

**SCIENCE AND CIVILIZATION IN
TRADITIONAL PERSPECTIVE**

A Tribute to A. K. Coomaraswamy

by
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Transaction No. 87

**THE INDIAN INSTITUTE OF WORLD CULTURE
BANGALORE 560 004**

TRANSACTIONS

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TRANSACTION NO. 87

This was an Endowment Lecture being a Tribute to Sri. A.K. Coomaraswamy given at the Institute by Shri. R. Ramakrishnan.

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*Printed by W. Q. Judge Press, 97, Residency Road, Bangalore 560 025, and published by
The Indian Institute of World Culture,
. 6B.P. Wadid Road, Basavangudi, Bangalore 560 004.
Printed in India.*

SCIENCE AND CIVILIZATION IN TRADITIONAL PERSPECTIVE

R. Ramakrishnan

The seminal writings of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy cover a vast number of subjects. Through the nearly sixteen hundred books and articles, not to speak of the letters written by this polyhistor, the vidwan, the Brahmin, as characterized by Alvin Moore in the sense of one who knew Brahman, the thread of Tradition is unmistakably seen. Again, Coomaraswamy occupies the first place in the already long and continuously growing list of Traditionalists, Eastern and Western, for his deep and incisive knowledge of a large number of languages. Coomaraswamy never used translations of texts, he always used the originals.

The details of Coomaraswamy's highly eventful life, interesting and edifying as they are, should not detain us. The doctor in keeping with the correct Hindu tradition which permits only hagiography, considered portraiture as *asvargya*. But a properly written biography of Coomaraswamy will be of the class of St. Augustine's *Confessions*, or the *Legends of St. Francis* by St. Bonaventura, or of Krishna Kaviraj's *Chaitanya Charitamritam* or the work on the life of the Tibetan saint Mila Repa.

In his brilliant introduction to the Rothko Chapel Colloquium of 1973, Marco Pallis, the Greek mountaineer, musician and entomologist, observes that the conditions of the modern world are such that one has to cultivate a deliberate mindfulness over apparently small matters to avoid getting thrown off balance in life. Pallis further observes that this mindfulness should be especially practiced in the use of the tongue lest falsehoods and worse, half-truths emerge. Tendentious usages are legion and words are continuously losing their intrinsic connotations. This is not a mere modification of the spoken language but a mark of the lowering of the general intellectual level. And, Tradition happens to be one of those much misused and abused words which has to be defined and recovered.

Tradition except in the pedestrian sense has been defined as consisting of all those principles, concepts, ideas and the like of more than human — metaphysical or suprahuman origin. Tradition is Truth not admitting any alternative standpoint. Tradition in simpler terms is indicative of a doctrine and as such within its framework several alternative formulations such as the Hindu, Islamic, Christian and the like are entirely valid. All the elements and departments of a traditional civilization are permeated and informed by metaphysical principles. Not only are institutions, principles, concepts and developments in a traditional civilization doctrinal in their origin, but what is more significant the relevant doctrine provides them with the necessary sanction and logic.

While Coomaraswamy did not devote even a single essay to the subject of tradition, he occasionally listed cultures that he considered traditional. In an essay in 1937 he observed: "...the normal and long enduring types of civilization . . . Indian, Egyptian, early Greek, medieval Christian, Chinese, Maori or American Indian, for example..." But he considered India as the epitome of traditional civilization. As one of his biographers has observed: A knowledge of Indian thought - metaphysics, spiritual disciplines, iconographic and symbolic repertoire, aesthetics, social theory and so on - provided him a touchstone when he studied other traditional civilizations. . ." Traditionalist thought is frequently comparative also and traditional cultures could be situated in a single category irrespective of time and space for, they are all ordered by truths or First Principles which are constituents in a unity.

The historiography of ancient India's scientific heritage has been moving in the direction of recounting achievements in the various areas of science and comparing these with

respective modern, Western development. The purpose of such exercises has been to advance the puerile argument that India has not been far behind; much that the West discovered very recently was known to ancient India. Such writings are part of the attempts of post-colonial India to overcome the sense of intellectual inferiority developed during the colonial period of India's history and due essentially to Western impact. That such expressions continue to appear years after the end of post-colonial rule is proof of the painful fact that modern India has not yet come out of her inferiority complex and is also demonstrative of the inability to comprehend our heritage in terms of our traditions. Significantly also, we are yet to develop an Indian philosophy of science, not to speak of the traditional Hindu perspective on this aspect of human endeavour. The Macaulayan aim of creating a class physically Indian and intellectually English has been truly achieved it seems. More than one-quarter century after political independence India's intellectuals continue to measure their work, in the Western value scale and this fact cannot be simply wished away, that, modern Western value scales provide for large numbers of intellectuals the - much, needed legitimization. Rudyard Kipling, only spoke of the White Man's Burden, the civilizing mission of the West. It may be justifiably doubted whether even Kipling and Macaulay would have envisioned a situation of such servility wherein, intellectuals have

— in the apposite words of Coomaraswamy, — become "spiritual orphans."

Sciences which develop within a tradition are sacred. All sacred sciences, whether they be Christian, Islamic, Hindu or any other are similar in their attitudes and ideals or goals. Sacred sciences are understood as revealed systems "derived from above." This line of comprehension has several important dimensions.

Now, those who composed treatises on scientific subjects within the traditional framework, did not claim any real authorship for themselves. They believed that they were only amanuenses. This idea is put across in the introductory portions of the treatises through brief or elaborate invocations to a deity. Science is a system of knowledge, a method by which man tries to grasp the universe in which he finds himself. Sacred sciences are derivations from the traditional system of knowledge and systems of knowledge consist in knowing the phenomenal world from which an image or picture of the universe is constructed. Traditional civilizations being doctrinal in basis and God-centred construct suprahuman and supratemporal pictures of the universe. Pictures of the universe are basically manifestations of human thought and its aims and objectives. And as observed by Simone Weil, in traditional societies, "man always submits his thought to some higher control which is superior either in value or else in power."

In a traditional civilization the principle of hierarchy, *adhikarabed- ha* in Hindu terminology, governs all activity. Broadly speaking there are three levels of comprehension in hierarchic order in a traditional civilization: the metaphysical, the psychological and the physical; the first being the highest, controlling and directing the second, and the second in turn controlling and directing the last of the three. The psychological level of activity and understanding corresponds to science and the physical level of activity and understanding corresponds to technology. Science and technology are closely related to each other. And since science has been defined as a system of knowledge, technology may be defined as the application of science for monetary and utilitarian ends. This correspondence could be extended. The constitution of man in Hindu terminology is a hierarchy of atman, manas and sarira, soul, mind and body. These three correspond to metaphysics science and technology. For the normal development of man, the body has to be under the control of the mind which in turn should be controlled and directed by the soul. Correspondingly, in a

traditional or normal civilization science should control technology. This hierarchic relationship has to be carefully maintained for any perversion would lead to disastrous consequences.

Since traditional civilizations are ordered by the principle of hierarchy, human thought in such a society has to manifest man's supratemporal nexus. For this reason also human thought in such a society cannot be autonomous. It thus follows that sacred sciences were not autotelic. They were not ends in themselves and were neither ethnocentric or worse egocentric. The telos of sacred sciences was the greater glory of God, not that of man or, man as a consumer. Being derived from a metaphysical matrix, based on first principles, sacred sciences were "always ultimately ordered towards man's Last End, knowing his Self."

To effectively comprehend his Last End, man has to be aware of his origins. The standard Vedic version of creation is that the world and all its creatures were created by Prajapathi's sacrifice of himself. This version is repeated in some of the Puranas also. Prajapathi is the centre of the cosmos. Having originated from that centre, man's Last End, the summum bonum of his existence, is to reintegrate himself to that centre, or attain moksha or sakshatkara in Hindu terminology. Significantly, the Vedic sacrifices re-enact creation in the reverse, fusing the seeming, multiplicity of the created world to its primordial unity. Creation is centrifugal, life is centripetal. Unity breaks itself into diversity, naturally diversity has to merge itself into unity.

In a traditional society sciences as systems of knowledge, dealing with different phenomenon are in reality cosmologies. Sacred sciences were different margas or ways, based on common metaphysical principles for the comprehension of Absolute Reality. If the white light on a prism can be equated to Absolute Reality, then the many colours dispersed by the prism are analogous to the several sacred sciences. Pursuing any one colour back to its source, the individual comprehends Reality. The mountain is one and there are several valid paths leading to the summit.

In a traditional, God-centred society, man was deemed a Viceroy. Created in the image of God, man was basically a spiritual being. The Upanishads declare that man's inmost core is one with the eternal and infinite Brahman. The position of Viceroy recognizes the spiritual dimension of man in society. As Viceroy man has unique responsibilities to fulfill. According to the Hindu tradition the creator manifests himself in numerous forms and assumes many names. The Puranas are replete with references to the omnipresence of the creator. The Viceroy has to recognise this omnipresent creator. As Viceroy, man the most important among created beings, endowed with the capacity to think has to understand the phenomenal world through the various sciences. Man has to understand the world around him, its grandeur, its ways, its working in a word, everything about it without forgetting that it was all created by Him. As aptly remarked by S. H. Nasr, "The purpose of creation is in fact, for God to know himself through this perfect instrument of knowledge that is the Universal Man. He is at the axis and centre of the cosmic milieu at once the master and custodian of nature. By being taught the names of all things he gains domination over them; but he is given this power only because he is the vice-regent of God on earth and the instrument of this will. Man is given the right to dominate over nature only by virtue of his theomorphic make-up, not as a rebel against heaven."

The pursuit of the sciences makes it necessary to use the natural environment. Use consists in application to a purpose. Man as Viceroy has both privileges and equally significant responsibilities. He has the privilege of using the natural environment and has to do so purposefully. Purposeful use consists in the understanding of the world and its ways

with a view to attain the Last End. Purposeful use implies responsible use and this implies maintaining the balance inherent in nature. Thus nature is a trust in the hands of man.

The custodian of nature has to be parsimonious in the use of the natural environment. Hinduism like all other traditions has advocated Holy Poverty, *aparigraha*; the rule that man should take from the earth only so much as to keep his body and soul together. This much would be for his proper use and this much, man earns by fulfilling his obligation of preserving the balance in nature. All else is robbery.

Holy Poverty gave critical direction to the development of the sciences. As already observed, every science presented a picture of the Universe and such presentation had the aim of reintegrating man. Hence from the traditional point of view the pursuit of the sciences had built-in limits. Man has only the right to understand God's world but not to pry into its secrets. Obviously man functioned with a sense of humility, not arrogating to himself any more power or any other status than was granted to him, namely that of the Viceroy.

Tradition provided man with a vast number of values, principles, ideals and methods relevant for all aspects of life to the minutest detail. Tradition defined man, his constitution and the ends of social life. According to the Hindu tradition, the constitution of man consisted of five Koshas, sheaths or envelopes. They are the Anandamaya Kosha (the beatific envelope), the Vignamaya Kosha (the intellectual envelope), the Manomaya Kosha (the mental envelope), the Pranamaya Kosha (the vital envelope) and, the Annamaya Kosha (the vegetative envelope). The first of these is the highest, it transcends the rest and corresponds to Moksha. Though hierarchically arranged the scriptures observe that they have to be developed in an integrated manner. In like manner the Hindu tradition also refers to the Purushartas, or cardinal ends of life. Purushartas constitute the justifications of the human state. Human life was programmed through: Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha. Dharma, is a very comprehensive concept which may be equaled with the foundations of social order, the moral standards of life, duty or virtue. Artha constitutes the support or pillar of social and economic life, the means of acquiring the material needs of man's sustenance. Kama constitutes the natural desires and longings of man, such as love, friendship and pleasure. Moksha, the crown of the Purushartas, is the final goal of life, liberation. The Dharmasastras contain numerous details regarding the principles to be adopted in the pursuit of the Purushartas. Man is advised to pursue Artha and Kama in an orderly balanced ethical fashion. Moksha is not the attainment of a world hereafter but consists in man performing his role properly here on earth.

Hinduism has often been attacked for being other worldly. Such a charge is baseless for even a superficial reference to the Purushartas indicates that wealth and prosperity were not looked down upon. Rather, man has to secure wealth and satisfy all legitimate desires in an orderly fashion. Again there are numerous prayers in the Hindu scriptures 'seeking wealth and prosperity.

In the foregoing paragraphs some of the important aspects of tradition, civilization and science have been briefly touched upon. Such a projection is obviously opposed to the current modernist perspective. While it is not the purpose of this essay to offer a critique of civilization and science in the modernist perspective, a few observations would be in order.

Modern life is dominated by science and technology to such an extent that, not to be involved in them one way or the other and not to possess what has been described as scientific temper is as good as to be lost. Science provides the rationale for modern life and scientism is the religion of the Brave New World. While this is commonplace to-day, there

are those who criticise modern science and point to its inherent evils and its deleterious impact on society and the quality of life. Between the two groups a miasmatic and often vituperative battle is on. And the burden of the problem between these two groups is one essentially of perspectives and the implications therefrom.

The momentous difference between sacred and modern science consists in the absence of tradition in the discourse of modern science. The sovereignty of tradition has been uprooted and man has replaced God as the telos of modern science. As a result of this usurpation, man securing for himself this parvenu status are unimaginably dangerous.

Not only science, but the entire modern civilization has lost its traditional roots. Naturally man no longer submits his thoughts and aspirations to any power higher than himself. Having banished God from society, modern man has lost his divine dimension and consequently his human dimension also. For man cannot be human unless he is basically divine. Human thought in effect has become autonomous and consequently uncontrolled. The universe in the modernist discourse has lost its sanctity and the upstart God of modern civilization has arrogated to himself the authority to prove even the most sacred secrets of nature without any restriction.

Reference has been made earlier to the principle of hierarchy in a traditional society. In keeping with this principle science should control technology and in turn be controlled by metaphysics. The principle of hierarchy being uprooted and tradition having lost its sovereignty technology has come to control and direct science. Technolatriy, the new religion of the modern world could be explained without labour. Technology is analogous to power and in the hierarchy of values corresponds to those of the physical level. Technology defined as the application of science of utilitarian and monetary benefits becomes the quest for material and monetary benefits. As power, technology has the inherent tendency of corruptibility. Corruption inherent in technology does not show up so long as the superior controlling and ordering force of metaphysics or tradition is present. When the sovereignty of tradition is uprooted, initially and only seemingly, science directs and controls technology. In the absence of the soul, the mind cannot forever control the body. Gradually the pursuit of technology becomes unhindered and uninhibited by values and the sovereignty of technology, technolatriy gets established.

Metaphysics helps man to understand his proper role and place in the world. Through metaphysics man understands that omniscience, the acquisition of all knowledge is impossible and attempts in that direction are fraught with the gravest consequences. When tradition is banished from civilization, man comes to believe omniscience to be possible and at an increasingly fast pace uses knowledge to acquire material benefits. The quest for wealth becomes the end of human existence and at one stage man acquires so much wealth he confounds omnipotence with omniscience. While omniscience, the acquisition of all knowledge, directed by tradition, would dissolve human ego, the quest for omnipotence is self-defeatist. Omnipotence is nemesi point It is like the puerile quest of the scientist to discover the universal solvent, which is logically impossible.

Descriptions of technological development generally posit the idea of conquest of nature. In such a scheme, man is shown as fighting against nature, pitting his brains to control the world around him. Man is no more Viceroy in such a scheme but he is depicted as constantly fighting a hostile environment. Like is depicted as a continuous battle in which to survive, man has to win. Obviously, man is shown as distinct and separate from nature. This dichotomous view gradually resulted in the loss of the normal, holistic and integrated vision of man in nature. Several other dichotomies such as:

Subjective-
Secular-
Individual-

Objective
Sacred
Society

came to be projected with understandably terrible implications. While tradition projects the idea of creation, existence and reintegration the anti-traditional view projects the scheme of birth, existence and death. Since death is understood as the terminal point, man has to make existence as comfortable as possible by the conquest of nature. That done, he attempts to make death as painless as possible.

In his devastating criticism of modern science, Phillip Sherrad rightly concludes that man can understand the universe properly only through tradition. It is only through tradition that man can rise above all dichotomies and attain simultaneity or stillness and conquer time.

Acknowledgement

Many of the ideas in this essay have emerged out of the continual discussions, I have had with **Mr. K. N. Iengar**, Retired Professor of Architecture, Bangalore University, on this subject and my reading of a considerable quantity of published literature under his direction. Below are listed some of the more significant works used in the preparation of this essay.

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