

# *Tradition Confronts the Cultural Elite*

*Owen A. Jones*

LIBERALISM, modernism, secular humanism—these are terms that we use to describe a centuries-old spiritual movement which now dominates the world cultural environment. It is a spiritual movement above all because it promises the divinization of man. The collectivist ideologies which are rapidly falling from power promised the divinization of a race or class of people. Western liberalism—which now claims to be the only viable substitute for totalitarian regimes—promises the divinization of the individual, and it is this movement, and its resiliency, which is the primary source of concern today to the traditionalist.

Liberalism is a heretical movement, actually, because it draws from the essential Christian promise of the divinization of each individual believer, and through the body of believers, all of the created order. The problem is that, in the liberal sense, man divinizes himself through his own knowledge, or will, or by the virtue of his emotional feelings. In the Christian sense, the divinization that is promised to the individual comes about only by an infusion of Grace through communion in the Church, and then only after the individual has done much in order to remove any impediments to Grace, through contrition and repentance for his sins, through a sincere desire for conversion, and through a willingness to

follow rigorously the path of virtue, all of which are necessary elements in the ascent of the soul from the human level to the divine level.

Therefore, we are offered a great and wonderful choice between a life of self-deceit and misery based on the myth of self-divinization and a life that is truly divine and glorious. Without traditional understanding, this becomes an almost impossible task. Being an individual human being in community with other individuals is extremely demanding and requires character. This comes to us only if we are willing to surrender to a teacher and to a tradition; to apply the traditional virtues to our lives; and to rejoice in the blessings that we receive to such an extent that we will risk even our lives, but certainly our public esteem, in order to pass the teachings of the tradition on to others.

There is nothing especially miraculous about it. It is hard work, as a fifth-century ascetic, John Cassian, teaches: "My purpose is to say a few words not about God's miracles, but about the way to improve our character, and the attainment of the perfect life, in accordance with that which we received from our elders."

John Cassian is an interesting and compelling figure in the tradition. To a few scholars he is known as the "author" of

The Seven Deadly Sins, about which he learned from his own spiritual elders whom he followed into the depths of the Egyptian desert. He is less well known as a teacher of the traditional doctrine of perfection which he alludes to above, and for the practical doctrine or teaching concerning how to achieve this perfect state.

The traditional term for this "work" is *askesis*, which can be roughly translated as "spiritual training," although the term usually carries a stronger connotation of toughness and rigor and severity. Like most traditional concepts, *askesis* has suffered a degradation of meaning in the modern world. To many, the term implies a kind of dull-witted subservient attitude appropriate for peasants, but hardly suited for the sophisticated or the cosmopolitan type who sees what he wants and then goes about doing whatever is necessary to get it.

But the tradition refers to *askesis* as the art form par excellence of becoming a spiritual being in the footsteps of our great religious and philosophical masters. As with any true art-form we move from the realm of facts and information, of propositions referring to the things of this world, from the sphere of power and domination, to a life in an entirely different dimension. The true ascetic ascends to the sphere of imagination, properly disciplined and trained by virtue, as it participates in the supreme reality of mind which we call God. The ascetic, or true artist, becomes an image of God or an icon of divinity once he has travelled a certain distance on his path. No propositional language quite meets the demands of this experiential pilgrimage. Its truth can only be imparted symbolically.

Tragically, the modern age is a movement of distorted symbols. This is doubly tragic for what it does, not only to the modern liberal, but also to the traditionalist, who often feels he must fall back on historical proofs and intellectual theses

to defend the truth of his beliefs.

But truth cannot be known or defended in this manner, because, as Saint Maximos the Confessor, perhaps the greatest of all Christian philosophers, puts it: "... wisdom is apprehended in a non-material way, and has no independent existence of its own." Therefore, "... in this world truth exists in shadows and conjectures. That is why there is need for the blessed passion of holy love, which binds the intellect to spiritual contemplation and persuades it to prefer what is immaterial to what is material, and what is intelligible and divine to what is apprehended by the senses."

The modern person suffers from the result of a modern education which is premised on an idea of man as critic of his world. The method of the critic is a radical empiricism. Anything and everything that comes under the human gaze is subject to critique, to division, to a breaking down into smaller and smaller component parts. Nothing in modern man's educational experience provides him with the ability to put anything together. The paradigmatic figure of the modern world is the journalist, who is expected to observe and distill an event into a story line and present it to a hundred million people as the truth in twenty minutes. He is considered to be successful when he has destroyed a few lives and a few reputations in the process. But whom or what does he build up?

A profound conservative political philosophy will want to return to founding principles. Perhaps, however, it is no longer good enough to return to the Founding Fathers of America. For the only true opposite of the modern type is the traditional ascetic.

The Christian ascetic follows the path of the Hebrew Exodus, but also the path of Christ. Christ fulfills the passage of the Hebrews, through His descent as the

Divine Logos, through His temptations and sufferings, through His descent into the netherworld which was necessary to raise up the souls who were lost, and through His ascent into heaven.

The ascetic becomes like Christ. By participating in His descent and ascent he enters into the experience and the reality of the logos of Christ. He "suffers" a real change in his nature by virtue of a divine power acting upon him and he becomes an iconic figure for the rest of the world to see. He becomes the highest exemplar for all of us, and his contemplative vision serves as the cornerstone of civilizational order.

Other traditional exemplars are Plato of blessed memory, and Moses, who ascended bodily to heaven because of the purity of his intellect. Finally, there is Mary, the God-bearer.

How could we convey such sublime truths without the aid of spiritual imagery. It is primarily the imagery of the tradition which crashes against the cultural environment. Secular humanism is more than just a kind of skepticism. As Eric Voegelin demonstrated, the whole idea of modernity is represented in the conflict of revelatory symbols between the traditional god-bearing images and the revolutionary symbol of the Jacobins—the guillotine: the belief that man can live without God.

The latter image is also a revelatory image, but as Voegelin points out, not the result of a theophany. The dominant images of our culture are the result of an egophany—an unveiling of the dynamic expansion of the ego to encompass all else.

In America, the Jacobin symbols of self-divinization have, until recently, been an undercurrent. But since the 1950s the revolutionary symbolizations have obtained cultural dominance because of the inordinate influence of a deracinated cultural elite. This cultural elite has effectively relegated the traditional revela-

tory symbolisms of our culture to the realm of private and personal experience, often with the unwitting consent of believers and secular conservatives.

Secular conservatives have forcefully argued for a return to the "Great Books" as a basis of education. Gone are the days when conservatives could speak nostalgically of our tradition by quoting the "Great Books." We have moved past the time when "the well-turned proposition compels assent," according to classics professor Colm Luibheid, "when the expert marshaling of words seemed enough to guarantee the existence of awesome and accessible domains of transcendence."

In the current cultural environment, reading and discussing the so-called "Great Books" of our tradition becomes a form of escapism. A true asceticism is the only answer. As *askesis* becomes more difficult, it becomes more necessary. It is time to "de-intellectualize" the tradition—by putting it into practice. There is a need for a new generation of people in their teens, twenties, and thirties who are willing to take on the more radical commitment of recovery through their spiritual actions. By literally burying themselves and their egos in the tradition, a generation of true traditionalists can say "no" to the symbols and images of the Jacobins in a more spiritually honest way than by just quoting the "Great Books."

This should not be as difficult as it seems on the surface, when we stop to remember that young people have plenty of traditional exemplars to follow. After all, traditional figures such as John Cassian are not unique. Cassian is struggling with the timeless problem of what to make of the life one has. Luibheid notes, "That problem in its turn rests on the deeper one of making sense of whatever reality we have happened to meet."

All of us know, deep down inside, that there is more. Most of us lack the willing-

ness to pursue what lies beyond and to persevere in the struggle. A real recovery of tradition hinges on the willingness to wage war on two fronts simultaneously: first, to stand up to those images conveyed by the modern experiment that represent the inversion of the true image, and secondly, and with equal courage, to move beyond criticism and become willing to turn in another direction, to accomplish the hard work that is necessary to conform to the true image.

The first part of the strategy requires an examination—in the same manner in which a physician examines a diseased body—of the ideological pathologies which infect the culture, while avoiding the sin of totally alienating oneself from the culture. The tradition does not teach a facile escapism. It does teach withdrawal, but this is very difficult.

The Logos of Wisdom requires first and foremost an attitude of acceptance. We begin by accepting partial culpability, for example, since we are all creatures to some extent of our cultural environment. The Logos requires that we kill everything inside of us that we hate in others or in our cultural environment. There is no room for complacency or halfway measures.

The cultural elite—bad artists and purveyors of the fragmented modern sensibility—preys on the intrinsic tendency to be complacent, to be morally and intellectually lazy, to accept less. They win because it is only natural that people would “soak up” the imagery of their environment.

Can one begin to see why the promises of modern liberalism are so attractive to so many people? Modernity is a social movement which some scholars trace back to the Renaissance, but which really embodies timeless images based on an over-sensitivity to things, either things that we see, taste, touch, hear, and feel, or things that we ingest. It is based on the desire to manipulate and control the

things of this world, not just for our utilitarian advantage, but as a means of achieving transcendence, perfection, unity, and most of all, the ecstasy of immortality.

Traditional wisdom as we know it, arising out of the experiences of Heraclitus and Plato, Moses and Jesus, teaches another path of immortality: the theoretical superiority of the Good, along with the practical means for achieving that goal, which is love, or more exactly, by becoming subservient to love. By becoming a true ascetic, the individual desensitizes himself to things. This is the key insight that, when put into practice, will defeat the modern world and all of its heresies.

Attentiveness to the tradition reveals a vast reservoir of scientific learning on the subject of sense experience. More precisely, the tradition differentiates between fantasy and dispassion and provides the necessary tools for discriminating between the two.

This is the art-form of becoming a free man under divine rule. A man becomes free by putting the things that he loves in their proper order, by ordering and governing his passions which are naturally driven by the images of his fantasy life. Instead of living a life governed by his fantasies—the image-producing faculty of the psyche—the free man has achieved a state of spiritual knowledge, in which the imagination can be used creatively.

Try to explain that to someone theoretically, and see how far you get! The benefit of surrendering to tradition can only be known once it is experienced, concretely, by the individual. Without that linkage, tradition is like an object of art—something to hang on the wall that is pleasing to the physical senses. But the inner senses will continue to be dulled. The image will lack iconic value.

Tradition is about change, but not just any change. Traditional wisdom refers to an inner change that transforms both

body and intellect into an image of the Logos or supreme and universal truth that can only come from active participation in the Logos.

All humans participate in the Logos at some level. That is why the imagery of change resonates so powerfully in each individual. But a person can be intoxicated with the idea of change, for example, without having a clue as to what needs changing or why or how to go about it.

As Eric Voegelin points out, intoxication is really the core of the modern experience. Intoxication is a dimension of ecstasy that can take many forms, ideological or intellectual intoxication being the most common form for the pseudo-educated person today.

All people naturally seek ecstasy, which the tradition defines as a going out from oneself toward God. This is an experience that is subject to inversion, and now that this inversion has become a widespread phenomenon, the dominant imagery reflects an obsession with the search for an ecstatic experience of almost any type. It doesn't matter if it is fruitful, only that it happens.

Voegelin diagnosed ideology as a "libidinous obsession," and devoted his entire scholarly career to the recovery of the classical philosophical *askesis* that was necessary, not only to sober up from this state of intoxication, but also to allow for a very real transformation to take place—to be transported into the realm of ecstasy, traditionally understood, which is participation in the eternal Logos, the mind of God—not as it "exists" somewhere off in the beyond, but at the level of participation.

The libidinous obsession—whether it is brought on by lust, by drugs, or by ideology—leads to a dream-like existence that is tantamount to total forgetfulness. Each moment careens into the next, leading to the false expectation of a new reality to replace the old, unfulfilled moment. Things come and go but nothing

seems to work out like we have been promised. The result is that people become angry, hardened, bitter, alienated, and resentful. The solution that is prescribed by our cultural elite?—more of the same intoxicant.

These are common experiences today, and religious people, conservatives, and traditionalists are not immune to them. That is why it is patently false and even dangerous to speak of being a "traditionalist" apart from the kind of ascetical demands that are placed upon us by the tradition.

What does the Christian tradition have to say in terms of a discovery or recovery of the person as an image of God? What is it about the *practice* of Christianity that provides both a diagnosis of the crisis of modernity and a cure as well? Far from being authoritarian, Christianity provides each person with a new divine energy which gives identity and power to the individual. As Origen puts it:

The bodies of human beings are the instruments of the soul. When the soul commands, the body obeys, and the soul makes use of it as it wills. [At this point, he still follows the Platonic model.] But the WORD of God wishes our bodies no longer to be energized by our souls but by Christ himself. This is why Paul says: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). We thus become members of Christ (*cf.* 1 Cor 6:15) when we do all things according to his WORD.

The new nature, or rather the energy to achieve it, is the quality of our tradition which has been forgotten and lost to modern eyes and ears.

Origen's teaching does not lend itself to a literalistic or even propositional interpretation. The statement by Origen is no proof of anything. It is ridiculous to assert that the tradition ought to submit itself to a modern method of proof. "Modern man," if we may be permitted to think figuratively in such terms, forms his images in relation to discrete facts and data

which he deems to be significant and which he then critiques. His image of himself is that of critic of anything and everything. So the traditionalist cannot hope to attract others to the traditional way by adopting modern techniques. The interpretive and demonstrative technique must also be traditional. It must involve an experiential exegesis, and the images used to convey the results of this exegesis must be figurative rather than literalistic, or else the spiritual fruit of the exegetical exercise will be wasted, squandered.

The traditional man thinks in terms of images, figures, and typologies which merge his personal, individual existence into a providential whole. Origen understood fully that the teaching cannot be passed on until the person sees both himself, and the texts of his tradition, in this new light. Here is Origen explaining the tradition typologically:

One should not think that historical events are types of other historical events, and that bodily things are types of bodily things, but that bodily things are types of spiritual things, and that historical events are types of intelligible events.

For example, let us take the Passover:

Most of the brethren, indeed perhaps all, take the word "passover" as referring to the passion of the Savior. But among the Hebrews, the feast in question is not called pascha but phas . . . which, translated, means "passage" [*diabasis*] . . . . That the passover still takes place today, that the sheep is sacrificed and the people come out of Egypt, this is what the Apostle is teaching us when he says: "For Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed."

Any person who approaches the tradition from the illuminating vantage point of figures and types is spiritually energized and made new. He now sees himself, lowly individual as he is in the social and historical stream of things, as the

fruition of these people and events. His persona is no longer determined by historical circumstance. He is deified. He is given the energy and power to live his life as if he were God ("and let them have dominion . . . over all the earth"). Let us think this deification of the individual should lead to hubris, the tradition teaches that the very same God humbled himself and took on the aspect of a slave or servant.

The spiritual realities of our tradition are fulfilled over and over again in the pilgrimage of each individual, and not by relying only on the historical facts of that tradition. As a practical matter, the cultural elite will continue to dominate the market place of belief as long as the faithful rely on historical facts as a sure refuge and defense.

History is a symbolic form of existence, according to Eric Voegelin, a way of representing the revelatory life of the Hebraic people as a people chosen by God and organized for action on the historical plane. In his monumental study *Order and History*, Voegelin demonstrates that the so-called events of the tradition—from the theophany at Sinai to the Incarnation, the Ascension, and the Eschatological end—are not events in history at all. They are events in *metaxy*, which is the participatory reality between the world and God. Such events that exist in the spiritual realm actually constitute history—not the other way around.

The fact that we have "historical" texts that witness to these events does not make them historical events themselves. The recovery of the truth of the tradition, according to Voegelin, depends on each man's willingness to participate in the divine life, and has very little to do with historical research, even though he was a master at the latter discipline as well.

What is the role of organized religion in the recovery of the tradition of participation? Perhaps some historical com-

parisons are in order. The concept of "organized religion" is really a degraded form of symbolization that has virtually replaced the earlier, more complete symbol of the Church as a holy mystery—the embodiment of Christ in the world. It was harder to become a Christian in the first three centuries of our era than it is to become a Trappist monk—or a Marine Corps drill instructor—in the present era. But in the modern age it has become common belief that the spirit of God can be "organized" into an institution. This is impossible.

Today we "join" a church as we would join any social institution. In the early church, participation in the very life, death, descent, and ascent of God himself was the key characteristic which set the Christian apart as a divine being. The deification of each person was inextricably tied to the restoration of the entire cosmos to its original and divine image. This power gave the Church and every individual in it a sense of urgent abandonment. The conversion of one soul was as important as everything else! Just as Adam's fall brought down the rest of the created order, each individual conversion transforms and restores the whole to its original state.

Unfortunately, disastrously, much of Christianity in the West today is cut off from the power of the tradition. Perhaps that explains the surge in ersatz spiritualities since the Enlightenment. When the historical Church detaches itself from the mystical energy which is its midwife, its religious teachings will be still-born. Small wonder, then, that most of our cultural images have to do with a sacralization of the formerly secular—from the search for the perfect orgasm to the search for extra-terrestrial intelligence. These are the images with which the traditionalist mind must compete for attention.

What is the answer today? It lies in becoming responsible as individual

affirmations of the tradition. The texts are there for instruction and guidance. There are others who are on the same search. When the two come together, new institutions come into being which embody the spiritual substance of the tradition. Such institutions cannot replace the Church. Nor should they be intended to do so. For the Church, according to tradition, is not an institutional body, but a mystical body.

That is where the younger generation comes into the picture. Many young people, both inside and outside of the Church, are natural mystics. They are involved in the same pursuit and are desperately searching for others who share the same desire, but the culture "conspires" so to speak against the necessary development of their contemplative energies. They lack support from their elders on the contemporary scene, so they have to look to the tradition to find spiritual elders. By putting the teaching into practice, each person then fills the role of elder for the other. This development will have to take place for America to be saved. No amount of Christian or conservative activism will save America. More activism adds fuel to the fire.

Modernity is already dying of its own inner sickness. Many of our institutions are rotting from within. There is no way to slow or hasten that process. It will happen at its own pace. A recovery of the tradition must be conducted by individuals for their own sake, quite apart from what is happening in the corrupt cultural environment. Recovering the tradition must be for the sake of one's soul, and not for the sake of an abstraction called "the society," or "the culture."

When individuals work diligently at perfecting the traditional virtues in themselves, they inevitably change the cultural environment by virtue of who they become. Saint Gregory of Nyssa puts it this way:

As your understanding is lifted up to what is magnificent and divine, whatever you may find (and I know full well that you will find many things) will most certainly be for the common benefit . . . .

This implies that any genuine recovery of the tradition in key individuals will automatically marginalize the power of the cultural elite, whether in this or any other age.

Tradition, according to the Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky, "is the abiding presence of the Spirit in history." The symbol "Tradition" really refers to the power to overcome the age in which a person bodily resides by transporting the soul into the *aeon*, which translates roughly to mean "the ensemble of cosmic duration." The *aeon* is also defined as "an attribute of God," by the translators of the *Philokalia*, "as the principle and consummation of all the centuries created by Him." Bereft of this power to enter into the *aeon*, the soul of a man is doomed to be a slave to the cultural elite, regardless of the historical period.

This power comes from love. The tradition teaches us to love, but also conveys the power to love, that is, if Lossky's definition of tradition is true and accurate. Saint Diadachos of Photiki defines love as a growing affection for those who abuse us. Anyone who practices these words will overcome the influence of the corrupt cultural environment, as well as the corrupt inner environment of mind, heart, and will, and achieve a state of ecstasy:

Then, according to the measure of its own progress, the intellect communicates its joy to the body too, rejoicing endlessly in the song of love and praise: "My heart has trusted in Him and I am helped; my flesh flowers again, and with all my being I will sing His praise." The joy which then fills both soul and body is a true recalling of the life without corruption.