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 suffice 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 a 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 kind of humanism, and an emphasis on “great books,” still carried on in a diffused way some elements of traditional cultures in an ever more mercantilist, mechanistic, or scientistic educational world—one cannot read Dante without imagining some of what it meant to be a medieval Christian, even if one is reading in a factory—but more and more, contemporary education has become fragmented and even openly anti-traditional.

By contrast, traditional education is informed by its spiritual origin and purpose. One of the truly great scholars of the twentieth century, A.K. Coomaraswamy, a man whose erudition is unparalleled, wrote that our educational systems are chaotic because we are not agreed for what to educate, if not for self-expression. But all tradition is agreed as to what kind of models are to be imitated: “The city can never otherwise be happy unless it is designed by those painters who follow a divine original;” The crafts such as building and carpentry . . . take their principles from that realm and from the thinking there;’ Lo, make all things in accordance with the pattern that was shown thee upon the mount; ‘It is in imitation of the divine forms that any human form, (shilpa) is invented here;’ There is this divine harp to be sure; this human harp comes into being in its likeness; ‘We must do what the Gods did first.’

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

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

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 (svadharm) 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’ and 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 educational system.

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cration of the traditional university, we find that the same veri-
ties, the same expectations, hold true. Just as the crafts
entail an apprenticeship to a master, and an initiatory or
spiritual path manifested in and attested to by one's life
work, so too the traditional scholar undergoes an 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 ori-
ented 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 de-
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-
bolic intelligibility, a fact that is directly respon-
sible for the crisis which the modern scientific world
view and its application have brought about.

In a traditional culture, both nature and the artistic
works of man are seen to be formed by 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 academe 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. The poetry of these
authors reflects the number symbolism at the heart of the
Christian revelation, numbers like three, twelve, thirty-
three, forty, and sixty six, each of which has a
constellation of symbolism surrounding it. These poets
were intimately familiar with the esoteric implications of
numbers, letters, and images, and wove these into their
poetry not haphazardly, but with full knowledge of the same
principles figuring in other disciplines like astrology or 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 tradi-
tional education in Christian civilization, but one could just
as well have drawn examples from Islamic, Hindu, or Bud-
thist civilizations, for as A.K. Coomaraswamy among
others has pointed out, essentially the same principles govern
these cultures as governed medieval Christendom. Indeed,
if it is really surprising to find that the origins of icons in Bud-
thism 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-
shippers—or that in all the major religions it is recog-
nized that "spiritual realities have a certain definite formal equiva-
 lent, certain fixed canons of proportion."?

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

References

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

2. Ibid.

3. A.K. Coomaraswamy, Traditional Art and Symbolism,
pp. 23-24; the sources quoted are from Plato, Republic,
508E, Plotinus, Enneads, V.9.11, Exod. 25:40; Attar, Baha-
mana VI.27, Shakhayana Aranyaka VIII.8, Shatapatha Brah-
mana VII.2.1.4. Coomaraswamy includes many other cross-
references in the notes.

4. Some will no doubt object, mistaking modern funda-
mentalism for a truly traditional society, that aregious 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 disturbing 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-
ond this life, or a pious craftsman in medieval Europe?

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

Enquiry into the Origins and Consequences of Modern Sci-

7. S.H. Nasr. Man and Nature, The Spiritual Crisis of Mod-
In this regard, see Arthur Versluis, “Piers Plowman, Numerical Composition, and the Prophecies,” *Connotations* 1 (1991) 2, pp. 103 ff.


