

René Guénon's *The Crisis of the Modern World* Revisited

By Patrick Laude

René Guénon's *The Crisis of the Modern World*, first published in 1927, was a seminal book. It has served as a reference point for the so-called perennialist or traditionalist school, which was represented by major figures such as Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) and Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998). This volume followed in the steps of *Orient et Occident (East and West)*, first published in 1924, which it developed and refined, and it preceded *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, published on the eve of World War II, which provided a wider and deeper metaphysical and cosmological background for Guénon's critique of the modern world. Notwithstanding its being published nearly a century ago, *The Crisis of the Modern World* has resisted the rust of time, since most of its diagnoses remain relevant, and no doubt more so than ever. Notwithstanding, some secondary components of the book may appear today somewhat limitative, or even at times moot, as a result of all-too-schematic categories and, in some cases, arguably outdated prescriptions.

The Crisis of the Modern World is comprised of nine chapters, six of which - chapters 3 to 8 - build on the basic contrast between East and West, which is the focus of chapter 2 in the wake of *Orient and Occident*. As for chapter 1, it provides an eschatological background while the final section evokes some possible courses of action as a response to the modern crisis. To sum it up, the substance of Guénon's critique lies in his observation that the modern West is an "anomaly,"

and even a “monstrosity” in the history of mankind.¹ Modern civilization is the first one in human history not to be founded on metaphysical principles. It must be specified that, in Guénon’s idiom, metaphysics refers to a transcendent Reality or a transcendent Order that may vary in its formal definitions but always implies a source of ultimate meaning that informs all areas of human activities.

Concomitant aspects of this radical flaw of the modern world include 1) an emphasis on action at the exclusion, or at the detriment, of contemplation, 2) the one-sided development of a science that focuses on the material shell of universal existence while dogmatically negating the reality of anything transcending this shell, 3) an individualism that moves away from universal metaphysical principles and substitutes subjective perceptions for intellectual knowledge, 4) a “social chaos” in which natural differences and qualitative vocations are ignored, and human society is being turned upside down, 5) a material civilization that reduces everything to quantitative measures, and 6) an “invasion” of modern Western ideas and practices all over the world.

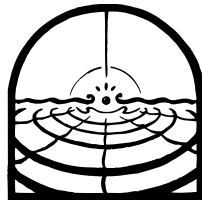
More synthetically, the content of the book can be divided into two sets of reflections: an extensive diagnosis of the modern world, which occupies most of the volume, and a few prescriptions, *in fine*, envisaging keys for the possible resolution of its crisis. The urgency of the crisis and the general thrust of Guénon’s response to it are distinctly expressed in the following: “Consequently, when it is said that the modern world is in the throes of a crisis, this is usually taken to mean that it has reached a critical phase, or that a more or less complete transformation is imminent, and that a change of direction must soon ensue whether voluntarily or no, whether suddenly or gradually, whether catastrophic or otherwise, remaining to be seen.”²

To what extent are Guénon’s diagnosis and prescriptions still relevant today, in what respect Guénon’s “prophecies” can be confirmed, developed, re-formulated or corrected? Before trying to answer these

¹ “Partial disorders cannot but exist, since they are necessary elements in the total order, but a period of disorder is in itself nevertheless comparable to a monstrosity, which, though the consequence of certain natural laws, is still a deviation and an error, or to a cataclysm, which, though resulting from the normal course of events, is nevertheless a subversion and an anomaly when viewed in itself.” *The Crisis of the Modern World*, Marco Pallis, Arthur Osborne, Richard C. Nicholson, translators, Hillsdale, New York: Sophia Perennis, 2001, p. 19.

² *Crisis*, p. 2.

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