951) gathered numerous followers around the world. Guénon is accepted rather as a father of Traditionalism¹. In many cases he became an interpreter of knowledge of Eastern religious traditions² for the western mind. The disarmament of the Western spirit and stability of the Eastern one, in his view, became one of the most powerful impetus not only to embark on the study of these traditions with their depth, but also to experience by his own the conversion from Christianity

- 1 The Traditionalist school also is titled as the Religio Perennis, the Perennial Philosophy, or Sophia Perennis.
- 2 S. B. Sotillos, *René Guénon and Sri Ramana Maharshi. Two remarkable sages in Modern Times*, part I, *The mountain path*, Vol. 51, No. 2, <http://www.sriramana.org/ramanafiles/mountainpath/2014%20II%20April.pdf> (September 25, 2022).

to Sufism. So called the “Cairo hermit” as the researchers name him dives deeper to the world religion traditions. As Guénon has an aim to show it, despite a long history of the formation of the worldview of all world religions they held similar aspects in their metaphysics. Among those religions he named Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Taoism, Buddhism and Hinduism. And the universality of view on the realization of man in these religions is not an exception here.

Who is man?

In Guenonian works man can be seen with his metaphysical relation to another reality or by visible and material state finding himself exceptionally in the worldly conditions alone. As Guénon underscore, the former position is a state of Person, and the latter man is seen as an individual. By the way both states are inseparably related but need to be accurately explained. Then the mode of existence sets in a certain conditions is understood by an individual human being. Having worldly modes, individuality posits a contingent plane, mutability, instability, has determined and a limited status. The existence of individual depends on Person as a source of all beings. Person, Guénon admits, is a universal principle, over any determinations and conditions. Ergo, the individual man is originated from Person, signs its finished expression in the sense that it is the end-mode or “end-product”³. Giving a dependent character to the individual, Guénon does not strive to distinct it fully from

3 R. Guénon, *The symbolism of the Cross*, trans. by Angus Macnab, 3rd ed., Sophia Perennis et Universalis, London 1996, p. 8.

the state of Person. The individual man as well as any individual position (state) expresses and contains a whole being. Guénon admits the possibility to discover Person in a corporeal or individual man, because the latter mirrors the whole cosmos and resembles the former⁴.

For the clarification of this description, another possible term is underlined by Guénon: *Soi* and *Moi*, what in English can be respectively finds translation in the terms of *Self* and *Ego*. What characterizes *Soi* or Person is a spiritual or universal realm⁵, so it has a metaphysical status. *Soi* has a cause of existence in itself, i.e. is self-sufficient and does not depend on anything else. The thinker puts *Soi* out of the limited and manifested frame of the natural world indicating impossibility of its modification. This is because what is manifested is subjected to the mutability and conversion that is exactly the characteristics of *Moi* or an individual. Instead, *Moi* or *Ego* finds its cause of existence in *Soi*, exists only because of it, and is unable to exist independently⁶.

Apart of this, the thinker turns his attention on the expression of a “human person” that for him does not have any sense meaning nothing more than an individual human and this is due to an archetypical character of Person. From this point of view, a human cannot become Person because it is a Principle, and also can be described as an archetype or matrix. Here the question arises whether

4 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

5 R. Guénon, *Man and his becoming according to the Vedanta*, Collected Works of Rene Guénon, trans. by Richard C. Nicholson, Sophia Perennis, Hillsdale NY 2001, p. 22.

6 R. Zobkov, *Unyversalnoe i individualnoe v diskurse Rene Genona*, *Yzvestiya Irkutskoho gosudarstvennogo universiteta*, “Seriya Politolohiya. Relihiovedeniye” 31 (2020) no. 69, <http://izvestiapolit.isu.ru/en/article/file?id=1808> (August 15, 2022).

it is reasonable and possible for man to achieve this state. Hence, by the next step it is explained how the stage of *Soi* relates to human spiritual growth and, therefore, his realization.

The idea of Universal Man

Speaking about the idea of Person, Guénon operates mostly with a term 'Universal Man'. The title of this conception, as the thinker notices, is taken from the Muslim esotericism, but it finds an equivalent with different titles in different religious traditions, for instance, as Cosmic Christ in Christianity, Cosmic Man or Self in Hinduism (Vedas and the Upanishads), Adam Kadmon in Kabbalah⁷, King in far-eastern tradition⁸. The concept of 'Universal Man' in various traditions has a similar interpretation and presupposes an existence in its totality and embraces all manifested and un-manifested states. Pretty clearly it can be demonstrated by the Kabbalistic tradition and its idea of Adam Kadmon or Primordial Man. According to the Kabbalistic knowledge, Adam Kadmon is described as a perfect unity, God's creation, that points out rather on a state. By the dismembering of Adam's body the whole universe was created and the all souls in it are the particles of the one Adamic soul. Hence, 'Universal Man' is a manifestation of the First Principle, namely God. Accordingly, an individual human is a manifestation of Universal Man. Then, Universal Man could be called as a virtual principle,

7 Guénon ignores the fact that Kabbalah, as says its representatives, has nothing to do with religion but is rather wisdom or science.

8 R. Guénon, *Man and his becoming according to the Vedanta*, p. 40.

while its manifested states are repetition and resembles of what belongs to the Principle⁹.

Such a concept mentioned by Guénon should not be mixed with western personalistic movement or school. The French intellectual sees his explanation as a purely esoteric one. And this concept directly relates to a human and his realization. He states on a possibility for man to achieve the stage of Universal Man. The French intellectual describes it by the way of initiation that is an entrance and a spiritual growing of man in his religious tradition by practicing it and having a teacher who can lead a human on this way of initiation. For instance, in Christianity such entrance is described by the Sacrament of Baptism. Without such an entrance to the chosen religion it is impossible for a human to be realized. On a way to his full and highest realization on a status of Universal Man, a human can go through different stages, but Guénon universalizes and underlines the next two stages: true man and Universal Man where Universal Man is the realization of the potentiality of true man. But this needs to be explained.

By describing the realization of man Guénon symbolically presents the image of the circle of being and represents two types of movement on a way of a human initiation. The primary way is symbolically denoted by the trace from the periphery to the center and this is the initiation to True Man. By the secondary way a human reaches the highest initiation and realization what symbolically is denoted by the ascension from the center to the top. The latter shows the way of initiation to Universal Man¹⁰. Thus, describing the way of human realization, Guénon distinguishes

9 R. Guénon, *The symbolism of the Cross*, p. 6–8.

10 R. Guénon, *The great triade*, trans. by Peter Kingsley, Quinta Essentia, Cambridge 1991, p. 126.

between these two moments, because it implies that man settles at the different stages of realization and the attitude to the Highest Principle or the Absolute. Both positions (the center and the axis) “in the eyes of ordinary men”¹¹ as well as for a man who finds himself on the way of initiation, are equally invisible¹². Although Guénon speaks of the possibility of full realization of man, nevertheless it is worth emphasizing that it does not mean that a human becomes true man or Universal Man, i.e. he does not become an archetype, what would not make a sense. Accordingly, it is impossible to become Person or *Soi*, as it is the Universal Principle, matrix or archetype. But a human in his way of realization can reach the state of being Person.

Therefore, the position of Universal Man, which involves ascending from the centre to the top (vertically), means a full initiation and the closest possible stay towards the Highest Principle. However, such realization is possible only through the achievement of the center – the position of true man. It is worth to note, that indeed we deal with a certain transfiguration of individual by initiation and as the French thinker himself notes, it will be mistakenly to call such transfigured man just a human, while he leaves an individual, contingent characteristics that are inherent to an earthy man, i.e. the man outside the way of initiation.

It will not be superfluous to add, that true man that settles at the center, as well as Universal Man, has approached to the Principle, became invisible to the periphery, but has already left the individual aspects of existence, taking the position of inaction. For the clarification of this point of view, Guénon makes an example from

11 *Ibid.*, p. 126.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 126.

the Taoist doctrine, which shows the ability to come to the center of the existence, so-called the “Invariable Middle” (Chung Yung)¹³, and is accepted as an act of wisdom¹⁴. For the explanation of this vision Guénon cites the sage of the work “Tao-te-King” written by Lao-tse, who teaches: “The Principle is always actionless, yet everything is done by It”¹⁵. Such a seemingly not logical position the “Cairo hermit” explains on the example of how the Emperor conducts his empire and he writes:

This influence is ‘actionless’, which means that it does not involve any external activity. The ‘One and only Man’ exercises his role as ‘unmoved mover’ from his position at the center. He controls everything without intervening in anything, just as the Emperor maintains order in all the regions of the Empire and regulates the course of the annual cycle without ever leaving the Ming T’ang.¹⁶

Hence, those who manages to occupy the central position (of being), shares some qualities of the Principles among which are the “actionless activity” as well as an invisibility towards the visible world, and, so to speak, gets rid of the contingency and temporality of the world.

Estimating Guénon’s anthropology and the idea of Transcendental man¹⁷ and true man, the researcher Dugin points out that

13 *The Invariable Middle (Chung Yung) Guénon represents as ‘World Axis’ and the realm of human possibilities.* See: R. Guénon, *The great triade*, p. 113.

14 R. Guénon, *The symbolism of the Cross*, p. 34.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

16 R. Guénon, *The great triade*, p. 127.

17 The author Dugin in his book uses the phrase ‘Transcendental Man’ that is a synonym for ‘Universal Man’. See: A. Dugin, *V poyskakh temnogo Logosa*, Academicheskii proect, Moskva 2013, p. 87.

it echoes with platonic vision and it presupposes getting rid of something individual for something general, which leads to dissolving of individual in the world soul¹⁸. It is important, that in Platonism individual meant material and bodily aspect, while mind (gr. *νοῦς*) directly related to the World Soul. Thus, platonic approach means emancipation of man from the material world by the means of dissolving in general principle of unity¹⁹. Dugin finds the platonic approach of Guénon in his descriptions of initiation to true man and Transcendental Man. But we can find another vision in Neo-Platonism, the one that gives an individual more value. For instance, this is Procles who sees a possibility for an individual to see the ideas and worlds even higher than the World Soul. An individual has this feature being the bearer of the mind (*νοῦς*). Ability of the mind is called an “individual intuition” (gr. *επιβολή*) and it gives a possibility “to see the transcendental depth profoundly” throughout the mind²⁰. So, an individual has something that cannot just disappear and dissolve. If we consider the classic way of Neo-Platonism, it presupposes disappearance of an individual man through creation of eidos-man and abandoning of “awakened mind”²¹.

The readers of Guénon’s works can admit similarity between his view and precisely in chosen topic and to Neo-Platonism though an absolute relation cannot be declared. For example, one can find criticism of Guénon’s anthropology, which can be described as a renewed version of Neo-Platonism²². The “Cairo hermit” himself agrees that in his teaching positive aspects of Neo-Platonism can

18 A. Dugin, *V poyskakh temnogo Logosa*, p. 87.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 90.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 88–89.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 90.

22 R. Zobkov, *Unyversalnoe i individualnoe v diskurse Rene Genona*, p. 66.

be found, but stresses that it cannot be combined with the ancient Greek thought as such. Apart from this it is easy to admit the proximity of ideas between Kabbalah and Neo-Platonism, though Guénon denies such attempt, considering Neo-Platonism rather an exoteric teaching²³.

Therefore, in the article is demonstrated a possibility of realization of man on a way of initiation proposed by René Guénon. Being a representative of Traditionalist movement, in his description he takes into account the worldview of the world religious traditions showing their sameness in the topic about the realization of a human being. In the article is shown two different and related stages man can occupy in his existence. In the earthly life a human sets a state of an individual which puts him in a contingent and temporal position. For Guénon an individual does not have a source of own existence and is originated from the Principle, so called *Soi*, *Self*, or Person. Person is a principle of origin of individual, it is a matrix or too an archetype. The existence of individual human reflects to some extent the existence of Person, then individual is able to achieve this state. It is possible through the process of initiation, that presupposes belonging to one own religious tradition, having spiritual practices with achieving spiritual growing through which a human can realized himself. By initiation a human comes closer to the Principle or to the state of Person. In the way of realisation, as Guénon underscores, human are able to achieve the position of true man and Universal Man, where the former is a state in the centre of being, and the latter is the full realization of man who escapes from the world fully. In the end the analysis between

23 R. Guénon, *Formes traditionnelles et cycles cosmiques*, Collection Tradition, Gallimard, Paris 1970, p. 39.

Guenonian view of this topic and Neo-Platonism is provided. The similar moments of them were shown, but a more thorough analysis is still pending for the researchers in this field.

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Abstract

The possible ways of realization of man in the explanation of René Guénon

The chapter by Natalia Petreshak analyzes René Guénon's concept of human realization within the Traditionalist School. The author discusses two key stages in the process of initiation: attaining the status of the "true man" and the realization of the "Universal Man." Guénon emphasizes that man as an individual is dependent on the principle he calls "Soi" (Self), while "Moi" (Ego) refers to the individual, earthly existence. Human realization is possible through engagement in religious tradition and spiritual practices leading to the transfiguration of the individual and proximity to the principle. The chapter also highlights similarities between Guénon's thought and Neoplatonism, noting differences in metaphysics and soteriology.

Keywords

René Guénon, person, individual, Neo-Platonism, true man, Universal Man