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Introduction

Some years ago when giving a talk at the University of Hawaii, I was approached by a young man who had wished to do his Ph.D thesis on Ananda Coomaraswamy.[1] His request was denied because, as his advisor said, "Coomaraswamy never said anything original!" I think my father would have been delighted, for if there is anything characteristic of his work, it is the absence of self-indulgence or originality. This of course does not mean that he lacked the consummate skill of an artist in re-stating what had been said from all times, for to quote him, "the beauty of a well turned phrase is the *splendor veritatis*."

How is it possible to situate a person who was a recognized scholar in many areas, whose total literary output numbered well over 1000 items, the value of which has not diminished with time?[2] He once said that he wrote to clarify his own thoughts and that if his efforts helped others, he was delighted. He also considered his scholarship and literary output as the fulfillment of his dharma and a karma-yoga—the way of works by which one perfects one's soul—for him the Benedictine principle that *laborare est orare* truly applied. How can we best situate this individual? There are several ways to consider this.

Perhaps most importantly he is a spokesperson for what has been called the Traditional view of life, or for the Philosophia Perennis (Sanatana Dharma in Hindu terms). He is one of several which the present age has brought forth. He is often linked with René Guénon, and Frithjof Schuon, though the names of several others might well be included. Attempts are sometimes made to determine which of them influenced the other—a futile endeavor—for each of them elucidated a slightly different aspect of the truth which is far too

1. Referred to as AKC for reasons of brevity.

2. A definitive Bibliography, itself the product of some twenty years of work by James Crouch, has recently been published by the Indira Gandhi National Center for the Arts (IGNCA), New Delhi, India.

"many splendored" for any single individual to encompass it totally. Thus it is that in many ways they complement each other.

It is of some value to consider his life. This is difficult to do as he was extremely reticent about personal matters. Indeed, he felt that autobiography in general was *aswarga*, or against the very principles that he had made his own and was expounding. At the same time his life was a pilgrimage and a constant growth towards the center and in its course traversed many and varied bypasses with which many of us are familiar. It is therefore of some value to review what little is known.

The family, Tamil in origin, must have originally come from the Indian subcontinent as connections were maintained with a temple in Allahabad. They, however, for several generations were established in Jafna, the northern part of Ceylon, and with the advent of British control, became increasingly prominent on the political scene. They belonged to the Velella caste which has been called the "fifth" caste, and is best situated as being between Brahmins and Kshatriyas. His father, Sir Mutu, who was the first Hindu to be called to the English bar, was actually a member of the British parliament. He was a close friend of Disraeli and is probably the "Indian gentleman" described in Disraeli's book *Coningsby*. He married Lady Elizabeth Bibi, one of the ladies in waiting on Queen Victoria and returned to Ceylon where AKC was born. Unfortunately Sir Mutu died shortly thereafter of Bright's Disease, or what is now referred to as renal failure due to glomerulonephritis. Lady Bibi then returned to England with the three-year-old child, who as soon as he was of age was sent to Wycliffe College, a private boarding school at Shroud (Stonehouse), Gloucestershire. As was common in the England of that period, there was very little parental influence, which was perhaps a blessing in disguise as his mother became involved in the fashionable spiritualistic practices of the day.

Wycliffe was in many ways a blessing. Not only did it inculcate a knowledge of Latin, Greek and French, but it gave him the opportunity to explore other languages. He taught himself Icelandic and the family has a copy of his translation of an Icelandic Saga which at the age of 14 he sent to the professor of Icelandic at Oxford for correction and received instead congratulations. Many years later when a gentleman from Iceland visited, he was able to carry on an evening's conversation with him in his native tongue. This linguistic ability remained with him throughout his life. I once asked him for

a list of languages he knew which proved to be dauntingly large. I subsequently saw him reading a Chinese text and pointed out to him that he had not listed this as one of the languages he knew. His response was that when he said he knew a language, he knew its poetry, its music, and could read it without a dictionary. With Chinese, he still needed to use a dictionary!

Wycliffe also provided another formative activity as there was a large quarry behind the school which was famous for the variety and quality of the fossils it contained. It is here that he developed his interest in Geology, which in turn led to his studies in geology and botany at London University. At the age of 22 he returned to Sri Lanka (Ceylon) and at 25 was appointed director of the Mineralogical Survey in Ceylon. His geological surveys of the island are still in use, and these along with his discovery of the two minerals Serendibite and Thorianite—this latter being radioactive—led to his association with Madame Curie and to his receiving his Doctorate in Science from London University. The various geological papers have recently been republished by IGNCA under the title of *Writings in Geology and Mineralogy*. His interest in these fields remained with him throughout his life.

His scientific endeavors necessitated his travel throughout Sri Lanka where the devastating effects of western education and the withering blight of Occidental industrialism pained him greatly. He not only became involved in social activities, but began an in-depth study of the indigenous arts and crafts—a study in which his marriage to Ethel Mairet (well known for her writings on weaving) introduced him to the works of Ruskin and William Morris. The latter remained a strong influence on his life, not because of his socialist views, but because of his understanding of craftsmanship. This eventually resulted in some of his early works such as *Visvakarma* (Lord of the Arts in the Mahabharata), which was a collection of examples of Indian architecture, sculpture, painting, and handicrafts, which he selected and published in conjunction with his lifelong friend, Eric Gill. These principles of craftsmanship bore fruit in his *Mediaeval Singhalese Art*, which he personally illustrated and hand printed on Kelmscott Press—the press that William Morris had used. But this is to get somewhat ahead of our story.

In the course of his studies on the arts of India and Ceylon he traveled extensively in India and for a time became politically

involved in the independence movement. He was listed among the 400 and while he disengaged himself from such activities, our home was on occasion visited by former revolutionary colleagues. For a brief period he spent time in Madras and was acquainted with Annie Besant but was never directly involved in the Theosophical movement. Traveling more to the north he also spent time at Shantiniketan with the Tagores who were attempting to revive Indian painting and culture. He collected an enormous amount of Indian art at a time when no one was particularly interested in such material, and then offered it to the British government in India if they would build a museum to house it. His offer was rejected and so he brought it back to England in order to preserve it from destruction.

His writings in the field of art reversed the negative opinion of western critics about the value and nature of Indian art and it is in this area that he is best known in India—indeed, he has been called the "Father of Indian Art" and, as such, allowed Indians to become proud of their heritage. This is rather unfortunate in so far as the majority of Indians are completely unaware of his sociological and exegetical writings both of which they are in dire need of absorbing. While in northern India he received the *yajnopavite* or sacred thread, which in essence affiliated him formerly into the Hindu tradition.

He returned to England around 1914 and established his residence at Norman Chapel, a run down Norman ruin which he converted into a home (and which subsequently became a national monument) where he continued his studies and publishing. It was here that he produced *The Arts and Crafts of India and Ceylon, Mediaeval Singhalese Art*, as well as his book on *Rajput Paintings*. This is but to touch upon some of the more significant publications. In 1917 he was asked to join the British Army and refused on the grounds that India was not an independent nation. This led to his being exiled from the British Commonwealth. Arrangements were made for him to move to America and he was allowed to take his art collection with him, which today fills the halls of many American museums. Because of his expertise in the field of oriental art, he was given the position of "Keeper of Indian and Mohammedan Art" at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, a position he held until his death in 1947.

This of course allowed him to continue both his studies and his publishing. In 1918 he published a collection of essays under the title of *The Dance of Siva* and thereafter followed innumerable texts dealing with Indian Art including his monumental *The History of Indian and Indonesian Art.* His life during the late 20s was complicated by a series of personal and family problems as well as by the loss of his personal fortune in the crash of 1929. At the same time however, and perhaps not unrelated, he deepened his approach to the arts and sought to penetrate their meaning and purpose, much as he had done with regard to vocational craftsmanship in an earlier period. In doing so, he not only turned to the traditional eastern authorities, but penetrated deeply into the Platonic and Christian sources. We begin to see the production of what can be considered his major work. In 1934 he published *A New Approach to the Vedas* which was an essay in translation and exegesis, and shortly thereafter *The Transformation of Nature in Art*, *The Darker Side of Dawn*, *Angel and Titan*, and the *Rg Veda as Land-Nama Bok.*

There is speculation as to whether some acute episode precipitated the change of emphasis which can be detected in his work. However, a closer familiarity with his literary output would indicate that there is a continuity throughout, and a progressive deepening of his understanding as he searched the Scriptures (his own phrase) of all the orthodox traditions in order to penetrate the unanimity of their teachings. This resulted in the production of his most significant and lasting works such as *The Christian and Oriental or True Philosophy of Art*, *Why Exhibit Works of Art?*, *Am I My Brother's Keeper*, *Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power in the Indian Theory of Government*, *Hinduism and Buddhism*,[3] *Time and Eternity*,[4] *Figures of Speech or Figures of Thought*, *The Living Thoughts of Gotama the Buddha*, and the two volumes of *Selected Papers* published by Princeton University Press. During this period of his life he also carried on an extensive correspondence with scholars and friends throughout the world, and many of these letters have been published in *Selected Letters* (temporarily out of print), which serves as an excellent introduction to his works.

3. Forthcoming, World Wisdom, 2005.

4. Forthcoming, World Wisdom, 2006.

In 1947 he planned to retire from his position at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and return to India with the intention of completing a new translation of the Upanishads and taking Sanyass. These plans were cut short by his death. His ashes were returned to both Sri Lanka and India by his wife and *shraddha* ceremonies were performed both in Benares and Ceylon, and again later by myself in Haridwar.

Such then is a brief outline of the life and work of AKC, a man who spent his life in seeking out the eternal truths of almost every sacred tradition and who willingly shared the product of his efforts with the rest of us. In a day and age when the majority of people lack the educational and linguistic background to approach these sources directly, AKC provides us—regardless of which traditional form God has called us to follow—with a well-spring of spiritual teaching as well as the practical implementation of such teachings on the social, political and personal level—what is essentially a guide out of the morass of the modern world. One last caveat: AKC was in no way interested in creating a religious esperanza. Rather, he hoped that by himself drinking at the *fons vitae*, to point out the way in which each and every one of us could come to know, love and serve the truth.

Rama P. Coomaraswamy

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by Rama P. Coomaraswamy

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