The Point of Contact Between Traditionalism and The History of Religion

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Abstract

Mircea Eliade, one of the founders of the history of religions, is said to have been influenced by the traditionalist school that began with René Guénon. In contrast, A.K. Coomaraswamy, an art historian and thinker based in the school, has more influence on Eliade in concept and methodology than Guénon did. This presentation will clarify the similarities, influences, and differences between Eliade and the traditionalist school by examining his interaction with Coomaraswamy. Guénon opposed tradition to modernity and envisioned a primordial tradition as the general framework of pre-modern traditions based on ahistorical and supra-human universal principles. On the other hand, Coomaraswamy did not speak of tradition in the abstract but always interpreted the forms of expression based on specific works and examples. Eliade was strongly influenced by Coomaraswamy in terms of hermeneutics coexisting with academic methodology, with a wide variety of art history and classical literature, as well as the disciplines of folklore and religion, to interpret myths, symbols, and rituals. But while history for Coomaraswamy is a deviation from the traditional concept of time, which is periodically nullified in contrast to eternity, for Eliade, history is a field of creative meanings generated in which human religious experience occurs, lost, and rediscovered. Coomaraswamy did not have an analytical standpoint to overview a series of interpretations, including his own, and he did not relinquish the framework of tradition or modernity. This difference in understanding history is considered the decisive difference between the two.

Keywords: A. K. Coomaraswamy; History; Mircea Eliade; Perennialism; Religious study