

# Tradition?

By Alain de Benoist

There are many ways to understand tradition. Its etymology is Latin, from the verb *tradere*, which means “to give, to hand in, to transmit directly.” Originally tradition designated “that which is transmitted” and it had a religious meaning. Tradition understood as “the action of transmitting” was nevertheless in common usage in France up to the end of the 18th century and is still part of today’s legal lexicon. Yet *tradere* has also meant “betray,” in the sense of delivering up a man or a secret. In the plural, traditions are generally considered as forming part of the distinctive features of a culture in a particular period. They evoke a body of accepted and immutable hereditary characteristics inherited from the past customs, ways of being, but also celebrations, work cycles, and popular traditions. Tradition here implies a sense of duration: it contrasts with novelty, even if one accepts its evolution. It also implies the idea of standard or norm, even if the traditions in question can be challenged. Tradition encompasses what is permanent and immutable, as opposed to the succession of events and fashions. An older definition describes it as marking the submission of the living to the authority of the dead, encompassing accepted customs and habits (we obey traditions because we always have) that modern people denounce as conventions, prejudices or superstitions. The term can have a positive or pejorative meaning, depending on the context in which it is used. When advertisers and tourist offices extol the virtues of “traditional craftsmanship,” they implicitly refer to a tried set of values and know-how. Tradition here evokes quality and authenticity. But it may also be seen as what is outmoded, as in the modernist critics’ use of “traditional morality.”

But there is another meaning to the word tradition, articulated by the representatives of traditional thought. Here the term is singular and has a capital T: Tradition. The first name that comes to mind is that of Rene Guenon (1886-1951), who published his *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines* in 1921 and died thirty years later in Cairo under the pseudonym Abdel Wahed Yahia.[1] Julius Evola’s *Revolt Against the Modern World* appeared in 1934. Other names are Arturo Reghini, Guido De Giorgio and Attilo Mordini,[2] Frithjof Schuon, whose writings began to appear in 1933 in *Etudes Traditionelles*, Michel Valsn, Titus Burckhardt, Ananda N. Coormaraswamy, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Marco Pallis, Martin Lings and Philip Sherrard.

In defining this school of thought, the word “traditionalism” (which appeared in France only in the middle of the 19th century) may lend itself to misunderstandings the representatives of traditional thought have been the first to denounce.[3] Rene Guenon qualifies as “traditionalists” those who “have only one sort of tendency or aspiration toward Tradition, without any real knowledge of it.”[4] Guido de Giorgio presents an even more radical opinion. “Tradition is absolutely different from traditionalism: one is an eternally fecund living patrimony, rich with infinite potentialities in all times and circumstances ... the other is but sterile residue, an inefficient, self-enclosing concreteness impossible to adapt and lacking all energetic and creative force. Tradition is clearly opposed to traditionalism, just as truth is opposed to commonplaces.”[5]

The word “traditionalism” contains yet another ambiguity. The way it is used by the representatives of traditional thought could be confused with counter-revolutionary political

traditionalism or with Catholic traditionalism, sometimes referred to as “integral,” which is hostile to “progressivism” within the Church, to liturgical reform and to newer “modernist” theologies. If the school of traditional thought is perfectly counter-revolutionary, it is so in a way very different from those who claim to be linked politically to the Counter-Revolution. While some of the school’s adherents call themselves Catholics (or at least accord Catholicism a privileged place with respect to Tradition in general) others do not. Some even affirm themselves as anti-Christian. Mario Polia states: “Considering it more closely, ‘Catholic traditionalism’ is an ambiguous expression, as if being Catholic were only a specification of a more general and absolute category: ‘traditionalism.’ It is equally unsatisfactory to speak of ‘traditionalist Catholicism’, giving the expression the sense of ‘traditional’, for it either presupposes the parallel and antithetical possibility of a Catholicism outside of tradition or, by defining ‘traditionalism’ as the ‘traditional interpretation’ of Catholicism, reserves for the traditionalist movements the prerogative of being the only true Catholicism. Traditionalist movements would then assume the prerogative of being Catholicism. To speak of ‘traditional Catholicism’ does not make much sense, either because one cannot define Catholicism in terms of Tradition, or because it presupposes an anti-traditional type of Catholicism.”[6] In fact, there is much difference between, for example, a traditionalist like Marcel Lefebvre and a “Christian traditionalist” like Attilo Mordini.

In seeking to define the “Indo-European tradition,” Jean Haudry speaks of a “constituted literary heritage, essentially of formulas and schemes expressing and transmitting a concept of the world that guides individual actions and that can be materialized within institutions.”[7] Such a definition, with its reference to a “literary” origin, obviously does not conform to what traditional thought understands by Tradition. According to this school, Tradition cannot be defined through sociological or cultural data, nor can it be appreciated in purely human terms. Tradition is not the body of customs but rather that which derives from the *philosophia perennis*. [8] Far from encompassing a body of observed and accepted rules, it constitutes a doctrine voluntarily and consciously transmitted as principles — a series of transcendental truths of permanent worth and of non-human origin. According to traditional thought, tradition is only secondarily cultural. At most, it can be said to inspire certain cultural or social activities. It is fundamentally spiritual, possesses a religious character and implies the metaphysical. Taking it as unique or ‘primordial’ and anterior to all local traditions. Tradition becomes a metaphysical doctrine — drawing on knowledge of ultimate, invariable and universal principles. It is not a human invention but a supra-human ‘gift’ manifesting the existence of a superior order of reality. On this point, all are unanimous. For Antonio Medrano, Tradition must be understood as “a sacred articulation of reality based on metaphysical principles.” Frithjof Schuon, who espouses the principle of the “transcendental unity” of all religions, sees in Tradition a body of truths principally uniting “all that is human to a divine reality.” Guenon connects Tradition with metaphysics, defining it as “suprarational knowledge, intuitive and immediate.”

Thus conceived, Tradition is defined as a coherent body of intangible and sacred principles imposed on all which delineates the essential rules of conduct, allowing man to accede to the supra-human level, allowing the *homo* to detach from the *humus*, to pass from the terrestrial to the celestial order. In this light, the transmission of Tradition from generation to generation obviously plays an essential role. Mario Polia writes: “There is Tradition — in the spiritual sense — only if there is the ‘transmission’ of a truth of metaphysical (not simply cultural) order embodied in a doctrinal system, transmitted and guarded by a spiritually qualified hierarchy,

encompassing the possibility of acceding to such truth through ‘spiritual’ or ‘religious’ means. In addition, a tradition must ensure a qualified and uninterrupted transmission through time from the source to the beneficiary, and the continuance of liturgical, ritualistic and “sacrificial” practices, without which transmission would become a purely cultural variable.”

Symbolic language is thus quintessentially traditional. Just as myth is beyond events and a properly historical significance, the symbol, contrary to allegory, is beyond words and semantic definition. Seeking to manifest the inexpressible, it communicates the abstract by transfiguring it into an always provisional and imperfectly concrete representation. It arouses affectivity in the body as much as in the mind. D.H. Lawrence said in *Apocalypse*: “Symbols are organic entities of conscience that have their own life: one can never exhaust their meaning, because they have a dynamic emotional value to the sensorial conscience of the body and spirit that is more than just intellectual.”

Above all, symbolic language constitutes the main path of analogical thinking that, by expressing correspondences between different levels of reality, simultaneously unveils the unity of the world and the subtle complementarity of the One and the Many. Reasoning by analogy can establish qualitative correspondences between these levels of reality and situate the backgrounds of meaning corresponding to symbols. Guenon evokes this “law of correspondence, which is the very foundation of all symbolism and by virtue of which each thing, while proceeding from a single metaphysical principle which guarantees its reality, translates or expresses this principle in its own way and according to its order of existence, such that all things are drawn together and correspond from one order to the next.” [10] According to the traditional outlook, the idea of non-separation is essential. “What is below is like what is above. Miracles are performed from one and the same thing,” according to the famed Emerald Table of Hermes Trismegistus. The city of men must reproduce the harmony pervading the city of God or expressed in the well-ordered cosmos. Similarly, Meister Eckhart writes: “The eye with which I see myself and the eye with which God sees Himself are one and the same” (Sermon 12), and Goethe adds: “What is inside is also outside.” For Raymond Abellio, the *gnosis* is also defined as a vision of universal interdependence, challenging the idea that there are separate beings or phenomena, though they may be distinct (union without confusion). This universal interdependence, says Abellio, implies an “intentionality of the world.” Being general, it can be applied to emotions as well as thoughts. Nothing — no thing, no person — can claim to be autonomous in the absolute.

This “holistic” vision is traditional in esotericism. From the viewpoint of traditional thought, the difference between esoteric and exoteric levels is also fundamental. One can say that Tradition constitutes the esoteric aspect of a spiritual reality. In their more immediately perceivable forms, institutionalized religions then express the esoteric aspect of this spiritual reality. Here esotericism should be taken in the sense of initiation and not the occult, which the school considers more a phenomenon of decadence or “counter-initiation.” Abellio states that esotericism dispels interior darkness just as positive knowledge dispels exterior darkness. He adds that transcendental interior darkness does not proceed from an opposition or a duality between consciousness and the world but from a correlation between the world and consciousness of our own consciousness. “This genitive encapsulates the secret of esotericism. One must consider it in its immediate genetic function: it serves to generate another consciousness. Hence the deep meaning of what we call initiation, which is the awakening of consciousness to its own transcendental self-consciousness.” [11] This consciousness of

consciousness, grounded in the internalized perception of external perception, is by definition fundamentally “self-intensifying.” Esotericism is the mode of knowledge and activity whereby man seeks to situate himself from a viewpoint which is no longer merely human.

Traditional thought, which began to develop seriously in the 1920s, has devoted itself to restoring order to the “occultist” jumble of the preceding century. It is a modern version of Oswald Spengler’s “second religiosity.” This demand for rigor undoubtedly distances it radically from false spiritualities and the “religious” pseudo-syncretisms of which the New Age doctrine is an extreme example. The boundary, however, is not always as clear-cut as desired. Should we treat the problems of sacredness and spirituality in general, as they are found within different religions? Should we speak of traditionalisms that do not conform to the traditional doctrine as we have defined it and which may be directly opposed to it? Where should the “theocratic” ideas of a Bonald, a Donoso Cortes or a Joseph de Maistre be placed? How can we avoid evoking the question of gnosis, as posed by Jean Borella, Raymond Ruyer and Raymond Abellio? Traditional thought emphasizes the study of myths and symbols. Jung and de Bachelard, Roger Caillois and perhaps also Rene Daumal immediately come to mind, as do the historical studies of religion by Mircea Eliade and the works on “myth analysis” and studies of the imaginary by Gilbert Durand and various other contemporaries inspired by Jung. The traditional school also has its great ancestors, from Plato to Pericles, Meister Eckhart and many others. Should we also refer to the studies of Frederic Tristan and Antoine Faivre on hermetic philosophy and alchemy, and those of Jacob Bohme and Swedenborg about occultist Masonry and the Cabbala? Finally, how can we not also consider Islam, to which many of the school’s major representatives have turned? Little by little, one touches on the history of religions, mysticism, esotericism, even psychoanalysis, and the risk is therefore great from Annie Besant to Blavatsky, from Rudolf Steiner to Krishnamurti, from Gurdjieff to Aurobindo, to arrive at a syncretism interested in all and feeding off anything (from holistic medicine to transcendental meditation, from popular astrology to runic divination, etc.). By keeping to the exposition of the fundamental themes of traditional thought, we have attempted to focus on and elucidate a few contiguous subjects.

Would Julius Evola’s denunciation of the “modern world” be as scandalous today, when criticism of modernity comes from all sides? The Greens question productivism. Post-modernists want to abolish the grandiose historicist narratives of legitimation. From Left and Right, modernism as the role of individualism, as the atomization of the world, as the triumph of the values of the market, as the dictatorial hegemony of the economy and money is being challenged. Felix Guatarri has recently written: “We focus our attention on impending catastrophes, while the true catastrophes are already here, under our noses, with the degeneration of social practices, with the mass media’s numbing effect, with a collective will blinded by the ideology of the ‘market’, in other words, succumbing to the law of the masses, to entropy, to the loss of singularity, to a general and collective infantilization. The old types of social relations, the old relations with sex, with time, with the cosmos, with human finitude have been rattled, not to say devastated, by the ‘progress’ generated by industrial firms.”[12] Clearly stated: the ideology of progress is crumbling. Novelty is no longer to be interpreted as increased well-being. It may well be that it is generally regressive and that we are living out the end of a cycle.

It is not surprising for the representatives of traditional thought who, in criticizing modernity, exhibit a radicalism difficult to surpass. Generally adhering to a cyclic conception of history, the school affirms that, within each cycle, humanity runs a course leading inexorably from a state of

perfection and simplicity to a state of spiritual decline and accentuated materialism. The history of humanity is interpreted as “metaphysical entropy,” as fall, degradation from an original primordial state. All traditional authors see in modern times the time of Kali-Yuga [in Hinduism, the present age of the world, full of conflicts and sin], the apogee of the blackest age, the terminal phase of the cycle, the ne plus ultra of spiritual decline. The conflict between Tradition and anti-Tradition in fact crystallizes itself in decadence, and it is this decadence that the decadents call “progress”. The opposition between traditional thought and the ideology of progress is therefore total, while being perfectly symmetrical (but inversely). All that modern consciousness analyses and perceives as progress, the school interprets as decline: the Renaissance was a fall (decline); the Enlightenment, a darkening.

For Guenon, the crisis of the modern world is essentially explained by the weakening and extinction of principles that originally inspired the institutions and, afterwards, by the multiplication of structures charged with remedying the situation. These structures bring about the proliferation of abstract and contradictory rules, such that finally “the contradictions proper to the institutional system overcome the satisfaction that it is supposed to afford.” [13] Again, nothing is separated: the spiritual level falls as the material level rises, the maintenance of quality (in all areas) is incompatible with the dominance of quantity. Social life becomes mechanical and abstract as the very result of the dissolution of organic and concrete communities. Secularization — the disenchantment of the world (Max Weber’s *Entzauberung*), social atomization, the materialist hegemony of traded goods, the primacy of the principle of reason (an exclusively technical and reductionist reason), all the phenomena characteristic of the contemporary world — proceed (according to the school) from a sole logic that must be understood as the end of a secular and probably millenary involution. The ultimate effect of the hegemony of the principle of subjective individuation is the death of God, which entails the death of man and allows for, in the best case, only the self-consciousness of the radical void which constitutes the truth of an ego separated from the world and of the nonsense of a social life without finality, completely enclosed in the race for growth and the negation of being in exchange for material possessions.

The modern world is thus perceived first and foremost as distraction: literally, it diverts man away from the essential and keeps him in a state of a perpetual estrangement that prevents him from returning to and regrounding himself authentically. We must search for sense in a world which no longer seems to make sense. We have almost become incapable of understanding even the meaning of the word, “sense.” Guenon writes: “If all men understood what the modern world truly is, it would cease to exist.” Nihilism is also put to the test.

## Notes

1. Guenon’s three fundamental works are *Orient and Occident* (1924), *La crise du monde moderne* (1927) and *Le regne de la quantite et les signes des temps* (1945).
2. Arturo Reghini, founder of the Italian Theosophical Society, editor of the journal *Atanor*, translator of Agrippa de Nettesheim’s *De occulta philosophia*, introduced Guenon to Evola. Guido de Giorgio (1890-1957) also collaborated with Evola in the journals *Ur* and *La Torre*. For more on Mordini (1923-1966), see Carlo Fabrizio Carli, *Attilio Mordini, il Cattolico Ghibellino* (Rome: Settimo Sigillo, 1989).
3. “Integral traditionalism” has also been discussed. See Karlheinz Weissmann, “Vom Geist der Uberlieferung. Die Lehre von der integralen Tradition,” in *Etappe 2* (October 1988), pp. 79-90.
4. *Le regne de la quantite et les signes du temps*, *op. cit.*, p. 280.

5. *L'Instant et l'éternité et autres textes sur la tradition* (Milan: Arche, 1987), p. 148.
6. "Tradizione. 11 significato di un Termine," in *I Quaderni di Avallon* 10 (January-April 1986).
7. *Etudes indo-europeenes* (December 19, 1986), p. 2.
8. This expression, often attributed to Leibniz, probably comes from Augustinus Steuchus' book, *De perenni philosophia*, published in 1540 and read by Leibniz.
9. "Tradizione: il Significato di un Termine," *op. cit.*
10. *Le symbolisme de la croix* (Paris: Vega, 1931), p. 12.
11. *L'esprit moderne et la tradition*, preface to Paul Serant, *Au seuil de l' 'esoterisme'* (Paris: Grasset, 1955), p. 18.
12. *Liberation* (June 30, 1989).
13. F. Jean Borella, "Rene Guenon et la crise du monde moderne" in *Connaissance des religions* (June 1989), p. 15.

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