

## MEANING AND SYMBOLISM IN THE WORK OF ANANDA COOMARASWAMY\*

In this Paper we propose to consider some of the questions that most preoccupied Ananda Coomaraswamy during his lifetime of writing and extensive research. And we trace the general process of thought that led Coomaraswamy to his insistence on the need for scrupulous study of, and then adherence to, traditional symbolism.

Before defining the three particular aspects of Coomaraswamy's thought that concern us here, it is necessary to say that the artist, his purpose and his creative work are all subjects that are prominent in Coomaraswamy's writings, and these must feature in even the briefest account of his outlook. (This is not at all to say that he sought to set the artist apart from other men or that he valued his work at the expense of other men's work. On the contrary, he was wholly opposed to such exclusive elevation of the artist. He took the artist or craftsman to be one among many men, each of whom followed a vocation and conducted themselves as the responsibilities and duties of that vocation required). We are here concerned with the artist's endeavours to convey meaning and values in his works, but it will immediately be evident that a large proportion of the comparatively modern works of art that we are commonly exposed to in galleries have little bearing on the discussion of Indian religions and their symbolism, or indeed on the discussion of religion as such. The subject matter of these works is quite plainly secular, and frequently enough it has been the artist's avowed intention to dissociate himself and his works from the 'spiritual' perspective and from spiritual concerns altogether. Coomaraswamy acted upon the premise that for discussion of works of art to be fully valid, it necessarily entailed constant reference to religious 'ends'. As Roger Lipsey points out in the Introduction to the Commemorative edition of Selected Works:

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"There are two paradigms of the work of art in Coomaraswamy's thought: the religious icon and the useful object."<sup>1</sup>

Our observations regarding Coomaraswamy's ideas will be taken under the following three headings:

- i) his affirmation of meaning in art, and his view of art's purpose as the transmission of values;
- ii) his insistence that beauty and utility have to be taken in conjunction in any worthwhile assessments of works of art;
- iii) his demonstration of the consistency of authentic symbolism, and his explanation of symbols as means to the attainment of an 'active wisdom'.

It is not the intention here to confine discussion exclusively to the artist and his choice of symbolic subjects for his paintings and sculptures. Discernment in the artist's choice of subjects is in itself commendable, and it answers one of Coomaraswamy's foremost requirements for the reinstatement of properly so-called 'significant' works of art. But if we are to be consistent in applying Coomaraswamy's standards, we should go considerably further, and should underline the following point: namely, that the monk, the layman and householder, the marriage partner, the warrior, the Sacrificial Priest and the temporal Ruler of a kingdom each bear responsibility akin to that of the artist in their own sphere of activity. This traditional view of vocational responsibilities is certainly prominent in the work by Coomaraswamy considered below, in the second part of our argument, namely his 1942 monograph entitled *Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power in the Indian Theory of Government*.<sup>2</sup>

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1. '*Selected Papers*', Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, Vol. I, p. xxxiii. Edited by Roger Lipsey, Bollingen Series LXXXIX, Princeton University Press, 1977.
  2. *Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power in the Indian Theory of Government*, Ananda Coomaraswamy. (American Oriental Society). New Havenm U.S.A., 1942.

Our account of Coomaraswamy's ideas begins with the following short but particularly instructive excerpt from his book *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*.

"The study of art, if it is to have any cultural value, will demand... in the first place an understanding and acceptance of the whole point of view from which the necessity for the work arose, and in the second place a bringing to life in ourselves of the form in which the artist conceived the work and by which he judged it."<sup>3</sup>.

For Coomaraswamy it is axiomatic that human needs prompt the making of beautiful objects. He writes from a deep conviction that legitimate study in this field must, by virtual definition, be founded on "an understanding and acceptance of the whole point of view from which the necessity for the work arose". And he is acutely aware of the researcher's tendency to attribute wholly inapplicable intentions to the artist, this being most often the false attribution that arises from importing one's own standards by which to evaluate what is produced in a substantially different culture.

We must be clear what Coomaraswamy has in mind when he speaks of the 'human needs' that are served by the making of beautiful objects. It is, more exactly, the making of beautiful, symbolically eloquent, objects that is our concern. Coomaraswamy commends the essentially Platonic view of value. The following quotation from his essay "Figures of Speech, or Figures of Thought" states the point clearly:

"It is one of Plato's virtues, and that of all traditional doctrine about art, that *value* is never taken to mean an exclusively spiritual or an exclusively spiritual or an exclusively physical value."<sup>4</sup>.

This, indeed, is one of the most prominent themes in Coomaraswamy's writings. It is illustrated by a wealth of extensive references to Scriptural sources of the various great religions. It would be worthwhile to mention,

3. *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*, Dover Books 1956, p.30.

4. *Selected Papers*, Coomaraswamy, Vol. I, 27.

for instance, that the well-known Christian dictum 'Man cannot live by bread alone' is seen by Coomaraswamy as applicable in this context among others: he says it indicates the danger that our concern for physical value may eclipse recognition of the spiritual needs that should be met by artistic and other activity. Certainly the Christian Church has ceased to exert a decisive influence as the artist's patron, and gives every appearance of being resigned to the divorce between utilitarian or commercially-minded artists and itself.

Where Coomaraswamy takes up questions of cultural history, and particularly the cultural history of Western Europe, he alludes constantly to our readiness to uphold a rigid distinction between 'fine' arts and, on the other hand, the 'applied' or technical arts. A measure of our acceptance of these opposed categories 'fine' and 'applied' can be seen, holds Coomaraswamy, in the fact that now - today - one does not readily associate 'beauty' with useful objects. Coomaraswamy argues that the notions of beauty and utility have in former times been intimately connected. I quote:

"For Socrates the distinction of beauty from use is a logical distinction, but not a real one, not objective; a thing can only be beautiful in the context for which it is designed."<sup>5</sup>

That we came to accept a distinction between beauty and use and that such distinction influenced our habitual perceptions and thought in this profound manner - this represents a decline. More exactly, Coomaraswamy calls it "an impoverished reality".

Of course, it is not the beauty/use distinction that alone accounts for our impoverishment; Coomaraswamy frequently cites the modern preference for the arbitrary and subjective in works of art - and very particularly the preoccupation with self-assertive expression - as being directly conducive to this decline.

Coomaraswamy's over-all thesis is that this 'impoverishment of reality' was very evidently *not* suffered by

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5. Op.cit.,19.

those who adhered to traditional canons of artistic production and evaluation.

He believed that a characteristic 'traditional' approach to artistic production *could* be defined, providing both general features of the traditional viewpoint and detailed supporting evidence gathered from anthropological and other studies. He further believed that the properly so-called 'traditional' approach to art represented a highly coherent view in itself. Coomaraswamy focused upon three broad notions:

1. There was unanimous acknowledgement in the traditional community that the objects to be made (i.e. those commissioned by the patron) were, ultimately, "supports of contemplation". Given that this was the end in view, naturalistic representation was unsuited and alien to the traditional artist, whose work was iconographic.
2. Self-assertion of the individual artist as *such* was not sought or valued in the traditional community; the personal characteristics and psychology of the individual are the accidental and least enduring aspects of his existence, and to give them prominent expression in a work of art could thus with good reason be considered arbitrary, unwarranted and irresponsible. Coomaraswamy underlines the traditional artist's concern with conformity to archetypes, where certitude and precision of expression become possible.
3. According to the traditional view, argues Coomaraswamy, the spectator's response to a work of art is not confined to enjoyment, or to gratification of the senses. This all-important point is affirmed clearly in his essay "Ornament": "In the traditional philosophy the work of art is a reminder - the summons of its beauty is to a thesis, as to something to be understood rather than merely, enjoyed".<sup>6</sup>

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6. *Selected Papers*, I, 241.

Coomaraswamy has been charged, upon occasion, with idealizing the virtues of the pre-industrial, feudal type of community and the values which inspired traditional craftsmanship. This alleged idealization is taken to derive from the powerful influence which William Morris's and John Ruskin's ideas exerted on Coomaraswamy in his student years. It is misleading, however, to characterise Coomaraswamy's own ideas as a type of confused romanticism or sentimentality about tradition and craftsmanship. In the first place, he deplored the gratuitous mimicry of mediaeval and other art forms by those who no longer grasped their intended meaning as "supports of contemplation". He held confusion of this sort to be particularly harmful, especially where it was masked by complacency or by conformity to fashion. Being acutely aware of the scale of confusion constituted by this failure to recognise contemplative and spiritual ends, Ananda Coomaraswamy consciously undertook to provide in his writings a re-clarification of terms in the traditional philosophy of art.

In his essay "Figures of Speech, or Figures of Thought" Coomaraswamy defines 'significant and liberating art' quite directly as "the art of those who in their performances are celebrating God in both of his natures, immanent and transcendent".<sup>7</sup> It is a definition consistent with the various religious traditions of East and West, and is a definition very evidently suited to the Hindu perception of life. The *celebratory* aspect of creative activity is eloquently affirmed by the dance of Shiva and by the notion of Lila, or Play. In this connection Coomaraswamy also quotes the authority of the Bhagavad Gita teaching, namely that "The world is imprisoned in its own activity except when actions are performed as worship of God".

"Figures of Speech, or Figures of Thought" is, in a number of ways, a definitive statement on questions regarding the true status of the artist and the nature of his work. Certainly it emerges from the essay that Coomaraswamy views the artist's life and activity as nothing less than discipline of self-transcendence. The artist's operation "is not a meaningless labour, but quite literally a sacred and significant rite, and quite as much as the

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7. Ibid., 40.

product itself an adequate symbol of a spiritual reality. It is therefore a way or rather *the* way, by which the artist, whether potter or painter, poet or king, can best erect or edify himself at the same time as he 'trues' or 'corrects' his work."<sup>8</sup>. Ideally a 'renunciation of works' is required of the artist. Coomaraswamy writes:

"This renunciation is essentially the abandonment of the notion 'I am the doer', and a reference of the works to their real author, whose skill is infallible."<sup>9</sup>.

Self-forgetfulness of this high order has been an ideal expressed in most Scriptural traditions, not least in the Russian and Greek Orthodox tradition, whose iconographic art is so universally acclaimed.

It is perhaps Zen Buddhism that gave particular force to the notion that by following one activity with a sufficiently concentrated attitude of mind - even the seemingly samsaric activities of archery, flower-arranging or sweeping a courtyard - one's own insight might be deepened and Enlightenment attained. Certainly some of the Japanese Masters displayed a genius for showing, albeit obliquely, how the mundane incidents in life provided true occasions for learning - learning, possibly, that we already hold the Pure Land within the heart, could we but recognise it. Such is the theme of Hakuin's Zazen Wasan, or Song of Zazen.

Coomaraswamy's writings bear out such insights, and those writings themselves point insistently to recognition of the Pure Land situated within the heart. His painstaking and scholarly application of Scriptural teachings, parable and symbolic myth to all possible levels of reference may in some measure counter-balance the bias against intellectual rigour which marks some expositions of Zen Buddhism.

As has already been stated, Coomaraswamy sought to reclarify terms that had become obscure through bad or thoughtless usage. Notably, he shows how we tend to refer

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8. Ibid., 30.

9. Ibid., 39 (notes).

to 'art' when we have in mind 'works of art'. The following quotation from *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art* reveals a significant difference of emphasis, given the correct usage of words:

" ... Art is nothing tangible. We cannot call a painting 'art'. As the words 'artefact' and 'artificial' imply, the thing made is a work of art, made by art, but not art itself; the art remains in the artist, and is the knowledge by which things are made."<sup>10</sup>.

A further instructive example of reclarification of terms occurs in Coomaraswamy's essay entitled "Ornament". In this case Coomaraswamy cites the mediaeval usage of the words 'ornament' and 'to adorn': such expressions were current as 'the mind is adorned by learning' and 'a sword adorns a soldier'. Here the idea of ornament signifies the attributes of someone or something that makes them "complete", that which allows them to operate effectively, as in the case of the soldier and his sword. This is clearly quite counter to the impoverished idea of ornament today, when it means something frivolous, extraneous, something entirely unconnected with the utility of an object. Coomaraswamy commends the former usage of the word and particularly the emphasis on ornament as necessary for 'effective operation'.

One might catalogue numerous cases where he has researched the etymological sources of terms that we now misuse, terms whose true import he conveys by giving specific examples of their correct application in Hindu, early Christian, Judaic or other cultures. Under this heading one could usefully consider essays such as his "Imitation, Expression, Participation", "The Intellectual Operation in Indian Art", "Recollection, Indian and Platonic", and "The Traditional Conception of Ideal Portraiture". Coomaraswamy has also written extensively on what is signified by iconoclasm in the various traditions, taking into account the Islamic avoidance of representational art, the early representation of the Buddha by his foot-prints (or "traces") alone, and - at the other end of the spectrum - some of the regrettably naturalistic depictions of Christ. Varied and wide as the range of these essays may be, their burden is

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10. *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*, p.18.



really this - that the artist's choice of subject matter, his attitude of mind, and his skill in the execution of his work are far from being arbitrary matters.

As was indicated above, it is not solely the artist's responsibilities that concern us in this paper. We are more concerned to follow the symbolic representation of ideas expressed in Scripture, and we will duly proceed to this theme. Relying upon Scriptural writings of the various religious traditions, there is great justification for the view that authentic religious symbolism is not of an arbitrary character, but is marked by the highest possible degree of consistency. Indeed, Coomaraswamy himself took the degree of consistency in symbolic expression as a reliable measure of its authenticity.

By taking up some prominent symbolic themes developed by Coomaraswamy in his commentary on the *Kājasūya* ceremony (as it appears in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*), we mean to show that in his scholarly exegesis of texts he convincingly demonstrated the consistency and instructive character of authentic religious symbolism.

First, the following explanatory remarks have to be made so as to emphasize how certain forms of literary symbolism should be set apart from the symbolism that concerns us here.

Due to the pronouncements of a school of literary theorists and poets who called themselves 'Symbolists' and enjoyed a certain popularity in Western Europe and Russia late in the 19th-Century and in the early 20th-Century, symbols have in popular parlance come to denote that which is obscure, vague, largely undefined. Plainly, that view is diametrically opposed to Coomaraswamy's understanding of the nature of symbols. Years of scholarly research on the world religions and on their traditional expressions of spiritual teaching led him to discern - and to convey in his own writings - the consistency and precision of authentic symbolism. His very many essays were intended to illustrate - with a wealth of examples - that where symbols are concerned, one should expect to find the very same degree of precision, order and clarity as is evident in mathematics.

Precision in the gestures of the (sculpted) object and appreciative understanding on the part of the observer can be noted in the following description of a Buddha image in Marco Pallis's article "Is there room for 'Grace' in Buddhism?" And of this image it can rightly and eminently be said that "the summons of its beauty is to a thesis, as to something to be understood rather than merely enjoyed".

"... We must .. examine one concrete means of grace, mentioned before, which perhaps more than all others has helped to keep remembrance of enlightenment alive among men. This is the image of the Buddha making the 'earth-touching' (bhūmisparśha) gesture. No corner of the Buddhist world but knows and loves this image; both Theravada and Mahayana have produced marvellous examples of it ...

Before going into the various details of the image itself, it were well to refresh our memory about the episode in the Buddha's life which this particular posture is meant to perpetuate. Everyone will remember that shortly before his enlightenment the Buddha-to-be proceeded into the great primeval forest near the place in Bihar now called Bodh-Gaya and there found a spreading pipal tree (*Ficus religiosa*) at the foot of which a seat stood ready prepared for one destined to become the Light of the World; the tree itself obviously stands for the world's axis, the Tree of Life as Genesis calls it. Just as he was about to take his seat there, Mara the tempter appeared before him, challenging his right to the adamant throne: 'I am the prince of this world', Mara said, 'so the throne belongs to me'. Then the Bodhisattva stretched forth his right hand and touched the earth, mother of all creatures, calling on her to witness that the throne was his by right, and earth testified that this was so.

In the classical form of this image the Buddha is always shown sitting upon a lotus; the choice of this water plant is in itself significant inasmuch as in the traditional lore 'the waters' always symbolize existence with its teeming possibilities, that samsara that the Buddha was to show the way to over-

coming, not by mere denial, but by showing forth its true nature. As for the figure itself, its right hand points downward to touch the earth as in the story while its left hand is turned upward to support the begging bowl, sign of a bhikku's estate. Just as the bhikku in his bowl catches whatever the passerby may choose to cast into it, be it much or little, not asking for more but letting it serve his own sustenance for the day, so also man has to accept the heavenly grace as the free gift it is. In the two gestures displayed by the Buddha image the whole program of man's spiritual exigencies is summed up.

Toward the earth, that is to say toward the world to which he belongs by his existence, man's gesture is *active*; such an active attitude is always needed where the world and its manifold temptations and distractions are concerned. Toward heaven and its gifts, on the other hand, the spiritual man is *passive*; he is content to receive the dew of grace as and when it falls and to refresh his more or less flagging powers with its aid. As for the ignorant man, he does just the reverse, showing himself soft and accommodating toward the world while making all kinds of conditions of his own choosing where the things of heaven are concerned, if indeed he designs to give them any thought at all. For the truly mindful man, even his own karma can be both grace and guru, not merely in the sense of reward or sanction imposed by a cosmic law, but because karma is a potent and inescapable reminder of enlightenment as the crying need of man and as the only unequivocally reasonable object of his desires. Accepted in this sense, karma, be it good or evil, can be welcomed as Savitri once welcomed Death when he came to claim her husband and by her resignation overcame him. Contemplated rightly, the Buddha's sacramental image tells us all these things. For us, it is the means of grace par excellence."<sup>11</sup>.

Coomaraswamy on frequent occasions used the terms 'le symbolisme qui sait' and 'le symbolisme qui cherche' ('the

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11. "Is there room for 'Grace' in Buddhism?", Marco Pallis, *Studies in Comparative Religion* (Middlesex), Autumn 1968, Vol.2, No.4.

symbolism which knows: and' the symbolism which seeks') so as to distinguish between the reliable and the unreliable forms of symbolic representation. He used them to highlight the arbitrary nature of contemporary, self-expressive literature as compared with the 'measured' nature and tone of canonical art. He argued that the former, the self-expressive work, could evoke a limited, 'local' interest only, and curiosity rather than informed interest. This would especially be the case where the artist, as an individual, aspired to "make his mark" and be "original".

Without actually embarking on an extensive examination of the literary movement known as Symbolism, it would be useful to point to the highly eclectic nature of the ideas that its proponents cherished. Further, one can say that at least where the Russian wing of the movement was concerned, many Symbolist writers were notorious for their diletante excursions into the Occult, and that not a few of these were self-avowed "dekadenty", or Decadents. Apocalyptic interpretations of the 1905 Revolution were in vogue, the fruit of understandable political aspirations and a keen sense of history. However, this flux of ideas, rich as it may have been in terms of a generalised sense of anticipation, yielded notably less in terms of defining goals and practical courses of action, on the individual or collective level. The literature of the period was abundant in literary manifestos, political programmes, Utopian declarations, tracts, and statements of belief, definitions and redefinitions, virtually all of which expressed the high level at which feelings were running, and which reflect the uncompromising seriousness with which ideas were taken, even quite outlandish ones. Given this climate, it would be unrealistic to expect any unanimity of purpose among the leading figures, whose various writings were often accorded almost oracular significance. And in the absence of unanimity one would not expect to find a "symbolisme qui *sait*" - a symbolism which *knows*.

In the view of Coomaraswamy and other exponents of the Perennial Philosophy, the Scriptural mode of expression is eminently suited to the gradual transmission of spiritual insights that accords with the level of under-

standing attained by the disciple.<sup>12.</sup> Many teachings come in the form of parables, because a less oblique expression of truth would not serve the purposes of instruction as readily. And yet, while the parable achieves simplicity of a unique kind at the literal level of interpretation, every Tradition - Christian, Buddhist, Hindu - takes as indispensable guidance and instruction from someone who has verified for himself what is treated in the Scriptural literature. The instructor can determine the lesson to be taught, but a whole range of means of transmission is available to him within his tradition. Rather than having to impose the truth in any external manner, he may, by a judicious choice of means, be simply the *occasion* for the growth or deepening of insight in the disciple. Answering also the Socratic ideal of "education", he plays the role of the *mid-wife* in this process, and no more than that.<sup>13.</sup>

In the light of all the foregoing considerations we now propose to examine Coomaraswamy's work "Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power in the Indian Theory of Government". His treatment of the *Ājāsūya* ceremony is particularly suited to demonstration of the consistency of authentic religious symbolism. This study by Coomaraswamy merits serious consideration, in the first place, as an account of consistent symbolism that appears to accord with traditional Scriptural authority. In the second place, the study strikes us as presenting a useful and instructive analogy between government of a state by the religious and temporal authorities, the High Priest and King, and, on the other hand, the individual man's need to resolve internal conflict which differing sides of his nature produce. This point of comparison here is that of *effective rule* - rule over the collective body of a king's subjects, and rule over mutually opposed elements in the individual man. In terms of quite practical worth, what is referred to as "the royal road" to self-mastery provides

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12. See T.R.V. Murti's *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (Allen and Unwin, 1955); 1980 reprint in Unwin Paperbacks: pp. 42-43, 45, 207, 247, 278 et al.
13. Here I am also indebted to M. Conrad Hyers's book *Zen and the Cosmic Spirit*, Rider Books, London, 1974.

a more useful goal for man than the elevation of self-expression as virtually an end in itself, which the modern sense of individualism promotes.

As the title of Coomaraswamy's study indicates, its central theme is the nature of the relationship between the representatives of spiritual authority and of temporal authority in a state, that is, between the High Priest and the King respectively. The Priest's sphere of operation is here termed the Sacerdotium, and the King's sphere the Regnum. We shall see that from the very outset the relationship of High Priest and King is equated with marital union. Not only this, but the status of the partners is clarified (and its significance is reinforced) by an extensive range of parallel relationships, where the mythic or other partners would be very familiar to the participants in the ceremony. In the remaining part of this Paper we will see how the over-all pattern of parallels and mutual references gives substantial weight to the central teaching which the text imparts.

Coomaraswamy introduces his study thus:

"It may be said that the whole of Indian political theory is implied and subsumed in the words of the marriage formula 'I an That, thou art This, I am Sky, thou art Earth' addressed by the Brahman Priest, the Purohita, to the King in Aitareya Brahmana VIII,27".<sup>14</sup>.

Though it will be made clear by subsequent illustration, Coomaraswamy asserts at the beginning that the King "is unquestionably the 'feminine' party in the 'marriage' of the Sacerdotium and the Regnum".<sup>15</sup> What is ideally sought is the two partners' unanimity of purpose, and their harmonious cooperation to secure or realize that purpose. And the purpose itself is to ensure the welfare of all in the Kingdom, because that is specifically what the King is charged to do. That is his calling, or svadharma, and it is the specific end for which he is entrusted with power.

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14. *Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power in the Indian Theory of Government*, p.1.

15. *Ibid.*,2.

These considerations may appear very self-evident, but the presence of a person in the state who is endowed with power that does not derive from the King's power, or that is of a different order from his, has provoked numerous historical instances of dissent and rivalry. In the course of European history the respective status of the King and the High Priest has been contested in various ways, fought over or legally disputed, though Judaic and other models of a theocratic state do exist. In the case of India, the mutual relationship of the spiritual and temporal powers is defined in the *Brāhmaṇa* Scriptures, and is also referred to in the *R̥g-Veda*.

Virtually at the beginning of his study Coomaraswamy introduces the notion that Mitra and Agni serve as divine archetypes of the Sacerdotium or spiritual authority in the state, and that Varuna and Indra serve as the archetypes of the Regnum or temporal power.

The position of the King as an *agent* in relation to the High Priest is established early on, and the claim is supported by Coomaraswamy's reference to *R̥g-Veda*, 100,1:

"The feudal relationship of the Regnum to the Sacerdotium is explicit in Agni's words addressed to Indra - 'I in person go before thee.. and if thou givest me my share (or due), then shalt thou through me, O Indra, perform, heroic deeds.'"<sup>16</sup>.

In his relationship to the King, and in other respects too, the Priest's role is essentially a "directive" one. With reference to the Priest's and the King's relative status, Coomaraswamy underlines the point that the King is not only the 'feminine' element in this pair, but that he represents the 'part' as distinct from the 'whole'. That is, the King stands in need of "completion". Here the figures of Mitra and Varuna assume significance, and it becomes more clear that the Priest and King do not stand on equal terms. Coomaraswamy first provides the explanation of the metaphysical principles involved:

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16. Ibid., See pp.3-5.

"The Infinite ..always includes the Finite as 'its own', of which it cannot be deprived whether logically or really.

It is the Finite nature that can be logically if not really isolated from the Infinite and therefore stands in need of a 'completion'."17.

Then Coomaraswamy notes the following words of the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*: "Whatever deed (karma) Varuna did that was not quickened by Mitra, the Sacerdotium, was not successful". So it is for this reason that Varuna called upon Mitra: 'Turn thou to me, that we may unite. I assign to you precedence. Quickened by thee, I shall do deeds'"18.

Coomaraswamy places the Priest's function in this context, faithful to the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* when he notes that the term *Purohita* itself means 'one who takes precedence'. He explains that the Priest invokes the deities, notably Savitr, specifically as "king-quickeners" (*Rājasvah*), and that the *Rājasūya* itself is "the sacrificial and initiatory ritual of the 'King's quickening'"19.

The symbolism is very exact - the King is brought forth 'new-born' and the officiating priests are in a sense the 'fathers' who beget him. After the 'rite' - which entails aspersion as its most essential element - the king is clothed in entirely new robes. He discards his old robes like the old, worn skin from which the snake emerges.

The King's immersion in water has a two-fold significance: that of a symbolic death of the 'old' man, and that of a baptism for the newly emergent man, free from sin and 'from all that pertains to Varuna'.20. This motif is echoed in the *Artharva Veda Samhitā* XIV,2,44:

"Clothing myself anew... as a bird from an egg, I am freed from all sin."21.

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17. Ibid.,8.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.,9.

20. Ibid.,11.

21. Ibid.



Before proceeding any further with Coomaraswamy's account of the symbolic values attached to the King's initiation rites, the *Rājasūya* itself, it would be useful to note some of the 'pairs' which reflect the King's and the Priest's relationship.

The counterparts of Heaven and Earth in male and female roles (mentioned by Coomaraswamy) are of course central to the Indian conception of existence. The recurrence of this Heaven/Earth polarity in virtually all mythologies and Scriptural traditions is so plain and so striking that it has been studied very extensively indeed. Useful explorations of that polarity appear in Coomaraswamy's own two essays "The Symbolism of the Dome" and "The Inverted Tree".<sup>22</sup>

Here, in *Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power*, the central place of that Heaven/Earth polarity is duly acknowledged, and is shown as the reciprocal relationship by which all other 'pairs' are judged or measured. But this study underlines the import of some complementary 'pairs' that feature less frequently and less prominently in mythological and religious studies than the fundamental Heaven/Earth, Male/Female pairs. Within his own lifetime Coomaraswamy came to be honoured for the meticulous work he carried out in studies such as this one: he not only took his readers back to 'first principles', exposing current misconceptions and reclarifying central terms, but he then wrote at copious length, showing how the 'first principles' (metaphysical, doctrinal, ethical) applied at the theoretical and practical levels.

We briefly catalogue some of the complementary 'pairs' whose significance Coomaraswamy explains.

It should be noted again that consistent with the symbolism of the Sacrifice expressed in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, the High Priest was regarded as Director, and that the King represented the Executive branch of government.

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22. *Selected Papers*, Coomaraswamy, Vol. I.

The complementarity of the contemplative life and the active life is an idea established and accepted among Indians,<sup>23</sup>.

This pair, Contemplation and Action, is situated in the context of Coomaraswamy's study in the following concise way:

"Inasmuch as the King is the Executive (*kartr*) his is essentially the *karmanārga*, the 'active life' as distinguished from the *jñānamārga*, the 'contemplative life', of the Brahman".<sup>24</sup>.

A further 'pair' that Coomaraswamy wishes us to consider is the pair *Mānas* and *Vāc*, or Intellect and Voice. *Vāc* has the status of messenger or *agent* here, and is only genuinely 'eloquent' when speaking on behalf of *Mānas* rather than for itself. As the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* III says - "Intellect takes precedence of Voice... and were it not for Intellect, the Voice would only babble."

There is a very direct connection between the pair *Mānas/Vāc* and another pair, *Sāman* and *Ṛc*, the Chant and the Words. Just as the Voice in the absence of the Intellect only babbles, so - points out Coomaraswamy - the words of the Chant without the Chant itself produces a mere cacophony, not an acceptable harmony.

The recurrence of symbols connected with *audition* is actually very noteworthy. Far from being a random example of symbols that appear in the Indian literature, its bearing in the themes of Rule and Kingship is a direct one, for this reason. The King is the "Voice" that "gives effect to the purposes of the Spiritual authority, and thus does the will of God on earth". He *enunciates* the will of the higher authority that delegated power to him, and his sceptre is quite specifically a symbol of delegated power. He may rightly be termed a "Vice-Roy" - but he is a necessary element in the process of government: with-

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23. *Indian Conception of Values*, M.Hiriyanna (Kavyalaya Publishers, Mysore, 1975), p.224.

24. *Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power in the Indian Theory of Government*, Coomaraswamy, 5.

25. *Ibid.*, 3.

out *his* participation or 'support' the Will of the higher authority could not be enunciated or put into effect.<sup>26</sup>

The idea of audition and auditory revelation is also expressed in the pairing of *sabda Brahma* and *asabda Brahma*, and of the audible Buddha and the inaudible Buddha.

The Priest and King relationship is also thought to have its equivalents in the terminology and philosophy of art: for instance, the Priest can justifiably be equated with the Patron who determines what the artist creates, while the King and the artist are in like manner responsible for the actual execution of an idea. The subject of true patronage is more extensively treated in other of Coomaraswamy's works, notably in *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*, and this is a matter about which he felt very strongly indeed, in part because the modern concern with the artist's self-expression does not accommodate the valid notion of patronage.

There is a second instance where traditional philosophy of art provides an instructive idea, an equivalent pair of terms with which to compare the status of the Priest and King in government. It is the traditional explanation of artistic production as a two-fold operation, that is, a matter of intellectual *conception*, followed by technical *execution* of the idea conceived. As one might expect from the foregoing pattern of references, the intellectual conception of the work to be done corresponds to the figure of High Priest, and the technical execution corresponds to the King. This two-fold procedure of the artist is explained from the Indian and from the European Scholastic points of view in Coomaraswamy's essay "The Intellectual Operation in Indian Art".<sup>27</sup>

We now return to the specific matter of the King's status and his acceptance of the power delegated to him. The ceremony entailed the discarding of the old garments by the yet uninitiated Prince, an immersion and a 'drowning' of the 'old' man, a sacrificial death that necessarily preceded the birth and 'Baptism' of the 'new' man, now King. Coomaraswamy points out that:

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26. Further explanations of this matter, see *Ibid.*, 12-13.

27. *Selected Papers*, Coomaraswamy, Vol. I, 131-146.

"All that is said elsewhere of the ritual death and rebirth of the Sacrificer can be applied to the King, a fortiori."<sup>28</sup>.

The fact that the new King received the sceptre or visible symbol of his Kingship from the High Priest makes him weaker with respect to the High Priest (that is, feminine and receptive), but at the very same time the King is considered to be *male* in relation to his kingdom - he is 'espoused' to his kingdom, and his is said to be a virile power for that reason. He shoots arrows to the four quarters as a symbolic demonstration of this relationship of dominion. But - as Coomaraswamy notes subsequently<sup>29</sup>. - "The King is only a true King insofar as he is in possession of his 'Royal art', insofar as he does not fail of the end, and does not 'miss his mark'".

Here it can be brought out that the traditional conception of Kingship (in India and likewise in Europe) entailed *skill*. Effective government required the employment of 'skill', and it was indeed considered to be "artful". Certainly the applicability of these terms can be judged if we take the example of King Asoka's reign. They apply to his rule eminently.

It becomes increasingly plain from the nature of the references so far, that the model of kingship here studied by Coomaraswamy is at no point divorced from an ideal of spiritual attainment. The principle of "as above, so below" determines the procedure of High Priest and King, as it determines the delegation of power from the former to the latter.

More generally, one might make some observation about 'skill' or 'skillful action'. The Sanskrit word *kausala*, signifying 'skill' is applicable not only to the artist or craftsman and his creative work, but to the 'creative' skill of right government or statesmanship, and in a quite clear way it applies to spiritual endeavour - it is an 'active wisdom'. The triple application of the word *kausala* in this way might serve well enough to indicate the degree of discernment and insight ideally sought in the

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28. Op.cit.,10.

29. Ibid.,16.

Hindu artist, ruler or ascetic and in their Buddhist, Christian, Islamic or other counterparts.

We have seen earlier that the *Rājasūya* ceremony entails a sacrificial death of the King's old persona, a casting off of his old 'skin', so that a new, better and purified self may emerge. Here, in this context, the figures of Mitra and Varuna assume importance. Coomaraswamy says, with regard to the whole *Rājasūya* rite:

"The intention is to enthrone as King not a 'Varuṇa', but a 'Mitra'".<sup>30</sup>.

In a variety of ways Varuna represents a force or principle *hostile* to men. He lies in the waters, facing the current, with his jaws open and ready to consume men who come in his path. In other contexts he is the God of privation and drought. And, as Coomaraswamy explains, he is also conceived of as holding or tying up men and children with a noose, or rope. Noting the assimilation of Varuna and *Vṛtra*, which is mentioned in *Atharva Veda Saṃhitā* III,13,1-2, Coomaraswamy explains that Varuna "seizes" the waters and makes them stagnant, while it is the flowing 'living waters', divine and fit for sacrificial use, that Indra frees from *Vṛtra*".<sup>31</sup>.

He further notes that men's necessary course of action is to *befriend* Varuna. Men need to act so as to *turn* Varuna from an enemy into a friend. They need to effect a *conversion* in him, and if this conversion is a genuine one, it will entail the 'death' and disappearance of an enemy and the birth of a friend. Only upon that basis are men going to achieve liberation from Varuna's binding knot or noose.

Coomaraswamy's exposition of the symbolism associated with Varuna is summarised here but briefly. As is generally the case with his writings, he cites Scriptural references so very extensively, follows up etymological links and other supporting evidence for his argument so thoroughly, that he makes the tasks of summarising and paraphrasing especially difficult. One is always inclined to re-

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30. Ibid., 10.

31. Ibid., 30.

commend that others refer to his works directly and thus benefit fully from his task of synthesis. It was suggested by Whitall N. Perry,<sup>32</sup> a former pupil of Coomaraswamy's in America, that because Coomaraswamy felt faced by a mass of academic readers who were hostile to his message, and very positivistic in their attitude, or plainly sceptical as regards its validity and import, he wished to present them with a mass of evidence that was quite incontrovertible. This was rather his position in the academic world. Of course it is not only the anticipated hostility of one section of readers that accounts for Coomaraswamy's approach and his written style. Instead of confining these remarks to our conclusion we have inserted them here because it seemed that his explanations of the symbolism associated with Varuna bring out one of the valuable qualities of his work. We wished to underline the point that Coomaraswamy did not treat the enumeration and tracing of symbols as an end in itself. Far from allowing his readers to remain content with a merely 'literary' appreciation of symbolism in traditional religious Scripture, that is, a characteristically *passive* appreciation, (which in his view amounts to *lack* of appreciation), Coomaraswamy emphasized the intimate and necessary link between the *understanding* of symbols and the philosophical bases which underpin specific spiritual disciplines or Ways. That is to say, Coomaraswamy took pains to show symbols both as 'points of departure' for a spiritual discipline and as a *means* to increased understanding.

Taking the symbol of Varuna's noose that ties men down, Coomaraswamy asks the crucial question about what release from that noose might ultimately mean. Then, in answer, he himself writes:

"To be wholly free is to be released from Name and Shape (*Nāma-Rūpa*)".<sup>33</sup>

This accords with the spirit of the Indian religious view, which holds that "Names themselves are knots" (as is affirmed in *Aitareya Āraṇyaka* 1.6) and the saying (in

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32. 'The Bollingen Coomaraswamy Papers and Biography', Review article by Whitall N. Perry, *Studies in Comparative Religion*, (Middlesex) Autumn 1977, p.208.

33. Op. cit., 31.

*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* IV 6.5.3) that "Everything here is gripped by name". This end or ultimate purpose, affirmed by Coomaraswamy, is the very same end towards which the wide range of Indian spiritual and contemplative disciplines aim - that is, to get beyond contingent being, beyond the conditioned and the named. And the mention of that ultimate purpose calls to mind the words of Sakyamuni Buddha's celebrated affirmation:

"There is, o monks, an Unborn, an Unbecome, an Unmade, an Uncompounded; if, o monks, there were not here this Unborn, Unbecome, Unmade, Uncompounded, there would not here be an escape from the born, the become, the made, the compounded".<sup>34</sup>.

The subject which concerns Coomaraswamy is not merely the conversion of Varuna into a Friend, but an actual 'conversion' with the *heart* of men. It is the second "birth", that from the Sacrificial Fire, which is to be valued most greatly, not solely birth from a woman, the first birth that we all experience.

As was said at the beginning of this account of the Indian theory of government, a unanimity as regards aim and action must be present in the High Priest and the King if the welfare of all the King's authority are not identical, but nevertheless the bond between these two figures needs to be extremely close. And to express the essential quality of that bond, it is likened to marital union. Of special relevance to the whole definition of the Priest's and the King's relative status is Coomaraswamy's observation that "marriage implies *trans*-formation of the second party by *assimilation*".<sup>35</sup>.

The theme of a marriage between Sky and Earth is centrally important because the directness and clarity of the idea allows one to measure the whole range of other relationships in terms of it. Coomaraswamy says:

"Amongst the syzygies to which we have referred, it is that of the Two Worlds, Sky and Earth, the Universal

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34. Op.cit., 31.

35. *Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power in the Indian Theory of Government*, p.37.

Parents upon whose harmony depend the posterity and fertility of the entire universe, which is chiefly taken to be the norm and archetype of all marriage."<sup>36</sup>.

The network of mutually reinforcing images is as great as could be: not only is the Sky masculine in its relation to the Earth, but it is also feminine in relation to the Sun. Mitra represents the Sun which inseminates Varuna, the Sky. And, consistent with this, Mitra is designated as seed and Varuna as the Womb. Coomaraswamy affirms that 'effective and productive coupling' depends on 'a conjunction (*mithūnam*) of contrasted form'.<sup>37</sup>.

Subsequently he writes:

"We are now in a better position to understand the mutual choice or 'wooing' of one another by the High Priest and the King, and to understand the marriage formula with which the alliance of their 'houses' is effected in *Aitareya Brāhmana* VIII,27".<sup>38</sup>.

The critical respect in which the King must "provide for" his people is - points out Coomaraswamy - to ensure that the Sacrifice can be performed, to "provide for" the Sacrifice.

"Unless the King fulfils his primary function as Patron of the Sacrifice, the circulation of the 'shower of wealth, the limitless, inexhaustible food of the Gods' that falls from the Sky as rain and is returned from the Earth to the Sky in the smoke of the burnt offering, will be interrupted".<sup>39</sup>.

The truly and completely effective Ruler is able to "provide for" his subjects' immortal *and* their mortal natures. Such is the burden of the traditional Indian theory of government. But the theory does not present a King who is self-sufficient, nor indeed self-assertive. The King may or may not choose to follow the Purohita. Coomaraswamy clarifies the position in the *Aitareya Brāhmana*:

36. Ibid., 39.

37. Ibid., 40.

38. Ibid., 51.

39. Ibid., 68 (See *Satapatha Brāhmana* III, 3. 15, 16)



"In our text it is clear that the choice *has* been made, and the spoken words are those of the Purohita expressing his acceptance of the King, whom he will 'cause to perform right acts', and therefore to prosper."<sup>40</sup>.

The King's efficacy is a "grace", a freely given *gift*. The gift cannot be duly valued or appreciated by the unreceptive Ruler who wishes to govern in his own right.

It is wholly consistent with the fundamental idea of 'government' or 'ruler' that it applies to the individual no less than to the nation. As Coomaraswamy writes:

"This doctrine has also a self-referrant (*adhyātman*) application; the question is not only of a universal and a national or a civic order, but also of an *internal economy*."<sup>41</sup>.

The self-assertion of *man's* ego or self can be likened to the rule, or rather the misrule, of the Tyrant who has appropriated the power of another. Coomaraswamy attributes this self-assertive way of action to ignorance:

"We are naturally at war with ourselves and often not merely at war with 'what is divine in us', but ignorant of it because of our notion that 'I am the doer'"  
.....<sup>42</sup>.

The relationship between our outer, active and 'feminine' self and our inner, contemplative and 'masculine' self is (to a greater or lesser extent) disordered or disturbed; these selves need to be 'wedded', and when they are truly so, their union will mirror the relationship of Sky and Earth, Mitra and Varuna, Krishna and Arjuna, the asabda Brahma and the sabda Brahma. That is, it will be "not indeed an equality, but a true reciprocity".<sup>43</sup> The central teaching here is that this 'marriage' is an indispensable condition for *efficacious action*:

40. Ibid., 62.

41. Ibid., 71.

42. Ibid., 78-79.

43. Ibid., 69.

"There is nothing that can be truly and well done except by the man in whom the marriage of the Sacerdotium and the Regnum has been consummated, nor can any peace be made except by those who have made their peace with themselves."<sup>44</sup>.

Though this study *Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power in the Indian Theory of Government* presents a picture of society as a highly ordered hierarchy, it is in no sense consistent with the idea of exclusive or tyrannical rule. Indeed, one of Coomaraswamy's most important and telling conclusions is this:

"The Kingship envisaged by the Indian and traditional doctrine is as far removed as could well be from what we mean when we speak of an Absolute Monarchy or of 'individualism'."<sup>45</sup>.

As in the Islamic context the Jihad or Holy War is understood to refer most truly to the inner battle between our two selves rather than to actual war, so here the *skill in ruling* refers most eminently of self-conquest as distinct from rule over the 'Body Politic', the state. And the *way* towards attainment of composure and control is even referred to, upon occasion, as "the royal road" to self-mastery.

All the foregoing examination of inter-related symbols of 'government' provides Coomaraswamy with certain evidence for his conclusion, namely the conclusion that:

"The essence of the traditional politics amounts to this, that 'self-government' (*svarāj*) depends upon self-control (*ātmasaṁnyama*), rule on ruliness."<sup>46</sup>.

The *Ījasūya* ceremony, examined above, endows a King with temporal power, and this fulfils a need both practical and ritual for the community of his subjects. The general welfare of the community is the King's direct responsibility, and what is required is his public acceptance of that responsibility, his undertaking to provide for his people and rule effectively.

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44. Ibid., 87.

45. Ibid., 86.

46. Ibid., 85.

The words or formulae of the ceremony affirm the worth of numerous so-called 'royal' qualities: the exercise of a benevolent will, sobriety and restraint, a skill in just administration, and others. But the ceremony affirms the ultimate value of *Svarāj*, Self-Conquest. Through the symbolic motif of temporal rule of a kingdom, the far-reaching effects of self-conquest are presented in a way that is at once graphic and instructive. And conversely, of course, the lack of Self-Rule in an individual can be recognised as harmful in its effects by comparison with the lack of rule at a national and at a cosmic level.

The symbols that recur in this ceremony, and in the Scriptural sources from which it derives its authority, impart knowledge and awareness of the need to "bring one's house in order". It is for each individual to resolve the conflict between his Outer King and his Inner Sage, the Regnum and the Sacerdotium.

Coomaraswamy presents the central idea in this text as an inwardly coherent teaching that requires no extension, and certainly no dilution. As is always his approach with the canonical literature of Hinduism, Buddhism and the other Traditions, he refrains entirely from statements of a purely personal view, because personal opinions have negligible bearing on the essential impact of teachings in Scripture. His intention has been to draw together passages of Scripture that affirm the worth and significance inherent in endeavours of self-discovery. Certainly he presents a persuasive argument for the view that the actions of men are *not* random, arbitrary or 'meaning'-less in their effects. Coomaraswamy's various writings establish the idea that Scriptural literature and iconographically 'true' works of art redirect the sufficiently receptive observer away from distractions and towards recognition of 'what he *is*'. But this rediscovery of oneself requires more than what we commonly understand by 'observation'. It requires a decisive *reorientation*, that one should rather call 'participation' in the truth expressed by an icon than 'observation' of it.

We hope to have adequately accounted for and illustrated Ananda Coomaraswamy's recognition of the decisive function that symbols fulfil within any authentic religious Tradition. It seems to us that his recognition of

that function informed his whole mode of thought and his writings. Certainly the books and the essays could not rightly be considered *apart* from his full acceptance of each of the major religious Traditions as Paths of spiritual attainment and liberation.

Jonathan Sutton