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What is Meant by Tradition?

. . . We have constantly had occasion to speak of tradition, of traditional doctrines or conceptions, and even of traditional languages, and this is really unavoidable when trying to describe the essential characteristics of Eastern thought in all its modalities; but what, to be exact, is tradition? To obviate one possible misunderstanding, let it be said from the outset that we do not take the word "tradition" in the restricted sense sometimes given to it by Western religious thought, when it opposes "tradition" to the written word, using the former of these two terms exclusively for something that has been the object of oral transmission alone. On the contrary, for us tradition, taken in a much more general sense, may be written as well as oral, though it must usually, if not always, have been oral originally. In the present state of things, however, tradition, whether it be religious in form or otherwise, consists everywhere of two complementary branches, written and oral, and we have no hesitation in speaking of "traditional writings", which would obviously be contradictory if one only gave to the word "tradition" its more specialized meaning; besides, etymologically, tradition simply means "that which is transmitted" in some way or other. In addition, it is necessary to include in tradition, as secondary and derived elements that are nonetheless important for the purpose of forming a complete picture, the whole series of institutions of various kinds which find their principle in the traditional doctrine itself.

Looked at in this way, tradition may appear to be indistinguishable from civilization itself, which according to certain sociologists consists of "the whole body of techniques, institutions, and beliefs common to a group of men during a certain time";[1] but how much exactly is this definition worth? In truth, we do not think that civilization can be characterized generally by a formula of this type, which will always be either too comprehensive or too narrow in some respects, with the risk that elements common to all civilizations will be omitted or else that elements belonging to certain particular civilizations only will

[1] E. Doutté, *Magie et Religion dans l'Afrique du Nord*, Introduction, p. 5.

be included. Thus the preceding definition takes no account of the essentially intellectual element to be found in every civilization, for that is something that cannot be made to fit into the category known as "techniques", which, as we are told, comprises "those classes of practices specially designed to modify the physical environment"; on the other hand, when these sociologists speak of "beliefs", adding moreover that the word must be "taken in its usual sense", they are referring to something that clearly presupposes the presence of the religious viewpoint, which is really confined to certain civilizations only and is not to be found in others.[2] It was in order to avoid all difficulties of this kind that we were content at the start simply to describe a civilization as the product and expression of a certain mental outlook common to a more or less widespread group of men, thus making it possible to treat each particular case separately as regards the exact determination of its constituent elements.

However that may be, it remains nonetheless true, as far as the East is concerned, that the identification of tradition with the entire civilization is fundamentally justifiable. Every Eastern civilization, taken as a whole, may be seen to be essentially traditional. . . . As for Western civilization, we have shown that it is on the contrary devoid of any traditional character, with the exception of the religious element, which alone has retained it. Social institutions, to be considered traditional, must be effectively attached in their principle to a doctrine that is itself traditional, whether it be metaphysical or religious or of any other conceivable kind. In other words, those institutions are traditional that find their ultimate justification in their more or less direct, but always intentional and conscious, dependence upon a doctrine which, as regards its fundamental nature, is in every case of an intellectual order; but this intellectuality may be found either in a pure state, in cases where one is dealing with an entirely metaphysical doctrine, or else it may be found mingled with other heterogeneous elements, as in the case of the religious or other special modes which a traditional doctrine is capable of assuming.

[2] In Guénon's writings the terms "religion" and the "religious viewpoint" refer to exoterism and the exoteric viewpoint respectively. Guénon considers this outlook characteristic of the Semitic monotheistic traditions alone. ED

. . . In Islam tradition exists under two distinct aspects, one of which is religious—it is upon this aspect that the general body of social institutions is dependent—while the other aspect, which is purely Eastern, is wholly metaphysical. In a certain measure something of the same sort existed in medieval Europe in the case of the Scholastic doctrine, in which Arab influences moreover made themselves felt to an appreciable extent; but in order not to push the analogy too far it should be added that metaphysics was never sufficiently clearly distinguished from theology, that is to say from its special application to the religious mode of thought; moreover, the genuinely metaphysical portion to be found in it is incomplete and remains subject to certain limitations that seem inherent in the whole of Western intellectuality; doubtless these two imperfections should be looked upon as resulting from the double heritage of the Jewish and the Greek mentalities.

In India we are in the presence of a tradition that is purely metaphysical in its essence; to it are attached, as so many dependent extensions, the diverse applications to which it gives rise, whether in certain secondary branches of the doctrine itself, such as that relating to cosmology, or in the social order, which is moreover strictly governed by the analogical correspondence linking together cosmic existence and human existence. A fact that stands out much more clearly here than in the Islamic tradition, chiefly owing to the absence of the religious point of view and of certain extra-intellectual elements that religion necessarily implies, is the complete subordination of the various particular orders relative to metaphysics, that is to say relative to the realm of universal principles.

In China, [there is] the sharp division . . . [between] a metaphysical tradition on the one hand and a social tradition on the other, and these may at first sight appear not only distinct, as in fact they are, but even relatively independent of one another, all the more so since the metaphysical tradition always remained well-nigh exclusively the appanage of an intellectual elite, whereas the social tradition, by reason of its very nature, imposed itself upon all without distinction and claimed their effective participation in an equal degree. It is, however, important to remember that the metaphysical tradition, as constituted under the form of "Taoism", is a development from the principles of a more primordial tradition, formulated in the *I Ching*, and it is from this primordial tradition that the whole of the social institutions commonly known under the name of "Confucianism" are

entirely derived, though less directly and then only as an application to a contingent sphere. Thus the essential continuity between the two principal aspects of the Far-Eastern civilization is re-established, and their true relationship made clear; but this continuity would almost inevitably be missed if it were not possible to trace them back to their common source, that is to say to the primordial tradition of which the ideographical expression, as fixed from the time of Fu Hsi onward, has been preserved intact for almost fifty centuries.

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