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. Naas has written, in a traditional society, "nothing lies outside the realm of tradition." Hence, to live in the traditional world is to breathe in a universe in which man is related to reality beyond himself, from which he receives those principles, truths, forms, attitudes, and other elements that determine the very texture of human existence.

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 scientific educational world—one cannot read Dante without imbuing 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 20th 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.'

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 unmovable center of a wheel, around which everything in the culture turns, and without which, we need scarcely add, the wheel itself would fall apart.

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 necessities 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.

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. 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 ver-
ities, the same expectations, hold true. Just as the crafts
taIl an apprenticeship to a master, and an initiatory or
spiritual path manifestations in and attested to by one's life
work, so too the traditional scholar undergoes an appren-
ticeship 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 orien-
ted towards their common spiritual center.

This means that the scientific disciplines in particular
are not conceived of as being divorced from human con-
cerns or from religious meaning. Whereas the modern
sciences have both created and resulted from a radically dese-
crated 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 reli-
gious 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 sym-

dolic intelligibility; a fact that is most directly re-

sponsible for the crisis which the modern scientific world
view and its application have brought about.4

In a traditional culture, both nature and the artistic
works of man are seen to be bound 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 indi-
vidual human being; and that the various scholarly disci-
plines 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 ex-
ample, in medieval Christian poetry like that of Dante or Wil-
liam Langland, which is governed by both simple and com-
plex number and letter symbolism.5 The poetry of these
authors reflects the numinous 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 poet-
s were intimately familiar with the ecstatic 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 al-
chemy, 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 tra-
ditional education in Christian civilization, but one could just
as well have drawn examples from Islamic, Hindu, or Bud-

dhist civilizations, for as A.K. Coomaraswamy among oth-
ers has pointed out, especially the same principles govern
these cultures as governed medieval Christendom. Indeed,

is it really surprising to find that the origins of icons in Bud-
dhism 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 wor-
shipers—or that in all the major religions it is recognized that
"spiritual realities have a certain definite formal equiva-

lent, certain fixed canons of proportion"?6

One may well say that the whole of a traditional civiliza-
tion—and of a traditional education—ultimately re-

flects the "science of forms," or the "science of symbol-

ism."7 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. Edu-
cation must entail the uncovering of meaning. In the final
analysis, then, traditional education is the progressive un-
veiling of spiritual significance in man, culture, and nature.

To what extent can we fuse some elements of tradi-
tional education in the modern world? Certainly much in
contemporary education—its gymnastics, its attempts at
symmetry and "mass production," the almost complete ab-
sence 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."8 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."9

Noneetheless, 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 man-
kind, and who recognize just how precious is our inheri-
tance 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 hu-
man being. Some of these people will inevitably teach oth-
ers, 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

1S.R. Nasr, Knowledge and the Sacred. (New York: Con-
tinuum, 1931), p. 80.

2Ibid.

3A.K. Coomaraswamy, Traditional Art and Symbolism,
pp. 23-24; the sources quoted are from Plato, Republic,
500E, Plotinus, Enneads, V.9.11, Exod. 25:40, Aitareya Brahma-
mana VI.27, Shankhayana Aranyaka VIII.8, Shatapatha Brah-
mana VII.2.1.4. Coomaraswamy includes many other cross-
references in the notes.

4Some will no doubt object, mistaking modern fundament-
alisr as for a truly traditional society, that religious cul-
ture 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
discrediting our smug modern belief in inevitable "pro-
gress," one might well ask who is more free in reality, some-
one who lives in one of our crime ridden, violent, hopeless
cities, caught in a consumer society that offers nothing be-
Yond this life, or a pious craftsman in medieval Europe?

5Eric Gill, A Holy Tradition of Working. (West Stock-

Enquiry into the Origins and Consequences of Modern Sci-

7S.H. Nasr, Man and Nature, The Spiritual Crisis of Mod-

8Ibid.
In this regard, see Arthur Versluis, “Piers Plowman, Numerical Composition, and the Prophecies,” Connotations 1 (1991) 2, pp. 103 ff.


