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The Wheel Of Traditional Education

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To speak of traditional education is to show oneself to be indisputably modern, for in any traditional culture, one would speak only of Christian education, Muslim education, Hindu education, and not in the abstract. Indeed, so much would one's own tradition suffuse this world, even to say "Christian education" would be redundant. As the Muslim scholar S.H. Nasr has written, in a traditional society, "nothing lies outside the realm of tradition."[1] Hence,

> To live in the traditional world is to breathe in a universe in which man is related to a reality beyond himself, from which he receives those principles, truths, forms, attitudes, and other elements that determine the very texture of human existence.[2]

This is true of any traditional culture. Unfortunately, it is not true of the modern world, whose most remarkable characteristic is precisely the rejection of tradition. But it is not our purpose, in this essay, to assail modern education as anti-traditional—however much this may be true. Rather, we wish here to outline the essential elements of an education in a traditional society, and to consider whether any of these can be infused into modern education.

Yet we cannot but begin by taking account of modern education in light of what Rene Guenon called in a book by that title, "the crisis of the modern world." Modern education—by which we mean chiefly our public and private schools and universities—to an increasing extent both participates in and furthers the drift of contemporary societies away from the spiritual principles and cultures which once guided and informed them. For some time a kindly humanism, and an emphasis on "great books," still carried on in a diffused way some elements of traditional cultures in an ever more mercantilist, mechanistic, or scientistic educational world—one cannot read Dante without imbibing some of what it meant to be a medieval Christian, even if one is reading in a factory—but more and more, contemporary education has become fragmented and even openly anti-traditional.

By contrast, traditional education is informed by its spiritual origin and purpose. One of the truly great scholars of the twentieth century, A.K. Coomaraswamy, a man whose erudition is unparalleled, wrote that

> Our educational systems are chaotic because we are not agreed for what to educate, if not for self-expression. But all tradition is agreed as to what kind of models are to be imitated: 'The city can never otherwise be happy unless it is designed by those painters who follow a divine original'; 'The crafts such as building and carpentry . . . take their principles from that realm and from the thinking there'; 'Lo, make all things in accordance with the pattern that was shown thee upon the mount'; 'It is in imitation of the divine forms that any human form, (shilpa) is invented here'; 'There is this divine harp to be sure; this human harp comes into being in its likeness'; 'We must do what the Gods did first.[3]

In short, what traditional human beings create on this earth, they make in imitation of and inspired by the heavenly Forms or archetypes. This is why traditional arts—in all their diversity—always present an integral harmony perfectly suited to human needs while directly reflecting their spiritual origin.

This is, then, the primary characteristic of traditional education: it is governed in all its forms by its spiritual purpose—by definition—which all the various crafts reflect, and in which all the disciplines find their origin and meaning. One may well say, using a simile that recurs in the Vedas, in Plato, and in the *Tao te ching*, that the center of the traditional culture—God—is like the unmoving center of a wheel, around which everything in the culture turns, and without which, we need scarcely add, the wheel itself would fall apart.[4]

In a traditional culture, all human activities are judged by the extent to which they reflect that which transcends the merely human; and education is really a process in which one learns how that activity proper to one's station in this life (svadharma) itself may when perfectly done transcend the merely human. Education in a traditional society (education taken in its broadest sense) is really a form of apprenticeship and initiation through which one's ordinary daily activity becomes a way of spiritual practice—and this is as true of the work of the craftsman as it is of the scholar in the university.

British artist Eric Gill wrote of the "diabolical" quality of modern industrialist society, and of its educational system which makes of people only contributors to an economic order:

> The necessaries of human life—the things men need and therefore love, the things upon which, during the countless centuries of human history, men and women have expended all their care and skill and pride—the arts of agriculture and the farm, the arts of the kitchen, clothes, furniture, pottery and metal, the whole business of building—from cottages to cathedrals—all these things will be made by machines, and we shall be released for 'higher things.' So they say. But for the majority of men and women—for us—there are no higher things. . . . [For] this is true art—to make well what needs making—for love of God and for the service of our fellow men and women.[5]

Whether Muslim or Christian, whether Hindu or aboriginal, all education entails maintaining a balance of means and ends, a balance between man and nature, and keeps to a human scale that does not allow for the recklessness which produces, say, nuclear weapons in the name of a "disinterested" science.[6] Traditional education, broadly conceived, does not produce masses of anonymous workers, but rather individuals who do good work tailored to the perennial human needs.

When we turn from traditional education broadly conceived—education as including the crafts—to the edu-

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cation of the traditional university, we find that the same verities, the same expectations, hold true. Just as the crafts entail an apprenticeship to a master, and an initiatory or spiritual path manifested in and attested to by one's life work, so too the traditional scholar undergoes an apprenticeship to a master, or to masters, until he is himself deemed a master, and in turn can teach. Like the various crafts, the university disciplines are all governed by and oriented towards their common spiritual center.

This means that the scientific disciplines in particular are not conceived of as being divorced from human concerns or from religious meaning. Whereas the modern sciences have both created and resulted from a radically desecrated cosmos stripped of its spiritual significance and seen only in terms of quantity and materiality, the traditional sciences like alchemy or astrology maintained an intimate unity between man and nature, and reflected a common religious orientation. As S.H. Nasr puts it

> In order for the modern sciences of nature to come into being, the substance of the cosmos had to be emptied of its sacred character and become profane. . . . In the process, the sciences of nature lost their symbolic intelligibility, a fact that is most directly responsible for the crisis which the modern scientific world view and its application have brought about.[7]

In a traditional culture, both nature and the artistic works of man are seen to bode forth the same harmonic and architectonic principles which govern all things. Nature and art—microcosm (the individual), mesocosm (the culture), and macrocosm (nature)—embody the same fundamental proportions. This means that both the sciences and the arts have common harmonic origins; that the same principles which inform the planetary spheres may in turn be found in nature, in cathedrals, in poems and music, and in each individual human being; and that the various scholarly disciplines are far more closely related by common principles than modern academia would be willing to admit.

One can see these common principles at work, for example, in medieval Christian poetry like that of Dante or William Langland, which is governed by both simple and complex number and letter symbolism.[8] The poetry of these authors reflects the number symbolism at the heart of the Christian revelation, numbers like three, twelve, thirty-three, forty, and six hundred sixty-six, each of which has a constellation of symbolism surrounding it. These poets were intimately familiar with the esoteric implications of numbers, letters, and images, and wove these into their poetry not haphazardly, but with full knowledge of the same principles figuring in other disciplines like astrology or alchemy, not to mention the numerical or harmonic principles also governing the building of cathedrals, or the making of sacred images.

We have concentrated here on basic aspects of traditional education in Christian civilization, but one could just as well have drawn examples from Islamic, Hindu, or Buddhist civilizations, for as A.K. Coomaraswamy among others has pointed out, essentially the same principles govern these cultures as governed medieval Christendom. Indeed, is it really surprising to find that the origins of icons in Buddhism and in Eastern Christianity are virtually identical—Buddha and Christ having been said to have impressed their respective images on material for the benefit of worshippers—or that in all the major religions it is recognized that "spiritual realities have a certain definite formal equivalent, certain fixed canons of proportion"?[9]

One may well say that the whole of a traditional civilization—and of a traditional education—ultimately reflects the "science of forms," or the "science of symbolism."[10] For the real function of education is to render our world intelligible, to reveal to us the manifest ways in which our world reflects transcendent archetypes and principles, to reveal above all the sacred symbolism informing what we do, and the culture and natural world in which we live. Education must entail the uncovering of *meaning*. In the final analysis, then, traditional education is the progressive unveiling of spiritual significance in man, culture, and nature.

To what extent can we infuse some elements of traditional education in the modern world? Certainly much in contemporary education—its gigantism, its attempts at uniformity and "mass production," the almost complete absence of the basic principles informing traditional education—leads us to expect little in the way of restoration. Frithjof Schuon has written that modernity "limits itself to playing with evanescent things and plunging into them with criminal unconsciousness."[11] It follows that much of modern education consists in ignoring the spiritual foundations of traditional education, in creating a kind of "bubble-world of 'conditioning,' or, to use a current phrase, 'brainwashing,' . . . that will undo [perennial] truth if it can, and will in any case prevent coming generations even from surmising that such a truth exists, or that men have any other function but to be socially or economically useful."[12]

Nonetheless, and however dark our future might look, always there will be those of independent mind, who see through to the perennial truths that have ever guided mankind, and who recognize just how precious is our inheritance from antiquity. Restoration, then, is not a matter of artificially infusing elements of traditional education into our present systems. Rather, so long as the great works of art and literature, and the spiritual traditions which inspired them, exist—and even if, God forbid, most of them are lost—there will always be those who recognize anew the meanings inherent in nature, and what it means to be a human being. Some of these people will inevitably teach others, and will as Plato said in his "Seventh Letter," draw forth that indefinable spark of realization that always has marked authentic education, and always will.

References

[1]S.R. Nasr. *Knowledge and the Sacred.* (New York: Continuum, 1981), p. 80.

[2]ibid.

[3]A.K. Coomaraswamy, *Traditional Art and Symbolism,* R. Lipsey, ed., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 23–24; the sources quoted are from Plato, Republic, 500E, Plotinus, Enneads, V.9.11, Exod. 25:40, Aitareya Brahmana VI.27, Shankhayana Aranyaka VIII.9, Shatapatha Brahmana VII.2.1.4. Coomaraswamy includes many other cross-references in the notes.

[4]Some will no doubt object, mistaking modern fundamentalism for a truly traditional society, that a religious culture is a kind of tyranny, that in a traditional culture one is bound by caste and stricture and is not free. But at the risk of disturbing our smug modern belief in inevitable "progress," one might well ask who is more free in reality, someone who lives in one of our crimeridden, violent, hopeless cities, caught in a consumer society that offers nothing beyond this life, or a pious craftsman in medieval Europe?

[5]Eric Gill, *A Holy Tradition of Working.* (West Stockbridge: Lindisfarne, 1983), p. 96.

[6]See Philip Sherrard, *The Rape of Man and Nature, An Enquiry into the Origins and Consequences of Modern Science,* (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1987).

[7]S.H. Nasr. *Man and Nature, the Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man.* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1968). p. 21.

[8]In this regard, see Arthur Versluis, "Piers Plowman, Numerical Composition, and the Prophecies," *Connotations* 1 (1991) 2, pp. 103 ff.

[9]Philip Sherrard. *The Sacred in Life and Art.* (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1990) p. 80.

[10]See Rene Guenon. *Fundamental Symbols of Sacred Science,* Alvin Moore, trs., (Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1992).

[11]Frithjof Schuon. *To Have a Center.* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1991), p. 37.

[12]Gai Eaton. *King In The Castle: Choice and Responsibility in the Modern World.* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Soc., 1990), p. 19.