

**AGAINST THE MODERN WORLD: TRADITIONALISM  
AND THE SECRET INTELLECTUAL HISTORY  
OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

(MARK SEDGWICK)

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This book is an academic study of an obscure movement, Traditionalism. The name has a specific meaning; it does not mean traditional forms of belief, that is, generically, conservatism. Rather, “Traditionalism” is a type of Gnosticism, holding that a core of hidden knowledge, contained within all true religion, is the cure for what ails the modern world. I certainly think that the modern world needs curing, though I don’t think that Traditionalism is what the doctor ordered. Still, the pull of Gnosticism across time and space must mean something. But what? Mark Sedgwick’s book helps us begin to answer that question.

I read *Against the Modern World* as part of my ongoing analysis of the lesser-known branches of modern right-wing thought. I was dimly aware of one Traditionalist thinker, the Italian self-described “superfascist” Julius Evola, about whom there was a burp of interest in 2016 when Steve Bannon mentioned his name as someone with whom he was familiar. George Hawley’s excellent *Right-Wing Critics of American Conservatism* spent some time on Evola and other Traditionalists, expanding my minimal knowledge; it noted an overlap between Traditionalism and the French New Right, wellspring of people like Guillaume Faye and his Archeofuturism. No Traditionalist is a household name; I therefore read this book hoping to gain more insight. I learned facts I did not know, but as far as insight, I was disappointed—although, to be fair, given that I expected no new wisdom, I can’t really complain.

Sedgwick’s writing isn’t great; he’s an academic, not a popularizer. But he seems to know an awful lot about his subject. Though British, for a long time he has worked in Denmark as a professor of Arab and Islamic Studies, so he is very familiar with the different threads of Islam, essential since the majority of Traditionalists have a close relationship to Islam (more specifically, Sufism). In fact, his enemies say that Sedgwick long ago converted to Islam, which as far as I know he has neither denied nor confirmed. If that’s true, it does not appear to affect his writing in any way, so for these purposes it’s irrelevant.

Most of his book revolves, in one way or another, around René Guénon (1866–1951), the French founder of Traditionalism. Guénon espoused and spread what he viewed as the “Perennial Philosophy,” or “Perennialism,” the idea that there is some “primal truth” that precedes, and is contained in, many (but not all) of the world’s major religions. The term arose with the Renaissance priest Marsilio Ficino, who tried to reconcile Plato and Christianity, and as whose heir Guénon viewed himself. This idea of reconciling Greek philosophy and Christianity wasn’t new with Ficino, of course—although Sedgwick doesn’t mention it, Christian Neoplatonists, such as Saint Augustine, worked along the same lines, and the tradition of an underlying truth had continued up until and after Ficino, both within Christianity, and, to a greater degree, among movements like Hermeticism. But it had died out in the early modern world, as modernism and materialism came to dominate the West.

What brought Traditionalism back was the perceived defects of the modern world; hence the title of this book. Sedgwick doesn’t do a great job of describing what defects Traditionalists saw (and see); they seem to revolve around spiritual *anomie* and excessive materialism, which are viewed as inevitably leading to collapse and barbarism. The modern age is often thought of as the Hindu *kali yuga*, the fourth and final stage of human degeneration before the cycle begins anew. Such preoccupation with decline and collapse is a very twentieth-century preoccupation, and part of the larger culture beyond Traditionalism—Oswald Spengler being the most obvious example. The Traditionalists, however, put a specifically religious gloss on both the projected collapse and its solution.

My key initial objection, or concern, is that we are never told with any precision, by Sedgwick or anyone else, what the claimed tenets of the universalist “Perennial Religion” are. I don’t think that’s Sedgwick’s fault, but rather the Traditionalists’. There is much talk of “ancient wisdom,” but nobody seems to think it particularly important to actually identify or specify that wisdom. The only belief that seems evident is in a transcendent deity of some type, source of all wisdom and perfection. The other characteristics of this deity seem opaque, and it is not because they are deliberately hidden in the Gnostic manner—Traditionalists wrote many books. There is talk of “the sacred unity of reality,” whatever that means. As a side dish, there is muttering about the “Absolute

which is indescribable,” which may be accurate, but is not very clarifying. What it all seems to boil down to is generic mysticism; a claimed path to approach, and to understand, the divine and ineffable without, and outside of, detailed rational thought.

Now, mysticism has a long and respectable pedigree in most of the world’s religions, tied to and found as an extension of core doctrines. In contrast, though, most or all Traditionalist mysticism seems to be solipsistic navel-gazing, unmoored from religion. It pays lip service to religious belief, but really thinks religious doctrine is fiction. To Traditionalists, that is probably a feature, not a bug, but it feels a lot like more sophisticated Oprah, pushing *The Secret*, talking about how the “Universe” wants each of us to have a new car.

One way to understand Traditionalist mysticism, from what I can tease out, is as an accelerated, shortcut, hobbled version of Orthodox *theosis*, union with the divine energies of God (but not with the divine essence). However, Orthodox doctrine, and thought outside doctrine, is extremely specific about the characteristics of the divine, what God requires, and in what manner it is necessary to approach God. (I imagine the same is true of other religious mysticisms, such as Sufism or those found in Hinduism.) Blathering about “ancient wisdom” and “unity,” beyond feeling like it was derived from a fortune cookie, seems calculated to impress other humans, not set one on an actual path to mystical experience. Probably that’s why, it seems, a lot of Traditionalists end up partaking of various rituals, many newly manufactured, to unlock the key to the divine presence. Whether to prevent being sullied by the uninitiated, or to prevent being ridiculed, these are rarely publicized (hence the “secret intellectual history” of the book’s subtitle). That’s not new, either, though—the reason we know little about the original Christian Gnostics, other than that some of their thought was suppressed, is that, like all such movements throughout history, they were obsessively secretive about their “hidden knowledge,” a necessary element of their attraction.

At first glance, Traditionalism is thus just another in a long line of quasi-religions that have a strong shyster element. The most obvious precursor is late nineteenth-century Theosophy, progeny of the earlier Spiritualism and mishmash of fraudulence and silliness, associated with the conwoman Helena Blavatsky (died 1891), which lasted some

decades as an undercurrent in American intellectual circles. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Thoreau had ties to it; later on, Henry Wallace, sometime Vice President to Franklin Roosevelt, lost his chance to become President, and impose Communism on America, by being exposed as a Theosophist. Sedgwick spends a good deal of time parsing various other related movements, such as Martinism (tied to Freemasonry). None of this is surprising—as Chesterton did not say, but should have, when men cease believing in God, they do not believe in nothing, they believe in anything. Or, as Sedgwick names it, citing Bryan Wilson, we get a “cultic milieu,” where, like the Island of Misfit Toys, fringe beliefs collect to support each other in their fringiness. Today we get New Age beliefs and various other clownish schools of “thought,” which, to be fair, are even more degenerate in their stupidity and lack of intellectual sophistication than Theosophy and its relatives. (Admittedly, these modern beliefs aren’t Gnostic, which makes them somewhat different in structure and approach. Maybe that’s confirmation of Traditionalist beliefs about modern degeneration—today, we can’t even manage a decent Gnosticism.)

The core of all Gnosticism has always been to promise initiation into some hidden, esoteric knowledge. Thus, it is no surprise that most Traditionalists end up connected to, and many formally received into, Sufism. Christianity has always treated Gnosticism as a heresy and held that truth is available openly to all. Sufism, on the other hand, offers both orthodoxy and a distinction between exoteric and esoteric belief. All (or nearly all) Sufis are devout Sunni Muslims (despite occasional tension with those finding mysticism unpalatable), but they add a layer of esoteric belief. This maintains the precise certainty for believers, something that Islam offers most of all among the major religions, while also offering the feeling of secret knowledge, and thus superiority and being on the inside track, all at the same time, a neat trick. A few of the Traditionalists profiled in this book tried to combine Perennialism with Roman Catholicism or Orthodoxy, but the inherent tensions in that project seem to always pull them either toward orthodox belief or its opposite, formal universalism. A few others, Evola being the most prominent, combined Traditionalism with a total rejection of monotheistic religion, focusing on what to them were real, earlier pagan gods. Most Traditionalists seem to find much of value in Hinduism—easy

to do in Hinduism, with its many threads and voluminous, opaque writings, which they pick and choose from as their starting point, but I suspect that actual, devout Hindus would not agree with Traditionalist thinking, and anyway all the Traditionalists seem to abandon everything but a few cherry-picked elements of Hinduism, moving on to focus on other religious traditions—from which they also cherry pick, since universalism is rejected by all such traditions.

Back to the history. Probably the reason Guénon got as much traction as he did was because in the early twentieth century mysticism was in the air, and more mainline figures, such as the prominent Catholic thinker Jacques Maritain, initially sponsored his writing to some degree. As with almost all Traditionalists, Guénon soon thought himself into being fundamentally opposed to actual Christian doctrine, as being both too exclusive in its claims and being a religion of enervation and femininity (shades of Nietzsche), so he went his own way. A circle formed around Guénon and a new journal in which he was involved, *The Veil of Isis*, from the name of which you can tell which way they headed, toward secrecy and supposed Eastern wisdom. World War I helped Guénon's project, in that it made the idea that modernity was fundamentally broken hard to argue. Still unsatisfied, Guénon ended up a Sufi, moving to Egypt and going native.

Sedgwick covers two basic periods, before and after Guénon's death, in 1951, since his death caused divergence into several vaguely connected movements, and turned an already nebulous philosophy into a mishmash. In fact, at least according to Sedgwick, most of the influence of Traditionalism in the past several decades has been through what he calls "soft Traditionalism," not always easy to identify. Basically this consists of academics in various fields (all in the humanities), who dislike modernity and hold to the universalist beliefs popularized by Guénon, such that elements of Traditionalism appear in their works, but they are by no means necessarily devotees. Such soft Traditionalism extends to men like E. F. Schumacher in his book *Small Is Beautiful*, and even to Prince Charles, who to external appearances is mostly just soft in the head (though if he is pulled toward Traditionalism, this, more likely than actual devotion to Islam, explains his frequent positive comments about Islam). In Russia, though, Traditionalism has lately had some apparent real political impact, through the "Eurasian" program of Alexander

Dugin, alleged to influence Vladimir Putin and the Russian government (and having a great deal in common with Faye's Archeofuturism).

Sedgwick talks about so many people, all obscure, that they are hard to keep straight. Thus, for the most part, I think this book is most valuable as a reference work, although to understand the overall framework you really have to read the whole book. A few people stand out, or maybe they just stand out to me because these are the ones I've heard of. Isabelle Eberhardt, Swiss woman of dubious mental stability, who converted young to Islam, moved to French Algeria (cooperating with the French colonizers but also assisting the locals, and conducting a tangled relationship with Hubert Lyautey, the French officer and Legionnaire in charge), and died before she reached thirty. The Italian Julius Evola, pagan occultist, worshipper of what he called the Absolute Individual, kept at arms' length by both Mussolini and the Nazis, because he thought they did not go far enough in maintaining hierarchy, and that they were too materialist by believing in racial, as opposed to spiritual, superiority. After the war he abandoned politics for his vision of "riding the tiger," i.e., surviving modernity by ignoring it until it collapses (similar in some ways to Ernst Jünger's concept of the Forest Rebel, or his related concept of the anarchist). Frithjof Schuon, whom I know of because he lived nearby while I was at school at Indiana University; what I did not know was his adoption of the usual cult leader practice of sleeping with his disciples' wives, a practice to which he gave the elevated name of "vertical marriage." He only died in 1998, after a scandal involving naked carousing with underage girls; apparently even the Bloomington police have limits. Since then, only Dugin has any relevance today, so apparently, at least as against Traditionalism, the modern world is in the ascendant, despite more than a hundred years of effort.

What all the many people Sedgwick profiles had in common was subscribing to the Perennial Philosophy. Again, though, I can't figure out what that means. I doubt if Eberhardt and Evola had much in common, other than a declared belief in some kind of transcendent unity of all things. What that implied for life meant very, very different things for them, and for most of the Traditionalists. It seems to me that something that has no predictive value, that *ex ante* cannot describe the acts or thoughts at any relatively narrow level of generality of any person, is not a useful categorization.

I'm all for attacks on the modern world. This is a difficult argument to make today, because Steven Pinker isn't wrong, that in a great number of important ways, we are better off than we used to be. The ways in which we are not better off are harder to quantify, and counterintuitive—for example, excessive personal autonomy is bad, but it feels so good. Yes, there are external indicia of the problems, most notably the failure of all modern societies to reproduce themselves. But Traditionalism is not a cure for modernity. It makes historical claims that are easily falsifiable. Its theology, to the extent it has any, smacks of pandering to the self-absorbed. What is needed is a much more grounded philosophy and political program. I am working on it, you will be glad to hear. In the meantime, this book is an interesting exploration of a dead end.