

## Julius Evola, *The Concept of Initiation*

### **Introduction**

In the final issue of *Krur*, the review of the esoteric sciences edited by Julius Evola over the course of 1929, he explained the reasons for the termination of this editorial experience, or rather for its transformation into a new one, namely *La Torre*, as follows: "*Krur*, in 1930, will be published in another form: (...) as a bi-monthly review of struggle, critique, affirmation and negation. The heroic-magical point of view, which we have championed until now, will not be abandoned: actually, it will constitute the sole point of reference and justification for a work of critique and revision which will be applied to immediate problems, in relation to whatever of significance is published in Italy or elsewhere. It is in our intention to build a stronghold invulnerable to the general decline in all values of life; it is our ambition to know and to indicate vaster horizons than the usual petty human constructions; it is our aim to remain standing firmly upon the ground, ready for defence as well as for attack, cut off and inaccessible to any evasion - and because of all this, the title *Krur* will be changed to *La Torre* - Foglio di espressioni varie e di tradizione una".

In the first issue of *La Torre*, Evola, setting the tone, stated: "Our review does not appear for the purpose of slapping the face of our honourable Mussolini, which neither Fascism nor our honourable Mussolini would care about. Our review appears, on the contrary, to champion principles which, for us, would be absolutely unchanged, whether in the Fascist regime, or in a communist, anarchist or republican regime (...) To the extent that Fascism follows and champions such principles, we can be considered as fascists. And this is all". As Marco Rossi put it, "the ideals offered by the review could be justly regarded as constituting a sort of traditionalist, imperialist and 'super-Fascist' ideology, for the ideas of hierarchy, of spirituality, and of order were explicitly and coherently valued; but the absolute freedom and the radical intransigent fidelity to the nature of things, without any cover, diplomacy or ambiguity, made it a unique case in the Italian editorial panorama of the 1930's". So unique that the review ceased to be published after only ten issues, although we need not see in this a result of governmental censorship, since, contrary to what is assumed today by most people on the basis of the propaganda of the Jewish-owned 'free press' of the 'democracies', the press under Fascism ended up enjoying, as Marco Rossi put it, rather vast spaces of liberty.

The controversial nature of *La Torre* reached its highest point in a column entitled, in accordance with the Kshatriya-nature of Julius Evola, 'L'Arco e la Clava': "The bow to strike from a distance, the bludgeon, to destroy at close range", as recalled by the Italian author himself in 'The Road of Cinnabar' in 1963. Five years later, he again used this title for an anthology of his writings, which he described as 'L'arco e la clava' ('The Bow and the Bludgeon'), "[ a collection of writings], some already published separately on various occasions, or constituting the texts of [my speeches at] conferences, others new". The bludgeon consists of the essays in which Evola deals with various aspects of the customs and society of today, from an anti-conformist point of view and in relation to a higher vision of man and life: homosexuality,

negrified America, pornography, the taste for vulgarity in everyday life, advertising, jazz, neo-spiritualism, and so on. With the bow, higher and more distant objectives are reached, such as the problems, many already attacked at the time of Ur and Krur, of the relations between West and East, the essence of myths and symbols, the significance of Romanity, the Olympian ideal, the centres of Initiation, the true significance of Tradition, the path of action and the path of contemplation, and, as we present here, the Concept of Initiation.

## The Concept of Initiation

It is not easy, today, to give an exact idea of what is meant by Initiation and to define the figure of the 'Initiate'. The main difficulty lies in the necessity of referring to a vision of the world and man, and to structures, which belong essentially to traditional civilisations, distant from the present one, not only from the modern mentality and culture, but also, to a large extent, from the religion which has come to predominate in the West.

In addition, there is the disgraceful circumstance that, if, today, one still hears of Initiation, outside of the empty ritualistic remains of modern Freemasonry and such amateurish literary exercises as, for example, the well-known book '*The Great Initiates*', by E. Schuré (1), it is on the sidelines of the various theosophical, anthroposophical, or generally occult sects. The discredit which has rightly become attached to these frivolous 'neo-spiritualistic' forms, which are sometimes outright hoaxes, could not but create a prejudice which impedes the understanding of what Initiation really is.

This state of affairs has provided those who claim to represent 'modern critical thought' and contemporary 'culture' with a pretext to assimilate the world of Initiation to that of the 'magicians', 'clairvoyants', and so on, of the lower classes, and to disregard the fact that, historically, Initiation was an integral and frequently essential part of the great traditions and civilisations of the past to which, in other regards, respect and gratitude are paid.

Nevertheless there is a group of modern disciplines - among them, the history of religions, ethnology, and the scientific study of the Orient and of Antiquity - in which certain momentous confusions are almost inevitable if the concept of Initiation is not defined in a precise manner. It can be noted that, in the face of the rich material which is now available, scholars who are highly thought of, such as Frazer and Van der Leew, do not know how to orientate themselves adequately; thus they may be seen making the Initiate, the medicine man, the mystic, the Yogi and even the wizard, into one and the same thing, whereas, between these general types, very precise distinctions must be made. Let us not even speak of what has happened with the psychoanalytical manipulations of this material; what we have already indicated about the views of C. G. Jung, who is one of the main persons responsible for such manipulations, will suffice.

On the positive side, today, almost the only thing we can mention is the contribution made by the Traditionalist current claiming to follow René Guénon; in this field, he is the most serious researcher and he bases himself on much accurate and authentic knowledge. Certainly, his horizons have some limits; however, he has proceeded with a certain rigour and he has maintained a well-calculated distance from the 'neo-spiritualist' by-products indicated above, as well as from the so-called 'scientific' researches of specialists of an external and profane nature.\

Having described the broad situation in these terms, in what follows we propose to clarify synthetically what should be understood by the term 'Initiation', and according to what spiritual frame of reference it should be

regarded. We should warn our readers that our purpose is to define the concept of Initiation in itself and for itself, so to speak in a pure state, as a 'spiritual category'. Readers who are familiar with other works of ours are likely to know already what they will find here summarised; readers who are not so familiar will experience a broadening of horizons because the vision of the higher ideals which humanity has managed to conceive would be rendered incomplete if the initiatory ideal were excluded or ignored. To the first group of readers, the extent to which we follow the views of the aforementioned Traditionalist current, and that to which we have found it necessary to grow away from them, will be self-evident.

I. Etymologically, 'to initiate' means to provide a new commencement. In this respect, one could also speak of a 'rebirth'; but then it would be necessary to give this term a strictly ontological signification. As a matter of fact, the fundamental premise of Initiation is that the human condition, with the limits which define the common individuality, can be surpassed. It is a change of state, a passage from a way of being to another way of being, in the most objective sense. This is why in some testimonies Initiation is described almost as a physical fact, to underline its real, ontological character. The opposition between 'Superman' and 'Initiate' can be helpful to explain the concept of Initiation. The term 'Superman' refers to the extreme and problematic strengthening of the species 'Man'. However, in principle, the Initiate no longer belongs to this species at all. If one has in mind High Initiation, it can be said that the 'Superman' belongs to a Promethean plane (Man remains as he is but seeks, illegitimately, to gain a superior dignity and power), while the Initiate in the proper sense belongs to an Olympian plane (he has acquired an innate, distinct, and justified dignity).

The theory according to which the being possesses multiple states, of which the human is only one, is therefore the premise of the concept of Initiation. These states must however be considered as not only superior, but also inferior to the one characteristic of the common and normal human personality. Thus we can conceive of a double possibility of opening of this personality, upwards and downwards; consequently, an 'ascending' overcoming (true to the strict etymological sense of the word 'to transcend', i.e., 'to go beyond by rising') must be well distinguished from a 'descending' overcoming (2).

This is why we have just spoken specifically of 'High Initiation', and the distinction indicated then also refers to what we have said elsewhere about primitive peoples constituting a special domain. The tribal initiations of the primitives and their so-called 'age cohort' initiations in general operate in the descending direction. The individual opens himself to the mystical-vital force of his stock, is integrated in it, and makes it his own. Or the integration may concern the deep powers which work formatively in the organism in the various periods of existence. What may result from this for the individual, the new faculties which he can thus acquire, contain however almost always something collective and sub-personal. The results of this show themselves to us in typical forms, for example, in totemism and in some varieties of

primitive religions of the dead. To this subject we shall not return in this essay.

We should however distinguish here something which also appears in the area of the higher civilisations. It pertains to the division of Initiation into the Lesser Mysteries, which can be called generically Demetrian-Chthonic, and the Greater Mysteries, which can be called Ouranic or Olympian. Sometimes the Lesser Mysteries have been presented as a preliminary phase and the Greater Mysteries as a culmination. However, at other times, the Lesser and Greater Mysteries, along with many other forms of Initiation which are named differently but which can be referred respectively to the former and the latter, have not shown this character of phases but have been distinct and even opposed to each other. As a matter of fact, the terms can refer to different orientations, vocations and meanings. To simplify, it can be said that the essence of the Lesser Mysteries has a 'cosmic' and, in a certain sense, pantheistic character. Their limit is the hyle, in the broadest and most original sense of the word, i.e. nature, Mater Natura, Mater Magna, the manifested world. The Greater Mysteries are, contrarily, under the sign of Transcendence, of what is not 'life', even in the cosmic sense, but supra-life or Being. One could therefore speak, in the former case, of a rebirth into Life, and, in the latter, of a rebirth into Being, as ends of the corresponding Initiations. Yet, the concept of Initiation gains the fullness of its higher significance essentially with respect to the second direction.

The initiations which aimed at establishing or renewing a contact with special powers of nature should be considered on their own, as a variety of the Lesser Mysteries. In the traditional world, various initiations corresponding to specific crafts are of this type.

**II.** Next, we should distinguish the world of religion from that of Initiation. Here a certain schematisation cannot be avoided. Basically, there are religions in which an Initiation is present, and from the point of view of the history of religion it is a fact that some religions have developed from a domain which originally had an initiatory character, through a process of popularisation, of flattening, and of externalisation of the original teachings and practices. Buddhism is characteristic of this: there is a real gulf between what can be called the pure 'doctrine of awakening' and the related practices at the origin of Buddhism, and the religion which spread subsequently. It can be stated, however, that, in a complete Traditional system, Religion and Initiation are two hierarchically ordered degrees, whose relation in the doctrinal field is expressed by the following binaries: exoterism and esotericism; mere faith and gnosis; devotion and spiritual accomplishment; plane of the dogmas and myths and plane of metaphysics. The present history of religions hardly brings out, or does not bring out at all, this essential articulation, and the way of conceiving religion which has come to predominate in the West, to the suggestive power of which many independent scholars are subject without realising it, shows that 'religion' can in fact become a category in itself, quite precisely determined and defined in opposition to everything which is initiatory and metaphysical. This

conception derives to a large extent from the beliefs of the Semitic peoples, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, characterised, in their positive forms, by theism, creationism and the concept of man as generated per iatum (i.e., generated by the deity as a detached being). Islam indeed possesses an esoteric and initiatory tradition in the contexts of Shi'ism and Sufism; Judaism has a related tradition, in the Kabbala; but these currents are in a certain manner separated from orthodoxy.

In Catholicism, their equivalent is completely lacking, since, instead of esotericism and initiatory experience, there is on the one hand mere mysticism, and on the other, as we shall note below, the curious phenomenon of structures which, in form, are of the initiatory type, but which are applied in a non-initiatic manner.

We can explain in sum the specific character of the religious perspective per se as opposed to the initiatory one by saying that the former is centred on the conception of the deity as person (= theism), and is defined by an essential, ontological, distance, between this God-person, whose place is principal, and man, whose place is subordinate, which results in a transcendence which admits only relations of dependence, of devotion, or, at the extreme, transport and mystical ecstasy, while the limit corresponding to the relation "human 'I' - divine 'Thou'" remains firm.

Initiation, by contrast, has as its premise the removal of this limit, and in its place posits the principle of the 'Supreme Identity', whose counterpart is a supra-personal conception of the First Principle. Beyond God-as-person, there is the Unconditioned, a superior reality to both Being and non-Being, and to any specifically religious representation (some have spoken of a "Supergod"). As is well-known, in Hindu metaphysics, and in the original forms of Buddhism, for instance, the personal god, the gods and the celestial kingdoms were recognised, but an inferior degree of reality was accorded to them and they were considered as belonging themselves to the realm of the conditioned. The Absolute is beyond them. In Neoplatonism, whose connections to the world of the Hellenistic Mysteries are established, we find analogous conceptions. This shows how arbitrary it is to speak indiscriminately of 'religion' wherever there are relations between man and a supra-human world.

**III.** From the practical point of view, the metaphysical principle of identity leads to the replacement of relations of a moral and devotional character with relations of knowledge. This finds its main expression in the idea that what defines the human state with all its conditionalities is not an ontological distance, but only 'ignorance' or 'oblivion'. This truth has sometimes been sensed also by high mysticism (Meister Eckhart: man is God, but 'does not know' he is such - which corresponds precisely to the Hindu theory of avidya, or 'ignorance'). The concept of salvation or redemption is thus replaced by that of awakening and metaphysical awareness of the dimension of transcendence as such. It is in these terms that the specific attainment of the Initiate should be defined. Its essential character is that of a 'centrality'. Thus, some have opposed to the concept of ecstasy that of en-

stasy, indicative of the opposite direction, not of a 'going out', but of a reconvergence towards the centre - besides, mysticism itself has known the saying: "You have not found Me because you have sought Me outside of yourself, while I (the deity) was within you". Another formula is that of the centre which unites with the Centre, of the one which unites with the One.

The essential distinction which has just been indicated between the religious and the initiatory perspectives would seem nevertheless compromised by the fact that, even in the religions of salvation, the aim seems to be the overcoming of mortal and fleeting nature. But, again, it is necessary to acknowledge that these terms have a different meaning there, and also that historically various forces have interacted and given rise to a promiscuity which does not let us distinguish the component parts with any clarity. This point can be explained by considering the special problem of existence in the afterlife.

What is peculiar to the Traditional 'Inner (i.e. esoteric) Teachings' is the distinction between immortality and survival in a generic sense. The difference between the Initiatory orientation and the conception of the religious type has been expressed adequately by a scholar of the Far Eastern tradition (Granet), who pointed out that in the religious perspective, the concept of a soul immortal in itself is never questioned, and the alternative is only the passage of this immortal soul after death to positive or negative states ('paradises' or 'hells'), a moral criterion being decisive in this; however, for the 'Inner Teachings', immortality is something problematic and uncertain, and the alternative is rather between survival and non-survival - in fact, not so much at the moment of physical death as at the moment referred to as the 'second death'. Immortality in the proper sense is an exceptional possibility and coincides with the 'deconditionalisation' of the Being. 'Great Liberation', the passage beyond any transitory state, be it even supra-terrestrial, is the aim of the Great Initiation. As is well-known, the concept of 'second death' is recurrent, especially in the ancient Egyptian texts related to the world beyond the grave, and it is notable that the related remarks which are found in the Old Testament are an echo of such initiatory teaching.

Another example, though somewhat mythologised, is provided by Greek tradition, in the opposition between the privileged and Olympian immortality of the Initiates and 'Heroes' identified with demi-gods, for the few, and the destiny of Hades for 'the great number'. But perhaps it was in Taoism, not speculative but practical, that this doctrine - the problematic nature of immortality and the Initiatory condition for it - found their more precise formulation. The teachings expressed in the so-called Tibetan Book of the Dead (Bardo Thodol), finally, amplify these fundamental ideas in an objective manner, propounding the phenomenology of the possible experiences of the world beyond the grave and always opposing the accomplishment of the Unconditioned to the passage to one or another of the possible human or non-human forms of existence, to none of which the attribute of immortality, of the non-transient, of stability, or of transcendent centrality can be referred in any way. And, here again, the alternative is

determined by 'knowledge' in the aforementioned metaphysical sense, and by actions of the spirit only possible to the possessor of such knowledge.

The common theme of these various examples is in obvious opposition to exoteric religious ideas about a naturally immortal soul and its destinies in the after-life, ideas which are often linked to the democratisation and degradation of a previous initiatory teaching. Thus, in Egypt and also in Greece; Rohde rightly noted in relation to Greece how, following the decline of the original conception of the 'hero', they ended up considering as a 'hero' everyone, including those who had no other merit than that of being dead.

It is worth pointing out that, in the ancient tradition of the Mysteries (which the current history of religions often confuses with the religions of salvation, the so-called Erlösungsreligionen), the essential ontological aspect by which the Initiatory conception is opposed to the religious one is highlighted. From Diogenes Laertius we know of the scandal provoked in certain already 'illuminist' Greek circles by the Mystery doctrine according to which even a delinquent Initiate would have a privileged destiny after death, to which even men of such high moral intelligence as Agesilas or Epaminondas, as uninitiates, would not have access. In this connection, one can speak of a 'transcendental realism', which is confirmed also in the conception of the objective effectiveness of the Initiatory rite: it is admitted that its power is, on the spiritual plane, as objective and impersonal, and as detached from morality, as, on the material plane, actions of a technical nature are. Like such actions, the rite only requires that certain objective conditions are satisfied; then the effect will follow of its own accord by necessity, whoever the subject (3). We may add that even in the first centuries of Christianity this opposition was still to a certain extent sensed, when the distinction was drawn between deification and sanctification. Deification is an ontological concept, it is defined in terms of change of essence, like the Initiatory transformation of Being. Sanctification has instead a moral and subjective character, which pertains essentially to the attitudes of the individual and to a certain conduct of life. In the development of Christian mysticism, after the beginnings (in which, especially in the Greek Church Fathers, there were remains of esoteric and Mystery traditions), the concept of sanctification got the upper hand almost exclusively (Augustinism, Spanish mysticism).

The conception to which we have just referred, nevertheless, seems to be contradicted by the fact that, even in what is known to us of Initiatory traditions, in Yoga and similar disciplines, strict precepts of a moral character can often be found. However, it is precisely in this respect that an essential difference between the world of religion and the world of Initiation, and between the religious attitude and the Initiatory attitude, stands out, because precepts which can be identical in both cases nevertheless acquire a different meaning in each. In the first case, they are given an intrinsic imperative power, either because they are considered as parts of a revealed divine law, or because an absolute validity, analogous to the categorical moral law of Kant, is claimed for them. In the second case, they have instead the significance of

means ordered to an end; they are considered only as conditions to the extent that to follow them creates in the individual certain favourable dispositions for Initiatory transformation. The classical expression of this instrumental conception of moral precepts is given by the well-known Buddhist simile of the raft: it is said that the sila, that is, the totality of the moral precepts, is to be compared to a raft built and used to cross a current; once the raft has carried out its task, it is absurd to carry the raft further (it could be added: it would be equally absurd to build it, if one did not propose to cross any water-course).

This is how the relationship between Initiation and morality can be defined. In general and in every tradition, from the Initiatory point of view, it is necessary to distinguish a part which has an exclusively social and mundane value, acting as a factor to hold in check the human animal, and a part which is really turned upwards, towards transcendence. The relativity of moral precepts becomes clear in both of these areas. In the first case, moral precepts undergo, in the various traditions, ethnic and historical conditionalities which make it impossible to find anything really constant and invariable, and therefore intrinsically valid, in the numerous varieties of rule prescribed according to times and places. In the second case, when, that is, a purely instrumental value is attributed to moral precepts, the sole criterion is the extent to which the means - of whatever nature - allow the goal to be reached, so that, not only are very different Initiatory paths indicated, with a view to the predominant dispositions of this or that individual, but also the chosen means may be in complete contrast to the moral precepts which a tradition in its exoteric aspects prescribes for the life of the majority in the world. The most typical cases are the so-called 'Left-Hand Path' of the Tantric *vâmâcâra* (which has some points of contact with Dionysianism - for example, when it comes to the use of sex and the emphasis put on the orgiastic and destructive element), and the 'heroic path' (*vîra-mârğa*), which, under the sign of pure transcendence, have as principle a true anomia, and a scorn for the common moral and religious rules, although the ultimate end is not different from that of the 'Right-Hand Path', which instead uses such rules as a support ("the rules which do not chain but sustain those who do not know how to go by themselves"). In general, the recurrence of 'antinomianism' (this word designates the rejection of the rules of the current religion), which almost always indicates connections with the world of Initiation or of esotericism, is well-known in the history of religions.

**IV.** What has been said so far will help to make it clear also that, between mysticism and Initiation, a boundary must be marked out. This point is generally neglected and confusion between the two domains is common, therefore it will be a good idea to add a few short considerations. To be accurate, in terms of mere etymology, mysticism refers to the Initiatory world because the 'mystes' (hence 'mysticism') was the follower of the ancient Mysteries. But, once again, we find ourselves in front of a typical case of the corruption of language. In its now current signification, the word 'mysticism' can legitimately be used only to designate a phenomenon with a specific physiognomy of its own, namely the extreme limit of the world of religion

alone. First of all, this is a matter of fundamental orientation. To use terms already mentioned, mysticism is under the sign of ecstasy, Initiation under the sign of en-stasy; extroverted motion in the first case, introverted motion in the second. In accordance with the structure of the religious spirit, the position of the mystic with respect to transcendence is essentially 'eccentric' (=decentred). Hence, the prevailing characteristic of mysticism is passivity, and of the Initiatory state, activity. A very common mystical symbol, especially in the West, is that of the spiritual wedding, in which the human soul plays the feminine role of the bride, which would be absurd on the initiatory plane. However, the passivity of the mystic is inherent in the prevalence of the emotional element, emotional and sub-intellectual, and it is reflected in the prevailing character of mystical experience, which chokes and overwhelms the conscious principle of the I, rather than being controlled and dominated by it. Thus the mystic, almost always, has no precise idea of the road covered, and is unable to grasp or indicate the real and objective content of his experiences. The subjective moment and elements of a purely human nature prevail, the soul having ascendancy over the spirit (this is what renders the reading of the texts, the monotonous emotional effusions, of the majority of Christian mystics, almost unbearable - one can skim through, for example, the anthology called 'The Mystics' published by E. Zolla). Thus one can legitimately speak symbolically of the mystical path as an essentially damp one, as opposed to the dry Initiatory one. It is undeniable that some mystics have occasionally reached metaphysical heights, but without attaining true transparency, so to speak, through flashes and raptures, through the momentary lifting up of a curtain which immediately after fell down.

Besides, the mystic as such is a lonely vagrant. He ventures into the domain of the supra-sensible without having true principles to orientate himself and without having at his disposal a true protection. Once he has left the ground of positive and dogmatic tradition, he is on his own. There are no chains of mystics, that is to say, of teachers who transmit the mystical tradition in an unbroken manner, with a related, adequate doctrine and practice. As a matter of fact, mysticism appears as a mainly sporadic and irregular phenomenon.

It develops above all in those traditions which have an incomplete character, that is to say, in which mere religion and exoterism do not find their integration and completion in Initiation and esotericism. Essentially, and in opposition to the character of the merely mystical experience, it is necessary to point out the conscious, noetic, and intellectual character attributed to the true Initiatory experience.

V. At this point, the essential pattern of what, according to some circles, 'regular' Initiation would be, may be mentioned. A discrepancy between the aforementioned theoretical premise (namely, that Initiatory teaching, denying the concept of 'creature', also denies the idea of a hiatus or ontological distance between the Being and the principle of the I) and the practical attitude seems to arise, given the assertion that Initiatory experience,

insofar as it consists of an overcoming of the human condition and a passage to superior states, cannot be realised optimally with the resources of the isolated individual alone. Here, however, one usually puts forward a consideration which is more historical and practical than one of principle, that is to say, the existential situation in which the great majority of individuals are placed, owing to the involutory process which, according to all Traditional doctrines, has occurred in the course of history. Thus, according to the indicated pattern, Initiation would require the transmission to the Initiand of a special force by the representative of an organisation which is the holder of it and which is also the trustee of esoteric and Initiatory teachings. In this context, the concept of 'Tradition' is specified in objective and technical terms as an unbroken 'chain' which refers to an original centre. Where the present situation makes it possible, it is maintained that this is the 'regular' form of Initiation, a form which, on its own plane, shows some analogies with that of baptism and even more with that of priestly Catholic ordination. But a different general premise concerning the ontological connections between the human and the supra-human is considered here, in the sense that, in the case of Initiation, it is, in the last analysis, a matter of a passage from *potentia* to *actu* (determined by the Initiatory operation) of a deep dimension of the very Being of the Initiand. This idea was also entailed in that of 'virtual Initiation', which, moreover, remains inefficient and ineffective (as in the case of the quality which is supposed to be infused by mere Catholic baptism), if a proper action does not intervene and is not added. However, if only in exceptional cases, it is not excluded that, in principle, this action alone may cause the disruption of level, the Initiatory opening, of consciousness, without the indicated 'regular' and, to a certain extent, external ritual, joining the Initiand to an organisation.

There exist certain conditionalities, existential or otherwise, for these exceptional cases, on which we cannot dwell here, since the argument is rather complex, and besides, the connection between asceticism and initiation would have to be examined. In the cases which we have just mentioned, this connection is significant, though asceticism should not be considered here in its mortifying, penitential forms, overwhelmed by secondary moral and religious elements, but as an action undertaken by the individual by his own means, which can provoke the 'descent' and the ingrafting into him of a force from above. In such a case, there is a connection which can be said to be 'vertical' or direct, contrary to the 'horizontal' connection through the medium of an Initiatory chain, an integrative meeting between the force which proceeds from below upwards and the supra-individual and supra-human one which proceeds from above downwards - on the religious plane, it would be called the 'gift of grace' - but here, among other things, there is an essential difference due to the determining character of the 'ascetic' action, insofar as it creates in man a quality like that of the magnet which attracts a metal - here, the transcendent influence: this signification, among others, could be given to the saying that "the Kingdom of Heaven can be taken by storm." When such

forces meet, the way to Initiatory development is opened, and the premise for the change of state in an autonomous manner is realised.

However, for 'regular' initiation with its 'horizontal' joining, there are also some conditions, with respect to the qualification required in the Initiand. This qualification has got nothing to do with qualities of a profane character; thus, an eminent representative of culture, a scientist, or a modern philosopher, may be less qualified for Initiation than an almost illiterate person, while, as far as moral qualities are concerned, we have already explained in what sense they can come into play and have a value on the Initiatory plane. In general, the qualification for Initiation pertains to a special existential situation, and it refers to a virtual tendency to self-transcendence, to an active opening beyond the human. When it is lacking, the individual is not open to Initiation because either the Initiatory action would not have any effect, or it would be dangerous and destructive.

It would not have any effect in the case of the 'virtual Initiation', namely, when what is merely transmitted is a spiritual influence as a germ which the individual should develop alone (assuming immediately an active realisatory autonomous part - which corresponds to a more or less articulated development in the follower). It would act in a destructive manner in the case of a direct and gross initiation by a master. If the power, which is attributed to some personalities, especially in the East, to provoke directly the Initiatory opening of consciousness, by means of one technique or another, met a rigidity in the structure of the I of the neophyte, the effect would be a trauma, a destruction of the unity of the person. Hence the importance of various preliminary initiatory tests, sometimes described in spectacular terms; they are always aimed at testing the capacity of supporting self-transcendence leading the individual even on the boundary of death and insanity. The affinity between initiation and death has always been underlined. The expressions which can be found in Plutarch and Porphyry are classical in this respect.

In essence, the Initiatory qualification is that which is required to be able to face actively and 'triumphantly', within one's lifetime existence, an experience corresponding to that of death. Often, a certain unification and harmonisation of the Being is indicated as the requirement for Initiation. It is explained that, when there are imbalances and splits in the individual, they become exacerbated by the contact with transcendent forces and, instead of the integration of the Being, the effect can be its disintegration and ruin. In passing, this shows the mistake of the interpretations of psychoanalysis, which has 'valued' some Initiatory processes as equivalent to psychoanalytic therapy: they have claimed that Initiation would have aimed at restoring a split individuality, an I grappling with the unconscious, with the libido and so on, but by 'pre-scientific' means. In fact, every Higher Initiation requires as point of departure and as 'qualification' the healthy, unified and perfectly conscious, man. The sole exception is constituted by cases in which certain diseases offer some virtual possibilities of self-transcendence, and have the character of diseases only because these possibilities do not work as such.

Then, Initiatory techniques use them by giving them the right direction and integrating them into the process as a whole. This is attested in the specific case of shamanistic Initiations. One can refer also, in part, to what was called in Antiquity 'sacred diseases' and here a new task would be the clarification of things with respect to those psychiatric 'positivist' interpretations which, especially in the recent past, have claimed to throw a scientific light on many facts of ancient Initiations, of mysticism, and also of demonology, but have actually given rise to extremely serious misapprehensions.

VI. To have spoken about a noetic (intellectual in the superior sense) content of Initiatory, as opposed to mystical, experience should not lead the reader to think of something like theoretical comprehension of a teaching, even of a special or secret character. The attribute here is only meant to indicate the character peculiar to this experience as such: always as experience, essentially, of a state. It is about the superior character of lucidity which was referred in the Antiquity to the nous, to the intellect in the eminent sense: and here what we have said elsewhere about the mistake of irrationalism can be recalled. Nevertheless, the new state created by Initiatory rebirth has always been considered as the indispensable premise and the principle of a knowledge of a superior character. It is a knowledge for which symbols, myths and signs above all (the 'language of silence') appear as paths, in which their true signification is revealed. For this knowledge, the word 'Attainment' is often used, with reference to direct grasp, through identification, of the essences, in sensible and direct experience; with an overcoming of the dualistic state by means of which 'common knowledge', when it is not mere conceptual abstraction, is always under the object-subject law. But here it is immediately necessary to re-emphasise the indicated noetic character, in order to oppose the tendency to confuse what is being discussed with that which is peculiar to a sub-intellectual, vital and emotional identification, similar to that supported by modern irrationalism.

Where the cognitive aspects of Initiatory development have been considered in a special and systematic manner - one can refer, for example, to the classic jñāna-yoga in its divisions - a process has occurred which, gradually, has led to the achievement of that intuitio intellectualis, or noumenal knowledge, which represents in Kant a limiting concept introduced only to characterise by contrast that which, according to him, is the only possible form of knowledge for man.

Knowledge as Attainment is knowledge which transforms and illuminating knowledge. In this respect, what is called 'esotericism' can be considered in a special light. Esotericism does not deal with a knowledge monopolised and held secret in an artificial manner, but rather with a truth which becomes obvious only at a level of consciousness different from that of the common man, of the profane man, and also of the simple believer. The 'secrecy' in which esoteric truth can be held pertains precisely to the fact that, in relation to the common man, this truth ceases to be true, becomes indeed rather dangerous, and can bring about his ruin. It is claimed that the conviction and execution of some Initiates, the dignity of whom was far from

being ignored (as a typical case, that of Al-Hâllaj in Islam is produced) was due to their not having recognised this requirement: it is not a matter of 'heresy', but of practical and pragmatic reason. A typical saying in this respect goes like this: "That the wise with his wisdom does not trouble the minds of those who do not know."

When, however, Initiatory knowledge is applied to the disclosure of Traditional material, a beneficial side effect analogous to the acquisitions of the science of comparative religion on the cultural plane may be mentioned. On the Initiatory level, what a modern representative of the Traditionalist current called 'the transcendent unity of religions' is valid, although, in this connection, the word 'religion' has too restrictive a character. Different symbols, myths, rites, dogmas and teachings reveal a constant content, according to an identity which is not derived from an extrinsic process of borrowing and of historical transmission, but essentially from a common metaphysical and a-temporal content. The point of departure being, in the case of esotericism, the direct, experiential perception of this content, the correspondences which can be established here assume a special character of evidence which distinguishes them clearly from exterior comparisons, so to speak quantitatively based, such as can be found in the expositions of the science of comparative religion.

As a counterpart to this intuitive penetration of the constant contents beyond the multiplicity of historical and exoteric forms, what has been called the "gift of tongues" (some people would say that there is an allegorical and exoteric reference to it in the well-known episode of the Old Testament) is regarded, in general, as a distinguishing mark of the true Initiate. Just as the one who knows many languages knows how to exhibit the same concept in the words of one language or another, so is regarded the ability to exhibit, in the words of one tradition or another, the same content from the plane which is anterior and superior to the multiplicity of these traditions. However, it should be borne in mind that not every language has the same expressive possibility and an equally complete vocabulary.

**VII.** The last point to which we shall allude in these short notes no longer pertains to the definition in itself of the pure concept of Initiation, but to the connection between the plane of Initiation and that of mundane reality and of history. Above all in recent times the conception of the secret character of the quality of Initiate has prevailed. Thus, this saying of a Sufi (Islamic Initiate) could be cited: "That I am a Sufi is a secret between me and God".

The 'Hermetic' character of the Initiate is clear, moreover, from the same Initiatory current - alchemical Hermeticism, one of the main currents in the post-Christian West - from which this adjective is specifically derived. In this respect, if we go back further in time, a different possibility is also attested. Having a look at the civilisations which, in an eminent sense, we can call Traditional - to those civilisations, thus, which had an organic and sacred character and in which "all activities were ordered adequately from top to bottom" - at the centre of such civilisations we often find, quite visible, figures with features similar to those attributed to the Initiates. This centre being

constituted, if we way put it this way, of an 'immanent transcendence', that is to say, of the real presence of the non-human in the human, it presupposes particular beings or elites, there is precisely a correspondence with the form of spirituality which defines the Initiate and distinguishes him, for example, from the priest, because the priest, at best, is a mediator of the divine and the supernatural, but does not incorporate it in himself with a character of 'centrality'.

The 'divine royalty' at the origins in a great number of civilisations had indeed this metaphysical character (4). A typical case is that of ancient Egypt, where the rites which established or confirmed the quality of the sovereign did not differ from the rites of Osirification and, in general, from the rites which ensured the change of nature, rebirth and privileged immortality. Many other testimonies of the same type could be produced, even if each individual case would require special consideration. Besides, residual traces of this primordial tradition are still attested in the Western medieval age, in the context of Christianity itself, because the rite of consecration of the king originally only differed in matters of detail from that of consecration of the bishops, which was held to bring about a transformation of the nature of the one who was the object of it, and the ingrafting into him of a new character indelebilis (in this comparison, we only consider the mere formal correspondence - and the indicated difference between the orientation of the priest, that of the Initiate, and that of the King in the original Tradition is not compromised by this) (5).

Thus, in other periods, besides the secret or 'Hermetic' type of the Initiate, a type is attested who, finding his natural and legitimate place at the top and centre of an organisation which was sacral and also political, also acted as a symbol, and who, by incorporating a superior force or principle, was believed to be able to exercise a direct action, visible and invisible, on historical, political and social reality (this idea was particularly emphasised in the Far East). The type of civilisation which has come to predominate in historical times has however increasingly denied the unity of the two powers, spiritual and political, and has suppressed therefore this function too, which, in general, was attributed to a visible leader known to have Initiatory features. Besides, in Europe, the character of its religion, Christianity, has progressively driven underground any strands or centres of Initiatory tradition which might have survived. In fact, historical Christianity not only does not have an Initiatory tradition, but its specifically religious orientation (in the main sense of the word 'religious' which we have defined above) has opposed any such tradition. We have already pointed out the weird phenomenon that we meet in Catholic Christianity: a sort of imitation of the Initiatory pattern. Baptism conceived as a rite which will transmit a principle of supernatural life to the Christian by differentiating him essentially from every non-Christian and providing the necessary condition for salvation; supernatural influences linked to the apostolical and pontifical traditions and claimed as basis for the efficacy of the sacraments; the objectivity of the character indelebilis created by priestly ordination; and so on - all this shows

obvious formal analogies with Initiatory structures. But the plan is different, the orientation is different. It can be said that an image or reproduction has replaced reality and has been used to try to create an order on a different existential plane (6).

This is not the matter we wish to discuss here, nor is the organising function which Catholicism was able to develop in the Western world. We will note, however, that the latter has not been able to hinder the birth of the modern world, and of the modern 'civilisation', in the Christianised area, nor the progressive destruction of any traditional order and the affirmation of forms of subversion and materialism which, starting from the West, are becoming planetary in scope and are showing an increasing irreversibility. A problem, rather, would be posed when the real existence in the world of the most recent times of true Initiatory centres, and therefore also of persons in virtual possession of these powers which are derived from the very concept of Initiation, is asserted. Then, it would be necessary to ask ourselves whether any connection exists between these persons and historical developments. Given the course taken by such developments, no longer only in the West, the idea of a secret influence from behind the scenes would be problematic; for many reasons, an action of this type would be better attributed to opposite powers, to those of an anti-Traditional destructive force, called, in certain circles, a 'counter-initiation'.

In general, in this respect, the idea of a 'withdrawal' of Initiatory presences from the process of history has been put forward. But even without considering the domain of history, limiting oneself to the spiritual plane alone, most of those who have some qualification to give a decision on this matter agree that the Initiatory organisations in a position to claim an authentic filiation in Europe are now either non-existent or in a phase of degeneration (the possibility of such degeneration poses, in its turn, a difficult problem), and that even the few existing outside Europe have become more and more inaccessible, while the falsifications and the mystifications proliferate: which corresponds to one of the features of what has been called the 'dark age'.

Such a situation has its effects upon the concept of Initiation itself, in the sense that anyone today who has Initiatory aspirations, by force of necessity, should consider a different path from that still termed 'regular', constituted by the 'horizontal' joining with an existing living chain. Thus, it seems that the perspective of an essentially 'vertical' and autonomous joining becomes the more possible, by virtue of an exceptional individual qualification and by that action, to a certain extent violent, which we have already mentioned when we talked about the connections between Initiation and asceticism. On this matter, in circles seriously interested in the problems of Initiation, controversies have developed lately and those who insist on asserting exclusively the 'regular' patterns of initiation in abnormal times like ours have been accused, not unjustly, of formalist bureaucratism distant from reality.

It is not eccentric on our part to question their view. In fact, in addition to the importance, for the reasons we indicated at the beginning, of the formation in abstract terms of a clear idea of what Initiation is and of the differences between its domain and other spiritual domains, today it would be interesting to establish if, to what extent and in what contexts, Initiatory attainment is still possible at all. The problem is of essential importance to those who have made an absolutely negative assessment of all the cultural, social, ideological and religious values existing today, and are at a dead point; for them, perhaps, the superior freedom which has always been the aspiration of whoever tried the Initiatory path constitutes the only alternative to the forms of revolt peculiar to a destructive, irrational and even criminal nihilism.

These last considerations fall, naturally, outside the topic of the theoretical definition of the concept of Initiation (and it is this definition in which, in general, most of our readers will be interested), but perhaps they can provide the necessary context for a comprehensive evaluation of it.

Since we have mentioned the contribution to the study of Initiation made by René Guénon and the Paris-based group inspired by him, it is perhaps advisable to mention the special case constituted by a small group which has formed in Turin at the time of this writing, which would like to be 'Traditional' and devoutly Guénonian (7). Although it cannot be relegated to the plane of the numerous neo-spiritualistic conventicles, nevertheless it makes Guénonianism into a veritable scholasticism (in the second-rate sense). As true aspirants to the 'top of their class', its members slavishly follow their teacher, with tedious and stereotyped repetitions, to the point of suffocating the more lively elements of his doctrine instead of developing them, going deeper into them, or achieving any eventual revisions and integrations of those points in Guénon where, despite all his efforts, problems remain which are not by any means about 'metaphysics' (in his sense), but about simple philosophy, and where some consequences, often simplistic, of his personal equation can be felt.

In the meantime, in a magazine, they presume to be able to start judging Traditionalist 'orthodoxy' ex cathedra and calling whoever does not follow their line 'profane' and deviationist, avoiding naturally the production of any entitlement which would justify this frivolous pretence of theirs. As a matter of fact, neither their passive, easy theoretical conformism, nor their being - according to what they claim - on good terms with Freemasonry, can authorise them to regard themselves as 'non profanes': since, in Freemasonry, there is no real, actual and experiential initiation whatever, but only empty, ineffective, debased, ritualistic remains, if not something even worse (compare what we have brought forward on this subject in the last chapter of our 'Mystery of the Grail') All this shows a definite lack of sensibility or qualification.

This brief clarification may have assisted the orientation of our readers. One merit of the conventicle in question, whose existence is likely to be ephemeral, must be granted to be the production of editions of some books and writings by Guénon in Italian, although it would have been useful to

have provided introductions specifically for these editions outlining the contents of the texts and their limitations point by point.

### Notes:

(1) Edouard Schuré: 'The Great Initiates: A Study of the Secret History of Religions' (Steinerbooks, New York, 1961)

(2) Exactly these two tendencies, almost as a reflection, can be discerned on a more exterior plane completely outside the Initiatory domain, in the life itself of the man of our days. Thus A. Huxley (and also Jean Wal), referring to this man, has also talked about an "upward self-transcendence" and a "descending self-transcendence", adding a third direction called by him "horizontal" or "lateral self-transcendence". For Huxley, today, the most widespread experiences in the descending direction are linked to the use of alcohol, of drugs and of a pandemic sexuality; horizontal or lateral self-transcendence would manifest itself in the collectivising phenomena, in the passive and irrational identification of the individual with assorted fanatical currents or movements or ideologies, with the manias of the day. For the man of today, both the descending self-transcendence and the lateral one are, according to Huxley, forms of escapism (we would add: and of regression). However, both mix because, in all which is collective, 'infernal' powers, that is to say powers of the sub-personal level, always act, and are perceptible upon the surface. To give everyone his due, Jung is right when he says that the ancient demons against possession by which one sought in other times to defend oneself, today, in the "illuminated and progressed" world, have not disappeared but continue to function in disguise at the root of the various 'isms' (nationalism, progressivism, communism, racism, and so on), as collectivising forces of 'horizontal' escapism.

(Note by editors: Even though to give everyone his due is the least that one can do, the fact that both 'nationalism' and 'racism' are included in this list of pernicious 'isms' will come, to say the least, as a surprise to the reader who is familiar with Evola's writings on nationalism and race in the thirties and in the early forties. We may explain the apparent contradiction by distinguishing unacceptable from acceptable 'nationalisms' and 'racisms' thus: regarding 'nationalism', the reader will recall the pertinent distinction made by Evola as early as in 'Revolt against the Modern World' between a 'catagogic nationalism', for which the nation is conceived of as a mere mystical-biological collectivity, as a more or less abstract national consciousness distinct from others, the one which was actually used by the forces of subversion to undermine and to destroy the remains of the European traditional society throughout the XIXth century, and, on the other hand, a nationalism which may constitute a putting right, a recovery, a reintegration with respect to the latter situation, 'anagogical nationalism', for which the nation is seen and felt as an entity in itself, a person, on the basis of a traditional hierarchical caste order; and regarding 'racism' we recall that while rightly condemning biological racism, a racism only based on the colour of the skin, he also praised the superior form of racism which he upheld, going so far as to state, in 'The Elements of Racial Education' (1941): "racism has the value of a test, of a reagent, even in its most general formulations. The reactions of this or that person towards the racist idea are a sort of barometer

which show us the 'quantity' of race which is found in the person in question. To say yes or no to racism is not merely to differ intellectually, it is not something subjective and arbitrary. The one who says yes to racism is the one in whom race still lives: the one who has been internally defeated by the anti-race and in whom the original forces have been stifled by ethnic waste, by processes of cross-breeding and degeneration, or by a bourgeois, weak, and intellectualistic style of life which has lost for generations any contact with anything which is really originary, opposes it and searches in all directions for alibis in order to justify his aversion and discredit racism.")

(3) Naturally, the variety of the subjects will result in a variety of effects, just as the action of fire is different if it is exerted on water, on wood or on a metal.

(4) With respect to the indicated character of 'centrality', of 'immanent transcendence', the sovereign of such civilisations, structurally, can therefore be connected to the type of the Initiate more than to the type of the priest, even though his nature qualifies him for sacerdotal functions. This is what Guénon has not grasped, since he insists that, in normal traditional civilisations, the supreme representative of spiritual authority at the top and centre would have been the type of the priest, with entails the subordination of royalty to a sacerdotal caste. This, in reality, does not by any means describe the original and higher state, but pertains to a situation which is to be considered abnormal from the traditional point of view.

(5) Further on this topic consult the first chapters of our work 'Revolt Against the Modern World'.

(6) The question of the existence or non-existence of a Christian initiation was lately the object of discussion in some Traditionalist circles (cf. the review *Etudes Traditionnelles*, 1965. n. 389-390). To what we have just said, that is, that the sacramental Catholic corpus appears, in some respects, as a kind of representation transposed onto the religious plane of Initiatory structures, some have added that such structures existed originally on the plane of true Initiation, and even that they could also have continued to be such later on in Christianity. Some excerpts of the Greek Church Fathers, above all, were produced, where the distinction between the simple believers and those who are in possession of a superior knowledge (of the 'perfect gnosis') are met with, and where an esoteric interpretation of the Sacred Christian Writings is alluded to.

In more recent times, however, speculation has moved towards the Christianity of the Greek-Orthodox Church (because it is admitted that in the West, from the council of Nicea, the purely religious forms have completely prevailed), and the current of 'hesychasm' has been considered by some to be characterisable as a "Christian yoga"; some expressions of one of the main representatives of this current, Saint Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022) were cited, concerning a rite of transmission of a power (the 'holy spirit') through the laying on of hands, distinct from baptism; a rite which is thought to have had the aspect of an 'initiatory transmission'.

However, originally, especially in Greek Patristics, the mixtures of Christianity with motifs belonging essentially to non-Christian mysteriosophy are obvious, and the example given by Origen shows what the alleged "esoteric interpretation" amounts to in fact. If, in the so-called Apocryphal Gospels, and also in everything which has passed under the name of gnosticism in the history of religions, elements of a superior knowledge are found, all this nevertheless falls outside the central and official current of positive Christianity, just as, for example, in later times, the current of the Brothers of the Free Spirit does. Hesychasm itself has to be considered as an isolated vein of Greek-Orthodox Christianity and the rite of the laying on of hands seems to us to have the generic character of 'Blessing', at best that of a 'virtual Initiation', not that of a real operation of Initiatory opening of consciousness. These are lateral phenomena.

Naturally, from within Christianity and sometimes also from within certain religious regular orders, some have managed to reach sporadically a level superior to that of theistic devotional religion (even in the Protestant area). But this is another question, which does not prove by any means the existence and continuation of an Initiatory Tradition, which, by its very nature, should have had its place at the centre and top of historical Christianity, especially of Catholic Christianity, and should have been the keeper of an 'Orthodoxy' in a superior sense. Against this, the arguments produced by those indicated above have no probatory force.

On the other hand, the question can to be resolved on the morphological and doctrinal plane: it is necessary to judge if what we have brought forward until now really corresponds to the essence of the Initiatory reality. If it corresponds to this reality, one must ask whether it is compatible with what can be said to be characteristic of the positive tradition and central conception of Christianity. The reply, we believe, is not in doubt, and shows other considerations to be peripheral. To put it drastically, in our opinion, what can be Initiatory in Christianity is not Christian and what is Christian in it is not Initiatory.

(7) Evola refers here to *Edizioni Studi Traditionali*, which, in the middle of the Sixties, printed various hitherto unpublished works by Guénon in Italy, and to their paper, the *Rivista di Studi Tradizionali*, which would regularly publish critical articles against him, and with which he often exchanged polemics. Evola's reply to them is constituted by an article called '*René Guénon e la scolastica guénoniana*', which can be found in an English translation in '*René Guénon: a teacher for modern times*' (N.D.T.)