

***Against the Modern World:
Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual
History of the Twentieth Century***
by Mark Sedgwick, Oxford University Press, 2004, 384 pp.

Peter Ryley

... the past is all we know, the future is always obscured by cloud, we hack our way through it towards nowhere we know, and whenever we tire of the endless exploration, as well we might, whenever life seems absurdly short and the horizon no closer than when we set out all those years ago, it is the past that is always lying in wait for us, tempting us with the infallible promise of the trusted, the explored, the warm and the safe, the only real home we shall ever have. Waiting to tuck us up tight. [1]

James Hawes' excellent satire is a timely reminder that the most seductive, and repressive, of utopias are not ones that offer a bold vision of a future remade but those that seek to impose a fictitious past on a reluctant present. This is one of the paradoxes of the anti-totalitarian left's understanding of political Islam, currently dominated by Paul Berman's [2] illuminating analysis. He stresses the modernism of Jihadi and Salafi Islamism and its links with European Nihilism and Fascistic totalitarian thought. This would seem to be enough in an era when the former leader of the Neo-Nazi organisation *Combat 18*, David Wyatt, has converted to Islam, ostensibly finding the Jihadi movement sufficiently anti-Semitic, violent and authoritarian for his tastes. The ideological contortions, too, of the Respect Coalition neatly confirm Berman's analysis of the opportunism of the left, placing conflict above principle.

However, there is still a sense of unease that this is not all and that by confining Islamism within totalitarian theory there may be a danger of over-simplification of the appeal and nature of the movement. Two central aspects of Islamism seem to be left unexplained, its regressive, nostalgic utopia and extreme religiosity. These have been discussed through the concept of identity politics, but this too can be unsatisfying. To explore these features requires a wider inquiry that looks at links with other anti-modernist movements of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries. Once again, some of these aspects of Islamism have roots in Western intellectual

Ryley | On Traditionalism

developments, which is hardly surprising if they are to attract the alienated youth of European countries. Critiques of conventional notions of progress have a long history and many can be secular and progressive in their own right; however there are those that are locked into nostalgia and anti-rationalism and Mark Sedgwick has written a fascinating historical study of one of them, Traditionalism.

Traditionalism is intriguing in this context as it is an overt example of the complex relationship between Islam and the West, as many, though not all, Traditionalists became Muslims. In their preference for Sufism they had little in common with contemporary Islamism, which, as indicated by Islamists' antagonism to the Italian convert Abd al-Wahid Pallavicini, challenged Traditionalists' core beliefs and right to speak for Islam in the West. Despite this, Islamism and Traditionalism have combined as fringe beliefs in Italy and Russia and Traditionalism plays a part in the ongoing theological debate in post-revolutionary Iran.

Sedgwick divides Traditionalist writings into 'hard' and 'soft' versions. The hard is explicit about Traditionalist doctrine and is a small minority movement, but soft Traditionalism has covertly infiltrated its ideology into many different forms and is surprisingly influential. Sedgwick has assiduously traced these influences, some of which certainly unsettle the reader. Some are quite simply bizarre, such as the feminist separatist group, Aristasia [3] (pp. 216-19). Others are more mainstream. The poet Kathleen Raine is one example. She founded the Traditionalist *Temenos* review that attracted The Prince of Wales' 'spiritual mentor' Laurens van der Post. Both Raine and der Post influenced Prince Charles and, though not a full Traditionalist himself, his contributions to public debate seem more coherent when placed in the context of this Traditionalist influence (pp. 213-16). Whilst Prince Charles' involvement would be unsurprising to a casual observer, that E.F.Schumacher knew of and incorporated Traditionalist ideas into his seminal Green text, *Small is Beautiful*, raises eyebrows (pp. 212-13). Its presence in Russia, especially given the violent struggle with Islamist Chechen separatists, is more astonishing still. Yet, through Alexander Dugin's Neo-Eurasian movement, Traditionalism has found a significant place in the anti-democratic and anti-Western elements of Putin's regime. Even my own profession, Adult Education, which feels smugly secure in its liberal rationality, has its own Traditionalist heritage through the French advocate of Continuing Education, Henri Hartung (p. 197), one of the rare leftist Muslim Traditionalists. With Hartung speaking at a Bilderberg meeting in 1968, conspiracy theorists could have had a field day, but fortunately Sedgwick is a fine academic who does not hype the content of the book to match his subtitle.

The core beliefs of Traditionalism were synthesised by the French writer, René Guénon (1886-1951). Guénon's own intellectual journey was based in his search for an esoteric spirituality. He started in Catholicism, moved through Hinduism and various forms of occultism, including Theosophy and Masonry, before lighting on Sufi Islam and eventually settling in Cairo in an increasingly paranoid isolation. His major books, *The Crisis of the Modern World* (1927) and *Oriental Metaphysics* (1939), amongst his many other publications, reworked the themes that he first elaborated in his PhD thesis from the Sorbonne, which failed due to his tendency to bend his empirical research to fit his theory. It remains a weakness of Traditionalism that it does not fit with observable reality, though much the same could be said of many ideologies.

There were three distinct aspects to Guénon's thought. The first is *Perennialism*, the idea that all religions express the same Perennial Philosophy, a truth that is contained in most spiritual beliefs, and which can be best realised by a return to an authentic religious form. This is the least acceptable to any religious absolutist and was rarely publicised in the Islamic world. The second is the idea of *inversion*. Sedgwick writes, 'Inversion is seen as an all-pervasive characteristic of modernity. While all that really matters is in fact in decline, people foolishly suppose that they see progress' (pp. 24-5). The solution to this inversion is the wisdom of Eastern spirituality, which will overcome the West's superstitious faith in reason, progress, sentimental morality, and a belief in change for change's sake. Whereas the East had held onto its Traditional Society, the West had foolishly abandoned its own version in pursuit of a material modernity. This is a theme that has been particularly popularised by soft Traditionalism and will be more than familiar to students of all types of movements from some Green Politics, especially those associated with Edward Goldsmith, to Islamism. Finally, Guénon wrote of the need for *initiation*, a process of induction into spiritual organisations that would create a metaphysical elite that would be the catalyst for returning the West to a spiritual path. This would not be an organised conspiracy but an intellectual network, suffusing the mainstream.

Guénon saw change coming through pure intellectualism, but many of his followers tried to translate Traditionalism into action. Three of the most important ones were Frithjof Schuon (1907-98), Baron Julius Evola (1896-1974), and Mircea Eliade (1907-86). Schuon created his own Sufi order, which later became known as the Maryamiyya, after his vision of the Virgin Mary. It increasingly diverged from proper Islamic practice and ended up as a cultic community in the United

Ryley | On Traditionalism

States, where its strange rituals, perhaps influenced by Schuon's earlier occultism and practise of sexual magic, ended with him charged, but acquitted, of offences of child molestation and sexual battery. Evola's career was more chilling. Determined to interpret Traditionalism as a doctrine of action, he flirted with Mussolini and Italian Fascism, though in an attempt to convert it to Traditionalism rather than as a true believer. However, in the post war period, his record is less ambiguous as he became one of the ideologists behind far right Italian terrorism. Eliade too flirted with Romanian Fascism, but, to his credit, decisively rejected it. He finished his career in the United States, as a respected Professor of the History of Religion at the University of Chicago for the remaining twenty-eight years of his life. There he became one of the most able propagators of soft Traditionalism. It is intriguing to see that the University of Chicago is not only linked with Neo-Liberalism and Neo-Conservatism, but Traditionalism also. Sedgwick is, once more, too good an academic to speculate on any possible cross-fertilisation of influences.

Sedgwick demonstrates the immense flexibility and diversity of Traditionalist ideas by taking the reader on a journey to meet far more individuals and movements, from Israel to Iran, noting that the one place where there is no appeal for Traditionalism is in those very traditional societies that were so idolised. This, he concludes, points to the paradox that Traditionalism is in itself a doctrine of modernity, a product of the civilisation it seeks to undermine. This is familiar territory; anti-Western thought flourishes in the West as rejectionism, apologias and irrationality. This is a key theme of Berman's and many others. [4] Traditionalism is part of this retreat from the rational. This is one of the reasons why an anti-totalitarian left feels the need to mount a defence of liberal Enlightenment values, why the Euston Manifesto was drafted, and why so many of the democratic left have taken their despair to the blogosphere. One comforting factor is that this is not a new phenomenon. Perennialism itself is a product of the Renaissance.

The book has two major strengths. Firstly, it is scholarly and scrupulous in the depth of its research, avoids speculation and hyperbole and does not make exaggerated claims for the importance of its subject. Secondly, and most importantly, it is written by a specialist scholar of Islam, who understands the theology as well as the philosophy and politics. Sedgwick came to Traditionalism through his study of Sufism. This may make the book less overtly political but here lies the crux of its importance for readers of *Democratiya*.

The anti-totalitarian Left has rightly made a virtue of its rejection of apologism. But this very moral strength also runs the risk of creating a weakness of explanation. This too can create its own orthodoxies; i.e. Islamism is Fascism, pure and simple. Yet, Islamism is both a religious and a political movement and its appeal cannot simply be confined to the secular and the power of the myth of rebellion. For example the personal histories of some British-born Islamists are often ones of a troubled vacillation between two worlds, a conflict between materialism and spirituality, before finding personal salvation in the rigours of a strictly interpreted religious faith, albeit one that sanctions mass murder as a form of political action. Is this much different as a phenomenon from those hippies in search of enlightenment, even if their spirituality is more an emanation of Charles Manson than Timothy Leary?

One of the main challenges to Islamism has to be in the realm of ideas. This means a more sophisticated understanding of the complexity and subtlety of the interaction of Islam and the West, a greater appreciation of the influences that give Islamism its appeal to Western-raised youth, and an understanding of the operational features of the ideology. It requires a better grasp of the theology and the nature of Islamism as a synthetic construction from a range of anti-modernist thinking. Sedgwick's book is only a starting point, he refuses to be drawn into a discussion of the nature of Islamism, but it is important and worthy of careful study.

In conclusion it is worth returning to the ex-neo-Nazi and radical Islamist, David Myatt, or, as he now prefers to be called, Abdul Aziz ibn Myatt. The Times reported him saying about his conversion,

The pure authentic Islam of the revival, which recognises practical jihad (holy war) as a duty, is the only force that is capable of fighting and destroying the dishonour, the arrogance, the materialism of the West ... For the West, nothing is sacred ... They want, and demand, that we abandon the purity of authentic Islam and either bow down before them and their idols, or accept the tame, secularised, so-called Islam which they and their apostate lackeys have created. [5]

This is less a statement of Fascism than of Traditionalism.

Ryley | On Traditionalism

Peter Ryley has worked for the past twenty-five years in Adult Education and currently works at the Centre for Lifelong Learning at the University of Hull.

References

Benson, Ophelia and Jeremy Stangroom 2006, *Why Truth Matters*, Continuum, London and New York.

Berman, Paul 2004, *Terror and Liberalism*, W. W. Norton, London and New York.

Hawes, James 2006, *Speak for England*, London, Vintage.

Notes

[1] Hawes, 2006, p. 335.

[2] Berman, 2004.

[3] Their web site is amazing – www.aristasia.co.uk.

[4] See in particular, Benson and Stangroom, 2006. The authors also run an excellent web site, www.butterfliesandwheels.com.

[5] *The Times*, 24th April 2006.