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Introduction:

Signs of the Times and the Light of Tradition

The title of this anthology alerts us to the spiritual crisis of modernity and to its root cause: the betrayal of tradition. That there is indeed a spiritual crisis will hardly be denied by anyone who has pondered the condition of the contemporary world. We need not rehearse the whole catalogue of inter-related symptoms, but here are a few of the more conspicuous: ecological catastrophe, a material sign of the rupture between Heaven and Earth; a rampant materialism and consumerism, signifying a surrender to the illusion that man can live by bread alone; the brutal extirpation of traditional cultures by the runaway juggernauts of "modernization"; political barbarities on an almost unimaginable scale; a religious landscape dominated by internecine and inter-religious strife and by the emergence of aggressive fundamentalisms in both East and West; social discord, endemic violence and dislocations of unprecedented proportions; widespread alienation, ennui and a sense of spiritual sterility amidst the frenetic confusion and din of modern life; the loss of any sense of the sacred, even among those who remain committed to religious forms. These "signs of the times"—and the inventory is by no means exhaustive—are plain enough to those with eyes to see. No amount of gilded rhetoric about "progress," the "miracles" of modern science and technology, or the "triumphs of democracy" (to mention just three shibboleths of modernity) can hide the fact that our age is tyrannized by an outlook inimical to our most fundamental needs, our deepest yearnings, our most noble aspirations. More problematic is the question of how we arrived at this state of affairs and in which direction we might turn for some remedy.

In the luminous essay with which this volume opens, Frithjof Schuon observes: "That which is lacking in the present world is a profound knowledge of the nature of things; the fundamental truths are always there, but they do not impose themselves because they cannot impose themselves on those unwilling to listen." Those truths, so often derided in the modern world, can be found in tradition—and by this term we mean something very different from

the jaundiced senses it has accumulated in the modern mentality ("the blind observance of inherited customs," and the like). St. Augustine speaks of "wisdom uncreate, the same now that it ever was, the same to be forevermore."[1] This timeless wisdom has carried many names: *philosophia perennis*, *Lex Aeterna*, *Hagia Sophia*, *Din al-Haqq*, *Akalika Dhamma*, and *Sanatana Dharma* are among the better known. In itself this truth is formless and beyond all conceptualizations. Any attempt to define it is, to borrow a metaphor, like trying to catch the river in a net. This universal wisdom, in existence since the genesis of time and the spiritual patrimony of all humankind, can also be designated as the Primordial Tradition. René Guénon refers to "... the Tradition contained in the Sacred Books of all peoples, a Tradition which in reality is everywhere the same, in spite of all the diverse forms it assumes to adapt itself to each race and period ..."[2] In this sense tradition is synonymous with a perennial philosophy or wisdom which is eternal, universal and immutable. The Primordial Tradition or *sophia perennis* is of supra-human origin and is in no sense a product or evolute of human thought. It is the birthright of humanity. All the great religious teachings, albeit in the differing vocabularies appropriate to the spiritual economy in question, affirm just such a principle. Recall Krishna's declaration, in the *Bhagavad Gita*, of the pre-existence of his message, proclaimed at the dawn of time.[3] Likewise Christ, speaking in his cosmic function as incarnation of the Truth, states, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, before Abraham was, I am."[4] "Tradition," then, in its most pristine sense is this primordial Truth and as such takes on the status of a first cause, a cosmic datum, a principial reality woven into the very fabric of the universe and ingrained in the human spirit.

"Tradition" also has a secondary meaning, directly pertinent to our theme. Etymologically it simply means "that which is transmitted." Here the term cannot be equated with a formless and

[1] Quoted in S. Radhakrishnan, "Fragments of a Confession," in *The Philosophy of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan*, ed. P.A. Schilpp (New York: Tudor, 1952), p. 80.

[2] R. Guénon in *La Gnose*, 1909, quoted in Whitall Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1971), p. 20.

[3] *Bhagavad Gita* IV.5.i.

[4] *St John* VIII.58.

immutable Truth but is, rather, that Truth as it finds formal expression, through the medium of a divine Revelation, in the myths, doctrines, rituals, symbols, and other manifestations of any religious culture. As Lord Northbourne has observed, "Tradition, in the rightful sense of the word, is the chain that joins civilization to Revelation."[5] In this context "tradition" becomes more or less synonymous with "religion," always with the proviso that it is integral, orthodox religions of which we speak. Let us also not forget that,

> When people talk about "civilization" they generally attribute a qualitative meaning to the term, but really civilization only represents a value provided it is supra-human in origin and implies for the civilized man a sense of the sacred ... A sense of the sacred is fundamental for every civilization because fundamental for man; the sacred—that which is immutable, inviolable, and so infinitely majestic—is in the very substance of our spirit and of our existence.[6]

Traditional societies are grounded in an awareness of this reality. Society itself represents nothing of permanent or absolute value but only insofar as it provides a context for the sense of the sacred and the spiritual life which it implies.

At radical odds with Tradition, in all of its senses, stands the world of modernity and the Promethean philosophy which underpins it. For want of a better word we might call the dominant worldview of the post-medieval West "modernism" (not to be confused with the more restricted meaning sign-posting certain artistic and literary movements in the early 20th century). For present purposes the term comprises the prevalent assumptions, values and attitudes of a worldview fashioned by the most pervasive intellectual and moral influences of recent European history, an outlook in conformity with the *Zeitgeist* of the times. One might classify the constituents of modernism under any number of different schemata. Lord Northbourne typifies it as "anti-traditional, progressive, humanist, rationalist, materialist, experimental, individualist, egalitarian, free-thinking, and intensely sentimental."[7] Seyyed Hossein Nasr gathers these tendencies together under four general marks of modern thought: anthropomorphism (and by extension, secular-

[5] Lord Northbourne, *Religion in the Modern World* (London: J.M. Dent, 1963), p. 34.

[6] Frithjof Schuon, *Understanding Islam* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1976), p. 33.

[7] Lord Northbourne, *Religion in the Modern World*, p. 13.

ism); evolutionist progressivism; the absence of any sense of the sacred; an unrelieved ignorance of metaphysical principles.[8]

Modernism is nothing less than a spiritual disease which continues to spread like a plague across the globe, destroying traditional cultures wherever they are still to be found. Although its historical origins are European, modernism is now tied to no specific area or civilization. Its symptoms can be detected in a wide assortment of inter-related "mind sets" and "-isms," sometimes involved in cooperative co-existence, sometimes engaged in apparent antagonism, but always united by the same underlying assumptions. Scientism, rationalism, relativism, materialism, positivism, empiricism, evolutionism, psychologism, individualism, humanism, existentialism—these are some of the prime follies of modernist thought. The pedigree of this family of ideas can be traced back through a series of intellectual and cultural upheavals in European history and to certain vulnerabilities in Christendom which left it exposed to the subversions of a profane science. The Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution and the so-called Enlightenment were all incubators of ideas and values which first ravaged Europe and then spread throughout the world like so many bacilli. Behind the bizarre array of ideologies which have proliferated in the last few centuries we can discern a growing and persistent ignorance concerning ultimate realities and an indifference, if not always an overt hostility, to the eternal verities conveyed by tradition. Not without reason did William Blake characterize the modern worldview as "Single Vision," a horizontal understanding of reality which strips the "outer" world of its mystery, its grandeur and its revelatory function, and denies our human vocation as the "arks of God."

The contrast between tradition and modernity is a motif to be found in many of the essays in this anthology. The contrast is likely to be most illuminating when it is informed by the following considerations:

> When the modern world is contrasted with traditional civilizations, it is not simply a question of seeking the good things and the bad things on one side or the other; good and evil are everywhere, so

[8] See S.H. Nasr, "Reflections on Islam and Modern Thought," *The Islamic Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (1979): 119-131.

> that it is essentially a question of knowing on which side the more important good and on which side the lesser evil is to be found. If someone says that such and such a good exists outside tradition, the answer is: no doubt, but one must choose the most important good, and it is necessarily represented by tradition; and if someone says that in tradition there exists such and such an evil, the answer is: no doubt, but one must choose the lesser evil, and again it is tradition that embodies it. It is illogical to prefer an evil which involves some benefits to a good which involves some evils.[9]

No one will deny that modernity has its compensations, though these are often of a quite different order from the loudly trumpeted "benefits" of science and technology—some of which are indubitable but many of which issue in consequences far worse than the ills which they are apparently repairing. Furthermore, many so-called "advances" must be seen as the poisoned fruits of a Faustian bargain which one day must come to its bitter conclusion. What indeed is a man profited if he gain the whole world but lose his own soul? On the other hand, one real advantage of living in these latter days is the ready access we have to the spiritual treasuries of the world's religious and mythological traditions, including esoteric teachings which hitherto have been veiled in secrecy.

Many of our contributors are traditionalists who cleave uncompromisingly to the *sophia perennis*—we need only mention such towering figures as René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Frithjof Schuon, and Titus Burckhardt. Readers unfamiliar with their work will find here an introduction to some of the most sagacious thinkers of the last century. However, the anthology is not intended as a compendium of traditionalist thinkers alone but embraces a variety of viewpoints and perspectives, united by the conviction that the modern world stands in the most urgent need of the wisdom of the ages. *The Betrayal of Tradition* complements the other volumes already published by World Wisdom in the Perennial Philosophy series, especially *Science and the Myth of Progress* (edited by Mehrdad M. Zarandi) and *Every Branch in Me* (edited by Barry McDonald).

It is my hope that the juxtaposition of essays by traditionalists

[9] Frithjof Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds* (London: Perennial Books, 1966), p. 42.

and other eminent contemporary thinkers will illuminate some common ground and thereby help to dispel the false charges sometimes leveled at traditionalists that they are dusty obscurantists "out of touch" with the contemporary world, that they want to "wind back the clock," that they are romantic reactionaries escaping into an idealized past. The essential message of tradition is timeless and thus ever new, ever fresh, and always germane to both our immediate condition and to our ultimate destiny. As Schuon remarks, a "nostalgia for the past" is, in itself, nothing; all that is meaningful is "a nostalgia for the sacred" which "cannot be situated elsewhere than in the liberating 'now' of God."[10]

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[10] Frithjof Schuon, "On the Margin of Liturgical Improvisations," in *The Sword of Gnosis,* ed. J. Needleman (Baltimore: Penguin, 1974), p. 353.