

TRADITIONAL AND MODERN ATTITUDES  
TO RELIGIOUS BIOGRAPHY

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Put on the mantle of nothingness, and drink of the cup of annihilation, then cover your breast with the belt of belittlement and put on your head the cloak of non-existence (Attar).<sup>1</sup>

In a traditional civilisation, it is almost inconceivable that a man should lay claim to the possession of an idea (Réne Guénon).<sup>2</sup>

Truth is not and cannot be a personal affair (Frithjof Schuon).<sup>3</sup>

In an essay entitled "The Pertinence of Philosophy", Ananda Coomaraswamy suggested:

. . . if we are to consider what may be the most urgent practical task to be resolved by the philosopher, we can only answer that this is . . . a control and revision of the principles of comparative religion, the true end of which science . . . should be to demonstrate the common metaphysical basis of all religions. . . .<sup>4</sup>

This might well serve as a capsule statement of the intellectual programme for a group of several contemporary thinkers who can be gathered together under the term "traditionalists".

The traditionalist perspective was first publicly articulated in recent times by Réne Guénon. Since the time of Guénon's earliest writings, soon after the turn of the century, a significant

traditionalist "school" has emerged. With Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy and Frithjof Schuon are acknowledged within the group as its most pre-eminent exponents.

The traditionalist outlook stands in sharp contrast to the prevailing attitudes and assumptions which characterize most modern scholarship. Traditionalism is antagonistic to almost all the predominant trends in European thought since mediaeval times. This article is intended as an introduction to traditionalist thought through a comparison of modernist and traditionalist attitudes to biography. An inquiry into this rather specific subject will perhaps open up new perspectives on several larger questions.

In Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus* we are told that the sage resisted all attempts to unravel his personal history:

. . . he could never be induced to tell of his ancestry, his parentage or his birthplace. He showed too, an unconquerable reluctance to sit to a painter or a sculptor, and when Amelius persisted in urging him to allow of a portrait being made he asked him "Is it not enough to carry about this image in which nature has enclosed us? Do you really think I must consent to leave, as a desirable spectacle to posterity, an image of the image?"<sup>5</sup>

The episode is instructive. We see in this anecdote not only an attitude everywhere to be found amongst the wise and the pious but also, at least implicitly, the principle which informs it. The outer person, the egoic self with all its attendant contingencies, is a matter of no lasting significance. It is only the Inner Self which matters, which is not a mere "image". An aversion to any preoccupation with purely personal and temporal considerations is, of course, a characteristic mark of the mystic. It is sometimes thought that a predilection for anonymity and self-effacement is "Eastern" or "oriental". The simple fact is that such an attitude is common amongst those of high spiritual attainment wherever they be found.

Discussing this outlook a recent commentator remarked that:

To an age which believes in personality and personalism, the impersonality of the mystics is baffling; and to an age which is trying to quicken its insight into history the indifference of mystics to events in time is disconcerting.<sup>6</sup>

Between the spiritual posture exemplified by Plotinus and the modern European mania for "personal history" lies a veritable abyss. This

is not the place for a detailed inquiry into the growth of the voracious appetite, scholarly and otherwise, for all manner of biography. However, a few general remarks will serve as a backdrop against which to sketch out the traditionalist attitude.

One of the most potent influences shaping our recent history has been a humanistic individualism, the seeds of which were germinated in the Renaissance. The erosion of traditional Christian values by the Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution, the so-called Enlightenment and the rationalist-positivist-materialist ideologies of the nineteenth century, has been matched by a corresponding growth of secularism and humanism. In alliance they have helped to promote what can properly be called a pseudo-cult of individualism. Several other developments in the European history of ideas have also shaped the growth of an interest in mundane biography. Historicism in its various guises — Marxism, for instance — has sharpened our interest in "events in time" and emphasized the influence of our social environment. More recently psychologism — so called because its practitioners are more often than not dealing in a kind of ideology rather than a science-proper — has focused an interest in the apparently unique experience of each individual person.

Our ideational history since the Renaissance has also been dominated by an emergent and totalitarian scientism, one bereft of any metaphysical framework and operating outside the cadre of any religious tradition. The influence of scientism, conspiring with the political and economic ideologies of industrial capitalism, has done nothing to check the growth of secular humanism and individualism — quite the contrary. The implications of these sorts of changes in the European ethos have been profound and far-reaching. They have everything to do with our current interest in biography.

Part and parcel of this intellectual and cultural change is the triumph of empiricism and of a whole-sale philosophical relativism. All phenomena are reduced to a level where they can be investigated empirically and are situated on the plane of the "natural" or the "cultural". This trend is writ large over the pages of our recent history, evidenced by such characteristically modern modes and value-systems as philosophical rationalism, positivism, dialectical materialism and so on. We can see a somewhat paradoxical expression of it in those typical offspring of the Enlightenment, theories of "natural religion".<sup>7</sup> A recurrent set of modern assumptions about "reality", "human nature" and "knowledge" is embedded in these ideational networks and has infiltrated almost every academic

discipline and shaped our modes of inquiry. A kind of scientific reductionism pervades comparative religion as much as any of the other humane disciplines that have been herded together as "social sciences" — the term itself is revealing of the sorts of assumptions under discussion.

The interest in biography is intertwined with these changes in the European mentality and is linked with the habit of mind which might be called the "relativising impulse". In the biographical field this appears as the tendency to see whatever a person thinks or believes as no more than a function of social background and personal experience. Now whilst this has often been a healthy corrective to culture-bound and ethnocentric views of "reality" and "normality", it has also seduced many minds into an all-embracing relativism. In castigating this outlook Frithjof Schuon has written that it

. . . will not ask whether it be true that two and two make four, rather it will ask from what social background the man has come who declares such to be the case.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, questions about a more or less accidental background take precedence over questions of truth and falsity. Once the objective nature of truth is compromised and everything is seen through the spectacles of relativism, then, of course, such a tendency becomes inevitable.

Psychologism is one of the components in a relativism which has now penetrated the European mentality to such an extent that it is more or less "invisible", so much is it taken for granted. The interest in biography has been consolidated by a psychologistic outlook which is less interested in *what* a person believes than in *why* they believe it. One of the symptoms of a rampant psychologism is what has been called the "psycho-genetic fallacy", namely, the belief that to explain the psychological motivation for an idea is to explain the idea itself. Some thinkers of a psychologistic bent make the even greater error of supposing that if an idea or belief correlates with some "subconscious wish" them, *ipso facto*, this invalidates the idea as such. However, as Erich Fromm points out:

Freud himself states that the fact that an idea satisfies a wish does not mean necessarily that the idea is false. . . . The criteria of validity does [sic] not lie in the psychological analysis of motivation. . . .<sup>9</sup>

No one will deny that there is an intimate nexus between a person's spatio-temporal situation and his or her beliefs, attitudes, values,

ideas and so on. Most of us are creatures of our environment, mentally as well as in other ways. The issue at stake here is this: is this all we are? The traditionalist attitude to biography suggests, as we shall see, a decisively negative response to this kind of question. However, before turning to the traditionalists we should remind ourselves of another trend in modern European thought.

There are those people, who it seems, "invent" or "discover" "new" ideas — Newton, Darwin, Freud or Einstein, to name a few from the "pantheon" of modern science. Similarly in the world of the arts: Michelangelo, or Beethoven, or Tolstoi, we are told, was a creative "genius", a special kind of individual.<sup>10</sup> What so impresses us about such figures is that they seem to have fashioned, out of their own subjective resources, some new idea, some original art form, some fresh and startling perception of the world. Our adulation of such figures is fuelled by a passion for what is called, often improperly, "originality" ("novelty" would sometimes be more apt). There is no gainsaying the fact that the subjective resources of, say, a Michelangelo were considerable indeed. It is the emphasis on subjectivity which is interesting and revealing. As Ananda Coomaraswamy remarked:

Individualists and humanists as we are, we attach an inordinate value to personal opinion and personal experience, and feel an insatiable interest in the personal experience of others. . .<sup>11</sup>

Thus we tend to identify an idea or an art-form with the personality which apparently first gave it expression. This tendency issues from a humanistic individualism and has come to colour the way in which we understand "ideas". Again, there are links with the interest in biography.

The cultural pedigree of this web of ideas and values which we have signalled in a kind of short-hand by terms like "individualism", "humanism" and "scientism" need not concern us here. At present the point which needs to be clearly established is this: the interest in biography has grown in a distinctive climate of ideas. There is, on the other hand, an attitude to biography quite at odds with some of the trends we have mentioned, the attitude evinced by Plotinus. Before turning to several contemporary traditionalists and to some of the principles which sponsor a distaste for biography, a personal reminiscence might not be out of place.

A few years ago a friend had the privilege of looking after a Tibetan lama and of introducing him to a culture which, to him, was strange indeed. One of the phenomena which most astonished the lama was the Europe interest in biography. He was amazed

to learn that quite ordinary people should write about their own lives and those of others, and that there should be such a sizeable market for such personal histories. For him the only biography which could be of any possible value or interest was the life of a saint or sage, an exemplary life rather than one made up of the "paraphernalia of irrelevant living".<sup>12</sup> Coming from what was until recently one of the last bastions of an authentic traditional culture, the lama was expressing a point of view which nowhere would have seemed idiosyncratic until modern times.

Traditionalism as a whole is sharply antagonistic to the predominant trends in European thought since mediaeval times. This can be seen in microcosm in the attitude of the traditionalists to biography and in their related perception of "ideas" and "truth".

When pressed to write his autobiography Coomaraswamy replied:

I must explain that I am not at all interested in biographical matter relating to myself and what I consider the *modern* practise of publishing details about the lives and personalities of well-known men is nothing but a vulgar catering to illegitimate curiosity. . . . All this is not a matter of "modesty" but of *principle*. . .<sup>13</sup>

It was the same principle which left Coomaraswamy indifferent to the question of the copyright of his own works.<sup>14</sup> Plotinus has already introduced us to the principle at hand: the plane of the individual human ego, of the conditioned, subjective personality and of its doings in the world, is the plane of *maya*, of ephemerality and flux, of impermanence. Insofar as a person is no more than a "product" of this environment, they are as nothing in the face of Reality. Likewise, any ideas, or for that matter any art, which grows out of purely subjective and conditioned resources are of no lasting moment. The highest and most urgent purpose of life is to free oneself from the limiting contingencies of one's spatio-temporal situation and from the fetters of the ego, to liberate one's Self from one's self, so to speak, or as Coomaraswamy puts it, to become no one.

In one form or another this lies close to the heart of all the great religious teachings. As. R.D. Laing has observed:

In fact all religious . . . philosophies have agreed that such egoic experience is a preliminary illusion, a veil, a film of *maya* — a dream to Heraclitus, and to Lao-Tzu, the fundamental illusion of all Buddhism, a state of sleep, of death, of socially accepted madness, a womb state to which one has to die, from which one has to be born.<sup>15</sup>

Such, of course, is precisely the point of Christ's teaching about the corn of wheat,<sup>16</sup> of the Prophet's "Die before ye die",<sup>17</sup> and of an inexhaustible wealth of spiritual maxims of like intent from all over the world. Black Elk, the revered Sioux holy-man, espoused the same principle when he said, in the inimitable idiom of the Plains Indians:

. . . what is one man that he should make much of his winters, even when they bend him like a heavy snow? So many other men have lived and shall live that story, to be grass upon the hills.<sup>18</sup>

The lack of historically accurate biographies of the great saints and sages, especially in the East, has often been regretted by scholars. Often we hear talk about "a lack of a sense of history". This is to see the issue only in negative terms. Frithjof Schuon has commented on this question with reference to two of the great Eastern traditions:

What characterizes Buddhism, as also Hinduism and every other comparable doctrine is precisely this, namely that it likes to express . . . its consciousness of the "mythological" character attaching to all formal data; and that is also why it hardly troubles to give its symbols any semblance of historicity, indeed quite the contrary: it sets out to awaken a presentiment of the great rending of the veil that is to come and it tries to suggest from beforehand that facts themselves are nothing but "emptiness".<sup>19</sup>

We cannot plumb the depths of the philosophical and metaphysical issues involved here but the contrast with the modern European obsession with history is marked enough.<sup>20</sup>

From a traditionalist point of view the modern preoccupation with history and the vogue of private biography is nothing other than a symptom of the disproportions of the modern outlook, especially when they are pursued, as they usually are, in the context of profane scholarship. (The emphasis on a *sacred* history, as in the Judaic tradition, is another matter altogether.) They signify a preoccupation with worldly and ephemeral matters and an indifference to ultimate ends.

Closely associated with this stance is another principle of crucial importance. It concerns the nature of "ideas", of "truth", and of our relationship to truth. Guénon stated the principle in striking and unequivocal terms:

. . . if an idea is true it belongs equally to all those capable of understanding it; if it is false there is no reason to be proud of having thought it. A true idea cannot be "new", since truth is not a product of the human mind; the truth exists independently of ourselves, and it is for us simply to comprehend it; outside of this knowledge there can be nothing but error. . .<sup>21</sup>

Here Guénon is speaking, of course, of the principal domain and not of the realm of material exactitudes. In one of his early books Schuon remarked that:

. . . it will be useless to look for anything "profoundly human" in this book . . . for the simple reason that nothing human is profound. . .<sup>22</sup>

He was re-stating the same principle.

The principle of the independence and non-personal nature of truth is nothing new, being repeatedly affirmed within the religious traditions. Something of the traditionalist attitude to truth is antipated in a passage such as this, from an early Buddhist Scripture:

Whether Buddhas arise, O priests, or whether Buddhas do not arise, it remains a fact and the fixed and necessary constitution of being, that all its constituents are transitory. This fact a Buddha discovers and masters, and when he has discovered and mastered it, he announces, teaches, publishes, proclaims, discloses, minutely explains, and makes it clear.<sup>23</sup>

We might compare this with the following passage from Coomaraswamy:

There can be no property in ideas. The individual does not make them but FINDS THEM; let him see to it that he really takes possession of them, and work will be original in the same sense that the recurrent seasons, sunset and sunrise are ever anew although in name the same.<sup>24</sup>

This is the only kind of "originality" in which the traditionalists are interested.

The traditionalist disposition is also governed by certain moral and spiritual values, humility not the least of them. We might profitably pause to ponder the implications of a more or less random sample of maxims which affirm another one of the principles informing the traditionalist tendency to self-effacement.

A man may receive nothing except it be given him from heaven (St John).<sup>25</sup>

. . . no creature, howsoever rational and intellectual, is lighted of itself, but is lighted by the participation of eternal Truth (St Augustine).<sup>26</sup>

Outward existence can perform no act of itself; its acts are those of its Lord immanent in it . . . (Ibn 'Arabi)<sup>27</sup>

. . . no good thing can be done by man alone . . . (Black Elk).<sup>27</sup>

Nothing could be further from the spirit of a humanistic individualism. We are free to take such teaching seriously or not, but in their light one begins to understand the moral dimension of the practice of anonymity in the eyes of the world. What Coomaraswamy called "the invisibility proper to the complete philosopher" is anchored in the virtue of humility, one which Schuon describes as "as a state of emptiness in which our thoughts and actions appear as strangers to us".<sup>29</sup>

Today the traditionalist posture — the distaste for personal biography, the affirmation of the non-personal nature of truth, the immunity to self-publicizing, the refusal to identify ideas as their "own" — is less than common. Nevertheless, there remain those who resist all attempts to identify the ideas to which they give expression with themselves as individual persons, refusing to participate in a kind of "capitalism" of ideas where these are seen as the "creation" and "property" of this or that thinker. (The copyrights laws are, after all, not so different from those regulating patents!) Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, explaining to his editor his reluctance to make public details of his private life, wrote:

. . . there is a sense in which our writings, though born out of ourselves, are worth more than what we are.<sup>30</sup>

Thomas Merton disclaimed any "originality" in his work, writing in one of his Prefaces:

We sincerely hope that it [his book] does not contain a line that is new to Christian tradition.<sup>31</sup>

These remarks share something with the traditionalist position.

Traditionalists like Guénon and Coomaraswamy were quite unconcerned with any aspiration towards a personal "creativity" or "originality" in the sense that the word is now usually understood. Their purpose was the re-expression of the *sophia perennis*, the timeless wisdom which is everywhere and always the same but

which, according to the exigencies of the age, can be expressed anew in such a way as to bring humankind back to the truths it enshrines and the spiritual path which its realisation entails.

We can see, then, that the traditionalist attitude to biography is only one thread in a whole fabric of ideas and values. It is interwoven with principles and values concerning the nature of the human situation, truth, knowledge, the role of ideas and their view of their own function as writers. Any kind of "intellectual individualism", if one might so put it, is out of the question. Thus it is that Coomaraswamy, for instance, abjures any suggestion that he is propounding his own ideas:

I am not a reformer or propagandist. I don't think for myself . . . I am not putting forward any new or private doctrines or interpretations . . . For me there are certain axioms, principles or values beyond question; my interest is not in thinking up new ones, but in the application of those that are.<sup>32</sup>

In other words, it is a matter of being a vehicle for the expression of ideas which belong to everyone and to no one.

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