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By Angel Millar



Although still a relatively unknown figure in both the West and in contemporary Islamic thought, the French esotericist René Guénon (1886–1951) “has exercised profound influence in certain significant circles in a number of Islamic countries,” says Seyyed Hossein Nasr, an Iranian-born scholar of Islam, “and [Guénon’s] impact is very much on the rise” (Nasr, 363). Members of these circles either read Guénon in the original

French or in translation, or have learned about his ideas through the writings of other major Traditionalist authors as well as a number of “Muslim-born” thinkers.

“Tradition,” capitalized, is a technical term associated with Guénon. It does not indicate a conservative reverence for the customs of a particular society. Rather, “Tradition” refers to the authentic revelations of Deity and a way of life that was in accord with Divinity, cosmic laws, and so on, that preceded contemporary religions.

According to the Traditionalist doctrine, knowledge (gnosis) of Divinity is acquired through stages of esoteric learning, which is, necessarily, structured hierarchically, as is the case in initiatic organizations such as Sufism, Freemasonry, and Hindu Tantra. For Guénon, as for Islamic esotericists, it was the *haqiqa* (the inner spiritual truth) that counted. The Qur’an had to be understood not



and his relation to Theosophy, see Richard Smoley, “Against Blavatsky: René Guénon’s Critique of Theosophy,” *Quest*, winter 2010.)

Although less influential in the Arabic-speaking world than in Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, Bosnia, or Southeast Asia, Guénon’s *Crisis of the Modern World* – critical of Western modernity – as well as a number of his essays on esotericism and Sufism, have been translated into Arabic since the turn of the century. Nasr himself introduced Guénon’s work to Iran when he returned from studying in the U.S. in 1958. During the 1960s, Nasr commissioned the translation into Farsi of Guénon’s *La crise du monde moderne* (“The Crisis of the Modern World”) and *Le règne de la quantité* (“The Reign of Quantity”), and from the middle of the decade, he says, the ideas of Traditionalist authors “became part of the general intellectual discourse” in Iran.

If the Islamic Revolution of 1979 disrupted the growing interest in Traditionalism, it was only a temporary blip. In 1998 and 1999 Mufid University in Qom devoted two issues of its journal to the subject. These included translations of some of Guénon’s articles as well as others about Guénon himself. Also significant, a “major conference” on “Traditionalism and modernism” was held in Tehran in 2002. Guénon’s books *Le symbolisme de la croix* (“The Symbolism of the Cross”), *Aperçus sur l’ésotérisme islamique et le taoïsme* (“Insights into Islamic Esotericism and Taoism”), and *Orient et Occident* (“East and West”) have been translated into Farsi, and a Persian-language book on Guénon’s life and work has also been published.

### **Defender of Faith**

But Guénon has also had a significant if largely unacknowledged impact on some Western thinkers vis-à-vis Islam. Perhaps one of the most unlikely contemporary defenders of Islam, from a perspective that is at least informed by Traditionalism, is Charles, Prince of Wales. Though heir to the British throne, he is perhaps

best known to Americans and many others outside of Great Britain

I accept



Church of England. Consequently, the prince's admiration and sympathy for Islam has sparked controversy, partly because he may one day be made king of what many still regard as a Christian country, partly because Islam – and more especially Islamism – is not infrequently regarded as a threat to Britain's secular, liberal institutions, such as women's equality with men.

Unlike Guénon, who had to move to Egypt to live under shari'a, the prince lives in a time in which shari'a family tribunals are operating in Britain, with their rulings on civil matters, such as inheritance, legally binding. In 2008, when the existence of these tribunals – some of which are run from the back rooms of shops or other commercial premises – was reported, it provoked alarm and debate in the country, which has since been witness to campaigns by Saudi-style “morality police” patrols proclaiming areas of London and other cities “shari'a-controlled zones.”

With this background, the prince's views on Islam are more controversial than they might be otherwise, though he seems to be fully aware that, on a range of issues, his opinions are outside of the mainstream. In 2010, the prince published *Harmony: A New Way of Looking at Our World*, with the opening words “This is a call to revolution” – not exactly what one would anticipate from a member of the British royal family. *Harmony's* premise is that the environmental crisis, financial crisis, and other crises of the modern world are the result of “a crisis of perception.” Man no longer knows how to live in harmony with the planet because he no longer has any knowledge of the sacred principles that it embodies, and that, for at least thousands of years, traditional cultures have revered and represented in their material culture, such as the architecture of temples, cathedrals, mosques, and so on.

Max Hastings, a writer for the British newspaper *The Daily Mail*, was alarmed by 7 message and proclaimed, “Anyone who reads the Prince of Wales' new book will have little doubt that the chief peril to our royal institution in the decades ahead lies within his well-meaning, muddled, woolly head.” For Hastings, modern monarchs had to be “distant symbols of glamour, beauty and decency.” The public should not know their opinions, especially if they happened



combination of nostalgic longing for the past and slavishness to political multicultural ideology, which holds all cultures and religions to be inherently equal and, in some sense, the same. A more thorough reading of Charles's statements and interests show that, even if he does not formally call himself a Traditionalist, his thinking approximates Guénon's Traditionalism, of whose doctrines and thinkers the prince is well aware.

But it is his sympathy for Islam that has worried especially center-right journalists in Great Britain and, in a few cases, abroad. Daniel Pipes, an author and journalist broadly in the American neoconservative camp, has aired the suspicion that Charles might even be a secret convert to Islam. Similarly, one of the biggest firestorms to erupt around the prince occurred in 2008, when Charles announced that he planned to be known as the "Defender of Faith" rather than by the official title of "Defender of the Faith" (i.e., of the Church of England) when he ascends to the throne.

It is probably true that this change was intended, in part, to reflect the fact that Britain was no longer primarily a churchgoing nation, but one in which Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, etc., are active, alongside the various, dwindling denominations of Christianity, propped up by large-scale immigration. If this were the whole story, the declaration would be – and was seen to be – impeccably multicultural. Misconstrued, for many, Charles's statement has come to signify that he is out of touch with the problems of contemporary Britain. The prince would probably contend that he is looking deeper.

In a nation fracturing along lines of various competing "identities" – religious identities in particular – and increasingly ill at ease with political multiculturalism, it was easy to lambaste the prince's comment as just the latest pandering to the politically correct – and some, of course, seized the moment. Damian Thompson of *The Telegraph*, a conservative British newspaper, complained that the heir to the throne's statement had "a whiff of vanity about it."

It was, he suggested, as if the prince were saying: "Britain is a multicultural society, so aren't you lucky that I contain multitudes?"



when unscrupulous, bizarre or extreme religions demand Royal protection – as they will?”

Thompson’s main concern with the prince becoming the “Defender of Faith” was, perhaps not surprisingly, the erosion of the country’s Christian identity, which had informed its unwritten constitution and even its secular traditions. In the popular, center-right media, Christianity seemed to be under sustained assault. The concern was a valid one, although Thompson’s assertion that the proposed change was “the Royal equivalent of replacing the word ‘Christmas’ with ‘Winterval’” was grossly in error. Such secularizing of Britain, and the West more broadly, profoundly disturbs the heir to the throne. Thompson had misinterpreted a small but crucial detail. The prince had expressed his desire to defend “faith,” not “faiths,” to be a champion, in other words, not for various competing religious and cultural groups, but for a sense of the sacred in contemporary life.

Still, not everyone believes that monarchs should be seen but not heard. Writing in *The American Spectator*, Rod Dreher defended the prince against his critics, despite being fully aware of the intellectual influences on the heir to the British throne. “It’s impossible to read his words on Islam,” commented Dreher, “without recalling the thought of René Guénon . . . the French traditionalist who converted to Sufi Islam.” Picking up on Charles’s statement in *Harmony* that “we are not the masters of creation,” Dreher concluded his article and assessment of the prince with apparent approval: “In modern Western civilization, it is hard to imagine a more profoundly conservative statement,” he said, “or a more revolutionary one.”

### **A Guénonian Prince**

Defending faith, from the Traditionalist perspective (and, it would seem, from Prince Charles’s perspective), could have nothing to do with the exterior, that is, with pandering to particular politicized groups. Rather, it is to defend the spirit against a modernity that has squeezed out the Divine, and turned man away from eternal and immutable truths and into a mere consumer. It is, in simple



constancy; a need for those who can rise above the clamor, the din and the sheer pace of our lives to help us to rediscover those truths that are immutable and eternal; a need for those who can speak of that eternal wisdom which is called the perennial philosophy.”

“The perennial philosophy,” we should note, is sometimes used as another name for Traditionalism, but in case we are in any doubt, Prince Charles continues, observing that the conference that he is introducing is dedicated “to a critique of the false premises of Modernity – a critique set out in one of the seminal texts of the traditionalists, René Guénon’s *The Reign of Quantity*.” Referring to the Traditionalists, the prince contended that “their’s [sic] is not a nostalgia for the past, but a yearning for the sacred and, if they defend the past, it is because in the pre-modern world all civilizations were marked by the presence of the sacred.”

We should recall the prince’s phrase “Defender of Faith.”

For Prince Charles, Traditionalism represents the prospect of “integration” in an era of “*dis*-integration, *dis*-connection and *de*-construction,” and one that is, consequently, hurtling toward a “Dark Age” of environmental disaster.

In his introduction to the Sacred Web Conference, Charles reminded his audience that “the traditionalist perspective is that we are living at the end of an historical cycle,” i.e., the Kali Yuga or Dark Age. According to this doctrine, as Charles observed, at the beginning of the cycle of time all potential manifestations were latent. Emanating throughout the ages, these manifestation descended from higher, spiritual forms to lower and more materialistic ones. However, because of the ever-increasing distance of existence, society, etc., from eternal, spiritual laws, at a certain point collapse becomes inevitable. Yet, Charles went on, it is “through our understanding of and attachment to traditional norms of metaphysical doctrine and spiritual practice that we can, in a measure, transcend the baleful influence of the descent that is the eventual exhaustion and end of our cycle of history and prepare



the West has become increasingly characterized “by a mechanistic approach to science.” Although science is valuable, he says, it cannot “articulate matters of the soul.” Guénon is nowhere mentioned in *Harmony*, but the spirit of Traditionalism and esotericism more broadly is apparent: ancient traditions, Christianity, Islam, sacred geometry, ancient Egypt, and Hermeticism are all used to illustrate the prince’s worldview.

Like Guénon before him, the prince conceives that Islam is able to act as a bulwark against a type of modernity that strips man of his relationship to the Divine. We in the West must rediscover our relationship to the sacred, both have asserted. It is a task that will require us to understand not with the head but with the “heart” – a word that Charles sometimes uses when speaking of the Islamic faith. Quoting an Arab proverb, “What comes from the lips reaches the ears. What comes from the heart reaches the heart,” the prince has reminded audiences (at the Open University in Cambridge in 2007, and in Oxford in 1993) both of his own sincerity and, if one reads between the lines, the necessity for what the Sufis refer to as *tawajjuh*, or spiritual concentration.

The history of Islam and the West has long been intertwined and overlapping, and Muslims and Christians share essential beliefs – “one divine God,” an afterlife, accountability for one’s actions after the death of the body, etc. – as Charles asserted in an article published in *The Telegraph* a month after the 9/11 attacks in 2001. Both sides had to be aware of the dangers of misunderstanding each other, and of seeing history only from their own perspective. More daringly, considering the timing, the prince renewed his call for Westerners to “understand the Islamic world better,” including “the extent to which many Muslims genuinely fear our own Western materialism and mass culture” as a threat to their traditional culture and societies.

Although, in 1993, the prince spoke at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, attempting to dispel Western stereotypes about Muslim countries – telling the audience, for example, that women in Turkey, Egypt, and Syria are given equal pay, and received the vote as early as women in much of Europe – his interest in Islam is not





our hearts to each other,” he declared in 1993. The Arabic term *tadabbur* refers to contemplation of the Divine, especially through meditating upon chapters of the Qur’an (*tadabbur al-Qur’an*), on what they tell the Muslim, and how their lessons are to be implemented in daily life. *Tadabbur* is often defined as the “remembrance of God” and “remembrance of the thoughts of God.”

The prince’s is a gnostic, esoteric understanding of Islam. It is not primarily the faith of the shari’a or *fiqh* (jurisprudence)— nor of what is permitted (*halal*) and forbidden (*haram*) – or of international politics and group identity, but of the inner reality connecting man and God. It is the faith of the Islamic mystics, Rumi and Ibn Ashir, whom the prince has cited in his speeches, albeit in passing. Like the Traditionalists, Britain’s heir to the throne believes that the West has focused on the external at the expense of the inner, creating a confused and “exploitative” materialist culture. The “oneness and trusteeship of the vital sacramental and spiritual character of the world about us,” the prince has said, “is surely something important we can re-learn from Islam.”

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others. This article is adapted from his book *The Crescent and the Compass: Islam, Freemasonry, Esotericism, and Revolution in the Modern Age* (Numen Books, 2015). Reprinted with permission.



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