

Who Speaks for the East?¹

by

Rama P. Coomaraswamy

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Anyone attempting to discuss “cross-cultural” relations between East and West must be prepared to answer the fundamental questions as to just what is meant by “culture” and just what is envisioned by such terms as “East” and “West.” I as a product of both the East and the West would like to share a few thoughts on this topic.

Now, the term “culture” is extremely difficult to define. It can in no sense be synonymous with “education” as it is usually understood for we have all met people with the highest academic qualifications that we would agree are lacking in it. Conversely, an artist or a musician who has had no formal education can clearly be “cultured.” Nor can the term be correlated with material success any more than it can be with the extremes of poverty. Few in recent times have attempted to come to terms with the meaning of this concept, and I should like to take as one authority an individual whom I think we would all accept as being “cultured”: T. S. Eliot.

The first important assertion that Eliot makes in his book *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* is that “no culture has appeared or developed except together with a religion.” Indeed, he goes on to ask “whether what we call culture, and what we call the religion of a people are not different aspects of the same thing: the culture being (so to speak), the incarnation of the religion of a people.” However much some of us in the West may like to pride ourselves on being “a-religious” or even “irreligious,” I think we would all agree that until very recent times what was understood by Eastern culture would fall within the definitions that Eliot gives. Thus in common parlance we tend to speak of Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, or American Indian culture regardless of any local accidental variants that are of ethnic or national origin. As if to prove the point, let us note that prior to the present century, it is virtually impossible to point to a work of art from the East that is without religious significance.

T. S. Eliot makes still further comment. For one, he states that culture is never the possession of a small elite, but rather the expression of a whole people, and for another that culture “is not merely the sum of several activities, but a *way of life*,” which latter phrase he italicizes. Here again, we find in the traditional East a valid manifestation of his criteria. Anyone

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who has had the privilege of living in the more remote—and “less spoiled” parts of India cannot but be struck by the fact that the *way of life* of the people—at all levels of society—is intrinsically an expression of both the culture and the religion.

Now, I have said nothing about contemporary Western culture, for apart from the fact that almost no one would call it “Christian,” it is much more difficult to define. None of us would dispute the material advantages and scientific advances that prevail in the West, but few would argue that these characterize its culture. Certainly, no one would point to the great industrial complexes, the skyscrapers, and the large banking enterprises as examples of Western culture any more than one can say that the waterfront hotels on Hawaii are representative of Hawaiian culture. In so far as the West is “a-religious” and has departed from its Judeo-Christian roots—a situation that is incidentally of very recent origin—other criteria than those that Eliot postulates must be used. There are those who see culture as synonymous with the beguiling pastime of going to the theatre, to concerts, and to museums. What often passes for “cultured” in the West is an intimate knowledge and appreciation of what is called “the fine arts.” Yet in all this, there is nothing that can be called “religious”—nor is it the “possession” of more than a small and rather well-to-do group of individuals. Certainly, it is not in any sense a *way of life*.

Yet, despite this, what passes for modern culture can be said to “incarnate” what the greater majority of contemporary men have placed their “faith” in. There are in the West certain fundamental concepts that have been so taken for granted as to be almost axiomatic. Thus modern man and his “culture” reflect his belief in the concept of “progress,” in the “evolving” of man through some sort of “dynamic process” into a continuously better state of existence; a belief that he has achieved the highest form of “civilization” yet discovered, and if there are still a few flaws to be found, we have but to wait a while, for modern science will bring about that perfect millennium that is just around the corner. He believes in no absolute truths, and as the poet Auden says somewhere, the very democratic system of modern government is based on the premise that all truth is relative—that one man’s opinion is as good as another’s. Above all, it is a belief that it is in this world that man finds his meaning and his purpose; that morality is necessitated by what is called “social contract”; that virtue is “enlightened self-interest” and that the most altruistic expression of all this is the euphemism of “serving mankind.” I grant that this viewpoint is not espoused by all, but the greater majority of contemporary men hold to such attitudes with a “fideism” that borders on the “superstitious.”

Now, if we turn our attention to the traditional world, such a humanistic and liberal doctrinal exposition would be anathema. However much we might disagree with the premises of Eastern culture, we would have to admit that it never envisioned this world as anything more than a preparation for the next. There is in Lahore a bridge dating back to Mogul times over which can be read the following inscription:

Shaykh Isa (Jesus) said, “This world is a bridge, pass over quickly and build no house upon it.”

Traditional Eastern culture is not anthropocentric, but theocentric, and holds that man is a metaphysical or spiritual being—or if not, then just an animal. It seeks not the psychological goal of “ego-satisfaction” but rather teaches that man’s ego is nothing but an ephemeral chimera; he equates egoity with pride (a deadly sin!) and holds with Saint Paul that man must “hate” this aspect of soul if he is to know God. If contemporary man proclaims that all truth is relative, traditional man in both East and West believes in an absolute Truth revealed to him by God or a Divine Messenger, and preserved for him in both his Scriptures and his Traditions. This being so, he sees morality as pre-dispositive to the spiritual life, virtue as the “normal” expression of man’s true nature, and the unfolding of time, not as a progressive evolving towards some earthly millennium or “point Omega,” but rather as a continuous departure from the “center” as a result of which mankind becomes more and more degraded as he increasingly loses sight of the spiritual lights that are his “birthright.” He seeks to serve, not man *qua* man, but God, and serves his neighbor because he takes literally the words of Lord Buddha:

He who nurses the sick, nurses me.

We are living, as he sees it, in the end of the *Kali Yuga* or *dark age*, a time when the Truth is obscured and when “scoffers” prevail, “walking after their own lusts.” Faith for him is an aristocratic virtue, and as an old gloss of Plato states, “unbelief is for the mob.” Above all, he believes in sanctity, and hence it follows that sainthood is his highest aspiration. I could best summarize this attitude by quoting a contemporary American Indian medicine man:

We wish to walk in the footsteps of our fathers, to be blessed by the same rites he performed, and to live in a sacred manner.

I have been careful throughout to characterize contemporary Western values as “modern” and Eastern values as “traditional.” In doing so, I have painted a picture of two irreconcilable worlds. One must not forget that there was once a time when the Western world also adhered to the same traditional system of values. The contrast between traditional Christian beliefs and those of modern man are just as stark and are well summarized in the words of the American Indian chief Ohiyesa who said:

It is my personal belief, after thirty-five years’ experience of it, that there is no such thing as “Christian civilization.” I believe that Christianity and modern civilization are opposed and irreconcilable, and that the spirit of Christianity and of our ancient religion is essentially the same.

Unfortunately, modern Western values have become increasingly prevalent in the East. As evidence of this I would point out that it is most unusual to find an English speaking Oriental who seriously holds to any of the above-noted traditional convictions. Admittedly he might defend the artistic achievements of his culture, or at least some of them. Yet typically he would have nothing but contempt for his relatives who still persisted in following the rules of caste, who still made daily visits to the temple, who still painted their bodies with ritual marks, and

who persisted in reciting their “beads” or sacred texts with belief. He would almost certainly describe them as “backward” and “uneducated”—not blessed with the advantages of “progress”—and accuse them of “not being in step with the times.”

Inevitably, in an article of this sort, one is forced to oversimplify. Clearly there is a spectrum between those who embrace the Traditional or “orthodox” viewpoint, and those who proclaim themselves, rather like the rabbit in Aesop’s fable who lost his tail, to be “modern.” But is it any different in the West? Should an Oriental be traveling in Europe and ask for an exposition of Western culture, the answer given by a mediaeval monk would be vastly different than that given by a contemporary Unitarian. And which, may I ask would speak for the West? It follows then, and here I quote my father Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, directly, that:

The problem of the “spiritual East” versus the “material West” is very easily mistaken. I have repeatedly emphasized that it is only accidentally a geographical or racial problem. The real clash is of traditional with anti-traditional concepts or ideological with material or sensate points of view. . . . I think it undeniable that the *modern* world (which happens to still be a Western world, however fast the East is being Westernized) is one of “impoverished reality,” one *entleert* (empty) of meaning, or values. Our contemporary trust in *Progress* is a veritable *fideism* as naive as is to be found.

You have, in your kindness, invited me to write, not only because I am a product of both East and West, but above all because you are honoring my father. Thus it is that in addressing you I have tried to give you the framework within which my father’s writing may have real meaning. If I entitled my article “Who Speaks for the East?”, it is because I feel it is important for you to understand that his function had nothing to do with speaking for any economic, political, or geographical entity. He spoke only for Traditional man, and it mattered not to him whether this man was Hindu, Muslim, American Indian, or Christian.² As such, he was admittedly “dogmatic” for he regarded Truth “as a matter of certainty, not of opinion.” He was also “orthodox” in the sense that the Catholic Encyclopedia defines the word, for he held to “right belief or purity of faith.” He clearly stated:

I am not a reformer or a propagandist. I don’t think for myself. . . . I am not putting forward any new or private doctrines or interpretations. . . . I spend my time trying to understand some things that I regard as immutable truths; in the first place, for my own sake, and secondly for that of those who can make use of my results. For me, there are certain axioms, principles, or values beyond

² He was personally a Hindu and was invested with the *yajnopavite* (sacred thread) as a young man. At the time of his death he had resigned from the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and was returning to India to embrace the religious life. His ashes were returned to the Ganges at Banares.

question; my interest is not in thinking up new ones, but in the application of those that are.

If, in conclusion, I can convey to you anything that my father would have said, it is that we must all return to the basic principles that underlie the Traditional view of life. The Traditional life, he taught, is one that incorporated the various concepts I have listed above at all levels of society, and hence it follows that it is truly the cultured life, one that must be lived, not studied. It is one that sees all activity as sacred because it is ordered to man's proper last end. It is one that is admittedly not perfect, for even in the Garden of Eden is to be found the serpent and it recognizes that each generation and each individual must in the last analysis make his own choices for good and evil. It is however the only form of society in which the "full potential of man is recognized and not just his potential freedom to rise to the top of the economic ladder."³

He therefore advocated that form of society which demanded that every individual be a special kind of artist and saw as false the concept that only special people such as painters, musicians, and writers should be "creative" while the remainder were to be laborers and to live as shudras or untouchables. Unlike the factory worker or bank clerk who works for money (or perhaps, just to survive), the artist's pleasure is in doing well the work to which he is called. If he earns a living, it is in order that he might go on working. (This is not dissimilar to the man who eats in order to live, rather than that of the glutton—the man who lives in order that he may eat). As Plato taught, the man who is not an artist has no true place in the social order.

Thus it follows that it is a society that holds that "man does not live by bread alone . . . but by the very Word . . . of God," for if the artist is one who makes things properly, he is also one who lives both a contemplative and an active life. Such a life does not demand of us that we return to mediaeval patterns of living, even though they were incomparably superior to those we now live with—rather it is a return to the principles that underlay mediaeval Christendom as much as Hinduism. If the principles are correct "other things will be added unto us." Nor did my father advocate a position that can in any sense be considered "syncretist," for while my father admitted that many paths lead to the same summit, he also held that man can travel but one path at a time. Certainly, one can appreciate other cultures and traditions, but one cannot live them all simultaneously. One must live within that tradition to which one is called by circumstance. The only tragedy is that of modern or contemporary man who lives by no Tradition whatsoever, and

³ Those who believe that a return to traditional values would result in economic deprivation are simply unaware of historical fact, or else, have accepted the distortions of contemporary historians. Prior to her contact with the modern world, India was hardly a destitute nation. Indeed, it was her wealth that attracted the Western adventurers. Similarly, the American Indian was hardly deprived of the necessities of life in his natural condition. Anyone who argues for the modernization of India must realize that he is asking the village potter, an independent craftsman and artist, to become a "wage-slave" in a factory. Even the "moderns" would have to admit this to be a "crime against humanity."

therefore has no way to travel “home.” It is he who is condemned to live on the “husks” that are fit only for swine.

Above all, as he was often fond of saying, it is really a question of putting first things first, a matter of “seeking first the Kingdom of God and His Righteousness.” Such a principle was not for him a sociological anachronism; rather, it was the endeavor of his life, the purport of his writing, and, I think we may assume, his ultimate achievement.