



Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century

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The first history of Traditionalism, an important yet surprisingly little-known twentieth-century anti-modern movement. Comprising a number of often secret but sometimes very influential religious groups in the West and in the Islamic world, it affected mainstream and radical politics in Europe and the development of the field of religious studies in the United States.

In the nineteenth century, at a time when progressive intellectuals had lost faith in Christianity's ability to deliver religious and spiritual truth, the West discovered non-Western religious writings. From these beginnings grew Traditionalism, emerging from the occultist *milieu* of late nineteenth-century France, and fed by the widespread loss of faith in progress that followed the First World War. Working first in Paris and then in Cairo, the French writer Rene Guenon rejected modernity as a dark age, and sought to reconstruct the Perennial Philosophy-- the central religious truths behind all the major world religions --largely on the basis of his reading of Hindu religious texts.

A number of disenchanted intellectuals responded to Guenon's call with attempts to put theory into practice. Some attempted without success to guide Fascism and Nazism along Traditionalist lines; others later participated in political terror in Italy. Traditionalism finally provided the ideological cement for the alliance of anti-democratic forces in post-Soviet Russia, and at the end of the twentieth century began to enter the debate in the Islamic world about the desirable relationship between Islam and modernity

Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century Details

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Matthew W says

"Against the Modern World" is the only book that academically documents the history of what is known as Traditionalism (or "Guenonism"), an ambition secret metaphysical intellectual movement that rejects the values of the modern world, originally sprouted and heavily influenced by René Guénon.

Traditionalists have attempted to influence the world within various world revolutions/movements/sects/what-have-you, but have mostly failed. My interest in reading this book came from the fact that Julius Evola is one of most well known of the Traditionalists, although a lot of people nowadays like to pretend he doesn't exist due to his involvement with Italian fascism, National Socialism, and his attempt to influence the racial theories of the Nazi SS via the help of insane SS Occultist Karl Maria Wiligut (who designed the SS Totenkopf rings). Evola would also heavily influence Italian "right-wing" groups and terrorist groups in the 1970s/1980s. Evola was paralyzed at the end of World War II when he wanted to "test his fate" by walking the streets as they were being bombed by the allies. Although confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his life, many Italian intellectuals and revolutionaries would visit him often as he was considered a Sage of sorts.

It should also be noted that Julius Evola felt that it wasn't Fascism that failed, but that the Italian people failed fascism. I kind of had the same theory. haha.

Other interesting information about Evola is revealed such as the short stint he did as a Dadaist painter as well as how he was the young lover of an Italian cougar twice his age. The woman, Sibilla Aleramo, would use Evola as one of her characters in a fictional novel "I Love, Therefore I am."

Traditionalism is nowadays popular with a lot of Russian Nationalist/Neo-Euroasian groups, especially since Vladimir Putin took power in Russia. Strangely enough, also Orthodox Jews, Islamic folk, Hindus, and a variety of others looking to retain their traditions within our degenerating modern world are also taking up Traditionalism. Personally, I think that if there is to ever be any "white nationalist" revolution, it would be lead intellectually by traditionalists. After all, these are the people nowadays that are publishing the works of Julius Evola (among tons of others) as well as taking political office. Like any revolution before it, it will take a strong intellectual elite looking through a "different type of lens" (meaning sometimes just being plain nuts) to create a new world. Unfortunately, some of these people seem like complete degenerates such as Edvard Limonov who the great Russian writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn described as "a little insect who writes pornography."

A lot of this book felt like "Greek" to me as I don't have a strong background knowledge of many of the people mentioned in this fact-filled work. Most of the book is written in a very dry, dense, and academic style that will turn off a good percentage of readers. I do see this book as very valuable and something I will surely will come back to when I have a deeper knowledge of Traditionalism and its various players (who often go by various different names). The author Mark Sedgwick is extremely objective with the material and thankfully spends zero time "moralizing" and condemning the people mentioned in the book. Sedgwick merely states he is not endorsing anything in the book. The first part of the book is a sort of personal introduction to how the author Mark Sedgwick got involved with the book and the many diverse people he met while researching. He certainly put his dues in as far as research goes, unlike most mainstream historians nowadays who merely rely on secondary sources of the same old recycled material.

This is a book that is a mandatory own for those that take their person library serious and have at least a slight interest in the subject.

Bas says

"Modern Western civilization appears in history a veritable anomaly among all those that we know; this civilization is the only one that was developed in a purely material direction, and this monstrous development, the start of which coincides with what is commonly called the Renaissance, has been accompanied by a corresponding intellectual regression which has reached a point where today's Occidentals no longer know what pure intellectuality might be - hence their disdain, not only for Oriental civilizations, but also for the European Middle Ages." - Rene Guenon

A decent introductory book for the individual interested in traditionalism. However, it fails to satisfactorily explain what traditionalism is, deciding instead to present a "taxonomy" of traditionalist thinkers, events, and movements. It is difficult to imagine anyone finishing this book who hasn't yet heard of traditionalism; it's simply too descriptive. Although this is not a great book I would still recommend it for those who are just starting their journey into traditionalist philosophy. For tourists, I would say leave it.

Charles says

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 Rene 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’s 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 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.

Frederik Vandellannoote says

This book is the first, and more important, an excellent overview on the history of Traditionalism. It contains short biographies of all the main characters and deals with the impact of their ideas on society. The book is very well researched and above all very neutral in tone. A recommended read.

Sila says

I will most definitely not be recommending this self-promoting work which is tabloidesque, market-driven, and loaded with errors.

Ari says

Traditionalism might be one of the more important intellectual trends you've never heard of. The basic principles are that all ancient religions embody true wisdom -- and the same true wisdom. This wisdom has been lost from the modern world, and the way to recover it is to find yourself an ancient religion, and join it. The Traditionalists were especially enthusiastic about Hinduism, Buddhism, and (Sufi) islam.

This book unhappily has the usual vices of academic writing. It's an exhaustive -- and exhausting -- tour of the topic, but without enough attention to context. At the end, I find myself much less interested in the topic than I was at the start. The book exhaustively chronicles the doings of various small Traditionalist groups, without exploring their impact on society broadly, or even what their popularity, such as it is, tells us about society.

The main thing I learned is that the traditionalists were culty and weird, often with each group splintering off in their own direction. But I didn't learn anything much about the world more broadly.

Sean Sullivan says

I never said I had refined tastes. Anytime a book has got "secret" and "intellectual history" in the subtitle, I am definitely interested. Plus, its published by Oxford University Press, so how bad could it be?

Pretty bad actually.

A note to all my academic motherfuckers out there reading this – pick a neat subject matter, like, say, bonkers Europeans interested in fascism, masons and Sufism, and a publisher will sign you up, even if you can't write your way out of paper bag.

A note to Mr. Sedgwick – its fucking annoying that every time you introduce a new person you say they are "pivotal to the history of traditionalist thought". Also annoying when everything is a "key idea".

Traditionalism is an interesting idea. Basically it's a combination of the sort of standard new age idea that all the worlds religions share a single basic kernel of truth coupled with a fascistic hatred for the corruption of the modern capitalistic world and a distrust for the average person. Add in a bunch of masons and western sufis, and its an weird religious movement. There's a wikipedia page for it, but I think it's a little biased towards traditionalists. Far as I can tell these people are at best new age losers at worst they're crypto fascists. Still, they're interesting and the story of the movement is compelling enough to get me past the dreadful writing of Sedwick.

Maybe I should write a book on the secret intellectual history of anarcho primitivism. I bet I could get Oxford to publish it.

Mel Bontje says

Hoge informatiedichtheid, maar voelt soms als een (te lange) opsomming van feiten en gebeurtenissen. Vooral de introductie leest goed weg; was het gehele boek in dezelfde stijl voortgezet, dan zou dit boek toegankelijker zijn geweest. De ontoegankelijkheid draagt wel bij aan de esoterische zweem die bij het onderwerp van het boek hoort.

Serhiy says

Величезна кількість фактів та дат, що надає враження інформаційної щільності. Однак, особливо вступ, який написаний дуже цікаво. Якщо б цілі книга була написана в такому ж стилі, це було б дуже цікаво. Але, на жаль, це не так. Це робить книгу менш доступною, хоча це і додає певної естетичної цінності.

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the SS, the Iron Guard and Italian Fascism also indicate an inherent naivete about the ways of the world.

Too many of the movement's gurus end up behaving like sad old gits looking to justify a tormented sexuality or living in poverty for their ideas, half saint, half mad, all holy fool. Perhaps only the French thinker Henri Hartung was able to use it as constructive critique intended to bring balance to the modern world without the intrinsic hysteria of most, though not all, other such thinkers.

But this is a valuable monograph that adds important detail (though not quite the analysis of its importance or lack of it that I would have liked) to little known aspects of Western, Orthodox and Islamic cultural and religious history. Nevertheless, the book does require that you are already moderately well educated in both esoteric and mainstream intellectual history.

Christian says

Certainly one of the most entertaining while informative studies in the history of religion you can read. His methodology could be better, as well as the structuring, but then again histories with multiple locations and foci is (well, because, it's history) no linear thing. Highly recommended!

DROPPING OUT says

I was disappointed. Period. I was hoping for an in-depth study of Rene Guenon (1886-1951) and the anti-modernist spiritual movement called Traditionalism. The purported premise of Traditionalism (which seeks to reverse the effects of the Enlightenment and return human society to theocentrism, something akin to getting the genie back into the lamp).

Traditionalism can be described as a throw-back to the thought of Marcilio Ficino (1533-1599) who posed that there was a primordial unity to all religions. Fast forwarding to the 20th century, it is a lovely Romantic notion, but intellectually specious. Every human society ever studied has "religion," but to state that ALL religions have primordial unity is what the Brits call "bosh."

Sedgwick chronicles, rather than analyzes. Lots of footnotes, but a bibliography seemingly missing "important titles" by some of the players (such as Titus Burckhardt and Frijthof Schuon).

He also runs somewhat far afield to detail the life and activities of Julius Evola, a Fascist "thinker" so bizarre that he ran afoul of the Italian and German ideologues.

Frijthof Schuon comes in for closer scrutiny, not so much for his writings as his outre spiritual practices and activities.

Sedgwick mentions Mercea Eliade as a crypto-Traditionalist (as well as not so crypto-) who had a major impact of the academic study of "Religion." And later introduces Houston Smith and Seyyed Hossein Nasr as disciples of Schuon who also had major influence on popular perceptions of religion through their publications and public personae.

While mentioning the likes of Smith and Nasr in connection to Schuon, he also mentions Victor Danner (a major American academician in the field of Islam), but draws in the reins when it comes to unmasking others because they are still active on the academic scene.

Was Sedgwick afraid of libel suits? Could he not maintain the not-so-subtle allegation that the study of Religion in academia is tainted by unsupportable premises?

While I found many of the biographical details fascinating, the overall study of Traditionalism as an intellectual force I found flawed.

TR says

There is some interesting info gathered here, but there are many errors. Eliade and Dugin do not belong in the same category as Guenon and Evola. Eliade was partially influenced by Guenon but did not accept some major tenets of traditional metaphysics (in fact, he did not really understand it) and Dugin is just a rhetorician/politician who takes some inspiration from the general ideas of Guenon and similar authors.

It could be a good starting point, but those interested should just read the relevant authors own words.

Peter says

Historians of esoteric or occult thought generally go around with a chip on their shoulder about the way their field is ignored and, allegedly, ridiculed by historians writ large. There's some truth to it, and some make a good case for the importance of their field to intellectual history writ large- Earl Fontainelle on his very enjoyable podcast, "The SHWEP" (Secret History of Western Esotericism Podcast), for instance. But in some cases the desire to prove that esoteric thought was important, relevant, and like other intellectual movements, with lineages and everything, overwhelms whatever other analytical point a given work might try to make.

In some cases, it looks like a case of a historian being captured by their sources- they begin to sound like the sort of people who insist, not so much that magic is real, but that keep an open mind, and in other cases like the squabbling of the sort of real world occultists they write about, forever going back and forth on who has the legit secret knowledge, etc. They get cute about whether they themselves believe in it or not, as though their personal belief in magic is actually what people care about. Sometimes it's like "Masters of Atlantis" but not funny.

Historian Mark Sedgwick's book on the traditionalists is more in the latter camp. Traditionalism is an esoteric philosophy that, as Sedgwick contends, traveled far, especially (well, almost exclusively) in elite circles in the early twentieth century. The basic idea of Traditionalism is this: there is a set of unified spiritual truths that everyone once knew about and that held society — in some far distant prehistoric time — in perfect harmony. Something happened and now we have modernity, which isn't perfect, unified, or spiritual. Bits of the tradition are scattered amongst the world's religions and spiritual movements. A spiritual elite should piece together the Tradition for themselves and... well, most of the time, the next step is form clubs and bicker with each other about who's being properly traditional, but at least some thought about trying to spread the message more broadly. Some of these ideas went into New Age spirituality, though major Traditionalist figures like Guenon, Coomaraswamy or Evola would doubtless sneer mightily at New Agers over... whatever differences they have.

If I already didn't know about Traditionalism at least a little from prior research, this book would have been

borderline incomprehensible. Sedgwick doles out definitions of what they actually believe almost grudgingly. He does very little analysis of the many texts the Traditionalists produced. The bulk of the book is made up of talking about the Traditionalists, how they knew each other, their connections to other belief systems (particularly Sufism, of which Sedgwick is a scholar), etc. etc. This is of little intrinsic interest, especially considering the big claims Sedgwick makes early on of Traditionalism forming a key part of twentieth century intellectual life as proven by the big names who got into it... but the big names basically aren't there. He goes out of his way to say Carl Jung wasn't one, appearances to the contrary. That's about as big as we get, unless Mircea Eliade is an especially big deal to you.

The frustrating thing is, as a peculiar ideology for elites with at least some pull, I could buy an argument for saying that Traditionalism might have had some importance, in much the same way similarly elitist (and basically nonsensical) ideologies like Objectivism have. Sedgwick barely makes it. The closest he comes is the way figures like Eliade and Coomaraswamy helped popularize the idea that all religions have a core of truth (which is the Tradition handed down from olden days) and all are worth studying. That's interesting, but he doesn't develop it much.

Similarly, Traditionalism's connections with fascism and the European far right, as exemplified by the person of Julius Evola, who was in the news recently because Steve Bannon thought to name drop him (if he's actually gotten through a volume of the Baron's fatuous oeuvre, I'll give him... I don't know, a penny and a shot of Scope to quell the shakes? I'm not giving that guy shit). Sedgwick does the annoying thing New Age people (including Evola's English translators) do where they try to take Evola's snobbish disdain for the plebian Mussolini as a sign he wasn't a fascist. No- if anything, he was just even more violently attached to hierarchy, and put Traditionalism together with racial hierarchies in the most obvious combination since plastic explosives and roofing nails. Sedgwick can't quite stay away from the story of how Evola-inspired neofascists contributed more than their fair share to the Years of Lead in 1970s Italy- after all, there's that delicious line about the cops finding an Evola volume in your flat being more damning than if they found C4. But again- it's stories, anecdotes, connections, no real analysis of the ideas or how they interacted. It's a shame because Traditionalism and other marginal ideas of that kind have more to tell us if we trace their dynamics than if we try to insist they're not marginal, or anything else they manifestly are. **

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