

Towards a definition of “initiation”

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Introduction

The term “religious initiation,” like the term “religion,” connotes a wide range of meaning so that dialogue on the nature of religious initiation requires some preliminary definitions. Given that I am offering these ruminations in a “traditionalist” journal it is not out of place to note that I am aware of the baggage that this topic holds for followers of both Guénon and Schuon. The question of initiation and particularly the question of the status of the Christian sacraments is a well know point of divergence between these thinkers. I have addressed this more directly in two articles, ‘Guénon and the question of initiation’ (*Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies* Vol.14 No.1, 2008, pp.63-87) and ‘Guénon and the Christian sacraments’ (forthcoming). The purpose of the present essay is to consider the nature of “initiation” starting from first principles.

The first step towards a definition of initiation, or at least a more developed appreciation of the concept, must be the recognition of the width and breadth of meaning that the word allows. In doing this I do not wish to make the issue more vague or retreat to a position where I might sit on the fence, so to speak; rather our aim is to delineate the possible usages, so that we might find common ground, and recognise unfamiliar territory. These considerations are then in the first place “theoretical”; that is, I am not specifically talking of a particular initiatic practice in this or that tradition. No doubt the idea of initiation denotes specific things within specific traditions. In this respect my approach may be justifiably reproached for attempting to define something that does not actually exist, that is, an ideal and universal initiation. This caveat is well made; still, I think that this exercise is merited in terms of identifying common ground connecting these various and particular

Towards a definition of “initiation”

ideas of initiation. Moreover my interest is in identifying the essential metaphysical conditions that underpin initiation rather than identifying the particular nature of *an* initiation.



According to common usage “initiation” is the lead or first step, often considered as determining the conditions of a particular “journey.” In turn, initiate means “to begin or start”; “to introduce (to) (e.g. knowledge)”; “to admit, especially with rites, (e.g. to a secret society, a mystery).” As an intransitive verb, initiate means “to perform the first act or rite.” The Latin root here is *initiāre*, “to originate,” from *intium*, “a beginning.” Here we are simply using the Latin roots for the sake of expediency. In the traditions of the world there are rituals, customs and practices to which the term “initiation” is variously applied that do not necessarily (or at least not immediately) suggest origination or beginning. In most cases the simplest way of describing these is as a “rite of passage”: the recognition of a change of states. The prime example is the transition from childhood to adulthood. Obviously this concept does in fact include the sense of a “new beginning.” The other common idea associated with initiation is purification; here again there is the idea of return to the original state, a starting afresh. Let us then, for the sake of our current ponderings, take “initiation” as embracing the concepts of origination and beginning.

There is a difference between origination and beginning that can best be recognised by considering the word “origin.” This term simultaneously denotes both principle and “the point of act.” The principle of a thing is beyond the conditions of its manifestation; the point of act is the first and defining manifestation of these conditions. Certain cultural appreciations of initiation emphasize—sometimes exclusively—the idea of beginning, while for others the concepts of beginning and principle are, as it were, identical. Similarly some appreciations emphasize the idea of purification—again, sometimes exclusively—while some recognise in initiation a relationship between purification and union. A question we might flag at this point is this: Is it possible to have purification without union? And if so, in what sense are these two ideas related?

Symbolic Exegesis

It is possible to speak of two “forms” of religious initiation. To avoid undue confusion we should distinguish this idea of two forms from the two initiations known as the Lesser Mysteries and the Greater Mysteries, principally associated with the Eleusinian Mysteries.¹ What I have in mind at the moment are the most general definitions. I say “forms” rather than “types,” for these are different in nature rather than simply distinct in character; nevertheless these two forms are not mutually exclusive and in fact the second must participate in the first for it to be legitimate and valid. The first of these forms might be broadly described as “existential initiation”; with the second form I have in mind the type of formal or legalistic practice or “rite of passage” that is popularly associated with the idea of initiation. It is to the former idea that we first turn.

Existential initiation

Existential initiation might also be described as an “initiation of substance,” that is to say, a metaphysical condition or event that acts to create a conversion in the human substance, in the sense of a “turning back” (*convertio*) to one’s divine Origin. This idea of “origin” is to be understood both in the spatio-temporal sense of the “beginning” (*intium*) and in the sense of the divine Principle. This twofold nature is found in the Hebrew word *reshit* (Gen.1.1) and the Greek *archē* (Jn.1.1). As Meister Eckhart says of *John* 1.1: ‘This is in the Greek: “In the principle was the Word”.’ In the “principle,” that is *in principio*, where, the Latin *principium* means both “beginning” and “principle,” a semantic ambiguity that, as Bernard McGinn notes, Eckhart plays with throughout his treatment of *John*.²

This “initiation of substance” is *de facto* rather than *de jure*, and in itself it may be realized to varying degrees. Moreover, we may speak of a specific and unique initiatic event recognizable as triggering the conversion that marks the start of one’s spiritual journey, and we may speak of general and continuous *initiations*, which serve to periodically

¹ According to Thomas Taylor, ‘the Lesser Mysteries occultly signified the miseries of the soul while in subjection to body, so those of the Greater obscurely intimated, by mystic and splendid visions, the felicity of the soul both here and hereafter, when purified from defilements of material nature, and constantly elevated to the realities of intellectual [spiritual] vision’ (*The Eleusinian & Bacchic Mysteries*, San Diego: Wizards Bookshelf, 1980, p.49).

² Meister Eckhart, *Commentary on John* 4, Colledge & McGinn (tr.), 1981, p.123, see n.8.

Towards a definition of “initiation”

turn one back to God—the repetition of the Eucharistic rite might serve as an example. Where we talk of multiple initiations these might be said to serve two purposes: firstly, psychological reinforcement of the original *unique* initiation, and secondly, the participation in a continuous “turning back” to God or a continuous “re-creation.” This second idea is articulated through the Akbarian doctrine of *al-khalq al-jadīd*, or “renewal of creation at each instant.” In this sense the idea of continuous initiation serves to conform the initiate to the divine nature, being ‘made in the image.’

The idea that these multiple initiations are reinforcements to an original initiation has some psychological value. These are then “supports”—‘for man was created weak’ (*Qur’an* 4:28)—to keep one on the straight and narrow, so to speak. However, we are considering the idea of existential initiation, an idea that suggests more than just psychological stimulation. We have in mind substantial transformation of the metaphysical or spiritual being. Here the objection may arise that if the original initiation was adequate—producing in a qualified and receptive person an *adaequatio rei et intellectus*, where the intellect of the knower must be adequate, in the sense of being equal (ad-equate: a “making equal to”), to the thing known—then any further initiations would be redundant, insomuch as adequate knowledge of the Absolute must in turn be absolute knowledge. However, this objection is based on an insufficient and limiting conception of the Absolute. To consider this further we turn to the second purpose of continuously “turning back” to God.

Man is ‘made in the image of God.’ God is simultaneously Transcendent and Immanent, the Divine Immanence being manifested as onto-cosmological existence. The cosmogonic act is both unique (*in illo tempore, ab origine*) and perpetuated *ad infinitum*. To be precise, this perpetuation is better described as indefinite, for the adjective infinite should only really be applied to the transcendent realm.³ Again, this perpetuation might be envisaged either as a simultaneous “extension” embracing cosmological existence *in toto in tota simul* or as a series of renewals, each unique and sufficient in and of itself. The former is Meister Eckhart’s “Eternal Birth”: ‘God is creating the whole world now, this instant’.⁴ This conforms to Boethius’ definition of Eternity as

³ See Guénon, *The Multiple States of the Being*, Ch.1 &10; also *Symbolism of the Cross*.

⁴ Meister Eckhart I.37, Evans (tr.), 1956, pp.41-42.

‘*interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possessio* [possession, without succession and perfect, of interminable life]’.⁵ It is worth clarifying this by noting that Aquinas distinguished Eternity from time so that that which is called Eternity properly refers to the Principle rather than manifestation.⁶ The latter is the “renewal of creation at each instant.” Jalāl ud-dīn Rūmī: ‘Every breath, then, thou art dying and returning ... Life is ever arriving anew, like a stream, though in the body it has the semblance of continuity’.⁷ In his *Lawā’ih*, Nur-ud-din ‘Abd-ur-rahman Jamī speaks of the instantaneous renewal of the universe: ‘The universe consists of accidents pertaining to a single substance, which is the Reality underlying all existence. This universe is changed and renewed unceasingly and at every moment and breath’.⁸ As Reynold Nicholson says, ‘phenomena are perpetually changing and being created anew, while God remains as He was, is, and shall be. The whole infinite series of individualisations is in fact one eternal and everlasting *tajallī* (illumination), which never repeats itself.’⁹ This last point is vital: the “eternal return,” to use this phrase made famous by Mircea Eliade, is not a “repeat” but a making “anew”—‘Look, I am making the whole of creation new’ (Rev.21:5). Moreover, as Ibn al-‘Arabī tells us, there is ‘no moment of non-being between the successive acts of creation’.¹⁰ God is continuously creating the world anew; man—‘made in the image of God’—is thus not only entitled to re-enact his perfect initiation (*in illo tempore, ab origine*) but, in effect, obliged to do so by the very participation in the Divine Identity that initiation begets.

One may liken the above complexities to the “problem” of creation itself, which is often articulated through the problem of suffering and evil: Why did God not create the world in a perfect unchanging state? In answer Ibn al-‘Arabī says, ‘It is part of the perfection of Being that there

⁵ *De Consol. Phil.*, 5.6.

⁶ See *Summa Theologica* 1.10.

⁷ Rūmī, *Mathnawī* 1.1142-8, Nicholson (tr.), 1921.

⁸ *Lawā’ih* 26, tr. E. H. Whinfield & M. M. Kazwini, London: Oriental Translation Fund XVI, 1906, p.42, cited in A. K. Coomaraswamy, *Time and Eternity*, Ascona, Switzerland: Artibus Asiae Supplementum Vol. 8, 1947, p.99.

⁹ R. Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, 1921, p.154.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.154, n.1. Nicholson cites Ibn al-‘Arabī (see *Fusūs al-hikam*, chapter on Shu‘aib and chapter on Solomon).

Towards a definition of “initiation”

is imperfection in it.’¹¹ Similarly, Frithjof Schuon: ‘The All-Possibility must by definition and on pain of contradiction include its own impossibility’;¹² and again: ‘the world is a necessary aspect of the absolute necessity of Brahman. Put another way, relativity is an aspect of the Absolute. Relativity, *Māyā*, is the *Shakti* of the Absolute, *Brahman*. If the relative did not exist, the Absolute would not be the Absolute’.¹³

Some may still see the above in terms of a necessary “weakness” or “failing.” Here it may be more profitable to see the “continuous”—in the sense of continuity and hence unity—turning to God in terms of St. Gregory of Nyssa’s idea of *epektasis* (“extension,” as in “stretching forth” in “tension”).¹⁴ Gregory develops this from *Philippians* 3.13: ‘Brothers, I do not reckon myself as having taken hold of it [Perfection]; I can only say that forgetting all that lies behind me, and straining (*epekteinomenos*) forward to what lies in front, I am racing towards the finishing-point to win the prize of God’s heavenly call in Christ Jesus.’ Gregory’s *epektasis* represents a movement of perpetual ascent towards God, who is immovable. As Jean Daniélou remarks, ‘There is at once for the soul an aspect of stability and possession, which is her participation in God, and an aspect of movement, which is the ever infinite gap between what she possesses of God and what He is ... Spiritual life is thus an everlasting transformation of the soul in Christ Jesus in the form of a growing ardour, thirst for God growing as participation in Him increases, which is accompanied by a growing stability, the soul becoming simple, and fixed ever more firmly in God.’¹⁵ As used by Gregory, *epektasis* refers to the drawing of the soul ever onwards ad infinitum in *aeternitas*, where Eternity, as Boethius says, ‘is the perfect possession of an interminable life in total simultaneity (*tota simul*) ... whereas there is nothing placed in time which can embrace the whole of its life at once... For it is one thing to be led through an interminable life ... and another thing to embrace the whole of an interminable life present in all its complexity.’¹⁶ St. Gregory Palamas takes up the idea of *epektasis* in his Triads. As John Meyendorf

¹¹ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Al-Futuhat al-makkiyyah (Meccan Revelations)*, cited in Austin’s introduction to his translation of *Fusus*, 1980, p.40.

¹² F. Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.102.

¹³ F. Schuon, *Language of the Self*, 1999, p.28.

¹⁴ See for example *Against Eunomius* 8.5.

¹⁵ J. Daniélou: *Platonisme et théologie mystique*, 1944, pp. 305-307.

¹⁶ Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy* 5.6.

Symbolic Exegesis

observes in his introduction to *The Triads*, ‘Communion with God never becomes exhaustion or saturation, but implies the revelation that greater things are always to come.’¹⁷ He continues to note that ‘the model of the *Song of Songs* inspires the mystics in describing union with God as a limitless ascent “from glory to glory,” similar to a perfect form of erotic love, in which true joy is, at the same time, fulfilment and further expectation.’¹⁸ It is not that man is obliged to perpetuate the “suffering” of relativity by continuously turning to and then from God—as if this was possible, for ‘Wherever you turn, there is the face of God’ (*Qur’an* 2:115)—so as to be able to again turn *back* again to God, but rather that each initiation effects an ascent *towards* God, and at the same time deeper *into* the Heart of God, so that one is in a state of perfect tension (*epektasis*). Each act of initiation is *the* initiation *in toto* and simultaneously an unfolding of the infinitude prefigure by the first initiation.



These comments refer to what we have called “initiation of substance,” being a turning back (*convertio*) to the beginning (*intium*), in the sense of both origin and principle (*principium*). This, as we have noted, is initiation *de facto* if not *de jure*. Now, moving from the abstract to the concrete we need to consider what specifically can constitute such initiation. Here it is the case that any phenomenon might act to trigger the existential “turning back” and “first step” of initiation. This phenomenon may be formal, in the sense of a religious rite or symbolism, or informal, in the sense of Virgin Nature. With respect to the former, Titus Burckhardt remarks, ‘To carry out a rite is not only to enact a symbol but also to participate, even if only virtually, in a certain mode of being, a mode which has an extra-human and universal extension’.¹⁹ Thus, according to Martin Lings, ‘The symbolism of a rite is its very essence, without which it would lose its ritual quality’.²⁰ This formal symbolism may take various characteristics or modes. Adrian Snodgrass explains: ‘The net of symbolic cognates is formed not only by

¹⁷ J. Meyendorf, Introduction to *Gregory Palamas: The Triads*, 1983, pp.14-15.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.15.

¹⁹ T. Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, 1976, p.99.

²⁰ M. Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, 1971, p.177.

Towards a definition of “initiation”

visual and spatial symbols, but also by symbolic constructs expressed in other modes: *myth*, which is symbol expressed in a verbal or narrative form; *ritual*, which expresses the symbolic concepts by gestures and words; and *doctrine*, which expresses them conceptually.²¹ These modes are not exclusive. Ritual and doctrine may be found in myth, doctrine may be expressed through ritual, and the eternal Myth—the story of the Divine and the human—is “spoken” through participation in ritual and doctrine. Again, each mode is expressed through various types. For example, the symbolic dialogue of mythology may be expressed both orally and visually. As Snodgrass observes, ‘what the architectural symbol is spatially the myth is verbally.’²²

With respect to Virgin Nature: in the first case, the entire cosmos is a theophany, eternally singing the praise of God for those with eyes to see and ears to hear—thus William Blake says ‘a fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees’.²³ Here, as Seyyed Hossein Nasr remarks, theophany (“to show God”) ‘does not mean the incarnation of God in things but the reflection of the Divinity in the mirror of created forms.’²⁴ In the second case, any individual phenomenon may reveal the full nature of Reality so, as Schuon says, ‘For the sage each flower is metaphysically a proof of the Infinite.’²⁵ Just so individual phenomena can be the source of initiation; that is to say, a flower, a rock, a tree, an animal, a landscape, any of these might “offer initiation,” any of these might be one’s “spiritual master.” An obvious case at hand is the relationship between Sri Ramana Maharshi and Mt. Arunachala.

The objection arises that this way of considering initiation renders the term virtually meaningless, inasmuch as everything is then initiatic. It is certainly worthwhile to recognise this danger; however, this objection fails to take full stock of what is at issue. In the final analysis the ultimate purpose of initiation is knowledge of God; if God is everything, then everything is initiatic, or at least has the potential to be so to the degree that one is able to see God everywhere. But this does not render the idea of initiation or the initiatic efficacy of particulars meaningless anymore than saying that God is One renders the especial

²¹ A. Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stupa*, 1985, p.6.

²² *Ibid.*, p.6.

²³ Blake, *The Proverbs of Hell*.

²⁴ S. H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 1981, p.215, n.6.

²⁵ Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.10.

Symbolic Exegesis

nature of multiple Revelations meaningless. In fact this most fundamental sense of initiation simply serves as the measure by which particular initiations may be understood and assessed: that most secret, specific and particular *initiation*, if it is to be truly initiatic in the deepest sense of this idea, must in the end be the transmission of the knowledge of God and hence Unity.

Initiation of substance may be realized to varying degrees, as we have noted, and in most instances there is no way of confirming an existential change, although in some exception cases a luminosity of the face is reported. In a sense, it is partly to guard against the kind of subjective claims of initiation that these degrees of experience potentially allow that a formalistic and legalistic form of initiation is required. This brings us to the second form of initiation.

Legalistic initiation

The second form of religious initiation pertains specifically to what we might call “legalistic initiation.” Here we are concerned with the role of initiation as an introduction to certain levels of religious knowledge or states of being, usually through the means of rites, which thereby admit the initiate into a relationship with a mystery, be it a spiritual state or simply a level of recognition within a society. The term “introduction” is maybe too weak here; René Guénon talks of initiation as the transference of spiritual states or “blessings,” and whatever may be said of Guénon’s application of his definition to certain traditions (namely Christianity) this definition is entirely orthodox—let me stress that I am using the term orthodox in a general sense. According to this view the “blessing” has an ontological status independent of the initiator or the initiate.

Legalistic initiation is initiation *de jure* if not necessarily *de facto*. This qualification is given for it is theoretically possible that an hypocritical or even evil person might partake of a religious rite, or that a fool might pass through a rite of initiation by sheer mimicry. However, in the final analysis, which considers the rite according to its symbolic and metaphysical efficacy, all initiation will have an effect albeit that it may be at a level of ontological reality imperceptible to its participants. Just so, might we say, did St. Francis preach to the birds.

When I use the example of an “evil” person partaking of an initiation or, more precisely, partaking in an initiatic rite, my intention is to put

Towards a definition of “initiation”

the problem into bold focus. However, our evil person might well be replaced by an ignorant person (undoubtedly there are many ignorant spiritual leaders and followers in all religions). In both cases the effect of either the evil or ignorance must be said to be on the recipient not the sacrament, that is to say, not on the blessing that affects union with the Origin. However, there is a difference in that a person who is ignorant, that is, deficient in understanding of the full intellectual significance of the sacrament, can still stand before God in a state of sincerity that empties them to receive His blessing; in contrast, an evil person, by definition, stands before God full of their own pride so that what is offered them spills instead into the world (for God’s blessing are never wasted). In both cases God gives abundantly.

The above comments question the purpose of the initiatory “effect.” Without going into too much detail, let us say that the blessing has firstly an objective and transcendent reality unaffected by human conditions. It then has a supra-individual efficacy, which is to say, the performance of an initiatic rite effects a cosmic consequence (in a similar sense to the idea of *karma*); this is also unaffected by the state of the participants. It then has an effect on the participants of the rite and principally, but not exclusively, the recipient, but this is precisely a comm-union and involves two parties: the recipient and God, and thus the effect here is proportional to the spiritual receptivity of the recipient.

Purification or Union

The final point I wish to briefly mention is the nature of this “effect.” Common usage tends to consider the effect of initiation in terms of “purification”: one must be purified before one can set out on the “first step of the journey.” I think it is fair to say that the most immediate (the exoteric, if you will) view of religion restricts the usage of the term initiation to the idea of purification as a first step. This is then seen as distinct from the idea of “Union” with God, which is conceived of in terms other than initiation. This view is justified within an exoteric framework that is itself rooted in the spatio-temporal domain and must therefore conceive of things sequentially. Again this view is justified by the sense of *intium*, inasmuch as purification is a return to the beginning, “before” the stains of sin, which are precisely what is cleansed during purification. However, initiation is also *initiāre*, where

Symbolic Exegesis

origination implies Origin, that which is both Principle and effect. To talk of initiation as return to the Principle is to talk of it as Union with God. In the final analysis the only real purification can be the “making anew” in Union. Taking the Christian tradition as an example, we can say that initiation is most immediately associated with the rite of Baptism, while Union is associated with the Eucharistic communion. But, in the deepest sense of the term initiation, we must also say that the Eucharist is an initiatic rite. In fact in some forms of Christianity, Baptism and the Eucharist are not two separate rites but one initiatic mystery. As Jean Borella observes, the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist ‘were often conferred at a single time and were considered ... to be part of the baptismal rites’.²⁶ The fact that they have “separated” in many forms of Christianity does not diminish their unity, or might we say, *the* unity of *the* Mystery, for the blessing that it effects is itself beyond time and space: it is in fact the Centre and the Origin, from which all things originate anew.

²⁶ Borella, *Guénonian Esoterism and Christian Mystery*, 2004, p.362.