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Foreword

The name of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy has become synonymous with an entire approach to art and of the civilization of which it is an expression. Coomaraswamy's genius lay not only in presenting it to the modern Western world but also in demonstrating that this civilizational art and artistic civilization was contrapuntal and not necessarily antithetical to the modern West, as ears less gifted than his to hearing celestial harmonies might have proposed. His multi-splendored genius expressed itself in over a thousand published items. One might say that Coomaraswamy wrote more than many people read in the course of one life.

The publication of his seminal contributions in the form of the compendium of his essential writings that you hold in your hands is therefore to be greatly welcomed. It conveys to us the flavor of his thought, as water collected in a small shell on the shore conveys the flavor of the entire ocean. Of course it cannot convey a sense of the ocean's magnitude, but it earns our gratitude in conveying a sense of its taste; of how the divine dialectic of the transformation of religion into art and art into religion might hold the key to the rejuvenation of both life and art in the modern world.

Our contemporary world is trying to rejuvenate itself not through God but through religion, thereby creating for itself the problem of fundamentalism, an outcome which would not have surprised Coomaraswamy, who insisted that the modern world must rejuvenate itself through God rather than religion, and bring its wasteland to life by irrigating it with the waters of Tradition. This Tradition offers perennial answers to contemporary questions whereas modernity has only been able, if at all, to offer contemporary (and fugitive) answers to perennial questions. It is not merely an accident then that while that great work of the Enlightenment, Voltaire's *Candide*, ends with Dr. Pangloss cultivating his garden living in the best of all possible worlds, Coomaraswamy, when he sensed that his life was about to run its course, chose to leave his body in the manner of a Hindu renunciate, also in a garden, sym-

bolizing the fact that he brought to us from all possible worlds the spiritual fragrance of humanity, fresh from the exquisite gardens of its various religions. And they are various. For none of the great expositors of the perennial philosophy—not Coomaraswamy in any case—made the mistake, to which some are prone, of imagining that just because all the religions say more or less the same thing that they are therefore all the same. Thus Coomaraswamy has rightly been hailed as a bridge-builder at a time when the West was acting like a steamroller in the rest of the world.

All the reader need do to verify what I have said, lest he or she be inclined to consider the thoughts and emotions I have just shared as too encomiastic or enthusiastic, is to read this book.

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"Foreword" to *The Essential Ananda K. Coomaraswamy*
by Arvind Sharma

Features in

The Essential Ananda K. Coomaraswamy
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