

René Guénon and the Heart of the Grail*

SIMON WILSON

Looking around him, describing and deploring the effects of modernity, René Guénon found an answer in the Grail. More than that, he believed that it could light our way back to the Terrestrial Paradise, to the kind of communion with the divine enjoyed by our primordial parents in Eden. It may even offer us deliverance from the world completely, carrying us beyond the cosmos until we are so utterly transfigured and transformed that we are no longer merely human.

As Guénon is undoubtedly one of the most interesting thinkers of the twentieth century, we may find it fruitful to meditate on these ideas. They may not set us on the path to transformation (as Guénon would wish), but they may reveal a truth which is not generally appreciated: that at the very centre of Guénon's challenging thinking, the place where the Grail is to be sought, is a heart overflowing with joy and love.

René Guénon (1886–1951) is widely acknowledged to be the founder of what has been called the Traditionalist or Perennialist school of thought. In the words of Harry Oldmeadow, he

occupies a special position in the perennialist movement by virtue of being the first to articulate the fundamental metaphysical and cosmological principles through which the *sophia perennis* might be rediscovered and expressed anew in the West.¹

He was an enormously prolific writer, and many of his book-length studies and collections of essays are justly celebrated for their penetrating and illuminating insights: I am thinking, for example, of works such as *Man and His Becoming according to the Vedanta* (1925), *The Crisis of the Modern World* (1927), *The Symbolism of the Cross* (1931), *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times* (1945), *Perspectives on*

* This is the text of a talk presented to the Temenos Academy on 6 November 2014.

1. Harry Oldmeadow, *Frithjof Schuon and the Perennial Philosophy* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2010), p. 23.

Initiation (1946) and *Symbols of Sacred Science* (1962).² He has been a crucial influence on some of the most notable thinkers of our age, such as Ananda Coomaraswamy, Frithjof Schuon, Mircea Eliade, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr.

Yet he and his writings are also perceived, by admirers and detractors alike, as stern, unapproachable, forbidding, monolithic: works to be revered rather than loved. Whitall Perry, for example, who knew Guénon personally, called him ‘ungraspable and remote’.³ For Seyyed Hossein Nasr, ‘Guénon, as he is reflected in his writings, seemed to be more of an intellectual function than a “man”’.⁴ In a similar vein Frithjof Schuon, who of course had also met Guénon, and who corresponded with him for many years, wrote that ‘Guénon was like a personification, not of straightforward spirituality, but of intellectual certitude in its own right . . .’⁵ As such he was uncompromising: Martin Lings, another close associate of Guénon, and probably the first to read *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, described his writings as having ‘an implicit “take it or leave it”’.⁶ Kathleen Raine, writing from a more critical perspective, talked of ‘René Guénon’s bitter diatribes and intellectual pride.’⁷

Certainly an icy, bracing wind blows through his meticulous dismantling of the philosophical and spiritual underpinnings of modernity in *The Crisis of the Modern World* or *The Reign of Quantity*, while his searching expositions of human spiritual potential allow little room for discussion. Time and time again, for example, they refer to the absolute and non-negotiable requirement that any seeker be affiliated to an authentic and completely orthodox tradition with its origin in divine revelation. Just as frequent are his unbending warnings of the fatal consequences of error and of falling for counterfeit traditions. Given these inflexible strictures, it is perhaps no wonder

2. In each case I have given the year of the first French publication: *Symbols of Sacred Science* is a posthumously published collection of essays.

3. Quoted in Oldmeadow, *Frithjof Schuon*, p. 23.

4. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 101.

5. Frithjof Schuon, ‘A Note on René Guénon’, *Studies in Comparative Religion* 17:1/2 (Winter–Spring 1985) 3–6 (at p. 4).

6. Martin Lings, review of Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* in *Studies in Comparative Religion* 17:1/2 (Winter–Spring 1985) 112–18 (at p. 113).

7. Kathleen Raine, *The Lion’s Mouth: Concluding Chapters of Autobiography* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1977), p. 132.

that Kathleen Raine held that Guénonian-style philosophy could in fact disconnect one from anything truly life-giving.⁸

Yet some of Guénon's most central writings are not as coldly Apollonian as they may at first appear to be. They in fact direct us to the heart and to the deepest most fervent longings of the heart, which may, if we are so blessed, enable us in a moment of joy to see through to the source of all.

Guénon's magnum opus is, in my view, *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*. Published in 1945, this is a truly prophetic work, foreseeing, among many other things, a world in which privacy has been all but abolished and, as he writes, 'everything is counted, recorded, and regulated'.⁹ There is however a remedy for those individuals who seek it: the Grail.

The basic theme of *The Reign of Quantity* is 'the pure multiplicity toward which the present world is straining with all its might'.¹⁰ People are plunging headlong into a purely quantitative existence, in which only numerical distinctions are perceived or allowed.¹¹ This Guénon understands as a spiritual predicament, resulting from modernity's drift from principal unity at the centre of things, which can only end in 'the final dissolution of the present world'.¹²

The Centre was a constant theme of his writings, and he defined it as follows:

The Centre is before all else the origin, the point of departure of all things; it is the principal point, without form, without dimensions, therefore indivisible, and consequently the only image that can be given to primordial Unity. From it, by its radiation, all things are produced . . . The central point is the Principle, it is pure Being, and the space which it fills by its radiation and which exists only by that same radiation (the *Fiat Lux* of Genesis) . . . is the World in the widest sense of the word, the totality of all beings and all states of existence constituting universal manifestation.¹³

8. See Jack Herbert, 'Philip Sherrard on "Kathleen Raine and the Symbolic Art": Some Reactions and Thoughts', *TAR* 12 (2009) 238–47 (at p. 243).

9. René Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, trans. Lord Northbourne (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2004), p. 144.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 8. 11. *Ibid.*, p. 49. 12. *Ibid.*, p. 112.

13. René Guénon, *Symbols of Sacred Science*, trans. Henry D. Fohr (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2004), pp. 57–8.

The Centre is the place where the cosmos first comes into being, the place of the primordial manifestation of the world and of God in the world. It remains, for those with eyes to see, completely transparent to the One, always as it were shining with the Divine. Those living there, as they are immersed in the presence of God, embody the closest thing possible in this domain to pure quality. It is not however limited to a particular place: its presence suffuses the whole of manifestation, so that it is truly ever-present to those who are capable of perceiving it.

In the Judaeo-Christian tradition this pristine Centre is known as Eden, the place and state of perfect communion with God in which mortality is unknown: it follows then, as Guénon says, that 'the real meaning of the "fall" is the abandonment of the Centre and consequent drift into quantity'.¹⁴ As humans move further away from the Centre, they are deprived, as it were, of the gifts of quality, and become 'reduced to nothing more than simple numerical "units"'. As they are robbed of their proper qualities, they are turned 'into something as nearly as possible like mere machines'.¹⁵

But as Guénon points out, the Centre of the World is in its turn dependent on the higher, divine Centre: the Supreme Principle, the unconditioned, uncreated and transcendent Origin of all that is. Being beyond the cosmos, the Supreme Principle is beyond all forms and all modes of existence recognised by human eyes.¹⁶ It may however be glimpsed in the cosmic Centre, and may even draw the inhabitants of the Centre up toward It, beyond the world, into divine realms.¹⁷

In Eden, then, man may transcend Eden, may move beyond even his proper qualities, to actually *become* Quality, or Being Itself. Possession of this ultimate state, higher even than the primordial state, is yet another possibility of which he has been robbed by the Fall.

Deprived as we are of the possibility of transformation, deprived even of our humanity, we cyborg beings are flung by modernity ever further away from the Centre, with the result that the faculties which had once enabled us to experience God in the world begin to atrophy.¹⁸ The cosmos solidifies, until it seems to be nothing but an

14. Guénon, *Reign*, p. 162. 15. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

16. On Guénon's understanding of the Supreme Principle, see Graham Rooth, *Prophet for a Dark Age: A Companion to the Works of René Guénon* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2008), p. 47.

17. See for example René Guénon, *Perspectives on Initiation*, trans. Henry D. Fohr (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2001), p. 245.

18. See for example Guénon, *Reign*, pp. 101, 106, 134.

entrancing and seductively quantifiable accumulation of surfaces, mere husks and shells.¹⁹ Consequently, as Alexander Schmemmann puts it, it now 'seems natural for man to experience the world as opaque, and not shot through with the presence of God', as it was before the Fall.²⁰

All this of course begs the question of what can be done. On a global level the answer is: nothing. The phenomena Guénon describes are, he believes, inevitable symptoms of the stage of the cosmic cycle we happen to find ourselves in at the moment. Sooner rather than later that cycle will end and the Centre will be restored.²¹

But happily this does not mean that individuals should sit idly by while the world falls apart and they turn into robots colliding with other robots: we are not obliged to be victims of a hostile age.

The answer Guénon suggests throughout his writings is to seek re-attachment to the Centre and methodically begin to progress back towards it, and indeed perhaps to go through it, as through the eye of the needle, and re-emerge on the other side, beyond the world. It is in his writings on this journey that we encounter the Grail, which may also lead us beyond the coldly austere centre of his thought to a higher heart burning with longing and love.

To return to the Centre, Guénon tells us, we need to be attached to a tradition, a word which in his works has a rather specific meaning. True traditions, he maintains, have their source in the ever-present Centre and are therefore not human in origin.²² They radiate from the Centre like the spokes of a wheel. Each tradition is a particular manifestation of the Centre: in the words of Harry Oldmeadow, these traditions represent 'formless and immutable Truth . . . as it finds expression, through the medium of a divine Revelation, in the myths, rituals, symbols, doctrines, iconographies and other forms of different primal and religious civilisations'.²³

Initiation into a tradition, as conceived of by Guénon, has two main stages, as we progress from the Centre of the World to the Supreme Centre. The first stage leads eventually to the restoration of the primordial state, the return to Eden.²⁴ Guénon calls this restoration

19. For Guénon on solidification, see *ibid.*, pp. 113–19.

20. Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973), p. 16.

21. Guénon, *Reign*, p. 162. 22. See for example Guénon, *Symbols*, p. 83.

23. Oldmeadow, *Frithjof Schuon*, p. 72.

24. See for example René Guénon, *Initiation and Spiritual Realization*, trans. Henry D. Fohr (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2001), p. 27.; and *idem*, *Perspectives*, p. 244. On

'salvation', and he claims that it permanently preserves the individual at the zenith of human nature, the most developed state of human potential, even after death.²⁵ Initiation is only complete, however, when the individual goes 'beyond the origins of humanity'²⁶ and achieves 'Deliverance . . . the supreme and unconditioned state'.²⁷ At that moment the initiate emerges from the cosmos and is no longer human: 'he' or 'she' is effectively divine.

These journeys through the Centre of the World to the Supreme Centre occur within our *own* Centre. Initiation into a tradition, that is, leads us to Eden and then beyond, but it does so from our own core outwards, by suffusing our whole being with the Centre from our Centre. As Guénon puts it: 'the being must above all identify the centre of its own individuality (represented by the heart in traditional symbolism) with the cosmic centre of the state of existence to which this individuality belongs' (i.e. with the Centre of the World).²⁸ Put somewhat more metaphorically, this means that the rays of the spiritual sun draw out the rays of the initiate's inner sun, transforming him as light spreads from his heart to meet the rays from above to become eventually one shining light, a light within the Light.²⁹

Symbols of the Centre are consequently essential to all traditions: Guénon discusses, among others, the symbols of sun, mountain, cave, island or stone in this connection.³⁰ Possibly the most widespread of the symbols of the centre, however, is the heart. '[T]he heart as centre of the being,' writes Guénon, 'is common to all ancient traditions, having arisen from the primordial tradition . . .'³¹ One could indeed say that, for Guénon, the appearance of the heart in any given tradition proves that it is a true tradition.

The heart is a sure sign of the proximity of the Terrestrial Paradise. Every time a person's heart is transformed, the pristine source manifests, and the primordial moment of Creation occurs for the first time

Guénon's understanding of initiation, see Timothy Scott, 'René Guénon and the Question of Initiation', *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies* 14:1 (2008) 63–87.

25. See for example Guénon, *Spiritual Realization*, pp. 46–8.

26. Guénon, *Perspectives*, p. 248. 27. Guénon, *Spiritual Realization*, p. 46.

28. René Guénon, *The Esoterism of Dante*, trans. Henry D. Fohr, Cecil Bethell (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2001), p. 47.

29. Naturally the whole process of initiation and return to the centre is much more complex than this outline would seem to imply, and is subject to all kinds of provisos which cannot be gone into here.

30. See Guénon, *Symbols, passim*. 31. *Ibid.*, p. 406; see also p. 11.

again. That person is made new. The mechanical self dies, and the individual undergoes a second birth which is actually their first true birth: a heart-birth.³² Eden is then everywhere, within and without. The individual walks with God, eats with God, thinks and feels with God.

Within the Christian tradition, Guénon examines the symbol of the Sacred Heart, or the Heart of Christ. The Heart of Christ is, he argues, Eden itself, the Terrestrial Paradise, the place of lived communion with God, without which there would not actually be any life.³³ It is in fact 'the Word manifested at the central point of the Universe'.³⁴ Equally, and at the same time, it is 'at the centre of every being, which conforms', he writes, 'to what St John says in speaking of the "true Light which enlightens every man coming into this world"'.³⁵ The Christian saint who realises the Heart of Christ, the very Centre, in his own heart transfigures his being, and is enlightened. Or rather the saint is the Light that enlightens: he is become a new body of light which both shines and is shone upon.

This new way of being in the world is also of course a new way of *knowing* the world. Transformed eyes see a transformed world, so different from the world seen through eyes blinkered by mechanisation. The saint sees the light of Christ shining through the world; sees in fact that the world is a world of light, one great epiphany shining with pristine truth. According to Guénon:

'[k]nowledge of the Heart' is the direct perception of the intelligible light, of that Light of the Word spoken of by St John in the prologue of his Gospel, that radiant Light of the 'Spiritual Sun' which is the true 'Heart of the World'.³⁶

The Word makes the world transparent to truth, and the truth is that the world is essentially unfallen and divine.

Salvation, then, in Guénon's understanding of the term, occurs in the heart. But it is also in the heart that the individual moves beyond the prelapsarian, primordial state, to realise the Supreme Identity—Deliverance in the Guénonian sense. For heart knowledge, at its most sublime, ascends to the level of—and then becomes indistinguishable from—divine knowledge, and like God, it is 'necessarily infallible in itself'.³⁷

32. *Ibid.*, p. 297. 33. *Ibid.*, p. 21. 34. *Ibid.*, p. 22. 35. *Ibid.*, p. 442.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 414. 37. *Ibid.*, p. 413.

The being whose heart carries this knowledge has now become Being. 'He' stands alone, no longer in communion with God but God Himself: 'he has come to the unconditioned state that leaves no possibility outside of itself'.³⁸

Relationship cannot exist for this Being, for there is no Other to be in relationship with: there is only Itself. It follows that, for Guénon, this Being—this Heart of Hearts—is beyond love. Again and again, therefore, Guénon attempts to distinguish this highest heart knowledge from any form of love.³⁹

And so Guénon would appear to stand, remote and monolithic, were it not for the Grail.

The Grail is Guénon's ultimate symbol both of tradition itself and of the transformed heart, and as such can break the hold of modernity. However, when we investigate it, as indeed we must if we accept Guénon's view that it is vital for our spiritual health, we find that it leads us to a heart which is full of joy and love as well as knowledge. Since love must always be for another, the Grail fractures Guénon's ideal of metaphysical singularity.

Guénon returned again and again to the Grail throughout his writings, publishing major essays on the topic in the 1920s,⁴⁰ 1930s⁴¹ and 1940s.⁴² The Grail was perhaps *the* quintessential symbol for Guénon, containing all the meanings of the heart, of Eden and of the transcendent Centre. Our predicament, adrift as we are in the quantified and chaotic modern world, can be summed up in terms of the loss or withdrawal of the Grail.⁴³ In fact *The Disappearance of the Grail* could well be an alternative title for *The Reign of Quantity*, while the Grail's rediscovery promises the end of the dispersal and confusion of the modern world and a return to the paradise of light and love and vision at the heart of the world: it can also take us beyond that paradise.

38. Guénon, *Perspectives*, p. 209.

39. He justifies subordinating love to knowledge by referring to two traditional Hindu paths: the Way of Knowledge and the Way of Loving Devotion to God: Guénon, *Symbols*, p. 404, and Guénon, *Spiritual Realization*, pp. 91–8.

40. Guénon, *Symbols*, pp. 12–22, 78–88; *idem*, *The King of the World*, trans. Henry D. Fohr (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2001), pp. 27–32.

41. Guénon, *Symbols*, pp. 23–37.

42. *Ibid.*, pp. 279–83. Mention may also be made of an essay published posthumously in 1951: see René Guénon, 'L'Ésoterisme du Graal,' in *Lumière du Graal*, ed. René Nelli (Paris: Editions les Cahiers du Sud, 1951), pp. 37–49. Most sections of this piece, however, are identical to an article already published in 1934: see Guénon, *Symbols*, pp. 23–37.

43. Guénon, *King*, p. 29.

Guénon supplies the Grail with a long and idiosyncratic history which has three significant—or indeed Central—moments. At its origin it is fashioned by angels from an emerald which dropped from Lucifer's forehead at his fall.⁴⁴ Then the Grail was 'entrusted to Adam in the Terrestrial Paradise, but after his fall he lost it in turn', and it remained in Eden. Finally, Seth, the third son of Adam and Eve, 'succeeded in re-entering the Terrestrial Paradise, and was thus able to recover the precious chalice'. Seth and later guardians of the Grail 'were thereby able to establish a spiritual centre destined to replace the Lost Paradise, a sort of image of the latter'.⁴⁵

Once part of the 'body' of the supreme angel, then, the Grail is suprahuman: not merely a light in the Light but almost the transcendent Light itself.⁴⁶ It is also the zenith of human nature, the primordial, pristine Edenic state; it is even the subordinate Centre or Centres, where the Edenic state is made available to initiates.⁴⁷ Equally, as a kind of gift from the Supreme Centre, it is the means by which communication is kept alive between the Centres, communication which otherwise would have been interrupted by catastrophic

44. *Ibid.*, p. 28. Guénon insists that the Grail falls from Lucifer's forehead and not, as is in fact the case in the thirteenth-century manuscript generally called the *Wartburgkrieg* (which was Guénon's source for this part of the story), from his crown: *ibid.*, p. 28, footnote 5. See Richard Barber, *The Holy Grail: The History of a Legend* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), p. 190. With the exception of this one work I know of no other previous Grail writings which may have functioned as direct sources for Guénon's account of its history. Seth's retrieval of the Grail from Eden, however, may have been inspired by stories like those collected by Jacobus de Voragine in *The Golden Legend* (c.1255–c.1266), which tell of Seth's return to Eden to obtain oil from the Tree of Mercy, in an attempt to heal the ailing Adam. Instead the Archangel Michael gives Seth a shoot from the Tree of Mercy (or possibly from the very tree on which the apple had hung). Seth later plants this shoot in his father's grave, and the tree which it grows into eventually furnishes the wood used for the Cross: see, for example, Mercia MacDermott, *Explore Green Men* (Loughborough: Heart of Albion Press, 2003), pp. 104–105. Perhaps a connection to the Grail story was suggested by the presence in *The Quest of the Holy Grail* of a passage telling a similar tale: Eve, after the Fall, takes a twig which had been attached to the fatal apple out of Eden, and later plants it; it grows into a mighty tree, wood from which is later used as bedposts in a miraculous ship, the self-same vessel which is destined to transport Galahad, Perceval and Bors to Sarras: see *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, trans. P. M. Matarasso (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), pp. 222–35.

45. Guénon, *King*, pp. 28–9.

46. I am thinking of the meaning of Lucifer's name: 'light-bringer' or 'shining one'.

47. All traditional peoples or cultures have their own subordinate Centres, and all Centres are 'images of the same unique and supreme centre that alone is truly the "Centre of the World"' (Guénon, *Symbols*, p. 82).

Falls in both the suprahuman and human realms. Without the Grail both realms would be blocked to us.

Finally, as the Grail is also the 'symbolic equivalent' of the Heart of Christ, to find it is to realise the true Light at the very centre of one's being, and so, as we have seen, to be utterly transformed.⁴⁸

The Grail, then, is both the guarantor of tradition itself and 'the effective possession of this tradition'.⁴⁹ For Guénon, to speak of tradition and the *sophia perennis*, or to speak of the spiritual destiny of humankind, is to speak of the Grail. To possess the Grail is to be saved, to achieve 'the fullness of the "primordial state"'.⁵⁰ It may even lead beyond that state, to transcendence of every human possibility, to deification, to Deliverance.

Significantly, however, this supreme manifestation of tradition and the higher states is not—and for Guénon cannot be—Christian at its core. The subordinate Centre to which it was communicated, and which preserved the Grail tradition, was in Guénon's view Celtic and Druidic. That Centre then transmitted the Grail and all that it signifies to Christianity in the twelfth century.⁵¹

Christianity had been, by then, long since disconnected from the Centre. Although initially offering an authentic path back to the Terrestrial Paradise and then beyond, Christianity had, according to Guénon, broken the link early in its history.⁵² As a result, the Christian tradition was deprived of life, and had withered to an essentially dead husk, a few 'clearly defined and limited formulas' or 'notions learnt by heart, in a purely mechanical and schoolboy way'.⁵³ What was true of Roman Catholicism was to become even more extreme in the Protestant Churches, which abandoned doctrine altogether to promulgate a mush of personal opinion and 'vague sentimentality having no real significance'.⁵⁴

48. *Ibid.*, p. 13. 49. *Ibid.*, p. 84. 50. Guénon, *King*, p. 31. 51. Guénon, *Symbols*, p. 30.

52. See René Guénon, *Insights into Christian Esoterism*, trans. Henry D. Fohr (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2001), pp. 6–10.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 11; and René Guénon, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, trans. Marco Pallis, Arthur Osborne and Richard C. Nicholson (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2001), p. 85.

54. Guénon, *Reign*, p. 78. See also Guénon, *Crisis*, p. 61. It is also my strong suspicion that Guénon rejected Christianity's claims to be a living tradition because of the pre-eminence of love in its doctrine, which, in Guénon's eyes, would have excluded it from access to the highest states. Although he never put it like this, it is as if Guénon saw in Christianity's conception of love—no matter how purified, no matter how transfigured—a tragic flaw that it could never transcend and which rendered almost inevitable its descent, in Protestantism, into mere religiosity.

It is clear that for Guénon Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, in their association with robotic activity and sentimental individualism respectively, had become symptoms of the Fall and modernity rather than a remedy.

The Celtic Grail, while it re-invigorated Christianity's dead forms by re-opening communication with the Centre, did not in essence belong to that religion. In Guénon's view, constant references in the Grail texts to Christ, the crucifixion, or the Eucharist, serve but to veil a Druidic heart, a Celtic Centre.⁵⁵

If, however, we take seriously Guénon's argument that the Grail plays a pre-eminent role in every level of the divine economy (and surely he would want us to), then we are obliged also to take the Grail romances very seriously indeed. We have to turn to them, we have to study them carefully: anything else, if we are to believe Guénon, would be negligent or indeed dangerous for the health of our souls, and would leave us trapped by the reign of quantity. I would like to show that if we read the romances we are able to find much that confirms Guénon's interpretation of the Grail. But at the same time something else becomes apparent: the hearts enraptured by the Grail in these texts, far from being beyond love, shine with a wholly other way of feeling and of loving. It is indeed love and longing which uncovers the Grail to them, which transfigures them utterly, while the Edenic state, far from being untainted by emotion, is characterised by a form of blissful joy or joyful bliss otherwise unavailable to humans. In one case at least, love and joy take the heart beyond that state, so that it is no longer human.

In fact, if we examine the Grail texts we find that Guénon guides us despite himself back to a living Christian tradition of the heart.

Of course many have disagreed with Guénon's analysis of Christianity. Frithjof Schuon, for example, has refuted it on a matter of principle, arguing that it is inconceivable that God would ever withdraw from the sacraments the spiritual power with which He had invested them, while Jean Borella has devoted a whole book to uncovering the shortcomings in Guénon's understanding of the nature and history of Christianity. See Frithjof Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, ed. James S. Cutsinger, trans. Mark Perry, Jean-Pierre Lafouge and James S. Cutsinger (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2006), pp. 139-40; and Jean Borella, *Guénonian Esoterism and Christian Mystery*, trans. G. John Champoux (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2004).

55. Similarly Lucifer, Eden, Adam and Seth in Guénon's history of the Grail must all be understood as being Christian equivalents of a now unrecoverable Celtic original. The Grail, after all, had been so thoroughly absorbed into Christianity after its transmission that its true Celtic lineaments were no longer perceptible: see Guénon, *Symbols*, p. 30.

I will largely confine my discussion of the Grail to the earliest romances—those written in French and German between around 1190 and around 1270—as it is to these texts that Guénon is mainly referring (although it must be said that he is at times vague about his sources). He believes that these stories are the most authentic versions: he claims, for example, that Chrétien de Troyes and Robert de Boron received the Grail story from representatives of a subordinate Centre, and that Wolfram von Eschenbach's description of the Grail as a stone from heaven demonstrates his orthodoxy.⁵⁶

The first appearance of the Grail in writing was in *The Story of the Grail*, a romance by Chrétien de Troyes, probably composed around 1190. If we attempt a Guénonian reading of the work we see that from this very first mention of the Grail, the world of the knight—of chivalric values and ethics—is recognisable as an early version—a prototype as it were—of the solidified, robotised modernity as described by Guénon, the condition in which 'man is . . . effectively trapped in the sensible world'.⁵⁷ The seemingly impermeable shell of matter is symbolised in the romances by armour, whose hard surfaces block vision and insight, while the Grail is the solution to this predicament.

The story of Perceval, as told by Chrétien, is initially the story of failure to see beyond the beguiling surfaces. When, for instance, Perceval sees some knights for the very first time in his life, their gleaming armour leads him to believe that they are angels, and that their leader is God Himself.⁵⁸ Whatever one may make of this episode, this is indeed a world in which the man with the best and shiniest armour is generally the greatest knight.

Armour is portrayed as isolating individuals, preventing any type of relationship or communion with another person—or indeed with the divine: it blocks love. As Perceval embraces the world of chivalry he encases himself in a hard shell of armour, further obscuring his vision and becoming, like the other knights, all helmet, breastplate and sword. When he sees the Grail, in what is of course also the world's first ever glimpse of it, he does not *really* see it at all. The Grail's appearance is entirely narrated from the point of view of Perceval. What he sees in the castle of the Fisher King—and what listeners or

56. Guénon, *Symbols*, p. 20; p. 30; pp. 279–83. 57. Rooth, *Prophet*, p. 201.

58. Chrétien de Troyes, 'The Story of the Grail', in *The Complete Romances of Chrétien de Troyes*, trans. David Staines (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 339–449 (at p. 341).

readers see with him—is merely one beautiful and costly material object among *other* beautiful and costly objects:

Two more attendants then entered, bearing in their hands candelabra of fine gold inlaid with niello. Handsome indeed were the attendants carrying the candelabra. On each candelabrum ten candles, at the very least, were burning. Accompanying the attendants was a beautiful, gracious, and elegantly attired young lady holding between her two hands a Grail. When she entered holding the Grail, such brilliant illumination appeared that the candles lost their brightness just as the stars and the moon do with the appearance of the sun. Following her was another young lady holding a silver carving platter. The Grail, which came first, was of fine pure gold, adorned with many kinds of precious jewels, the richest and most costly found on sea or land, those on the Grail undoubtedly more valuable than any others.⁵⁹

It is apparent that Perceval does not see *the* Grail, he sees *a* Grail, that is to say a kind of large platter or shallow serving dish.⁶⁰ True, he sees the radiance which accompanies this dish, but he is immediately distracted by its extraordinary value. In effect the costly materials blind him to the presence of the Grail.

Subsequent to his failure of vision Perceval's heart hardens as if it itself is enclosed by armour. No longer even capable of seeing God in a shiny-armoured knight, for five years he forgets Him utterly. In effect he lives as an utterly modern man. Significantly this atheism in no way interferes with his chivalric way of life. He succeeds in 'strange adventures, savage and stern ones', and manages to send 50,000 knights as prisoners to King Arthur.⁶¹ He has become a chivalric cyborg, a repetitive and relentless robo-knight.

Transformation comes when he encounters some barefoot pilgrims, a group of knights and ladies who are shocked to see him in full armour and bearing arms on a Good Friday. Not only does Perceval suddenly remember God, but he undergoes profound metanoia as his heart turns to his Lord. He weeps, and he feels 'his very heart sighing

59. *Ibid.*, p. 379. I have amended Staines's translation, which offers 'bowl' and 'serving bowl' instead of the word 'Grail'.

60. See Barber, *The Holy Grail*, pp. 94–6. 61. Chrétien, 'Grail', pp. 414–15.

because he knew he had sinned against God and was sorry'.⁶² This is not the sentimentality which so appalled Guénon: strong emotion is here a sign of his change of heart, not a hindrance to it.

This transformation—this opening to the divine—is the necessary preparation for knowledge of the Grail. A saintly hermit now tells him that the costly dish he saw is really the Holy Grail and that the man it sustains is a transfigured being:

With a single host carried to him in the Grail, we know, he sustains and nourishes his life. Such a holy object is the Grail, and so pure in spirit is he himself that his life requires no further nourishment than the host that comes in the Grail.⁶³

On Easter Sunday, the day of Resurrection, Perceval receives communion for the first time in many years, and he receives it 'with a pure heart'.⁶⁴ That is the very last thing Chrétien tells us of his hero: 'The Story of the Grail' was left unfinished. So we do not learn from Chrétien what this reborn being beheld when he saw the Grail again—or rather when he truly saw it for the first time.

It remained for other poets to define the Grail transformation further, and it is on these that Guénon is drawing when he refers to the Grail as a symbol of integration into the Edenic state. Most notable of these writers is Robert de Boron, in whose work Guénon believed the 'higher meaning' of the Grail was more transparent than in Chrétien's.⁶⁵ Writing in around 1200–1210, Robert recounts how the Grail was the vessel used by Christ at the Last Supper, and then later by Joseph of Arimathea to collect his Saviour's blood when Joseph was preparing and washing Jesus' body after it had been removed from the cross. Robert goes on to tell how Joseph, thrown into a cell to die, was brought the Grail by Christ Himself, who told his disciple: '[D]o not be alarmed: the divine power has come to your aid. You should know that it will lead you to paradise, and there will be your salvation.'⁶⁶

62. *Ibid.*, p. 416.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 417. (Again I have substituted 'the Grail' for the words 'the bowl' in this translation.)

64. *Ibid.*, p. 418. 65. Guénon, *Symbols*, p. 29

66. Robert de Boron, *Joseph of Arimathea – A Romance of the Grail*, trans. Jean Rogers (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1990), p. 13.

In Robert, the Grail becomes a Centre: it draws around it a community of followers whose hearts are transformed since they live in what Guénon calls the primordial state. For Joseph and for the other members of the Grail company, the holy vessel in fact brings paradise here and now, and they live, we are told, in a state of complete sinlessness.⁶⁷ This state, however, far from being associated with a rather lofty coldness of vision, is characterised by love and joy. Immediately before He gives the imprisoned Joseph of Arimathea the Grail, Christ tells him:

You have loved me secretly, and truly, so have I loved you. Our love shall be brought into the open, so that everyone knows about it You shall have in your power the proof of my death.⁶⁸

The Grail manifests the truth of Christ's love and also of His death. It is therefore also the proof of His Resurrection and hence of His divine being. It is a paradise of love, resurrection and divinity. To the community around it, this paradise means hearts brimming over with joy. Christ also tells Joseph: 'All those who see your vessel shall be members of my company. Their hearts shall be filled to overflowing, and their joy shall be eternal.'⁶⁹ Their perfect, sinless state is an eternity of joy, and will continue as such after death.

The Grail as the pristine Edenic state was indeed a constant theme of the romances. The anonymous French *High Book of the Grail* (written around the same time as Robert's *Joseph of Arimathea*) tells how, after many adventures, Perceval—or Perlesvaus as he is called here—enters into paradise in the presence of the Grail. He comes into possession of the Grail Castle, whose threefold name makes quite explicit its essence: it is called Eden, or the Castle of Joy, or the Castle of Souls, and around it run the waters of a river which flows from paradise. Anyone who dies there, we read, goes straight to heaven.⁷⁰ We understand that, in the presence of the Grail, Perceval's condition is almost that of a joyful soul in eternal union with its God.

Guénon also drew on German Grail writings for his conception of the Grail as the Heart of the World. Wolfram von Eschenbach's

67. *Ibid.*, pp. 44–5. 68. *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15. 69. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

70. *The High Book of the Grail: A Translation of the Thirteenth-Century Romance of Perlesvaus*, trans. Nigel Bryant (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1978), p. 195.

Parzival, composed between around 1205 and 1210 (and thus contemporaneous with *Joseph of Arimathea* and the *High Book of the Grail*), describes the Grail as ‘the consummation of heart’s desire, its root and its blossoming . . . paradisaical, transcending all earthly perfection’.⁷¹ It is ‘the very fruit of bliss . . . and such that it scarcely fell short of what they tell us of the Heavenly Kingdom’.⁷² A company of men and women serve and venerate the Grail. They live in an atmosphere of paradise, a heavenly society on earth, spellbound, transfigured by the presence of the Grail. Wolfram writes that the men and women ‘live from’ the Grail: by constantly contemplating it they are spared from death. As in Robert or the *High Book of the Grail*, the guardians are ‘immune from the shame of sin and have a rich reward in Heaven. When they die here in this world, Paradise is theirs in the next.’⁷³ The castle where the Grail and its court reside is the Centre of the World, open, as Guénon argues it should be, to the Supreme Centre beyond the world. As one scholar has put it, at the Grail Castle ‘there is no divergence between the world and God’,⁷⁴ but rather a seamless continuum emanating from the divine, through the Grail, to the community. Every Good Friday a dove, symbol of the Holy Spirit, descends from Heaven to place a wafer on the Grail, and then returns to Heaven again. When a new member of the company—knight or lady—is to be appointed, his or her name appears on the Grail. The influence of this Centre is transmitted to subordinate Centres: sometimes, having removed the ruler of a land, God ‘sends . . . out’ lords from the Castle to replace him, who then govern ‘under the protection of [His] blessing’.⁷⁵

The most detailed account of this sacred centre is not to be found in *Parzival*, but in *The Later Titurel*, an influential work written around 1260/1270 by a poet about whom we know nothing except his name: Albrecht. Albrecht describes the Grail Temple, built according to instructions provided by the Grail itself. A tremendous structure with 72 sides, it is constructed almost entirely of gold and precious stones, which serve to weave an enchantment around the members of the

71. Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*, trans. A. T. Hatto (London: Penguin Books, 1980), p. 125.

72. *Ibid.*, p. 127. 73. *Ibid.*, pp. 239-40.

74. Joachim Bumke, ‘Die Utopie des Grals. Eine Gesellschaft ohne Liebe?’, in *Literarische Utopie Entwürfe*, ed. Hiltrud Gnüg (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1982), pp. 70-79 (at p. 73). My translation.

75. Wolfram, *Parzival*, pp. 240, 251.

Grail fellowship, helping to liberate them from the fallen world. At its very centre hovers the Grail.⁷⁶

This is the Terrestrial Paradise: 'Earthly Paradise had they in the presence of the Grail,' as Albrecht writes.⁷⁷ The Temple is the pristine cosmos made again, experienced and known by those transfigured beings who live there.

Guénon was evidently right to see the Grail as a manifestation of the Centre, the Heart of the World. But as we have seen, unlike Guénon the romances describe those who live in the Centre as having hearts overflowing with joy in the presence of their hearts' desire and the highest fulfilment of love. At least one important romance known to Guénon shows that only those whose hearts are burning with passion and desire for it will actually be allowed into the Grail's presence. Composed anonymously around 1220/1230, *The Quest of the Holy Grail* introduces Galahad, 'the perfect knight without blemish' as Guénon describes him, whose desire is so great that it takes him to the Centre of the World and out beyond it, to the Supreme Centre.⁷⁸

The romance tells the story of how the knights of the Round Table are possessed by desire truly to see the Grail. At the start of this romance the Grail appears at the court of King Arthur, and yet it does not: the assembled company know it is there, yet cannot see it as it is veiled by a cloth of white samite (a rich silken fabric). Sir Gawain realises the problem is not one of concealment but one of vision: '[W]e are so blinded and beguiled that we could not see it plain,' he tells Arthur. Sir Gawain goes on:

I for my part make here and now this vow: in the morning I will set out on this Quest without more delay, and pursue it for a year and a day, or more if need be, nor will I return to court, come what may, until I have looked openly upon the mystery we have but glimpsed this day⁷⁹

But what Sir Gawain and Sir Lancelot, Sir Owein and Sir Bors, Sir Galahad and Sir Perceval, and all the other knights require in order to

76. For a more detailed account of the Grail Temple, see S. R. Wilson, 'The Grail Utopia in Southern Germany', *TAR* 14 (2011) 138-58 (at pp. 140-42).

77. '...irdisch paradyse heten sie von dem grale': Karl August Hahn, ed. *Der jüngere Titurel* (Quedlinburg and Leipzig: Gottfried Basse, 1842), p. 8 §79.

78. Guénon, *Insights*, p. 109. 79. *Quest*, p. 44.

be able to see the Grail is not to hunger for *knowledge* but to be consumed by love and longing for the Grail. They have to burn with unquenchable desire, desire for the Grail and what it means.

Most knights do not succeed, because they are half-hearted: they do not give their hearts completely to the Grail. Most notorious is the case of Sir Lancelot. Lancelot's failure may partly be moral, but is largely because his heart and mind focus on Guinevere not on the Grail. He wants Guinevere more than anything else, so that his Queen's face eclipses the Grail in his heart. '[H]e thought more of her than of anything else, and could not keep his heart from her,' writes the author of *The High Book of the Grail*.⁸⁰ One of the many saintly hermits who populate these romances tells the knight: 'If you had desired and longed to behold the Grail as much as you do the queen, then you would have seen it.'⁸¹ The problem, it must be stressed, is not love in itself or indeed desire, it is where love and desire are ultimately directed. Lancelot's love stops as it were at Guinevere: he does not see the Grail shining through her.

Much of *The Quest of the Holy Grail* is dedicated to making much the same point, as Lancelot fails again and again in his quest. In this romance however it is not Perceval whose heart burns most for the Grail, but Galahad. His transfiguration surpasses even that of Perceval, and he evidently moves beyond the world, into the suprahuman.

The *Quest* tells how, of all the knights, only Galahad, Perceval and Sir Bors are led into the presence of the Grail. In an elaborate ritual, the knights are fed, like Joseph of Arimathea before them, from the Grail by Christ Himself, who tells them that they have 'attained to the spiritual life whilst in the flesh'.⁸²

Galahad's heart has been burning for this vision. It has led him onward and onward, and its vision has grown ever more refined in preparation for this moment of transfiguration. But, uniquely, he is destined by his heart's desire for even clearer vision. Christ tells him: 'Now hast thou seen the object of thy heart's most fervent longing; yet shalt thou see it plainer still one day . . . [i]n the city of Sarras, in the spiritual palace . . .'⁸³

Together with Sir Perceval and Sir Bors, Galahad sails to this mystical city, which is of course another manifestation of the Grail Centre, the Heart of the World. It is the place, we are told, where Joseph of

80. *High Book*, p. 112. 81. *Ibid.*, p. 115. 82. *Quest*, p. 276. 83. *Ibid.*

Arimathea's son, Josephus, was consecrated the very first Christian bishop by Christ Himself, and despite its 'cruel and perfidious' king it remains Christian.⁸⁴

In Sarras Galahad's longing increases day by day, until eventually, and after much suffering, he himself is crowned king: he is now as it were King of the Heart of the World. One year later Galahad passes through that Heart to a higher Heart. Once more he is handed the Grail, with the words, 'Come forward, servant of Jesus Christ, and look on that which you have so ardently desired to see.'⁸⁵ Galahad looks into the vessel and, as he says, sees 'revealed what tongue could not relate nor heart conceive'.⁸⁶ His lifeless body falls to the floor.

Galahad's progress has been a slow and difficult initiation into the mysteries of the Grail. But there has never been any suggestion that it has been a quest for merely intellectual knowledge. Rather the prerequisite and driving force for his success has been the highest passion of his heart. Now his passionate heart leads him beyond the heart, beyond Eden, beyond paradise on earth, beyond the fleshly expression of even his highest self in this life.

Guénon tells us to take the Grail seriously. When we do that, and return to the Grail texts, we find much to support his interpretation of the legends. From its very first appearance, in Chrétien, it offers a spiritual alternative to a chivalric world which is very much the precursor of modernity, a place of hard material surfaces which block contact with God and indeed with fellow humans. The Grail is found at the Centre, which is the Terrestrial Paradise, and those who live there enjoy the primordial, Edenic state. It may even draw a few beyond the cosmos, to the Supreme Centre.

But the romances describe these states and these places in language which is very different from that used by Guénon. They speak of overflowing joy, of love, of bliss, of the highest desire and fervent longing of the heart, language which carries at its heart a sense of relationship and communion. The choice of such wording is not primarily a question of style: these phrases body forth an utterly different conception of spiritual fulfilment from Guénon's monolithic insularity.

Neither is there any sense that the nature of this experience changes beyond Eden, in the transcendent realms to which Galahad is translated. A good indication of this is the presence of two persons

84. *Ibid.*, pp. 274, 281, 283. 85. *Ibid.*, pp. 282–3. 86. *Ibid.*, p. 283.

presiding at the first sublime Grail mass experienced by Galahad. Before Christ appears, Josephus, Grail guardian and the very first Christian bishop, descends from heaven. Despite coming from the celestial paradise, despite evidently living in the constant presence of Christ, Josephus, clearly, has not simply become one with his Lord. Josephus may enjoy transcendent communion with Christ, but he is not identified with Him, and continues to be drawn to Him by love and longing, as witnessed by his worship of Christ in the mass. Again, at the mystical rites in Sarras, Josephus is not identified with the suprahuman presence who reclaims the Grail and carries it back to Heaven.⁸⁷ Transfigured beings, beings who have experienced the mysteries of the Grail in full and who have left the cosmos behind, do not become infallible singularities in the Grail romances. Josephus has not become the Supreme Being: neither will Galahad.

The bliss experienced by a Grail initiate such as Josephus or Galahad or Perceval, then, is not at all the ecstasy of impervious and unchanging oneness, but the joy of communion without end with God, boundlessly deepening, ever growing but never resulting in total identity. This resembles very closely an ancient tradition of thought in Christianity, what the Church Fathers called *epektasis*, an eternal blissful 'upward striving' or 'reaching forward' to God. Propelled by the deepest desires of the heart, *epektasis* can never reach a final moment of omniscient infallibility, not even after death:

The soul possesses God, and yet still seeks him; her joy is full, and yet grows always more intense. God grows ever nearer to us, yet he still remains the Other; we behold him face to face, yet we still continue to advance further and further into the divine mystery.⁸⁸

A Guénonian reading of the romances thus uncovers conceptions of what he calls the Edenic state ('Salvation') and the supreme state ('Deliverance') which differ considerably from those he held himself, and which in fact have their highest expression in Christianity.⁸⁹ As that is the case we may, despite Guénon's own assertions, even be led

87. *Ibid.*, p. 284.

88. See Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, revised edition (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), p. 138.

89. It is surely significant, and not simply a symptom of Christian dressing-up, that the Grail romances often have passages near their very beginning which address the

to the conclusion that Christianity can very well be understood as an authentic tradition in his sense of the word.

Guénon never allowed that this truth radiates through the Grail. But late in life he did come to accept that one form of Christianity was after all traditional. Writing in 1949, just two years before his death, he reiterated his view that Western Christianity no longer offered a path to the Centre, but now added that that was not true of the Eastern Churches. He highlighted in particular the Orthodox practice of hesychasm, 'of which the truly initiatic character seems indisputable'.⁹⁰ He pointed to the regular transmission of certain formulas in hesychastic practice, and added that it 'also contains a complete "technique" of invocation as a true method of interior work'.⁹¹

Hesychasm is, as it were, applied *epektasis*. It focusses the heart utterly on God by invoking the Holy Name of Jesus in the Jesus Prayer.⁹² The hesychast's whole being becomes centred on the actual presence of Christ in the heart, so that he or she is transformed into light within the Light, in a 'union without confusion' which is never-ending.⁹³

Guénon's belated concession that Eastern Orthodoxy represents an authentic tradition carries great implications for the origins of the Grail. If we have to ascribe an origin to the Centre shining in and through the Holy Cup, for example, we may speculate that it is to be found not in Celtic or Druidic sources but in Orthodox Christianity. The Grail romances may even have preserved for the West a Christian initiatic tradition, the Great Schism between Eastern and Western

Trinity, the central instance in Christianity of the paradoxical combination of union with separateness. Robert, for example, writes of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit that 'these three are one single being, each person contained within the other' (*Joseph*, p. 2). The *High Book of the Grail* even insists that 'The high book of the Grail begins in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. These three are one substance and that substance is God, and from God comes the noble story of the Grail.' The author then tells us that 'those who hear [the story] with their hearts will find it most profitable' (*High Book*, p. 19). The very essence of the story of the Grail is a kind of emanation from the Trinity, to be received in the heart.

90. Guénon, *Insights*, p. 18. 91. *Ibid.*

92. See Kallistos Ware, 'How Do We Enter the Heart?', in *Paths to the Heart: Sufism and the Christian East*, ed. James S. Cutsinger (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2002), pp. 2–23 (at p. 19).

93. *Ibid.*, pp. 19–20.

Churches having cut off Roman Catholicism from Orthodox teachings by the time of the first appearance by the Grail.⁹⁴

It is not my intention, however, to catch René Guénon out; nor does my point primarily concern Christianity or the role of Christianity in his thinking. Rather, I would like to remark on how studying Guénon resembles the two-stage initiation he himself outlines. The first reading of Guénon may lead one to achieving a higher understanding of the nature of humanity and of the cosmos. But it would be most un-Guénonian indeed if his writings had only one level of meaning, and that on the surface: we must be ready to abandon even our hardest-won levels of understanding. If we do not simply take his arguments at face value, but continue to deepen our understanding of his writings, we may be led by them beyond Guénon into quite different transcendent realms.

By taking seriously his arguments concerning the Grail, as I have indicated, I have been led, for example, to seriously doubt the truth of a central Traditionalist tenet, namely, that 'beyond the limits of the individual state, there can be only a single and unique path'.⁹⁵ The Grail itself shows that this is not the case: instead of Guénon's view of the supreme transcendent state as a kind of monolithic and infallible singularity, it offers a vision of endless and blissful *epektasis*. Indeed, it seems to me that there is no logical or metaphysical justification for a doctrine which seeks, as Guénon does, to delimit transcendent states, since, by their nature, these are infinite and unconditioned.

If we follow Guénon's instruction on the path to the Grail, then, we may reach a *truly* Perennialist view, unencumbered by the fence of doctrine. At this point we may see the universal Light of the Logos, what John calls 'the true light which illumines *everyone* who comes into the world' (John 1:9; my italics), no matter what one's spiritual tradition is. This light may transform our soul, so that we realise that the way to God is the way of love and that it is the way of knowledge and that it is both those things and that it may never end.

94. The standard English account of the Great Schism is probably still Steven Runciman, *The Eastern Schism: A Study of the Papacy and the Eastern Churches During the XIth and XIIth Centuries* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955).

95. Guénon, *Spiritual Realization*, p. 93. Guénon—naturally—adds that that path is one of 'pure Knowledge' (*ibid.*, p. 93).