

# Looking Forward to Tradition Ancient Truths and Modern Delusions\*

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*...the very idea of tradition has been destroyed to such an extent that those who aspire to recover it no longer know which way to turn*

René Guénon<sup>1</sup>

*In all epochs and all countries there have been revelations, religions, wisdoms; tradition is a part of mankind, just as man is part of tradition*

Frithjof Schuon<sup>2</sup>

“When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life...”, said Samuel Johnson. Well, ladies and gentlemen, I am tired of neither. I am very glad to be here. And it is through the good graces and generosity of the Matheson Trust and the Temenos Academy that I am so, though I hope you will not hold them to account for anything I might say tonight. But let us not tarry over introductions...

Penicillin, computers, man on the moon, Bertrand Russell, democracy, compulsory education, the United Nations, longer life expectancy, mobile phones, indoor toilets, anesthetics, Albert Einstein, the internet, the Genome Project... a random sample of the sorts of things which are often marshaled by the apostles of “progress”. Looking at such a catalogue of apparent marvels one might be tempted to recall Terry Pratchett’s wise dictum that, “Progress just means bad things happen faster”. More seriously, thinking about the last century some of us might compile a more sobering and blood-soaked list. For instance: the Somme, Auschwitz, Hiroshima, serial killers, the Gulag, Chernobyl, 50 million-plus refugees worldwide today, environmental devastation, terrorism, Pol Pot, Bhopal, pornography as global mega-business, chemical and biological weapons. Nonetheless, the idea of Progress is one of the most potent shibboleths of modernity. It comes dressed in many alluring guises, often hand-in-hand with its shady accomplice, evolutionism, and finds applications in many fields. So pervasive is this

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<sup>1</sup> René Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity & the Signs of the Times* (first published 1945) (Ghent, NY: Sophia Perennis et Universalis, 1995), pp. 251–252.

<sup>2</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2006), p. 25.

idea in the modern climate, so much taken for granted, that it has become almost invisible—rather like the smog to which urban dwellers become inured. No doubt the unprecedented barbarisms of the 20th century have caused some disenchantment but the tenacity of the idea is remarkable. “Progress” has a long and sordid pedigree in Western thought, and many brutalities and infamies have been justified in its name. To mention just one we might adduce the extirpation of the nomadic cultures, one of the most appalling vandalisms of the last few centuries: Cain’s murder of Abel repeats itself on a vast scale. The idea of Progress is modernity’s siren song, luring the ways of the past to their destruction. But it is not my purpose tonight to unravel this dark history, nor to analyze the ways in which the pseudo-myth of Progress contaminates almost all aspects of modern thought. In the first instance, I want to focus on an idea which stands at radical odds with it: “Tradition”.

“Tradition” has accumulated many unhappy political and sentimental accretions over the last two centuries. Here is Henry Ford, one of the pioneers of industrial mass production:

I don’t know much about history, and I wouldn’t give a nickel for all the history in the world. History is more or less bunk. It is tradition. We want to live in the present, and the only history that is worth a tinker’s damn is the history we make today.<sup>3</sup>

More often than not nowadays the word “tradition” is used pejoratively, signifying the “dead weight” of the past, useless baggage which should now be jettisoned. Hence Brian Eno, the avant-garde musician, tells us that when he returned to England after a year’s absence, “the country seemed stuck, dozing in a fairy tale, stifled by the weight of tradition”. The English actress, Minnie Driver, declares that, “You do a James Bond film, you’re being part of an anachronism, a tradition”—well gosh Minnie, we wouldn’t want that!<sup>4</sup> For others adherence to “tradition” betrays a mental condition—lazy, conformist, stagnant—as when Jiddu Krishnamurti declares that, “Tradition becomes our security, and when the mind is secure it is in decay” whilst another commentator warns us that, “tradition” is “one of those words conservative people use as a shortcut to thinking.”<sup>5</sup> Sometimes the term signals no more than blind custom, or some institution which has persisted over generations but which is now obsolete. Defenders of tradition are associated with a “nostalgia for the past”, and perhaps with “romanticism” and “folklore”—sentimental fuddy-duddies with their heads in cloudy idealizations of a Golden Age that never was.<sup>6</sup> Lewis Mumford put the case a little more charitably when he remarked that, “Traditionalists are pessimists about the future and optimists about the past”.<sup>7</sup> I prefer to say that it is a matter of neither pessimism nor optimism but of

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.searchquotes.com/quotes/about/Traditions/>

<sup>4</sup> Eno and Driver quotes at: <http://www.brainyquote.com>

<sup>5</sup> Krishnamurti and Ellis quotes at: <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/tradition>

<sup>6</sup> For some comments about these associations see Frithjof Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence* (London: Perennial Books, 1975), p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> <http://thinkexist.com/quotations/traditions/2.html>

seeing things clearly. I also want to repudiate the conventional notion that we look back on Tradition, belonging to the past, and we look forward to Progress, taking us into the future. Perhaps some of you had the privilege of knowing the late Lord Northbourne. He entitled one of his books *Looking Back on Progress*; in similar vein, and following the suggestion of our Chairman, I entitle this talk “Looking Forward to Tradition”. My sub-title is “Ancient Truths and Modern Delusions” which some of you will recognize as an oblique tribute to Martin Lings and his book *Ancient Beliefs and Modern Superstitions*.

Of course, in some quarters, even today, the word “tradition” retains some weight and dignity. Perhaps its most positive usages have been within the discourses of religion and cultural history (and perhaps cricket!): think, for instance, of Dr. Leavis’ use of the term when he writes that a literary tradition is “essentially more than an accumulation of separate works: it has an organic form, or constitutes an organic order, in relation to which the individual writer has his [or her] significance”.<sup>8</sup> Or recall T.S. Eliot’s use of “tradition” to refer to “all those habitual actions, habits, and customs, from the most significant religious rite to our conventional way of greeting a stranger, which represent the blood kinship of ‘the same people living in the same place’.”<sup>9</sup> Here Eliot renders the term more or less synonymous with “culture” which he defined as “a whole way of life” and “all the characteristic activities and interests of a people”.<sup>10</sup> However, no denying that in recent years the word “culture”, like “tradition”, has been corroded and tarnished by postmodernist theorizing, and by the general “slaughter of the ancestors” conducted by over-heated ideologues and by those Parisian “monks of negation”—Foucault, Derrida et. al.

I want to argue that “tradition”, in its full amplitude, is a *religious* and *metaphysical* conception and that even its more positive latter-day meanings and associations—as in writers such as Leavis and Eliot—are somewhat restrictive while its more negative usage, as in the postmodernist lexicon, betrays a complete ignorance of what the term might properly comprise. Some seventy years ago, the French metaphysician, René Guénon, observed, “the very idea of tradition has been destroyed to such an extent that those who aspire to recover it no longer know which way to turn”<sup>11</sup>—words certainly no less true today than then!

Guénon’s name brings us to one of the central concerns of this talk: the understanding of tradition to be found in a small group of thinkers and writers who have hitherto exerted only a marginal influence on the Anglophone world but whose works unravel some of the darkest enigmas of modernity. Because of the key place occupied in their thought by “tradition”, the figures in question have sometimes been referred to as “traditionalists”; another designation is “perennialist”.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> F.R. Leavis in *Two Cultures* (1962), quoted in Andrew Milner, *Contemporary Cultural Theory* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991), p. 27.

<sup>9</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Selected Prose* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953), p. 20.

<sup>10</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Notes towards a Definition of Culture* (London: Faber, 1965), p. 31.

<sup>11</sup> Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity*, pp. 251–252.

<sup>12</sup> While Ananda Coomaraswamy, the great art historian and savant, occasionally used the term “traditionalist” in a straightforward way to describe an outlook in conformity with traditional

The traditionalist perspective was first publicly articulated by René Guénon (1886–1951), the remarkable French intellectual (sometimes misleadingly described as an “occultist” and “orientalist”) whose metaphysical writings really inaugurate the movement. Since the time of Guénon’s first writings, a century ago, a significant traditionalist “school” has emerged with Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877–1947) and Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998) recognized as its most authoritative exponents. Other leading figures include Titus Burckhardt, Marco Pallis, Martin Lings and Seyyed Hossein Nasr.<sup>13</sup> These writers are committed to the explication of the Perennial Philosophy which lies at the heart of the diverse religions and behind the manifold forms of the world’s different traditions. At the same time, unlike many other so-called perennialists—Aldous Huxley might serve as an example—they are dedicated to the preservation and illumination of the traditional forms which give each religious heritage its distinctive character and guarantee its formal integrity and, by the same token, ensure its spiritual efficacy. In other words they have insisted on the incalculable value of religious orthodoxy.

St Augustine speaks of “Wisdom uncreate, the same now as it ever was and ever will be”.<sup>14</sup> This timeless wisdom has carried many names: *Philosophia Perennis*, *Lex Aeterna*, *Hagia Sophia*, *Din al-Haqq*, *Akalika Dhamma* and *Sanatana Dharma* are among the better known. In itself and as such this truth is formless and beyond all conceptualizations. Any attempt to define it is to chase the wind with a net.

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principles, Guénon himself applied it negatively to certain individuals who in reaction to the relentless march of modernity were calling for some kind of traditional restoration in the West although they were themselves unaware of the true nature of tradition: “people who,” as Guénon wrote, “have only a sort of tendency or aspiration towards tradition without really knowing anything at all about it...”. (*Reign of Quantity*, pp. 251–252.) He called these people “traditionalists” and their vague objectives “traditionalism” which he contrasted with “the true traditional spirit”. It is important to note in this context that, at that time, a Guénonian school guided by a proper understanding of tradition had not yet emerged, and by the time such a movement began to take shape mid-century, not only were both Guénon and Coomaraswamy no longer alive, but the war years had effectively put an end to such revivalist agitation as Guénon had in mind when he first used those terms. Therefore, some three decades later when the new traditionalist movement had established itself and attracted sufficient attention, it was inevitable that the term “traditionalism” should be used to describe its message and that its members be called “traditionalists”. If the traditionalists themselves have used the term cautiously this is doubtless because they do not see themselves as a “school”, nor the principles they affirm as constituting any kind of “-ism”. See Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*, p. 6, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) p. 104.

<sup>13</sup> Coomaraswamy, of English and Sri Lankan parentage, was an art historian, philosopher and Curator of the Asian collection of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Schuon was born in Alsace of German parents, trained as a textile designer, spent time in North Africa and eventually became a Sufi Shaykh. He is the author of some thirty books on religious and metaphysical subjects. Titus Burckhardt (1908–1984), a schooldays friend of Schuon, worked in publishing, and was the author of many books on sacred arts and sciences. Marco Pallis (1895–1989) was a musician, mountaineer and the author of several works on Buddhism. Martin Lings (1909–2005) was for many years Keeper of Oriental Manuscripts at the British Museum, a poet, author and spiritual teacher. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1931) is recognized as one of the leading Islamicists in the contemporary world and holds a chair at George Washington University.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, “Fragments of a Confession”, in *The Philosophy of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan*, ed. P. A. Schilpp (New York: Tudor, 1952), p. 80.

This universal wisdom, in existence since the dawn of time and the spiritual patrimony of all humankind, can also be designated as the Primordial Tradition. Guénon refers, in one of his earliest articles, to “the Tradition contained in the Sacred Books of all peoples, a Tradition which in reality is everywhere the same, in spite of all the diverse forms it assumes to adapt itself to each race and period...”.<sup>15</sup> In this sense tradition is synonymous with the perennial philosophy itself which is universal and immutable.<sup>16</sup> “Tradition” in its purest metaphysical sense—the sense in which Guénon often means it—signifies the unity of First Principles, an eternal wisdom which, in Schuon’s words, signifies “the totality of the primordial and universal truths”,<sup>17</sup> it is one and the same timeless Wisdom which can be found, sometimes heavily veiled, in all the sacred Scriptures, and which nourishes all integral religious traditions. This is a first principle, the *sine qua non* of traditionalist thought. It has met with a good deal of skepticism, even derision, in modern times, which only goes to show how far we have “progressed” in our foolishness. On the other hand, the credibility of the principle, if one might so put it, has also been compromised by a rag-tag of so-called “gurus” and pseudo-spiritual movements claiming adherence to some vague universalist “essence” without really understanding its nature. More often than not such people are shameless iconoclasts who repudiate the very forms in which the perennial wisdom is necessarily clothed; they are also, thereby, anti-traditional.

Schuon and other perennialists point out that all the great religious teachings, albeit in the differing vocabularies appropriate to the spiritual economy in question, affirm a primordial truth or wisdom. We remember Krishna’s declaration, in the *Bhagavad Gita*, of the pre-existence of his message, proclaimed at the dawn of time.<sup>18</sup> Likewise Christ, speaking in his cosmic function as Incarnation of the Truth, states, “Verily I say unto you, before Abraham was, I am”.<sup>19</sup> Affirmations of the principle are to be found over and over in the religious traditions.<sup>20</sup> “Tradition”

<sup>15</sup> René Guénon in *La Gnose*, 1909, quoted in Whitall Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1971), p. 20.

<sup>16</sup> See Ananda Coomaraswamy, “Vedanta and Western Tradition” in *Selected Papers 2: Metaphysics*, ed. Roger Lipsey, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 7. See also Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, p. 74.

<sup>17</sup> Frithjof Schuon, “The Perennial Philosophy”, in *The Unanimous Tradition*, ed. Ranjit Fernando (Colombo: Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies, 1991), p. 21. When comparing the terms *sophia perennis* and *philosophia perennis* Schuon explains that he prefers “the term *sophia* to that of *philosophia*, because the latter is less direct and in addition it evokes associations of ideas with a completely profane and all too often aberrant system of thought”. See also Frithjof Schuon, *The Feathered Sun* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1990), p. 114, where he refers to this underlying unity or totality as the Primordial *Sanatana Dharma*.

<sup>18</sup> *Bhagavad Gita* 4.6.

<sup>19</sup> *St John* 8.58. For a brief commentary see Marco Pallis, *A Buddhist Spectrum* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1980), p. 157.

<sup>20</sup> Chou Li: “The true doctrine has always existed in the world” (in Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, p. 794); St Augustine: “That which is called the Christian Religion existed among the Ancients, and never did not exist, from the beginning of the human race” (cited in Radhakrishnan, “Fragments of a Confession”, p. 80); Plotinus: “There must first be one from which the many arise. This one is competent to lend itself to all yet remain one...this is identity in variety” (in Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, p. 776).

in its most pristine sense is this primordial truth and as such takes on the status of a first cause, a cosmic datum, a principial reality woven into the very fabric of the universe. As such it is not amenable to “proof”; it is a self-evident, self-validating principle in the face of which it is possible only to understand or not understand. As Coomaraswamy points out, “a first cause, being itself uncaused, is not probable but axiomatic”.<sup>21</sup> Thus the Primordial Tradition or *sophia perennis* is of supra-human origin and is in no sense a product or evolute of human thought: it is “the birth-right of humanity”.<sup>22</sup> It is, in Marco Pallis’s words, “formless and supra-personal in its essence” and thus “escapes exact definition in terms of human speech and thought”. Deploying a Buddhist idiom, Pallis also writes this:

Only the divine Suchness is unborn and therefore undying, limitless and therefore not limiting, free and therefore the seat of Deliverance. The voice of tradition is the invitation to that freedom whispered in the ear of existential bondage; whatever echoes that message in any degree or at any remove may properly be called traditional; anything that fails to do so, on the other hand, is untraditional and humanistic.<sup>23</sup>

However, the word sometimes carries a different signification which can be confusing. Etymologically “tradition” simply means “that which is transmitted” and this is the key to the second meaning of the word. Here tradition cannot simply be equated with a formless and immutable Truth but is rather that Truth as it finds formal expression, through the medium of a divine Revelation, in the myths, rituals, doctrines, iconographies and other manifestations of different primal and religious civilizations. The Truth as such is formless and so cannot be conveyed, as such, within forms: thus it is *aspects* of Truth or, we might say, *partial truths* or *intimations* which are transmitted by traditional forms.<sup>24</sup> Thirdly, “tradition” may sometimes refer to the living process of the transmission itself. Lastly it may also refer to the channels of transmission. This is not as confusing as it might look: once the distinction between the first sense and the other three has been grasped then the meaning is signalled by the context in which it is used.

When Guénon uses the word “tradition” he is more often than not referring to the primordial wisdom as such; he was not much interested in history in general, nor in the annals of the particular religions. However, later perennialists frequently use the word “traditions” to refer to different religious and spiritual heritages as they are manifested in time, conduits for the transmission of truths of supra-human origin, couched in the forms which have been providentially

<sup>21</sup> Ananda Coomaraswamy, *Time and Eternity* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1993), p. 42n.

<sup>22</sup> Coomaraswamy in Letter to Vasudeva Saharan Agrawala, March 1939, *Selected Letters of Ananda Coomaraswamy*, ed. Rama Coomaraswamy & Alvin Moore Jr (New Delhi: Oxford University Press/Indira Gandhi National Center, 1988), p. 168.

<sup>23</sup> Pallis cited in the Introduction to Fernando, *The Unanimous Tradition*, p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> A caution must here be issued against seeing any particular tradition as no more than a temporal continuity of the Primordial Tradition. Guénon’s work sometimes leaves the way open for this kind of misunderstanding. For a definitive treatment of the relationship between Tradition and the traditions see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, ch. 2, esp. pp. 66–69, 74; see also Whitall Perry, “The Revival of Interest in Tradition” in *The Unanimous Tradition*.

adapted to suit the needs and receptivities of the peoples and civilizations in question. Tradition, then, entails “an effective communication of principles of more-than-human origin... through use of forms that will have arisen by applying those principles to contingent needs.”<sup>25</sup>

Plainly tradition here means vastly more than the observance of custom; it cannot be understood as a mere temporal continuity nor assimilated to any historical process. As Brian Keeble has observed:

...tradition is far beyond being merely an accumulation of human endeavour and invention even if it does have a history. Granting that the external characteristics and expression of a tradition are coloured by and reflect the passage of time, nonetheless, to equate tradition with a form of historical continuity is to ignore its supra-formal essence in the name of which it remains free and objective in relation to spatio-temporal determinations.<sup>26</sup>

As Guénon insisted, “there is nothing and can be nothing truly traditional that does not contain some elements of a superhuman order.”<sup>27</sup> In our context, then, the term cannot be applied to anything of purely human provenance—which is to say most of modern culture, even if traces of fossilized traditional forms inevitably persist. It must always be remembered, to cite Brian Keeble again, that

Tradition cannot be improvised from human means for by the terms of a tradition the human state as such is by definition a mode of ignorance—a blindness that cannot, by merely having recourse to itself, overcome its own unknowingness.<sup>28</sup>

On the other hand, tradition cannot simply be equated with religion which is one form of tradition, neither exclusive nor exhaustive. Thus “tradition” is more inclusive than “religion” though the relationship of the latter to the former is always intimate. A tradition may appear in a guise which cannot strictly be termed “religious”, this word implying the presence of certain formal elements which may be missing. A tradition may, for instance, be embedded in a complex of stories and rituals which might more properly be described as mythological rather than religious. Or again, one might refer to an esoteric wisdom which may be associated with religious forms but which is distinct from them—one can speak, for example, of the Pythagorean or the alchemical tradition. However, these qualifications notwithstanding, in most cases where the word “tradition” is used in a perennialist context the writer has in mind a religious tradition including, of course, whatever esoteric currents might be associated with it. This is to say that tradition here encompasses more than the visible exoteric forms.

Marco Pallis provides us with a kind of working definition of a religious tradition:

<sup>25</sup> Marco Pallis, *The Way and the Mountain* (London: Peter Owen, 1960), p. 203.

<sup>26</sup> Brian Keeble, “Tradition, Intelligence and the Artist”, *Studies in Comparative Religion*, 11:4, 1977, p. 236. The same point is made in Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, p. 69.

<sup>27</sup> Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity*, p. 253.

<sup>28</sup> Keeble, “Tradition, Intelligence and the Artist”, p. 239.

... wherever a complete tradition exists [he writes] this will entail the presence of four things, namely: a source of... Revelation; a current of influence or Grace issuing from that source and transmitted without interruption through a variety of channels; a way of “verification” which, when faithfully followed, will lead the human subject to successive positions where he is able to “actualise” the truths that Revelation communicates; finally there is the formal embodiment of tradition in the doctrines, arts, sciences and other elements that together go to determine the character of a normal civilization.<sup>29</sup>

—Revelation, grace, method, forms: these are the four indispensable constituents of any religious tradition properly so-called.

What then is a traditional civilization? In *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (1948) Eliot posed the question

whether what we call the culture, and what we call the religion of a people are not different aspects of the same thing: the culture being essentially the incarnation (so to speak) of the religion of a people.<sup>30</sup>

The great scholar of Jewish mysticism, Gershon Scholem, has written that tradition “embodies the realisation of the effectiveness of the Word in every concrete state and relationship entered into by a society.”<sup>31</sup> For perennialists, tradition is the “application and full extension in every domain” of Revelation.<sup>32</sup> Thus the Revelation informs the arts and crafts, the sciences and the social life of a traditional civilization, as well as its theology and spiritual means. In this sense, then, tradition is “the chain that joins civilization to Revelation”<sup>33</sup> and “the mediator between time and eternity”.<sup>34</sup> As Seyyed Hossein Nasr insists,

Tradition is inextricably related to revelation and religion, to the sacred, to the notion of orthodoxy, to authority, to the continuity and regularity of transmission of the truth, to the exoteric and the esoteric as well as to the spiritual life, science and the arts.<sup>35</sup>

Of the many formal elements which necessarily appear in any tradition the perennialists have paid especially close attention to sacred art. We might note in passing the implications of Schuon’s affirmation that, “Traditions appear out of the Infinite like flowers; they can no more be invented than can the sacred art which is their witness and their proof.”<sup>36</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Pallis, *The Way and the Mountain*, p. 9.

<sup>30</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Notes towards a Definition of Culture*, p. 28.

<sup>31</sup> Gershon Scholem, “Tradition and Commentary as Religious Categories in Judaism”, *Studies in Comparative Religion*, 3:3, 1969, p. 148.

<sup>32</sup> Perry, “The Revival of Interest in Tradition”, p. 3 (emphasis mine).

<sup>33</sup> Lord Northbourne, *Religion in the Modern World* (London: Perennial Books/J.M. Dent, 1963), p. 34.

<sup>34</sup> A.K. Saran, “The Crisis of Hinduism”, *Studies in Comparative Religion*, 5:2, 1971, p. 93.

<sup>35</sup> Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, p. 68.

<sup>36</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Treasures of Buddhism* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1993), p. 8.

This view of tradition has all manner of implications and applications. Let us consider a few. The traditionalists, unlike most modern social theorists, find no absolute or self-evident value in “society” as such, nor, indeed, in what is called “civilization”. Nor are they susceptible to the “demagogic obsession with purely ‘social’ values” which is nowadays so widespread, even amongst believers”.<sup>37</sup> As Schuon points out,

When people talk about “civilization” they generally attribute a qualitative meaning to the term, but really civilization only represents a value provided it is supra-human in origin and implies for the civilised man a sense of the sacred... A sense of the sacred is fundamental for every civilization because fundamental for man; the sacred—that which is immutable, inviolable, and so infinitely majestic—is in the very substance of our spirit and of our existence.<sup>38</sup>

Traditional societies are grounded in an awareness of this reality. Society itself represents nothing of absolute value except insofar as it provides a context for the sense of the sacred and the spiritual life which it implies.<sup>39</sup>

Such a vision of a religious culture is radically opposed to the Marxist/Durkheimian thesis about the relationship between religion and society. It is not society which fashions religion in its own image but religion which shapes the society whose whole rationale is embedded in the sense of which Schuon speaks. In traditional societies, “It is the spiritual, not the temporal, which culturally, socially and politically is the criterion of all other values.”<sup>40</sup> It is from this platform that the traditionalists reaffirm the values of civilizations other than our own and from which the most trenchant critique of modernity can be mounted. Western civilization is now, in Guénon’s words, “devoid of any traditional character with the exception of the religious element”,<sup>41</sup> which itself is increasingly devastated on all sides. Such an understanding also disallows those condescending, sometimes frankly contemptuous, attitudes to the past widespread today amongst so many of the so-called “intelligentsia”.

A tradition is not static, an unchanging datum that persists in a frozen state through time. Traditions are dynamic: if needs be, they can grow, branch out and blossom. However, the principle of continuity which preserves the link with the Revelation must always be respected if the tradition is to remain an integral one. As G.K. Chesterton pithily remarked, tradition “does not mean that the living

<sup>37</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *The Transfiguration of Man* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1995), p. 18.

<sup>38</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Understanding Islam* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1998), p. 26.

<sup>39</sup> One of the most eloquent statements of this principle can be found in the Foreword to A. Govinda, *The Way of the White Clouds* (Boulder: Shambhala, 1970), pp. xi-xii. A traditional society will not necessarily be self-consciously aware of being “traditional”: the conditions pertaining to a traditional order will appear to be natural and normal, no other possibility having intruded itself.

<sup>40</sup> Schuon, *The Transfiguration of Man*, p. 28. See also *Treasures of Buddhism*, pp. 13ff; *Light on the Ancient World*, p. 18; and Abu Bakr Siraj Ed-Din, “The Spiritual Function of Civilization” in *The Sword of Gnosis*, ed, Jacob Needleman (Baltimore: Penguin, 1972), pp. 104ff.

<sup>41</sup> Guénon, quoted in Roger Lipsey, *Coomaraswamy: Life and Work* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 266.

are dead but that the dead are alive”.<sup>42</sup> “The growth of a tradition,” writes Titus Burckhardt, “resembles that of a crystal, which attracts homologous particles to itself, incorporating them according to its own laws of unity.”<sup>43</sup> In the final phrase—“its own laws of unity”—we find the key to the principle of orthodoxy. The great doctrinal formulations which follow a Revelation, usually at some historical distance, do not, essentially, constitute an “addition” to the tradition but an unfolding of principles and perspectives which until then have remained implicit. One thinks of a Shankara, a Nagarjuna, an Aquinas, an Ibn ‘Arabi or the Sixth Patriarch. Such figures disavow any personal “originality”, claiming only to be elaborating the spiritual teaching to which they are heirs. Burckhardt again: “Doctrine grows, not so much by addition of new knowledge, as by the need to refute errors and to reanimate a diminishing power of intuition...”<sup>44</sup> For the traditionalists there is always something providential about the appearance of the great doctors of theology and metaphysics.<sup>45</sup>

## Modernity

Let me now turn briefly to a few remarks about modernity which in the European context means the post-medieval era inaugurated by the Renaissance and subsequently shaped by the Scientific Revolution, the so-called Enlightenment, and the economic and political upheavals and transformations of the 19th century. Our interest here is primarily in what, for want of a better word, we might call “modernism”<sup>46</sup>—the dominant worldview of the post-medieval West. One might classify the ingredients of modernism under any number of schema. Lord Northbourne typifies modernism as ‘anti-traditional, progressive, humanist, rationalist, materialist, experimental, individualist, egalitarian, free-thinking and intensely sentimental’.<sup>47</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr gathers these tendencies together under four general features of modern thought: anthropomorphism (and by extension, secularism); evolution-

<sup>42</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America*, p. 40.

<sup>43</sup> Titus Burckhardt, *Alchemy: Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1972), p. 17.

<sup>44</sup> Titus Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine* (Wellingborough: Thorsons, 1976), p. 17.

<sup>45</sup> Schuon has addressed this issue in unequivocal terms: It is therefore our increasing weakness, and with it the risk of forgetfulness and betrayal, which more than anything obliges us to externalize or make explicit what at the beginning was included in an inward and implicit perfection. Saint Paul needed neither Thomism nor cathedrals, for all profundities and splendors were in himself and all around him in the sanctity of the early community. And this, far from supporting iconoclasts of all kinds, refutes them completely; more or less late epochs—the Middle Ages, for example—have an imperious need for externalizations and developments, just as water from a spring, if it is not to be lost on its way, needs a channel made by nature or by the hand of man; and just as the channel does not transform the water and is not meant to do so—for no water is better than spring water—so the externalizations and developments of a spiritual patrimony are there, not to change that patrimony, but to transmit it as fully and effectively as possible. *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, p. 5.

<sup>46</sup> The term should not here be confused with its more restricted meaning, referring to certain artistic and literary developments originating in late 19th century Europe.

<sup>47</sup> Northbourne, *Religion in the Modern World*, 13.

ist progressivism; the absence of any sense of the sacred; an unrelieved ignorance of metaphysical principles.<sup>48</sup> Frithjof Schuon observes that

...humanistic culture, insofar as it functions as an ideology and therefore as a religion, consists essentially in being unaware of three things: firstly, of what God is, because it does not grant primacy to Him; secondly, of what man is, because it puts him in place of God; thirdly, of what the meaning of life is, because this culture limits itself to playing with evanescent things and to plunging into them with criminal unconsciousness.<sup>49</sup>

Modernism is a disease which continues to spread like a plague across the globe, destroying traditional cultures wherever they are still to be found. Although its historical origins are European, modernism is now tied to no specific area or civilisation. Its symptoms can be detected in a wide assortment of inter-related ‘mind sets’ and ‘-isms’, sometimes involved in cooperative co-existence, sometimes engaged in apparent antagonism, but always united by the same underlying assumptions. Scientism, rationalism, relativism, materialism, positivism, empiricism, evolutionism, psychologism, individualism, humanism, existentialism—these are some of the prime follies of modernist thought, and they are all variations on a theme. Their genealogy can be traced back through a series of intellectual and cultural upheavals in European history to certain vulnerabilities in Christendom which left it exposed to the subversions of a profane science. The Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment were all incubators of ideas and values which first ravaged Europe and then spread throughout the world like a lethal virus. Behind the bizarre array of ideologies which have proliferated in the last few centuries we can discern a growing and persistent ignorance concerning ultimate realities and an indifference, if not always an overt hostility, to the eternal verities of Tradition. Not without reason did William Blake characterize the modern worldview as ‘Single Vision’, a horizontal understanding of reality which strips the ‘outer’ world of its mystery, its grandeur and its revelatory function, and which denies our human vocation. As he so acutely remarked, ‘Man is either the ark of God or a phantom of the earth and the water.’<sup>50</sup> In similar vein, W.B. Yeats penned that now well-known passage, “The mischief began at the end of the seventeenth century when man became passive before a mechanized nature.... Soul must become its own betrayer, its own deliverer, the one activity, the mirror turn lamp.”<sup>51</sup>

Since the Scientific Revolution of the 17th century the prevailing worldview amongst the Western intelligentsia (and alas, increasingly elsewhere) has been

<sup>48</sup> See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, ‘Reflections on Islam and Modern Thought’, *The Islamic Quarterly* 23:3, 1979, 119–131.

<sup>49</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *To Have a Center* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1990), p. 37.

<sup>50</sup> Blake quoted in Kathleen Raine, ‘The Underlying Order: Nature and the Imagination’ in *Fragments of Infinity: Essays in Religion and Philosophy*, ed. Arvind Sharma, (Bridport: Prism Press, 1991), 208.

<sup>51</sup> Introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936).

constructed on the foundations of *scientism*—which is to say on an *ideology*, albeit one heavily camouflaged in the sterilized vestments of “scientific objectivity”. Science (a field and method of inquiry) becomes scientism (an ideology) when it refuses to acknowledge the limits of its own competence, denies the authority of any sources which lie outside its ambit, and lays claim to a comprehensive validity as if it could explain no matter what, and as if it were not contradictory to lay claim to totality on an empirical basis (witness Stephen Hawking’s preposterous pretensions to a “Theory of Everything” or the grandiose claims made on behalf of the Genome Project!). Although this ideology has come under the most cogent criticism from many directions it retains its grip on the modern mentality and its spokesmen are increasingly strident and arrogant in their triumphalism. So it is, for example, that Richard Dawkins can assert, “It is absolutely safe to say that if you meet anybody who claims not to believe in evolution that person is ignorant, stupid or insane”.<sup>52</sup> Thanks for that Richard! So pervasive is the scientistic regime that the American National Science Foundation can asseverate, with hardly a murmur of dissent from *anywhere*, that, “Science extends and enriches our lives, expands our imagination and liberates us from the bonds of ignorance and superstition.” Such bromides are to be found all around us. Yet, as David Berlinsky observes, “there is hardly any reason to believe them to be true”.<sup>53</sup> We might well recall Gai Eaton’s remark that the so-called advance of science is a matter of “knowing more and more about less and less”. Modern science, to be sharply distinguished from what the ancients called natural philosophy, is today effectively inseparable from scientism. That *this* kind of science—and we can find hardly any other, in the Western world at least—might constrict and impoverish our lives, stifle our imaginations and imprison us in both ignorance and superstition, is a proposition which will strike most people as self-evidently absurd.

Some years ago E.F. Schumacher observed that,

Nothing is more conducive to the brutalization of the modern world than the launching of, in the name of science, of wrongful and degraded definitions of man, such as “the naked ape”. What could one expect from such a creature...?<sup>54</sup>

Thanks to the likes of Richard Dawkins such definitions are now more widely countenanced than ever, at least amongst the so-called intellectual elites. Berlinsky observes that it is an article of faith amongst the belligerent atheists that humankind is no more than another biological species, enmeshed in the Darwinian struggle for survival:

The thesis that we are all nothing more than vehicles for a number of “selfish genes” has accordingly entered deeply into the simian gabble

<sup>52</sup> David Berlinsky, *The Devil’s Delusion: Atheism and Its Scientific Pretensions* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), p. 7.

<sup>53</sup> Berlinsky, *The Devil’s Delusion*, p. 16.

<sup>54</sup> E.F. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1977), p. 31.

of academic life, where together with materialism and moral relativism it now seems... self-evident....<sup>55</sup>

The same might be said of many of the other bleak reductionistic accounts of the human being which litter modern thought. Reductionism, to recall Kathleen Raine's vivid image, is that habit of mind "which sees in the pearl nothing but the disease of the oyster".<sup>56</sup>

No one will deny that modernity has its compensations, though these are often of a quite different order from the loudly trumpeted 'benefits' of science and technology—some of which are indubitable but many of which issue in consequences far worse than the ills which they are apparently repairing. Furthermore, many so-called 'advances' must be seen as the poisoned fruits of a Faustian bargain which must one day come to its bitter conclusion. What indeed is a man profited if he gain the whole world but lose his own soul? In this context we might remind ourselves of Schuon's caution that

When the modern world is contrasted with traditional civilizations, it is not simply a question of seeking the good things and the bad things on one side or the other; good and evil are everywhere, so that it is essentially a question of knowing on which side the more important good and on which side the lesser evil is to be found. If someone says that such and such a good exists outside tradition, the answer is: no doubt, but one must choose the most important good, and it is necessarily represented by tradition; and if someone says that in tradition there exists such and such an evil, the answer is: no doubt, but one must choose the lesser evil, and again it is tradition that embodies it. It is illogical to prefer an evil which involves some benefits to a good which involves some evils.<sup>57</sup>

On the other hand, one real advantage of living in these latter days is the ready access we have to the spiritual treasures of the world's religious and mythological traditions, including esoteric teachings which have hitherto been veiled in secrecy.

If we are to believe the textbooks the story of the modern world is one of man's climb out of a dark world of ignorance, superstition and barbarism into a more spacious and sunlit world wherein we understand how things really stand and in which, with the aid of science and reason, we can determine our own destiny. But as Blake and Yeats so well understood, the modern understandings of the human condition have actually reduced and imprisoned us. Is it not one of the most galling ironies of modernity that these much vaunted ideologies and scientific theorizations which, we are told *ad nauseam*, have emancipated us from 'the shackles of ignorance and superstition', have, in reality robbed us of all that is

<sup>55</sup> David Berlinsky, *The Devil's Delusion: Atheism and Its Scientific Pretensions* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), p. 8.

<sup>56</sup> Kathleen Raine's image cited in Theodore Roszak, *Where the Wasteland Ends* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), p. 264.

<sup>57</sup> Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, p. 33. See also Schuon, *To Have a Center*, pp. 11–12.

most precious in the human estate ‘hard to obtain’, by denying the Divine Spark which we all carry within? This, truly speaking, is a monstrous crime against God and thereby against humanity.

Many of the luminaries of modern thought—from Darwin and Marx, through Nietzsche and Freud, down to the Parisian postmodernists—deprive man of his fundamental freedom by portraying him as the subject of blind, impersonal forces: in Darwin’s case the biological imperatives of the survival of the fittest; for Marx, the dialectic of the material forces of history; for Freud the sexual drive with all its accompanying repressions, projections, complexes and neuroses; for Nietzsche, the ‘will to power’. In each case we are offered a meagre and charmless portrait of the human condition: man as biological organism, as a highly evolved ape whose essential function is to ensure the survival of the species, and whose behaviour is governed by the iron dictates of biological necessity; man as economic animal, fashioned by his material environment and by the impersonal forces of history; man as a herd-creature, mediocre, cowardly, foolish and deluded, redeemed only by the *Übermensch* who dares to exercise the will to power; the human being as a marionette of the dark forces of the *Id*. As Guénon so acutely observed nearly a century ago, “While nineteenth century materialism closed the mind of man to what is above him, twentieth century psychology opened it to what is below him”.<sup>58</sup> But it hardly matters whether these purportedly scientific accounts be of a pseudo-biological, psychological or sociological nature, not to mention the surreal postmodernist “erasure” of the human individual altogether! These are all variations on a single theme—man cut off from the transcendent, a creature living in an entirely horizontal world, a puppet of “drives”, “complexes”, “reflexes”, “conditionings”, “historical forces” or whatever.

It comes as no surprise that each of these thinkers leaves God out of the frame. In the case of Marx, Freud and Nietzsche, the disavowal is quite explicit whilst in Darwin it is a matter of ignoring the question, which amounts to more or less the same thing. The transcendent dimension of both the cosmos and the microcosmic human being is stripped away to leave us in an entirely horizontal world in which there is no longer any sense of our dignity, responsibility and freedom as the children of God. In such a world there is no longer any sense of the sacred from which we might take our spiritual bearings. Our souls cry out for bread but we are given stones. It might also be said that these god-denying thinkers paved the road to the slaughter-houses of the 20th century. We now better understand the truth of Dostoevsky’s frightful premonition that ‘without God, everything is permitted’.

The modern mentality is rationalistic, materialistic, empiricist, historicist and humanistic. The adulation of Reason and of an empirical and materialistic science could only arise in a world in which the sacred sciences of the traditional worlds had been lost. To cleave to these much-vaunted modes of modern thought is simply to announce that one is entirely bereft of any metaphysical discernment, entrapped in the world of *maya*, that tissue of fugitive relativities which makes up the time-space world. As Frithjof Schuon has tersely remarked, “The rationalism

<sup>58</sup> René Guénon, *L’Erreur Spirite* (1923), quoted in Ananda Coomaraswamy, *Hinduism and Buddhism* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1996), p. 61.

of a frog living at the bottom of a well is to deny the existence of mountains; this is logic of a kind, perhaps, but it has nothing to do with reality.<sup>59</sup> To succumb to the idolatry of Reason is also, necessarily, to turn one's back on the ever-present sources of traditional intellectuality and spirituality, which is to say doctrine and spiritual method—the epochal Revelations providentially directed towards various human collectivities, the traditions issuing from these Revelations, the Scriptures and commentaries of the doctors and sages of each tradition, the witness of the saints and mystics. All this is thrown out in favour of the prejudices of the day, largely fashioned by those pseudo-mythologies current at any particular moment.<sup>60</sup> Forget Lao Tzu, forget Meister Eckhart, forget Ramana Maharshi—listen instead to Bertrand Russell or Christopher Hitchens or Sam Harris: can a more bizarre and ludicrous proposition be imagined?

### Our Contemporary Predicament

I started this talk with reference to the pseudo-mythology of “Progress”: the absurdity of progressivism, if one may so call it, is exposed by the most cursory consideration of our contemporary situation. Who can deny that there is indeed a fundamental crisis in the modern world and that its root causes are spiritual. The crisis itself can hardly be disputed. Some of the symptoms: ecological catastrophe, a material sign of the rupture between Heaven and Earth; a rampant materialism and consumerism, signifying a surrender to the illusion that man can live by bread alone; the genocidal extirpation of traditional cultures by the careering juggernauts of ‘modernization’; political barbarities on an almost unimaginable scale; social discord, endemic violence and dislocations of unprecedented proportions; widespread alienation, ennui and a sense of spiritual sterility amidst the frenetic confusion and din of modern life; a religious landscape dominated by internecine and inter-religious strife and by the emergence of aggressive fundamentalisms in both East and West; the loss of any sense of the sacred, even among those who remain committed to religious forms, many of whom have retreated into a credulous religious literalism or into a vacuous liberalism where ‘anything goes’. These ‘signs of the times’—and the inventory is by no means exhaustive—are plain enough to those with eyes to see. No amount of gilded rhetoric about ‘progress’, the ‘miracles of modern science and technology’, or the ‘triumphs of democracy’ (to mention just three of modernity’s “sacred cows”) can hide the fact that our age is tyrannized by an outlook inimical to our

<sup>59</sup> Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 42.

<sup>60</sup> In a passage of singular importance, René Guénon wrote, “...when profane science leaves the domain of a mere observation of facts, and tries to get something out of the indefinite accumulation of separate details which is its sole immediate result, it retains as one of its chief characteristics the more or less laborious construction of purely hypothetical theories. These theories can necessarily never be more than hypothetical, since their starting point is wholly empirical, for facts in themselves are always susceptible of diverse explanations... and besides, such hypotheses are really not inspired by the results of experience to nearly the same extent as by certain preconceived ideas and by some of the predominant tendencies of the modern mentality”; from *Reign of Quantity*, p. 149.

most fundamental needs, our deepest yearnings, our most noble aspirations. As Frithjof Schuon has acutely observed,

That which is lacking in the present world is a profound knowledge of the nature of things; the fundamental truths are always there, but they do not impose themselves because they cannot impose themselves on those unwilling to listen.<sup>61</sup>

Those truths, so often derided in the modern world, can be found in Tradition—and as I hope I have made clear, by this term we mean something very different from the jaundiced senses it has accumulated in the modern mentality. We must dispel the false charges sometimes leveled at traditionalists that they are dusty obscurantists ‘out of touch’ with the contemporary world, that they want to ‘wind back the clock’, that they are romantic reactionaries escaping into an idealized past. Let us never forget that the essential message of tradition is timeless and thus ever new, ever fresh, and always germane to both our immediate condition and to our ultimate destiny. As Schuon remarks, a ‘nostalgia for the past’ is, in itself, nothing; all that is meaningful is ‘a nostalgia for the sacred’ which ‘cannot be situated elsewhere than in the liberating ‘now’ of God’.<sup>62</sup> In this sense we do not look back to Tradition as a kind of relic of the past: we look forward to re-discovering those ever-present intellectual and spiritual treasures vouchsafed by Tradition. From another point of view we might say that we must look neither backwards nor forwards but upwards. And here, by way of an aside, we might note that one of the roots and symptoms of a horizontal worldview is historicism—that mentality which holds that everything is to be explained by the exigencies and vicissitudes of Time. For such a mentality there can be no looking up.<sup>63</sup>

No doubt our crepuscular era is riddled with all manner of confusions but there are many directions in which we can still turn to find a way out of the darkness. It might be through humble listening and dialogue with those representatives of authentic traditional forms such as still survive in the modern world, or through the lessons of the primordial cultures of the nomadic and indigenous peoples. We can turn to the saints and sages who are always in our midst, though often hidden from view, and without whom the world would instantly vanish: in recent times one might mention such figures as the Algerian Sufi master, Shaykh Ahmed Al Alawi, or Hindu sages such as Paramahansa Ramakrishna, Ramana Maharshi and Ananda-mayi, or Native American visionaries such as Black Elk and Chief Thomas Yellowtail, not to mention the many wise lamas and masters of the Far Eastern world. We can turn to the example and writings of those Christian writers who can help us discover anew the spiritual treasures which are close at hand but often forgotten or obscured—I am thinking of figures such as Thomas

<sup>61</sup> Frithjof Schuon, ‘No Activity Without Truth’ in *The Sword of Gnosis*, 28 (a different translation of this article can be found in *The Betrayal of Tradition: Essays on the Spiritual crisis of Modernity*, ed. Harry Oldmeadow [Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2004], 3–14).

<sup>62</sup> Frithjof Schuon, ‘On the Margin of Liturgical Improvisations’ in *The Sword of Gnosis*, 353.

<sup>63</sup> On this subject see Mircea Eliade, “Religious Symbolism and Modern Man’s Anxiety” in *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), pp. 231–245.

Merton, Bede Griffiths, and the French monk, Henri Le Saux who became Swami Abhishiktananda. Then, too, there is the abiding work and example of the great perennialists of whom I have made mention in this talk. At a time when the forces of anti-Tradition sometimes seem overwhelming and when we feel unable to keep our hands to the plough, let us recall Frithjof Schuon's reminder that no effort on behalf of the Truth is ever in vain.<sup>64</sup> Before inviting you to ask me questions which I cannot answer I will conclude this talk, as I have done others, with some salutary words from René Guénon:

Those who might be tempted to give way to despair should realize that nothing accomplished in this order can ever be lost, that confusion, error and darkness can win the day only apparently and in a purely ephemeral way, that all partial and transitory disequilibrium must perforce contribute towards the great equilibrium of the whole, and that nothing can ultimately prevail against the power of truth. Their watchword should be that used formerly by certain initiatory organizations of the West: *Vincit Omnia Veritas*.<sup>65</sup>

Thank you. Peace be with you!

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<sup>64</sup> Schuon, "No Activity Without Truth", 39.

<sup>65</sup> These are the concluding words of René Guénon's *La Crise du Monde Moderne* (1927). This translation is taken from the *Vincit Omnia Veritas* website: <http://www.religiooperennis.org>