

# Coomaraswamy - The Man, Myth and History

by

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WHO was—or what was—Ananda Coomaraswamy? The man is of no help here, as he discouraged biographical “curiosity” in his avowed intention to be “nothing.” And yet this very self-willed effacement affords a key to the answer. *Hic Jacet Nemo* was the epitaph he most desired, and “Here lies no one” is already a clue to the response we are seeking.

Coomaraswamy was of course very much a “somebody,” in a most prodigious way as regards both family heritage and personal genius; but above and beyond this was the spiritual man, keenly aware of all that is implied in Plotinus’ “Flight of the Alone to the Alone” (and it is significant for our purposes that Coomaraswamy capitalized *both* “A”s).

Rather than adding to the mass of tributes to the Doctor that have poured in over the years, we propose to examine an aspect of his person that we only touched upon in our appreciation “The Man and the Witness” which appeared in S. Durai Raja Singam’s recent commemorative volume, *Ananda Coomaraswamy: Remembering and Remembering Again and Again*.

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Even those who knew him as a student remarked on a nature combining superiority with remoteness: “He is head and shoulders above his fellows both literally and figuratively,” wrote the Wycliffe College class report; while Coomaraswamy shunned social activity at the University of London to a degree that made a fellow student reflect, “Perhaps he could say with Erasmus that he was least alone when most alone: *nunquam minus solus quam solismus*.”

When we met him for the first time at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in February, 1946, where he was giving a lecture called “The Conception of Immortality in Buddhism,” the effect was that of beholding a rare personage of commanding authority step in from a distant past whose wisdom he embodied along with a searing vision of the foibles underlying this modern civilization which he had intruded upon.

In the Singam volume we mentioned certain peculiar similarities between the Doctor and René Guénon, whom we met later that same year in Cairo, and how the two men in reality personified complementary poles of a single function. Our first encounter with the French metaphysician was a particularly disconcerting experience, as this austere yet benevolent figure was twofold more ungraspable and remote than we had found Coomaraswamy himself: the René

Guénon whose writings we had avidly been assimilating was to all appearances quite simply not *there*.

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Coomaraswamy tirelessly proclaimed the doctrine of the “two selves” or “minds” (*duo sunt in homine*), and certainly both he and Guénon had their human side. Not only was the Doctor’s erudition on a purely human plane staggering in its combination of scope, depth, and universality, with a literary style to match, but he was also a skilled polemicist, a brilliant conversationalist, and a man of unfailing generosity towards aspiring students and all who turned to him for help through correspondence—just to mention several examples.

While Guénon lacked in breadth the other’s erudition, he appeared to come on the scene with an inborn knowledge of metaphysical and cosmological principles, and it was this vision of fundamental truths which gave the ultimate polarization to Coomaraswamy’s own learning. It also had the unfortunate drawback of making Guénon somewhat slipshod in scholarship; his certitude about principles lent a false sense of security on the factual level, where a little research would have sufficed to protect him from the barbs of orientalists who, if incognizant of metaphysical and spiritual truths, had at least done their homework. It is here that Coomaraswamy’s erudition more than once came to the other’s rescue.

Where Guénon was uncannily well documented on the human plane was in the realm of the occult in all its ramifications: he seemed to have antennae reaching everywhere. He, too, had a ready pen for polemics, and he, too, was painstaking in his correspondence; for the rest, he was a devoted family man. Yet such was his anonymity that an admirer of his writings was dumbfounded to discover upon his death that the venerable next-door neighbor whom she had known for years as Sheikh Abdel Wahed Yahya was in reality René Guénon.

“The least important thing about Guénon is his personality,” wrote Coomaraswamy. “The fact is that he has the invisibility that is proper to the complete philosopher: our teleology can only be fulfilled when we really become no one.” As for himself, the Doctor insisted: “I must explain that I am not at all interested in biographical matter relating to myself and that I consider the *modern* practice of publishing details about the lives and personalities of well known men is nothing but a vulgar catering to illegitimate curiosity... All this is not a matter of ‘modesty’ but one of *principle*”—a principle that left him indifferent to the copyright of his own works, concerning which he once told us: “I shall feel happy if my writings have really been of help to four or five people...”

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This “principle,” as we shall see, went very far. The individual human plane for both these men was virtually valueless, being for them equitable with the world of phenomena, impermanence,

and change. It belonged to the *samsâra*, this never-ceasing cycle of births-and-deaths, of permutation, flux, and irreality.

In his *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Mircea Eliade demonstrates how ancient man saw Reality as an unending recurrence of archetypal paradigms played out in the cosmos; history for traditional humanity was identified with accident, suffering, punishment for sin (namely, transgression from the archetypal norms), and in general, incongruity and meaninglessness. Coomaraswamy went a step farther; for him *as theorist* “history” in the measure possible scarcely existed.

One need not read far in his works to catch the refrain: “there is no ‘I’ that acts or inherits” (*Samyutta-Nikâya*); “our Ego in fact is nothing but a name for what is really only a sequence of observed behaviors”; “things that are not immutable, are not at all” (St. Augustine); “what we call our ‘consciousness’ is nothing but a process”; “the kingdom of heaven is for none but the thoroughly dead” (Eckhart); “no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven” (St. John); “man’s last end is to be ‘as free as the Godhead in its non-existence’” (Eckhart). Now these and similar statements are elliptical ways of expressing the discontinuity between the Divine Essence and its created accidents. But as Frithjof Schuon stipulates, there is not only the Transcendent Essence, there is also the Immanent Substance which runs continuously throughout the various levels of Reality and planes of Being, otherwise there could be no manifestation at all, nor any worlds. Coomaraswamy in fact knew this, as is proven in the answer he gave to a question we put to him on why the Absolute manifests: “Not that the One is two,” he replied, citing Hermes, “but that these two are one.”

Yet in practice he expounded an utter dichotomy between the temporal individuality and the Immortal Self: “An immortality of ‘this man, So-and-so’ is inconceivable... However strange and repugnant the denial of the reality of individuality may be... the truth is that neither the whole nor any part of the composite psycho-physical personality is my Self... Throughout the Bible, the word ‘soul’ (*nefes, psyche, anima*) refers to that psycho-physical, animal life that returns to the dust when ‘the spirit returns to God who gave it,’ when we ‘give up the [Holy] Ghost.’” Were this to be taken to the letter, then the bodily translation of such as Enoch and Elias, Christ and the Virgin Mary into Heaven would have been inconceivable, not to mention the dogma of the “resurrection of the body.” Schuon makes what should be the obvious point, that souls in Paradise do not lose their identities: while the Buddha, Krishna, and Christ are all manifestations of the one Logos, they do not for that *in divinis* lose their separate historical selfhoods as the Buddha, Krishna, and Christ. Man, after all, according to scripture was created deiform. And here again Coomaraswamy proves by a passage in his *Hinduism and Buddhism* that he understands this perspective, where he says that the saved are in a state of “distinction without difference” (*bhedâbheda*) or what Eckhart means by “fused but not confused.” The Absolute is not only unique, it is also infinite.

But returning to history: so intent was Coomaraswamy on demonstrating the pre-eminent reality of mythological truths over purely historical facts that he could be led to write, for example, in his *The Rg Veda as Land-Nâma-Bôk*: “Now, so far as I know, it has never been propounded by any scholar, however historically minded, that the voyage of Manu, or for that matter, Noah’s, represents the legendary memory of an historical migration,”—when in truth if no scholar has propounded this, which is not actually the case, it is because the self-evident needs no propounding! Or again: “That Exodus is a creation myth, rather than an historical event, is of course the Qabbalistic point of view,”—when in fact for the Qabbalah the one interpretation in nowise excludes the other, and this is even confirmed by Coomaraswamy himself, where he writes beautifully elsewhere of Myth as “the penultimate truth, *of which all experience is the temporal reflection*” (italics ours).

Since the Buddha, Krishna, and Christ have been mentioned, it is interesting to see what the Doctor maintains about their historicity. The life of the first, he says in *Gotama the Buddha*, “can be regarded as historical or simply as a myth in which the nature and acts of the Vedic deities Agni and Indra have been more or less plausibly euhemerized... The writer is inclined to the mythical interpretation. “The reference to the second comes in *Hinduism and Buddhism* where he speaks of “the pseudo-historical Krishna and Arjuna,” which “are to be identified with the mythical Agni and Indra.”

Lastly, he writes to a Harvard professor in a letter dated 10 July, 1942: “I am not convinced of the historicity of either Christ or Buddha.” When we brought up this latter point to Rama Coomaraswamy, he replied, “My father was much too intelligent not to believe in the historical Jesus, and he would have explained the remark in this letter as being a reaction from fighting all his life against the prevailing tendency to humanize everything sacred and to belittle mythology as nothing more than the superstitions of primitive peoples.” In his appreciation of Guénon, for example, entitled “Eastern Wisdom and Western Knowledge,” the Doctor wrote: “For the Hindu, the events of the Rgveda are nowhere and dateless, and the Krishna Lîlâ ‘not an historical event’; and the reliance of Christianity upon supposedly historical ‘facts’ seems to be its greatest weakness.”

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In the special issue of the *Etudes Traditionnelles* dedicated to René Guénon that appeared in 1951, the year of his death, Schuon contributed an article called “L’Oeuvre” (“The Work”), where he wrote: “If on the doctrinal plane the Guénonian work has a stamp of unicity, it may not be useless to point out that this is owing not to a more or less ‘prophetic’ nature—a supposition that is excluded, and which Guénon himself had already rejected beforehand—but to an exceptional cyclical conjuncture whose temporal aspect is this ‘end of the world’ in which we live, and whose spatial aspect is—by the same token—the forced convergence of civilizations.”

Now the characteristics of this latter-day society are individualism, libertinism, narcissism, relativism, and in general, “divorce from any principle,” to use Coomaraswamy’s own words for it. He and Guénon accordingly had the providential role to remind the world once again, “in a way that may be ignored but cannot be refuted” as the former puts it, of first principles, and to restore the sense of the Absolute. And this they did with an uncompromising rigor, meticulous in its precision, that baffles minds untrained to think in certitudes. Guénon’s metaphysical exposition is so crystalline and geometric, so mathematically abstract and devoid of almost any human element, that Schuon once used the image to describe this phenomenon as practically that of “an eye without a body,” namely, principle divorced from any psychic substance—to reverse the metaphor cited just above.

Yet alchemically speaking, the reading of these two authors (not to mention Schuon, who is a whole other dimension again, the psychic sphere being fully integrated with all the rest) can work just the necessary therapeutic corrective to minds corrupted by the intellectual anarchy of “our sentimental generation” (Coomaraswamy); and though these writings are capable of engendering metaphysical pretension and spiritual pride in persons of little understanding, nevertheless for the serious and receptive reader they can open a vista onto the Sacred which overwhelms all else and reinstates him with a true hierarchy of values.

Since mention was made of prophecy, we will at the risk of misunderstandings venture a few observations on the subject. While it is true that we live in a time when prophets no longer walk the earth, all the major religions notwithstanding teach that certain central prophetic functions attaching to them must remanifest at the end of time, and surely this can operate in varying degrees and modalities. Moreover, a prophetic function like that of Melchizedek or Elias which is timeless will by definition always be present—even if not able to descend in prophetic form. We see no satisfactory way to resolve those undeniable ambiguities marginally attaching to the otherwise exceptional witness of the two men under study save by proposing that they both, while not of prophetic substance, did nonetheless vehicle elements of a prophetic message, being spokesmen for what Leo Schaya calls the Eliatic current. “Spokesmen” is the correct word for it, as theirs was an active role, the intensity of their intellectual powers betokening none of that psychic passivity which goes with mere mediumship.

At the same time, the fact that they were almost “obsessed” with the compulsion never to say anything on their own goes with Philo’s definition of a prophet as being someone who “speaks nothing of his own.” They must have felt they had a calling which was disproportionate to what they considered were the limits of their human capacities, which would explain this reticence to talk about themselves, as also their insistence on the discontinuity between the “merely” human plane and the Supernal Truth. Something approaching a scission in their two natures or selves might account for the way in which they relativized even the concept of human salvation, that of the individual soul: “Paradise is still but a prison,” Guénon would say, citing a Sufic adage more striking for its Semitic hyperbole than for its spiritual propriety. Had they been

fully integrated prophets, not only would this have been disproportionate considering the function for which they were born, it also would have prevented them from plunging into the academic and occult milieus which they had to know inside and out in order to accomplish the testimony it was theirs to deliver. And had they been simply geniuses in metaphysics and mythology, then how to reconcile this with that *other* dimension, which is not just of our century, especially when Coomaraswamy insisted with St. Paul that “God has never nor anywhere left himself without a witness,” albeit in a world that will not be persuaded—as he concords with St. Luke—“though one rose from the dead”?

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Various considerations brought up in this paper remind us by analogy of the two witnesses “clothed in sackcloth” as described in the Revelations 11:1, who are traditionally associated with Enoch and Elias. The sackcloth could refer to the impoverishment of the human receptacles in their veil of anonymity, this anonymity that struck Schuon to write of Guénon in the article already cited: “The man seemed unaware of his genius, just as inversely, the genius seemed unaware of the man.”

And if any man will hurt them, fire proceedeth out of their mouth, and devoureth their enemies: and if any man will hurt them, he must in this manner be killed.

This power which was given to Elias (II. Kings 1:10) here could be taken to signify the self-implied judgment that necessarily takes place with all those who come within the range of their witness, which covers nearly every aspect of religion, history, thought, and the social order in its various forms.

St. John in his vision sees the two overpowered by “the beast that ascendeth out of the bottomless pit,” and ignominiously profaned after death by “the people and kindreds and tongues and nations.”

And they that dwell upon the earth shall rejoice over them and make merry, and shall send gifts one to another; because these two prophets tormented them that dwelt on the earth.

Tributes apart, Coomaraswamy and Guénon were a huge cause of embarrassment to countless men of modern erudition and religious aberrations who saw the cornerstone of their constructions imperiled by the cold voice of truth coming from these two.

And after three days and a half the Spirit of life from God entered into them... and they ascended up to heaven.

Dona Luisa Coomaraswamy wrote to us that her husband in death looked “like a rishi in marble” (*Hic Jacet Nemo*). Having attended Guénon’s funeral, we can testify that he too looked

the same. In fact, it was only in his death that we finally saw the integral person, the René Guénon whom we had sought in vain all the years we knew him alive.

It would be both pretentious and irrelevant to push analogies further. In “The Man and the Witness” we insisted on the indispensable “precursive or ‘heraldic’ nature of their mission.” It suffices to close this paper with the affirmation that their witness, far from falling on barren soil, is already bearing precious fruit with those who put their faith in the device that comes at the end of Guénon’s *The Crisis of the Modern World: Vincit omnia Veritas*.