

The Reform of the Modern Mentality*

René Guénon

MODERN CIVILISATION appears in history as a veritable anomaly; of all those we know about, our own is the only one which has developed in a purely material sense, and is also the only one which is not supported by any principle of a higher order. This material development which has been pursued for several centuries now, and at an ever accelerating pace, has been accompanied by an intellectual regression which this same material progress is quite unable to neutralize. It is of course a genuine and true intellectuality which is in question here, which could also be called spirituality; for we refuse to give the name intellectuality to what is currently so called today, namely, the cultivation of the experimental sciences in view of the practical applications to which these sciences lend themselves. A single example will allow us to measure the extent of this regression: the *Summa Theologica* of St Thomas was, in its time, a manual for the use of students. Today, where are the students who would be capable of fathoming and assimilating it?

This decay has not come about all at once; one can follow its stages throughout modern philosophy. It is the loss or the forgetting of genuine intellectuality which has made possible two errors, apparently in opposition but in reality correlative and complementary: rationalism and sentimentalism. Once all purely intellectual knowledge had come to be denied or ignored as it has been since Descartes, the end was logically bound to be in positivism and agnosticism together with all manner of 'scientific' aberrations, and on the other hand in all those contemporary theories which, not content with what reason can bestow, seek for something else, but on the side of sentiment and instinct, that is, beneath reason and not above it, until with William James, for example, the point is reached at which the subconscious is conceived as the means by which man can communicate with the Divine. The notion of truth, after having been reduced to nothing more than a mere representation of sensible reality, is finally identified with utility by pragmatism, which amounts purely and simply to its suppression. For what is the importance of truth in a world whose aspirations are solely material and sentimental?

It is not possible to develop here all the consequences of such a state of affairs; we will simply point out some of those which relate more particularly to the religious perspective; and first of all, let it be noted that the contempt and repugnance that other peoples, especially Orientals, feel with regard to Westerners stem in large part

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from the fact that Westerners generally appear to them to be men without tradition, without religion, which in their eyes is a real monstrosity. An Oriental cannot admit a social organisation which does not rest upon traditional principles; for a Muslim, to take one example, legislation in its entirety is no more than a mere appendage of religion. It used to be so in the West also—we have only to think what Christianity was like in the Middle Ages; but today the relationships are reversed. Religion is now looked upon as nothing more than a social fact; instead of having the entire social order attached to it, religion is, on the contrary, no longer regarded as anything but just one element among those that constitute the social order, if indeed it is still allowed to hold there any place at all, and how many Catholics, alas, without the least difficulty, accept this way of viewing things. It is high time to react against this tendency, and in this respect the affirmation of the social Reign of Christ is a particularly opportune manifestation. But to make this a reality, today's mentality must be altogether reformed.

A blind eye must not be turned to the fact that even those who believe themselves to be sincerely religious have nothing, for the most part, but a greatly diminished idea of religion. It has hardly any actual influence on their behaviour or on their thought; it is as if separated from the rest of their existence. Practically, believers and unbelievers behave in almost the same way; for many Catholics, the affirmation of the supernatural has no more than a completely theoretical value, and they would be quite embarrassed to have to take note of a miracle. This is what might be called a practical or *de facto* materialism. Is it not still more dangerous than an avowed materialism, precisely because those whom it infects are not even aware of it?

On the other hand, religion for most people is only an affair of sentiment, without any intellectual import. Religion is confused with a vague religiosity, or is reduced to a morality. The function of doctrine is diminished as much as possible, despite the fact that it is the essential from which everything else ought to be but a logical consequence. In this respect Protestantism, which is on its way to becoming no more than a 'moralism' pure and simple, is very representative of the tendencies of the modern mind. But it would be a great mistake to believe that Catholicism itself is not affected by these same tendencies, not in its principle, certainly, but in the way in which it is ordinarily presented. Under the pretext of making it acceptable to the contemporary mentality, the most disturbing concessions are made, concessions that encourage what on the contrary should be energetically fought against. We will not insist on the blindness of those who, under the pretext of 'tolerance', make themselves unconscious accomplices of counterfeits of religion, the hidden intentions of which they are far from suspecting. But in this connection, let us just note in passing the deplorable abuse which is frequently made of the word 'religion': is there not a ceaseless use of such expressions as 'religion of patriotism', 'religion of science', or 'religion of duty'? This is not simply carelessness in language; rather such abuses are symptomatic of the confusion that permeates the modern world, for

in truth, language is a faithful representation of states of mind, and such expressions are incompatible with the true sense of religion.

But let us move on to what is more essential. We wish to speak of the weakness of doctrinal teaching, which is replaced almost entirely by vague moral and sentimental considerations. These developments may please some, but at the same time they can only rebuff and estrange those with any Intellectual aspirations, of whom there are still some in our time in spite of everything. The proof of this is that more people than one might think deplore this lack of doctrine. A favourable sign, in spite of appearances, is the fact that this lack is now more widely recognized than it has been for some time. It is certainly wrong to claim, as we have often heard it claimed, that nobody could understand an exposition of pure doctrine. First of all, why wish to remain on the lowest level on the pretext that it is that of the greatest number, as if it were necessary always to consider quantity rather than quality? Is not this a consequence of that democratic spirit which is one of the characteristic aspects of the modern mentality? Should it not be recognized that even those who would not understand everything would nevertheless derive a perhaps greater benefit from doctrinal exposition than might be supposed?

But the gravest obstacle is doubtless this kind of mistrust towards intellectuality that one generally finds in so many Catholic circles, even among ecclesiastics. We say gravest, because this mistrust is a mark of incomprehension that is to be found even among those on whom the task of teaching is incumbent. They have been touched by the spirit of modernity to the point of no longer knowing, any more than the philosophers named above, the nature of true intellectuality, to the point, at times, of confounding intellectuality with rationalism and thus unintentionally playing the game of the enemy. We think that what is important above all else is precisely the restoration of true intellectuality and with it the sense of doctrine and of tradition. It is high time to show that religion is something other than a matter of sentimental devotion, something other than mere moral precepts, or the consolations available to souls weakened by suffering, and that one can find in it that ‘solid nourishment’ of which St Paul speaks in the Epistle to the Hebrews.

We know well enough that this goes against certain fixed habits that are difficult to throw off; but nevertheless, it is not a question of innovation—far from it—but on the contrary of returning to the tradition that has been strayed from, of finding again what has been all too willingly lost. Would this not be better than making the most unjustified concessions to the modern mind, such as are to be found, for example, in so many apologetical works that strive to reconcile dogma with all that is most hypothetical and least well founded in current science, an effort that has to be repeated all over again whenever these so-called scientific theories are replaced by others? It would, however, be quite easy to show that religion and science are not really in conflict, for the simple reason that they do not concern the same domain. Why is there no perception of the danger of even seeming to seek corroboration, in what is most changeable and most uncertain, for doctrine that concerns immutable

and unchangeable truths? And what is one to think of those Catholic theologians who are so affected by the ‘scientistic’ mentality that they feel obliged to take into account, in more or less large measure, the results of modern exegesis and ‘textual criticism’, when it would be so easy, for anyone who had just a reasonably sure doctrinal foundation, to show their inanity? How can one not see that the so-called ‘science of religions’, such as it taught in the universities, has never been anything else in reality but an instrument of war directed against religion and, more generally, against all that may still subsist of the traditional spirit, which those who are guiding the modern world in a direction that can only end in catastrophe naturally want to destroy?

There is much more that could be said on all this, but we only wanted to indicate very summarily a few of the points about which a reform is urgently necessary; and now to conclude with a question that is of especial interest to us in this domain, why is there so much more or less avowed hostility towards symbolism? Assuredly, because it is a mode of expression that has become entirely foreign to the modern mentality, and because man is naturally prone to distrust what he does not understand. Symbolism is the means best adapted to the teaching of higher religious and metaphysical truths, that is, of all that the modern mind spurns or neglects. Symbolism is entirely contrary to rationalism, and all its adversaries behave, some without even being aware of it, as true rationalists. For our part, we think that if symbolism is not understood today, this is one more reason to insist upon It, expounding as completely as possible the real significance of traditional symbols by restoring to them all their intellectual meaning instead of making them simply a theme of sentimental exhortations—for which, moreover, the use of symbolism is quite pointless.

This reform of the modern mentality, with all that it implies, namely the restoration of true intellectuality and of traditional doctrine, which for us are inseparable from one another—this certainly is a considerable task. But is that a reason for not undertaking it? It seems to us, on the contrary, that such a task constitutes one of the biggest and most important ends that can be proposed for the activity of a society such as the Society for the Intellectual Propagation of the Sacred Heart, so much the more in that all the efforts accomplished in this direction will necessarily be orientated towards the Heart of the Incarnate Word, the spiritual Sun and Centre of the World, ‘in which are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and science’, not of that empty, profane science which is the only one known to most of our contemporaries, but of the veritable sacred science which opens, to those who study it in the proper way, unsuspected and truly unlimited horizons.



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