A PELICAN BOOK

Traditionalism

The Radical Project for Restoring Sacred Order

Mark Sedgwick

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Introductory

CHAPTER 1

Traditionalism and the Traditionalists

Traditionalism is today's least-known major philosophy, and my aim in this book is to make it and its radical project for restoring sacred order more widely known and better understood. It is not my aim to convert people to Traditionalism. This is partly because I am by training and trade a historian of ideas, and thus professionally neutral. It is also because the outcomes of the Traditionalist project are, as we will see in later chapters, mixed.

Traditionalism has been used to encourage respect for the environment, compose great music, and reduce hostility between followers of different religions. It has also been used to support very different causes, from the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States of America to what many would call fascism and racism, not to mention terrorism. Some have blamed a Russian Traditionalist, Aleksandr Dugin, for Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine. The Traditionalist philosophy, then, needs to be handled with care. It is not always a good thing for someone to become a Traditionalist. It would be good, however, if those who oppose fascism, racism, and terrorism could more easily recognize Traditionalism when they see it.

To be able to recognize Traditionalism and make sense

of its project, we need to understand the ideas on which it is built, and its somewhat specialized terminology. The 'tradition' in 'Traditionalism', for example, is not what is generally meant by the word, but rather a group of sacred teachings that are understood to have been handed down since time immemorial and are the basis for the proper order of things, a sacred order. These traditional teachings have something of the philosophical and something of the religious about them, so Traditionalism is both philosophical and religious, although some Traditionalists prefer the term 'metaphysical', which combines those two aspects.

The sacred order that once derived from tradition is often contrasted with modern disorder, and Traditionalism is anti-modern as well as metaphysical. This anti-modernism has important political implications, as liberalism and democracy are both modern, and anti-modernism is thus hardly compatible with liberal democracy, and may imply its rejection. Traditionalism is thus political as well as metaphysical. It is a radical political ideology as well as a religious philosophy. But if a single term is needed, 'philosophy' usually works best, with that word used in its oldest and widest sense, denoting not the contents of contemporary university courses but rather a coherent body of theory concerning fundamental questions of existence. The Traditionalist project is a philosophical or intellectual project, not an organized or institutional undertaking.

Traditionalists understand the traditional teachings that their philosophy is based on as ancient and timeless – and some of them really are very ancient. The way that they are understood and interpreted by Traditionalists, however, is much more recent. The Traditionalist philosophy that this

book examines originated in the 1920s and 1930s, and has since then been developed in various directions. Many philosophies that were important in the 1920s and 1930s have now vanished, but Traditionalism has not. It remains little known partly because it has never sought a mass audience, and partly because it can be difficult to follow. This book aims to make it (relatively) easy to understand.

Traditionalism

I myself first encountered Traditionalism during the 1990s, when I was living in Cairo and studying the history of Sufism. Sufism is a sort of lay monasticism within Islam. Just as Catholic and Orthodox Christians who are drawn to the spiritual life can join monastic orders, Sunni and Shia Muslims who are drawn to the spiritual life can join Sufi orders. One major difference is that Christian monasticism is a full-time, lifelong commitment, while Sufism is part-time, and need not be lifelong. Another difference is that some Sufi theology is further from mainstream Islam than most monastic theology is from mainstream Christianity. Mainstream Islamic theology is generally fairly down-to-earth, while Sufi theology stretches into realms of imagination beyond time and space.

In the 1990s, I was especially interested in understanding how Sufi orders change over time, and how they adapt as they spread from one part of the world to another. I collected oral histories and documents from the descendants of great Sufi shaykhs, as Sufi masters are called, in isolated villages in Sudan, travelling across the empty desert in the trucks that are the main form of transport in rural areas. I attended Sufi festivals in villages in Upper Egypt, and visited Sufis in towns and

villages across Malaysia, parts of Thailand, and Singapore. Finally, I ended up in Italy, where a charismatic gentleman called Abd al-Wahid Pallavicini, who had once worked in Singapore, now lived in a large house in Milan where his Sufi followers met. They were all well-educated young people who, like their shaykh, had Muslim first names and Italian surnames. During their meetings they often discussed questions that seemed to me to have more to do with Western philosophy than with the Sufism I had found in Sudan, Egypt, and Southeast Asia. They were, in fact, Traditionalists as well as Sufis.

It was Shaykh Pallavicini who first told me about Traditionalism and gave me a copy of a biography of Traditionalism's founder, René Guénon.[1] I read the biography, and realized that Shaykh Pallavicini was not the first Traditionalist I had met. Some American and European converts to Islam I knew in Cairo, it became clear, were also Traditionalists. After I got home from Milan, the more I looked, the more I found. I even found Traditionalists in Moscow, newly open to Western scholars after the collapse of the Soviet Union. When I first met Dugin, then still relatively unknown, he told me that he thought that Guénon was the undiscovered Marx.

After writing up my research on Sufism between Sudan and Malaysia, I started to work on Traditionalism. I published a book on the history of Traditionalism, *Against the Modern World*, in 2003.[2] In that book I traced the origins, development, and spread of the movement that Guénon had started, which turned out to be a far larger phenomenon than I or anyone else had suspected. One reason that nobody had heard of Traditionalism, I discovered, was that Traditionalist writers almost never identified themselves as such. Unlike

Marxists, they never tried to reach the masses, whom they considered no longer capable of understanding traditional teachings. Traditionalists sought to change the world and restore sacred order more quietly, in other ways.

In the conclusion to *Against the Modern World*, written in 2002, I suggested that the Traditionalist project had run its course, and was even in decline. That turned out to be quite wrong. In 2002, there were indeed fewer Traditionalists writing about Sufism, Islam, and art than there had been twenty or thirty years before, but there were already more politically active Traditionalists. I did not see this at the time, but the key reference was fast becoming not Guénon but Julius Evola, an Italian Traditionalist writer who had died in 1974 and had once advised Mussolini on race before moving to Germany as a guest of the Nazis.

Politically active Traditionalists who referred more to Evola than to Guénon were becoming more and more visible. In Russia, Dugin's 1997 book *The Foundations of Geopolitics: The Geopolitical Future of Russia*, discussed in a later chapter, became a bestseller.[3] When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, some turned to Dugin's views on geopolitics for an explanation, and, in August 2022, a car bomb probably aimed at Dugin instead killed his 29-year-old daughter, Darya, who was driving home from a literary festival entitled 'Tradition', where her father had spoken on 'Tradition and History'. It seems likely that the bomb was planted by Ukrainians.

After 1997, Dugin became the best-known politically active Traditionalist, but there were others. A Hungarian Traditionalist, Gábor Vona, founded a right-wing political party called Jobbik that did surprisingly well in the 2010

Hungarian elections, winning 47 seats in parliament and coming third overall. Something similar happened in Greece. And then, in early 2017, as the world was trying to come to terms with the unexpected election of Donald Trump, the *New York Times* reported that Trump's campaign manager and counsellor, Steve Bannon, had been citing Evola. As the *New York Times* contacted me to try to find out who on earth Evola was, I began to wonder whether Dugin had been right, and whether Guénon really was the new Marx. Traditionalism certainly seemed to be thriving as a political ideology.

The popularity of ideologies and philosophies always has a lot to do with circumstances. Traditionalism has been doing well in the new world created by the slow collapse of the centre-left and centre-right political parties that dominated Western politics after the end of the Second World War. The centre-left historically depended on the votes of industrial workers and the support of the union movement, and inevitably suffered from the shift in Western economies from industry to services. As industrial workers became fewer and fewer, and union membership declined, the centre-left was bound to be in trouble. The centre-right suffered from the decline of the centre-left, against which it had always defined itself, and from the rise of new issues that it had never really thought through, notably immigration, which worried more and more Western voters. The collapse of centre-left and centre-right parties made room for new parties like the Greens and, especially, for nationalist parties that would once have been beyond the pale, like Vona's Jobbik in Hungary and Trump's version of Republicanism in America. Even when they do not win power, such parties pull the larger parties

towards those of their policies that voters seem to like. The collapse of centre-left and centre-right parties made room for new ideologies as well as new parties. Traditionalism is one of these new, or newly important, ideologies.

Even if Guénon is the new Marx, Traditionalism will never be the new Marxism. It is not suitable as the basis for a mass ideology like communism, and the days of mass ideologies have passed, anyhow. Marxism, like Nazism, needed industrial workers, and industrial workers are now in short supply in advanced economies. Nor are politicians like Trump ever going to read Guénon's or Evola's books; they are far too difficult, and politicians need to be flexible and pragmatic. Politicians are well advised not to get too ideological, or even too consistent. But politicians need advisers and activists, who may be both ideological and consistent, and Bannon is not the only activist adviser to be inspired and motivated by Traditionalism. Shortly after Bannon's appreciation of Evola was revealed in the *New York Times*, for example, a parliamentary aide from the AfD, the German nationalist party that had come third in the federal German elections in 2017 (but fifth in 2021), approached me at a conference and said that he had read the German translation of my *Against the Modern World*. He lamented that most AfD activists knew nothing of Traditionalism. But even if most AfD activists know nothing of Traditionalism, some do, as my conversation with the aide made clear. So do activists in less famous parties and in groups that have never won any parliamentary seats at all, but still matter in other ways. This is why those who support liberalism and oppose nationalism need to be able to recognize Traditionalism and its project when they see it.

This book

Many introductions to Traditionalism have been published over the years, but all of them have been written by Traditionalists aiming to recruit people to their cause. Some readers of these books have become Sufis, and some have joined the far right, but most stopped reading after a few pages, bemused by how bizarre some Traditionalist ideas can seem. This book is different from those other introductions in two ways. Firstly, as I have already said, it does not seek to recruit new Traditionalists, but rather to explain Traditionalism and its project as neutrally and as comprehensibly as possible. Secondly, it introduces Traditionalist ideas not as timeless wisdom, which is how Traditionalists tend to see and present them, but as contributions to ongoing intellectual debates. Almost nothing about Traditionalism is entirely new. Most elements of the Traditionalist philosophy connect to discussions with which readers will already be familiar. What is new and powerful about Traditionalism is what these different ideas and elements all add up to.

This book will examine Traditionalism in four parts. First come its foundations, the ideas and perspectives that are fundamental for all varieties of Traditionalism, for Sufis and presidential campaign managers alike. Most fundamental of these is perennialism, the idea that beneath all the different forms of tradition, from Catholicism to Buddhism, there lies one single, timeless and esoteric sacred tradition – 'the' tradition. This is the basis of sacred order. The second fundamental idea is a view of history that replaces the general assumption that things get better over time with the conviction

that things are actually getting worse, giving rise to the Traditionalist critique of modernity, seen as the opposite of sacred order. The final foundation of Traditionalism is its perspective on how and when thought can change society.

We then look at the core projects of Traditionalism in three central areas of human life: self-realization, religion, and politics. These projects have interested all Traditionalists, and the applications of Traditionalism to them are at the core of Traditionalism's significance today. Different Traditionalists have understood self-realization in different ways, but all have seen it as the fulfilment of one's true nature through some form of consciousness of the transcendent. Non-Traditionalist understandings of self-realization, in contrast, often omit the sacred. Traditionalist understandings of self-realization and of religion give us the Traditionalist Sufi project, and Traditionalist understandings of self-realization and of politics give us the Traditionalist political project. There could also have been a chapter on symbolism, as nearly all Traditionalists have also been interested in the interpretation and use of non-verbal, usually visual, expressions of traditional teachings. Traditionalist understandings of symbolism, however, have not had any major impact, and so are of limited interest to non-Traditionalists.

Traditionalism has also been applied beyond these central areas. Traditionalist thought has been applied fruitfully to four further areas: art, gender, nature, and interfaith dialogue. These further projects are discussed in the book's third part, taken in chronological order. There are Traditionalist understandings of what art is and should be, and also Traditionalist

artists. Similarly, there are Traditionalist understandings of gender, though these have never really been put into practice. Traditionalist understandings of nature as sacred and in need of protection have contributed to today's environmental movement. Finally, Traditionalist understandings of religion have been used as a basis for interfaith dialogue.

The book's final part contains only one chapter, and looks at today's radical right, and at what some call 'post-Traditionalism'.

First of all, however, this chapter will introduce the major thinkers who developed the foundations of the Traditionalist philosophy. Their names will come up time and time again in later chapters, so it is good to know who they were.

The Traditionalists

The first of the three major thinkers who developed the foundations of the Traditionalist philosophy was René Guénon, a French Orientalist and philosopher. Traditionalism might, in fact, almost be called 'Guénonism', rather as communism is often called 'Marxism'. It was Guénon whose works began the development of Traditionalist thought during the 1910s and 1920s and continued that development until his death in 1951, and it was he who established Traditionalism's most important foundations and who was responsible for Traditionalist philosophy's early application. The application of Traditionalism to self-realization is primarily his work. Then comes Julius Evola, an Italian painter and journalist who developed the political project of Traditionalism on bases laid by Guénon, first under Fascism and then during the immediate post-war period. The third name that will be encountered very often is that of Frithjof Schuon, a Swiss Sufi who was younger than

Guénon and Evola, and who was responsible for Traditionalism's most important religious applications.

Today, some Traditionalists read both Evola and Guénon and focus on politics, while some read both Schuon and Guénon, or just Guénon, and focus on religion and self-realization. Those who do not read Evola commonly regard him with the horror with which fascists are generally regarded in the post-war world. 'Schuon and Guénon' or 'Guénon only' versus 'Evola and Guénon' is the most important division in the contemporary Traditionalist movement.

RENÉ GUÉNON

All three of these foundational Traditionalist thinkers led interesting lives. Guénon's was the quietest. He was born in 1886 to a respectable middle-class family in provincial France and moved to Paris as a student. He became involved in the occultist circles that flourished there during the Belle Époque, and in 1909, at the age of 23, founded a small and short-lived journal, *La Gnose* (Gnosis), subtitled 'A Monthly Review Dedicated to the Study of the Esoteric Sciences'. It ceased publication in 1911, but not before it had published the articles from which the Traditionalist philosophy would later develop. Some were written by Guénon, and some were written by Abdul-Hadi, a Sufi who had made a deep study of the philosophical and theological works of the leading mystical theorist of Islam, Muhyi al-Din Ibn Arabi, while living in Cairo. Abdul-Hadi was not an Egyptian, but a Parisian painter and art critic of Swedish origin, also known as Ivan Aguéli. He died in 1917, before the foundations of Traditionalism were fully developed. He was more a precursor of Traditionalism than an actual Traditionalist.

After the First World War, Guénon moved on from those occultist circles to Catholic ones. He studied philosophy and Hinduism at the University of the Sorbonne and then independently. His perspectives were incompatible with those of the Orientalist scholars of his day, as he was more interested in recovering and restoring sacred order than in philological analysis or intellectual history. His early attempts at an academic career thus failed. He supported himself with a variety of teaching jobs while writing the books that later became the main Traditionalist canon, and also writing articles for a longer-lasting journal, *Études traditionnelles* (Traditional Studies), that a collaborator of his edited. Twelve books were published in French during the 1920s and early 1930s. Some were translated into English and other languages, mostly in the 1940s and 1950s. Since 2000, all have been translated.

In 1930, Guénon moved to Cairo, where he lived the rest of his life, supported by gifts from admirers. This move was the most dramatic event in what was otherwise a quiet life. It involved a change not just of residence, but also of religion – Guénon in Cairo was a Muslim and a Sufi – and of nationality. When it became clear that he was never going to return to France, Guénon, who had married an Egyptian woman with whom he had had several children, took Egyptian nationality so that his children could be citizens of the country in which they had been born. (Egyptian nationality then passed solely through the father, not the mother.)

Guénon's Cairo period was not an important one for his writing, with only one major new book being published, in 1945. Instead, he focused on *Études traditionnelles*, on compiling and editing collections of his earlier articles, and on

conducting an extensive correspondence with readers around the world. His following was a loose network rather than a formal group, but Guénon himself thought it was an important project and that it might lead to intellectual, social, and political changes that would strengthen tradition against anti-traditional modernity.

Guénon died in Cairo in 1951. His importance lies, above all, in his writings, which are discussed in the remainder of this book, as are their applications and implications. The network that he had established did not survive his death.

JULIUS EVOLA

Julius Evola's life was more dramatic than Guénon's. He was born in Rome in 1898 and christened Giulio. He served in the Italian army during the First World War. He then became an avant-garde painter, and the somewhat prosaic name Giulio was replaced by its more classical version, Julius. It was around this period that the title of 'Baron' somehow became attached to his name. Evola's Dadaist paintings are good, if not first rate. His first two books, published in the 1920s, were on art. He was also interested in philosophy, which he studied privately, and he published four books in the late 1920s that dealt with philosophical topics. Like many other painters of the time, he was involved in the occultist milieu, and it was in this milieu that he encountered the work of Guénon.

Evola was an early supporter of the Fascist leader Benito Mussolini, as were some others in Italian artistic and occultist milieus, and after Mussolini came to power he worked as a journalist on a Fascist newspaper, while writing eleven Traditionalist books, mostly on political topics; these later

became a canon in their own right. The first, *Pagan Imperialism*, was published in 1928.[4] In 1936, Evola started writing on race, and these writings attracted Mussolini's attention. They also interested some Nazis, and German translations of Evola's major works were published in the 1930s and 1940s. Evola was never a major figure in the Fascist regime, however, and was at first kept at arm's length by the Nazis. His views were too unusual and too controversial.

After the fall of Mussolini, Evola took refuge in the German Reich, where he was briefly involved in high politics and attempts to restore Fascism in Italy, once even visiting the Wolf's Lair, Hitler's headquarters in Rastenburg, East Prussia (now Kętrzyn, Poland). He spent the last period of the war studying and writing in Vienna, where he was badly injured in an air raid in 1945. After the defeat of Germany, confined to a wheelchair by his injuries, he returned to Italy, and lived the rest of his life in a small flat in Rome, writing books and articles that, together with some translations and occasional donations, allowed him to live simply but comfortably. Seven books published between 1949 and 1963 form a second Evolian canon. During this period, Evola was arrested and tried for attempting to re-establish Fascism, but was acquitted. This was probably the right verdict, as by then what Evola wanted to establish was very different from Mussolini's Fascism. He was turning instead to heroic political action as a means to self-realization. After publishing five books of lesser importance in the later 1960s and early 1970s, he died in 1974.

Evola never led any group (at least after his early occultist days), and none of his multiple political initiatives ever

succeeded, so his significance today derives purely from his writings. These writings were important in three very different periods. First, they played a very minor part in the development of Italian Fascist race laws and acquired a small readership in Nazi Germany. Second, rather different writings inspired post-war Italian neofascism, which was an important political force in the 1970s, involved in both parliamentary and extra-parliamentary politics, including terrorism. There was some interest in Evola outside Italy in this period, but not much. Third, starting in the 1990s, Evola's books began to be translated into more and more languages, and his readership grew and grew, until he became one of the key intellectual references of the radical right, the position he occupies today.

FRITHJOF SCHUON

Frithjof Schuon was born in Switzerland in 1907 to a German musician father and a French mother. He grew up in Switzerland and then, after the death of his father when he was thirteen, in France. He worked in France as a textile designer, reading Guénon, whose works inspired him to convert to Islam and visit Algeria in search of a Sufi shaykh. He joined the Alawiyya, a major Algerian Sufi order, in 1932, and then established a branch of the Alawiyya in Switzerland, together with some Swiss friends who were also readers of Guénon.

During the Second World War, Schuon moved from occupied France back to neutral Switzerland and devoted himself to leading his Sufi order and to writing, supported financially by his followers. His first full-length book, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, was his major work, published in French in 1948.[5] Five more books, all in French, followed during the

1950s, and a further six during the 1960s and 1970s. These were generally translated into English fairly soon after their publication, and in some cases into other languages. During these years, membership of his Sufi order, which became independent of the Algerian Alawiyya, grew, mostly among intellectuals and academics in Europe, the Americas, and elsewhere. The order was renamed the Maryamiyya in honour of the Virgin Mary, known as Maryam in Arabic, following a series of visions in which Schuon saw the Virgin.

In 1980, at the age of 73, Schuon moved from Switzerland to America, where he had many followers, and where he had been spending time since becoming interested in Native American religion during the 1950s. Schuon and some of his followers began attending Native American rites as sympathetic observers, as well as practising Sufi and Islamic rituals. Several more books were published with the help of his followers during the 1980s and 1990s. He died in Indiana in 1998.

Schuon's importance lies not only in his own writings but also in his Sufi order and in the writings of other members of that order. His own books were never bestsellers, but the total sales of all the books written by all the members of his order were significant. These books exercised only a limited influence on the general public but had a real impact on scholars and intellectuals studying Islam, religious studies, art, and some other subjects. The peak of their influence was between the 1970s and the 1990s.

These, then, are the major thinkers who developed the foundations of the Traditionalist philosophy: a French scholar who led a retired life in Paris and then Cairo, an Italian

activist who played a small part on the margins of great and terrible events, and a Swiss religious leader who saw the Virgin Mary in visions. There are others, who further developed and applied Traditionalism, like, for example, Dugin. They will be introduced in later chapters.

Conclusion

Traditionalism is a radical project for restoring sacred order. It finds that order in metaphysical tradition, and sees modernity as its opposite. It is a metaphysical religious philosophy that has inspired Sufis, and a radical political ideology that has expanded into the gap created by the decline of the centre-left and the centre-right. It is ultimately based on the foundations laid between the 1910s and 1950s by Guénon, Evola, and Schuon: perennialism; a view of history in which things are seen to be getting worse not better; a critique of modernity; and certain perspectives on how thought can change society. After surveying historical perennialism, we will proceed to look at these foundations, and then at their application to Traditionalism's various projects.

CHAPTER 2

Historical Perennialism

Traditionalists see tradition and myth as a body of understandings, handed down through the ages, that is the key to making sense of the sacred order, and of the modern disorder that has replaced it. It is also fundamental that one single, timeless tradition is understood to underlie all the different forms of tradition, myth, and religion that exist and have existed. Belief in such a single, timeless tradition is known as 'perennialism', from the adjective 'perennial', meaning everlasting or timeless. Perennialism is so central to Traditionalism that some Traditionalists refer to themselves as 'perennialists'. But, while all Traditionalists are perennialists, not all perennialists are Traditionalists. There are also non-Traditionalist perennialists who do not share Traditionalism's other fundamental ideas, and perennialism has a long history in Western thought.

Traditionalist perennialism builds on a discussion that goes back to the Renaissance. That discussion is now mostly forgotten, but it was once important, and survives in certain contemporary academic debates. This chapter therefore looks at the history of perennialism and of two related concepts, tradition and myth. In line with my approach elsewhere in the book, it seeks to introduce ongoing intellectual

debates rather than to provide a comprehensive account of them. Certain non-Traditionalist philosophers and thinkers will be referred to from time to time, but not all non-Traditionalists who contributed to every debate will be mentioned. The following chapter will then move on to the Traditionalist understanding of perennialism.

Tradition

Tradition is an important part of human culture. For progressives, certain traditions may be an obstacle to reform, but even progressives usually follow family traditions when it comes to birthdays and holidays. Festivals like Christmas and Thanksgiving are built out of tradition quite as much as they are built out of community. For conservatives, it is important to maintain traditions, which may offer protection against hasty or unwise reform. Conservatives who have lost a fight against reform may still attempt to recover particular traditions, and the label 'traditionalist' is thus often applied to those who are attempting to defend what are, actually, already lost causes. Traditionalist Catholics, for example, reject the liberalizing reforms introduced into doctrine and liturgy by the Second Vatican Council of 1962–5. They have become more and more marginal over the decades. This more general sense of the word 'tradition' is quite distinct from the Traditionalism that this book is discussing.

A tradition is, literally, something which is handed down. The English word is a form of the Latin *traditio*, which is derived from the verb *tradere*, which means to hand over or hand down. One of the traditions which may be handed down is a way of doing things, from conducting elections to

celebrating Christmas or Thanksgiving. Another thing that may be handed down is a teaching, and this is the primary meaning of 'tradition' for the Traditionalist philosophy: a teaching that has been handed down since time immemorial.

A historian might distinguish three overlapping categories of this sort of teaching. The oldest teachings that are handed down take the form of myth, the stories which the earliest human cultures developed that explain creation and account for the invisible forces thought to be behind events, often identified as spirits or gods. Then there is philosophy, initially developed when some thinkers in Ancient Greece moved beyond myth and sought to understand the structures of creation and human consciousness. Finally, there is religion. For those living at the western end of the Eurasian landmass and in the Americas, the most historically important religion is Judaism, which established the monotheistic model that is sometimes called 'Abrahamic' and that, in its Christian and then its Islamic versions, became dominant first around the Mediterranean, then across northern Eurasia, and finally also in Africa and the Americas.

Myth, philosophy, and religion are all in some sense tradition, as they are all handed down, though philosophy also develops over time in a way that religion and myth do not. All three also overlap, as religion contains myth, and theology contains philosophy. All three forms of tradition have lost much of their authority in the West since the Enlightenment, which stressed reason against myth and religion, drew philosophy away from religion, and led ultimately to the triumph of the scientific method. With the Enlightenment, reason and science replaced myth and religion as the

standard bases of a reliable explanation of reality, making space for non-sacred conceptions of 'natural' order, and secularized philosophy receded from the centre of the public sphere. Neither myth nor religion vanished, however, and we will now see what happened to them.

Myth

The triumph of Enlightenment rationalism was never complete. The poets of the Romantic movement were quick to challenge a purely material understanding of existence, as the great British philosopher Isaiah Berlin showed in 1979 in a famous essay, 'The Counter-Enlightenment'.[1] Philosophers and artists like William Blake, Johann Gottfried Herder, and Friedrich Schiller objected, Berlin thought, to 'cold political dehumanization, to the straitjacket of lifeless . . . rules in which the living body of [the] passionate and poetical . . . is to be held fast'.[2] For these early agents of the Counter-Enlightenment, the great Enlightenment thinkers 'tell us that men seek only to obtain pleasure and avoid pain, but this is absurd. Men seek to live, create, love, hate, eat, drink, worship, sacrifice, understand, and they seek this because they cannot help it. Life is action.'[3] Berlin never looked at Traditionalism, but if he had, he would certainly have placed it in the Counter-Enlightenment.

During the nineteenth century, myth took on new significance for those who were interested in the passionate and poetical, in life as action. Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm collected and published Germanic legends and tales to general acclaim,[4] John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley drew on Greek myth for the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' and *Prometheus*

Unbound, respectively, and Richard Wagner drew on Norse myth for his *Ring* cycle. Myth was of great importance for the nineteenth-century Romantic imagination.

Myth was also studied in the universities, notably at Cambridge University by James Frazer, whose study of 'primitive superstition', first published in 1890 as *The Golden Bough*, had grown to twelve volumes by 1915. Frazer traced similarities between different myths from different civilizations, finding a universal common ground in which the most prominent features were magic, the sacrifice of a divine king, and the mirroring of the rhythms of the agricultural year – the death and resurrection of vegetation. He saw his work as a contribution to intellectual and institutional history, and also as something that would help 'to follow the long march, the slow and toilsome ascent, of humanity from savagery to civilisation'. The study of myth had practical value for Frazer, as it might 'expedite progress if it lays bare certain weak spots in the foundations on which modern society is built – if it shews that much which we are wont to regard as solid rests on the sands of superstition rather than on the rock of nature'.[5] In understanding progress in terms of the triumph of 'the rock of nature' over 'the sands of superstition', and in taking positions that were generally hostile to religion, which he saw as a development of magic, Frazer was placing himself squarely within the Enlightenment project. His emphasis on the sacrifice of the divine king as a central feature of universal myth in fact stood on shaky foundations and was soon forgotten, but the idea of myth as a treasury of meaning persisted.

Myth was also used by Sigmund Freud, in whose hands it formed part of an argument against the exclusive dominance

of reason in human affairs, if not an attack on the Enlightenment as such. Freud's reading of the myth of Oedipus was central to his psychoanalytical theory. Myth was understood slightly differently by Freud's one-time Swiss pupil Carl Gustav Jung, who proposed that just as instincts intervened in human consciousness, so did the 'primordial images' that he called 'archetypes'. These inhabited the collective unconscious. He thought that these images could be found most easily in the myths of 'primitive peoples', where he found ideas 'of magic power or magic substance, of spirits and their behaviour, of demons and gods and their legends'[6] that were very similar across cultures. Jung agreed with Frazer that a universal common ground could be found in primordial myths, and that these provided a key to understanding modern society: 'We see the perfection of those images, and at the same time their envelopment by rational forms, in the great religions of the world,' Jung concluded.[7]

The idea of myth as a source of truth, then, survived the Enlightenment rather better than one might have thought. There was disagreement about quite what sort of truth myth contained – the living body of the passionate and poetical for the Romantics, the shaky foundations of modern society for Frazer, the functioning of the unconscious for Freud, or archetypical ideas and images for Jung. But all agreed that myth mattered. The Traditionalists, as we will see, thought the same.

Religion

Religion, or at least the Christian Churches, attempted to fight back against Enlightenment rationalism. Even so, rationalism and the discoveries of natural science helped push the

Churches in Europe and much of America down a long road from dominance to marginality. It was not just rationalism and natural science that pushed Christianity down this road, however. Another issue was the problem of religious variety. This issue is especially important for Traditionalism.

One classic understanding of the problem of religious variety was advanced in 1979 by the American sociologist Peter Berger. When all that anyone knew was Christian doctrine, thought Berger, that doctrine was automatically believable. Nothing else was plausible. Once other, contradictory doctrines became known, however, as they did in Europe from the seventeenth century onwards, Christianity lost its apparent monopoly of truth, and its plausibility suffered. This resulted in what Berger called the 'heretical imperative', a play on words, as 'heretical' is derived from the Greek *hairesis*, a choice. Faced with religious variety, people had to choose, and what they chose, implied Berger, was something other than the old orthodoxy: a sort of heresy. He modified these views later, but his 1979 understanding remains classic.

Perennialism

In fact, the pre-modern human religious landscape was never quite as flat as Berger thought in 1979. One of the first Europeans to confront the problem of religious variety was a Catholic priest in fifteenth-century Florence, Marsilio Ficino. The development of perennialism starts with Ficino and ends with Aldous Huxley, the English novelist best known for his dystopian *Brave New World*, who published *The Perennial Philosophy* in 1945 – and, of course, with the Traditionalists.

RENAISSANCE PERENNIALISTS

Unusually for his time, Ficino learned Ancient Greek, and read and translated rare pre-Christian manuscripts, notably Greek texts by Plato, the late-antique philosopher Plotinus, and Hermes Trismegistus, then also considered a great philosopher, and now known to have been a mythical figure to whom the authorship of a variety of texts was assigned. Ficino's problem was that, as a Catholic priest, he necessarily regarded the Christian revelation as the ultimate and authoritative source of truth, but the pre-Christian texts he was reading and translating seemed to him also to be repositories of truth. What they were saying appeared to fit neatly enough with what the Christian revelation was saying. His solution to this problem, which others later developed further, and which Traditionalism still relies on, was to propose that these pre-Christian philosophers were not pagans but ancient theologians (*prisci theologi*) whose teaching was compatible with Christian teachings. This argument was assisted by giving the ancient theologians a Jewish origin, as the Hebrew Bible was already understood to be compatible with Christian teachings (hence its adoption into Christian doctrine as the Old Testament). Ficino thus proposed a transmission of ancient theology from Moses and Zoroaster, to Hermes Trismegistus, Orpheus, Iamblichus (a follower of Plotinus), Pythagoras, and finally Plato. This chain of transmission makes no historical sense in terms of current knowledge, but seemed plausible in the fifteenth century.

Ficino's solution was further developed by the Renaissance philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and then

by the sixteenth-century Italian scholar Agostino Steuco, who named the teachings of Ficino's ancient theologians the 'perennial philosophy' (*philosophia perennis*), perennial because they had endured over the years and were in a sense timeless. For Steuco, the word 'philosophy' had a somewhat different meaning from that which it has today. Today, philosophy is generally placed by most non-philosophers in opposition to religion, as the repository of reason, not of revelation. In Steuco's time, as in the ancient world, philosophy was a description of truth, just as was religion, and might well derive ultimately from revelation. Philosophy was not then seen as being in opposition to religion, a position that some philosophers still take today.

Steuco expanded Ficino's chain of transmission, starting with Noah, and proceeding to the Chaldeans (Zoroaster), the Jews (Moses), the Egyptians (Hermes Trismegistus), and then the Greeks. Other, later perennialists embellished their chains of transmission even further, sometimes starting with Adam and Abraham, and occasionally introducing the Druids and the Knights Templar. These chains of transmission were, however, a weak part of early perennialist theory, and soon fell victim to advances in historical knowledge. One immediate problem was that the Ancient Egyptian civilization clearly preceded Moses, even in the biblical account, so one could hardly base Egyptian wisdom on a supposed transmission from the Jews.

EARLY MODERN PERENNIALISM

The ahistoricity of these chains of transmission was not the only problem confronting early perennialism, however. A second problem was that, even if some writings of

the ancients were compatible with Christian understanding, others were clearly not. It was obvious that the Ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans had, in their worship, all been polytheists. The solution to this second problem, which Traditionalism also still relies on, was found by the seventeenth-century Cambridge University theologian Ralph Cudworth, who explained away the apparent polytheism of the Ancient Egyptians in terms of the distinction between a secret theology, 'arcane and recondite . . . – that was concealed from the vulgar' and was monotheistic, and a 'vulgar and fabulous theology' that was not concealed and was polytheistic. Cudworth compared this distinction to the 'exoterics' and 'acroamatics' of Aristotle – the exoterics being his public teaching, and the acroamatics (from the Greek *akroaomai*, 'to listen') being his supposed secret and oral teachings.[8] This argument was repeated a century later by the Bishop of Gloucester, William Warburton, who replaced the little-used term 'acroamatic' with the easier term 'esoteric'. This pairing of exoteric and esoteric was an old one, going back to the Ancient Greeks, who had distinguished between the *exoterikos* (external) and the *esoterikos* (internal), and had also speculated about the esoteric teachings of the Ancient Egyptians.

With Cudworth and Bishop Warburton, then, the perennial becomes esoteric and what is taught to the vulgar becomes exoteric. This satisfied Cudworth and Warburton, but those who were losing faith in Christian doctrine as the Enlightenment progressed were less accepting of this identification of the esoteric with the teachings of Christianity. Among those who had lost faith in Christian doctrine was John Toland, a controversial Irish writer who had proposed in 1720 the existence of

> a two-fold doctrine: the one *popular*, accommodated to the prejudices of the vulgar, and to the received customs or religions; the other *philosophical*, conformable to the nature of things, and consequently to truth, which . . . they [ancient philosophers] communicated only to friends of known probity, prudence, and capacity. These they generally called the *exoteric* and *esoteric*, or the *external* and *internal doctrines*.[9]

Toland then went on to explain exoteric doctrine as serving the interests of the powerful, a variation on the well-established view, also expressed by Bishop Warburton, that exoteric religion served the cause of public order. Toland identified the esoteric philosophy not with Christianity but with Deism, a then-popular response to the decline of Christianity that rejected the details of Christian theology, including sometimes even the idea that Jesus was divine, and focused instead on a set of clear and reasonable propositions that they held to be universally true.

Thus, the idea of an esoteric perennial philosophy that, as we will see, is so important for Traditionalism, started in fifteenth-century Florence with Ficino, was developed over the following centuries by scholars in Italy and England, and reached a mature form with Toland, who identified the perennial philosophy with Deism and exoteric religion with the self-interest of the powerful.

UNIVERSALIST AND THEOSOPHICAL PERENNIALISM

A second response to the decline of Christianity and the problem of religious variety was universalism. This resembles

perennialism, but differs in one important respect. Perennialism proposes one single truth found in different places, while universalism finds multiple truths of comparable value, or even regards all religious claims as equally true. One of the first great universalist events was the World's Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago in 1893, a massive public event during which representatives of America's various Christian Churches were joined by representatives of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. In their speeches, these representatives spoke in favour of religious universalism, and presented their own religions in universalist terms. Swami Vivekananda, representing Hinduism, quoted from a Hindu hymn:

> As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths which men take, through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to thee.[10]

Vivekananda did not mention the previous lines of the 'Hymn About the Greatness of Shiva' that he was quoting, which make clear that the 'different streams' in question are those of three specific *astika* schools of Veda Hinduism: Samkhya, the School of Shiva, and the Vaisheshika. Nobody else spotted this at the time, and Vivekananda's universalism was widely welcomed.

In practice, universalism is usually restricted or qualified in some way. No 'Indians', as Native Americans were then still called, were invited to the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago. When, almost a century later, Pope John Paul II gathered the religions of the world to pray for peace