

Ananda K. Coomaraswamy¹

He was one of the luminaries of scholarship from whom we have all learned. And by the immense range of his studies and his persistent questioning of the accepted values, he gave us an example of intellectual seriousness, rare among scholars today

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Ananda Coomaraswamy was a much more public figure than René Guénon. Despite his aversion to biography his life story has been told in some detail by Roger Lipsey. Whitall Perry has observed of this paradox:

It nonetheless remains, as Coomaraswamy would doubtless have admitted, that biographies of great men are a source of inspiration... While he understandably deplored the fashion of modern biography to “psychoanalyze” the subject by dredging up and then distorting trivia, as “a vulgar catering to illegitimate curiosity”, this is but the perversion of a legitimate art...³

The “legitimate art” has been admirably pursued by Dr Lipsey in a model biography, sympathetic but clear-eyed and critical, painstakingly researched but not burdened with trivial detail, shunning any half-baked psychologizing, narrated in elegant prose, and attuned to those aspects of the *oeuvre* to which Coomaraswamy himself would have wished attention to be drawn.⁴

¹ [Chapter 3 of Kenneth Oldmeadow, *Traditionalism: Religion in the Light of the Perennial Philosophy*, Colombo: Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies, 2000.]

² Letter to Doña Luisa Coomaraswamy, 12th September 1947, quoted in RL *CLW* p246.

³ W. Perry: “The Bollingen Coomaraswamy Papers and Biography” *SCR* XI, iv, 1977; p212.

⁴ Lipsey’s biography and two companion volumes of selected papers have been met with critical acclaim and have generated renewed interest in Coomaraswamy’s work. For a sample of reviews see J.K. Galbraith in *The New York Times* 12th March, 1978; K. Raine: “Seminal Influence” in *The Times* 18th May, 1978; p22; P. Rawson in *New York Review of Books* 22nd Feb, 1979; p15; V.S. Naipul in *New York Review of Books* 22nd March, 1979; p6; M. Eliade: “Some Notes on the Theosophia Perennis: Ananda Coomaraswamy and Henry Corbin” *History of Religions* XIX, 1979; pp167-176; J. Rykwert: “Ananda Coomaraswamy” *Religion* IX, 1979; pp104-115; H. Smith: Review article in *Philosophy East & West* XX, ix, 1979; pp347-356;

Here we shall concern ourselves less with biographical matter than with an introduction to Coomaraswamy's ideas and writings. We will focus on certain intellectual and spiritual contours in Coomaraswamy's development, isolate some of the landmarks, and offer a few remarks about the influence and significance of his work. It should be said plainly at the outset that nothing less than a full-length study could do justice to the scope and depth of his work nor to the manifold influences issuing from it. By the end of his life Coomaraswamy was thoroughly versed in the scriptures, mythology, doctrines and arts of many different cultures and traditions. He was an astonishingly erudite scholar, a recondite thinker and a distinguished linguist. He was a prolific writer, a full bibliography running to upwards of a thousand items on geological studies, art theory and history, linguistics and philology, social theory, psychology, mythology, folklore, religion and metaphysics. He lived in three continents and maintained many contacts, both personal and professional, with scholars, antiquarians, artists, theologians and spiritual practitioners from all over the globe. The contributors to a memorial volume, some one hundred and fifty of them, included eminent scholars like A.L. Basham, Joseph Campbell and V.S. Naravane, writers such as T.S. Eliot and Aldous Huxley, art historians like Herman Goetz and Richard Ettinghausen, the distinguished Sanskritist Dr V. Raghavan—the list might go on.⁵ Coomaraswamy was a widely known and influential figure. The contrast with Guénon is a marked one.

We can discern in Coomaraswamy's life and work three focal points which shaped his ideas and writings: a concern with social and political questions connected with the conditions of daily life and work, and with the problematic relationship of the present to the past and of the "East" to the "West"; a fascination with traditional arts and crafts which impelled an immense and ambitious scholarly enterprise; and thirdly, an emerging preoccupation with religious and metaphysical questions which was resolved in a "unique balance of metaphysical conviction and scholarly erudition".⁶ Allowing for some over-simplification, we can distinguish three "roles" in Coomaraswamy's intellectual life: social commentator and Indologist, historian of Indian art, perennial philosopher. Each of these

⁵ See SS *ACRR* pvii for a list of contributors.

⁶ From RL *CLW* quoted in W. Perry: *op.cit.*; p206.

roles was dominant during a certain period in his life: 1900 to 1917, 1917 to 1932, and 1932 to 1947 respectively. The three strands eventually became interwoven in Coomaraswamy's life and his work. However, his early concerns took on a different character when, following his encounter with the work of Guénon, Coomaraswamy arrived at a thoroughly traditionalist understanding.

Born in Ceylon in 1877 of a Tamil father and an English mother, Coomaraswamy was brought up in England following the early death of his father. He was educated at Wycliffe College and at London University where he studied botany and geology. As part of his doctoral work Coomaraswamy carried out a scientific survey of the mineralogy of Ceylon and seemed poised for a distinguished academic career as a geologist. However, under pressure from his experiences while engaged in his field work, his interests took another turn. He became absorbed in a study of the traditional arts and crafts of Ceylon and of the social conditions under which they had been produced. In turn he became increasingly distressed by the corrosive effects of British colonialism.

In 1906 Coomaraswamy founded the Ceylon Social Reform Society of which he was the inaugural President and moving force. The Society addressed itself to the preservation and revival not only of traditional arts and crafts but also of the social values and customs which had helped to shape them. The Society also dedicated itself, in the words of its Manifesto, to discouraging "the thoughtless imitation of unsuitable European habits and custom".⁷ Coomaraswamy called for a re-awakened pride in Ceylon's past and in her cultural heritage. The fact that he was half-English in no way blinkered his view of the impoverishment of national life brought by the British presence in both Ceylon and India. In both tone and substance the following passage is characteristic of Coomaraswamy in this early period:

How different it might be if we Ceylonese were bolder and more independent, not afraid to stand on our own legs, and not ashamed of our nationalities. Why do we not meet the wave of European civilisation on equal terms?... Our Eastern civilisation was here 2000 years ago; shall its spirit be broken utterly before the new commercialism of the West? Sometimes I think the eastern

⁷ Manifesto of the Ceylon Reform Society, almost certainly written by Coomaraswamy, quoted in RL *CLW* p22.

spirit is not dead, but sleeping, and may yet play a greater part in the world's spiritual life.⁸

Prescient words indeed in 1905!

In the years between 1900 and 1913 Coomaraswamy moved backwards and forwards between Ceylon, India and England. In India he formed close relationships with the Tagore family and was involved in both the literary renaissance and the *swadeshi* movement.⁹ All the while in the subcontinent he was researching the past, investigating arts and crafts, uncovering forgotten and neglected schools of religious and court art, writing scholarly and popular works, lecturing, and organizing bodies such as the Ceylon Social Reform Society and, in England, the India Society.

In England he found his own social ideas anticipated and given forceful expression in the work of William Blake, John Ruskin and William Morris, three of the foremost representatives of a fiercely eloquent and morally impassioned current of anti-industrialism.¹⁰ Such figures had elaborated a trenchant critique of the ugliest and most dehumanizing aspects of the industrial revolution and of the acquisitive commercialism which increasingly polluted both public and private life. They believed the new values and patterns of urbanization and industrialization were disfiguring the human spirit. These writers and others like Thomas Carlyle, Charles Dickens and Matthew Arnold, had protested vehemently against the conditions in which many were forced to carry out their daily work and living. Ruskin and Morris, in particular, were appalled by the debasing of standards of craftsmanship and of public taste. Coomaraswamy picked up a catch-phrase of Ruskin's which he was to mobilize again and again in his own writings: "industry without art is brutality".¹¹ This was more than a glib slogan and signals one of the key themes in Coomaraswamy's work. For many years he was to remain preoccupied with questions about the reciprocal relationships between the conditions of daily life and work, the

⁸ A.K. Coomaraswamy *Borrowed Plumes* 1905, quoted in W. Perry: *op.cit.*; p214, and in RL *CLW* p18.

⁹ See RL *CLW* pp75ff.

¹⁰ For a chronological account of Coomaraswamy's involvement in English social reform movements and of the development of his own ideas under English intellectual influences see RL *CLW* pp105ff.

¹¹ RL *CLW* p114. For a penetrating discussion of the anti-industrial movement in England see R. Williams *Culture and Society* Hogarth Press, London, 1990 (rev ed).

art of a period, and the social and spiritual values which governed the civilisation in question.

The Arts and Crafts Movement of the Edwardian era was, in large measure, stimulated by the ideas of William Morris, the artist, designer, poet, medievalist and social theorist. Morris's work influenced Coomaraswamy decisively in this period and he involved himself with others in England who were trying to put some of Morris's ideas into practice. The Guild and School of Handicraft, with which Coomaraswamy had some connections, was a case in point.¹² Lipsey does not altogether grasp the moral values which underpinned the Arts and Crafts Movement's resistance to industrialism and speaks of Coomaraswamy's "absurdly anachronistic" attitude on many social questions in this period.¹³ This is facile. Lipsey has not been alone in making this kind of charge about Coomaraswamy's social thought; we shall return to it later.

We can catch resonances from the work of the anti-industrialists in a passage such as this, written by Coomaraswamy in 1915:

If the advocates of compulsory education were sincere, and by education meant education, they would be well aware that the first result of any real education would be to rear a race who would refuse point-blank the greater part of the activities offered by present day civilized existence... life under Modern Western culture is not worth living, except for those strong enough and well enough equipped to maintain a perpetual guerilla warfare against all the purposes and idols of that civilisation with a view to its utter transformation.¹⁴

This articulates a concern with the purposes of education which was to remain with Coomaraswamy all his life. The tone of this passage, ardent,

¹² Lipsey offers a persuasive discussion of the influence of Morris. For other material on this phase of Coomaraswamy's life and his involvement in the Arts and Crafts movement see W. Shewring: "Ananda Coomaraswamy and Eric Gill" and A. Crawford: "Ananda Coomaraswamy and C.R. Ashbee", both in *SS ACRR* pp89-90 and pp239-243. On Morris and his milieu there are several biographical studies, those by P. Henderson and E.P. Thompson amongst them. See also K. Clark *The Gothic Revival* Penguin, 1962.

¹³ RL *CLW* p113. Lipsey likewise fails to fathom Coomaraswamy's attitude to modern art. See Ch 9 of this study.

¹⁴ A.K. Coomaraswamy: "Love and Art", 1915, quoted in RL *CLW* p105.

vigorous, sharp-edged, is typical of Coomaraswamy's writings on social subjects in this period.

Later in life Coomaraswamy turned less often to explicitly social and political questions. By then he had become aware that "politics and economics, although they cannot be ignored, are the most external and least part of our problem".¹⁵ However, he never surrendered the conviction that an urbanized and highly industrialized society controlled by materialistic values was profoundly inimical to human development. He was always ready to pull a barbed shaft from his literary quiver when provoked. As late as 1943 we find him writing to *The New English Weekly*, again on the subject of education, in terms no less caustic than those of 1915:

We cannot pretend to culture until by the phrase "standard of living" we come to mean a qualitative standard... Modern education is designed to fit us to take our place in the counting-house and at the chain-belt; a real culture breeds a race of men able to ask, What kind of work is worth doing?¹⁶

Coomaraswamy's work on social theory has, as yet, received scant attention.¹⁷ It has been overshadowed by his work as an art historian and as a metaphysician. This is right and proper but it should be remembered that Coomaraswamy was profoundly concerned with social questions throughout his life. These came to be situated in a wider, and from a traditional viewpoint, more adequate perspective but his concern for a qualitative standard of living runs like a thread through his work. Here we have only touched on his social thought. However, a close inquiry into his fully developed ideas about education, literacy, social organization and government would make a fascinating study.

Coomaraswamy's significance as a social commentator is not fully revealed until his later work when the political and social insights from the early period in his life found their proper place within an all-embracing traditional framework which allows him to elaborate what Juan Adolpho

¹⁵ A.K. Coomaraswamy quoted in D. Riepe *Indian Philosophy and Its Impact on American Thought* Charles C. Thomas, Springfield, 1970; p126.

¹⁶ Letter to *The New English Weekly* April 1943, AKC SL p293.

¹⁷ Two of his most important essays in this field were re-published in *The Bugbear of Literacy* Perennial, London, 1979. A recent and welcome development has been the reprinting of *Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power in the Indian Theory of Government* Oxford University Press, New York, 1994.

Vasquez has called “a metaphysics of culture”.¹⁸ In the years before he moved to America he was more significant as a propagandist and educator than as a theorist. In this respect he was almost certainly more important in India and Ceylon than in England where his voice was one amongst many. The seeds sown by Coomaraswamy in India and Ceylon, at first with his early writings and later through his mature work, have been a long time germinating. The harvest, if it does come, could be none the less rich for that. We should not imagine that because he at first received a lukewarm or even unfavourable response from his compatriots (an attitude which in some measure persists to this day) that this betokened any kind of failure but rather that his ideas were then, just as his later writings are now, from one point of view, “ahead of their time”.¹⁹ Ultimately Coomaraswamy’s most important function as a social commentator lay in his insistence on relating social and political questions back to underlying religious and metaphysical principles. In this respect he anticipates some of the more percipient of present day social critics who realize that our most fundamental problems derive from a progressive etiolation of authentic moral and spiritual values.

In the context of the present study this period of Coomaraswamy’s life is important for the ways in which some of his ideas and attitudes, later to be assimilated into a traditionalist vision, took shape. If Guénon’s disillusionment with contemporary civilisation was first fashioned by French occultism, Coomaraswamy’s was impelled by the contrast between the traditional and the modern industrial cultures of the two countries to which he belonged by birth. His thought was also imprinted with the social concerns and values of the great English anti-industrialists from Blake to Morris.

The second refrain which sounds through Coomaraswamy’s life is closely related to his interest in social questions and became the dominant

¹⁸ See J. A. Vasquez: “A Metaphysics of Culture” in *SS ACRR*.

¹⁹ To a sub-continent which despite a long struggle for political independence from colonial rule has now come to accept “the counting house” and the “chain belt” as desirable goals and to understand by a “standard of living” a quantitative, and by no means a qualitative, standard, Coomaraswamy’s mature work can have little appeal at the present time although paradoxically it is in India that almost all his books have long been in print. For a sample of the growing literature (most of it quite unsatisfactory) on Coomaraswamy by Indian scholars see M. Bagchee *Ananda Coomaraswamy* Bharata Manisha, Varanasi, 1977; K.C. Kamaliah *Ananda Coomaraswamy, Wise Man from the East* Madras, 1977 (no publisher given); P. Sastri *Ananda K. Coomaraswamy* Arnold-Heinemann, New Delhi, 1974.

theme of his public career—his work as an art historian. From the outset Coomaraswamy's interest in art was controlled by much more than either antiquarian or "aesthetic" considerations. For him the most humble folk art and the loftiest religious creations alike were an outward expression not only of the sensibilities of those who created them but of the whole civilisation in which they were nurtured. There was nothing of the *art nouveau* slogan of "art for art's sake" in Coomaraswamy's outlook. His interest in traditional arts and crafts, from a humble pot to a medieval cathedral, was always governed by the conviction that something immeasurably precious and vitally important was disappearing under the onslaught of modernism in its many different guises. As his biographer remarks, "...history of art was never for him either a light question—one that had only to do with pleasures—or a question of scholarship for its own sake, but rather a question of setting right what had gone amiss partly through ignorance of the past."²⁰ Coomaraswamy's achievement as an art historian can perhaps best be understood in respect of three of the major tasks which he undertook: the "rehabilitation" of Asian art in the eyes of Europeans and Asians alike; the massive work of scholarship which he pursued as curator of the Indian Section of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts; the penetration and explanation of traditional views of art and their relationship to philosophy, religion and metaphysics. Again, for purposes of convenience we can loosely associate each of these tasks with the three main phases in his adult life whilst remembering that it was in the middle years (1917-1932) that he devoted himself almost exclusively to art scholarship.

In assessing Coomaraswamy's achievement it needs to be remembered that the conventional attitude of the Edwardian era towards the art of Asia was, at best, condescending, and at worst, frankly contemptuous. Asian art was often dismissed as "barbarous", "second-rate" and "inferior" and there was a good deal of foolish talk about "eight-armed monsters" and the like.²¹ In short, there was, in England at least, an almost total ignorance of the sacred iconographies of the East. Such an artistic illiteracy was coupled with a similar incomprehension of traditional philosophy and religion, and buttressed by all manner of Eurocentric assumptions. Worse still was the

²⁰ RL *CLW* p20.

²¹ See RL *CLW* pp60-61 and W. Perry: "Bollingen Coomaraswamy" p214.

fact that such attitudes had infected the Indian intelligentsia, exposed as it was to Western education and influences.

Following the early days of his fieldwork in Ceylon, Coomaraswamy set about dismantling these prejudices through an affirmation of the beauty, integrity and spiritual density of traditional art in Ceylon and India and, later, in other parts of Asia. He was bent on the task of demonstrating the existence of an artistic heritage at least the equal of Europe's. He not only wrote and spoke and organized tirelessly to educate the British but he scourged the Indian intelligentsia for being duped by assumptions of European cultural superiority. In studies like *Medieval Sinhalese Art* (1908), *The Arts and Crafts of India and Ceylon* (1913), and his earliest collection of essays, *The Dance of Shiva* (1918), Coomaraswamy combated the prejudices of the age and elaborated a vision of traditional Indian art and life which was inspiring, and adequate to the realities of the time. He revolutionized several specific fields of art history, radically changed others. His work on Sinhalese arts and crafts and on Rajput painting, though they can now be seen as formative in the light of his later work on Buddhist iconography and on Indian, Platonic and Christian theories of art, were nevertheless early signs of a prodigious scholarship. His influence was not only felt in the somewhat rarefied domain of art scholarship but percolated into other scholarly fields and eventually must have had some influence on popular attitudes in Ceylon, India, England and America.²²

As a Curator at the Boston Museum Coomaraswamy performed a mighty labour in classifying, cataloguing and explaining thousands of items of oriental art. Through his professional work, his writings, lectures and personal associations Coomaraswamy left an indelible imprint on the work of many American galleries and museums and influenced a wide range of curators, art historians, orientalist and critics—Stella Kramrisch, Walter Andrae, and Heinrich Zimmer to name a few of the more well-known.²³

²² See Betty Heiman: "Indian Art and Its Transcendence"; K.C. Kamaliah: "Ananda Coomaraswamy's Assessment of Dravidian Civilisation and Culture"; A. Ranganathan: "Ananda Coomaraswamy: Confluence of East and West"; B.N. Goswamy: "Ananda Coomaraswamy as a Historian of Rajput Painting"; M.S. Randhava: "Rediscovery of Kangra Painting"—all in *SS ACRR* pp.24-26, 43-52, 53-58, 75-83, 201-204 respectively. For his impact on American thought see *RL CLW* passim and D. Riepe: *op.cit.*; see "Coomaraswamy" in the Index.

²³ See *RL CLW* pp.206-231 and A. Ripley Hall: "The Keeper of the Indian Collection: An Appreciation of Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy" in *SS ACRR*, pp.106-124. This article includes a bibliography of Coomaraswamy's writings for the *Bulletin of the Museum*.

Here we shall not rehearse Coomaraswamy's complex vision of traditional art but will only stress a few of the cardinal ideas. Traditional art, in Coomaraswamy's view, was always directed towards a twin purpose: a daily utility, towards what he was fond of calling "the satisfaction of present needs", and towards the preservation and transmission of moral values and spiritual teachings derived from the tradition in which it appeared. A Tibetan tanka, a medieval cathedral, a Red Indian utensil, a Javanese puppet, a Hindu deity image, a piece of Shaker furniture—in such artifacts and creations Coomaraswamy sought a symbolic vocabulary. The intelligibility of traditional arts and crafts, he insisted, does not depend on a more or less precarious "recognition", as does modern art, but on "legibility". Traditional art does not deal in the private vision of the artist but in a symbolic language.²⁴

Modern art, which from a traditionalist perspective includes Renaissance and all post-Renaissance art, is by contrast, divorced from higher values, tyrannized by the mania for "originality", controlled by "aesthetic" (sentimental) considerations, and drawn from the subjective resources of the individual artist rather than from the well-springs of tradition. The comparison, needless to say, does not reflect well on modern art! An example:

Our artists are "emancipated" from any obligation to eternal verities, and have abandoned to tradesmen the satisfaction of present needs. Our abstract art is not an iconography of transcendental forms but the realistic picture of a disintegrated mentality.²⁵

During the late 1920s Coomaraswamy's life and work somewhat altered their trajectory. The collapse of his third marriage, ill-health and a growing awareness of death, an impatience with the constrictions of purely academic scholarship, and the influence of René Guénon all cooperated to deepen Coomaraswamy's interest in spiritual and metaphysical questions.²⁶ He became more austere in his personal lifestyle, partially withdrew from the academic and social worlds in which he had moved freely over the last decade, and addressed himself to the understanding

²⁴ See AKC *COPA passim*.

²⁵ "Symptom, Diagnosis and Regimen" in AKC *SP1* pp316-317.

²⁶ See RL *CLW* pp161-175. On Coomaraswamy's move from "descriptive iconography" towards metaphysics see his letter to Herman Goetz, June 1939 in AKC *SL* pp26-27.

and explication of traditional metaphysics, especially those of classical India and pre-Renaissance Europe. (Coomaraswamy remarked in one of his letters that “my indoctrination with the *Philosophia Perennis* is primarily Oriental, secondarily Mediaeval, and thirdly classic”.²⁷) His later work is densely textured with references to Plato and Plotinus, Augustine and Aquinas, Eckhart and the Rhinish mystics, to Shankara and Lao-Tse and Nagarjuna. He also immersed himself in folklore and mythology since these too carried profound teachings. Coomaraswamy remained the consummate scholar but his work took on a more urgent nature after 1932. He spoke of his “vocation”—and he was not one to use such words lightly—as “research in the field of the significance of the universal symbols of the *Philosophia Perennis*” rather than as “one of apology for or polemic on behalf of doctrines”.²⁸

The influence of Guénon was decisive. Coomaraswamy discovered Guénon’s writings through Heinrich Zimmer some time in the late twenties and, a few years later, wrote,

...no living writer in modern Europe is more significant than René Guénon, whose task it has been to expound the universal metaphysical tradition that has been the essential foundation of every past culture, and which represents the indispensable basis for any civilisation deserving to be so-called.²⁹

Several commentators have detailed the creative reciprocal influences which flowed between Coomaraswamy and Guénon.³⁰ We shall not go over this ground again here. However, it is worth noting that Coomaraswamy told one of his friends that he and Guénon were “entirely in agreement on metaphysical principles” which, of course, did not preclude some divergences of opinion over the applications of these principles on the phenomenal plane.³¹

The vintage Coomaraswamy of the later years is to be found in his masterly works on Vedanta and on the Catholic scholastics and mystics. Some of his work is labyrinthine and not easy of access. It is often laden

²⁷ Letter to Artemus Packard, May 1941, AKC *SL* p299.

²⁸ A.K. Coomaraswamy: “The Bugbear of Democracy, Freedom and Equality” *SCR* XI, iii, 1977; p134.

²⁹ Quoted in RL *CLW* p170.

³⁰ See W. Perry: “The Man and the Witness” pp3-7; M. Pallis: “A Fateful Meeting of Minds” pp176-182; and M. Bastriocchi: *op.cit.*; pp350-359.

³¹ W. Perry: “The Man and the Witness” p5.

with a mass of technical detail and with linguistic and philological subtleties which test the patience of some readers. Of his own methodology as an exponent of metaphysics Coomaraswamy wrote,

We write from a strictly orthodox point of view...endeavouring to speak with mathematical precision, but never employing words of our own, or making any affirmation for which authority could not be cited by chapter and verse; in this way making our technique characteristically Indian.³²

Sometimes one wishes the chapter and verse documentation was not quite so overwhelming! Coomaraswamy was much more scrupulous than Guénon in this respect, the latter sometimes ignoring the niceties of scholarship at the cost of exposing some of his claims to scholarly criticism.

However formidable some of Coomaraswamy's later writings may be they demand close attention from anyone seriously interested in the subjects about which he wrote. There is no finer exegesis of traditional Indian metaphysics than is to be found in Coomaraswamy's later works. His work on the Platonic, Christian and Indian conceptions of sacred art is also unrivalled. Roger Lipsey has performed an invaluable service in bringing some of Coomaraswamy's finest essays on these subjects together in *Coomaraswamy, Vol II: Selected Papers, Metaphysics*. Special mention should be made of "The Vedanta and Western Tradition", "Sri Ramakrishna and Religious Tolerance", "Recollection, Indian and Platonic", "On the One and Only Transmigrant" and "On The Indian and Traditional Psychology, or Rather Pneumatology" ...but it hardly matters what one picks up from the later period: all his mature work is stamped with rare scholarship, elegant expression and a depth of understanding which makes most of the other scholarly work on the same subjects look vapid and superficial. Of his later books three in particular deserve much wider attention: *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art* (1939), *Hinduism and Buddhism* (1943) and *Time and Eternity* (1947). *The Bugbear of Literacy* (1979) (first published in 1943 as *Am I my Brother's Keeper?*) and two posthumous collections of some of his most interesting and more accessible essays, *Sources of Wisdom* (1981) and *What is Civilisation?* (1989), offer splendid starting-points for uninitiated readers.

In this introductory discussion of Coomaraswamy we have referred only briefly to some aspects of his work. However, it will be clear enough

³² Quoted in V.S. Naravane: "Ananda Coomaraswamy: A Critical Appreciation" in *SS ACRR* p206.

that he was a man of wide interests and achievements. From a traditionalist point of view and in the context of our present study we can unhesitatingly ratify Coomaraswamy's own words: "I have little doubt that my later work, developed out of and necessitated by my earlier works on the arts and dealing with Indian philosophy and Vedic exegesis, is really the most mature and most important part of my work."³³ However, we should remember that Coomaraswamy's influence radiated out in many directions. Even a severely attenuated list of some of the well-known figures on whom he exercised a significant influence testifies to his impact: Eric Gill, the English designer and writer; Christmas Humphreys, the English judge and early populariser of Buddhism in England; the great Indologist Heinrich Zimmer; Joseph Campbell, the Jungian student of the world's mythologies; René Guénon himself; Joseph Epes Brown who has helped to bring to light some of the esoteric traditions of the American Indians; the comparative religionist Mircea Eliade; and, of course, other traditionalists, including Titus Burckhardt, Marco Pallis and Whitall Perry.³⁴

A tribute from his friend Eric Gill will leave us at an appropriate point to conclude this introduction:

... there was one person... to whose influence I am deeply grateful; I mean the philosopher and theologian, Ananda Coomaraswamy. Others have written the truth about life and religion and man's work. Others have written good clear English. Others have had the gift of witty exposition. Others have understood the metaphysics of Christianity and others have understood the metaphysics of Hinduism and Buddhism. Others have understood the true significance of erotic drawings and sculptures. Others have seen the relationships of the true and the good and the beautiful. Others have had apparently unlimited learning. Others have loved; others have been kind and generous. But I know of no one else in whom all these gifts and all these powers have been combined.... I believe that no other living writer has written the truth in matters of art and life and religion and piety with such wisdom and understanding.³⁵

Whatever we may think of Gill's commendations we can hardly doubt that the life and work of this "warrior for dharma"³⁶ was a rare and precious gift to all those interested in the ways of the spirit.

³³ in RL *CLW* p248.

³⁴ For Coomaraswamy's influence on these figures see Index of RL *CLW* and SS *ACRR*.

³⁵ E. Gill *Autobiography* London, 1940, p174.

³⁶ M. Pallis: *op.cit.*; p187.