

Editorial: Is Tradition 'Against the Modern World'?

By *M. Ali Lakhani*

I consider myself as contemporary and not modern... (and) ...modernism as a philosophy whose very premises and assumptions I oppose.

*Seyyed Hossein Nasr*¹

...the fact that I reject modernism as a general phenomenon obviously does not mean that I do not recognize isolated instances of individual worth in these latter times. But no one, in full awareness of the facts, could deny that the main characteristic of our time is a desacralization of the whole world.

Frithjof Schuon, private correspondence, 1996

Tradition, understood as the continuation through time of the perennial or timeless principles of the Sacred as revealed through the faith traditions and the ever-renewing theophanies of the Absolute, cannot *per se* be 'against the modern world.' This is because, to quote Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 'there is nothing more timely than the timeless.' The temporal world, whether 'ancient,' 'modern,' or 'postmodern,' exists on a plane that 'stands apart' (as the etymology of the term 'existence' implies) from its originating and eternal Source, the Absolute, yet is sustained and informed by it (the term 'Absolute' refers to the Reality which both transcends and pervades existence). From the point of view of the Absolute, nothing eludes the Divine embrace; but from the point of view of Man, each human being endowed with intelligence has the freedom to adhere to the Divine (as the etymology of the term 'religion' implies) or not: the choice is between orienting the soul to

¹ Nasr, S.H., *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr* (The Library of Living Philosophers, Chicago, 2001), p164. He also writes, 'My understanding of tradition is that of sacred principles rooted in revelation and their application in the context of a living religious universe. I oppose modernism in principle...' (ibid, p810)

its sustaining central Source or disorienting it by the distractions of the periphery. The 'world' itself can either be regarded as the wondrous locus of Light, of the qualitative realm of the theophanies illumining the Divine (as William Blake declares in *Jerusalem*, the realm of 'Eternal Worlds' opening to 'the immortal Eyes/Of man'), or as an opaque and quantitative construct of closed systems (in Blake's language, of 'wheels within wheels' and 'dark Satanic mills', of 'Single vision and Newton's sleep'). Tradition guides those 'who have eyes to see' to witness the Sacred, to reverence the Divine, and to adhere to that Reality which is Truth, Goodness and Beauty. In all this, Tradition is not intrinsically opposed to the world or to modernity as such; on the contrary, it views it as a domain of the theophanies, of the sacred 'signs' of the Divine Presence (through what Blake terms a 'Fourfold vision' that incorporates the incandescent and undivided imaginative vision of Eden and Eternity, rather than the enchaining and crippling 'Single vision' of Ulro, which, according to Czeslaw Milosz, denotes a 'realm of spiritual pain').

But, since this is the time of '*Kali Yuga*' (the Dark Age of the End Times), as Traditionalists claim, where modernity is infected by diverse spiritual ills, some critics of Tradition maintain that, in this sense, Tradition is indeed opposed to the modern world. A corollary of this opposition, they maintain, is that it inevitably leads Traditionalists to retreat from the world (rendering Tradition irrelevant) or, worse, to a fundamentalist antagonism toward it (rendering it dangerous). To this, we reply as follows.

While it is a basic tenet of Tradition that the unfolding of time is beset by spiritual entropy (in W.B. Yeats' celebrated image of the 'widening gyre', 'the falcon cannot hear the falconer'), this does not mean that Tradition is itself opposed to modernity as such; rather, Tradition merely objects to the false premises that promote the resulting malaise of modernity. These premises are not embedded in modernity *per se* but in an ethos which Traditionalists have described as 'Modernism,' namely, that which is cut off from the Transcendent and the Sacred. The terminology can be confusing because Traditionalists sometimes use the term 'modern' to refer not to the contemporary, but to the ideology of Modernism, which they oppose. See, for instance, the epigraph cited above, from Nasr. This opposition is not, in Nasr's words, 'a romantic nostalgia for the past' but 'for that spiritual reality residing at the center

of man's being, that eternal home from which we have become exiled.² It is to be noted, therefore, that the opposition of Tradition to Modernism does not logically entail a retreat from the modern world. This journal is itself an example of Tradition's engagement with modernity (as the subtitle of *Sacred Web* denotes). The relevance of Tradition can also be noted from the title of the anthology that has gathered many of the Editorials from this journal: '*The Timeless Relevance of Traditional Wisdom*.' This is not Tradition in retreat from the world, but in engagement with it, challenging its false premises.

In their personal lives, some Traditionalists have chosen to live in traditional ways and settings, while nevertheless engaging with modernity without condemning the world which, as God's creation, and bearing the divine imprint as the domain of His Self-Disclosure, cannot be rejected. Some, like René Guénon, speak of the 'crisis of the modern world'; but to speak of such a crisis does not mean that one opposes all aspects of modern life, as is evident from the fact that the leading lights of Traditional thought in the last century have not condemned modernity itself but the errors of Modernism. There are many Traditionalists who live fully modern lives, surrounded by the trappings of the modern world, while seeking to integrate their lives inwardly, to be (according to the Sufi adage) '*in* the world but not *of* it.' And there are others yet who may choose to stay away from the clamor and din of modern life, seeking instead solitary seclusion and serenity. In some cases, this retreat happens toward the end of a life, often a life well and fully lived, representing a choice to put away the things of the world for a more spiritual focus. These choices are personal, not inherent within Tradition itself, and it is a mistake to assume that every faith tradition, or Tradition itself, requires such a retreat (making allowances, of course, for monastic disciplines). In any event, there are several writers of this journal who, while leading secluded lives, have participated in debates about Modernism, demonstrating the falsity of the assumption about the alleged disengagement or irrelevance of Tradition. This journal, and others like it, such as its precursors, *Études Traditionnelles*, *Studies in Comparative Religion*, and *Sophia*, while being Traditionalist, have addressed all manner of issues relevant to the times, ranging from moral and aesthetic values, environmentalism, science and scientism, the new

² Ibid, p274.

technologies and their impacts, transhumanism and its implications for the 'human,' politics and human governance, and the culture wars, to a host of other issues relevant to the times. Though opposed to the decline of spiritual values, it can be fairly claimed of neither Tradition nor Traditionalists that they espouse an ethos pitted 'against the modern world.'

With regard to the claim that Tradition is a form of fundamentalism, this is false; it is to completely misunderstand Tradition which, in promoting fundamental metaphysical principles, is opposed to the reductive exteriorization associated with fundamentalism, which is not necessarily opposed to Modernism. As Nasr has stated, 'Those who are resistant to modernism are the traditionalists rather than the fundamentalists.'³ The confusion here stems from the fact that there have been, and still are, certain individuals who claim to be Traditionalists or influenced by Traditional ideas, who promote views that are in fact Modernist. In previous Editorials of this journal, we have written about the distinctions between Tradition and fundamentalism (*'Fundamentalism': A Metaphysical Perspective - Sacred Web 7*), and Tradition and its fascist misrepresentations (*Umberto Eco, Fascism and Tradition - Sacred Web 11*). The touchstone for Tradition is the reverential and dignified respect for the Sacred, and for the freedom that faith demands (there is 'no coercion in matters of faith'), and therefore any notion of violating the Sacred through repressive violence is utterly opposed to Traditional principles. This canard is more a case of 'the devil citing scripture' and of academic complicity in a misrepresentation, either through shoddy research or, in some instances, intended mischief.

Yet the question remains: are the times we live in so spiritually blighted that Tradition must inevitably oppose the modern world? We have previously stated in this journal that we live in an age where the spirit of the times is increasing pitted against the Spirit itself. There are many indicators of this Modernistic *zeitgeist*: declining religiosity, an atheistic and scientific triumphalism, the pursuit of dehumanizing and predatory new technologies, environmental degradation, hubristic progressivism, heedless hedonism and antinomianism, the manipulation and distortion of truth, the normalization of the abnormal, and so on. The list is long. The common thread of these ills is the loss of the sense of the Sacred, whose recovery lies precisely in Tradition. Of course, the times have both

³ Ibid, p359.

their compensations and their dispensations. The centrifugal influences can also be accompanied by a heightened awareness of the need for a sanctuary, a salvific Center. As Man grows more spiritually vulnerable (a corollary of his material dependence), he also senses a greater need for God, for spiritual reliance. And as conditions deteriorate spiritually, the formal demands of Tradition, while needed more than ever, also become more relaxed, though not to the point of relieving Man from having to seek the grace and mercy of his Maker.

To answer the question posed in the previous paragraph, there is no inevitable opposition between Tradition and the modern world, even in the End Times. While Tradition is undoubtedly opposed to the *zeitgeist* of modernity, represented by Modernism, it requires that one nevertheless must embrace the world, just as God embraces it, by remaking it afresh in His image in each moment. What the times call for is a creative remaking of the self, a search for (in the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins) 'the dearest freshness deep down things,' and a correspondingly creative engagement with the world out of the goodness within ourselves.

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We have referred earlier to the 'false premises' of Modernism, and these can be expressed as, in the first place, the denial that reality is Absolute (hence, relativism and reductionism); then, as a consequence of that denial, the loss of the sense of the Sacred, of wholeness (or 'holiness'), of the binding harmony of the cosmos; then, as a consequence of relativism, Promethean individualism (with its various psychopathologies) and tribalism; then, as a consequence of reductionism, materialism, deracinated scientism, progressivism, and the commodification and 'rape' of nature; in sum, what Guénon has termed 'the Reign of Quantity.'

For Tradition, the cosmos is, as it were, a sphere, comprising height, depth, breadth, and symmetry. Modernism, by contrast, in its denial of the Absolute, strips the cosmos of height and depth, thereby of verticality; all is now reduced to the horizontalized and exteriorized reality of matter, to the 'flat' world of the appetitive senses, and is devoid of symmetry. The qualitative elements that are associated with the Absolute, the Font of Qualities, are replaced by the measurable data of Quantity, whose quanta are central to the empiricism of modern sciences. Instead of

the imaginal 'world of signs and mysteries,' the theophanies are now viewed through a 'Single Vision' that renders them not as open to transcendence but merely as operational and atomized parts capable of being empirically known by science. This loss of a holistic worldview, coupled with a scientific faith in demystification, leads inevitably to the disenchantment which contributes to the malaise of modernity. Instead of the spiritual Intellect, whose interiority ontologically mirrors the vertical nature of the cosmos, in a universe stripped of verticality, there is only the ersatz psychic intelligence of 'dry' abstraction, discursive and mechanical reasoning or the subjectivized interiority of the ego. Logic is sundered from its ontological roots, and intelligence from its metaphysical foundations. In the result, there is no appreciation of hierarchy or of limit; horizontality (the dimension of breadth) has no bounds: freedom is uncontained, while growth, with the logic of the cancer cell, is deemed boundless. Lacking the natural boundaries that transcendence imposes on Man, not only is there a loss of harmony but of its concomitant equilibrium.

We are not intending to suggest, however, that this analysis of Modernism reflects the condition of the modern world. There is a general awareness among many thinkers nowadays of the intellectual and practical consequences of relativism and reductionism, and of the potential harms of individualism, tribalism and materialism. Those who recognize these consequences and potential harms are not all Traditionalists, but there is a pressing need for Tradition's viewpoint and analysis to be included in this debate, and for Traditionalists to offer not only intellectual critiques but practical solutions to the issues of our times.

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A common criticism of Tradition is that the solutions it has to offer are impractical. In a certain sense, there is some truth to this but, in reality, the criticism is unfair. It is true that a Traditionalist's response to the environmental crisis will differ, for example, from Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, but that is because what the Traditionalist is treating of is not symptoms and their apparent solutions but root causes and their more profound healing—in other words, the Traditionalist, unlike the non-Traditionalist, relates symptoms to their spiritual causes

and so aims at a restorative harmony of both inner and outer worlds. As many readers of this journal know, one of the earliest thinkers to sound the alarm about the environmental crisis was Seyyed Hossein Nasr whose seminal writings on the subject include *The Encounter of Man and Nature*, based on his Rockefeller Foundation lectures at the University of Chicago in 1966, and *Religion and the Order of Nature*, based on his Cadbury lectures at the University of Birmingham in 1994. This example illustrates that a Traditionalist intellectual was able to identify the problem many years before more conventional and non-Traditionalist thinkers did. Nasr was a pioneer in doing so, along with the conservationist, Rachel Carson, whose approach, while outwardly different from that of Nasr, and lacking his philosophical insights, was implicitly rooted in a reverence for the Sacred. Nasr's analysis illustrates how he trenchantly and explicitly located the outer manifestation of ecological abuse and the economic exploitation of nature in an inner cause—a loss of the sense of the Sacred, stemming from our failure to appreciate not only our biological interdependence but also our spiritual interconnectedness, the basis for the cosmic ordering of Man and Nature.

Some critics have argued that Nasr's approach typifies the impracticality of Tradition as it is focused on theoretical matters, not on practical solutions. While it is true that it lacks the outward practicality of, say, a politician negotiating a larger environmental budget, or a scientist researching environmentally-friendly sources of renewable energy, or an economist calculating the long-term monetary impacts of fracking or bitumen spills, or an eco-activist taking to the streets or becoming an eco-warrior, it is an approach that rightly prioritizes doctrine over praxis, appreciating that right principles must guide right outcomes. The roots of the environmental crisis are found, as Nasr has analyzed, in the spiritual sundering of Man from Nature, and no amount of political, scientific or economic advocacy or activism alone, can repair the problem—for it is the heart of Man which needs to be repaired and restored to its cosmic harmony before the natural environment can be healed and sustained. This view deserves a seat at the table—indeed, it is only by applying 'first principles' to our problems that we can find truly profound practical solutions. Philosophical arguments for environmentalism and its spiritual justifications can shape not only the convictions of its supporters but of specific initiatives. What is required, in the end, is

that the talents of specialists from fields as diverse as politics, science and business, should be brought together by a sustaining understanding of the Sacred and of Man's role of stewarding Nature. In this way, through pointing to core principles and values that can shape actions, Tradition can guide modernity.

Tradition, in the end, is not opposed by its nature to modernity, but its viewpoint, drawing as it does from a perspective that transcends the contingencies of time, has something vital to offer Man: a rediscovery of who he is and why he is in the world, of his place in Nature and before God.