

# Response to David Appelbaum's "The Moment of Modernity"

by William W. Quinn

Professor Appelbaum has submitted a thought-provoking commentary that responds to the appearance and first number of *Sacred Web*, in which the journal's inaugural policy is articulated. In one sense, his submission is more interrogative than declarative. Accordingly, we choose to respond as if he affirmatively and expressly posed an important question that is central to Traditional discourse in modernity, and respectfully attempt an answer whose objective is to clarify and satisfy the concerns he raises. In addition, we attempt by this answer to benefit the journal's general readership who to varying degrees may share these concerns, and for whom the *complexio oppositorum* of Tradition/modernity is a subject of continuing inquiry.

The principal theses of Professor Appelbaum's commentary, in an admittedly radical distillation, are as follows:

- There exists today a "certain [Traditional] strain of thinking" that demonizes modernity and with it any modern approach to the esoteric that, necessarily, is its progeny.
- This strain of thinking is romantic in its idealization of Tradition (or truly Traditional cultures) and in its criticism and/or repudiation of modernity, including modern analytical philosophy.
- This strain of thinking, consequently, misses the fact that in modernity lies a significant opportunity because it presents a "field of possibility, a locus of human endeavor" which, perhaps ironically, affords the spiritual seeker or Traditionalist even a greater chance

of spiritual growth than that which he might encounter in a Traditional setting.

- Unless the Traditionalist comes to terms with this fact, any “inner approach” to the esoteric is endangered and may be barred altogether, resulting in an impediment to freedom.
- In sum, the world of modernity is unique, its resonance is “in and for this time,” and it must be accommodated by the spiritual seeker at the risk, in failing to do so, of falling into a kind of transcendental idealism which obscures the significance and importance of the moment of modernity.

The question, then, posed by the composite of these principal theses is whether Traditionalists have overlooked or otherwise failed to grasp the significance and/or opportunity of modernity because of a nostalgic or idealistic perspective of Tradition and Traditional cultures and, by extension, whether Traditional dialectic on the interrelation of Tradition/modernity and the nature of modernity is overreaching and therefore unreliable. In response, each of the theses delineated above shall be addressed *seriatim*. For the sake of clarification, we mean by Tradition the totality of first principles of the *philosophia perennis* (the Absolute, duality, polarity, periodicity, correspondence, gnoseology, etc.) or its other formulations, e.g. *sophia perennis*, *theosophia*, as found in the sacred scriptures or revelation of the major world religions and reiterated, most recently, in the works of René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy, and Frithjof Schuon.

In the first place, we admit that there is a certain strain of thinking that, arguably, demonizes modernity. Guénon was its premiere critic as evidenced by his books *The Crisis of the Modern World* and *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*. Coomaraswamy made occasional but direct references to it throughout his works, and described modern culture as a “monstrosity” and a “headless corpse.” Schuon’s views are neatly encapsulated in Professor Nasr’s compilation *The Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon*, Part VIII, “Criticism of the Modern World.” These “demonizations” are not, however, of the type that Professor Appelbaum describes or ascribes to the Traditionalist writers. At the outset, one needs to be clear on what is being formulated as contraries. Tradition and modernity, *per se*, are inherently neither opposites

nor categorically coextensive but, depending on one's purpose, can be employed as such. "Tradition," as we have defined it, is primordial wisdom or the *philosophia perennis*. "Modernity" may be used in two distinct ways: (1) it can be referred to simply as the absence of or antithesis to Tradition that manifests as a sort of generic materialistic, rationalistic philosophy, or (2) it can be understood as a temporal marker, a segment or arc on a cycle of time, which may contain within it attitudes and prevailing assumptions but which is not categorically a "philosophy" in the broad sense. Based on his commentary, it seems probable that Professor Appelbaum believes the Traditionalist writers are using the term modernity in the latter sense, rather than their actual use of the term in its former sense—as the absence of Tradition. Additionally, both Tradition and modernity are distinct from, but may nonetheless incorporate, the concept of contemporaneity. The proper "philosophy" of modernity, as it were, could accurately be described as some form of "secular, rationalistic materialism" (or possibly existentialism or nihilism), or other synonymous combination of those terms. What may therefore be formulated as precise contraries are (1) Tradition and materialism or, equally pertinent to our discussion here, (2) Traditional *culture* as against modern *culture*. This last distinction is crucial and will be developed more fully below.

Second, the views of Traditional writers on this subject are not romantic. Neither are they nostalgic or based on delusional presumptions about a "golden, Hyperborean age." To assert this one must assume a diachronic and rectilinear view of time, which is explicitly not the Traditional view. The Traditional view of time, which is absolutely central to this discussion, has two principal and complementary components: (1) aeviternity and (2) periodicity. A full comprehension of the former, in large measure, resolves the primary issues raised by Professor Appelbaum, while a full comprehension of the latter explains to a great extent the descriptions of modernity made by the Traditional writers. And as part of understanding the latter, one can then appreciate the comments by Coomaraswamy that he "nowhere said that [he] wished to 'return to the Middle Ages,'" and elsewhere that the world could not be given back its meaning "by a return to the outward form of the Middle Ages," whose culture he and Guénon often used as a paradigm of Traditional culture and contrasted to modern culture. Romanticism and nos-

talgia, we can therefore conclude, are *not* what the Traditional writers convey to their readers by referencing the operation of Traditional societies. The positive side to this negative, or what *is* conveyed by their writings, is succinctly answered by Coomaraswamy in a 1938 letter to the editors of the journal *Apollo*: “we are not using the Middle Ages or the Orient as a blue print for a new society; *we use them to point our moral.*” (Emphasis added). That is, because things are defined by their opposites, depictions of earlier Traditional cultures were used by these writers as heuristic devices for describing those aspects of modern culture which, by contrast and from a metaphysical standpoint, are substantial infirmities.

Third, the considerable if not extreme difficulty in following a spiritual path in modernity, as against living in a Traditional society that by its very structure assisted and encouraged this path, may in fact—and perhaps ironically—present to the aspirant a greater opportunity for advancement along that path. On an individual level, there is a certain truth to this observation made by Professor Appelbaum. The greater the challenge, the greater the adversity, the more will one have achieved by one’s triumph over it. However, we need now return to the seminal distinction between aeviternity and periodicity and apply those principles directly to this point. The spiritual chaos and pseudo-esoterism of modernity is an attribute of periodicity: the vicissitudes if not exigencies of life in the *kali yuga*, as Guénon would have it. No Traditional writer has ever stated that achieving Supreme Identity is impossible in modernity. To do so would be to belie contemporaneity and deny the fundamental principles of Tradition in their entirety. That state is always and fully accessible to anyone who can overcome time—past, present and future—by living fully in the moment. The present moment (*aeviternitas*) is sacred precisely because it is imbued with the eternal.

In what appears strictly from a Traditional perspective to be an attempted rehabilitation of Descartes by partial correlation of the latter’s philosophy with the Tradition, it is not clear whether Professor Appelbaum means to correlate Descartes’ “moment of arrest” with the concept of realization of aeviternity. This is discussed in the Professor’s commentary within the context of the *cogito ergo sum* formulation in the *Meditations* and, that being the case, it is probable that the cognitive process is primarily if not exclusively at issue. Antoine Arnauld’s “Carte-

sian Circle” arguments aside, the principal problem is that cognition is a type of behavior and is thus of the formal order, which, by logical necessity, would mean the “I” is also of the formal order under the Cartesian construction. This, in turn, brings up substantial questions of epistemology and correlative terminology. For example, using the morphology of human being as explicated in the *Vedanta*, would Descartes’ “I” (*sum*) be the *manomaya-kosha* or the “third envelope” as described by Guénon in *Man and His Becoming*? Is not the true “I” higher on a vertical axis? In this regard, we agree with Schuon who wrote in *Logic and Transcendence* that the proper formulation is “*sum ergo est Esse*, and not *cogito ergo sum*.” Whatever one may make of specific aspects Descartes’ *opera*, one can never conceal the overriding fact that his main thesis was to place the thinking consciousness at the center of reality and the source of knowledge, thereby turning Western philosophy into pure rationalism and obscuring the intellectual intuition and what can be “recollected” by it. Furthermore, though the “moment of arrest” is acknowledged in Traditional texts in various guises, it is not as a mechanism to achieve enlightenment, but rather a means of perception whose locus is the Intellect.

For the spiritual aspirant who achieves the condition of realized aeviternity, living in the moment of the eternal now, or by whatever terms one chooses to employ to describe this state, it does not matter whether he lived in a Traditional culture or whether he lives in the modern world—the result is the same. The aspirant’s recognition of transcendence does not mean a repudiation of immanence. The esoteric approach lies precisely in admitting the translucence of the divine Light; in perceiving that this moment opens into (unveils) eternity, and admits of the possibility of living in two worlds at the same time. Even in modernity.

Fourth, for any Traditionalist with competency in metaphysics, there is no necessity for any coming to terms with a presumed tension between idealism and reality regarding the proper role of modernity and nostalgia for the past. The metaphysicist recognizes in the spin of the cycle, as part of the first principle of periodicity, the darkness of the present modern culture. The hiding of the deepest secret in the most obvious place is a staple in the practice of the esoteric and occult sciences, and the profundity of the principle of periodicity lies in its sim-

plicity. At midnight upon the equinox, you are in the darkest place on earth; in several hours, however, it will be light. In the larger cycles that govern our human universe and to which there is an exact correspondence to the diurnal motion, the contemporary world is now in its darkest hour, i.e., modernity. It too, spins slowly toward more Light and will reach sunrise unless humanity destroys itself irrevocably in the interim. It is not a rectilinear proposition, and the “progress” of modern science and technology that appears to make modernity unique is not, principally, anything new. Furthermore, neither the significance of periodicity nor contemporaneity is denied by Traditional metaphysics. The Absolute manifests ultimately as truth and as presence. Both are located in the eternal now of reality. “Proximity” in the “search for real consciousness” is, consequently, not barred in Traditional metaphysics by a nostalgia or by a romantic strain. Unlike those consciousnesses that operate exclusively in terms of space and time, it is unequivocally acknowledged by Traditionalist writers that true spiritual aspirants are not bound or barred by such restrictions; neither are they bound or barred by the romanticism predicated upon such restrictions.

Finally, the first principles of Tradition are not of modernity or the modern world, nor are they of any time or place. They are as true now as always. The condition of modernity, or of modern culture, is, simply put, the absence of any application of first principles to contingent circumstances, i.e., society, government, economy, the arts. The condition of Traditional cultures is the application of those principles, overtly, to contingent circumstances. The Traditional writers recognize the difference and use the existence of the latter to illustrate the absence of the former. Because there are no longer any truly Traditional cultures left on the planet, and examples of them are only found in recorded history, one might be led to the conclusion that there is a nostalgia or romanticism involved in discussions of them by Traditional writers. But that conclusion would be incorrect. Even though the “dress of modernity may lack appeal,” the Traditional perspective is not opposed to living in the present; rather, it seeks to expose the false premises of the modern world view and the inversions of metaphysics that veil the divine Presence and thereby rob the “moment of modernity” of its divine pulchritude.