

At the Tomb of René Guénon in Old Cairo

By Atif Kbalil



René Guénon (1886-1951)

René Guénon (d. 1951) needs no introduction for readers of this journal.¹ In my own specific case, my first encounter with him came when I read *The Crisis of the Modern World* shortly after graduating from high school at the counsel of a wise teacher. Like others who had stumbled across the writings of the perspicacious French thinker who penned his seminal works in the first half of the last century, it turned out to be a watershed moment in my own intellectual formation as a young man struggling to understand the anomalies

and contradictions of the modern world as well as the role of religion in an era increasingly antithetical to faith — or at least to its genuinely

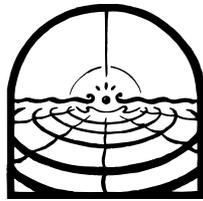
¹ For those unfamiliar with his thought, the best English introduction to his work can be found in *The Essential René Guénon: Metaphysics, Tradition and the Crisis of the Modernity* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 2009). Edited by the keen and discerning eye of John Herlihy, the anthology gathers together some of the finest samples of his writings. On his life, see S. H. Nasr's concise article in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan Press, 2005), 6:3706-3708. See also Jean Borella's more comprehensive overview, "René Guénon and the Traditionalist School," in *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, eds. Antoine Faivre and Jacob Needleman (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 330-358.

contemplative articulations. While I have long since abandoned many ideas to which I was at one point or another fervently devoted, like so many others whose understanding of the world matures with age, the defining arguments surrounding religion, symbolism, modernity, and the inner affinity of the world's wisdom traditions found in Guénon's *oeuvre* never quite lost their grip over my own thinking.² It was only natural, therefore, that on a recent trip to Cairo, my first to the "city of a 1001 minarets," with the intention of paying homage to the Ahl al-Bayt and Friends of God buried in various shrines throughout the city, that the *maqām* of Shaikh 'Abd al-Wāḥid Yaḥyā (as he was known in Egypt) would be on my itinerary of places to visit. As a friend who had already attempted to visit the shrine had informed me, the challenge would lie not so much in finding the unmarked burial ground as much as in arranging for the doors of the modest enclosure surrounding the grave to be opened so the appropriate prayers might be recited over the actual grave. Through a series of fortuitous events, beyond what seemed to lie within the ordinary range of possibilities, not only was I able to visit the site with two close friends, but also the home on Niwal St. where the metaphysician spent the last decade or so of his life with his wife Fatima and their children — all made possible through the generous invitation of Guénon's youngest son.

Upon entering his home, there was what can only be described as a powerful spiritual ambiance, as if there were an electric current of *baraka* flowing through and enveloping the room. In this particular case, however, it seemed as if the spiritual power or radiance had been

² Needless to say, Guénon's thought has been the subject of vigorous debate within and outside of the university among both admirers and detractors. For a critical appraisal (at times severe) by a fellow Traditionalist, see Frithjof Schuon, *René Guénon: Some Observations* (Hillsdale, New York: Sophia Perennis, 2004). For a more academic assessment, see Brannon Ingram's "René Guénon and the Traditionalist Polemic" in *Polemical Encounters: Esoteric Discourse and Its Others*, edited by Olav Hammer and Kocku von Stuckrad (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 201-226. While Ingram does an admirable job in identifying obscure precedents to Guénon's ideas in various currents of Western thought, he overlooks their Islamic parallels in a way that might prevent Guénon from the accusation of being yet another Orientalist, that is to say, of "orientalizing the Orient" through the filter of European imagination. Ingram's article also seems to be guided by the principle that by explaining the historical origin of an idea, its truth may be explained away. This after all was also one of the weaknesses of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, and the source of some of the tensions in his own writings, especially when it came to addressing the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, of which he claimed to speak from a position of epistemic authority.

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