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Why I Am Not a Traditionalist

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Abstract

After presenting some background information on the historical climate that gave rise to the traditionalism of Guénon, Coomaraswamy and their followers, I discuss the major tenets of this school of thought and offer some criticisms. Although I find much in the traditionalist critique of modernism to be insightful, and the reverence of authentic tradition to be inspiring, in the final analysis, traditionalism seems to be too reactionary and too nostalgic to offer a workable way to move through and beyond modernity. Its positive theses about perennial philosophy romanticize the occult aspects of the world's religious traditions and are backed by unsupported assumptions, tenuous comparisons based on a prejudiced selection of materials, and rather wild speculations. In conclusion, I humbly offer a few suggestions for a more balanced view of religion and modernity.

Introduction

In an interview in 1989, the Yale historian of Christianity Jaroslav Pelikan said: "*Tradition* is the living faith of the dead; *traditionalism* is the dead faith of the living. *Tradition* lives in conversation with the past, while remembering where we are and when we are and that it is we who have to decide. *Traditionalism* supposes that nothing should ever be done for the first time, so all that is needed to solve any problem is to arrive at the supposedly unanimous testimony of this homogenized tradition."[1]

Traditionalism is a modern European reaction against modernism. It has appeared in a variety of religious movements: Jewish, Catholic, Protestant and Islamic. In what follows, I am particularly concerned to address a specifically Islamic form of traditionalism that traces itself to the writings of Rene Guenon and Ananda Coomaraswamy, but it is useful first to take a brief

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[1] *U.S. News & World Report*, June 26, 1989. Jaroslav Pelikan is the Sterling Professor Emeritus of History at Yale University where he served on the faculty from 1962-96. He is the immediate past president of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He is one of the world's leading scholars in the history of Christianity and has authored more than 30 books including the five volume *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (1971-89). His 1997 book was *What Has Athens to Do With Jerusalem? "Timaeus" and "Genesis" in Counterpoint.*

look at Catholic traditionalism in order to gain a better understanding of the historical roots of traditionalism generally.

Traditionalism is a paradoxically modern reaction against modernism whose roots are to be found in 19th century Europe, especially France. There, Catholic opponents of secularism and modernism defended a traditionalism based on the authority of the Pope. While there was a liberal wing of this *ultramontanist* movement, Pius IX (1846-1878) became decisively hostile to all liberalism in political and intellectual life after he temporarily lost the Papal States after the revolution of 1848. Pius's *Syllabus of Errors* (1864) proclaimed that the pope "cannot and should not be reconciled and come to terms with progress, liberalism, and modern civilization."[2] The movement to reaffirm papal authority culminated in the doctrine of papal infallibility in 1870, although in that same year Vatican Council I in its *Dei filius* sought to appear moderate by condemning both traditionalism (defined as a denial of the ability of natural reason to achieve certainty on any religious truth) and modern forms of rationalism. Despite the wording, Catholicism explicitly opposed modernism in favor of its own traditions and the authority of the pope. Catholic opposition to modernism was much diminished after Vatican Council II (1962-65), but prior to that the Church saw itself as a defender of tradition against the political and intellectual currents that had swept over Europe. In 19th century England, the Catholic lead in defending tradition became a controversial issue among Anglicans, with liberals in the Church of England accusing traditionalists of moving too close to Roman Catholicism. Catholic sympathy was aroused in England by French clerics who sought refuge in England after the revolution. Before mid-century, the leader of the traditionalist Oxford movement, John Henry Newman (1801-1890), converted to Roman Catholicism, became a priest and was eventually appointed cardinal.

The reaction against modernism in 19th century Europe took various forms, only one of which is found in the stance taken by the Roman Catholic Church. Fundamentalist Protestants also began to make use of anti-modernist rhetoric, especially in the United States. The religiously conservative stance against modernism also found expression in literature, of which the best examples are to be found in the poetry of T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) and in his enormously influential essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent."[3] Eliot moved from America to England, converted to the Church of England and supported religious traditionalism within Anglicanism.

French Catholicism in the 19th century supported both tradition and monarchy. In the latter half of the 19th century, French liberals gained the upper hand over monarchists, and imposed a number of anti-clerical laws. The movement for such anti-clerical laws was instigated by Léon Gambetta

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[2] See Richard P. McBrian, "Roman Catholicism", in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (MacMillan, 1987).

[3] First published in the *Egoist* (1919); reprinted in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Vol. 2,* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1968), pps. 1807-1814.

(1838-1882) in his speech at Romans, 18 September 1878, containing the famous catchword "*Le cléricalisme, c'est l'ennemi*". Catholics alleged that such anti-clericalism was due to the influence of the Masonic lodges.[4]

The Masons provided an alternative to Catholic traditionalism based on alleged ancient occult sciences, and in French society they tended to attract free thinkers and anti-clerics, as well as those interested in occult speculations.

Nineteenth century France also exhibited a fascination with the Orient in its art, as is witnessed in the number of French painters who took up oriental themes, such as Jean-Léon Jérôme (1824-1904), Alexandre-Gabriel Decamps (1803-1860), Jean Dominique Ingres (1780-1867), Charles Bargue (1825/26–1883), Léon Bonnat (1833–1922), Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant (1845–1902), Eugène Fromentin (1820–1876), Charles-Théodore Frère (1814–1888), to mention only a few. [The painting to the right is by Jérôme, oil on canvas, 35 x 29 1/2 inches (88.9 x 74.9 cm), Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY. This painting was based on sketches Jérôme made at a mosque during his travels in Egypt and the Near East in 1876.]
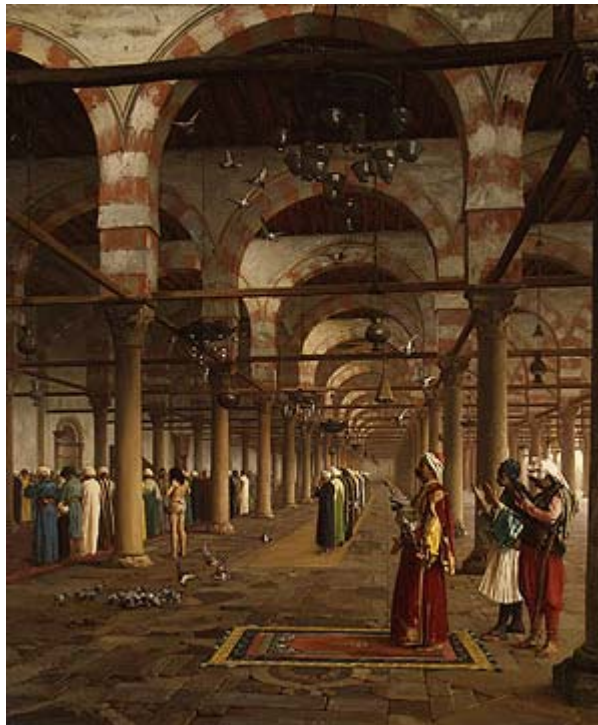
The fascination with the Orient, and the occult and ancient also helped attract members to the Theosophical Society founded by Madame Blavatsky, Colonel Henry S. Olcott, and W. Q. Judge in 1876 in New York City. In turn, the Theosophical Society published a number of translations from non-Western religious traditions, including a French translation of the *Gita* in 1890, and other works on Buddhism and Hinduism. In 1879, Olcott and Blavatsky moved to India, where they propagated their faith among Europeans and Indians. In 1882, they bought property at Adyar, near Madras, and the international headquarters of the society is still located there. Various national headquarters were also established in the US and European countries. While in India, Olcott became a Buddhist and traveled throughout Sri Lanka, where he led a movement to revive Buddhism. Olcott and the Theosophical Society founded Ananda College and several other Buddhist schools, and, for this, Olcott is still revered in Sri Lanka.

It is in the context of this cultural atmosphere that an esoteric form of traditionalism was developed in the writings of two fascinating and erudite authors, Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) and René Guénon (1886-1951).

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[4] See the article, "France" in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*.

Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy was born in Ceylon, raised in England at his mother's home after the death of his Tamil father when he was two, and studied at London University where he was awarded a doctorate in geology. Between 1906 and 1917 he made frequent trips to India and Ceylon, and became president of the Ceylon Reform Society, dedicated to the revitalization of Sinhalese culture, an aim that was also supported to the Theosophical Society in Ceylon since 1880. He joined the Theosophical Society in 1907. In 1917, as a conscientious objector to British conscription, he emigrated to the US where he became curator of the Indian and Asian sections of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Although he published various works in journals and presses of the Theosophical Society, he was critical of the movement, especially with regard to the understanding of the doctrine of reincarnation. Nevertheless, it is generally agreed that his introduction to metaphysical thought and the idea of an essential unity underlying the mystical traditions of the world came to him through the Theosophical Society. From 1932 until his death, he concentrated his energies on writing about what he called the *philosophia perennis.* His works on Indian art continue to be highly respected by scholars.

René Guénon came from a devout Catholic family and his early education was in Jesuit schools. He had a delicate personality, and when he felt that his teachers were persecuting him, his father had him transferred to the College Augustin-Thierry, where he completed baccalaureates in mathematics and philosophy. He was a brilliant student and won prizes in physics and Latin. He enrolled in the Collège Rollin in Paris, in 1904 to study mathematics, but withdrew after two years. In 1906 he became a protégé of Gérard Encausse, known as "Papus," who was a co-founder of the Theosophical Society in France. Papus had split off from the Theosophical Society to form the *Faculté des Sciences Hermétiques*, and Guénon later disassociated himself from both. He vigorously condemned Theosophy in several of his writings, in which he claimed that it was based on a corruption of perennial first principles. Nevertheless, like Coomaraswamy, important ideas about metaphysics and the esoteric unity of religious traditions were introduced to him through Theosophy.[5] While in Paris, Guénon also joined other occultist groups and

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[5] This point is emphasized by Quinn and others, but disputed by Kennedy. However, the reasons given by Kennedy pertain to the particular content of Guénon's views, for example, that the characters identified by Guénon in his *The Lord of the World* (1927) are derived from "authentic" Jewish tradition rather than through visions as in the case of Madame Blavatsky, or that Guénon lent support to the Polaires, a group that sought to find a hidden utopia in the unexplored polar regions, at the same time that the Theosophical Society was promoting Krishnamurti as the World Savior. Aside from such differences about personalities, however, the structural similarities found among Theosophists and Traditionalists is striking.

became a Freemason. Although Guénon never renounced Freemasonry as he did Theosophy and continued throughout his life to write on Masonic themes and symbolism, although after leaving Paris, he did not participate in Masonic activities, and his continued interest seems to have been purely intellectual. In 1912 he embraced Islam, and through Abdul-Hadi, a Swedish initiate, he joined the Sufi order of the Egyptian master Shaykh `Abd al-Rahman `Illaysh al-Kabir. After a short stint as instructor of philosophy in Algeria, Guénon entered the doctoral program in Sanskrit at the Sorbonne where he studied with Stanislav Levi. Although he did not complete his doctorate, apparently because he refused to provide the required references and notes for his thesis, the dissertation was published to general scholarly acclaim as *Introduction générale à l'étude des Doctrines hindoues* (1921). After the death of his French wife, he moved to Cairo in 1930 where he remarried, had four children, became an Egyptian citizen known as Shaykh `Abd al-Wahid Yahya and remained for the rest of his life. He is the author of twenty-nine books and roughly five hundred articles and reviews.

Coomaraswamy and Guénon corresponded and attracted a number of followers, a number of which became influential authors and promoters of traditionalism, including Frithjof Schuon, Titus Burkhardt, Marco Pallis, Martin Lings, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Huston Smith, and others. These writers defend a number of common doctrines:

> Tradition is the continuity of Revelation: an uninterrupted transmission, through innumerable generations, of the spiritual and cosmological principles, sciences and laws resulting from a revealed religion: nothing is neglected, from the establishment of social orders and codes of conduct to the canons regulating the arts and architecture, ornamentation and dress; it includes the mathematical, physical, medical and psychological sciences, encompassing moreover those deriving from celestial movements. What contrasts it totally with our modem learning, which is a closed system materially, is its reference to all things back to superior planes of being, and eventually to ultimate Principles: considerations entirely unknown to modern man.[6]

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[6] Whitehall Perry, in *The Unanimous Tradition: Essays On The Essential Unity Of All Religions*, ed. Ranjit Fernando (The Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies Press, 1999).

Traditionalism or Modernism?

In order to evaluate the claims of Traditionalism as expounded by Coomaraswamy, Guénon and their followers, we need a more complete account of that claims made by Traditionalism than the statement by Whitehall Perry given above. Since the main thrust of my criticism of Traditionalism aims at its rejection of modernity, it is important to make it clear at the outset that in criticizing Traditionalism, I am not endorsing modernism. The basic point is that nothing should be accepted or rejected merely because it is modern and likewise, nothing should be accepted or rejected merely because it is traditional. There is much that is good in modernity, and much that is good in traditional societies. There is much that is bad in modernity, and much that is bad in traditional societies. These obvious facts seem to be ignored by Traditionalists and modernists, and so, both Traditionalism and modernism should be rejected. Every claim and every practice must be subject to critical evaluation according to the criteria of religion and reason.

Modernity, Modernism and Modernization

Modernity is first of all a period of European history stretching from the aftermath of the Reformation through the twentieth century. Secondly, it is a cultural condition. During the modern period European society acquired a number of striking interrelated characteristics: economically, there was a shift from an agrarian to an industrial economy; politically, the institution of the nation-state began to displace monarchical rule, liberalism and secularism gained ground against the allied powers of the nobility and the Church; socially, individualism and social mobility began to take precedence over family and community and technology came to play an ever more important role in the private and public spheres that emerged; philosophically, Enlightenment rationalism and empiricism became dominant; in science, new methods of exact measurement and applied mathematics were developed; in the arts, there was a shift from iconic art to naturalism and then expressivism; and in theology, historical method and an emphasis on religious experience became prominent. Virtually every aspect of human life changed in ways that previously would not have been imaginable. When conditions such as these come to characterize a society, whether European or not, the society is said to have become modernized. In Europe and elsewhere, modernization has been met with enthusiastic support as well as resistance. The optimistic advocacy of modernization is modernism. There are other more specialized meanings that have been given to the terms *modernity*, *modernization* and *modernism*, but they are not immediately relevant to our discussion.

Traditions, Tradition and Traditionalism

The term *traditional* is perhaps even more vague than *modern*. It is generally understood in contrast to *modern*. Whatever was deeply ingrained in society prior to modernization is *traditional*. Indirectly, the traditional is understood in terms of European history, since the traditional is defined in contrast to the modern, which in turn can only be understood with reference to European culture. To call a non-Western society traditional is therefore to claim that it is similar in important ways to Europe before the Reformation. In contrast to *modernism*, *traditionalism* could be used to designate any

movement of resistance to modernization, or the view that pre-modern societies are superior to modernized societies. In this sense, one speaks not of traditionalism per se, but of Catholic traditionalism, Russian traditionalism, etc.

Since it would be extremely implausible to advocate an absolute traditionalism, i.e., the thesis that modernity is always worse than whatever it replaces, Coomaraswamy and Guénon introduced the notion of *authentic traditions* as those rooted in divine revelation. They claimed that there were common features to be found across pre-modern societies, whether aboriginal, Christian, Islamic, Hindu, Taoist or Buddhist.[7] It is the common features of these societies that are called *tradition*, and the advocacy of these features over those of modern societies is *Traditionalism*. Thus, traditionalism includes a thesis of a specific form of religious pluralism, that all the authentic religious traditions are divinely inspired and are at the innermost core the same, as well as a cultural thesis that asserts that the cultural institutions of societies dominated by authentic tradition are justified as reflections of Tradition. Both of these theses are dubious. I have made a case against Traditionalist religious pluralism elsewhere,[8] so here I will only touch on the main points.

Problems with Esoteric Pluralism

The sort of religious pluralism advocated by Traditionalists is one that it takes over from Theosophy. Even if Guénon decisively rejected the Theosophical Society, the key ideas of the Traditionalists regarding the unity of religions: (1) that all the major religions have a divine source; (2) that esoterically they are the same but exoterically different; and (3) that traces of the original perennial wisdom are to be found in the religions, are clearly stated by Madame Blavatsky in the introduction to *The Secret Doctrine*:

The true philosopher, the student of the Esoteric Wisdom, entirely loses sight of personalities, dogmatic beliefs and special religions. Moreover, Esoteric philosophy reconciles all religions, strips every one of its outward, human garments, and shows the root of each to be identical with that of every other great religion.[9]

The main differences between Blavatsky and the Traditionalists are: (1) she rejects the concept of a personal God found in the monotheistic religions as exoterically interpreted in favor of a more pantheistic view; (2) she considers Christianity to have deviated from the original doctrine, especially after

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[7] Guénon rejected Buddhism as an authentic tradition until persuaded to the contrary by other traditionalists, including Coomaraswamy and Schuon, through Marco Pallis. See Lings. The resolution of this disagreement indicates the importance of having some criteria by which to determine what should be included among the "authentic traditions."

[8] Muhammad Legenhausen, *Islam and Religious Pluralism* (London: al-Hoda, 1999), §2.3, 117-155.

[9] H. P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine,* Vol. 1, p. xx, Theosophical University Press Online Edition.

Constantine, and in general, she holds that the forms of religion now found in the world are all to a greater or lesser extent deviations from the original doctrine she claims to have uncovered.

Like the Traditionalists, Blavatsky holds that the esoteric teachings of the religions constitute a perennial wisdom:

> [T]he now *Secret* Wisdom was once the one fountain head, the ever-flowing perennial source, at which were fed all its streamlets -- the later religions of all nations -- from the first down to the last.[10]

Guénon came to the conclusion that Madame Blavatsky was a charlatan. However, the form of religious pluralism she espoused was retained by him and further elaborated in his writings and those of other Traditionalists. This is not the place to evaluate Blavatsky's credentials, and even if there is much in her writings that cannot stand up to scholarly scrutiny, that by itself does not prove that there is anything wrong with the type of pluralism she advocated, let alone the subtly different form of pluralism found in Traditionalist writings.

What's wrong with the sort of pluralism advocated by Blavatsky and the Traditionalists is that it depends on a rather questionable reading of the texts of the world's religions. It requires that one hold that certain similarities in doctrine, especially esoteric doctrine, constitute the core of the religions, and that differences be dismissed as deviations. Blavatsky supported this interpretation with the dubious claim that she had discovered the original secret teachings. The Traditionalists, on the other hand, claim that through intellectual intuition they are able to discern the common essence. The method used is implausible. It is assumed at the outset that the religions have a common esoteric essence, and the texts are interpreted so as to accord with this principle. This is question begging.

The second major flaw common to most forms of religious pluralism is that the teachings of the religions seem to be inconsistent with one another, and with pluralism, regardless whether we examine their esoteric or exoteric doctrines. Pluralists are forced to claim that these contradictions are either due to corruptions in the religious traditions, or are due to inessential factors, such as culture. This sort of claim is not supported by an examination of the texts, but only by an *a priori* conviction of the truth of pluralism.

These objections to pluralism are made by appeal to standards of good scholarship in religious studies. More importantly, however, there are theological grounds within Islamic teachings to reject the religious pluralism of the Traditionalists. The problem is not merely that Islam forbids idol worship, while idol worship is intrinsic to the non-monotheistic traditions. The problem is where the criterion for religious truth is to be found. According to Islam that criterion is given in God's final revelation to man, while according to Traditionalism it is something to be abstracted by intellectual intuition through a comparative interpretation of the world's esoteric religious teachings.

This theological criticism is not merely theoretical. It has practical consequences, as well. For example, Islam presents a relatively egalitarian social ideal in which no distinctions in religious duty are made on the basis of social standing, occupation, color or race. There is no priesthood in Islam.

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[10] Blavatsky, xliv-xlv.

Hinduism, on the other hand, not only has a priesthood, but it is enshrined in the caste system. Traditionalists such as Martin Lings continue to defend the Hindu caste system as being a part of authentic tradition, rather than condemning it on the basis of Islamic teachings.

> But thanks to the caste system with the Brahmins as safeguarders of religion we have today a Hinduism which is still living and which down to this century has produced flowers of sanctity.[11]

What is essential here is to see what criterion is being used for evaluative religious and moral judgments. Instead of making their evaluations from within the framework or Islam, Traditionalists base their evaluations on the conceit that they can view all of the religions from some higher transcendent perspective.

The flaws of esoteric religious pluralism may be summed up by listing the following points.

- Intellectual intuition, even if accepted as a valid way of obtaining knowledge, does not support esoteric pluralism.
- Esoteric differences among the religious differences are proportionate to their exoteric differences. Common features among religious traditions may be found by abstracting and generalizing from their exoteric features no less than from their esoteric features.
- Religious pluralists use a question-begging methodology in their reading of religious texts.
- Pluralists gloss over important differences in order to eliminate contradictions.
- Pluralism conflicts with Islamic teaching, because Islam presents itself as the final and definitive religion for mankind and not as culture bound, while pluralism sees the differences between Islam and other traditions to be due to cultural accidents.
- Islam offers a basically egalitarian social vision, while Traditionalists social differences such as are found in the caste system as manifestations of the hierarchical nature of being.
- Traditionalists use tradition and the intellectual intuition of the principles of *sophia perennis* as their criteria of evaluation instead of the principles of Islam.

The Traditionalist Critique of Modernism

Problems with the Traditionalist cultural thesis are best understood in terms of their critique of modernism. According to this thesis, the characteristics of traditional societies are manifestations of the divine principles on which they are based, and thus, the characteristics of modern societies, insofar as they deviate from tradition, are to be rejected.

Many critics of modernity have drawn attention to points upon which traditionalists focus their critique, e.g., scientism, atomistic individualism, lack of spirituality. They are important points. Guénon, Coomaraswamy and other

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[11] From Martin Lings, "René Guénon."

traditionalists are to be credited with seeing through the illusions of modernism at a time when its allure was at a peak. Martin Lings describes the mood after the First World War as follows:

> I myself remember that world in which and for which Guénon wrote his earliest books, in the first decade after the First World War, a monstrous world made impenetrable by euphoria: the First World War had been the war to end war. Now there would never be another war; and science had proved that man was descended from the ape, that is, he had progressed from apehood, and now this progress would continue with nothing to impede it; everything would get better and better and better…. I remember a politician proclaiming, as who would dare to do today, "We are now in the glorious morning of the world." And at this same time, Guénon wrote of this wonderful world, "It is as if an organism with its head cut off were to go on living a life which was both intense and disordered." (from *East and West*, first published in 1924).[12]

As we have seen, Coomaraswamy and Guénon did not invent dissatisfaction with modernity. A long line of poets and thinkers who found much in modern culture appalling preceded them. Since the very inception of the industrial revolution, there has been no lack of voices proclaiming that society and culture had taken a wrong turn, that something valuable was being lost and destroyed. Among the voices of dissent may be found Romantic poets, like Blake and Wordsworth, Catholic ultramontanists, philosophers from Nietzsche to Heidegger, and, not surprisingly, Blavatsky and Olcott.

So, what is distinctive about the traditionalist critique of modernity? It is not unprecedented, so the distinctive feature is not historical originality. Some critics of modernity focused on the social problems of modern life, while others have been more theoretical. Usually, however, the two are combined, and it is held that the social problems of modernity are a result of neglect of some important truths. For the Catholics, modern woes are due to neglect of the teachings of the Church. For the Romantics, the neglected truth is one that can only be grasped through the heart, or some sort of feeling or experience. For Heidegger, the problems of modern society are the result of a long progressive neglect of the question of Being stretching back to antiquity. For Blavatsky, Olcott, Guénon and Coomaraswamy, the problems of modernity arise from neglect of the perennial wisdom found in the esoteric teachings of the great religions, although it must be admitted that Guénon and Coomaraswamy went way beyond what was implicit in the writings of the Theosophists.

In all of these groups there is a common implausible causal claim, that the neglect of some truths is what causes the problems associated with modernity. As far as I know, none of the members of any of the groups mentioned does anything to substantiate this claim. It is taken to be obvious that since moderns have neglected the Truth and have various social

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[12] From Martin Lings, "René Guénon."

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problems, the neglect is the cause of the social problems. Consider the following statement by Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr:

> But the opposition of tradition to modernism, which is total and complete as far as principles are concerned, does not derive from the observation of facts and phenomena or the diagnosis of the symptoms of the malady. It is based upon a study of the causes which have brought about the illness. Tradition is opposed to modernism because it considers the premises upon which modernism is based to be wrong and false in principle.[13]

This is a gross oversimplification. The relation between modern thought and the characteristics of modern societies is a complex one in which social changes influence thought and vice versa. In order to understand the problems of modernity, more observation of facts and phenomena is needed than metaphysics. European modernization took place as European societies became increasingly industrialized. The changes wrought by industrialization led to shifts in political power and authority, and these shifts are reflected in modern political philosophies, including Marxism, liberalism and the various forms of traditionalism, for the reactions against the changes that accompanied industrialization are no less modern than the positivistic euphoria assailed by Guénon and Lings.

Another dubious feature of the Traditionalist critique of modernity that stems from the idea that social forms are products of dominant beliefs is that there is a tendency among Traditionalists to glorify pre-modern social structures because they are seen as products of true Traditional beliefs. Guénon writes:

> What we call normal civilization is a civilization which is based on principles, in the true sense of the term, and where everything is ordained and hierarchically arranged in conformity with these principles, so that everything there is seen as the application and extension of a doctrine purely intellectual or metaphysical in its essence; this is what we mean also when we speak of a "tradiitonal" civilization.[14]

In this way, the evils of feudalism are to be excused because feudalism is seen as an institution that was produced by a society dominated by Traditional beliefs and values and in turn the system protected those beliefs and values. The social pressures that made the feudal system intolerable and led to its overthrow are ignored, and the shift is glossed as having been brought about by a neglect of the perennial wisdom on which feudal society was based!

In place of the modernist faith in unlimited progress in which technology and "enlightened" thinking are supposed to lead to a continual improvement in the human condition, Traditionalists posit that modernization is a process of unmitigated decline, explained by Guénon in terms of the grand cycles of Hindu cosmology. While modernists seem blind to the spiritual crisis of

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[13] *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 84.
[14] Guénon, *Orient et Occident* (Paris: Payot, 1924), 236, cited in Quinn, 179.

modern man, the rape of the environment, the evils of colonialism and neo-colonialism, the weakening of the family, etc., Traditionalists seem blind to the benefits brought by modernization, the vast increase in literacy and availability of education, public health and sanitation, more humane treatment of prisoners and the insane, etc. The benefits of modernization cannot be ignored any more than its failings, even when judged not by the standards of modernity itself, but in accordance with traditional values. It is pointless to attempt any overall evaluation by which to justify the claim that modernity is better than what preceded it or worse. In some respects it is better, and in other respects worse.

While Traditionalists devote much of their attention to the evil aspects of modernity, there is relatively little analysis of the major themes of modern writers, such as inwardness, the importance of ordinary life, the moral resources within the self, the ideal of authenticity, liberal political ideals, naturalism, or autonomy, to mention a few of the most important.[15] For a meaningful criticism of modernity to take place without falling into reactionary posturing, an examination of the development of such themes in modern writing is required as well as a review of how such themes have gradually come to be reflected in modern culture and society generally.[16] Simply to pit the evils of modernity against sacred Tradition provides little help with understanding either modernity or traditional societies, or how they interact.

According to Catholic traditionalists, the traditions of the Church are sacred because the Holy Spirit guides the Church through history. This doctrine means that practices and beliefs that have no other justification than that they have been around as long as anyone can remember are given an aura of holiness. It also makes any deviation from accepted practices and beliefs seem demonic. Something like this doctrine may be found among Traditionalists, as well. There are several differences. First, they do not limit themselves to a particular religion, as do the Catholics. Second, they do not base the attribution of sacredness on the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but on the guidance of "true principles," *sophia perennis* and intellectual intuition. Nevertheless, both Catholic and Guénonian traditionalists see traditions as sacred because they are in some way manifestations or elaborations of divine revelation. Revelation becomes manifest in tradition. This sort of veneration of tradition results in a very extreme sort of conservatism, one that is open to moral criticism according to the very tenets and values of the traditions the Traditionalist pretends to defend.

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[15] For a balanced examination of some of these themes, see the writings of Charles Taylor, especially *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), Alasdair MacIntyre, especially *After Virtue* 2nd ed., (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), or such earlier writers as Arnold Toynbee, *An Historian's Approach to Religion* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), and W. E. Hocking, *The Coming World Civilization* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1958). All of these writers are critical of modernity, but carefully examine the development of its major themes and offer suggestions for how important elements of threatened traditions may be protected.

[16] To his credit, Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr recognizes the need for Muslim intellectuals to become aware of criticisms of modern Western civilization by Westerners, but he seems to take such criticism merely as confirmation of the Traditionalist view that Western civilization is breaking down. See his *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*, 83, 307-309.

Traditionalism is an ideology, in the general sense that it offers a system of ideas on the basis of which it recommends a social or political program. Of course, Traditionalism differs from many other ideologies in that while they concentrate on political action, Traditionalism is focused on metaphysics, and takes a political position only derivatively. Nevertheless, and more specifically, it is an ideology in the sense that it: (1) contains a more or less comprehensive theory about the world and the place of man in it; (2) sets out a general program of social and political direction; (3) it foresees itself as surviving through onslaughts against it; (4) it seeks not merely to persuade but to recruit loyal adherents, demanding what is sometimes called commitment; (5) it addresses a wide public but tends to confer some special role of leadership on intellectuals.[17] It is yet another "ism", another *maktab*, that has emerged out of the European experience of modernity. This is ironic, because Traditionalists condemn ideology generally as a product of modernity.[18] So, Traditionalism is self-defeating, in the sense that its condemnation of everything modern is so general that it implicitly condemns itself, since Traditionalism itself is a modern ideology founded by Coomaraswamy and Guénon prior to World War II.

As for the political program of Traditionalism, it is perhaps most clearly stated by Dr. Nasr:

> In the political domain, the traditional perspective always insists upon realism based upon Islamic norms. In the Sunni world, it accepts the classical caliphate and, in its absence, the other political institutions, such as the sultanate, which developed over the centuries in the light of the teachings of the *Sharí'ah* and the needs of the community. Under no condition, however, does it seek to destroy what remains of traditional Islamic political institutions…. As for the Shi'ite world, the traditional perspective continues to insist that final authority belongs to the Twelfth Imam, in whose absence no form of government can be perfect. In both worlds, the traditional perspective remains always aware of the fall of the community from its original perfection, the danger of destroying traditional Islamic institutions and substituting those of modern, Western, origin….[19]

As I understand Islam, many Sunni and Shi'ah Muslims are in agreement that at least after the first four caliphs, the caliphate has been a complete disaster in which lust for power, empire building and personal extravagance dominated the institution even as it claimed to rule in the name of Islam. The martyrdom of Imam Husaynυ rescued Islam from its association with such decadence by testifying that the caliphate had become in fact a force opposed to everything genuine Islam stands for. This sort of understanding of Islamic history seems unavailable to Traditionalists who laud governments based on the sovereignty of sultans and so-called caliphs as *traditional*, while playing down the corruptions and excesses of such governments as *imperfections* that should

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[17] See Maurice Cranston's article "Ideology" in the Encyclopedia Britannica (CD-ROM 2001 ed.)
[18] See Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World,* 21, 306.
[19] Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World,* 17.

be tolerated to prevent the danger that some Western model of government might come to power. This is reactionary politics at its worst.

In sum, although there is much insight into modernity's flaws in Traditionalist writings, the Traditionalist critique of modernity suffers from the following defects:

- First, there is the dubious idea that explicit or implicit belief in various principles causes a society to have the characteristics it exhibits, so that the ills of modernity are simplistically attributed to deviations in beliefs.
- Second, Traditionalists contrast the evils of modernity with a romanticized picture of traditional societies.
- Third, the Traditionalist analysis of pre-modern societies fails to do justice to the essential differences among them because it is motivated by the *a priori* assumption that they are all based on shared principles.
- Fourth, Traditionalists view modernization as unmitigated decline because they take adherence to Tradition as their evaluative standard rather than the standards inherent to the traditions themselves. This criticism may be presented as a logical one, revealing a contradiction inherent in the Traditionalist position, or as a theological criticism, that Traditionalism exalts Tradition in a manner not sanctioned by Islamic teachings.
- Fifth, the Traditionalist critique of modernity is based on intuitions about the deviant principles that dominate modern society rather than on historical analysis.
- Sixth, deviation from Tradition is condemned without regard to any evaluation of whether change could be merited, because change is seen as opposition to the sacred as it has become manifest in tradition. While it presents itself as inheritor of the sapiential legacy of the traditional cultures of the world, in fact it impedes the exercise of wisdom to critically examine the conditions of what are considered to be authentic traditional societies.
- Seventh, while Traditionalists condemn ideology as a modern phenomenon, what they offer is itself an ideology.
- Eighth, Traditionalism is politically reactionary.

Traditionalism fails in its criticism of modernity because it makes use of an arcane methodology and ignores the details of history, it oversimplifies the characters of both modern and traditional societies, and by making Tradition itself the standard of its evaluations, it violates the moral principles of the traditions it claims to champion. As an ideology, Traditionalism makes no provision for meaningful debate about how to improve society, reform its institutions or confront the changes that are taking place, because all deviations from tradition, glorified as the manifestation of divine principles, is opposed. Thus, the failings of the Traditional critique are both methodological and theological. Despite these failures, Traditionalist ideology may serve the useful purpose of fomenting some resistance to those who advocate modernization, development and industrialization in imitation of the Western model, and perhaps it is vain to hope for a more reasoned and nuanced

approach to modernity. Traditionalism succeeds in pointing out many important faults in modernity: the loss of the sacred with the rise of secularism, the loss of intrinsic value with the rise of instrumental rationality, the loss of art and vocation with the industrialization and automation, and the loss of a coherent world view with the emergence of pluralism, diversification and specialization.[20] However, others have observed these faults, too. What is valuable in the Traditionalist critique of modernity is not original, and what is original is not valuable.

The Inescapability of Modernity

Traditionalists offer no alternative to modernity because they fail to come to grips with its dynamics and instead wallow in nostalgia. When this criticism was explicitly leveled against Coomaraswamy, he responded that he did not wish to return to the Middle Ages.[21] Nevertheless, in speaking of the possibility of regeneration in the West, he says, "The possibility exists only in the event of a return to first principles and to the normal ways of living that proceed from the application of first principles to contingent circumstances."[22] The question that remains unanswered by Traditionalists is how to apply such principles in the present circumstances of modernization. Guénon responds to this problem with an expectation of the end of the age of modernity based on Hindu cosmological ideas. In the meantime, he suggests that what remains of Tradition may be preserved by certain elites who are initiated into the *sophia perennis.* Quinn suggests, on the basis of his readings of Coomaraswamy and Guénon, that this inellectual elite might serve a function similar to that of the Hindu Brahmans as a priestly caste to reestablish Tradition after the passing away of the modern age.

The scenario painted by the Traditionalists seems unlikely, and may God forbid any such destiny. Where there are Brahmans, untouchables are usually not far. Barring global catastrophe, and/or the reappearance of Imam Mahdi (may Allah hasten his return), it is more reasonable to assume that modernization, along with all its benefits and injuries, will continue to spread. The challenge that faces Muslims today, is how to minimize the injuries, how to ride out modernization so that it does not take the same form among Muslims as it has in Christian society, how to preserve the sacred norms and values prescribed for us by Islam in these rapidly changing times. There are no simple solutions, no easy answers. An insistence on fundamental principles is not enough. The problem for Muslims is exactly how the fundamental principles of Islam are to be applied in the situations in which we find ourselves. Compromise is necessary because the traditional institutions and cultural forms are not sufficiently flexible to accommodate the changes with which contemporary Muslim societies are faced. Moreover, there is much in the traditional institutions that is not worth preserving. Traditional oppression, despotism, and cruelty do not become justifiable for being Traditional. Initiation into esoteric wisdom by an intellectual elite will not

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[20] See Quinn, Ch. 13, 247-263.
[21] See Quinn, 292.
[22] Ananda Coomaraswamy, *Am I My Brother's Keeper?* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1967), 62, cited in Quinn, 296.

suffice to reform society in accord with divine guidance. Loyalty to Islam requires a realistic appraisal of the environment in which we seek to live as Muslims and foster the flourishing of Muslim communities. Part of this realism means understanding how the conditions of contemporary societies differ from those of pre-modern societies in ways that make the reinstatement of traditional forms impossible *or worse*. Many of the differences are due to technology. Some are simply the result of the huge differences in the size of the populations of societies then and now. Consider the concept of *shurá* (consultation). In the small community of believers at the time of the Prophet of Islamﷺ consultation could be carried out through direct conversation with recognized leaders of tribal groups. When the community of believers comes to include millions and tribal affiliations have been erased centuries ago, it will be appropriate to adopt democratic institutions and apparatuses, even in the absence of any endorsement of democratic political theory. As another example, consider punishment. In Islamic sources there is no precedent for the collection of fines or prison sentences. Traditional authorities introduced prisons and dungeons, and the conditions in such Traditional institutions were notorious. It is neither practical nor moral to attempt to regulate traffic with threats of Traditional forms of punishment. Tradition is of no help in such matters. The example of traditional Muslim societies may help us to understand how Muslims sought to live in accordance with their religion, and in what ways they succeeded and failed in this effort, given the circumstances in which they lived. Change in traditional societies tended to be gradual and rather slow, largely because of technological limitations. This enabled traditional societies to forge an accommodation of new elements with traditional principles and values. Slow and gradual change is conducive to organic integrity and harmony.

Today, we have to find ways to live in accordance with Islam that are appropriate to the exceedingly different circumstances in which we live. Social changes are being driven by rapid changes in technology that give no one time to adjust. This gives modern society an ugly mismatched quality. While certain measures can be taken to try to preserve some sort of proportionality, integrity becomes more of a utopian ideal than a realistic aim. In this effort, we can only rely on Allah and His aid as we seek to sort through the social, political, cultural and theological problems that face us.

Traditionalism and Islamic Fundamentalism

The term "Islamic Fundamentalism" is one that has been invented by Western journalists by analogy with "Christian Fundamentalism." It is not a very apt term, but it has gained currency. In the Sunni world it is used for groups descended from the *Salafiyyah* movement, such as the Muslim Brotherhood. In practice, any politically active movement that opposes Westernization and calls for the enforcement of Islamic law is termed "Islamic fundamentalism," whether Sunni or Shi'i. Sometimes, those who take a reformist or even modernist approach to Islamic law will also be considered by journalists to be fundamentalists. Anti-Western rhetoric accompanied by exhortations to return to Islam is sufficient to brand one as fundamentalist. For

the purposes of any insightful understanding of contemporary Islamic political thought, "Islamic fundamentalism" is a useless derogatory label.[23]

Since Traditionalists might well be considered fundamentalists, according to the way Western journalists and too many academics use this term, one might hope to get a better understanding of Traditionalism by contrasting it with other groups that could be called fundamentalist. This issue is taken up by Dr. Nasr at several points in his *Traditional Islam and the Modern World.* It is odd that Dr. Nasr himself points out how inappropriate the label "Islamic fundamentalism" is, yet goes to some pains to show that Traditionalists are not fundamentalists, and retains much of the disparaging rhetorical force of "fundamentalism." A brief examination of the reasons he gives to separate Traditionalism from fundamentalism will help illuminate the extent of the extremism in the Traditionalist critique of modernity. Once that extremism is made clear, we can try to begin to articulate a more balanced view of the issues of tradition and modernity.
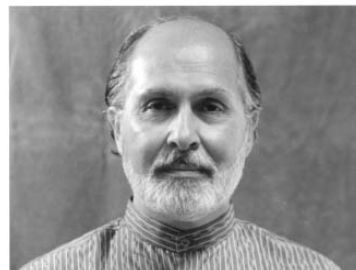
In traditional societies we find an integrated worldview centered upon religious belief. In modern societies this integration has been lost. To the extent that tradition remains in Iranian society, it is somewhat like a remnant of a civilization that once occupied this land but has been long since disappeared.[24] Under the circumstances, it makes as much sense to oppose modernity as it would to oppose hurricanes. Dr. Nasr writes:

> If traditionalists insist on the complete opposition between tradition and modernism, it is precisely because the very nature of modernism creates in the religious and metaphysical realms a blurred image within which half truths appear as the truth itself and the integrity of all that tradition represents is thereby compromised.[25]

Dr. Nasr continues by contrasting the Traditionalist perspective with that of fundamentalists and modernists. He also refers to the fundamentalist view as *counter-traditional* and *pseudo-traditional*, and sometimes *revolutionary*.[26] Often his distinction between fundamentalism and traditionalism amounts to little more than the accusation that fundamentalists are brutish and ugly, while Traditionalists are refined and sophisticated.

> The traditionalist and the so-called 'fundamentalist' meet in their acceptance of the Quran and *Hadíth*, as well as in their emphasis upon the *Sharí'ah,* but even here the differences remain profound. As already mentioned, tradition always emphasizes the sapiential commentaries and the long tradition of Quranic hermeneutics in understanding the meaning of the verses of the Sacred Text; whereas so many of the 'fundamentalist' movements simply pull out a verse

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[23] See *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*, 303-305.
[24] See Mohammad Khatami, "Tradition, Modernity and Development," in *Islam, Liberty and Development* (Binghamton: Institute of Global Cultural Studies, 1998), 17-37.
[25] *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*, 14.
[26] *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*, 18, 28.

from the Quran and give it a meaning in accordance with their goals and aims, often reading into it a meaning alien to the whole tradition of Quranic commentary, or *tafsír*. As for the *Sharí'ah*, tradition always emphasizes, in contrast to so much of current 'fundamentalism', faith, inner attachment to the *dicta* of the Divine Law and the traditional ambience of lenient judgment based upon the imperfections of human society, rather than simply external coercion based on fear of some human authority other than God.[27]

As for the interpretation of the Qur'an and *ahádíth*, true scholars pay attention to the commentary tradition, whether they are fundamentalists or traditionalists. Those who write popular works are more inclined to play fast and loose with the texts, but this cannot be considered a distinguishing feature that separates traditionalists from other fundamentalists. With respect to the Divine Law, as well, fundamentalists emphasize inner attachment as much as Traditionalists, and its implementation has been harsh among some fundamentalists as it has been among some traditional authorities, while others who would be considered fundamentalists have an attitude as lenient as any of which tradition might boast.

> Outside of this domain, the differences between the traditional and the counter-traditional in Islam are even more blatant. Most of the current 'fundamentalist' movements, while denouncing modernism, accept some of the most basic aspects of modernism. This is clearly seen in their complete and open-armed acceptance of modern science and technology…. Their attitude to science and technology is in fact nearly identical with that of the modernists, as seen on the practical plane in the attitude of Muslim countries with modern forms of government compared to those which claim to possess one form or another of Islamic government. There is hardly any difference in the manner in which they try to adopt modern Western technology, from computers to television, without any thought for the consequences of these inventions upon the mind and soul of Muslims.[28]

Does this mean that the defining distinction between traditionalists and fundamentalists is that whereas the latter accept Western science and technology, the traditionalists reject it? In this way, traditionalism is paraded as a more total rejection of modernity than that found in other Islamic groups. Fundamentalist governments are condemned for pursuing Western science and technology. What would a traditionalist government do? In fact, the traditional sultans who rule over various Muslim countries today are no less eager for Western science and technology than the so-called fundamentalist governments. Indeed, the only rejection of television and other aspects of Western technology at the level of government that seems to approach what is advocated by Dr. Nasr was to be found in the recently overthrown Taliban government in Afghanistan, a paradigm of Islamic fundamentalism if ever there was one.

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[27] *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*, 18.
[28] *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*, 19.

Dr. Nasr continues to distinguish traditionalism from fundamentalism in art and politics. In art, everything traditional is supposed to be beautiful, while the fundamentalists are tasteless. In general, those who are involved in what are called fundamentalist movements in Islam tend to be from the lowest strata of society, while traditionalists tend to be a very small group of highly educated people, some of whom, from Coomaraswamy to Dr. Nasr, have made important contributions to art criticism and aesthetics. The difference in attitudes toward the arts seems to have much more to do with education than ideology.

In the political realm, Dr. Nasr criticizes fundamentalists for accepting Western political institutions and ideas, including "revolution, republicanism, ideology and even class struggle in the name of a supposedly pure Islam."[29] Among extremist fundamentalists, it is not difficult to find people who reject all of these Western innovations that Dr. Nasr condemns.

In another essay, the differences are portrayed by Dr. Nasr in another way. He claims that fundamentalists usually share:

> opposition or indifference to all the inward aspects of Islam and the civilization and culture which it created, aspects such as Sufism, Islamic philosophy, Islamic art, etc. They are all outwardly oriented in the sense that they wish to reconstruct Islamic society through the re-establishment of external legal and social norms rather than by means of the revival of Islam through inner purification or by removing the philosophical and intellectual impediments which have been obstacles on the path of many contemporary Muslims. These movements, therefore, have rarely dealt in detail with the intellectual challenges posed by Western science and philosophy, although this trait is not by any means the same among all of them, some being of a more intellectual nature than others.[30]

This characterization, however, does not enable us to distinguish so-called fundamentalists from traditional Muslim groups, for there are Muslim groups that have been anti-intellectualist, anti-philosophical and rather outwardly oriented throughout the history of Islamic civilization. On the other hand, there are revolutionary Muslims who have been philosophers and mystics, and if most are not, this is merely a reflection of the general population. It is to their credit that Guénonian Traditionalists are interested in mysticism, art and philosophy, but that does not distinguish them from other Muslims who do not agree with their ideological principles.

In short, the main differences Dr. Nasr elaborates between fundamentalism and traditionalism is that traditionalism is more absolute in its rejection of everything modern and Western. On this account, fundamentalism seems to be downright moderate! The other difference that he repeatedly emphasizes is that fundamentalism is crude and rude, but this seems to reveal more about social background than any defining difference in the essence of Traditionalism.

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[29] *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*, 21.
[30] *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*, 84.

Balance and Truth-Seeking

Instead of trying to build a sense of self-worth based on the ruins of an idealized past, we need to seek whatever truth becomes available to us in our changing circumstances, regardless of whether they are enshrined in our own traditions or come from modernity or anywhere else. The only once and for all and always truths and standards that have been given to us are found in Islam. On that basis and with the aid of our limited intellectual faculties we should try to achieve a balanced understanding of our station and its duties. The course of the wise in moral affairs including politics and other issues pertaining to culture and civilization seems to be one of moderation. Moderation is not to be confused with lack of determination or an irresolute stance on issues of faith or justice. Moderation means having the wisdom to see the folly of extreme forms of modernism and traditionalism, and choosing a just course between them.

Moderation requires an understanding of the current conditions of Muslim societies today and of the elements shaping them: from global market forces to popular religious beliefs and practices. How our societies are shaped and changed is largely out of our hands. Where we do have an opportunity to effect change or to modify its direction in some way, we need the humility to admit that the results of our interference in social, political and other cultural affairs are often other than we would predict. This, however, should not be cause for timidity, but for submission to Allah in obedience to His commands, knowing that in the ordinance of His prescriptions, He knows better. The violation of the moral precepts given by human conscience and confirmed by divine revelation to His prophets, peace be with Muhammad and his progeny and with all of them, can never be excused as a means to obtain otherwise desirable social or political goals.

Moderation requires critical analysis and evaluation of the character of our civilization and the ways in which it is changing in order to assess their positive and negative aspects according to the standards of Islamic teachings and values. We need to understand what can be done to minimize the negative effects of the modernization taking place around us. It is here that Traditionalist writings can be of assistance. They can increase our sensitivity to how religious principles are reflected in various areas of culture, and how modernization may do violence to those principles. This is often overlooked by policy makers and politicians, as well as academics. Traditionalist writings, despite all the faults I have found with them in this paper, are invaluable aids to increasing our sensitivity, or in the popular expression, to consciousness raising with regard to how modernization does violence to the integral character of traditional cultures. Traditionalists share this feature with post-modernist writers: both are engaged in a project of unmasking various aspects of modernity. This is a task so valuable, that no matter how much I may disagree with various points of the Traditionalist position, I feel obliged to admit my indebtedness to the Traditionalist articulations of the character of modernity, especially in the indisputably erudite works of Dr. Nasr. However, we also need to recognize what sorts of modern changes may bring us into greater harmony with religious principles. The changing roles that various

social and cultural elements play allow them to be in harmony with religious principles in some environments, but contrary to them in others. Elements of traditional society cannot be imported from the past with the expectation that they can play the same integrative role in the new environment as they did in their original context.

Moderation also requires critical analysis and evaluation of traditional societies and their institutions. There is nearly consensus among contemporary Muslim thinkers (with the exception of some Traditionalists) that hereditary monarchy or sultanate is incongruent with fundamental Islamic aims and values. Sultanate is oppressive. It squanders national wealth for the sake of the luxury of a few. History shows that when such power is placed in the hands of a single person or group, and that person or group is accustomed to luxury, it is easy for foreign control and domination to crop up to the detriment of Muslim society, as in the Qajar and Pahlavi collaboration with Russian and US agents, respectively.

Nothing can be retained solely for the reason that it is traditional, and nothing can be rejected solely because it is modern, whether in doctrine, economics, social institutions, forms of cultural expression, or whatever.

Consider computerization. Dr. Nasr condemns this as modern and untraditional.[31] No doubt there is much about computer use that clashes with Islamic aims and values. To a large extent, however, it is unavoidable. On the other hand, there is much in computer use that serves Islamic aims, e.g., accessibility to information and facilitation of research, not to mention the more specifically Islamic applications, such as Islamic software, Islamic internet groups and magazines, searchable databases of *ahádíth*, etc.. Traditionalist reasoning is valuable when it points out aspects of modern culture and technology that conflict with Islamic principles in ways that would ordinarily pass without notice. In our enthusiasm for Islamic software, for example, we might overlook the fact that Islamic education through a computer program, no matter how detailed, is impersonal in the worst way. Traditionally, the relation between student and master is of utmost importance, for it is only in the context of such a personal relationship that the master can correct misunderstandings of the material presented to the student, and only in such a context that the master can determine what materials would be helpful for the student at a particular level, and what materials might be harmful at that level. Obviously, the computer program fails miserably by comparison. The solution, however, is not to heap scorn on Islamic software as a violation of Traditional principles of Islamic education. The software has its own advantages. In present circumstances there just aren't enough masters to go around. In Iran today something like half the population is under eighteen. For most, the choice is not between a computer program and a master, but between educational and non-educational computer use. This is just an example, but it could be repeated endlessly. Modernization is a fact of life. Traditionalists make some valid points about its failings, but on the whole, people do not have a choice as to whether they would like to live in a traditional or modern way. They find themselves caught in the whirlpool of modernization.

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[31] *Traditional Islam and the Modern World*, 24, fn. 8.

In the more theoretical realm, modernity pits history and all the modern sciences against metaphysics. Some of my criticisms of traditionalism revolve about this conflict. The history of the world's religions testifies to their particularities while a metaphysical viewpoint seeks universal themes. The critical historical attitude, once established, can never be banished. There can be no restoration of metaphysics to its former authority. This is felt nowhere so keenly as in theology. The error of modernism is to believe that historical study makes metaphysics otiose, merely another item for historical inquiry itself. The error of traditionalism is to hope for a reassertion of metaphysical principles in a victory over historical criticism. If we are ever to move beyond the impasse of such errors, we will have to learn how to integrate historical and metaphysical thought, or, at the very least, some sort of uneasy truce will have to be maintained between them. In some areas, both sides will have to retreat. One problem here is that so much modern science is built upon presuppositions that conflict with any sort of traditional metaphysics. In order to realize integration, modern science would have to be dismantled and built back up again without its biases against religion and metaphysics. Even if such a project could be successful, it would take several generations of scholars in virtually all the fields of the modern sciences, and while this work was going on, the established sciences of modernity would not sit still. At this point, we can only learn to live with it, and in this, modern history itself can help us to see the biases against metaphysics that have come to permeate the sciences as the products not of science itself, but of the historical forces at work during the formative period of the development of modern science. This recognition of the biases of the culture of modernity including its sciences and history is only the beginning of the sort of critique demanded by the Mennonite theologian Jim Reimer:

> …a rather thorough critique of modern liberal culture and its assumptions is necessary… but… it cannot be accomplished by using pre-Enlightenment categories in their purity, or by recovering and conserving the past in its pristine form. A recovery of classical categories from antiquity is necessary for the purpose of judging and transcending our own culture…, but these concepts must first go through the crucible of the Enlightenment before they can be effectively appropriated….[32]

> Theology, in my opinion, does not have the freedom to be or not to be "modern," or "non-modern" for that matter, as if its practitioners sit above the historical flow of things making such choices. It has been shaped by modern scientific, rational, and historical assumptions. We participate in the age of which we are a part. The fact is that new paradigms cannot arbitrarily be created or chosen; they emerge gradually replacing older paradigms that have lost their power.[33]

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[32] A. James Reimer, "Doctrinal Renewal and the 'Dialectic of Enlightenment'", in Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press and Herald Press, 2001), 56.

[33] A. James Reimer, "Transcendence, Social Justice, and Pluralism: Three Competing Agendas in Contemporary Theology", in Reimer (2001), 70.

The challenge for Muslims and Christians is to find a way through the process in which faith is maintained despite the evils of modernization. The hope for Muslim societies is that they may move beyond modernization without suffering all the injuries this has brought in the West, *in shá' Allah.*

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