

**Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and
the Secret Intellectual History of
the Twentieth Century**

Mark Sedgwick

New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. 370 pages.

One effect of 9/11 has been that Muslim voices, which until then had been mostly ignored, are increasingly reaching a wider audience of other Muslims and non-Muslims. In Europe and North America, this has meant that self-identified “progressive” Muslim scholars who emphasize social justice, as well as “traditional” Muslims who emphasize Islam’s spiritual or esoteric dimension, have been contributing in a much more vocal manner to the contemporary interpretation of what it means to be Muslim. Since most of the leading figures presented herein are Sufi Muslims of a particular strand of esoteric Islam, this book helps fill an important lacuna concerning the development of the traditionalist position – a position that has been voiced by such Muslim scholars as Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Martin Lings.

Sedgwick promotes the book as a biography of René Guénon (1886-1951) and an intellectual history of the traditionalist movement that he inaugurated in the early twentieth century. Guénon’s movement combines elements of perennial philosophy, which holds that certain perennial problems recur in humanity’s philosophical concerns, and that this perennial wisdom is now only found in the traditional forms of the world religions.

More specifically, Guénon started a movement that turned to particular Sufi orders as the best expression of that perennial wisdom.

But while billing the book as a biography – in fact, Sedgwick is done with Guénon in the first half of the book – and an intellectual history (in other words, rather dry academic stuff), the book reads very much like a spy novel from the days of the cold war. Moreover, the author appears very much as a sleuth seeking out far-flung, but secret, connections and influences. The tone of the book is thus conspiratorial and, in many instances, sensationalistic. Such a tone may be partly justified by the secretive and elitist aspects of Guénon's own approach. However, the sensationalism with which Sedgwick presents much of the material, particularly on the "irregularities" in the understanding and practice of traditionalism by Frithjof Schuon, a follower of Guénon's movement and later a dissenter in some important respects, seems unbecoming for an academic work published by a respectable university press.

The "Prologue" is written in an impressionistic narrative style that highlights two puzzles that drive Sedgwick's investigation of traditionalism: How many western Muslims could follow the traditionalist movement, in particular the Maryammiyah *tariqah*, given Schuon's "irregularities"; and how Baron J. Evola extended traditionalist philosophy into European fascism. The rest of the book sets out not so much to explain these puzzles as to lead the reader in what is clearly meant to be an exciting, if somewhat dark and detective-like, historical reconstruction.

The rest of the book is divided into three parts. Part 1 (chapters 1-3), "The Development of Traditionalism," sketches the "cultic milieu" (e.g., Freemasonry, the Theosophical Society, and other western forays into eastern spirituality) of the early twentieth century that partly influenced Guénon and to which he also reacted by turning to the esoteric strands of the major world religions, especially Islam and Hinduism. Part 2 (chapters 4-6), "Traditionalism in Practice," gradually shifts from Guénon's role in traditionalism to Evola's moving it toward fascism (chapter 5) and, more importantly, to Schuon's megalomaniacal conceptions and his role in fragmenting the movement (chapter 6).

Part 3, "Traditionalism at Large," mainly follows the developments of Schuon's Maryammiyah *tariqah* (chapters 7 and 8) and details his deviations not only from Sufism, but also from perennialism and traditionalism. These deviations resulted in highly explosive, if ultimately unproven, charges by disenchanting followers. Part 4 (chapters 11-14), "Traditionalism and the Future," reads very much like a dénouement with a discussion of the declin-

ing role of Guénonian traditionalism in the West and its uptake in such countries as Morocco, Turkey, and Iran through Nasr's continuing legacy there. The concluding chapter, "Against the Stream," attempts to give theoretical rigor to what is largely a non-theoretical book and, in so doing, gives it the academic standing that it deserves.

As I indicated earlier, Sedgwick's book addresses an important lacuna, and for this it needs to be taken seriously. However, the book is ultimately marred by sensationalism, which is expressed throughout via innuendos and speculative reconstructions, more than is usual in academic accounts. However, the author appears to be scrupulous in acknowledging such reconstructions in various footnotes. If we read the "Prologue" in *microcosm*, Sedgwick raises suspicions of a far-flung and somewhat threatening secret network, only to come back to the view of traditionalism as a deeply religious/spiritual movement of intelligent and sensitive people who feel alienated from the modern world. He finally dismisses the connection to fascism as marginal to the movement and regards the irregularities of Schuon's practice as rooted in Schuon's own practice, rather than in anything inherent to traditionalism as a movement. But the damage to other traditionalists is done along the way, intentionally or otherwise, by the implied associations.

My second reservation pertains to Sedgwick's inability or unwillingness to answer some very important questions that he implicitly raises. For instance, whereas traditionalist authors decry the ability of critical, scientific scholarship to understand the fundamental truths of religion, critical scholars decry the traditionalists' preconceived notions of truth and unity. Herein lies an important distinction between the concerns of Sedgwick's subjects and the method he uses to analyze them. He is clearly aware of this, for as one of his informants says: "What matters is metaphysics, biographies are of little account" (p. 133). Sedgwick's book is itself an implicit testimonial to this distinction between universal, eternal categories and contingent historical facts. Too bad he does not address this issue more thoroughly, although given the mode of analysis, we clearly know where he stands. But one is surprised to learn, at the end, that Sedgwick does not entirely dismiss the universalist truths of traditionalism; he merely separates them out as belonging to a different order of reality than the truths of critical, scientific discourse. And in this implicit acknowledgment of the separate orders of reality and of discourse, one can perceive Sedgwick's own residual traditionalism.

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