



Library

IAS, Shimla

TMP 294 G 935 T



00015602

3

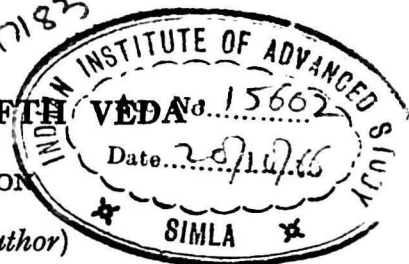
PH
294
9935 T

28/7/83

'THE TANTRAS: THE FIFTH VEDA'

By M. RENÉ GUÉNON

(Introduction ¹ on the author)



There is a far too general impression in certain circles that orthodox traditional intellectuality cannot be seriously maintained, or cannot be maintained in its entirety, in the face of modern Western science; in the face of what passes for science in the West, we should perhaps say, since a large part of this so-called science is built upon pure hypothesis and cannot therefore be properly classed as knowledge of any kind. The impression of the impotence of orthodoxy, in the face of its 'scientific' adversaries, corresponds no doubt to a certain reality, and one which traditional teaching has always foreseen: the coming of a time when disorder and false ideas would prevail in the world; but the truth of ideas is plainly unaffected by the numerical preponderance of the ignorant, and the impotence here is actually in man, and not in the traditional standpoint with which he has become unable to identify himself. The impression is illusory then, when it is transported outside the realm of human contingencies, where questions of material preponderance have their place, into the realm of pure intellectuality where they have none, and the illusion, where it exists, rests upon a double ignorance which the supposedly 'scientific' outlook is designed to maintain: ignorance, first and foremost, of what traditional intellectuality really represents, and secondly of what is really represented by the modern Western mentality in its various aspects. The 'scientific' outlook, we say, is designed to perpetuate an ignorance of traditional intellectuality, in short of any intellectuality which relates its object to the unity of a transcendent principle; it is by this rejection of any superior principle that modern science is to be distinguished from the sciences of any other age, and the civilization of the modern West from that of any other time or place; it is also by this rejection, or 'liberation' as some like to call it, that modern science loses all real intellectual value, all possibility of synthesizing the multiplicity of facts which it studies in any sort of unity, and all possibility of

¹ This Introduction regarding the works of M. René Guénon is quite necessary for understanding the standpoint the author takes in respect of the Hindu Scriptures. The Introduction is prepared by Mr. Maciver, an Englishman studying Sanskrit at Santiniketan, who is himself most conversant with the works of René Guénon. Mr. Maciver has also translated this paper which is in French in the original.

explaining these facts except in terms of ever-changing hypotheses, which means all possibility of really explaining them at all.

A proper understanding of the modern mentality is something which can only be acquired in the light of orthodox doctrine, and this for at least two reasons, firstly because the modern mentality only *exists* in virtue of its rejection of orthodoxy, and secondly because nothing can be thoroughly and profoundly understood except in the light of traditional doctrine; it necessarily follows therefore that those who have deserted their traditional paths for the will-o'-the-wisp of Western ideas are less qualified to know what they themselves are dealing with, and what influences they are serving, than those who have kept themselves rigorously from contact with the West.

Those who have any deep grasp of traditional doctrines can have very little use for modern science, and they do not need much acquaintance with it to convince them of the fact; in the East moreover this science is representative of an alien mentality with which the representatives of tradition have normally no need to concern themselves; those who are attached to modernism in one form or another are therefore apt to remain unaware that it is actually modern Western science which cannot for a moment be maintained in the face of traditional intellectuality. Perhaps for the most part this does not greatly matter, for those who are attached to modernism would generally be incapable of any profound attachment to tradition, either from a native incapacity of intellect, or else because the prejudices of the modern outlook have stamped them with an incurable deformity of mind. There may be some, however, who would be able and willing to discard the fetters of Western 'culture', if they understood its true character; it is their attention in particular that we wish to draw to the works of M. René Guénon.

These works have a somewhat unique character in modern times; not so much because they are constantly inspired by the purest traditional orthodoxy, which the East has always known and never ceased to know, but because this pure traditional doctrine appears under a Western name, in a Western tongue, and in short because the author's task has been to illuminate the chaos and disorder of the Western mind with it. To express the pure doctrine without distortion in terms of a mentality which is firstly so limited as that of the West, in its essential nature, and secondly so profoundly deformed as the result of a long process of decay, is something which calls for a closer acquaintance with Western civilization than any Oriental could acquire in the normal course of events. The importance of M. Guénon's works to such Orientals as have

suffered the influence of the West, lies precisely in his ability to situate the components of modern Western civilization in their proper plan by the light of traditional doctrine, and also to situate the traditional civilization of the West, from which modern civilization is not derived by legitimate descent, in its proper place beside the traditional civilizations of the East, as an aspect of that perpetual and unanimous primordial tradition from which all are derived.

We have here, in fact, a traditional orthodoxy which transcends the forms of particular traditions, like that of Shri Râmkrishna, but accompanied by a precise and detailed knowledge of different traditions which Râmakrishna never possessed.

The works of M. René Guénon have not yet received much attention in India; partly, no doubt, because they are written in French and have in only one instance been translated and published in English, and partly, perhaps, because the one translation which has appeared in English is at times defective, and always very far from reproducing the author's characteristic clearness and simplicity of style. To our knowledge these works have only twice been noticed in Indian periodicals; once in 'Triveni' (Jan.-Feb., 1935) where they formed the subject of a very interesting article entitled 'Oriental Knowledge and Occidental Research' by M. André Préau, and once in the 'Visva-Bharati Quarterly' (Nov.-Jan., 1935-1936) where a chapter from one of M. Guénon's books, 'The Crisis of the Modern World' was presented in translation by Mr. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, under the title of 'Sacred and Profane Science'.

Mr. Coomaraswamy prefaced his translation with a short introductory note in which he identified himself with the traditional standpoint of the author and declared that in his view no one writing in a modern Western tongue 'is more significant than René Guénon whose task it has been to expound the universal metaphysical tradition that has been the foundation of every past culture, and which represents the indispensable basis for any civilization deserving to be so called'. In detailing the author's works Mr. Coomaraswamy drew particular attention to 'Man and his Becoming according to the Vedânta' as 'probably the best account of the Vedânta available in any European language'; it is this book which has unfortunately been the victim of an inadequate English rendering. We make particular mention of Mr. Coomaraswamy, because his name commands an attention which our own does not, and also because certain recent works of his, which seem to have been a cause of some perplexity amongst Orientalists, find an almost indispensable complement in the works of M. Guénon.

The article of M. Guénon's which we now present is characteristic; it was published this year in the August-September number of

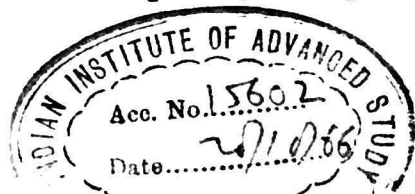
'*Etudes Traditionnelles*', a French periodical to which he is a regular contributor, and we have translated it as a particularly cogent proof that the representatives of orthodox intellectuality who are familiar with certain of the pretended 'conclusions' of modern science are as much entitled and indeed obliged to disregard them as those who have never heard of them at all; if they concern themselves with such things as the so-called 'law of progress', or its corollaries, it can only be to reduce them to whatever vestige of legitimacy they may possess and to demonstrate their intellectual impossibility beyond these limits; for it is not maintained that Western science is altogether false, but only that its legitimate field is rigorously and fatally limited to the realm of material phenomena, to the exclusion of all that transcends them; this suffices, however, to deprive it of any real intellectual interest.

We must especially emphasize the fact that this article was originally destined for a public which is already familiar with the author's works, and therefore in a position to know exactly what there is behind modern science; those who lack this advantage may well have a number of more or less serious objections to make, but provided it is not assumed that these cannot be met, because they are not met here, then the article may serve its purpose; we have meant it only as an introduction to the author's works, and of these a very considerable part is devoted to meeting possible objections in advance, so much so that no one who knows them would be likely to complain of a deficiency in this respect. We do not wish to suggest that every possible objection has been met, for if the author confined himself entirely to answering the objections that can be foreseen, the task would probably be enough to absorb all his activities, to the actual exclusion of his principal aim, which is the presentation of orthodox doctrine; and apart from that the number of possible objections to a point of doctrine is equal to the number of ways of misunderstanding it, and therefore indefinite. But plainly there is no real presumption that an objection cannot be met in the fact that it has not been met explicitly, and actually it will very seldom be found that an objection has not been met by implication and in its germ, as it were, in M. Guénon's works. What must never be lost of, in any case, is that where traditional doctrines are concerned one is no longer faced with 'profane science', but with 'Sacred Science', which rests not upon hypotheses and mere probabilities, but upon absolute metaphysical certainties, and is therefore in a position to answer any objection whatsoever, given the occasion, and provided always that there is anything to be gained by doing so.

Of the various peculiarly modern errors which we have often had to denounce, one which sets itself most flatly in the way of any

proper understanding of traditional doctrines is what may be called 'historicism', which is really only a simple consequence of the 'evolutionist' mentality: it consists in the supposition that everything must have started from the crudest and most rudimentary beginnings and subsequently have undergone a progressive elaboration, resulting in the appearance of particular conceptions at given times, the time being always more recent in proportion as the conception is taken to be more elevated; the implication is that ideas of such an *elevated* order could only be 'the product of an already *advanced* civilization', to use an expression which has become so common as often to be repeated more or less mechanically even by people who are trying to *react* against this sort of mentality, but who have only 'traditionalist' intentions, without any kind of real traditional knowledge. This way of thinking must be countered with the plain statement that it is at its *origin*, on the contrary, that everything belonging to the spiritual and intellectual sphere is found in a state of *perfection*, from which it has continuously departed ever since, during the gradual 'darkening' which necessarily accompanies every cyclic process of manifestation this fundamental law which we must be content to recall here without going into further developments, is clearly sufficient to reduce all the conclusions of what is called 'historical criticism' to nothing. It is to be further remarked that there is a definite purpose behind 'criticism' of this kind, which is to deny the possibility of any *superhuman* element and to treat traditional doctrines themselves as purely *human* 'thought', on exactly the same level as philosophy and the profane sciences; here again no compromise of any sort is possible, the fact being that it is really this profane 'thought', which is of such recent origin and which could only have appeared, we may say, as 'the product of an already advanced degeneration', to turn the phrase which we quoted further back in an 'anti-evolutionist' sense.

Applying these general considerations to the Hindu tradition, it has to be stated, contrary to the opinion of the Orientalists, that what are called 'Vedism', 'Brahmanism', and 'Hinduism' have absolutely no existence; they do not exist, we mean, if they are to be understood as doctrines which have made their appearance and replaced one another at successive epochs, each epoch characterized by essentially different, not to say more or less antagonistic conceptions, which have thus arisen one after another as the outcome of mere 'reflection' conceived upon the model of simple philosophical speculation. If the terms 'Vedism', 'Brahmanism', and 'Hinduism' must be maintained, they are to be taken only as so many names for a single tradition; as such all of them are quite fitting, and the most that could be said is that each refers more specially to a particular



aspect of the tradition, but these different aspects are all inseparably connected and cannot be detached from one another in any way. This follows directly from the fact that, in principle, the tradition which we speak of is contained in its entirety in the Veda, and consequently that whatever is opposed to the Veda or falsely derived from it is excluded from this tradition, under whatever aspect it is viewed; the unity and immutability of the doctrine are thus ensured, and this whatever the developments and adaptations which may be *occasioned* in response to the particular needs and aptitudes of different ages.

It should, in fact, be clearly understood that the changelessness of the doctrine in itself is no obstacle to any sort of developments or adaptations, so long as these always rest in strict accord with principles; at the same time, of course, they can never constitute any sort of a 'novelty', for in every case it can only be a question of rendering explicit what was always implied in the doctrine from the very beginning, or alternatively, of setting forth the same truths in different terms so as to make them more accessible to the mentality of a 'darker' age. What could at first be grasped immediately and without difficulty in the actual principle, could no longer be found there by men of later ages, apart from exceptions, so that it became necessary to make up for the general lack of understanding with a profusion of explanations and commentaries, none which had ever before been needed; further, as the capacity for direct attainment of pure knowledge continued to dwindle, it became necessary to open up other 'ways' which made use of ever more contingent means and thus kept pace, so as to rectify it as far as possible, with the 'descent' which continued from age to age as earthly humanity fulfilled its cycle. Hence, for its transcendent ends, one may say that the more the intellectual and spiritual level of humanity declined, the more means it received of attaining them, so that all that offered any possibility might still be rescued, with due allowance for conditions which must necessarily prevail as a result of cyclic laws.

These are the considerations which permit a proper understanding of the place occupied in the Hindu tradition by what is usually given the name of 'Tantrism', this place being that of a body of teachings and means of 'realization' which are more particularly suited to the conditions of the *Kali-Yuga*. It would be quite wrong therefore to regard it as a doctrine apart, and even more so as some sort of 'system', as Westerners are only too ready to do; really it is rather in the nature of a 'spirit', if the expression be permitted, which is more or less diffused throughout the whole of the Hindu tradition as it stands at present, and in such a way that it would be almost impossible to attribute exact and clearly defined

frontiers to it; so when it is reflected that the start of the *Kali-Yuga* goes back far beyond what are recognized as 'historical' times, it has to be granted that actual origin of Tantrism, far from being as 'late' as is claimed by some, must of necessity elude the limited *means* at the disposal of *profane* investigation. Moreover when we speak of its origin and make it actually coincide with that of the *Kali-Yuga*, as we do here, this is only half true; to be exact, it is only true when it is specified that what is in question Tantrism as *such*, we mean as the *expression* or *outward* manifestation of something which, like all the *rest* of the tradition, *always* existed in *principle* in the Veda itself, although it was more explicitly *formulated* and *developed* in its applications only when circumstances came to require it. It will thus be seen that there is a double point of view to consider here: on the one hand Tantrism can be found in the Veda itself, because it is contained there in its principle; but on the other hand, it cannot correctly receive a name as a distinct aspect of the doctrine until the moment when it is made explicit for the reasons which we have noted, and it is in this *explicit* aspect and this aspect only that it can be considered as peculiar to the *Kali-Yuga*.

The name of Tantrism derives from the fact that the teachings which form its basis are set forth in treatises bearing the generic title of Tantras, and this name is directly bound up with the symbolism of weaving which we have spoken about elsewhere, for *tantra*, in its strict sense, is the 'warp' of a cloth; we have pointed out that words of the same meaning are *also* to be found in *other places* applied to Sacred Books. These Tantras are often regarded as forming a 'fifth Veda', specially destined for men of the *Kali-Yuga*, and this would be altogether unjustified if they were not derived from the *Veda*, understood in its *strictest* sense, as an adaptation to the conditions of a particular epoch; this we have already explained. It is essential too to grasp that the Veda, in its principal and as it were 'timeless' state, is really one, before becoming threefold and then fourfold in its expression; should it then become fivefold at the present day in view of further developments needed for less 'open' faculties of understanding, which can no longer work so directly in the realm of pure intellectuality, it is clear that this will not have any greater effect upon its primitive unity, for this is essentially its 'perpetual' (*sanâtana*) aspect, and therefore independent of the special circumstances of any and every age.

The doctrine of the Tantras then is nothing and can indeed be nothing but a development from certain view-points, and a perfectly normal one, of what is already contained in the Veda, for it is thus and thus alone that it can form an integral part of the Hindu tradition, as in fact it does. As for the means of realization (*sâdhana*)

prescribed by the Tantras, by the same token they can be said to be directly derived from the Veda, for they are really only the application and the putting into practice of this doctrine. Every kind of rite, either of capital or subordinate importance, should of course be included amongst such means, and if they seem all the same to wear a certain aspect of 'novelty' when contrasted with what preceded them, the reason is that there was no need to conceive of these means in previous ages, except perhaps as mere possibilities, for people had no need of them then, and had others at their disposal which were more suited to their nature. In this there is something exactly comparable to the special development of a traditional science at some given time; a development of this kind is just as little a spontaneous 'appearance' or an 'innovation', for here again it can only be a matter of applying principles, and in such principles every application pre-exists at least implicitly and so could at any moment be made explicit, if there were any reason for it; but in actual fact such a reason is not to be found except in the contingent circumstances which characterize a particular epoch.

Now the impossibility of practising strictly 'Vedic' rites, as they were 'in the beginning', follows only too plainly from the simple fact that *soma*, which plays a capital part in them, has been lost for a time beyond 'historical' reckoning; and it must be clearly grasped that when we speak of *soma* here, it should be taken to signify a whole body of things originally manifest and accessible to all, which in the course of the cycle has become hidden, at least from ordinary humanity. Henceforward 'substitutes' for these things were needed, which naturally had to be found in a lower sphere than the first; thus the 'supports' by which the possibility of a 'realization' was maintained became ever more and more materialized from age to age, keeping pace with the downward march of cyclic manifestation; a comparison of the ritual uses of wine and *soma*, for instance, would furnish a symbolical example of this. When we speak of 'materialization' however, it should not be simply taken in the very narrow sense which is commonest; as we understand it, it may be said to start as soon as one leaves pure knowledge, which is also the only pure spirituality; and the appeal to factors pertaining to sentiment or will, for instance, is not one of the least signs of this kind of 'materialization', even if such factors are used in a legitimate way; are used, that is, only as means, subordinated to an end which is always knowledge; were they not so, indeed, one could no longer speak of 'realization' at all, but only of a deviation, an imitation or a parody, all of the things which are rigorously excluded by traditional orthodoxy, whatever form or level it may take.

- This last observation of ours is exactly applicable to Tantrism, which, generally speaking, offers more of an 'active than' a 'contemplative way', or in other words is more associated with 'power' than with knowledge; and a particularly significant fact in this connection is the prominence which it gives to what is called the 'heroic way' (*vīra-mārga*). The term *vīrya* which is equivalent to the Latin *virtus*, at all events in the acceptation which it had before it was brought down to a 'moral' plane by the Stoics, is clearly expressive in its strict sense, of the essential and, one may say, 'typical' quality, not of the Brāhman, but of the Kshatriya; and the *vīra* is distinguished from the *pashu*, that is to say the being who is held by the bonds of ordinary existence, less by effective knowledge than by a wilful affirmation of 'autonomy', which, according to the use he makes of it, may just as well carry him away from the end, at this stage, as lead him to it. The danger, in fact, is that 'power' may be sought for its own sake alone, and so become a hindrance instead of a help and that the individual may thus come to make himself his own end; it goes without saying, however, that this is simply deviation and abuse, which can never spring from anything but lack of understanding, and for this the doctrine can in no way be held responsible; furthermore, what we say concerns only the 'way' in itself, and not the aim, because, we must insist, this is the same in every case, and can never be anything but knowledge, for it is *by* knowledge and *in* knowledge only that the being truly 'realizes' itself in all its possibilities. It is none the less true for that, that the means offered for attaining this end are stamped, as they must inevitably be, with the special characteristics of the *Kali-Yuga*: it should be recalled, in this connection, that the proper rôle of the 'hero' is always and everywhere depicted as a 'quest', which may be crowned with success it is true, but also may end in a reverse; and the 'quest' itself implies the existence, when the 'hero' appears, of something which has been lost beforehand and which it is for him to recover; this task, at the finish of which the *vīra* becomes *divya*, may be defined, if one likes as the search for *soma* or the 'draught of immortality' (*amritā*), whose symbolism incidentally is exactly equivalent to that of the 'quest of the Grail' in the West; and by the recovery of *soma* the end of the cycle rejoins its beginning in the 'timeless'.