

## Traditionalist Representations of Buddhism

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*We observe reality from a point defined by our species (and cultural, and individual) makeup, our observations can only be made through representations, and representations always both add to and subtract from what they represent.*

—Derek Bickerton<sup>1</sup>

TRADITIONALISM HAS HAD A DEEP and pervasive influence on the formation of contemporary conceptions of religion, because of the power of its rhetorical claims of universality and inclusiveness, by its apparently liberal religious pluralism, and by the power of its prophetic narrative. However, Traditionalism's vision of unity, which many people seem to find inspiring, comes at a price.

Mark Sedgwick's work has been essential to the identification of Traditionalism and the exposition of its history.<sup>2</sup> Traditionalism has its roots in Romanticism, and combines Perennialism with anti-modernism. In addition, some Traditionalists extend the Perennialist hypothesis that there is a single core common to all religions, and give particular emphasis to the idea that this unitary and universal core is esoteric. They maintain that this core is only accessible through authentic initiation into religious traditions judged to be valid because they are unbroken, an idea itself rooted in Romantic nostalgia for an idealized past. Promoting their view as beneficial to human happiness and well-being, some Traditionalists seek to make the unitary and universal core available to all.<sup>3</sup>

Traditionalism can be understood as the extension into the religious culture of the twentieth century of themes and attitudes originating in the Romantic resistance to what were seen as the failings of the Enlightenment. For our purposes here, the most important of these can be summarized under the rubrics of what both Romantics

and Traditionalists oppose—rationality and modernity. The philosophic positions taken by the various figures involved in the history of Romanticism are, of course, actually much more complex and nuanced than the formulaic characterizations presented here. Such formulaic characterizations are, however, more relevant to our discussion because it is these simplified reductions that have in fact had the greater influence on popular religious culture and its resonance to the Traditionalist message. This essay is an examination of the Traditionalist representation of Buddhism, a representation that may well be much more widely influential than our own academic studies ever can be. It is the goal of this paper to explore the question of what price has been paid in the popular and scholarly understanding of Buddhism in the contemporary West.<sup>4</sup>

#### INTRODUCING TRADITIONALISM: REPRESENTING BUDDHISM

Traditionalism is, of course, no more monolithic than any other school of thought. Individual authors develop their thought in accord with their own concerns and preconceptions. There are, however, several themes that appear repeatedly in the Traditionalist representations of religion, and which mold their representations of Buddhism as well.

The Traditionalists deploy a set of rhetorical claims about their own project. First, while different authors formulate these claims in their own way, in general the Traditionalist claim is to be representing the traditional or pre-modern aspect of all religions. The location of the traditional is, however, never very clearly defined. As with the Romantics, it is somehow simultaneously in the religions of the Paleolithic era,<sup>5</sup> in the mystical strains of medieval Catholic Christianity, among the Celts and ancient Germanic tribes, and among native American, African, Asian, and Polynesian peoples in the present. It is in fact, however, nothing more than a polemical category serving to distinguish that which the Traditionalists approve of from that which they do not.

According to the Traditionalist rhetoric, this traditional aspect was originally present in all religions, but has been lost, obscured, or displaced by the forces of modernization, secularization, post-modern relativism, and science and technology. Notably absent in this critique of modernity is any mention of capitalism, urbanization, or industrialization—themes that the Romantics per se were fond of, as for example in Blake's image of "dark Satanic mills." These lacunae evidence

the shift toward spiritualized individual interiority, and the culture of individualized therapeutic self-improvement, reminiscent of late Romanticism. Part of the artificial idealized past constructed by the Traditionalists involves the retrograde projection of this therapeutic individualized interior spirituality onto all religious cultures—overcoding the concerns of those cultures with a prophetic vision of our own modern life as one of Fallen-ness.

This would explain why, for example, Daoism receives the Traditionalists' attention, and Confucianism is ignored. Daoism is more easily recast in the mold of therapeutic individualized interior spirituality than Confucianism—though only through the “parting of the Way,” an artificial separation of “philosophic” Daoism from “religious” Daoism.<sup>6</sup> The former is, according to the Traditionalists, rooted in pure mystical experience, while the latter is a decadent, popularized form. Confucianism in contrast, having been the official state cult in the nineteenth century, was always linked with issues of governance and state in the Western conceptions of it, and hence resistant in this form to being molded into a Chinese version of Traditionalism.

If we avoid essentializing Buddhism, then it is clear that it is an imaginal object. As such, an examination of Traditionalist representations of Buddhism can serve to exemplify the rhetorical strategies by which Traditionalist preconceptions regarding the nature of religion as a general category create a version of Buddhism in contemporary popular religious culture. In large part this is done by employing selective representation—choosing particular parts of Buddhism to constellate (either positively or negatively)—in the service of a hegemonic metanarrative. Since all representations are of necessity constructive and selective—adding and leaving out as per Bickerton's quote in the headnote to this essay—it is important to understand the principles of selection, organization, and interpretation employed in the construction of a representation. The second major rhetorical strategy employed is overcoding—creating a new interpretation of Buddhist concepts that fits within the Traditionalist discourse.<sup>7</sup> Presuming what is called the “transcendent unity of religions”—the idea that all religions derive from the same transcendent reality and therefore ultimately teach the same set of truths—overcoding is frequently accomplished by equating Buddhist concepts with those of other religions. Such reinterpretation then is concealed under the guise of being an explanation.

In addition to these two rhetorical strategies—selective representation and overcoding—it is important to also examine the ideological commitments of Traditionalist thought. The Traditionalist themes that mold their representation of Buddhism can be summarized under the two dominant ideologies that flow together to form Traditionalist thought, Perennialism and anti-modernism. More specifically, some of the tropes regarding religion and Buddhism that Traditionalism inherits from its Romantic roots include (1) nostalgia for an idealized past, (2) appeal to the authority of the exotic, (3) heroic individualism, (4) an epistemology and theory of mind that are a version of “experience fundamentalism,” and (5) an aestheticization of religion (including asceticism as an aesthetic).

“Religion” is a socially created category, and not a natural one. In other words, there is no entity “out there” to which we can point as religion per se, only instances of things that we identify as belonging to the general category of religion.<sup>8</sup> The definition of what a religion is, therefore, is not an incidental question, but rather it is central to any contemporary discussion of religion. The question of how religion is defined is important because the definition implicitly legitimates certain aspects of a religion and de-legitimizes others.

#### THE INTERNAL CONTRADICTIONS OF TRADITIONALISM

While Traditionalism is a modern form of religious thought it claims to provide access to the unitary worldview of all traditional peoples<sup>9</sup> and the single set of shared teachings that forms the essence of all “true” religions (the emphasis on true here points toward the use of that concept or its correlates in the process of selective representation). The apparent contradiction is resolved by attention to the difference between what Traditionalism is (the first) and what Traditionalism claims (the second). Although claiming to simply be presenting what traditional religious people have at all times and in all places believed, the representation is a modern creation, created in a colonialist manner—that is, by appropriating religious elements from other cultures in response to issues of modernity. Traditionalism as a system of religious thought—either explicitly (a theology) or implicitly (a crypto-theology)—dates from the end of the nineteenth century, is reactionary in its opposition to modernity, and is not, as it presents itself, a wisdom teaching millennia old.

The Traditionalist rhetoric of wisdom teachings is linked to what is now a common usage, the practice of calling a religious teaching “timeless.” To describe a teaching or a religious tradition as “timeless” may seem like a harmless enough epithet, a polite way of saying something positive (but basically simply decorative). If, however, we step back from the pleasantries of polite discourse and consider the consequences of the use of “timeless” as an adjective, we can see that it is far from simply decorative, and certainly not harmless. To describe a teaching in this way, as timeless, is to cut off considering an idea as having an origin in some particular time and place—some specific socio-historic setting. More particularly, such ideas originate as answers to some specific problem. Placing a religious teaching in the realm of timeless truths not only obscures and conceals its origin, it also—oh, so politely—asserts that it is simply true, not to be questioned as to either its truth or its utility. As a rhetorical strategy, this is far from merely decorative, and serves to insulate such ideas from critical reflection.

As used by Traditionalist authors, “tradition” and “traditional” have been emptied out of any defining reference and function as little more than markers of approval. In addition to indicating approval, the use of the term at the same time conceals the location of the source of that approval as being in the present. The logic of “traditional” is that it is whatever serves the rhetoric of opposition to modernity. By deferring authority to the traditional itself, the responsibility for selection is concealed—“It is not I who approve of belief X or social practice Y, it is traditional.” It is, however, Traditionalists themselves who select some beliefs and practices to value positively, to promote on the grounds that they are traditional, while rejecting others which may in fact be equally “traditional” but offensive to contemporary—dare one say “modern”?—sensibilities, rejecting them as degenerations of whatever it is that the Traditionalist wants to retain. In this way, the concept of “traditional,” as in the phrases “traditional society” or “traditional religion,” is kept conveniently ill-defined—convenient not only because it conceals responsibility for selecting what is and what is not traditional, but because it simultaneously gives the practice or belief authority in itself simply by being labeled “traditional.” It serves to stop critical inquiry.

## TRADITIONALIST FEATURES

The Traditionalist opposition to rationality takes the form of what some authors refer to as the absolutizing of the self,<sup>10</sup> and that I have come to call “experience fundamentalism,” that is, a belief that individual experience is irreducible.<sup>11</sup> Because of this supposed irreducibility, personal, direct, unmediated experience is held to be irrefragable, that is, inherently veridical, and to be epistemologically privileged. In particular, religious experience—especially what the Romantics considered to be the most exalted form of religious experience, mystical experience—was accorded this status of veridicality and privilege, and held in opposition to the critical “analytic faculty or method that collects, classifies, experiments, takes to pieces, reassembles, defines, deduces, and establishes probabilities.”<sup>12</sup>

Corollary to this is a positive valuation of the immediacy of the emotional and the spontaneous over the reflective and reasoned. Aesthetic sensitivity—such as nostalgia inspired by certain landscapes, especially those punctuated by ruins dating from an idealized past—became the mark of a Romantic soul. Romanticism hypothesizes that the allegedly spontaneous and unmediated responses are characteristics of pre-reflective or pre-verbal experience, and on this basis considers mystical experience to be the hallmark of true religion. And, at the same time, doctrinal studies, scholasticism, reasoned argumentation, and critical reflection are diminished, devalued, and dismissed as inadequate to the “true” religious goals of inspiration, exaltation, and ecstasy.<sup>13</sup> Romanticism, thus, provided the proximate ideological milieu out of which the two dimensions of Traditionalist thought—Perennialism and anti-modernism—developed in the twentieth century.

Perennialism takes its name from the notion that there is a *philosophia perennis*, a philosophy that was identified as perennial because it was to be found in the *Corpus Hermeticum*. This collection of magical, alchemical, and gnostic speculative philosophical texts was originally—though mistakenly—thought to pre-date Christianity and Plato, yet appeared to prophetically foreshadow both. Rather than pre-dating Plato and Christianity, however, the work actually originates from a much later period. Despite the correct dating being known since 1614, the idea that the *philosophia perennis* recorded in the *Corpus Hermeticum* both pre-dated and provided the basis for Platonic and Christian ideologies was kept alive in Masonic circles. The influential Mason Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin asserted that “All the traditions of the earth must be

seen as deriving from a fundamental mother-tradition that, from the beginning, was entrusted to sinful man and his first offspring.”<sup>14</sup> At the beginning of the twentieth century Traditionalists drew heavily on Masonic thought, including this Perennialist conception of a single, core, mystical teaching originating in the ancient past.

This idea was popularized in the mid-twentieth century by Aldous Huxley. Huxley’s own introduction serves as an excellent summary of this idea:

Philosophia perennis—the phrase was coined by Leibniz; but the thing—the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man’s final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being—the thing is immemorial and universal. Rudiments of the Perennial Philosophy may be found among the traditionary lore of primitive peoples in every region of the world, and in its fully developed forms it has a place in every one of the higher religions. A version of this Highest Common Factor in all preceding and subsequent theologies was first committed to writing more than twenty-five centuries ago, and since that time the inexhaustible theme has been treated again and again, from the standpoint of every religious tradition and in all the principal languages of Asia and Europe.<sup>15</sup>

Here in Huxley’s description we see the modern propagation of the conception of an original unity of religion, the long-discredited dating to five centuries before the rise of Christianity, and the Romantic equation of historically ancient with contemporary primitive.

Traditionalism also continues the anti-modernist strain of some of the Romantics, extending the Romantic nostalgia for an imagined ideal past to all “traditional” peoples.<sup>16</sup> Löwy and Sayre note that for English Romanticism, “Nostalgia for the Middle Ages and the English Renaissance predominated (in fact the two were often viewed as part of a single past era), but there was also nostalgia for “barbarian” societies (Nordic, Gaelic, Scottish, and so on), as well as for primitive Greco-Roman antiquity or traditional peasant society.”<sup>17</sup> It is this idealized imaginal past that becomes the basis for a critique of modernity. “The specificity of Romanticism is that it develops this critique from the standpoint of a value system—with reference to an ideal—drawn from the past.”<sup>18</sup>

Historically, Romantic anti-modernism is a reaction to the descent of the French Revolution into the Terror. Despite their initial sympathy for the noble cause of the Revolutionaries, Romantics—particularly those in Britain—then felt betrayed by the Terror, and came to reject Enlightenment values as leading to chaotic disorder. The Revolution had been seen as a coming into social reality of the values and ideas of the Enlightenment, specifically reason as the guiding principle for human decision-making, and the malleability of society that made such radical transformations as the displacement of the monarchy in favor of democracy possible. Having established that causal link the implosion of the Revolution and its descent into the Terror were then attributed to those very same Enlightenment values and ideas. The fear instilled by this vision of the seemingly necessary consequences of Enlightenment emphasis on reason and the idea that social structures are malleable<sup>19</sup> led the Romantics to revalorize the aristocratic social organization of pre-Revolutionary France, establishing an important motivation for the Romantic emphasis on nostalgia for an idealized past. Characteristic of the Romantic's reactionary response is that it takes the form of interiorizing, individualizing, and spiritualizing ideas of freedom and liberty, moving away from the social expression of those same values.<sup>20</sup> This same interiorized and individualized spiritual orientation then likewise characterizes the Traditionalists as well.<sup>21</sup>

Beyond this specific political history, much of the Romantic message is formed out of a resistance to the dehumanizing effects of modernity, a dehumanization that resulted from industrialization and urbanization. Seeing the world as “disenchanted,” Romanticism “attempts to re-enchant the world and bring back the mystery driven away by the ‘coldness’ of the new science and its attendant worldview.”<sup>22</sup> One need only think in this regard of Blake’s “dark Satanic mills,” and Dickens’ London to understand what they were opposing.<sup>23</sup>

As suggested above, Romanticism is not a single or uniform phenomenon, and this is reflected in the variety of different kinds of anti-modernism found in Romanticism. Löwy and Sayre have identified six different versions of Romantic anti-modernism, which they describe as reactions “against industrial capitalism and bourgeois society.”<sup>24</sup> Organized “roughly from right to left on the political spectrum” these are restitutionist, conservative, fascistic, resigned, reformist, and revolutionary/utopian.<sup>25</sup> Löwy and Sayre suggest that individual Romantics can be found to move easily from one of these positions to another, for



example, from fascistic to restitutionist to conservative. The reason for the ease of such movement is that Romanticism has a “fundamentally ambiguous, contradictory, and hermaphroditic...worldview [that] makes the most diverse solutions—and the shift from one to another—possible, without a need for the author to break with the foundations of his previous problematic.”<sup>26</sup>

In the hands of many Traditionalists, however, the opposition to the dehumanizing qualities of industrialization and urbanization becomes generalized into an opposition to modernity *in toto*, and especially to the authority given to science and to (their own interpretation of) post-modernism as an un-nuanced and destructive relativism.<sup>27</sup> In doing so, they are generally either restitutionists, conservatives, or fascists, that is, they are toward the right end of the spectrum described by Löwy and Sayre. Restitutionists evidence the “essence” of Romanticism in that “nostalgia for a precapitalist state lies at the heart of this worldview. Now the restitutionist type is defined precisely as aspiring to the restitution—that is, the restoration or the re-creation—of this precapitalist past.”<sup>28</sup> Conservative Romantics, on the other hand, wish to defend “societies that are already well along on the road toward capitalist development, but these societies are valued precisely for what they preserve of the ancient, premodern forms.”<sup>29</sup> Fascist Romanticism is characterized by an anti-Semitic anti-capitalism in which capitalists and Jews are equated, as well as moving a positive valuation of the non-rational into a glorification of irrational aggression, and finally a solution to the problematics of the Romantic self (isolated individual) through its submersion into the fascist state. Such submersing depends upon the emergence of a leader who carries the projections of the Romantic heroic individual, the man of action who does not reflect, doubt, or give any consideration to the perspective of the other—the very model of the ideal fascist leader. The paradox of fascist Romanticism is that the ideal state is at one and the same time conceived as having existed in the past, and as requiring a restoration that is to be achieved through the use of modern technology.<sup>30</sup> In its nostalgic quest for an idealized past, Traditionalism employs one of the most powerful narrative modes in Western culture, prophecy.

#### PROPHETIC VOICE OF TRADITIONALISM

Although it is clearly the case that Traditionalism with its Romantic anti-modernism is defined by that which it opposes—modernity—

Traditionalists frequently employ a narrative structure that is much older. The narrative structure that is employed frequently in Traditionalist writings is prophecy, specifically in the literal biblical sense. The standard opening for a Traditionalist work is to declaim the decadence of the contemporary world and declare the need to return to an earlier time, idealized as holier or more harmonious.

Quoting Charles Upton, a contemporary Traditionalist author, at length in order to share the full effect of this prophetic rhetorical strategy:

At the beginning of the third millennium, the human race is in the process of forgetting what it means to be human. We don't know who or what we are; we don't know what we are supposed to be doing here, in a cosmos rapidly becoming nothing to us but a screen for the projection of random and increasingly demonic fantasies. Human life is no longer felt to be valuable in the face of eternity simply because it is a creation of God, nor is it as easy as it once was for us to see the human enterprise as worth something because of our collective achievements or the historical momentum which produced them, since without a scale of values rooted in eternity, achievement cannot be measured, and without an eternal goal toward which time is necessarily tending (in the spiritual not the material sense, given that eternity cannot lie at the end of an accelerating linear momentum which is precisely a flight from all that is eternal), history is a road leading nowhere. The name we've given to this state of affairs is 'postmodernism.'<sup>31</sup>

Where Upton emphasizes post-modernism, another contemporary Traditionalist, Huston Smith, has focused on science as the source of our contemporary "crisis," employing the same prophetic narrative mode:

The crisis that the world finds itself in as it swings on the hinge of a new millennium is located in something deeper than particular ways of organizing political systems and economies. In different ways, the East and the West are going through a single common crisis whose cause is the spiritual condition of the modern world. The condition is characterized by loss—the loss of religious certainties and of transcendence with its larger horizons. The nature of that loss is strange but ultimately quite logical. When, with the inauguration of the scientific worldview, human beings started considering themselves the bearers of the highest meaning in the world and the measure of everything, meaning began to ebb and the stature of humanity to di-

minish. The world lost its human dimension, and we began to lose control of it.<sup>32</sup>

Similarly, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a contemporary Traditionalist with an explicitly Sufi orientation, opens his work on ecology and religion by declaring that, “The Earth is bleeding from wounds inflicted upon it by a humanity no longer in harmony with Heaven and therefore in constant strife with the terrestrial environment.”<sup>33</sup> Nasr blames this condition on “those who have secularized the world about them and developed a science and technology capable of destroying nature on an unimaginable scale.”<sup>34</sup>

Even more sweeping is the anonymous “Editorial Note” introducing the recent reprint of René Guénon’s *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, a work considered by most Traditionalists to be foundational. Here we learn that “The past century has witnessed an erosion of earlier cultural values as well as a blurring of the distinctive characteristics of the world’s traditional civilizations, giving rise to philosophic and moral relativism, multiculturalism, and dangerous fundamentalist reactions.”<sup>35</sup>

This, however, is neither simply a stylistic flourish, nor an objective evaluation. If it were the first, a stylistic flourish, it would matter little. If it were the latter, then the truth of the many highly dubious claims making up these introductory paragraphs would need to be established rather than simply being asserted. Instead, these openings serve as the opening move in a rhetorical strategy. Like biblical prophecy, the Traditionalist prophetic rhetoric first creates the sense that there is a crisis, second, it gives that ill-defined sense of crisis a specific form, and, third, offers a specific religious solution for that crisis.<sup>36</sup>

#### TRADITIONALIST AUTHORS ON BUDDHISM

With a general understanding of the Perennialist preconceptions of religion that characterize Traditionalist theology (used in a broad sense here), it makes sense that many of them would have felt impelled to write about Buddhism. If their understanding of religion is correct, then it should be possible to fit every religion into the Traditionalist mold, including Buddhism. We now turn to six Traditionalist authors, each of whom has written about Buddhism: Frithjof Schuon, Julius Evola, Marco Pallis, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Mircea Eliade, and Huston Smith.<sup>37</sup>

*Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998)*

Schuon is best known for a work entitled *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*,<sup>38</sup> considered by many to be one of the key theoretical works of Traditionalism. Despite an early involvement with the Alawiyya, a secret Sufi sect, “Schuon retained his Traditionalist Perennialism,”<sup>39</sup> and *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* serves as the theoretical expression of this view.

Schuon’s approach to Buddhism is an instance of overcoding, the imposition of an interpretive view onto a subject. Simply by refusing to countenance the possibility that there are real and irreconcilable differences between religions, Schuon creates a powerful rhetoric. Expressing the argument in logical form, however, reveals it to be a *petitio principii* fallacy:

- all religions are ultimately the same (suppressed premise)
- ∴ there are no real or irreconcilable differences between religions
- ∴ all religions are the same.

Another way of disclosing the problematic character of Traditionalist rhetoric is to test it against Popper’s falsifiability criterion (now a pleasantly old-fashioned, but I believe still reliable, epistemological principle). Since there is no way to falsify the Traditionalist claims, they are meaningless, i.e., one can with equal justification (or absence of it) make exactly the opposite set of claims.

At the beginning of his *The Transcendental Unity of Religions*, Schuon lays out his claims of epistemological privilege. His fundamental claim regarding the epistemological status of the view that he represents is that it is a direct, intuitive participation in the Divine as it is directly known by the “pure intelligence.” This is not, according to Schuon, the product of human thought, and therefore it transcends not only mere philosophy, but theology as well. Philosophy is constrained by reason, while theology or the religious point of view is “incomparably superior,” proceeding as it does from Revelation. But far superior to this is “intellectual intuition [which] is a direct and active participation in divine Knowledge and not an indirect and passive participation such as is faith.”<sup>40</sup>

Quite evident in these claims is the Romantic view of both aesthetic and religious, particularly mystical, experience as a function of a kind of special psychic capacity—perhaps found in all humans *in potentia*, or perhaps limited to an elite few, but in either case the source of a form of knowledge that is subject neither to question, nor to contradiction.

In Schuon's case, however, it is quite clear that his view is elitist. The special quality of such mystic intuitions, and its limitations to an elite, are evident in what he calls metaphysics. For Schuon, metaphysics is superior to revealed religion, just as revealed religion is superior to philosophy. Drawing the distinction between metaphysics and philosophy, a distinction he admits may be difficult for those accustomed to thinking of metaphysics as a part of philosophy, he says,

When philosophy uses reason to resolve a doubt, this proves precisely that its starting point is a doubt that it is striving to overcome, whereas we have seen that the starting point of a metaphysical formulation is always essentially something intellectually evident or certain, which is communicated, to those able to receive it, by symbolical or dialectical means designed to awaken in them the latent knowledge that they bear unconsciously and, it may even be said, eternally within them.<sup>41</sup>

Schuon's Perennialism leads him to make what seem to be intended as explanations, but which—if one is not already uncritically predisposed to accept his idea of the “transcendent unity of religions”—are quite evidently nothing more than assertions of identity. Thus, for example, in his discussion of Vajrayāna Buddhism, we find him asserting that

The “Great Vehicle” possesses a mysterious dimension known as the “Adamantine Vehicle” (Vajrayana); in order to grasp its meaning, one has to first understand what we repeatedly have termed the “metaphysical transparency of the world,” that is to say one has to base oneself on a perspective according to which—to quote an expression of Pascal's we favor—Reality is “an infinite sphere whose center is everywhere and its circumference nowhere”: it is this circumference and this center which are represented, in the adamantine doctrine, by the Buddha Mahāvairocana (in Japanese, Dainichi Nyorai) who is at one and the same time—in Vedantic terms—*Ātmā*, *Īshvara* and *Buddhi*; that is to say Supra-ontological Essence, Ontological Essence and Universal Intellect.<sup>42</sup>

“Explanations” of this kind, that is ones in which a concept or idea from one religious tradition is given as the meaning of a concept or idea from another, are common in Traditionalist and Perennialist literature, and as mentioned previously function through overcoding, that is, interpreting away differences by laying a second “code” over the original message, which itself then becomes invisible. Considered critically, however, an assertion such as Schuon's claims regarding the “meaning” of Mahāvairocana in the Vajrayāna tradition of Bud-

dhism only makes sense if one has already accepted the notion that there is a single, esoteric set of teachings at the core of all religions, and that therefore they all have the same meaning. If one has accepted that premise, however, it makes sense—it has the appearance of meaning—within that discursive realm to think that the character of the Dharmakāya Buddha Mahāvairocana can be explained by reference to Vedāntic terms—or, more accurately, to Schuon’s own interpretations of those Vedāntic terms.

Another instance of such overcoding of Buddhist concepts by Traditionalist ones is in Schuon’s treatment of the concept of emptiness. Here, in the course of defending Buddhism from its critics—those who blame Buddhists for “denying the soul”—in what is almost an aside Schuon asserts that nirvana is “the prototype of the soul and its summit.”<sup>43</sup> Here again, we see the function of overcoding in the way in which Schuon re-presents Buddhist thought in a fashion amenable to Traditionalism. While it is quite correct that familiar Western rejections of Buddhism based on its supposed “denial of the soul” are fundamentally flawed because of a misunderstanding of the concept of emptiness, an explanation of the Buddhist idea of emptiness should draw on Buddhist explanations. Instead, Schuon explains Buddhism by asserting that his ideas about the relation between the particular constrained by time and the eternal cosmos are those not only of Buddhism, but also of Vedānta and Sufism.<sup>44</sup>

Schuon’s Perennialism depends for at least some of its rhetorical efficacy on the covert repetition of ethnic stereotypes. In attempting to explicate his own view as a synthetic one, he employs a metaphor of radii and concentric circles as representing

the Universe under the twofold representation of essential identity and existential separation; the synthesis of these two relationships will be indicated by the spiral.... Grosso modo it can be said that the West—namely European philosophy and Semitic exotericism—is rather attached to the second relationship, that of concentric circles and of existential discontinuity or separation, whereas the East—namely Semitic esotericism and Asian metaphysics—will prefer the first relationship, that of radii and identity of essence.<sup>45</sup>

Setting aside the implicit Neoplatonism, the vestigial Hegelianism, the metaphoric and florid language, we are left with nothing more than the shopworn stereotypes of the Western mind as narrowly empirical, rational, and materialistic, and the Eastern mind as expansively mys-

tical, intuitive, and spiritual. The implicit racism here is rather more explicitly expressed in Huston Smith's introduction to Schuon's *Transcendent Unity of Religions*. In addressing the rejection of other religions by those committed to one, Smith asserts that

The epithet "false" is also appropriate when a faith that is valid in its own sphere bids to extend beyond that sphere into territory it could not incorporate salvifically; for the esoteric, it is in this light that Koranic objections to Judaism and Christianity are to be read. According to that perspective, the Koran does not deny the validity of these religions for their own adherents; it denies only that they were intended for—could save—the Arab world.<sup>46</sup>

We find here a particular version of what should honestly be called racism. The ideas promoted by the Traditionalists, such as Schuon and here his commentator Huston Smith, recycle as a form of what might be called "ethno-mysticism," old Romantic ideas of "blood and soil" (Ger. "Blut und Boden") that assert some mystical ethnic coherence based on descent (blood) and homeland (soil). The indefinite malleability of doctrine is viciously evident in ideas that have been employed for the promotion of a compensatory sense of pride in one's own ethnicity, and for the expulsion or attempted genocidal extermination of ethnic groups. That the Traditionalists dress these ideas in spiritual robes makes them no less dangerous. While the specific religio-political issues here are clearly important, there is a more general point that extends to all doctrinal claims and ideological positions—doctrine is indefinitely malleable.<sup>47</sup>

#### *Julius Evola (1898–1974)*

Julius Evola's contribution to the Traditionalist literature on Buddhism is known in English translation as *The Doctrine of Awakening: The Attainment of Self-Mastery According to the Earliest Buddhist Texts*. The original Italian was published under the title *La dottrina del risveglio* in 1943. The translation, by H. E. Musson, appeared in 1948.

Much of what Evola writes appears—at least initially—as simply derivative of what we might call the standard Buddhist modernist rhetoric: the Buddha was strictly human, though exceptional in that he attained an extraordinary level of awareness, insight, and freedom through his own efforts; the doctrine he taught was a practical, individual, and heroic path of rational, moral self-improvement—free from superstition.<sup>48</sup> But, as with the rest of the Traditionalists, there is more

at work than simply the standard Buddhist modernist rhetoric. In the case of Evola, there is a consistent appeal to an Aryan superiority:

A particular characteristic of the Aryan-ness of the original Buddhist teaching is the absence of those proselytizing manias that exist, almost without exception, in direct proportion to the plebeian and anti-aristocratic character of a belief. An Aryan mind has too much respect for other people, and its sense of its own dignity is too pronounced to allow it to impose its own ideas upon others, even when it knows that its ideas are correct.<sup>49</sup>

Evola asserts that the “so-called salvationist religions” appear in both Europe and Asia after “the original cycle of Aryan civilizations” when there is “a lessening of the preceding spiritual tension, with a fall from Olympian consciousness and, not least, with influxes of inferior ethnic and social elements.”<sup>50</sup>

A related rhetorical structure that Evola employs is that of purity versus impurity, impurity being the product of outside pollution—a rhetoric very familiar from Nazi descriptions of the pollution of the body politic by the Jews. In discussing the pre-Buddhist history of Indian religions, Evola describes the Vedic origins as being based on an “original cosmic and uranic consciousness.”<sup>51</sup> The rhetoric of decadence is deployed as an explanatory device, such that in what Evola identifies as the post-Vedic period “the germs of decadence...were already showing themselves [and] were to become quite evident in the Buddha’s day.”<sup>52</sup> Evola identifies six of these “germs of decadence”: “a stereotyped ritualism,” “the demon of speculation,” a “‘religious’ transformation of many divinities who, in the Vedic period were...simply cosmically transfigured states of consciousness,” pantheism, and “foreign, non-Aryan influences, to which we believe are attributable... the formation and diffusion of the theory of reincarnation.”<sup>53</sup>

Running through all of Evola’s speculative history is a fundamental opposition that serves as an explanatory device, a racial theory that he sees as having causal efficacy in history. This is the division between what he refers to as the uranic and the telluric races.<sup>54</sup> The uranic are heroic and masculine, Olympian in nature, while the telluric are feminine, oriented toward the mother, and have “no knowledge of a reality transcending the naturalistic order.”<sup>55</sup> These latter are the common characteristics of all “telluric” races, in which the individual is bound “to a female-maternal divinity found alike in the pre-Aryan Mediterranean world, and in the pre-Aryan Hindu civilization, such as the Dravid-



ian and Kosalian.”<sup>56</sup> It is this last characteristic that explains, according to Evola, the origin of the doctrine of reincarnation, for in a maternal, earth-bound telluric civilization, one feels bound to return to the earth upon death, rather than ascending heroically. Written to a European audience in the early 1940s, one can easily imagine Evola’s categories being “decoded” to mean Germanic–Aryan and Jewish–Semitic.

When written in the early 1940s, by someone who had actively solicited support from both the Italian Fascist regime and the German Nazi regime, as well as having written a work entitled *A Synthesis of the Doctrine of Race* (*Sintesi della Dottrina della Razza*, 1941), use of the term “Aryan” would unavoidably have explicitly racist resonances. No amount of *ex post facto* apologia<sup>57</sup> that Evola’s use of the Sanskrit term Aryan (“noble”) in relation to Buddhism is referring to a spiritual status can obscure the racist, aristocratic, and elitist connotations that become evident when seen in its proper historical context.<sup>58</sup> As with other Traditionalist authors, there is a continuity between ideas of a spiritual elite and metaphysical hierarchy on the one hand and a racial elite and socio-political hierarchy on the other.

*Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877–1947)*

During the course of his career, Coomaraswamy frequently wrote on the topic of Buddhism. Indeed, one of his earliest books is *Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism* from 1916. This predates his encounter with Traditionalist thought, for Sedgwick tells us that Coomaraswamy “was already a distinguished art historian when he encountered the work of Guénon in the late 1920’s.”<sup>59</sup> Even so, in this early work we can discern traces of Romantic, Perennialist, and anti-modernist views that seem indicative of Coomaraswamy’s readiness to accept Traditionalism when he did hear its call.

Some of Coomaraswamy’s comparisons between Buddhism and other forms of thought appear to constitute little more than a literary flourish, a simple attempt to connect something the reader may already feel familiar with to this new and unfamiliar subject. For example, in a discussion of Buddhist cosmology, he draws a rhetorical analogy between yogic ascent to the form realms (*rupadhātu*) and a phrase from Goethe’s *Faust* to the effect that in aesthetic contemplation one is carried away from oneself (“*aus sich selbst entrückt*”).<sup>60</sup> Here we see, however, the Romantic equation of aesthetic contemplation and mystical experience.<sup>61</sup> Additionally, the equation of mystical expe-

rience and Buddhist yogic ascension is itself based on the Perennialist presumption of the universality of a singular mystical core common to all religions. This part of the Traditionalist hegemonic metanarrative is itself problematic.<sup>62</sup>

That Coomaraswamy is also inclined toward anti-modernism is indicated by his approving (and lengthy) quotation of a letter from the *Japan Daily Mail* of 1890, written by the Viscount Torio.<sup>63</sup> Identifying the Viscount as both a high-ranking Army officer and someone well-versed in Buddhist thought, the letter is an example of what Löwy and Sayre identify as fascist Romanticism. According to these authors, fascist Romanticism is characterized by an opposition to both capitalism and to parliamentary democracy,<sup>64</sup> by anti-Semitism (identifying “capitalists, the wealthy, and those who represent the spirit of cities and modern life” as Jews), by a glorification of irrationality, and by the attenuation or suppression of individualism: “in the fascist movement and the fascist state the unhappy romantic self disappears.”<sup>65</sup>

Although Viscount Torio replaces anti-Semitism with an anti-Westernism, the basic dynamic of an appeal to a putatively superior ethnic identity in opposition to some decadent, inferior, corrupting ethnicity serves the same purpose. According to Torio, in contrast to the social organization of the “Orient,” which is characterized as a benevolent authoritarianism continuous from ancient times, the social system of the “Occident” is characterized as “gravely disturbing to the order and peace of a country.” The Viscount’s anti-capitalist attitude is evidenced by his totalitarian assertion that “if the people be influenced chiefly by public considerations, order is assured; if by private, disorder is inevitable.”<sup>66</sup> At the same time he gives a negative valuation to private concerns as selfishness. Upon a closer reading, the letter approvingly quoted by Coomaraswamy is more Japanese totalitarian neo-Confucian than Buddhist, and evidence of a particular kind of anti-modernism. In the case of Viscount Torio we may perhaps safely assume that his anti-modernism is an instance of fascist Romanticism, though in Coomaraswamy’s use of the text, it may indicate nothing more than his own anti-modernism and an anti-Western sympathy for the Viscount’s rejection of the West based in his own sense of a nationalism resistant to British rule.<sup>67</sup>

After encountering the works of Guénon in the late 1920s, however, Coomaraswamy’s thought becomes much more focused by the Traditionalist view of religion. As Sedgwick says, “Coomaraswamy was the

first of many scholars to become dedicated, 'hard' Traditionalists."<sup>68</sup> The Traditionalist transformation of Coomaraswamy's work is reflected in the difference between his early work on Buddhism, the *Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism* (1916) referred to *supra*, and his later *Hinduism and Buddhism* (1943).<sup>69</sup> For *Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism*, his goal "is to set forth as simply as possible the Gospel of Buddhism according to the Buddhist scriptures, and to consider the Buddhist systems in relation, on the one hand, to the Brāhmanical systems in which they originate, and, on the other hand, to those systems of Christian mysticism which afford the nearest analogies."<sup>70</sup> In contrast, to an exposition of "analogies," in *Hinduism and Buddhism* "Coomaraswamy's basic thesis is, of course, one of Perennial unity—that Hinduism and Buddhism were both expressions of the original Perennial Philosophy."<sup>71</sup>

As with other Traditionalists, Coomaraswamy constructs a semi-otic opposition between traditional and modern. Given the importance of this issue for an understanding of the rhetorical dynamics of Traditionalism, we quote Roger Lipsey, Coomaraswamy's biographer, *in extenso*:

"Traditional" described cultures which, whatever their historical faults, were founded on an understanding of the spiritual nature of man and the world; "modern" described cultures that have forgotten many truths of the spirit, no matter how brilliantly they exercise particular faculties of the spirit. "Modern" cultures were described as antitraditional: they emerged by rejecting and forgetting tradition, and they tend to destroy traditional cultures around them both by competition and attraction. "Traditional" became a word of praise, guaranteeing that a given entity (an idea, a social form, a practice) was true or fitting in itself and related to a larger whole. What was not "traditional" had deviated from the only real *norm*; it was anti-traditional, that is modern, and either evil or only accidentally good. This concept of Tradition was presented dogmatically and soon became a rigid means of parting the Cursed from the Blessed.<sup>72</sup>

In the trajectory of Coomaraswamy's life from art historian to Traditionalist thinker, we can see the connections between Romanticism—as expressed in the Arts and Crafts Movement with its emphasis on an anti-modernist opposition to industrialism, and a sense of the inherently ennobling character of handicrafts—and Traditionalism.<sup>73</sup>

*Marco Pallis (1895–1989)*

Marco Pallis is another adherent to the Traditionalist perspective who wrote on Buddhism. He was a follower of René Guénon, and it appears that Pallis was himself a member of the Maryamiyya, the secret Sufi order deriving from Frithjof Schuon's contacts with al-Alawi.<sup>74</sup>

Marco Pallis wrote rather extensively on Buddhism, a travelogue entitled *Peaks and Lamas* about his travels in Tibet and several essays now collected under the title *A Buddhist Spectrum*. One of these essays evidences what may be called the Traditionalist style, a way of writing that makes a seemingly-plausible argument, but only by presuming the Traditionalist understanding of religions as all manifestations of the same underlying unitary truth. From such a perspective concepts from one religion can be freely introduced into discussions of another, not simply as passing literary flourishes and minor explanatory analogies, but without even identifying that these concepts are drawn from different traditions. Employing religious concepts from one religious context in a different context involves a reinterpretation of those concepts, since they take on new meanings in their current juxtaposition.<sup>75</sup>

In his essay, "Dharma and the Dharmas as Principle of Inter-religious Communication,"<sup>76</sup> Pallis not only makes reference to the works of René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon, but in the midst of a discussion of the idea of dharma in Buddhism, introduces the concept of *svadharma* as one's own personal vocation. The *locus classicus* for the concept of *svadharma* is, of course, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, not usually considered a Buddhist text, and the idea of *svadharma* plays no particular role in Buddhist thought at all. The point that Pallis is making here is the ethno-mystical one discussed above—there are certain religious traditions that are effective for some race or ethnicity, and they are not to be used by others. This is one of the rationales for the cautions regarding the impropriety of Westerners undertaking Asian religious practices that one finds in various strains of literature discussing the active participation by Westerners in the religious practices of Asia.<sup>77</sup> Pallis, referring to Guénon's commentaries on Hindu thought, asserts that

there was no question of merely trying to copy Eastern ways; to transfer a few eclectically favored features from one traditional form to another can do more harm than good.... What Guénon hoped for was that an intelligent study of the Eastern religions would act as a catalyst of a metaphysical awareness to which Western minds had long

been strangers, but he was also careful to point out that the forms in which that awareness would need to be clothed for the purpose of its wider dissemination would still have to be Western in character and in all probability Christian.<sup>78</sup>

Pallis's attitude toward Guénon is informative about the issues of hierarchy and authority in Traditionalist circles. In discussing the concept of *anattā*, Pallis tells us that Guénon dismissed the concept "and the whole of Buddhism with it, as little more than a heretical ripple on the ocean of Hindu intellectuality."<sup>79</sup> Supported by Coomaraswamy, Pallis appealed to Guénon to reconsider his hostility toward Buddhism. The outcome was that "he agreed to eliminate from his published works the offending anti-Buddhist passages, a decision for which one will never cease to be grateful."<sup>80</sup>

One of the issues that Traditionalist thinkers seem to constantly struggle with is the Buddhist doctrine of *anātman* and its later correlate emptiness (*śūnyatā*). Evola, for example, asserts that the doctrine really means that in what is normally

considered as "I," it is impossible to recognize the true self, the supersensible *ātmā* of the preceding Upaniṣadic speculation; this true self is considered as practically nonexistent for the common man. Buddhism does not say: the "I" does not exist—but rather: one thing only is certain, that nothing belonging to samsāric existence and personality has the nature of "I."<sup>81</sup>

This interpretation might be called the "Big Self/little self" strategy. It manages to claim that Buddhism is right, but doesn't really mean what it appears to: "Buddhism is only denying the reality of the little self, as a means of revealing the Big Self." This reinterpretation of *anātman* allows the Traditionalists to integrate Buddhism, despite the radically distinct character that the doctrine indicates, into their vision of all religions as ultimately the same. This is an instance of the harmonizing of differences by reinterpretation according to their own preconceptions.<sup>82</sup>

Pallis notes that Coomaraswamy had attempted to deal with this issue "by employing the two forms 'self' and 'Self' in order to distinguish automatically between the empirical self or ego, seat of illusory thinking, and the true or transcendent principle of selfhood towards which all contemplative experience tends."<sup>83</sup> Although critical of Coomaraswamy's solution as "technically improper and misleading in the long run,"<sup>84</sup> Pallis is in agreement with the interpretation. As with Evola,

Pallis claims that “our customary consciousness of self is itself deceptive and that it is through its divestment that a real something can be discovered, one which cannot be named as such lest this should start a new chain of illusory attributions in its turn.”<sup>85</sup>

The tendency of Traditionalist authors to deal with lacunae in their knowledge by creating authoritative “explanations” based on their own Perennialist presumptions is evidenced by two errors of Pallis’s. He claims that the term *kōan* can be rendered as “‘mysteries,’ a matter of sense, not of etymology, since the syllabic structure of the word itself, as a Japanese expert has informed me, affords no clue as to how it became applied to its eventual use as a support for Zen meditation.”<sup>86</sup> The history of the term and the practice have been understood for a long time, but simply looking at the two characters would reveal nothing of that history.

Pallis then goes on to discuss *dhāraṇī*, saying that

such a formula usually consists of a number of syllables strung together in apparently haphazard fashion, though without displaying the whimsicality of many Zen koans. Some of the syllables figuring in a *dhāraṇī* come from the common vocabulary of the mystical tradition while others, as they stand, often seem barely intelligible.<sup>87</sup>

The explanation here assumes that there is some “common vocabulary of the mystical tradition,” as if there is a single mystical tradition that can be referred to no matter which religious tradition is being studied. Just as in his discussion of *kōans* he would have been well-advised to consult an expert on Chinese Buddhism, so in attempting to explain *dhāraṇī* he would have been better off consulting not the unitary mystical tradition of Perennialist imagining, but rather someone familiar with Sanskrit and Indian Buddhism. Again, however, the issue is not that there were gaps in the knowledge of various Traditionalists, some of which may be explained by the limitations of the scholarship of their day, but that they attempted to resolve these difficulties by resorting to the Perennialist presumption that there is a single, unitary mystical tradition at the core of all religious traditions.

#### *Mircea Eliade (1907–1986)*

Mircea Eliade’s theories of religion have been critically examined by many scholars, repeatedly and in great depth. But because Eliade was perhaps the paradigmatic case of Sedgwick’s “soft Traditionalist,”<sup>88</sup> that is, someone who employs Traditionalist ideas without ac-

knowledging their provenance, this aspect of his work has hardly been noted. Eliade's involvement with Traditionalism began while still a student in Romania, and he continued to be part of an active Traditionalist group founded in 1933 in Bucharest. While the thought of Guénon was important to this group, Evola was more directly influential.<sup>89</sup> It was during this period that he also became involved with Romanian versions of fascism.<sup>90</sup>

Sedgwick notes that Eliade was more oriented toward established academia than other Traditionalists, and that this was a factor in his concealing his Traditionalist sources. Specifically, Eliade expresses concern that Traditionalists were known to deny historical evidence and factual data.<sup>91</sup> This concern remains as relevant today as in 1943 when Eliade expressed it.<sup>92</sup>

The academic study of religion in the United States was greatly stimulated by the work of Eliade and his presence at the University of Chicago. This influence, however, introduced many Traditionalist themes, particularly its Perennialism and esotericism, into the American study of religions. As Sedgwick summarizes,

Eliade's general model of human religiosity is in effect the Perennial Philosophy dressed up in secular clothes.... What Eliade did over his entire career was to pursue the standard Traditionalist research project of "reassembl[ing]...debris" under other names and by more scholarly methods.... A regular Traditionalist would study various traditions as a believer in them all as expressions of the Perennial Philosophy; Eliade instead studied archaic religions *as if* a believer, "on their own plane of reference." To what extent Eliade actually believed that the "archaic religions" he worked on were aspects of a Perennial Philosophy is impossible to say, but to the extent that he did believe this, it must have made it easier for him to place himself in the position of a believer in one religion after another.<sup>93</sup>

Although not informed by an awareness of the Traditionalist roots of Eliade's thought, Richard Gombrich's 1974 review of Eliade's *Yoga* provides an excellent perspective on the way in which Traditionalist authors reinterpret religious traditions in a fashion to make them fit into their own preconceptions. In some cases there are assertions made that, lacking historical nuance, are simply false as generalizations. An example is when Eliade's claim, "without reference or substantiation, 'The importance of the *guru* as initiatory master is no less great in Buddhism than in any other Indian soteriology.'" Gombrich corrects this, stating that "So far as concerns pre-Tantric Buddhism, we emphati-

cally disagree; early Buddhism was unusually exoteric, and in most strains of the Theravādin tradition to this day the importance of the *guru* has been radically de-emphasised, compared with other Indian traditions.”<sup>94</sup>

There are also interpretations that force Buddhism to fit into Traditionalist preconceptions. Specifically in this case Eliade’s apparent determination to fit Buddhism into his conception of shamanism leads him to misrepresent the Buddhist understanding of the path as leading through shamanic rebirth. “To obtain the state of the unconditioned—in other words to die completely to this profane, painful, illusory life and to be reborn (in another “body”! [Gombrich]) to the mystical life that will make it possible to attain *nirvāṇa*—the Buddha employs the traditional yogic techniques....”<sup>95</sup> As Gombrich points out, however, “to attain the state of the unconditioned’ is ‘to attain *nirvāṇa*’; it is not just an intermediate state which ‘makes it possible.’ In fact the Buddhist who attains *nirvāṇa* does so in his own body.”<sup>96</sup> Gombrich characterizes the role of selectivity in creating a misleading representation of Buddhism by analogy with the hallmark of Indian magic. “By quoting passages from the *Sāmañña-phala-sutta* out of sequence, mostly under other names, Eliade has performed a variant of the rope trick: plucking the dismembered pieces of the text out of the air, he has ‘before the spectators’ wondering eyes’ reconstituted them into something rich but strange.”<sup>97</sup>

#### Huston Smith (1919–)

While Mircea Eliade may have introduced Traditionalist ideas to the academic study of religion, Huston Smith is perhaps most responsible for introducing Traditionalist ideas into American popular religious culture. Like Eliade, Smith—at least for most of his career—acted as a soft Traditionalist, and one will not find overt reference to figures such as Guénon or Schuon in his most widely read works.<sup>98</sup> Their ideas are certainly central to his work, however, including his representations of Buddhism. As with Coomaraswamy, he leaned toward a Perennialist understanding even prior to his encounter with Traditionalism. In addition to this Perennialist influence, his understanding of Buddhism is clearly formed by Buddhist modernist representations of Buddhism as a reform movement opposing a decaying Vedic sacramentalism, emphasizing rational self-control, and established by an extraordinary, but still fully human founder. His most recent work on



Buddhism per se is entitled *Buddhism: A Concise Introduction*, and dates from 2003. It repeats with only minor editorial revisions material that originally appeared as the Buddhism chapter of his 1958 *Religions of Man*.<sup>99</sup> Thus, any detailed study of Smith's representations of Buddhism would need to stratify his work around the date 1969 when Smith read Frithjof Schuon's *In the Tracks of Buddhism* (discussed *supra* under its new title *Treasures of Buddhism*). For our purposes here, however, we will look at aspects more specifically Traditionalist in character.

We can gain a sense of the way in which Traditionalist thought contributed to Smith's representation of Buddhism by examining two aspects of his religious thought. First is his promotion of the idea of hierarchy as not only universally held by all religions, but also as a metaphysical principle with beneficial consequences. Second is the aestheticization of religion—the Romantic conflation of aesthetic and religious experiences as unique, spontaneous, individual, veridical, and irreducible. Beyond the intellectual consequences for the understanding of Buddhism, both of these factors also serve to mask the political consequences of Traditionalist religious belief.

Smith objects to what he considers the “post-modern” suspicion of hierarchies. He claims that this post-modern suspicion involves a fundamental confusion regarding metaphysics and politics. Whether it is his conscious intent or not, the effect of this is to draw a distinction that makes the discussion of the political (and economic, and psychopathological) consequences of religion appear incoherent. He seems to think that because *he* means “good” hierarchies, like those of a well-ordered family or classroom, abstracting this to a metaphysical principle does not open the door to the abusive exploitation of hierarchical relations. He wants to separate out “empowering” hierarchies—most importantly the metaphysical hierarchy—from socially and politically oppressive hierarchies—by claiming that the former are not political in nature.

The commitment to a metaphysics of hierarchy is an expression of the historical sources that feed from Neoplatonic thought into Romanticism and then forward into Traditionalism. This is one of the issues that becomes particularly problematic when Traditionalist interpretations of Buddhism are created, since the Buddhist commitment to an ontology of impermanence mitigates against any idea of an absolute, eternal, unchanging, or permanent reality. The imposition of a Neoplatonic metaphysics onto the two truths is an instance of overcoding. In

some Traditionalist interpretations, a Neoplatonic metaphysics that is fundamentally dualist and hierarchical is read onto the Buddhist conception of *śūnyatā* in such a fashion as to make *śūnyatā* the transcendent source of being. Presuming the universality of the Traditionalist system of thought, Buddhist thought is assumed to be simply another instance of that view, and is thus made to fit into that scheme, whether that is an accurate representation of Buddhist thought or not.

#### TRADITIONALISM VERSUS RELIGIOUS STUDIES

##### *Perverved Comparisons: Comparison as Method versus Comparison as Ideology*

From a superficial view, Traditionalists seem to be engaged in the same project as others pursuing the comparative study of religion—that is, the determination of characteristics common to the various religions. Indeed, Smith's works are still frequently used in introductory courses in the comparative study of religion, and are shelved under that category in bookstores. There is a radically different epistemology at work in these two approaches to that goal, however.

For the academic study of religion comparison is a method, a tool, a technique that allows an understanding of other people's religions as objective entities—that is, as social practices, cultural patterns, and historical institutions.<sup>100</sup> The academic enterprise of the study of religion is known under a variety of names, but is perhaps most commonly referred to as “comparative religions.” As the name of the academic study of religion, this has certain problems attached to it, but it is so widely used that we will retain it here—especially as we are discussing popular perceptions. As an academic field of study, comparative religions was initiated in Europe in the nineteenth century and gradually spread, becoming increasingly instantiated in American universities from the middle of the twentieth century forward. Its credibility as an academic enterprise depended upon the important pedagogical distinction between teaching religion and teaching about religion made in the 1960s.<sup>101</sup> Teaching religion is understood as the promotion of a religious agenda of one kind or another, while teaching about religion is represented as the examination of a social phenomenon, one on a par in terms of its importance with economics.<sup>102</sup>

*When Comparison Isn't*

The references and allusions to other religions found in the works of the Traditionalists are not simply a matter of literary style—of embellishing a discussion of some aspect of Buddhism through a throw-away comparison, a sort of “Oh, isn’t this interesting, X looks like Y.” Nor is it a principled comparative project, identifying similarities and differences against a theoretically based hypothesis regarding how to explain the similarities and differences. Nor is it a matter of an explanatory analogy—asserting a similarity between something familiar and something unfamiliar in order to help someone to understand the unfamiliar, something like “Buddhist meditation is just like Christian prayer, only they don’t say anything and they don’t believe in God.”

The comparisons made in Traditionalist works instead reflect a core doctrinal claim of Traditionalism, that is, the Perennialist claim that all religions are basically or ultimately the same. It is in other words a dogmatic core belief that provides a systematic hermeneutic. Thus, the anonymous “Publishers Preface” to Frithjof Schuon’s *Treasures of Buddhism* explains that

The leitmotif of Frithjof Schuon’s entire corpus of writings is the *philosophia perennis*, the timeless metaphysical truth underlying the diverse religions, whose written sources are the revealed Scriptures as well as the writings of the great spiritual masters. Readers familiar with Schuon’s works will therefore not be surprised to find here references to the spiritual worlds of Hinduism, Christianity, and others as well.<sup>103</sup>

As indicated in this quote, it is a fundamentally metaphysical claim, a claim regarding absolute reality—eternal and unchanging, and which Schuon identifies with “the Void”—and the transitory world of mundane phenomena. This is, of course, a fundamentally Neoplatonic metaphysics. Despite their appearances, then, these are not comparisons, but interpretations.

*Fetishizing Tradition*

Since the term “tradition” does not signify any one thing, it serves for the Traditionalists both as a slogan, and as a value judgment. In other words, it serves a rhetorical function as a strategic claim about particular beliefs and social practices as simply and undeniably ancient and venerable. As Sedgwick has pointed out in relation to several

Traditionalist publications, “Traditionalist interpretations are never presented as such, but rather are given as the simple truth.”<sup>104</sup> In doing so it conceals the fact that the beliefs and social practices identified as “traditional” are a construct, have been selected, and, by asserting their status as simply given, avoids the question of their consequences. This rhetoric effectively claims that “it is simply the tradition, one cannot question it any further”—such questioning becomes itself a symptom of the corrupting effects of tradition’s semiotic opposites, the modern and post-modern.

In other words, when Traditionalists speak of “traditional religion” they do not actually mean any specific religion. Rather, this is their own religious worldview which they have cloaked under the raiment of traditionality, and which by doing so conceal its modern origins and constructed character.<sup>105</sup>

It seems that the Traditionalist’s relation to Tradition is not simply a matter of being disingenuous. It is not that they simply present something that they know is a modern construction as if it were traditional, but rather that they actually believe the traditional character of their own belief system. In other words, they are not simply lying, but rather participate in “bad faith” as described by Jean-Paul Sartre.

We can briefly characterize Sartre’s notion of bad faith as a common human condition in which one is simultaneously two different things, but by identifying with one, denies the other. As Sartre explains it, this is not simple duplicity—saying one thing while believing something different—but rather the construction of identity through the denial of aspects of oneself by consciously keeping them out of conscious awareness. In this case, it is the claim that the belief-system is tradition that conceals from the Traditionalists’ conscious awareness the fact that it is they themselves who have constructed this belief-system.

Indeed, Kierkegaard addressed this issue in relation to religion specifically, discussing the denial of personal responsibility that belief in an all-powerful creator allows. “The Bible is the word of God, therefore I believe it,” conceals responsibility for the decision to believe that the Bible is the word of God. It is perhaps, then, no surprise that modern thinkers such as the existentialists—Kierkegaard, Sartre, and their colleagues—are held in such special contempt by many Traditionalists. Such a deferring of responsibility is perhaps the most directly personal way in which the Traditionalist belief-system takes on political consequences. In order to be free, one must acknowledge one’s personal

responsibility. Like many other belief-systems that are based on an act of bad faith, and which promote bad faith in adherents, Traditionalism relieves adherents of this burden of responsibility. Such systems are basically infantilizing and authoritarian.

Likewise, there is little clarity about when the transition from traditional society to modern occurred, no clearly identified markers—thus leaving “modernity” an empty signifier only connoting opprobrium. In one place, for example, Smith writes as if modernity begins with the French Revolution. One could, however, just as well choose a technological advance such as the mechanical clock, or an economic one such as the invention of banking as marking the change from traditional to modern. However, as we have seen, for example, with Coomaraswamy, modernity is not in fact either an historical or a sociological category for the Traditionalists. It is rather a moral category—what is modern is corrupt and decadent, mechanistic and dehumanizing, the realm of Ortega y Gasset’s masses and Heidegger’s *das Mann*.

*Political Ramifications and Their Obscurations:  
“The Religious Is the Political”*

The intellectual separation of religion from politics obscures the ease with which ideas propagated as religious become converted into agendas for social and political action. One example of this obscuration that we have already encountered is Huston Smith’s attempted distinction between metaphysical and socio-political hierarchies. Another way in which the relation between religion and politics is obscured is the aestheticization of religion by defining religion as individual, subjective experience. Like so many other aspects of Traditionalism, the aestheticization of religion derives from Romanticism. One of the consequences of its emphasis on individual, subjective experience was to valorize aesthetic experience, and to equate aesthetic experience with religious, especially mystical, experience. By defining religion in terms of individual, subjective, aesthetic experience, the social, political, and economic aspects of religion can be dismissed from consideration—those aspects are simply considered unimportant, peripheral to the real essence of religion, and therefore not in need of consideration.

The aestheticization of religion is also dialectically related to the Perennialist conception of a common core of experientially realizable insight found in all religions. While some Perennialist interpretations see this common core as publicly accessible, Traditionalists more gen-

erally focus on the mystical or initiatory elite as the ones having the capacity to access these “metaphysical” realities.

The aestheticization of religion and the attempt to distinguishing between metaphysical and socio-political hierarchies all *implicitly* obscure the relation between religion and politics. However, the denial of any relation between the two is sometimes made explicit. Discussing the fact that some critics have dismissed Evola’s religious works because of his associations with Fascism and Nazism, H. T. Hansen claims that “This has affected his purely esoteric writings, which have nothing to do with political questions.”<sup>106</sup>

Traditionalism is, by its very nature, necessarily not only religiously but also politically and socially conservative. Anti-modernist nostalgia can very easily become a reason for rejecting the democratic institutions of modern society, leading to authoritarianism. This can be seen, for example, in the work of the early-twentieth century political philosopher, José Ortega y Gasset.<sup>107</sup> The Traditionalists generally presume a Neoplatonic cosmology, which is of course hierarchical in nature. A metaphysical hierarchy very easily translates into a socio-political hierarchy leading to authoritarianism.

The political commitments of leading Traditionalists to totalitarian and fascist regimes have been discussed by several authors.<sup>108</sup> Julius Evola, for example, attempted to interest both Italian Fascists and German Nazis in his own brand of spiritualized aristocratic racism.<sup>109</sup> Despite the importance that such religio-racist ideologies have clearly had in modern history, the relation between politics and religion has largely been ignored in the academic study of religion. This may be in part the consequence of two dynamics in the study of religion. First, the principle of separation of church and state as fundamental to liberal democracy has promoted an active ignoring of political consequences of religion in order to protect the teaching about religion from criticism by what is perceived—accurately or not—as an anti-religion, secular, academic establishment. Second, those academics sympathetic to the study of religion may also associate any discussion of the political ramifications of religion with Marxist social critique, and desire to distance the study of religion from an overtly hostile attitude toward religion. Usually such resistance to an examination of the social, political, psychological, or economic consequences of religious belief and religious institutions is cloaked in the language of a resistance to “re-

ductionism,” and a commitment to the *sui generis* nature of religion or religious experience.<sup>110</sup>

If one is interested in preserving and promoting traditional beliefs and social practices, then one is of necessity opposed to innovation, change, and the active questioning of authority. This conservative emphasis would seem to apply especially when the “traditional beliefs and social practices” are themselves a contemporary construct, and constitute therefore simply one form of resistance to modernity, a form entailing bad faith.<sup>111</sup>

### *The Chimaera of Liberality*

Because of their putative religious pluralism, many people have the impression that the Traditionalist’s position is a liberal one.<sup>112</sup> This is, however, far from being the case. The Traditionalist view is two-fold—anti-modernist and Perennialist. The reason that their position is not follows directly from the Perennialist dimension of their system of thought. As already discussed above, they claim that they are simply representing the traditional core of all religions—that which existed prior to the modern onslaught of secularism, relativism, and science and technology that obscured, destroyed, or pushed aside the traditional core. In its turn, the traditional core is conceived as singular and universal—there is one religious truth and it is found in all traditional religions.<sup>113</sup>

Out of this rhetoric Traditionalists have undertaken the representation of many different religions, and in doing so appear to validate the plurality of religions. It is this apparently positive attitude toward the plurality of religions that many find appealing and which may then lead them to accept the Traditionalist representations uncritically.

Far from being an acceptance of variety, however, what the Traditionalists have done is select and interpret so as to create a representation that fits into the Traditionalist preconceptions—what is “best about religion” as Smith puts it. Having thus imposed uniformity by selection and interpretation, the Traditionalists have successfully set up their own views as a hegemonic metanarrative. There is a difference between accepting diversity and imposing uniformity.

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Although, as the perceptive reader can tell, I believe that there is much to be critical of regarding the Traditionalist representations of Buddhism, it is important to avoid judging these authors in terms of our own current knowledge.<sup>114</sup> In some cases at least they were working with the best scholarship available to them at the time. That their representations of Buddhism are, therefore, dated and inadequate in terms of more recent scholarship is in a sense simply given.<sup>115</sup> There are two other issues that are more important. First, given the information available to them, how do they go on to represent Buddhism in terms of their own preconceptions (about religion, the cosmos, the nature of human existence, etc.), and second, how do their representations continue to shape the understanding of Buddhism today?

Despite the possibility of understanding the socially created nature of imaginal objects such as Buddhism in a radically relativist fashion, that is not the understanding intended here. It is the task of scholarship to attempt to assure that cultural representations are increasingly accurate, which is why scholarship necessarily involves an ongoing process of self-critical reflection. Although sometimes flippantly dismissed with a reference to the Freudian concept of the killing of the father, such self-critical reflection is the difference between scholarly debate and the dueling ideologies that appear to be the dominant mode of discourse in our own society today.

## CONCLUSION

It would be very easy to dismiss the Traditionalist view simply on the basis of its being based on claims that are not subject to either verification or falsification, and which are therefore only faith-claims and cannot be a basis for an academic study of either religion as a whole or Buddhism in particular. The depth of influence of the Traditionalist understandings of religion and of Buddhism mitigate against an overly facile dismissal, however.

There are two important aspects of Buddhist doctrine that the Traditionalist interpretations overcode, recreating Buddhism in the model of Traditionalist presumptions regarding the nature of human existence, the world, and the path/goal. One is the interpretation of Buddhist ontology within a Neoplatonic framework as simply another instance of a hierarchy of truths. The other is the interpretation of awakening within a Perennialist framework as simply another instance



of a single and universal category of mystical experience. Because both Neoplatonism and Perennialism function almost pre-reflectively in American popular religious culture these two acts of overcoding Buddhist doctrines are usually invisible.

In addition to the overcoding of these two doctrines, Traditionalism consistently utilizes various rhetorical strategies to create a compelling interpretation of religion and of Buddhism. One such strategy is the use of context, in its most literal meaning of what is around a text.<sup>116</sup> For example, juxtaposing a Japanese Buddhist figure such as Hōnen with a Christian figure such as Luther creates a radically different understanding from juxtaposing Hōnen with an Indian Buddhist figure such as Bhāvaviveka or a Chinese Buddhist figure such as Xuanzang. Another is by selecting what fits into a predetermined understanding and then presenting that selection as if it were actually representative. Because of the distorting quality of such overcoding, it needs to be critically resisted. Fredric Jameson, discussing Deleuze and Guattari's engaging of Freud, describes the dynamics of resistance to such overcoding: "What is denounced is therefore a system of allegorical interpretation in which the data of one narrative line are radically impoverished by their rewriting according to the paradigm of another narrative, which is taken as the former's master code or Ur-narrative and proposed as the ultimate hidden or unconscious *meaning* of the first one."<sup>117</sup>

The Traditionalist decrying of modernity—blaming the modern world for fragmentation and alienation of our lives—is a theme that has become a staple for many religious thinkers in the present.<sup>118</sup> In 1948, at the close of his public lectures broadcast on French national radio, Maurice Merleau-Ponty directly confronted this claim. Speaking in terms of the "classical," rather than the traditional, but a world portrayed as one in which life was orderly and complete, he says,

We have to wonder whether the image of the classical world with which we are often presented is any more than a legend. Was that world also acquainted with the lack of completion and the ambiguity in which we live? Was it merely content to refuse official recognition to their existence? If so, then far from being evidence of decline, would not the uncertainty of our culture rather be the most acute and honest awareness of something that has always been true and accordingly something we have gained?<sup>119</sup>

The voice of one of the leading twentieth-century philosophers here points us toward seeing that our awareness of the incomplete, fragmented, and alienated character of human existence is itself an accomplishment, and we may say, an act of bravery. It is certainly a perspective consonant with the Buddhist understanding of existence as being characterized by impermanence (*anitya*), essencelessness (*anātma*), and dysfunctionality (*dukkha*).

## NOTES

1. Derek Bickerton, *Language and Species* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 233.

2. Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

3. One might, on the basis of this difference, distinguish between “occult Traditionalists” and “evangelical Traditionalists.” This distinction is not to be confused with Sedgwick’s distinction between “hard” and “soft” Traditionalists. This latter focuses on whether or not the Traditionalism is overt (hard) or concealed (soft). See Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 111. Soft Traditionalism avoids mention, for example, of the effective founder of Traditionalism, René Guénon. This concealment is itself strategic, however, as it allows Traditionalist concepts much wider dissemination and acceptance.

4. The genesis of my interest in this particular dimension of the modern representations of Buddhism occurred when I was teaching a course on Buddhist tantra three or four years ago. As an introduction to the course I had the students read Hugh Urban’s *Tantra* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), which though in large part concerned with the Hindu forms of tantra, provides an excellent overview of the ideas that inform the modern Western discourse on tantra generally. Urban briefly mentions Julius Evola, an Italian esotericist with Fascist political associations who had written a book entitled *Yoga of Power* (repr., Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 1993). Very shortly thereafter, I was in the bookstore at the Graduate Theological Union looking for something else, when I noticed this same work, Evola’s *Yoga of Power*, being used as a textbook in another course being taught that same semester. I suddenly became confronted with the reality that the representations of tantra and, as I would soon learn also of Buddhism, which had been formulated by Evola, together with their implicit quasi-fascist political and racist ramifications, were not something safely confined to a past now gone and unmourned, but were alive, well, and living in Berkeley. Indeed, some relatively casual searching on the Web was even more disturbing as I learned not only that the publisher reprinting Evola’s works was an American one, but that sites with information about Evola opened up to a neo-Fascist world that is very much alive and very active.

The next step for me was a kind of “Ah-ha” moment, one of those times when something you have been struggling with suddenly constellates in such a fashion as to be from then on self-evidently obvious. This shift in *Gestalts* was eventuated by Mark Sedgwick’s work, *Against the Modern World*. For many years I have been bothered by some aspects of the comparative study of religion. The best that I could do was to try to distinguish between comparison as a method (discussed perhaps most lucidly in some of Jonathan Z. Smith’s essays) and the fact that some people seemed to turn comparison into something

more—an argument that somehow all religions are ultimately the same.

I had, of course, been long familiar with the New-Age commonplace that there is only one mountain and that all religions are simply different paths to its peak (a metaphor I now know from the side of a box of herbal tea has been attributed to Ananda Coomaraswamy). And I was of course familiar with Aldous Huxley's *Perennial Philosophy* (orig. pub. 1945; repr., New York: Harper Colophon, Harper and Row, 1970), which I'd read as an undergraduate close on the heels of reading his two essays on drugs and his utopian fiction, *Island* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1962), in which psychedelics play a major and positive social role. But suddenly Sedgwick's naming of Traditionalism as an identifiable, coherent, and largely unrecognized ideological stream within modern Western religious culture—both popular and academic—acted as a catalyst. All of these things, from vague discomforts to adolescent enthusiasms, formed themselves into a pattern, crystallized, and, falling out of solution, became visible as part of a common phenomenon. Not only, then, was it clear that there was indeed something there, but that it had ramifications for the project of critical self-reflection within Buddhist studies as well.

5. For an instance of a Romantic idealization of the Paleolithic, see Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991).

6. See Holmes Welch, *Taoism: The Parting of the Way* (orig. pub. 1957; repr., Boston: Beacon Press, 1966).

7. I am adapting the concept of “overcoding” from Umberto Eco's semiotics. Nöth explains Eco's concept, saying “Overcoding is the interpretative process of modifying a preestablished code by proposing a new rule which governs a rarer application of the previous rule. Stylistic and ideological conventions are examples of such rules used in overcoding.” Winfried Nöth, *Handbook of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 212. Another definition is given by Bruce Caron, <http://junana.com/CDP/corpus/GLOSSARY20.html>: “‘Overcoding’ is the practice of applying meaning/values from one discursive field to others. This is where power connects with knowledge to create codes that dominate not only their own discursive field, but others as well. This may occur through active institutional programs which insist that their scope is universal. Religions, such as Christianity or Islam, may be promoted in this fashion, overcoding discourses of diseases, of sexuality, of economies, and political behaviors, etc.” The concept seems to have its earliest expression in the work of Umberto Eco, and has also been used by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.

8. The literature on the creation of the category “religion” is extensive. See particularly Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

9. This is done by means of a circular argument, a *petitio principii* fallacy—traditional peoples hold such and such a worldview, if a people doesn't then they are not traditional. And indeed, one contemporary Traditionalist, Huston Smith, has claimed that the categories of traditional and religious are coterminous, thus creating a semiotic dichotomous pairing by means of which modern is definitionally identified as irreligious. According to this semiotic structuring of the concepts, “modern religion” would be oxymoronic.

10. See Andrew Hewitt, *Fascist Modernism: Aesthetics, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 74. Hewitt is here discussing the thought of Georg Lukács.

11. The opposition between reflective rationality and spontaneous experience is rhetorically supported by many other related dualisms in Western thought, such as reason and emotion, mind and body, and so on. The oppositional character of these dualities is, of course, to be found in the Platonic heritage, which was itself given new caché among the Romantics. It now appears, however, that these dualisms are themselves artificial cultural constructs. See, for example, the works of Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999), *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1994), and Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). See also Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005).

12. Isaiah Berlin, “Counter-Enlightenment,” quoted in Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (orig. pub. 1996; repr., Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 415.

13. This is, of course, now a commonplace of contemporary Western popularized Buddhism. In keeping with the American tradition of anti-intellectualism, many contemporary Western Buddhists presume that meditation can be separated from doctrine, and that while the former is the sole essential for awakening the latter is an obstacle. Although this is contrary to such fundamental Buddhist conceptions as the eightfold path, this modern, Western, Romanticized view is presented as “authentic” Buddhism.

14. Quoted in Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 41.

15. Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, vii.

16. That this past nostalgically longed for is both imaginal and idealized is evident in consideration of the works of Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, such as *Carnival in Romans* (English trans., New York: G. Brazziler, 1979), and *Montaillou* (English trans., London: Scholar Press, 1979) as well as Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* (English trans., London: Routledge, 1980). For a more extended critique of this issue in relation to one particular contemporary Tradi-

tionalist, see Richard K. Payne, "How Not to Talk about Pure Land Buddhism: A Critique of Huston Smith's (Mis)Representations," in Richard K. Payne, ed., *Path of No Path: Contemporary Studies in Pure Land Buddhism Honoring Roger Corless* (Berkeley: Institute of Buddhist Studies and Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2008).

17. Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre, *Romanticism against the Tide of Modernity*, trans. Catherine Porter (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), 52.

18. *Ibid.*, 28.

19. See Huston Smith, *Why Religion Matters* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 18.

20. See Aidan Day, *Romanticism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

21. This is also evident in Buddhist modernism's treatment of individual, silent, seated meditation not simply as paradigmatic for Buddhist practice, but also as the single valid defining characteristic of Buddhist identity.

22. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (orig. pub. 1996; repr., Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 423.

23. It is perhaps one of the most touching bits of irony that the Scottish highlands—a supposedly eternal landscape quaintly punctuated by isolated shepherds tending their flocks—so highly valorized by the Romantics were in fact depopulated by the same modern economic forces that created the urban slums they found so horrific.

24. Löwy and Sayre, *Romanticism against the Tide of Modernity*, 57.

25. *Ibid.*, 58.

26. *Ibid.*, 59.

27. Post-modern thought is perhaps the only thing more offensive to contemporary Traditionalists than modernity itself, and consequently there are several polemical representations of post-modernism in contemporary Traditionalist literature. One example of the polemical character of the representations of post-modernism is provided by Huston Smith: "Whereas the Modern Mind assumed that it knew more than its predecessors because the natural and historical sciences were flooding it with new knowledge about nature and history, the Postmodern Mind argues (paradoxically) that it knows more than others because it has discovered how little the human mind *can* know." Huston Smith, *Beyond the Post-Modern Mind*, rev. ed. (Wheaton and Madras: Quest Books, Theosophical Publishing House, 1989), xiii. Not only is this an abusive representation of post-modernism, but by creating a vague generalization—the "Postmodern Mind"—it becomes virtually impossible to refute, and is

therefore itself if not an outright fallacy (i.e., an unfalsifiable claim), at least highly suspicious. It points, however, to a key issue in the Traditionalist debate with both modernity and post-modernist thought, which is fundamentally epistemological. True knowledge for them is absolute and revealed by direct intuition, regarding which see the section on Schuon below. Expressed differently, as with Platonic thought generally, absolute knowledge is knowledge of the absolute. Anything less is not truly knowledge. It seems to me that this link between the epistemological object and the character of knowledge does not hold for Buddhist epistemology, where absolute knowledge is knowledge of the impermanent.

28. Löwy and Sayre, *Romanticism against the Tide of Modernity*, 59.

29. *Ibid.*, 63. One thinks here, for example, of Huston Smith's work with Native Americans.

30. See Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); also, Heather Pringle, *The Master Plan: Himmler's Scholars and the Holocaust* (New York: Hyperion, 2006), especially regarding Himmler's idea of constructing SS villages in Eastern Europe that would recreate the imaginal ancient German society.

31. Charles Upton, *The System of the Antichrist: Truth and Falsehood in Postmodernism and the New Age* (Ghent, New York: Sophia Perennis, 2001), 3. Upton is explicitly following Huston Smith's understanding of post-modernism, which is itself a rhetorically slanted "straw man."

32. Smith, *Why Religion Matters*, 1.

33. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature: The 1994 Cadbury Lectures at the University of Birmingham* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 3.

34. *Ibid.* His solution to this is classically Traditionalist—"the reformulation of the traditional cosmologies and views of nature held by various religions throughout history." *Ibid.*, 287. The plausibility of this suggestion is itself evidence of the wide influence of Traditionalist views.

35. Anonymous, "Editorial Note," in René Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, trans. Lord Northbourne, 4<sup>th</sup> rev. ed. (orig. pub. in French, 1945; English 1953; repr., Hillsdale, New York: Sophia Perennis, 2001), xi.

36. It is obvious that this rhetorical strategy works for political motivation as well, as for example, when the number of immigrants in the U.S. is defined as a crisis, around which then all kinds of other anxieties and dissatisfactions can be constellated. The politician then offers his/her election as the solution to the crisis.

37. Although René Guénon is considered to be the founder of Traditionalism, he himself did not write extensively on Buddhism—there are only some passing references, rather than any sustained treatment to be found in his writings. Not only does it seem to be the case that Guénon was largely hostile toward Buddhism, but that because of the intervention of Marco Pallis and Ananda Coomarswamy, he eliminated passages that were critical of Buddhism from later editions of his works. For more on this see below in the discussion of Marco Pallis.
38. Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., with new introduction by Huston Smith (orig. pub. *De l'unité transcendante des religions*, 1957; Wheaton and Chennai: Quest Books, 1993).
39. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 87.
40. Schuon, *Transcendent Unity*, xxx.
41. *Ibid.*, xxxii.
42. Frithjof Schuon, *Treasures of Buddhism* (Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1993), 34.
43. *Ibid.*, 37.
44. *Ibid.*, 39, and 39 n. 1.
45. *Ibid.*, 34–35.
46. Huston Smith, introduction to Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, xix. Marco Pallis makes the same kind of claim (see below).
47. This is why religious attempts to solve social problems on the basis of a doctrinal or theological basis will, I believe, only prove to be at best temporary.
48. Note that the rhetorical stance of “freedom from superstition” allows selective de-contextualization.
49. Julius Evola, *Doctrine of Awakening: The Attainment of Self-Mastery according to the Earliest Buddhist Texts* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 1996), 17.
50. *Ibid.*, 17.
51. *Ibid.*, 25.
52. *Ibid.*, 26.
53. *Ibid.*, 26.
54. The racist quality of Evola’s thought is evidenced in his *Rivolta contro il mondo moderno* (orig. pub. 1934; English ed., *Revolt against the Modern World*, trans. Guido Stucco; Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 1995). He employs there the dubious (even then) fantasy of a “Northern primordial race,” or “Hyperboreans carrying the same spirit, the same blood, and the same body of



symbols, signs, and languages” in a great migration from north to south. Employing the same kind of racist theories as those being promoted by the Nazi Ahnenerbe, he suggests, for example, that the civilization of the Hyperboreans “is found even in the vestiges of the people of the Far North (civilization of the reindeer)” (195–196). For a fuller sense of this, we quote at some length:

Anthropologically speaking, we must consider a first major group that became differentiated through idio-variation, or variation without mixing: this group was mainly composed of the migratory waves of a more immediate Arctic derivation and made its last appearance in the various strains of the pure Aryan race. A second large group became differentiated through miscegenation with the aboriginal Southern races, with proto-Mongoloid and Negroid races, and with other races that probably represented the degenerated residues of the inhabitants of a second prehistoric continent, now lost, which was located in the South, and which some designated as Lemuria. (197)

The first “prehistoric continent” is, of course, Atlantis. It is also worth adding that at this point Evola adds a note, which reads, “See the works of H. Wirth for the attempt to utilize the researches on blood types in order to define the two races that emerged from the original stock” (197 n. 4). Wirth’s work was part of an attempt to establish “scientific” means of distinguishing Aryans and Jews. See Pringle, *Master Plan*, for example, chap. 18, “Searching for the Star of David.”

55. Evola, *Doctrine*, 26.

56. *Ibid.*, 26.

57. See for example, “Evola’s *Autodifesa* (Self-Defense Statement)” written after his arrest in 1951. Julius Evola, *Men among the Ruins: Postwar Reflections of a Radical Traditionalist*, trans. Guido Stucco, ed. Michael Moynihan (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2002), appendix, trans. Joscelyn Godwin. Evola further individualizes his rhetoric in *Ride the Tiger: A Survival Manual for the Aristocrats of the Soul*, trans. Joscelyn Godwin and Constance Fontana (*Cavalcare la Tigre*, orig. pub. 1961; Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2003).

58. An explication of Evola’s use of the term “Aryan” as more than simply racist is to be found in H. T. Hansen, “Introduction: Julius Evola’s Political Endeavors,” in Evola, *Men among the Ruins*, 75.

59. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 34.

60. Ananda Coomaraswamy, *Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1916), 112.

61. Bruce Sullivan has suggested that additional sources evidencing Coomaraswamy’s Traditionalist attitudes are his *Yaksas: Essays in the Water Cosmology*

(orig. pub., Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institute, 1928–1931), and *Dance of Shiva* (orig. pub., Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1948). Sullivan also suggests that Theosophy's influence in Sri Lanka, Coomaraswamy's home, may have directly contributed to his acceptance of Traditionalist thought when he encountered it later. Bruce Sullivan, personal communication (e-mail), November 13, 2007.

62. A further indication of a Perennialist orientation is found in Coomaraswamy's discussion of *nibbāna* in *Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism*, 115–126.

63. Coomaraswamy, *Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism*, 134–137. Coomaraswamy is actually in turn citing Lafcadio Hearn's *Japan*, 241.

64. And also to Communism, though 1890 is a bit early for such sentiments to surface in Japan.

65. Löwy and Sayre, *Romanticism against the Tide of Modernity*, 68.

66. Coomaraswamy, *Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism*, 134.

67. Roger Lipsey, *Coomaraswamy, 3: His Life and Work*, 3 vols., Bollingen Series, 89 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 3:77.

68. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 34.

69. Ananda Coomaraswamy, *Hinduism and Buddhism* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1943).

70. Coomaraswamy, *Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism*, v.

71. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 35, citing a letter from Coomaraswamy to Marco Pallis.

72. Lipsey, *Coomaraswamy*, 3:266.

73. On the influence of the Arts and Crafts Movement on Coomaraswamy, see Harry Oldmeadow, *Journeys East: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Western Encounters with Eastern Religious Traditions* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2004), 196. It is not inappropriate to note that while Oldmeadow's own orientation is itself Traditionalist, he seems in this work to have attempted a balanced presentation.

74. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 162–165. Pallis also corresponded with the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, and he seems to have acted as the agent who made it possible for Merton to be invited to join the Maryamiyya. Apparently, however, Merton's sudden death in Bangkok happened before the invitation could be acted on.

75. One is reminded in this regard of a Brazilian modernist group who called themselves "the cannibals" because they consumed everything from all cultures to feed their own creative process. See Jackson, Kenneth David, "Three Glad Races: Primitivism and Ethnicity in Brazilian Modernist Literature," *Modernism/modernity* 1, no. 2 (April 1994): 89–112.

76. Marco Pallis, *A Buddhist Spectrum: Contributions to Buddhist-Christian Dialogue* (repr., Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2003), 125–147. Although these essays are republished from the Traditionalist journal *Studies in Comparative Religion* (Oldmeadow, *Journeys East*, 140), the publisher gives no indication of their provenance.

77. The ethno-mystical rationales which argue that Westerners cannot benefit from the practice of Asian religions are to be distinguished from the psychosocial rationale behind Carl Jung's cautionary notes. Casual readings of Jung's cautions have often led to him to being simply lumped together with others whose thinking is more ethnically or racially motivated. A closer reading of Jung shows that he is concerned with issues of individual psychological orientation and the possibilities of misusing Asian religious practices to reinforce psychological dysfunctions. Specifically, such practices can be used to absolutize the common Western stance of heroic individualism, which is appropriate to late adolescence and early adulthood, creating the possibility of a person remaining "stuck" at that developmental stage.

78. Pallis, *Buddhist Spectrum*, 141–142.

79. *Ibid.*, 162.

80. *Ibid.*, 162–163.

81. Evola, *Doctrine*, 77.

82. This "Big Self/little self" strategy also appears in Aldous Huxley's *Perennial Philosophy*. While it is outside the scope of this essay to deal with the issues of *anātman*, we can simply say that untangling this interpretation is made more difficult by being half true. The first part, that Buddhism denies the self or essence any metaphysically absolute status, is correct; the second step, that Buddhism only does this to reveal the actual metaphysical absolute, is mistaken.

83. Pallis, *Buddhist Spectrum*, 163.

84. *Ibid.*, 163.

85. *Ibid.*, 164.

86. *Ibid.*, 173.

87. *Ibid.*, 173.

88. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 111.

89. *Ibid.*, 110–111.

90. *Ibid.*, 114. See also Oldmeadow, *Journeys East*, 369–370.

91. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 111.

92. For example, Huston Smith's recent publication on Buddhism—Huston

Smith and Philip Novak, *Buddhism: A Concise Introduction* (New York: HarperOne, 2004)—repeats without any significant updating the Buddhism section of his 1958 *Religions of Man*, ignoring five decades of scholarship.

93. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 112–113.

94. Richard Gombrich, “Eliade on Buddhism,” *Religious Studies* 10 (1974): 228.

95. Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, 2<sup>nd</sup> English ed. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), 167, cited in Gombrich, “Eliade on Buddhism,” 229.

96. Gombrich, “Eliade on Buddhism,” 229.

97. *Ibid.*, 229.

98. See Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 165–167. For a brief biography of H. Smith, see also Harry Oldmeadow, *Journeys East*, 58–62.

99. Huston Smith and Philip Novak, *Buddhism: A Concise Introduction* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003); Huston Smith, *Religions of Man* (New York: Harper, 1958).

100. See the important essays by Jonathan Z. Smith on this issue, most particularly “In Comparison a Magic Dwells” in Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), also reprinted in Kimberly C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray, eds., *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

101. Central to establishing the distinction between teaching religion (religious indoctrination) and teaching about religion is the United States Supreme Court case *Abington Township School District v. Schempp* (1963). See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abington\\_School\\_District\\_v.\\_Schempp](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abington_School_District_v._Schempp).

102. One way in which the goal of comparative religions used to be expressed is the understanding of the phenomenon of religion itself, in any form, in any society, in any historical period. This goal may be described as the global goal of comparative religions. This goal is itself hotly contested in the field, there being those for example who claim that there is no such thing as “religion in general,” only specific religions. Or, even more radically, there are those who claim that the very category of religion is itself a construct of Western societies, and therefore it is inappropriate to extend it to other societies. Clearly this is another instance in which the epistemological issues are closely related to metaphysical ones, and one in which the claim that “Buddhism is an instance of a more general category, i.e., religion,” entails certain consequences that need to be problematized.

103. Frithjof Schuon, *Treasures of Buddhism*, v.

104. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 169. Sedgwick goes on to point out that “There need be no dishonesty in this practice: we all present things in the way we see them, without feeling obliged to explain precisely how we have come to see them in that way.” Perhaps I am less kind than Sedgwick in this, as I see the Traditionalists actively engaging in Sartrean bad faith. It is, however, at least necessary for readers to be critical even of the assertions of simple truth.

105. One contemporary Traditionalist, Charles Upton, argues at some great length in attempting to distinguish Traditionalism from New Age religion (see *System of the Antichrist*). Yet from outside the rhetorical system of traditionalism, both are equally constructed by selection from various actual religions and the result of the secularization of society in the nineteenth century, which allowed for the acknowledgment of religions other than Christianity as having any interest other than as false religions needing to be overcome by missionary activity.

106. Hansen, “Introduction,” 1.

107. See in particular, José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (orig. pub. 1930; trans. 1932; repr., New York: W.W. Norton, 1964).

108. See Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, esp. chap. 5, “Fascism” (pp. 95–117); Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), esp. part 3, “Politics” (pp. 125–156); and Robert S. Ellwood, *The Politics of Myth: A Study of C.G. Jung, Mircea Eliade, and Joseph Campbell* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

109. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 98–109. Some contemporary apologists for Evola (see for example Hansen, “Introduction,” 1–104), have called attention to the fact that he was never a member of the Italian Fascist Party. This hardly negates, however, the active engagement he had with both Fascist and Nazi movements, the racist dimension of his esotericism, and his ongoing political commitments as evidenced in his post-war writings. While he may not have been a Fascist, narrowly understood as being committed to the ideological program of the party, his aristocratic orientation is part of a reactionary, anti-modernist opposition to the Enlightenment principles of humanism and democracy, fully in keeping with the Romantic notions of the heroic and aristocratic individual striving for self-fulfillment in opposition to stultifying values encouraged by “the masses,” and the “mob-rule” of modern democratic institutions.

By focusing on the issue of party membership, such apologia offer an apparently more precise understanding of the idea of fascism, a move appealing to the semi-intellectual. Similarly, in contemporary political discourse, the demand for precision about what “fascism” means seems often to serve

simply as a distraction and an obscuration of the point. Javier Marías, a Spanish author writing about the contemporary social situation in Spain, notes that “It isn’t easy anymore to define what fascist meant, it’s becoming an old-fashioned adjective and is often used incorrectly or, of course, imprecisely, although I tend to use it in a colloquial and doubtless analogical sense, and in that sense and usage I know exactly what it means and know that I’m using it properly.” Javier Marías, *Fever and Spear*, vol. 1 of *Your Face Tomorrow*, trans. Margaret Jull Costa (New York: New Directions, 2005), 56. Umberto Eco has in fact dealt with this issue of the amorphous quality of fascism, employing a kind of Wittgensteinian analysis of its characteristics as constituting a family resemblance. See Umberto Eco, “Ur-Fascism,” *New York Review of Books*, 22 June 1995.

110. That the issue of “reductionism” and the passions raised against it is a burning one is evident from June 2008 issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, no. 2, which features two opposing articles, together with responses and refutations on the issue of reductionism.

111. Although a full discussion of this issue would take us too far afield from the main topics of this essay, reflection on the political implications of the Traditionalist metanarrative of religion should be of consequence to contemporary engaged Buddhism. Adoption of the rhetoric that all religions share a core set of beliefs that lead to the same concern with contemporary issues may seem to be an empowering one. It may, however, come at the price of a restitutionist, conservative or fascist representation of Buddhism as one of many “ancient wisdom teachings” entailing a hierarchical, Neoplatonic metaphysics that leans toward an authoritarian social organization.

112. H. Smith has, for example, been quite active in promoting the religious rights of Native Americans, including the cultic use of peyote.

113. The argument for this singular and universal religious truth can be understood as starting from an unproblematic claim that there is only one way in which a statement can be true, but many by which it can be false. But “Truth” is then converted into its Neoplatonic function as identical with Being itself, and this Truth is then asserted to be singular in the same way that the truth of a statement is singular. Additionally then, if there is only one Truth, it must be the same Truth that all religions point toward. If they did not point toward that whatever-it-is, then they would not be pointing toward the Truth. Hopefully the metaphysical muddle created by this argument is obvious to the reader.

114. A very important exception to this qualification is when authors have simply ignored the ongoing scholarship, as is the case with Huston Smith’s *Buddhism*. See Payne, “How Not to Talk about Pure Land Buddhism.”

115. One example of this is that in his discussion of the ideas of karma and

rebirth dating from 1916 Coomaraswamy asserts that Buddhism “does not explain in what way a continuity of cause and effect is maintained between one life A and a subsequent life B, which are separated by the fact of physical death; the thing is taken for granted” (*Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism*, 109). He supports this claim with a reference to the work of Rhys-Davids, which is itself constrained by the latter’s exclusive focus on the early Pāli canon. Since 1916, however, we now know a great deal more about the idea of the *alayavijñāna* and its function as an explanatory device for just this issue. That a work shows its age, however, is no more than an ordinary function of the expansion of scholarship and is not, therefore, anything more than an ordinary mistake. What this does indicate, however, is the fragility of the Traditionalist claim to represent some kind of “timeless wisdom.”

116. For example, Harry Oldmeadow, a contemporary Traditionalist author, has done this in two recent collections of essays that he has edited—*Light from the East: Eastern Wisdom for the Modern West* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2007) and *The Betrayal of Tradition: Essays on the Spiritual Crisis of Modernity* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2005). In each of these collections, essays by Buddhist authors are placed in relation to explicitly Traditionalist works in such a fashion that they seem to present a single unified front. *Light from the East*: the Dalai Lama, John Paraskevopoulos, Anagarika Govinda, and Gary Snyder; *Betrayal of Tradition*: Robert Aitken and Anagarika Govinda.

117. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (1981; repr., London and New York: Routledge, 1983), 6.

118. Hans Blumenberg has given us one of the most nuanced examinations of these themes in his *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1983). Rather than a simplistic dualism between “tradition” and “modernity,” Blumenberg notes that:

We would not be able to accept the formulas of “secularization” as so much a matter of course if we did not find ourselves still within the horizon of the operation of the process: We are describing something that would not even exist for us if we were not still in a position to understand what had to precede it, what the hope of salvation, what the next world, transcendence, divine judgment, refraining from involvement in the world and falling under the influence of the world once meant—that is to understand the elements of that “unworldliness” that must after all be implied as a point of departure if we are to be able to speak of “secularization.” (p. 3)

119. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, trans. Oliver Davis (orig. French pub. *Causeurseries*, 1948; London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 111.