From the online library at www.worldwisdom.com

3. TRADITIONAL AND MODERN CIVILIZATIONS

T. S. Eliot wrote that each of the great world cultures—Byzantine, Medieval, Islamic, Chinese, or other—is the social and artistic expression of a religious revelation. Each revelation is handed down—unchanged in essence but increasingly elaborated in expression—by the power of tradition. It is through this social and artistic deployment which we call "tradition" that the original revelation comes to permeate, and imprint its particular stamp on, every sector of collective life; and it is precisely this permeation of society by religion that enables us to speak of a "traditional" civilization.

Modern civilization, on the contrary, is the only civilization in history that was not founded on religion. In its origin, and in its subsequent unfolding, it is entirely secular and humanist. It had its first stirrings in the 14th century, at the tail-end of the Middle Ages, and came into full spate with the 15th-century "Renaissance" and the 18th-century "Enlightenment". It has developed at an ever-increasing pace right up to our own day: both the first half and the second half of the 20th century have provided us with a surfeit of unsavory examples of the nature and characteristics of modern "civilization".

I venture to add, without any euphemism, that, for the fully-fledged "traditionalist", these great cultural cataclysms—the "Renaissance" and the "Enlightenment"—have nothing to do with "re-birth" or "light"! On the contrary, they are seen, not as advances, but as successive impoverishments! It is for precisely this reason that the traditionalists see a perfect religious and cultural equivalence between Medieval Christian civilization (the age of the cathedrals, the age of the illuminated Gospel manusscripts, the age of faith) and the religious civilizations of the East. All of these traditional civilizations are to be contrasted with the post-Renaissance, post-Enlightenment, and post-Industrial-Revolution civilization of today. I do not think that this analysis is controversial. What is controversial is the value judgement which we make with regard to the two opposing sets of principles. For it is not a question of a gradual historical process. The Renaissance, and its repetition in the form of the Enlightenment, were conscious revolutionary breaks with the traditional past. It was with these breaks—seen as advances by some and impoverishments

by others—that Europe became different from the rest of the world. That there are two opposing sets of principles—the traditional and the modern—is precisely what is elucidated with such clarity and authority in the works of the authors of the "traditionalist" or "perennialist" school. (*See chapter 11 for a full discussion of this school.*)

In considering here the contrast between traditional and modern civilizations, we will have recourse to Titus Burckhardt's analysis of this in his book *Fez, City of Islam.* As a young man, in the nineteen-thirties, Burckhardt spent some years in Morocco, where he established intimate friendships with some remarkable representatives of the as yet intact heritage of the Islamic Far-West. Already at the time concerned, he committed much of his experience to writing. Not all of this was immediately published, and it was only much later that his definitive works appeared.

In his book on Fez, Burckhardt relates the history of a people and its religion—a history that was often violent, often heroic, and sometimes holy. Throughout the book Burckhardt traces the thread of traditional Islamic mores and attitudes, and he uses these to introduce us to the meaning of the traditional way of life as such. He helps us to understand not only, let us say, remote Tibet or remote Tamilnad, but also our own European Middle Ages—for example the Celto-Christian world of Kells, Iona, and Lindisfarne, and the Saxon and Norman periods in England.

Basing himself on the city of Fez, Burckhardt conveys many of the teachings, parables, and miracles of the Maghribi sages and saints of many centuries, and demonstrates not only the arts and crafts of Islamic civilization, but also its "Aristotelian" sciences and its administrative skills. There is much to be learnt about the governance of men and of nations from Burckhardt's presentation of the principles lying behind dynastic and tribal vicissitudes—with their failures and their successes. His book is rich in historical clarifications, artistic appreciations, and philosophical insights.

The chapter on "Traditional Science" is an open window onto the subtleties and insights of pre-humanist, or "Aristotelian", thinking. Most people (except, no doubt, people like C. S. Lewis) are quite unaware of the breadth and depth of pre-modern thinking. Some may have familiarity with ancient Greek philosophy, but here, in the examples given in Burckhardt's book, we see the same ancient attitudes still, as it were, in operation.

The chapter entitled "The Golden Chain" is a poetic evocation of Sufism or Islamic mysticism. Burckhardt stresses that, in Sufism,

the two classical spiritual "ways"—of "knowledge" and of "love"—together constitute the path towards God and salvation, which is the *raison d'être* of human life.

What relevance can the writings (be they historical or spiritual) of the traditionalists have for us today? Well, they do provide insights into one or two contemporary problems. It could perhaps be said that two of the greatest evils of the age are atheism on the one hand and religious "fundamentalism" on the other. Atheism in its brutal communist mode has already foundered, but of course it continues in other ways. "Fundamentalism" or "communalism" (an Anglo-Indian term derived from the expression ethnic or "communal" conflict) is now rampant world-wide and is forcibly brought to our attention every day. This all too prevalent disease of our times is discussed in detail in a later chapter entitled "Religious and Ethnic Conflict". The study of traditional civilizations opens our eyes to a world in which the prevailing state of soul was, to a significant extent, the exact opposite to what has just been described. Traditional religion and piety, by definition, gave priority to the Inward, not the outward. True, man was still man, and there were crusades, holy wars, and *jihâd*s—though one has to say that the religious civilizations which they were allegedly fighting for were still religious. However, both the hagiography and the arts of the traditional periods prove beyond doubt that it was the Inward—or the spiritual—that predominated in the mind and soul of the people. The appellation "age of faith" was not awarded by the historians for nothing.

The overriding benefit, for the contemporary world, of "traditionalist" writings such as those of Burckhardt is their ability to make clear that the essential is to see beyond the form to the content, and, within the content of the various religions and cultures, to discern the supra-formal Truth and saving Way. "Supra-formality" of this kind is possible only on the basis of respecting, and understanding in depth, the meaning and function of the various revealed forms, which in reality are but different languages and pathways of the one Divine Message.

Tradition and Modern Civilizations

Features in

Remembering in a World of Forgetting:
Thoughts on Tradition and Postmodernism
© 2008 World Wisdom, Inc.
by William Stoddart, Edited by Mateus Soares De Azevedo and
Alberto Vasconcellos Queiroz
All Rights Reserved. For Personal Usage Only
www.worldwisdom.com