

# THE ONLY TRADITION

William W. Quinn

Reviewed by

Alvin Moore Jr.

***THE ONLY TRADITION***, by William W. Quinn, Jr; xviii, 384pp 1966, State University of New York Press, Albany, New York.

In 1991 an extraordinary and long awaited book, *The Unanimous Tradition*, was published in Sri Lanka under the auspices of that country's Institute for Traditional Studies. Edited by Ranjit Fernando, the volume includes contributions from almost all the major contemporary traditionalist writers of the Anglophone world. The excellence of the book and the similarity of its title to that of the book under review aroused hopeful interest and anticipation on the part of this writer. Unfortunately the similarity in titles is misleading, for the content of the Quinn book cannot be compared with that of the first named. *The Only Tradition* is also meretricious in that it purports to offer something it does not deliver, namely an adequate account of the first principles of the *philosophia perennis* and how an effective return to these principles could offer a “‘solution’ to the vicissitudes of modernity” (the title of the last chapter). On the other hand, the book delivers something that is not announced: namely, an ongoing apologia for the Theosophical Society. The author endeavors not only to co opt Coomaraswamy and Guénon for this and other purposes, but also to identify this heterodox movement with “the only tradition”. From the standpoint of traditional orthodoxy the book is not only a nullity, it is sinister.

Quinn states in his “Acknowledgement” that the “...book is essentially a revised and updated dissertation submitted in candidacy for the Ph.D. at the University of Chicago in 1981”, the title of the dissertation being ***The Only Tradition: “Philosophia Perennis” and Culture in the Writings of Ananda Coomaraswamy and Rene Guénon***. Given the dissertation title, a focus on Coomaraswamy and Guénon naturally follows; but there is actually very little attention given to the properly metaphysical element in the writings of these two, and it is this element that sets them apart from other writers who have had the same or similar concerns. Quinn's interest is at the social level and he is largely an innocent, metaphysically speaking. Moreover, very little attention is given to the work of Frithjof Schuon, a sage outstanding not

only for his functioning at the level of the transpersonal Intellect but notable also for his practical wisdom: namely, the application of principles to the realm of contingencies.

Quinn also mentions his indebtedness to several distinguished scholars who served on his dissertation committee, chief among whom was Mircea Eliade; and it was Eliade who introduced Quinn to the works of Coomaraswamy and Guénon. Not surprisingly, Quinn's dissertation-become-book is dedicated to Mircea Eliade, the doyen of *religionswissenschaft* during much of his long career. Throughout *The Only Tradition* there is only one relatively minor point on which Quinn states his disagreement with the learned Roumanian. So it is appropriate to note that Eliade was a scholar for whom all the world's Traditions, sacred texts, myths, beliefs and symbols became so much grist for the mills of academe -- which is to say that all mankind's traditional inheritance was reduced to matter for academic and secular ratiocination, to sterile programs demanding no personal commitment and yielding little if any spiritual gain. As Schuon has observed: it is possible to exhaust the potential of traditional ideas on the level of mental exercises. And Guénon remarked somewhere, with more perspicacity than we then gave him credit for, that one of the purposes of the history of religions, considered as a secular discipline, is to empty traditional forms of their qualitative content; a statement that takes on new meaning precisely in the light of Eliade's (and other scholars') indifference to this qualitative content.

Permit us an aside, but it is one that is necessary to clarify remarks that follow: in Quinn's book the Primordial Tradition (which alone can be considered "the only tradition") is frequently mentioned; but there is no recognition on the part of our author that the Primordial Tradition has been outspread, like the fingers extending from the palm of one's hand, into Heaven's major initiatives towards this or that sector of mankind. These Heavenly initiatives form the great orthodox traditions, and it is only within the parameters they establish that man can return to his Fatherland. For the Christian, *nemo venit ad Patrem nisi per me*, "no one cometh to the Father but by Me" -- the **Me** who is simultaneously Way, Truth, and Life. Strict parallels exist in all orthodox traditions. As Schuon has glossed this idea for other traditions: no one returns to God except through the human manifestation of the Logos and by all that this manifestation represents --

whether it be Christ, the Buddha, Muhammad, etc. This obviously assumes, in the words of the *Holy Qur'an*: that “surely we are from God, and to Him we shall return”. But it is by no means sure that our author recognizes this absolutely indispensable principle, for he writes from the Theosophist perspective; and to say the least, it is not certain that Theosophists are creationists or, speaking more broadly, that they recognize the entire dependence of contingent existence on a creating or manifesting Principle. In any case, the dispensations mentioned above: namely, the orthodox Traditions ordained by Heaven, will hold until the consummation of this world, that is, until the end of the present cycle. The present humanity generally will not see the restoration of effective traditional unity this side the grave, or the hither side of extraordinary spiritual realization. To hold otherwise is to ally oneself with parodies and caricatures, with the counter-tradition, with the ephemerality of evil, with the Anti-Christ or what Muslims call *al-MasīḤ ad-Dajjāl*, the false or lying Messiah. Some foretaste of primordial tradition unity, however, is intrinsic to esoterism; but this is not something that can be approached or achieved on the human and sociological level. We know, sadly, that esoterism, too, can be and is caricatured, especially in these last times.

To return briefly to Mircea Eliade: in spite of promising beginnings and career-long proximity to the world's great Traditions, in his maturity Eliade was a secular humanist and a rationalistic “philosopher” (in the contemporary sense) who had not found a home in any of the Traditions. Instead, *à la* Teilhard de Chardin, he advocated a “globalization” or a “planetization” of consciousness and culture which, in spite of lip service to spirituality, could only be horizontal, this-worldly, and ultimately downward leading. It may be objected that this is supposed to be a review of Quinn's *The Only Tradition*, not of Eliade. But we must show Quinn's antecedents, where he is coming from; for no man ploughs an entirely virgin field, intellectually speaking. It is the perspective personified in Eliade and his work that has shaped the thinking that has gone into *The Only Tradition* as well as the manner in which Quinn utilizes his major sources, Ananda Coomaraswamy and René Guénon. Though Quinn speaks here and there of metaphysics, of the *philosophia perennis*, even of the *sophia perennis* and of *theosophia*, the *rasa*, the overriding taste of his writing is cerebral and sociological in character. There is nothing of that inescapable quality

which one rightly expects in the utterances of the better traditionalist writers. He cites Coomaraswamy and Guénon primarily where they speak of social applications of metaphysical principles, not where metaphysical or even cosmological realization is in question -- which is the fundamental *raison d'être* certainly of Guénon's *oeuvre*, and which is fully implicit in Coomaraswamy's normative writing.

Quinn seems beholden to certain well known persons who on any serious reckoning would have to be considered of the most doubtful traditional pedigree: to wit Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, co-founder of the Theosophical Society; and Carl Gustav Jung, founder of the analytic psychology movement. One illustrative episode each from both lives must suffice to range them among the gurus of darkness, for these episodes are not untypical. When Blavatsky was residing at Adyar (a suburb of Madras, in South India), certain persons associated with the Adyar office (then international headquarters of the Theosophical Society) charged that alleged psychic phenomena produced by Blavatsky were fraudulent. The Society for Psychical Research (London) was invited to investigate. On completing its inquiry, the SPR stated that Blavatsky was not a mere vulgar adventuress, she was a highly skilled impostor. It is noteworthy that she made no serious effort to defend herself, and soon afterwards left India never to return. As for Jung, spiritism and occultism were elements in his family inheritance. He characterized his own mother as normal by day but uncanny by night; and Jung himself spent a career exhuming the subconscious prolongation of the human psyche, thus greatly abetting the growing topsy-turvy conviction of the modern world that, as Arnold Toynbee said (in *A Study of History*),

... the Subconscious, not the Intellect, is the organ through which man lives his spiritual life....the fount of poetry, music and the visual arts and the channel through which the Soul is in communion with God.

It is unconscionable that an intelligent writer -- which Quinn clearly is -- should implicitly place the doctrine of these two, Blavatsky and Jung, on an equal footing with the doctrine expounded by Coomaraswamy and Guénon. One can only conclude that, intelligence notwithstanding, the author has not informed himself of the real thrust of Coomaraswamy's and Guénon's work; or that he is seriously lacking in discernment and discrimination; or, *quod absit*, that there is an intention to deceive.

Quinn is patently sympathetic to Theosophy though he does not identify himself personally with the Society (which was born with fissiparous tendencies, and there are several). In fact he asserts that the several societies must be distinguished from the movement; but the several societies are the most direct expression of the movement. Nevertheless, because of Quinn's obvious sympathy one must wonder if he is not trying to advance an agenda. Unfortunately, the modern Theosophical movement has been heavily colored by very questionable characters, claims, and initiatives. There is, for example, the effort by the Society under Annie Besant to put forward a new "*World Teacher*", in effect a new *avatar*, which in the nature of things could only have had been a "false or lying" messiah -- had the effort succeeded. There were numerous charges of fraud against Blavatsky (not only those at Adyar) and much of this she only half denied, saying in effect that it was all necessary to win followers. But what is one to think of a leader who has to resort to such tactics and what is one to think of those thus engaged as disciples? And there is the eclectic hodgepodge of disparate elements offered as doctrine, the fictions passed off as "communications" from the Masters, and numerous other fantasies that do nothing to command respect for those who lend them credence. But that was earlier. What about the contemporary Theosophical Society? According to Joscelyn Godwin in his *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, "Together with the Western occult tradition, the Theosophists have provided almost all the underpinnings of the 'New Age' movement, their exoteric reflection...." (In passing, we must ask, "what kind of 'enlightenment' is it that includes the likes of Aleister Crowley?", whose 'illumination' can only have been *d'en bas*).

The path of deception extends back much further than Quinn and his book, and includes the hijacking of the word *theosophy*. *Theosophy* or *theosophia*, in itself thoroughly honorable and venerable, is a combined form of the Greek words *theos*, and *sophia*, and according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* means wisdom concerning God or things divine". This same source traces the word to St Dionysius the Aeropagite through John Scotus Erigena. Other sources carry it back even to Ammonius Saccus (175-242 AD), the reputed founder of Neo-Platonism and teacher of Plotinus, and still others say it originated during the Renaissance. Whatever the case regarding the origin and early use of the word, the reality thus denominated is obviously a permanent possibility; but it appears that it is to be distinguished from

spiritual realization itself as expounded in the Vedanta, the Buddhists schools, Sufism, and in Hesychasm. What is to be remarked here, however, is that Quinn seeks to identify modern Theosophy, blemished as it is, with this permanent “wisdom concerning God or things divine”; and though he distinguishes between the Society (or societies) and the movement, he nevertheless seeks in this way to authenticate something that is intrinsically heterodox. He suggests that there is continuity between *theosophia antiqua* and *theosophia recens* or *moderna* (though these adjectives are not used). In an effort to associate modern heterodox Theosophy with ancient and medieval figures of unquestioned honor and integrity, Quinn lists as theosophers Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Plato, Clement of Alexandria, St Augustine, St Dionysius, and Boethius; then continuing with the the medieval and modern periods, Quinn mentions Avicenna, Ibn ‘Arabī, Eckhart, Ficino, Cusanus, Boehme, Nostradamus, Law, Swedenborg, Balvatsky, Mead, Steiner, Waite, Coomaraswamy and Guénon. This is plainly duplicitous; Nostradamus, Blavatsky, Mead, Steiner, and Waite have no intrinsic right to be considered of the same quality as the others named in the list, and grouping them with Plato, St Augustine, Ibn ‘Arabī, and Eckhart can only establish false associations and lead astray the unwary.

Quinn seems ashamed of some of the things that have characterized the Theosophical Society. Nevertheless, as we stated above, the Society or societies are the direct expression of the movement; and *a fructibus eorum cognoscetis eos* -- “by their fruits shall ye know them”. To speak, then, of “the only tradition” and to try and include heterodox Theosophy in this context is to obfuscate if not to deceive.

Chapters 13 and 14 of *The Only Tradition*, “Losses and Gains of the Western Worldview” and “Cultural Effects of Modernity”, are not without interest and some diagnostic merit. In the final chapter, however, “The ‘Solution’ to the vicissitudes of Modernity”, the author endeavors to give a secular treatment to the end times, the examination of which traditionally lies within the scope of eschatology, whether Christian, Muslim or Jewish (and even Zoroastrian). This field of great doctrinal importance and richness is passed over in silence as if it did not exist. Quinn writes of an historical continuity between our present cycle, accelerating to its *dénouement* and he conceives this even as a physical continuity with a coming new Golden Age even though he allows this transition may be accompanied by great

catastrophes. But according to traditional doctrine a *pralaya* if not a *mahapralaya* must intervene between the *kali-yuga* and the next *kâta-yuga* or Golden Age. This means that whatever continuity may exist will not be of the corporeal order, but of the subtle, formless or principial realms, according to the nature of the cycle or sub-cycle in question. The further implication is that *this* world will be dissolved and reintegrated into its immediately superior principle and thence into still superior levels. *Dies irae, dies illa, Solvet saeculum in favilla, Teste David cum Sibylla.*

The diversity of the great Traditions is willed by Heaven, and it is Luciferian pride to think man can upset this order, achieve anything against it, or enter in by a gateway other than that of Him who said of Himself, *Ego sum ostium. Per me si quis introierit salvabitur; et ingredietur et egredietur et pasqua inveniet.* “I am the Door. By Me if any man enter in he shall be saved; and he shall go in and out and find pasture” -- and *mutatis mutandis* for other orthodox Traditions.

On the face of it, in *The Only Tradition* we are presented with an attempt to clear the way for the counter-tradition, for a tradition in reverse. We have seen that at least one abortive attempt has already been made, under the auspices of the Theosophical Society, to foist on the world a false *avatara* in the Krishnamurti affair. Quinn speaks of the possibility of a new *avatara*, though in words which leave no doubt that he is not thinking in terms of the eschatology of Semitic monotheism. In this period of narrowing possibilities a new divine descent is not to be expected. But we may expect attempts to mimic an *avatara*; we may expect caricatures and parodies. And no doubt the counter-initiation will learn from its earlier ineptitudes and make more and more subtle efforts, “*deceiving if possible even the elect*”. As for the Theosophical Society itself, it is now somewhat numerically reduced from its heyday and has become but one among many occult groups. But it has not grown less sinister for all that and, indeed, in becoming less popular it may have become more influential as the intelligence of its adherents has grown. We see the name and/or influence cropping up in all sorts of unexpected places: in the arts, especially painting, literature and music, in extremist sectors of the environmentalist movement, and as noted above in the guise of the “esoteric” inspiration of the New Age movement.

It is relatively easy to see through Quinn’s book; even so, it will doubtless achieve its purpose of confusing and then deceiving many,

especially in this period of diminishing discernment and discrimination. Meanwhile as Yeasts (who was himself influenced by Blavatsky and Theosophism) wrote:

Turning and turning in widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world...  
The best lack all conviction while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.  
Surely some revelation is at hand;  
Surely the Second coming is at hand...  
And what rough beast its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethelhem to be born?

In the interim we must do all we can to affirm and to defend the Good, the True, and the Beautiful -- first of all within ourselves, and then in the world about us -- in the certainty that they can never be really but only apparently defeated.

There are other points in *The Only Tradition* which can be challenged: for example the claim that Ananda Coomareswamy was influenced by Theosophy; which is tantamount to saying that all contact implies endorsement or identification. Then there is the claim of great similarity between the *philosophia perennis* and Theosophy; but in the presence of such pretensions, one must ask: "How well have you read in the *philosophia perennis*?" And there is the claim that Theosophy, heteroclitite by nature, is really one among many other expressions of the *philosophia perennis*. Theosophy is, in fact, a caricature, a hodgepodge of ill assembled elements from diverse quarters, an unworthy travesty of the Truth concerning man's origin, nature, and destiny. (And we must not forget that man shares the nature of the what he worships.) But having identified and treated at some length more immediately pivotal errors in this book, it would be overkill to dwell further on each fallacy. We will close with an invitation to the author to reconsider his personal orientation and employ his very considerable talents in ways more positive and more profitable both for himself and for his fellows. *Hodie si vocem audieritis, nolite obdurare corda vestra secundam diam tentationis....*



Note: This controversial book has aroused considerable interest among the traditionally minded. Though all the errors and shortcomings in this review are strictly our own, we wish nevertheless to acknowledge helpful comment, useful suggestions, and material provided, and to thank Rama Coomaraswamy, James Cutsinger, Whitall Perry, Charles Upton, Brice Warnick and James Wetmore.

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