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Introductory

The apse mosaic in the north ambulatory of Rome's fourth-century basilica of Sta. Costanza depicts Christ standing on a rock, from which flow the four streams of Paradise. His right hand is raised in benediction; his left contains a scroll that is being handed to St. Peter. This action is the *traditio legis*, the "handing over of the law," and is drawn from a prevalent motif in the classical art of late antiquity. Yet, there is a new element involved in the Sta. Costanza mosaic. Though the *traditio legis* motif is essentially the same as in the Roman imperial depictions, the Christian mosaic shows a new law—a new tradition—being established.

Not too dissimilar from this fourth-century appropriation of a standard mode used to illustrate a new perception is the use of the term *Tradition* in the writings of two twentieth-century metaphysicists:¹ René Guénon and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy. These two men produced a voluminous amount of written material in the general areas of comparative religion and culture, esotericism, and natural metaphysics. They consistently espoused a particular ideology and hermeneutics of the religious and philosophical material they treated throughout. René Guénon (1886–1951) was a Frenchman who adopted Islam and later relocated to Cairo (1930), and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877–1947) was an Anglo-Ceylonese raised and educated in England who emigrated to America in 1917. In their later years, the two became colleagues and frequent correspondents. Their "particular ideology" they labeled Primordial Tradition and *Philosophia Perennis*, respectively. They each abbreviated and referred to this ideology in their writings as the Tradition—a specific and limited usage of the word not part of the normal definition. Their works, and their views, are not yet widely known, for as Edward Shils observed, "It is rare [in modernity] to encounter persons who pride themselves on the espousal of a tradition, call it that, and regard it as a good thing."² Different from the Roman

and early Christian usage, this twentieth-century usage changes the verbal noun form *traditio* into the proper noun form Tradition,³ by which Guénon and Coomaraswamy meant *a group of interdependent metaphysical principles and a concomitant cultural worldview*—these being the primary subjects of investigation in this work.

A useful prologue to the detailed examination of the highly specific and particularized usage of the term Tradition in the writings of Guénon and Coomaraswamy is the examination in Appendix A of etymology, definition, and variants in current conventional usage of the word tradition, especially as it applies to the history of culture, the “social sciences” (namely, sociology and anthropology), and religious studies. The contrast thereby delineated between the conventional usages and the particularized usage will help localize and define the latter within today’s general discourse on tradition, which is also among the specific aims of this work.

Tradition is not a long word; neither is it obscure. Although this is expressly a book about the word tradition and its particularized meaning, it is at the same time a book about *culture* and a way of viewing culture as Guénon and Coomaraswamy viewed it. But this is not all, for in addition to explicating a particular perspective of culture, it is equally an explication of natural metaphysics—of the *philosophia perennis*—and of the first principles of this metaphysic that both inform and consequently define Traditional culture. This is so because, in the larger worldview of Coomaraswamy and Guénon, these elements of the term Tradition are inextricable and cannot be discussed intelligibly unless discussed in reference to each other.

There is a nuance of difference between the relationship of Tradition and culture that occurs in the thought of Coomaraswamy and in that of Guénon, and which should be disclosed at the outset. It is described as a “nuance” here because it is more a matter of placement of emphasis than of any real disagreement between the two men, yet it goes to the heart of a difference in the way certain Traditionalists—those who have followed in the pioneering footsteps of Coomaraswamy and Guénon—perceive the currents of twentieth-century Traditional thought. Coomaraswamy emphasized an absolute integration or fusion of sacred religion and culture in order for any given society to be called Traditional, and in any society such as this the activity of all persons—by virtue of fulfilling their vocations, whether they be sacerdotal or otherwise—was initiatory. While Guénon did not refute this, he emphasized the Tradi-

tionality, as it were, of the orthodox elements in major religions and of esoteric initiatic associations within societies both premodern and modern, and believed in the availability of regular initiation in certain surviving lineages within Christian and Buddhist culture, of bona fide *gurus* and their students in Hindu culture, and most especially in Islamic culture of the Sufi *ṭarīqa* of which he and Frithjof Schuon were and are participants.

Other similar nuances of difference exist both between the views of Coomaraswamy and Guénon, and the way in which they are perceived by others. For example, in Part 1 of *Access to Western Esotericism*, Antoine Faivre posits three “paths” of Tradition or esotericism today—purist, historical, and humanist—and lists René Guénon as a “purist.” To this purist path or category, fairly accurately described by Professor Faivre, we add Ananda Coomaraswamy. This we do—using Faivre’s own criteria—not only because of the similarity between what Coomaraswamy meant by Tradition and what Guénon meant, but also because his express views of modernity paralleled those of Guénon. Faivre’s segregation of Guénon from Coomaraswamy points to a further issue that differentiates certain Traditionalists as amongst themselves, and one to which attention should be given at the beginning in order to establish parameters.

The position taken in this treatise is that, notwithstanding their different methods and styles, Coomaraswamy and Guénon were coequal expositors of the Tradition. One significant effect of this position, for example, is the way in which the forums of Traditional perspective are depicted in chapter 4. This position can be described as the *historical* analysis of the Traditional perspective, and is based on (1) the fact that the two men were close contemporaries, and (2) the fundamental similarity of the metaphysical content of their works.

The other principal position involves the life and work of Frithjof Schuon, and holds that Guénon and he were successive “continuator” of the Tradition, while Coomaraswamy was a “complementor.” This position, which can be described as the *initiatic* analysis of the Traditional perspective, primarily involves a strong Sufi or orthodox Islamic influence, insofar as Guénon and Schuon were both regularly initiated into Sufi *ṭarīqas* or spiritual fraternities as were a number of other later Traditional writers, whereas Coomaraswamy was a Hindu and by comparison with the former was neither a specialist in Arabic nor Islamic metaphysics.

Where, as here, the objective is to begin at the beginning to describe Traditional exposition in the twentieth century within a comprehensive framework, the historical analysis is necessary since it alone accommodates the biographical and historical data. Schuon, for example, published his first major doctrinal book in 1948, a year after Coomaraswamy's death and only three years prior to Guénon's death, and so could not be considered a pioneer in the same sense as Coomaraswamy and Guénon. On the other hand, Coomaraswamy differed from both Guénon and Schuon by virtue of his academic credentials and his target audience of academicians. This fact, taken together with the active participation in the Sufi *ṭarīqas* held in common by Guénon and Schuon, does lend viability to the initiatic analysis, but still cannot raise Schuon to the level of a founder of twentieth-century Traditional exposition in the historical sense.

There are, in addition, certain other minority views within the greater Traditional school that can be described as permutations of these two principal positions—for example, Schuon as the culmination of work only partially introduced by Guénon and/or Coomaraswamy, or the various “Guénonian” spin-off groups in France devoted to some particular aspect of the teacher's writings. The point is that it is necessary to clarify and articulate one's premise. Whichever position one begins with will affect the outcome: for the author, it will affect the organization and exposition of the subject; for the reader, it will affect his or her understanding or judgment of the book.

Brief biographies of Coomaraswamy and Guénon will, from here, begin Part 1, followed by an examination of currents or “forums” within modern Traditional exposition, the hermeneutical method of those in the Traditional school, and the basal notions of *quality* and *quantity* that are central to the Traditional worldview. Part 2 discusses briefly, and from several sides, the term and concept of *philosophia perennis*, followed by a similarly brief discussion of both ancient *theosophia* and modern Theosophy, whose late nineteenth-century dissemination by H. P. Blavatsky is most relevant due to its direct influence on both Coomaraswamy and Guénon, and ending with an enumeration of the first principles of Tradition that contrasts the latter with those principles as found in modern Theosophy. Part 3, which could be called the heart of the book, examines Traditional culture—both tribal, or “primitive,” and developed—compares them, and seeks to identify the elements of Tradition in medieval Christendom as

viewed by Coomaraswamy and Guénon in order to prepare for the contrast between Traditional Western culture and modern (non-Traditional) Western culture, which is the subject of Part 4. Finally, Part 4 makes the comparison just mentioned and, using the basic notions of culture as revealed in the writings of Guénon and Coomaraswamy, extrapolates about a possible if not inevitable development of a new form of planetary Traditional culture in future millenia based on the first principles of Tradition. Wherever possible, and as much as possible, the views of Coomaraswamy and Guénon are set forth in their own words throughout this treatise.