There are many varieties of traditionalism in the West, but only one that really deserves a capital ‘T’, and only one that modified the understanding of both Islam and the Islamic world. This is ‘Guénonian’ Traditionalism, the fruit of the marriage of 19th-century oriental scholarship with the Western esoteric tradition, a movement established by the work of the French religious philosopher René Guénon (1886-1951). Born in the provincial French city of Blois, Guénon lived the last 20 years of his life in Egypt, and died at 72 in Cairo. Although Nasr fled Iran at the Revolution and has never returned, the Imperial Academy of Iran survived with a change of name, and between Muslim thinkers in wider debates such as those on religious pluralism, and are regularly interviewed in a number of publications. Their views are regarded with some sympathy from circles within the Bajia mithqal to the Qom seminary. Traditionalism is also important in parts of the Islamic world where there are no Traditionalist organizations, as for example in Turkey. Large numbers of Traditionalist works were translated into Turkish during the 1980s and 1990s; while they have not achieved massive sales, they are widely available, and present a direct and subtle challenge to the fundamental principles and values of the modern Turkish state. They are generally read not by old-fashioned Turkish Muslims but by the educated elite. In the same way that in the West Traditionalism generally appeals to intellectuals, in the Islamic world it generally appeals to Western-educated intellectuals, or at least to intellectuals familiar with Western currents of thought.

Traditionalism and Islam

In Western terms, Traditionalism is primarily an intellectual explanation and justification of traditionalist views from the Islamic world, certain Muslims feel, and a path into Islam for many of those who find it appealing but cannot identify as such. In particular, Traditionalism is a way to look at the relationship between the Islamic world and the West. Traditionalists tend to be reticent about both their Islam and their Traditionalism, especially when they are academics. In institutional terms, the most important result of the encounter of Traditionalism and Islam is that there are two Traditions: one in the West and one in the Islamic world. While both are based on the same religious truths, the Islamic world’s Traditionalism differs somewhat from mainstream interpretations. Traditionalism in the Islamic world also differs from that in the West in its terms of organization. A Western Traditionalist in search of a Sufi order is likely to choose a Traditionalist order rather than a Sufi order, and has never returned, the Imperial Academy of Iran Academy was a well-funded body, which not only began a project for the study and restoration of Traditional sciences, but also attracted major figures from overseas. Although Nasr fled Iran at the Revolution and has never returned, the Imperial Academy survived with a change of name, and between Muslim thinkers in wider debates such as those on religious pluralism, and are regularly interviewed in a number of publications. Their views are regarded with some sympathy from circles within the Bajia mithqal to the Qom seminary. Traditionalism is also important in parts of the Islamic world where there are no Traditionalist organizations, as for example in Turkey. Large numbers of Traditionalist works were translated into Turkish during the 1980s and 1990s; while they have not achieved massive sales, they are widely available, and present a direct and subtle challenge to the fundamental principles and values of the modern Turkish state. They are generally read not by old-fashioned Turkish Muslims but by the educated elite. In the same way that in the West Traditionalism generally appeals to intellectuals, in the Islamic world it generally appeals to Western-educated intellectuals, or at least to intellectuals familiar with Western currents of thought.

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